The Institutionalization of Literature and Criticism

Since the appearance of the seminal works of Georg Lukács, literary studies have accepted the failure of the bourgeois Revolution of 1848 as a decisive influence on the evolution of European and German literature. Using as examples the works of such authors as Heine, Keller, and Fontane in Germany and Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola in France, Lukács pointed out the difference between prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary literature. The transition from portrayal to description, or lyricism, indicated to Lukács that literary production after 1848, viewed as a whole, had entered a phase of decadence corresponding to that in ideology and society. The literary superstructure, according to Lukács's scheme of development, exactly followed the economic and social base (a transition to monopoly capitalism). The theoretical weaknesses of his position are obvious. His coupling of literary and historical evolution remains mechanical. It assumes simultaneous development without any real proof. He singled out individual authors and works and treated them as representative. What is truly necessary, however, is to relate the presumed transformation—as well as the presumed correlation to political change—to literary production and reception as a whole. In other words, the transformation should be treated on the level of the institution, not of the work.

The question, accordingly, is whether 1848 represents a break—a decisive turning point—in the institution of literature; that is, whether the failure of the bourgeois revolution had a decisive influence not only

on individual writers and their works but on the process of institutionalization. The concern here is with the relationship between the state and the ideological apparatus of literature. Lukács’s interpretation, which has been followed by such scholars as Fritz Martini and Friedrich Sengle, puts forward a plausible hypothesis. It is not difficult to show that the defeat of the middle-class forces left its mark on the postrevolutionary institution of literature. Since the end of the eighteenth century the institution of literature had largely been occupied by the middle class, which certainly had not been the case in the political realm. The literary public sphere was the field on which the liberal and democratic opposition could marshal its troops before 1848. Thus the victory of the conservative forces necessarily affected literature as well. It remains to be determined, however, in what way the crisis and the conservative stabilization of the political system affected the institution of literature. My argument here is that the change affected the aesthetic program—that is, the literary norms and conventions—and that this is reflected in the literary criticism of the time. Furthermore, the change was related to the concept of art and its function in society, but it scarcely touched on the material side of the institution. The changes in the apparatus had less to do with the revolution than with industrialization and were accordingly of long duration. Thus one can speak of changes within the institution of literature, but not of its destruction and rebuilding.

In general, the restructuring was carried out as a deliberate confrontation in the critical sphere, and for this reason it can be reconstructed. The loci of these clashes were the subinstitutions of literary criticism and literary history. Discussion revolved around the evaluation of pre-revolutionary literature, with its leading authors, such as Heinrich Heine and Ludwig Börne, and their claims and goals respecting society and politics. The heart of the conflict was the relationship between the literary and the political public spheres, which had been so intensified by the radical literature of the Vormärz that in literary criticism and history it dominated the definition of literature. Denunciation of the political pretensions of literature, either as an exaggeration or as a basic failure, resulted in a major upheaval within the institution of literature, which affected the relationship between ideological formation (and its practices) and the political apparatus. Here we must distinguish between the conservative forces, which sought to refeudalize literature, and the liberals—Gustav Freytag and Julian Schmidt, for example—who adapted to changes in the political situation and sought to rescue

part of their program by abandoning the attempt to carry the possibilities of the liberal model to their logical conclusion. The reconstruction in the institution was not without consequences. It created a logic of its own in the field of aesthetic and poetic theory. Both the discussion of realism and the genre theory of the 1850s must be viewed in connection with the changed function of the institution of literature.

In more recent scholarship, the extent to which the unsuccessful revolution left its mark on the theory of realism has been a controversial issue. On the one hand, realism has been related to the ideology of postrevolutionary liberalism; on the other, some critics have proposed that the basic aspects of the theory of realism are indebted to idealism and are, therefore, not specifically postrevolutionary. The historical locus of ideas and concepts, however, is of secondary importance in our investigation. What matters, rather, is their value within the system; that is, the question of the function of art and literature. The reconstruction of traditions and influences, justified though it may be in a work of intellectual history, can distort our perception of structural change, for it strongly suggests the assumption of linear developments, whereas the real task is to recognize the way in which ideas and concepts are incorporated into systematic contexts.

Our evidence of such change will, therefore, be presented in several steps. First, we will set forth the concept of literature in the Vormärz and the debate with conservative theory. Then, against the background of prerevolutionary institutionalization, we will examine the Nachmärz institution of literature, especially the subinstitution of literary criticism.

**Literary Criticism in the Vormärz**

The left-Hegelian Robert Prutz, who with his critical and historical works took an active part in literary discussion both before 1848 and after the revolution, exemplifies the turn from a radical prerevolutionary liberalism to the moderate, nationalistic liberalism of the Nachmärz. That Prutz is today virtually forgotten as a critic indicates the extent to which the tradition he represented was submerged, if not extinguished, during the late nineteenth century. His concept of literature and its public function typifies the left-Hegelian position. It was

---

hardly original, but for this very reason his position after 1848 is instructive. What distinguished Prutz from most contemporary critics was a strongly developed historical consciousness with respect not only to literary texts but also to the functions of literary criticism and literary history. His writing on literary history was accompanied by a process of self-reflection resulting in changes in his critical position that followed from political and social change. In this manner, in Die deutsche Literatur der Gegenwart (Contemporary German Literature) (1859), Prutz thematizes the development of historiography since the 1920s and at the same time defines what he considers to be his task. He accordingly views the history of literature within the broader context of historical evolution as a whole; it changes as public problems and requirements change. This historical awareness, however, did not prevent Prutz from accommodating to changes in public opinion. On the contrary, as soon as the correctness of the belief that ideas result in human progress became uncertain, his historical approach allowed him to make a relativistic reassessment of his task and point of view.

Pruz's critical writings of 1848 are clearly in the Hegelian tradition of the philosophy of history. They proceed from the assumption "that philosophy indeed moves the world and that every other force is powerless against the energy of a spiritual, of a moral conviction."6 Since Prutz viewed literature as an expression both of the spirit of the times and of the intellectual and moral convictions of an epoch, he subjected it to the same requirements as philosophy: literature is result-oriented; it claims to bring about change in social and political conditions. On the other hand, the question posed by Hegel and developed further by Heine—whether art can still make a significant contribution—is not taken up by Prutz, because for him the purpose of art is not primarily to create and perfect beauty but to serve the political progress of humanity. Thus, literature is for Prutz an aspect of human progress in a double sense: it reflects the present position of the intellect, and it is itself a driving force of historical development.

Before 1848 Prutz stressed primarily the effective and determinant aspect of literature; the literary movement was the avant-garde of the political and social movement. Once again the Enlightenment view of literary discussion as a prelude to political discussion determined Prutz's outlook. In 1859, reflecting back on the function of the history of literature during the years of reaction, he wrote: "In the bleak period of the twenties, the heyday of the restoration, it was [literary history] that primarily, if not exclusively, kept alive the patriotic hopes of the nation

---

and sparked some kind of public life.” Whether this judgment was correct is not the question here (it might be noted in passing that a greater contribution to the enlivenment of literary-political discussion was made by Heine’s prose). Its significance lies in the connection it draws between literature, criticism, and the public sphere. What Prutz says here about the history of literature applies to literature in general: in his view, it has a preparatory character; it is the first step toward political action—that is, toward political revolution. This activist element, however, cannot be abstracted from the concrete historical situation. Accordingly, Prutz speaks of the historically determined imperfection of the literary production of Young Germany. Its one-sided subjectivity can be understood as a justifiable attack on the restoration, which, indeed, later lost its legitimate purpose. The historicization of literature and aesthetics sometimes allowed Prutz to define concrete tasks for an epoch—tasks that were limited in scope and could be superseded by new ones. This approach became vital for Prutz in the forties, as in his program for political poetry—that is, for radical political verses—and again in his program for popular novels.

Robert Prutz’s Vormärz Criticism

The postrevolutionary literary program developed by Prutz in the journal *Deutsches Museum*, which he edited, differed markedly from his prerevolutionary writings. Despite his bias against the radical revolutionary forces, Prutz regarded the failure of the revolution without any doubt as a kind of shipwreck. He again called for a realistic popular literature, but this goal had a different significance: it lacked the activist component—the belief that literature can lead to political change. Instead, the other aspect of his historical approach came to the fore: he now emphasized that literature had to express its own historical situation and hence could no longer be what it was before the revolution.

