Building a National Literature

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Preface

This book was originally published in German in 1985, in somewhat different form. It grew out of and referred to a set of interrelated problems that during the 1970s were at the center of critical debate in Germany. Among the key terms were: reception of literature, history of reading, reading public, public sphere, and social history. Literary history as social history (Sozialgeschichte) was an objective that inspired many critics with the hope for a new synthesis. My introduction gives a critical account of these debates and at the same time tries to situate my own position within them. My project, however, did not confine itself to the German discussion. Important theoretical impulses for the method of this book came from other sources, among them French structuralist Marxism, American sociological theory (Parsons), reader-response theory, and structuralist literary criticism.

When I began to think about this project some fourteen years ago, most American critics showed little interest in the questions I wanted to raise. At that time the vanguard of American literary criticism was preoccupied with the lively and sometimes bitter debate over the significance of post-structuralism—a debate that focused on the question of reading and meaning, pitting the defenders of hermeneutics against the proponents of deconstruction. Although the meaning of history was very much part of this discussion, literary history was clearly not something on which critics would spend a great deal of energy. There was almost a consensus that literary history, because of its epistemological connections with nineteenth-century historicism, was not worth saving. In the United States literary history had become a practice without a legitimating theory. Thus literary criticism had to draw on European theory to renew interest in historical arguments. It is noteworthy, for
instance, that Fredric Jameson, one of the few American critics who consistently emphasized the historical character of literature and therefore fought formalism, turned to the French structuralism of Althusser, Greimas, and Lacan and attempted to fuse it with the Neo-Marxist theory of the Frankfurt School.

A decade ago there was not much concern with such historical issues as the formation of (national) literary canons or the concept of literature as an institution—issues whose significance has been recognized in recent years. As long as literary critics tended to view literary history as a collection of facts organized in diachronical fashion or as a narrative, stringing together authors and works of literature according to an unquestioned teleological principle, they could not bring into the foreground its more intriguing aspects—for example, the understanding of literary history as a construct created and shaped by professional critics who themselves are, of course, functioning within specific literary institutions. In recent years American criticism has paid more attention to these questions. In particular the problem of canon formation has come under closer scrutiny. Feminist theory and black studies have made us more aware of the power relations involved in the formation and shaping of canons. Yet these important new insights were not limited to feminism and black studies. A more political view of literary criticism, encouraged by Critical Theory, began to probe the professional role of the critic. This work has thrown more light on the way we read, define, and generate the body of texts we call "literature." As a result, the gap between American and European criticism has narrowed. Thus the topic of this book, the analysis of the institution of German literature between 1830 and 1870, will look more familiar to the American reader in 1989 than it would have done a decade ago.

This book does not attempt to cover the familiar ground of German literary history once more; it does not, for instance, offer yet another reading of canonical texts. Rather, it tries to analyze those material and ideological structures which determine the canonical status of such texts. In order to do so, I had to deal frequently with unfamiliar authors and texts, unfamiliar at least from the point of view of literary critics. My task was to bring into view and explore the concept of literature which informed the production and reception of individual literary texts. This examination includes their position vis-à-vis the established national canon, their importance for the "German tradition," their role in the educational system, and their participation in specific public discourses. Hence, I had to question most of the terms and concepts that literary critics and literary historians take for granted. In particular, I had to discard the traditional notion of literary studies as an enclosed field of research centered on the concept of the artwork. This
notion had to be replaced by an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on a variety of disciplines and discourses, among them political philosophy, aesthetic theory, and social and intellectual history. What had to be avoided was a traditional base/superstructure model that automatically traps the investigation inside worn-out dichotomies (literature/background, text/context). Instead, the interdisciplinary approach aims at a fresh and different conceptual understanding of inter- and contextuality. This method is based on reading, but it is not restricted to the reading of literary texts. In this respect, my research is not too far from the project of the New Historicism, particularly in its disregard for the traditional division between literary and “historical” texts. However, my readings place a stronger emphasis on a more systematic treatment of the institution of literature, although my examination of its intersecting and overlapping elements describes this institution as a configuration rather than a rounded totality.

It is to be expected that readers of the English edition will bring to the text interests different from those of the audience of the German edition. The German text addresses experts of German literature (and culture) who take a professional interest in the evolution of German literature and therefore want a detailed account of the historical material. By contrast, the English-speaking reader, who views German literature from a more distant vantage point, may be more concerned with the general theoretical and methodological questions I raise. Thus in its new context, this book might serve as a “case study” for the analysis of literary institutions. For this reason I eliminated the ninth chapter of the German edition, which deals with the structure and development of the German reading public between 1820 and 1880. In addition, I cut out a number of subchapters and passages that were, I felt, less important for American readers. In my choices I relied on the advice of American colleagues, especially that of David Bathrick, who offered his careful evaluation of the book.

Without outside support this book would probably never have been completed. I am especially grateful to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and to the Freie Universität Berlin, which gave me the opportunity as visiting professor in 1976 to test my hypotheses for the first time. I am no less indebted to the Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung at the University of Bielefeld, where I continued my project in the spring and summer of 1981. Finally, I owe thanks to the Guggenheim Foundation for a generous research fellowship (1983–84) that allowed me to complete this book. During the final preparation of the German manuscript I had the unflagging help of Rolf Schütte and Susanne Rohr, especially in checking sources and quotations. I also express
my gratitude to Renate Baron Franciscono, who undertook the arduous task of translating the German text into readable English. Last but not least I thank Daniel L. Purdy for his tireless efforts to improve the shape of the manuscript. Parts of the introduction have already appeared in English in *New German Critique* no. 28 (Winter 1983), and part of Chapter 7 in the book *Zum Funktionswandel der Literatur*, edited by Peter Bürger (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983).

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