Pruzt’s depreciation of the bourgeois revolution as a juvenile, amateurish undertaking anticipated Baumgarten’s self-criticism of liberalism (1866). Disappointed by the revolution, Prutz looked back at the Vormärz with the feeling that a lack of political experience had significantly contributed to the failure of the liberal and democratic forces. He now criticized the literary radicalism demanded by him before 1848—

---

8This aspect is emphasized by Hans Joachim Kreutzer in his postscript to the new edition of Robert Prutz, *Geschichte des deutschen Journalismus* (Göttingen, 1971); in contrast, Hüppauf emphasizes continuity in his introduction to Prutz, *Schriften zur Literatur und Politik* (Tübingen, 1973).
the concept that it was up to the writers to form the avant-garde—as abstract subjectivity and idealism insufficiently versed in power politics: “We were still newcomers to the world of politics. We were still talking about the storms of history, as the inlander talks about storms at sea which he has never seen with his own eyes and therefore pictures only as grand and picturesque, without remembering how many people they destroy and that anyone who actually is experiencing a shipwreck would gladly give up all the pictures in the world for a single safe, dry spot.” The allegory of the storm, which was so popular in Vormärz poetry, has been reversed here in a characteristic way. The inevitability of events inherent in the image of the storm has lost its compelling character. Prutz has taken back his radical variant of the Hegelian concept of history, according to which political action arises from the spirit. He now wants to eliminate the connection between the literary and political spheres, which the Hallische Jahrbücher had supported. His assumption of such an inner relationship had been based on the historico-philosophical premise that literature and politics arise from the same zeitgeist. This unity is precisely what Prutz now questions in citing the discrepancy between the events of the French Revolution and those of the Wars of Liberation and its inadequate expression in literature. Even postrevolutionary France had been under the spell of classicism. These doubts, however, lead Prutz not to an out-and-out criticism of his prerevolutionary approach but rather to a relativizing redefinition of the basic maxims concerning the correlation of art and life: “For literature by and large follows the same route as life, except that it sometimes rushes a bit ahead and at other times lags a bit behind.”

Thus Prutz did not abandon hope that the revolution would eventually give rise to a new literature, but he now reversed the relationship between the political and literary public spheres. In his youth he had celebrated literature as the driving force of the revolution; after the revolution he viewed political reform as the basis for a new blossoming of German literature. He argues: “But in literature, too, traces of a new development are even now by no means totally absent; for the most part, of course, they are still weak; indeed, in some cases it is doubtful whether they work for or against literature.” Even if Prutz was adhering to his earlier theories in such a sentence, we cannot overlook the fact that their function has changed: literature has been relegated to the superstructure, which has no effective power of its own. Life no longer needs literature, as it were, now that the political revolution has taken place.

9Prutz, Die deutsche Literatur der Gegenwart, 1:42, 51.
10Ibid., p. 53.
Rudolf Haym was more critical when he described this postrevolutionary situation in 1857 in his book on Hegel: "Idealism, alleged to be all-powerful, had proved powerless. We were, and continue to be, surrounded by a feeling of deep disappointment. With no respect for the victorious realities, for the triumphant misery of reactionism, we have also lost faith in once cherished ideals. The world of feeling and perception of the last decade is separated from that of the present as if by a heavily drawn line. . . . The interests and needs of the present have taken command over it." This opinion, which is certainly typical of its time, should not be regarded as approval of the reactionary forces in Prussia. Haym adhered to the concept of progress and political self-liberation, as is demonstrated not least by his liberal critique of Hegel, and directed it against a conservative Prussia, which he also saw embodied in Hegel. His critical remark was aimed rather at the young Hegelian interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy of history, namely, the derivation of political revolution from philosophical theory. Thus, Haym believed not in a new philosophical system that would supersede Hegel’s but in a new relationship between theory and history: Hegel’s philosophy “was not abolished by a system but temporarily set aside by world progress and living history.” Haym has marshaled against idealism the technical discoveries by which “matter seems to have been brought to life.” In this way, both the concept of history and the category of progress are given a different meaning. The distinction made between actual history—that is, material change—and intellectual history creates a new situation for the concept of literature, a situation that was also to leave its mark on literary theory.

The Postrevolutionary Literary Debate

The postrevolutionary debate over the function of literature was carried on within the framework of the theory of realism. This intensive discussion, whose real significance was not recognized by scholars until the 1970s, was by no means restricted to the question how reality should be represented. The disputants were only marginally interested in formulating a reflection theory; the larger question concerned the function of literature. This touched on its institutionalization. There is no need to describe the Nachmärz debate in detail again. Our concern is with the question—decisive for the institutionalization of literature—

11Rudolf Haym, Hegel und seine Zeit (Berlin, 1857), pp. 6, 5.
whether and to what degree the theory of realism presupposed the autonomy of the work of art and thus also a qualitative difference between art and reality. Moreover, we need to know what significance this theory had after 1848.

It is easy to show that the theoreticians and critics of the Nachmärz were not direct followers of classicism and romanticism. Julian Schmidt had considerable reservations about both Weimar and Jena. His objection to the idealistic detachment of art and philosophy, to the division between art and life, initially continued the criticism of prerevolutionary times: the heightened aesthetic claims of classicism have a reverse side, namely, flight from reality. The Weimar authors were unable to transfer the aesthetic visions crystallized in a work of art to historical reality. They thus left behind an unproductive, resigned sense of longing, which made political action impossible. Hermann Kinder has rightly pointed out that this polemic is reminiscent of Young Germany.13 These arguments are in the liberal tradition of the Vormärz. Collaboration between Schmidt and Arnold Ruge ceased only when it went beyond criticism of romanticism, about which there was little disagreement, and attempted to define the literary-political position more precisely. As in Heine, whom Schmidt denounced, romanticism is linked to a religious supranaturalism that fundamentally removes art from concrete, politically influenced historical reality. Schmidt's objection to romanticism was directed against the civic untrustworthiness of aestheticism, which fosters art for its own sake and denies it a moral, political function.

The rejection of romanticism was by no means restricted to the Grenzboten circle; similar opinions were held by Hermann Marggraff and Rudolf Gottschall. By charging the members of Young Germany—especially Heine—with being dangerously subjective, and therefore romantics, they created a picture of German literary history which ignored the decisive break of the literary avant-garde of the thirties with the romantic concept of literature. This inability to distinguish between romantic and Young German literary theory and practice was not accidental. It resulted from an attempt by early realists to rescue for their own theory important aspects of the classic-romantic model (autonomy) by removing them from the context of the critique of subjectivism. Heine's prose, which exploded the concept of a self-contained, organic work of art and consequently satisfied the avant-garde demand for the politicization of art not only in content but above all in form, was thus totally misunderstood and accordingly criticized as subjectivism. The call for objectivity in art, for impartiality and realism—which sums up

Building a National Literature

an important finding in more recent scholarship on realism—by no means excluded the idea of the uniqueness of a work of art. To this extent, despite all the polemics against classical and romantic art theory—which characteristically diminished in the 1860s—there existed a relationship with the aesthetics of Goethe’s time which gained acceptance with respect to major theoretical issues. This relationship found expression not least where the theory of realism defended the rights of poetry against the claims of reality. The notion that German realism never developed a consistent theory but sought to restrict the presentation of reality in content as well as in form has become a cliche.14 Not infrequently this is construed as a failure of German literature, which is said to have been too fainthearted to shed the restrictions of the earlier idealist aesthetics. But the actual historical process was a good deal more complicated. In the final analysis, it was not the polemic against Young Germany and the left-Hegelian avant-garde that brought the realists back to the supposition that art is autonomous.

In the postrevolutionary period the leading critics continued to criticize subjectivism and aestheticism and called for a national literature, while at the same time they underscored, under the guise of a new objectivity, the inherent individuality of art. They wanted literature to be closer to praxis, but at the same time they sought to preserve the aesthetic autonomy of a work of art, which precluded practical involvement. An admittedly abstract comparison with the twentieth-century avant-garde will perhaps clarify this contradiction. The literary avant-garde (dadaism, futurism, surrealism) aimed to undermine and destroy the model of aesthetic autonomy as the prevailing form of institutionalization. Aesthetic distance, which became a personal cult in the late nineteenth century, was to be replaced by the praxis of life, but in such a way that this praxis would be changed through literary “acts.”15 This fundamental attack on middle-class art was motivated by the experience of advanced capitalism and its consequences during World War I. Realist theory and its formulation of the praxis of life, in contrast, were part of the 1850s, that is, of the first phase of the German Industrial Revolution. It was in this epoch that the German bourgeoisie for the first time formulated its praxis of life in economic terms. Once the idealistic program of early liberalism had failed, the literary elite ap-

14This idea is expressed with negative dogmatism by Erich Auerbach in Mimesis, 3d ed. (Bern, 1964), pp. 478–81; it is historically differentiated by Georg Jäger in “Der Realismus,” in Realismus und Gründerzeit, 1:3–31.

proved rather than criticized this materialistic bourgeois attitude (Haym and Prutz may again be cited as examples). Thus the demand that art should have a relationship to life, that the work of art should not be created for its own sake, ultimately affirmed the status quo. The concept of life underlying the theory of realism was no longer that of the prerevolutionary period, which had been based on politics; it was an economic concept that found expression in industrial expansion.

Whereas the left-Hegelian criticism of subjectivism and aestheticism (romanticism) aimed at bringing about social change, the postrevolutionary demand for a close relationship to life appealed to existing developmental processes in which literature had to participate if it was not to lose its social function.

The question that needs to be answered is: How could theories supporting the notion that art has its own laws (autonomy) be developed when the primary concern of postrevolutionary critics was the integration of art and life? For Freytag and Schmidt, the correct—that is, objective—understanding of reality was crucially connected with the concept of work, through which the bourgeois-liberal nation-state would be realized. “Not until the year 1848,” Freytag wrote, “which gave the Volk a share in the state and brought each individual into a hundredfold new contacts with the mainstream of our cultural life,” could the change to praxis and liberation from Vormärz subjectivism occur. The new synthesis could only be achieved through political, “bourgeois work.”

The praxis of life sought by the Grenzboten circle can be understood as a synthesis of idea and reality. Schmidt’s and Freytag’s—and one might add, Prutz’s and Gottschall’s—theory of realism thus required more than a mere copying of empirical reality, which would embody only raw reality. Imitation becomes objective, they believed, only through poetic heightening—that is, through a treatment of the subject that distinguishes clearly between aesthetic and empirical reality. The poeticization of reality, of which German realism is so often accused, had less to do with narrow-mindedness than with the belief that a still imperfect empirical-historical reality had to be brought to harmonious perfection in the aesthetic sphere. The work of art was to create a totality reaching beyond the empirical elements of reality. Put differ-

---


ently, the theory of art of the *Grenzboten* circle proceeded from the hope for a better, still unrealized, praxis of life which would be anticipated in art. Art can perceive what is merely incipient in reality.

In the opinion of realist critics, then, the demand for reality and faithful imitation did not contradict an interpretation granting the work of art autonomous status. The artist transformed the material of reality “into a harmonious whole”\(^{20}\) that obeyed its own structural laws. The transfiguration did not make the world more beautiful, as was sometimes too hastily assumed, but—as Wolfgang Preisendanz has emphasized\(^{21}\)—it allowed art to remain a medium with an intrinsic value of its own. Preisendanz overlooks the fact, however, that with its restoration, artistic autonomy looked different after 1848 than it had around 1800. More recent discussions rightly stress the issue of function.\(^{22}\) Despite the setback they suffered after the failure of the revolution, liberal critics held to the opinion that art had a public mission, that it was a medium in which all could share. Hence they demanded popularity. But this political function was to be realized through a concept of art in which the idea of autonomy served to correct rather than to question, as had the avant-garde in the Vormärz. The theoretical model of early realism was less advanced than Heine’s, which showed a clearer understanding of the problem of artistic periods and their aesthetic claims. After 1848 the concept of autonomy lost the intrinsically negative aspect it had had in classicism and early romanticism, precisely because realist critics were not content to settle for the opposition of ideal and real but instead demanded their synthesis. This synthesis depended on the historical process. The goal—national humanism—was never in doubt; thus literature was surrendered to it unconditionally.

This surrender can be demonstrated in the reception of English and French realism. Although on the whole Schmidt continued to praise Dickens, he was skeptical of Thackeray and rejected Balzac’s novels as depictions of “the meanest earthly reality.”\(^{23}\) The disillusioning representation of social problems, of society in general as a capitalist contradiction that could never again be brought into harmonious balance, was

---


Institutionalization of Literature

no longer acceptable to Schmidt and Freytag or, indeed, to Prutz and Gottschall. Schmidt could only explain the gloom that hung over Western European novels as the consequence of a sophistic morality.\textsuperscript{24} In such instances, where literary norms were applied to specific works, it is all too clear that the hoped-for historical development was false history—an illusion the Western European realists were right to oppose.

Structural Change in the Subinstitution of Criticism

In a history of literary criticism that aims to go beyond individual characteristics and ideas, a crucial question is how historic changes in the institutionalization of literature affect the function and task of literary criticism. The history of literary criticism has hitherto been severely limited by the assumption that although norms and value judgments may change, the essence of criticism remains the same. It is not enough, therefore, to set forth norms and aesthetic judgments; we must first clarify the context in which they operate. Only against the background of the institution of literature as it appears in a specific epoch and society can we speak intelligibly and in concrete terms about the character and significance of literary criticism. This does not make it a part of aesthetics (applied aesthetics), however, but rather a subinstitution, which together with other subinstitutions constitutes the institution of literature.

The question may be stated as follows: In what way and to what extent was the institution of criticism changed by the Revolution of 1848? This means criticism as a public establishment, not a body of individual critics. Even if it could be shown that Prutz or Schmidt changed his literary views along with his political views after 1848—as in fact was to be the case—it would not necessarily mean that the institution of criticism changed as well. As I will show, after 1848 criticism changed in conjunction with a change in the concept of the function of literature. This change was not, indeed, fundamental. Rather, it was a modification of the earlier structure, which took into account changes in the public sphere. Such leading journals of the Nachmärz as Grenzboten, Deutsches Museum, and the Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung continued a tradition established in the early nineteenth century by accepting the conventional idea of the function of literary criticism. Despite their divergent political ideologies, they adhered to the model developed during the Enlightenment; they relied on

\textsuperscript{24}Widhammer, \textit{Realismus und klassizistische Tradition}, p. 120.
Building a National Literature

the public function of criticism, but without questioning whether the nineteenth-century public sphere was essentially similar to that of the Enlightenment. It was not by chance that they chose Gotthold Lessing as a model for their work.

This adherence to the liberal model was not unproblematic, because the liberal presuppositions, seldom reflected on or specifically formulated, were in any case only conditionally relevant. To the extent that the structure of the public sphere changed significantly during the Industrial Revolution, the liberal model lost its societal basis. It was symptomatic of this process that an organ such as *Deutsches Museum*, in which Prutz continued to display the rational discourse of liberal criticism (albeit in modified form), now had no more than six hundred subscribers, whereas a highly successful journal such as *Die Gartenlaube* offered no literary criticism. On the whole, it may be assumed that the leading critics and theorists of the Nachmärz overestimated the interest of the general reading public in literary criticism. Their claim to speak for the entire public rather than a small elite—a claim still resolutely upheld by the critics who reviewed realist literature—became increasingly doubtful. A gap existed between the professed popularity of realist literature and the actual size of a literary public formed by the rapid urbanization of the population—a gap that could only have been overcome by a revision of the critical model. Such a revision, however, was rejected by the representatives of realist literary theory. To the same degree that their concept of popularity—which was really intended as a criticism of Young Germany—became obsolete, the liberal model of criticism was in danger of atrophying. That such critics as Prutz, Gottschall, Marggraff, and Schmidt were unaware of this danger was due to the fact that they established their position—albeit in different ways—in opposition to the politicized literary criticism of the Vormärz. Forced by the shock of the failed revolution to confront the revolutionary demands of literary criticism in the Vormärz, they concentrated critical attention on one particular aspect of the liberal model, while the basic requirements of that model, which were recognized by the members of Young Germany and the left Hegelians, remained unquestioned in the background.

Since its genesis in the eighteenth century, the liberal model of literary criticism had been inseparable from the bourgeois public sphere.25 Indeed, the category of the public sphere itself created the framework for the concept of literary criticism. The establishment of criticism as a

---

25 On this, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Institution of Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), pp. 44–82; in addition see Christa Bürger, Peter Bürger, and Jochen Schulte-Sasse, eds., *Aufklärung und literarische Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt a. M., 1980).
discourse in which mature readers could discuss the character and value of literary texts according to specific rules was based on the assumption that there existed a free space, the public sphere, in which responsible citizens could assemble, without regard for the state and the forces of tradition, in order to reach an understanding about their praxis of life. This public sphere was distinct from traditional groupings and authorities. The principle of criticism, as it was formulated during the Enlightenment, was directed against such traditional, socially determinant forces as the church and the state. In this sense, the concept of criticism, as Reinhart Koselleck has emphasized, was the crucial instrument in destroying the authority of tradition and replacing it by reason. Literary discussion played a special role here: the agreement reached by debating citizens through the medium of literature prepared the way for political awareness. Thus the literary public sphere was, among other things, the forecourt of the political public sphere. Politicization of literary discussion was not the chief political outcome of Enlightenment criticism; it was indirectly brought about, rather, by morality, to the extent that the requirements for a better praxis of life were the theme of literary debate. Moral questions became political the moment they were shifted from the private to the public sector. The early liberal model, as it was constituted in connection with the public sphere of the Enlightenment, aimed at a moral political change. This occurred, on the one hand, when criticism questioned aesthetic and poetic norms and tested them in accordance with the rules of reason and, on the other, when it repeatedly subjected to debate the intersubjectivity of taste involved in the discussion of individual works. The subjectivity of judgments of taste was justified through anthropological consensus, which is necessarily shared by all participants. The normative character of this criticism, which it had in common with absolutist classicism (of, for example, Nicolas Boileau), was derived either from the general rules of reason, which critical opinion only had to follow in order to arrive at the truth, or from insight into the general binding force of subjective judgments of taste.

We must go a step further, however, and emphasize the seldom-formulated premises of enlightened discourse. In the early liberal model, literary discussion was viewed as a subsector of the public sphere—that is, the same basic premises were valid which were generally pertinent to the formation of public opinion: equality and universal accessibility. The early liberal public sphere denied in principle the appeal to privilege based on social status or traditional authority. Theoretically, therefore, the circle of debaters could not be restricted to

specific groups. In the eighteenth century there was obviously a discrepancy between this claim and the literary public that actually existed. Yet this discrepancy between the ideal and reality did not present an obstacle, because it was taken for granted that in the future the public would include everyone. Although the literary criticism of the Enlightenment was normative, it was in principle neither exclusive nor dogmatic. It could not be dogmatic because each of its basic tenets could be critically examined, and it could not be exclusive because there was no place in public discussion for privileged roles. The critic judged in the name of a collective public composed of private individuals; ideally, his Räsonnement reflected the outcome of a public discussion that was carried on, for instance, in journals.

The further development of this model will be outlined here only to the extent that it pertains to the development of literary criticism after 1848. At this point, however, we will bracket the problem of how the classico-romantic category of aesthetic autonomy relates to this model. In 1839 the young Georg Herwegh wrote in his essay “Die neue Literatur”: “True criticism is really nothing but the transmission of production to the masses.” This sentence epitomizes the radical interpretation that was to mark the forties. Criticism was defined as a mediation between the critic and the reading public; but the latter was no longer exclusively an educated, middle-class public. For the first time, reference was made to the entire Volk. To the degree that the concept of literature was democratized, that literature and politics addressed the population as a whole, the program of criticism also changed. The radical authors of the Vormärz fully exploited the possibilities of the liberal model, not infrequently in opposition to Young German criticism, which after all had not called for the democratization of literature until after the July Revolution. As indebted as the democrats and left-Hegelians were to the writers of Young Germany, they were at the same time anxious to distance themselves from the earlier movement. In the circle of the Hallische Jahrbücher it was generally agreed that such authors as Heine, Karl Gutzkow, and Heinrich Laube had carried out the required politicization of literary criticism halfheartedly because they were still too close to romanticism. The accusation of subjective caprice, leveled not least against Heine, overplayed the similarities and at times gave an impression of radicalism which was not borne out. The Börne-Heine debate showed how little the radicals knew

27 On this question, see Christa Bürger, Der Ursprung der bürgerlichen Institution Kunst im höfischen Weimar (Frankfurt a. M., 1977).
29 See Hartmut Steinecke, Literaturkritik des Jungen Deutschland (Berlin, 1982).
their own limits; the majority sided with Börne, whose exploitation of literature in the service of political progress was regarded as exemplary. The younger generation looked primarily to Börne, and in fact Börne developed the implications of the liberal model more consistently and logically, playing it off against the concept of aesthetic autonomy. By strongly emphasizing the public character of literary criticism—in his debate with the *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik*, for example, in which he maintained that the work of reviewing should not be carried out in a dialogue between critics and authors but by the public—Börne revived the move toward the concept of the Enlightenment and thereby also rescued the political function of literary debate. In this connection, he introduced the theme of the universality of the public sphere, which had certainly been accepted during the Enlightenment yet could hardly be said to have been realized. "I despise any society that is smaller than that of mankind," he wrote in opposition to the Hegelians. Accordingly, the locus of literary criticism was not erudite professional conversation or the small circle of the literary coterie but newspapers and journals. "So what is missing [in criticism]? Nothing but fresh air. It lacks feeling for the public sphere, which died for want of exercise. . . . The only thing missing is public opinion, a ballot box in which all votes could be collected so that they could be counted." Börne's goal as publisher of the *Dramaturgische Blätter* and *Zeitschwingen* was to reconstitute such a critical public sphere, to wrest it from Metternich's restoration period. He wanted criticism to become a rational discourse in which citizens could clarify their own lives through the medium of literature. The relationship between the literary and political public spheres was deliberately emphasized by him. Criticism—in this he went beyond the concept of the Enlightenment—was the instrument of political enlightenment. Discussion was political, even if it passed itself off as literary because political discourse was restricted or forbidden by censorship. That literature could thus be put in the service of political enlightenment, that a close relationship could be established between the literary text and political debate, posed no problem for Börne. In this respect he was an heir and follower of the Enlightenment, unlike romantic literary critics. In the final analysis his position was a mutual reflection of literary and political discourse. Börne had unbounded faith in the universality of rational discourse, although he defined it as a generally comprehensible

---

Building a National Literature

and public dialogue rather than a scientific one. He regarded the critic as a Râsonneur, whose judgment was formulated in a completely normative manner but was open to dispute because it represented merely one opinion among many.

Börne’s literary work became a model because of his tendency to democratize literature, not least by stylistic means that removed Râsonnement from the realm of learning and brought it into the street. The Young Germans’ program for literary criticism included the demand that German literature be brought out of its classicistic and romantic isolation. They intended to write on a journalistic level.\(^\text{33}\) It was no coincidence under these circumstances that the question of discourse became the focal point of interest. Since the goal was to produce an effect on the public sphere, the style of writing necessarily became an issue. Once again Heine and Börne became the models to follow, despite the great difference in their styles. Following their example, Young German critics searched for an idiom that would serve as a guide for a new social praxis. Since public opinion was thought to exert an influence, it was tacitly assumed in the literary discourse of the Young Germans that such a change in social praxis was possible. Once the public sphere was no longer suppressed, once censorship and political surveillance of the intelligentsia was lifted, freedom would be extended to the Volk in accordance with the model of liberal criticism. This idealistic hope became the object of liberal self-criticism after 1848; the radical concept of a revolutionary popular public sphere was largely retracted and revoked.

The Young German and left-Hegelian concept of literature drew scarcely any distinction between art and criticism. The traditional distinction lost its meaning in a concept of literature which emphasized the crucial role of criticism. We have to define more exactly, however, what is meant by criticism here. The more its judicial, appraising function was preserved, the more belief in objective aesthetic norms was pushed into the background. Börne had already emphasized that he was least concerned in his reviews with the rules to which a piece conformed. Since he regarded literature as part of the historical process, the notion of timeless norms had no meaning. Literary judgments represented a point of view resulting from a particular perspective in history. The possibility, indeed the necessity, for revision was the product of the historicization of criticism.

In the 1830s and 1840s the concept of criticism was inseparable from historico-philosophical discussion, especially of the Hegelian system. To the extent that Hegel’s concept of spirit was anthropologically ana-

\(^{33}\)See Steinecke, Literaturkritik des Jungen Deutschland, pp. 29–33.
lyzed by the Young German writers and even more by the left-Hegelians, the dualism of theory and reality, resolved by Hegel, was revived. Theory itself was not reality; rather, it demanded to be made into reality. The anthropological analysis and disintegration of the Hegelian *Geist* gave rise to the revolutionary demand that thinking had to be translated into action. The historical process, which Hegel regarded as the work of the *Weltgeist*, thus became an affair of the human species, whose task it was to realize humane emancipation by means of action. At the peak of self-awareness attained by humanity in Hegel's philosophy, theory—as criticism—was to become reality. Just as Theodor Echtermeyer contended in 1838 in the *Hallische Jahrbücher* that science should no longer be pursued for its own sake but needed to be related to life, literature too was regarded as an experimental field for new possibilities in human praxis. Criticism assumed the task of translation; it abandoned the aesthetic realm and brought literature into the praxis of life. At the same time, however, the contradictory aspect of this radical criticism was revealed. Criticism could call for and discuss the transition of literature to practical action, but it was still part of that literature. The postulated praxis had to remain intellectual: it was realized in manifestos, reviews, discussions, and polemics that remained in the realm of literature. In the anticipated revolution, this criticism, as theory that had become fact, had to be sublated. The outcome of the literary debate was foreseeable; the question was whether there could be any literary-critical discussion at all after the political revolution.

The radicalization of the concept of criticism, which elevated mediation between author, text, and public to a revolutionary act, exhausted the political implications of the liberal model and at the same time brought the aporias of this model into the open for the first time; because literature and literary criticism were primarily intended as instruments of political change, they were overtaxed. In Gustav Schlesier we read that “an indescribable influence is consequently exerted on German literature by criticism, on our culture by literature, and on our history by culture. The criticism of literature helps set the history of the Volk on its feet.”34 Not only did the radicalized liberal model fail because such a transmission could not occur in a literary public sphere restricted to the educated—as Georg Büchner alone realized—but its historical functionalism, which had no place for literariness, seriously narrowed the realm of literature and criticism.

The concept of aesthetic autonomy established in classical and romantic literary theory cannot be seamlessly joined to the historico-

---

political criticism of Young Germany and the left-Hegelians. It is debatable whether Young Germany merely suspended the aesthetics of Weimar classicism.\(^{35}\) Both Young German criticism and the concept of the radical Hegelians (albeit less markedly) were at right angles, as it were, to the aesthetics of autonomy. Within the framework of an activist and revolutionary literary theory, the category of aesthetic autonomy was marginal with respect to strategy and system, however much individual critics may have accommodated themselves to it. The philosophy of action and the concept of autonomy could not be systematically combined, because the former demanded that literature be made practical and the latter precluded the transfer of art to praxis on the basis of a categorical distinction between art and reality. The same applies to literary criticism. Whereas liberal criticism spoke for a collective public sphere, romantic criticism, inasmuch as it proceeded from the inherent autonomy of art, saw its task as the interpretation of works. It remained committed primarily to the work of art, not to the public. Liberal criticism of the 1830s and 1840s distanced itself from this hermeneutical model, since it failed to recognize its own concerns—that is, the enlightenment of public opinion—in the discourse of romantic criticism. Because the romantic theory of literature made critical methodology a fundamental problem for the first time by questioning the equivalence of aesthetic and philosophical-critical discourse assumed by the liberal model, it seemed elitist and reactionary to the radical, praxis-oriented critics of the Vormärz.

**Postrevolutionary Literary Criticism**

How did literary criticism after 1849 relate to earlier models and programs? Did it continue the liberal model, develop a new one, or return to the classic-romantic model? When disillusioned liberals of the Nachmärz accounted for the consequences of their radical political program, their self-critical reflections necessarily included their concept of literature. In hindsight, the hopes they had placed on literature seemed to them particularly exaggerated. Given the course of the revolution, in which material interests played such a conspicuous role, the ability of literature to transform reality proved a total illusion. The reader will recall the analysis of Robert Prutz, who relentlessly criticized the hopes of the Vormärz. As early as 1850 Julian Schmidt made equally harsh statements in *Grenzboten* about the literature of the Vormärz and its political program: “But it was characteristic of the German revolution that with its lyrical pathos, dreamy demeanor, and turbid,

obscure longing, it could compete with the poems of its prophets.” Schmidt established a connection between the dilettantism of radical art and revolutionary politics, concluding: “The basic fault was that German art did not know how to cope with the richness of the objective world and became mired in dilettantism. Since this was equally true of German politics, we made no progress there either, and science, which took both its studies and its principles seriously, was the only ground for intellectual development.” Schmidt flatly demanded a renunciation of political ideals, a return to concrete and positive factors, and a turn toward tangible, naive, and clearly unreflective art. His polemics were directed primarily against the reflexivity of radical Vormärz literature, which he denounced as the inability to form artistically—he meant by this the combination of poetry and criticism in a work of art. By again attributing a limited purpose to literature and confining it to creating form, Schmidt knowingly and intentionally demolished the Vormärz concept of critical poetry. “German poetry,” he wrote in 1851, “did not go beyond intention, primarily because it exceeded its limits. It thought it was expanding its range by proceeding from beauty and seeking to throw light on the forces of genesis and decay that belong to the realm of science. It has become apparent, however, that this mixture was an unwholesome one.” Schmidt—more radical in this respect than Prutz—proposed a strict separation between poetry and criticism, between literary praxis and art theory. This undoubtedly political decision was in keeping with the revival of the idea of autonomy in the theory of realism.

This objection to the Vormärz program, that poetry and criticism should be separated, characterized the institution of criticism in the Nachmarz. Its function was restricted. Clearly, mediation between literature and life was no longer of primary importance. Schmidt called for criticism and literary theory to return to their old task of defining and judging works of art. That task was to distinguish between wholesome fare and amateurish works. This is remotely reminiscent of the self-imposed task of the Weimar writers to create a German literature by establishing aesthetic values. But the context is entirely different; for consistent early realists such as Schmidt never really revoked the extra-aesthetic purpose of art, or of criticism. Compared to what it had been in the Vormärz, it was merely modified. The year 1848 did not represent the complete break with prerevolutionary tradition advocated in the polemics of Grenzboten. The continuity and resumption of earlier concepts can be demonstrated in the work of critics such as Schmidt and Prutz, who came from the circle of the left-Hegelians. Schmidt in

36Realismus und Gründerzeit, 2:78, 79, 86.
particular conceived his task as critic and historian largely along the lines of the liberal model.

The critics of the Nachmärz rarely said anything about their perception of themselves; and the question of legitimacy was only occasionally raised. Apparently they felt secure in their position. Consequently we must rely on their implicit attitudes to clarify their theories. The climate surrounding literary discussion undoubtedly changed after 1848, becoming calmer and more moderate. There was no shortage of literary feuds—the one between Lassalle and Schmidt recalls the spectacular feuds of the Vormärz—but generally speaking, critics tried to keep objective and personal matters separate. Confrontations between writers were supposed to be conducted according to certain rules, as the case of Freytag's novel *Soll und Haben* (Debit and Credit) demonstrates. The novel was generally well received. The few negative reviews included one by Marggraff in the *Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung*, which provoked a critical reply in the *Bremer Sonntagsblatt* by F. Pletzer: “Our honored friend Hermann Marggraff in Leipzig has reviewed Freytag’s novel at length in the ‘Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung.’ His criticism, as one might expect from Marggraff . . . , is careful, thorough, and kept within decent bounds; but it is false because he, too, has been unable to separate the person from the subject.”

This complaint was to be expected in view of the rivalry between *Grenzbote* and the *Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung*: although they were in basic agreement, on minor points there was considerable difference of opinion and mutual irritation. The point of departure in Pletzer’s metacriticism is typical: he accuses a critic, whose objectivity was generally unquestioned, of a lack of objectivity. In contrast to the Vormärz, personal attacks were to be excluded from literary discussion.

Marggraff and Pletzer were in agreement on the basic question, namely, the appropriate attitude of critic toward subject. Marggraff, too, insisted on objectivity and impartiality. For this very reason he felt he had to defend himself: “Our friend Pletzer has in this case allowed himself to be drawn beyond the bounds of that fine moderation he otherwise observes and which, like others among our friends, we, too, have repeatedly advocated in this paper. He has leveled an accusation we cannot accept, because it calls into question our critical openness and impartiality.” He therefore felt it his duty to reiterate the grounds of his opinion—which Pletzer seems to have misunderstood—and to use the occasion to defend his methods. This made a basically insignificant controversy interesting. Marggraff understood Pletzer’s attack as

---

part of the *Grenzboten* strategy for fending off, or neutralizing, negative opinions of *Soll und Haben*. Beyond this, he regarded it as interference with freedom of criticism: “We insist, and have the right to insist, on being granted complete freedom to criticize, the denial of which would sign the death warrant of all criticism.” Whether Marggraf was really motivated by the struggle for critical freedom so emphatically defended in this statement need not concern us here. But significantly, he regarded freedom of criticism as a prerequisite for a functioning literary life. Marggraf’s tacit assumption is that literature cannot exist without criticism. The critic thus has a public duty. As we might expect, Marggraf proceeds to argue that the *Grenzboten* critics have a very incomplete understanding of that duty and therefore abuse it. He implies that there are commercial reasons for this and feels forced to conclude that on the whole journalistic criticism in Germany does not have the necessary objectivity and impartiality. German criticism does not fare well compared to English criticism: “Even though the English journalist finds himself often enough in the position of condemning this or that literary achievement, of contesting this or that opinion as false or destructive, he would never presume in this fashion to throw suspicion on an entire class whose existence necessarily stems from and is dependent on the strongly expressed need for a book trade, because he knows that the private opinions of others concern him as little as his private opinions concern them, and because his practical common sense tells him that he himself would be the most hurt by it.”38

Marggraf’s protest against the accusation of partisan subjectivity and his claim to an objective basis of opinion points to the liberal model. His ideal critic is one who leads literary discussion and thereby guides the public sphere toward self-understanding. At the same time, it is clear that Marggraf regards this ideal as endangered by the intervention of private commercial interests and a polemical subjectivity that he considers a bad heritage of German journalism. The criticism of commercialism was directed against changes in the literary public sphere (and thus against the institution of literature), whose significance could hardly be perceived in 1855. The accusation of subjectivity—leveled, incidentally, by the majority of postrevolutionary critics—concerned the polemical style of prerevolutionary literary criticism, which left the author personally unprotected. These two questions must be dealt with separately.

Literary polemics have been an intrinsic part of literary criticism since the Enlightenment. Once literary works are imputed to have an effect on the public, that effect itself becomes the object of discussion. If a text

---

38Ibid., pp. 662, 663, 664.
can exert a questionable influence on public opinion, the critic has the obligation to come forward. Thus Lessing took a stand against the French theater and classicism because he believed they had a negative influence on the German stage. German classicism also made use of polemics, albeit with a different intention. Whereas Lessing’s attacks were primarily intended to have a moral effect, Goethe and Schiller sought through their polemical utterances to make the concept of aesthetic autonomy prevail over the Enlightenment. It was only in Young Germany and the Vormärz, however, that polemics became a fully developed ingredient of criticism. Heine’s attack on Platen, Börne’s remarks against Heine in the Pariser Brieze, and finally, Heine’s memorial to Börne, are examples of personal criticism casting aspersions even on character. With the politicization of literature, the author became such a public figure that even the private sphere, in which his subjectivity was grounded, could become the object of criticism. If the separation between art and life were abolished, as the Young German program called for, criticism would touch even the private life of an author if he exposed himself politically. Heine’s memorial to Börne (1840), which contemporaries—even radicals—regarded as defamatory, brings together the specific elements of prerevolutionary criticism: subjectivity, engagement, and literariness. It is at the same time a political and a literary commentary, drawing its authority not from general maxims but from the intentionally displayed subjectivity of its author—that is, Heine’s notorious frivolity as a writer, which clearly reflects its historical position. Literary critics of the Nachmärz rejected this form of engagement as subjective and biased. They wanted to put an end to the adulteration of discourse, to the blurring of distinctions between the literary and the political, the public and the private, which characterized the works of Heine and the Young German writers. Criticism should retreat to aesthetic and literary norms and thereby weaken the political component in the liberal model or at least make a clean break between literary and political discourse. The literary and political public spheres were still conceived as parts of a whole, but as separate realms with their own norms and conventions. Before 1848 the literary avant-garde considered itself a political avant-garde and was able to expand the task of the critic until it became virtually all-encompassing; after 1848 the concept of criticism was narrowed again, restricted to the concept of artistic judgment which had been institutionalized by the Enlightenment.

To the degree that postrevolutionary liberalism sought to limit the concept and function of public opinion because its extension to the masses seemed threatening, the concept of the relationship between the literary and political functions of criticism also changed. Postrevolu-
Institutionalization of Literature

...tionary skepticism with regard to the political function of art—that is, the scorn for the illusions of the prerevolutionary avant-garde we have encountered in the work of Prutz and Schmidt—ultimately weakened the relationship between the literary and the political public spheres. Certainly, the literary public sphere was no longer in the forefront of the political public sphere; to remain viable it had to allow citizens to relax after the rigors of work. In fact, the normative, judicial criticism of the Nachmärz lacked the very element that had made eighteenth-century criticism progressive: orientation toward the future. The liberal model had itself become conservative; insistence on a judicial function no longer meant freedom from heteronomous authorities but rather a turn toward authoritarianism. The institution of criticism was protected by “objective” aesthetic norms and generic rules, which were taken for granted in reviews.

To be sure, in the epoch between the bourgeois revolution and the founding of the Reich, these were merely tendencies that were overlaid and thwarted by others. The bond between literature and politics had not yet been severed in public discussion. This is clearly demonstrated by the political orientation of the important literary journals, such as Grenzboten, Deutsches Museum, and the Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung. These publications still viewed literary discussion as part of a general debate. In Deutsches Museum, Prutz characteristically addressed not only literary but also political and social issues. A separation between literary and political journalism became evident after 1848; but we should not forget that such critics as Gutzkow, Schmidt, Freytag, and Prutz still availed themselves of both. They saw no problem in switching from political to literary discourse, because they regarded them formally and methodologically as similar. Although the influential organs of public opinion differed in standing from the comparable journals of the Vormärz, they belonged in structure to the liberal tradition. Unlike the family magazines that began to appear after 1850, they were not mass publications. Their circulation—even the influential Grenzboten—was modest. Now as before, propaganda for the popularity of literature primarily reached the educated middle class, not the Volk. Gutzkow’s attempt to address a broader readership in his Unterhaltungen am häuslichen Herd had only moderate success compared to that of later family magazines. His promising, much publicized project failed because of its liberal orientation. To create a truly popular journal he would have had to eliminate politics, as Ernst Keil did in the Gartenlaube. This neither Gutzkow, Schmidt, Freytag, nor Prutz were prepared to do; they clung to a liberal concept of the public sphere, even though it was much reduced.

Ultimately, Prutz did not regard the founding of Deutsches Museum...
Building a National Literature

as a political act. Because so many prerevolutionary publications had failed, a public forum was lacking for literary and political discussion. Although Prutz had repeatedly declared himself in favor of popular literature, he regarded the “educated public” as the true readers of his journal. He thus dissociated himself, on the one side, from scientific journals addressed to specialists and, on the other, from popular enterprises that took the wider public into account. On the whole, he still identified the public with the middle class.39 This was certainly not a progressive journalistic position. Deutsches Museum was only cautiously receptive to changes in the literary market. Prutz avoided purely aesthetic judgments of literature, preferring a literary criticism that would respond to and exert influence on the public, but his orientation was still basically normative. The prospectus of his journal thus insistently announced that it would “take pride in restoring to aesthetic criticism the respect due it because of its strict principles, incorruptible opinions, and dignified and charitable representations.”40 The normative point of view and influence were to be combined: literary criticism was not to ignore the needs of its readers. We would misconstrue the historical significance of this development if we were to take this attitude as evidence that Prutz wanted to abolish a normative art criticism based on aesthetics. Prutz, too, exhibited a more literary and aesthetic point of view in his program of the 1850s than he had in prerevolutionary times. With the recovery of Weimar classicism in the Nachmarz, its aesthetics and literary theory were once again seriously considered in criticism. Deutsches Museum typifies the epoch in combining aesthetic traditionalism with a moderately liberal political concept. The journal was marked by a dualism of aesthetic and historico-political criteria, a dualism characterizing German realism in general.41

The journals reorganized or founded after 1849 clearly demonstrate that the liberal model had been revived by the institution of criticism, albeit in modified form. The intention was to restore literary discourse, which had become politically “chaotic,” to its original condition by eliminating political elements or at least restricting them. A critical analysis of authors and works was sought—once guided, however, by an ideal of objectivity and impartiality based on universally binding aesthetic principles. The preceptorial character of this criticism, no longer oriented toward the idea of the future but rather toward the concept of order, is unmistakable. The critic has quietly become a traditionalist reconditioning the past for use in the present. This brings us to the

40Quoted in Becker, “Das Literaturgespräch,” p. 22.
41On this, see Ulf Eisele, Realismus und Ideologie (Stuttgart, 1976), pp. 90–92.
crucial question for our argument: Were there typical, epoch-defining forms of critical response in this period which differed from those of both the Vormärz and the Gründerjahre? Can we speak of an epoch of literary criticism between 1850 and the founding of the Reich in the same way we can of an early literary theory and praxis of realism?

Only a qualified answer can be given to this question, since we are not concerned with a theoretical system but with critical essays, reviews, and glosses written by individual critics under very different circumstances. One's generation, education, and sensibility all had their effects on criticism. One cannot overlook, for instance, that the most important critics of the Nachmarz—Pruzt, Schmidt, Gutzkow, Gottschall, and Marggraff—played a significant role before 1848 and were more or less strongly marked by the literary discourse of the Vormärz. Nevertheless, their post-1848 criticism shows traits that distinguish it from prerevolutionary criticism. It must be borne in mind that the institution of literary criticism did not conform to a single model. Rarely in practice is a given approach displayed in a pure form; the more usual result is a mixture, compromise, or adaptation. The hidden tension in realist literary theory between an aesthetic and a pragmatic historical approach manifested itself in criticism as an exchange between, or a coexistence of, aesthetic, historical, and moral points of view. In general, the strengthening of the classicistic concept of art was accompanied by a greater regard for aesthetic norms: besides its extra-literary functions, an individual work had to have authority as a work of art. This turn toward normative judgment was not restricted to a particular critic or school. It was a general tendency with a number of manifestations, ranging from a dogmatic display of unquestioned aesthetic rules to a conscious resumption of aesthetic reflection in emulation of classicism. A critique of a particular work is thus not infrequently the occasion for a discussion of general aesthetic and literary problems. Theoretical and critical self-understanding took place largely in the medium of criticism.

Some examples will serve to illustrate this critical process: the reviews of Gutzkow's *Die Ritter vom Geiste* (1851–52) by Schmidt, Karl Rosenkranz, and Carriere, and Freytag's review of Willibald Alexis's novel *Isegrim*, which appeared in *Grenzboten* in 1854.

The reviews of Gutzkow's novel all share the normative approach mentioned above. The work is judged from a general point of view, whether historical, moral, or aesthetic. Each critic sees it as his task, after adequate preparation, to evaluate the novel; that is, to determine to what degree the work satisfies his own requirements and the norms established for the genre of the novel. As we might expect, this tendency is most evident in the detailed review by the Hegelian Rosenkranz in
Deutsches Museum, which comes close to being a systematic investigation. Despite its thoroughness, the review remains abstract. The positions determining the judgment of the novel were obviously fixed before the reviewer began his presentation. The important question for Rosenkranz is whether Gutzkow was capable of writing a social period novel and what presuppositions figure in such a work. Rosenkranz is accordingly least concerned with the complicated story, which Schmidt and Carriere explore in great detail. At the start of his review Rosenkranz refers briefly to the content of the novel in order to establish its character. His intention is to prevent the book from being labeled political, for this would mark it as a polemic, unsatisfying both ideologically and aesthetically. Having justified the novel’s content and view of the world, Rosenkranz turns to its poetic execution. His reservations concern the characters and presentation. The characters are classified by him into ideal types, supposedly embodying the idea of the novel; semi-ideal representational types; and amoral figures, who act out of pure egoism. His judgment of the novel conforms to this classification. Of the ideal characters Rosenkranz writes: “The group of ideal characters is the weakest. They lack depth and step-by-step development. These knights of the spirit are noble, brave, and speak cleverly, but they do not undergo a metamorphosis that would place them at the peak of their time. We appreciate them, but we do not learn from them.” The other groups are judged similarly. The standard of measurement is not derived from the object and its presentation but introduced into the review a priori. The treatment of the prince is a clear example: “This description of the prince has great style, but it is imperfect. It is like a beautiful statue that has been made from two others and is therefore disharmonious.” Gutzkow’s figures fail to amalgamate into harmonious characters; they exhibit unresolved contradictions that make synthesis an impossibility. It is obvious that Rosenkranz regards this Young German trait in Gutzkow as a poetic and aesthetic shortcoming. Yet he does not reflect on the question why a harmonious character should be preferable to a fragmented one and why one creation should be aesthetically more perfect than another. As a reviewer Rosenkranz sticks to basic principles without explicitly justifying his norms. The composition and presentation of the novel are treated in the same way. Rosenkranz is not entirely satisfied with the result, but he is not blind to the advantages of the construction. He praises Gutzkow in the following terms: “In fairness to Gutzkow, one has to grant him a pragmatic unity, which he has been able to preserve despite the many episodes and the many characters. Nothing has been idly dropped. . . . Even the poetic justification, nowadays often handled so frivolously, has been strictly managed.” For Rosenkranz, however, this technical mastery is
not in itself poetic; nor is the style aesthetically satisfying: "The freshness and virtuosity of Gutzkow's narrative must be acknowledged, no matter how severely it may be criticized. His style is clear, fluent, rounded, diversified, and appropriate to the subject matter." But the critic charges the author with a lack of poetic imagination and spontaneity. His narrative remains too rational, too much a product of reflection. Schmidt and Carriere register the same complaints in their reviews. But these complaints are not in themselves of interest here; they concern us only because of the way they are introduced into the review. Rosenkranz formulates his opinion of Ritter vom Geiste as if it were the result of his reading; yet the process of reading is not made apparent. His opinion is never really substantiated, either by quotations that would give an impression of the narrative or by the characterization and analysis of the stylistic means. This apodictic opinion presents the critic as a judge who classifies and assigns a rank by merit. Rosenkranz unmistakably exhibits the beginnings of a rigid dogmatism—a lack of reflection, which, however, is not yet pronounced because the reviewer claims to be equitable and fair.

Such fairness is entirely lacking in the Grenzboten review. It is partisan and treats the novel as the work of an ideological and literary adversary who has to be brought down. When Schmidt remarks that Gutzkow makes the reviewer's job easier because he is an intellectual and reflective poet and hence pursues clear, discoverable intentions, he hardly means this as a compliment. The reflective writer contradicts the theory of realism. Schmidt quickly reveals his strategy. From the outset he distinguishes between the relatively fixed rules of the drama, which determine the methodology of the critic, and the relatively open and indeterminate form of the novel, which evades judgment. The critic will, accordingly, refrain from applying fixed norms and judge the novel according to its intentions: "These intentions can be discovered and used as a basis for testing the worth of the performance." Schmidt, however, does not follow his own principles when he maintains, in opposition to the theory of the novel set forth in Gutzkow's preface, that it is impossible for this work to present a totally aesthetic view of life: "We would regard such an overall view as a contradiction of the idea of art, and its execution as possible only if fixed, finite, concrete phenomena were dissolved into indeterminate generalities lacking physiognomy; if the individualities were fragmented according to symbolic points of view and the ideas allowed to perish in imperfect representa-

Building a National Literature

tives, in bad individualities." Schmidt does not judge *Ritter vom Geiste* exclusively according to Gutzkow’s formulated program for a multifaceted social novel but by means of an apodictically introduced concept of mimesis (concreteness versus generality). Although the review pretends to argue on immanent grounds and to determine the worth of the novel on the basis of its inherent assumptions, Schmidt in reality supports his methods by a normative approach that explicitly relies on fundamental aesthetic and poetic principles. His search for details accordingly supplies the evidence from which his judgment must inexorably proceed.

Schmidt’s criticism, which is eventually directed against the novel as a whole, fastens on the sketching of characters, the composition of the text, the motivation of the action, and the general ideology of the work. This is not the place to pursue his arguments individually, since it is not the theory of realism but rather the act of criticism that is under discussion here. Like Rosenkranz, Schmidt is unable to reconcile himself to the characterization. He complains that Gutzkow is incapable of lending immediacy to his figures. Instead of rounding out features to lead to a harmonious whole, Gutzkow offers reflection, which is meant to link the particular case to the general. Yet characteristically, Schmidt does not ask whether and to what degree reflection is possible, or necessary, in a social novel. Instead, he apodictically rejects this approach: “Such ideas give no real pleasure. One is neither amused nor inspired by them; and the worth of a novel that moves exclusively along such lines can only be sought in its connection to a specific tendency, in the composition as a whole.” Schmidt here uses “one” not merely as a variant on the personal “I.” His choice of expression is appropriate, because the critic speaks for the reader by presenting the effect made by the novel. He does not, however, verify the novel’s reception empirically. Schmidt is not interested in how contemporary readers understand Gutzkow’s characters. His argumentation is basically axiomatic: a reflective depiction of character is artificial, so the reader (“one”) gets no pleasure from it.

The fullness of the review (twenty-three pages) is not the result of an attempt to investigate the uniqueness of the text or to reveal its structure. Its length is due, rather, to the numerous examples the reviewer presents in support of his opinion. The alternation between apodictic judgment—occasionally explained on the basis of an aesthetic axiom—and textual examples (plot, characters, motivations) determines the

---

44 Ibid., 4:111.
rhythm of the review. Thus Schmidt summarizes his objections to Gutzkow's characterization after revealing the failure in motivation by citing a number of examples: "Characterization has always been Gutzkow's weak point. His total lack of idealism is shared with recent Frenchmen and Englishmen—i.e., with Balzac and Thackeray—but he also lacks the boldness and sureness of line that at least adds a certain interest to the gloomy pictures of these writers." The objection to Gutzkow's characters is twofold. It is directed first against his content, that is, against his concept of people. His figures are too problematic, too negative, for an advocate of poetic realism. But at the same time it is directed against his form of presentation, namely, the pointillist composition of a figure from separate, contradictory traits that do not form a harmonious whole: "There are no organically articulated individuals, only aggregates of empirically introduced, anecdotal portrait elements and arbitrary thoughts."45

As we have seen, Schmidt's critical procedure is axiomatic and normative. He always judges the individual work as an example of already existing principles and points of view. The axioms are not always fully developed, but they are not infrequently mentioned. The critic is aware that his judgment is given authority by a theoretical system, but he does not make this theory the object of his critique; he does not usually reflect on it. The review is presented as a judgment, and there is no desire to hide its character as such. The reader has to be told what to think of the novel. A close look reveals that Schmidt even exaggerates the systematic character of his review; for when it seems necessary to him he introduces points of view not in accord with his initially defined strategy. Schmidt concedes, for example, that Gutzkow is successful in drawing his satiric characters, but he then proceeds to underscore their deficiencies. This is why he introduces the moral purpose of literature without further preparation: "The poetic depiction of even wretched characters must always serve the highest purpose of literature, the ethical refinement and purification of the spirit."46 But he does not explain how this didactic maxim, derived from the aesthetics of the Enlightenment, can be reconciled with the principle of poetic concretization.

Even more striking is Schmidt's method of political criticism, which abruptly introduces extra-aesthetic viewpoints into the review. He calls the political theme of the novel—a program for a new federation that will affect humanity and political freedom—diletantish. The literary program and the real political conditions in Prussia to which Gutzkow refers have not been brought into line. It is at those points that

46Ibid., 4:126.
Schmidt’s political ideology becomes plain in his judgment of the novel. In his view, the political tendency in *Ritter vom Geiste* contradicts the development of realpolitik. This estimation is based, without explanation, on a pragmatic concept of reality, whose relationship to reflection theory is not made clear. Accordingly, the review closes with a moral-political appeal rather than an aesthetic condemnation of the novel. Fictional reality is casually carried over to historical reality and is criticized as such. In place of the secret alliances described by Gutzkow, Schmidt calls for political parties that will further the liberal program. The battle, Schmidt says, can only “be waged by a determined struggle against the insensibility of egoism, . . . only by devoted work and self-abnegating humility.”

Thus the end of Schmidt’s critique is fundamentally different from its beginning and its proposed method. The critic has had the last word and his opinions have taken precedence over those of the novelist and his work. Schmidt’s critique of form and composition proves in the last analysis to be a criticism of the message—that is, of Young German tendencies. This again demonstrates the power of the liberal model, in which the relationship between literature and politics plays an important role. This link is no longer established in the review, however; its aesthetic and political points of view exist side by side, independent of each other.

The third critic, Carriere, is willing to concede to Gutzkow all the capabilities and qualities that Schmidt denies him: the ability to make an aesthetic presentation, a feeling for the national character of the German novel, and a capacity for artistic development, which has led to the heightening of his literary achievement. In other words, Carriere approaches the novel through its author, since he compares the novel with Gutzkow’s earlier works and views it as the sum of his previous literary experiences. As the critic emphasizes, this process of maturation has allowed Gutzkow to overcome the viewpoint of the Young Germans: “His Weltanschauung has matured in religious and ethical respects as well, and here again he comes close to the viewpoint of a free humanity achieved by Lessing; his earlier doubts about God and immortality and his youthfully brash disavowal of them have given way to a need for faith.” It is this retraction of Young German radicalism that makes the novel acceptable to Carriere. *Ritter vom Geiste* appears to him a novel in the tradition of *Wilhelm Meister*. Yet despite his general approbation, Carriere offers a number of criticisms and objections that concur in part with those of Schmidt and Rosenkranz. Carriere sees himself no less as a judge delivering praise and blame. He says, for example: “On the other hand, I have to fault Gutzkow for occasionally

47Ibid., 4:130.
portraying static objects descriptively instead of creating a picture through action and movement, as the art of literature must do in contrast to painting.” The appeal to Lessing is unmistakable. Carriere, too, introduces axiomatic aesthetic and critical principles. Yet the general impression is not the same as in Schmidt’s critique. Carriere is more conciliatory, more flexible, and less systematic in his application of aesthetic theory. The construction of his review is looser and more journalistic than Schmidt would have allowed. We can conclude from a number of details that the essay was written in parts, each intended for a different issue of the weekly publication in which it appeared. Furthermore, Carriere’s “I” is more personal and more individualistic than Schmidt’s critical persona. When he writes “I have already indicated how different Gutzkow’s thinking is in regard to Christianity from what it was formerly, when he wrote Wally,”48 he is referring to himself as an individual, as a journalist writing these lines at a specific point in time. Carriere’s review combines normative, historical, and personal approaches. The normative predominates, but its predominance is modified by a historical perspective. Thus Carriere is also decidedly more open to the new creative principles of Gutzkow’s novel than is Schmidt, whose dogmatic concept of realism gets in the way of his structural insight.

The fourth review we will consider, written by Freytag for Grenzboten, is of Alexis’s novel Isegrim (1854). The Prussian orientation of the author and of his novel found an immediate response in the reviewer, who emphasized its ideological-political affinity at the outset and made it the focal point of his review. Alexis was no literary novice: he was well known to the public through his earlier novels. In the second paragraph of his review, Freytag uses this knowledge to place the novel within Alexis’s oeuvre as a whole and to demonstrate the singularity of his fictional world. Not until the third paragraph of his lengthy review does he get to the novel itself, which he introduces by summarizing its content and describing its principal characters. Following his description, Freytag begins his critique by asking to what extent this novel can be considered a work of art. The principle of epic closure in a narrative is the standard by which the novel will be measured critically. Freytag first establishes that it was not Alexis’s intention to achieve epic completeness and that this norm would in any case have been difficult to realize, given the disparity of the material. But the author’s intention is not the critic’s ultimate yardstick. Rather, he calls that intention into question, because it fails to achieve its goal—the

48 Frankfurter Konversationsblatt (1852), nos. 105–7; quotations are from Literaturkritik, vol. 4, ed. Hohendahl, pp. 132–34, 137, 133.
creation of a larger artistic effect. At this point Freytag gives a clear explanation of the relationship between aesthetic theory and literary praxis: if the correct effect can be achieved in practice, it can deviate as much as desired from existing aesthetic and poetic norms. The critic seems to be abandoning the "old pedantic theory." He does so, however, only within the context of a more comprehensive strategy, which once again underscores the necessity for a normative approach. Thus Freytag writes: "The permanent need of a great many of these rules of composition is not difficult to understand." Accordingly, he says about Isegrimm: "We expect the novel to depict an occurrence whose parts are comprehensible because they give the effect of having an inner relationship to a complete whole and which thereby makes possible a certain uniform shading of style, description, and characterization. This inner unity, this connection of incidents in the novel, must have its source in the personalities depicted and the logical compulsion of the underlying circumstances of the novel."49

The connection to Christian Friedrich Blanckenburg's theory of the novel is evident, whether it was conscious or not. Inner unity—a trans-historical law of composition—which in the novel is derived from the characters, is the deciding factor for him. Freytag goes one step further as a critic; he not only establishes the existence of such norms but gives them authority through his references to the effect produced. For the reader to receive an impression of structural reality, empirical reality has to be transformed. The bare depiction of reality would confuse the reader, since it cannot provide a view of the whole. Alexis's novel is judged against the background of these explicitly introduced and explained norms: Isegrimm violates the laws of the epic because it increasingly subordinates the development of the characters to the political events, which should remain in the background. Freytag then extends his criticism to the characters, which according to him lack the inner harmony that is so vital to epic construction: "His main characters almost all lack clarity of action and do things that, given their personalities, are not believable." The logic of the review follows the logic of normative poetics. After a descriptive and historical introduction, Freytag summarizes the content of the novel. In the fourth, and central, paragraph, he sets forth the aesthetic and poetic basis for his judgment. These norms are subsequently applied to the discussion of the work in hand. The review ends in a consistent manner with a summarizing conclusion: "We can thus not grant the writer's claim that his work,

with the help of free invention, characterizes a great time. This final opinion, which emphasizes aesthetic failure, is explained again in the concluding paragraphs in order to make the aesthetic and artistic quality of Alexis’s novel as clear as possible.

Freytag’s review is greatly indebted to the ideal of rationalistic criticism. Both its strategy and its logic are derived from that approach: the critic sees himself as a reasoner for the public. Critical judgment is the logical, inevitable result of a thought process in which great principles—that is, aesthetic principles—are established and applied to individual objects. What is compelling in this process is that the reader can follow the judgment. If the aesthetic premises are correct and the description of the work is appropriate, the conclusion will be the same whoever the critic is. As the implied reader of the text, one reviewer can be replaced by another. In his text he remains abstract. The reader is of course aware that the description of the novel is due to Freytag the individual, but the text of the review gives no evidence of this. Rather, it is assumed that his observations have the same character as the theoretical parts of the text. His sentences present the qualities of the novel (action, characters) as given, referring to them as historical phenomena. Freytag’s review is based on the certainty that rational Räsonnement can accurately describe and judge the essence of a work of art. This assertion should not be misunderstood, however. Freytag by no means confuses art with reality. The lack of distinction between aesthetic and historical representation is precisely what he finds fault with in the novel. What is characteristic of a reasoned critique is, rather, its claim to be able to reformulate the aesthetic text in such a way that it becomes subordinate to a judgmental logic. It never occurred to Freytag that the development of such a judgment could be problematic, that the very objectivity of a description could be a fiction in which the critic passes off his observations and impressions of the text as facts. This same lack of discernment is found in rationalism and classicism. Characteristically, in his review of Isegrimn Freytag follows a classic model aiming more at an aesthetic than a moral-practical judgment. As a critic, Freytag represents “the viewpoint of art against the writer himself,” and the public and its interests are only secondary considerations. The reason is obvious: according to the logic of criticism, the public, as the ideal reader, has to arrive at the same conclusion as the critic.

The four reviews under discussion are not a sufficient basis for an exhaustive discussion of critical discourse in the Nachmärz; they do,
however, provide a picture of the possibilities and limitations in postrevolutionary literary criticism. The dangers inherent in a normative-rationalist approach were not lost on the critics of the time. Gottschall used the occasion of a review of Gutzkow’s *Die Zauberer von Rom* (1858–61) to take issue with Schmidt’s methodology. This polemic, the outcome of a harsh critique of Gutzkow’s novel which appeared in *Grenzboten*, affords insight into the contemporary consciousness. Gottschall’s deliberations are interesting because they go beyond the particular case. He accuses the journal of misusing and misunderstanding the purpose of literary criticism: “The harm ‘Grenzboten’ does to our literary development is more significant than the good it does in fighting pernicious trends.” What is noteworthy here is not only the attempt to set limits on the dogmatic realism of *Grenzboten* but also the intention—no matter how incompletely realized—to define criticism as a public institution and to defend it against Schmidt. Schmidt refers in this context to an “economy of literature,” in which the critic is given the role of a proofreader deleting what is harmful. The reviewer is compared to the sparrow who devours harmful grubs but can itself become dangerous if allowed to range too freely over the cornfields and vineyards of literature. Obviously, Gottschall prefers a system of checks and balances in which power is carefully apportioned. The *Grenzboten* critics, for instance, are accused of having misused their judgmental position by running down the public: “Through one-sided, often bitter and biased criticism, they have tried to discourage contemporary production and undermine faith in the authority, worth, and motivating force of a public that constantly allows itself to be impressed by emphatic assertions.” This complaint is directed against the overestimation of the principle of realism; yet, at the same time, it unintentionally raises the issue of form: the intimidation of the public through rational discourse. Gottschall’s critique concludes that the rational discourse of the liberal model, on which Schmidt and Freytag rely, has become doctrinaire and lost its dialogic character. The public no longer plays the role of an interlocutor in literary criticism. Gottschall probably touched a sensitive nerve here. Changes in the structure of the press—in particular, the appearance of family periodicals, inexpensive serial novels, and pulp fiction—indicate that the literary public was changing, that the educated reader to whom journals such as *Grenzboten* and *Deutsches Museum* were addressed was no longer the norm. A critic such as Gottschall was by no means close to

52Rudolf Gottschall, “Karl Gutzkow’s ‘Zauberer von Rom,’” in Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung (December 16, 1858), no. 51, pp. 925–33; quotations are from pp. 927, 928.
Institutionalization of Literature

resolving this dilemma. His suggestion to return to classic aesthetics (Schiller and Goethe) remains entirely within the framework of the bourgeois institution of literary criticism. His self-understanding as a critic does not essentially distinguish him from Marggraff, Prutz, Schmidt, or Rosenkranz. The change he observed in the literary public sphere did not lead him to a fundamental criticism of the institution but rather to a typical late-liberal adaptation of the model. The metaphor of the critic as a pest controller who must himself be controlled is instructive. The object of this literary criticism is literature, not public self-awareness. Gottschall’s aesthetic rigorism is as ineffective a solution as Schmidt’s moral rigorism. The search for fixed norms, the desire to replace the subjectivity of the Vormärz by objective standards, has to be understood as an attempt to bring the changing literary scene under control. Clear-sighted critics of the Nachmärz noticed that literary conditions were changing, yet they did not grasp the nature of those changes. By and large they held to their traditional role until the founding of the Reich. They trusted in the efficacy of the institution of literary criticism even when they distanced themselves from the dialogic model of early liberalism (Räsonnement). Earlier critics saw themselves as opinion-forming publicists, not as hired journalists who had to write what their chief editors demanded. The years between the bourgeois revolution and the founding of the Reich were a transitional phase in literary criticism. The dominant model of liberalism had lost its force, and alternative forms appeared, even though a total change in the paradigm had not yet occurred. The New Criticism—namely, a feuilletonistic criticism—did not dominate the press until after 1870.53

53On this, see Russell A. Berman, Between Fontane and Tucholsky: Literary Criticism and the Public Sphere in Imperial Germany (New York, 1983).