Building a National Literature

Franciscono, Renate Baron, Hohendahl, Peter Uwe

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The Institutionalization of Literary History

The Function of the History of Literature

A critical history of Germanistik and literary criticism still exists only in fragments, in divergent approaches that show all too clearly the difficulties connected with this task. What would be the object of such a history? On what should the historian train his or her eye? On the educational content of the discipline of literary studies? On the theories and methods of the field, or on its organization? To simply write a history of the field would not permit one to describe some important processes, for the discipline as we know it was not yet established in the mid-nineteenth century. At that time German studies, together with philology, still included folklore and jurisprudence, but literary history (recent literature) and literary studies (text analysis) were not necessarily part of them. Before 1860 literary history was mainly in the hands of men who occupied chairs in other fields or were active as free-lance writers. Gervinus's field was history, and even after the completion of his history of literature (1835–42) he maintained close ties with the field of European history. Haym's field was philosophy, and Prutz came to the history of literature from classical philology. Dilthey, to cite a representative of the younger generation, began his studies in theology and never restricted himself to German literature.

Although literary history became an academic discipline with its own academic chairs after 1850, the subject and its methodology had al-

ready been developed in the forties, largely under the guidance of Gervinus. There is good reason to distinguish in literary history between the institution and its organization. Discussion of theory and method preceded the organization of the discipline. The establishing of chairs in literary history in conjunction with the field of German studies and not, as earlier, with general history or aesthetics is an indication that the controversial discipline of literary history had become acceptable in the seventies. At the same time, the transition from a loosely organized institution to an established field of university studies—with academic chairs, regular courses, and final examinations—reflected a shift from open discussion to an attitude of affirmation. To understand this shift, one has to remember that such early historians of literature as Gervinus, Hettner, Schmidt, Prutz, and, indeed, even Gottschall were not writing for universities but for the general public. Gervinus specifically stated that his works were not meant for university and secondary school students but for the nation. Thus the development of the history of literature, which was closely connected with that of political history, was not only a question of theory and method but also of presentation. As late as 1859 Haym defended Schiller against attacks by professional historians, insisting that though he may have contributed little to scholarship, he contributed all the more to the form of historical presentation: “From the standpoint of historiography, they were by no means so worthless, and even less were they ineffectual. The neglect of form in the field of scholarship, the prevalence of learned pedantry, of laborious rigidity, and at the same time of sloppy crudeness is a basic German fault that to some extent we . . . have to acknowledge with shame even today.” Learned pedantry limits the efficacy of a work to a circle of specialists and makes it impossible to reach the general public. Characteristically, Gervinus, whose aim was to reach this very public, almost totally avoided scholarly apparatus and citations in his history of literature to make it more readable. As long as literary history was addressed to the general literary public sphere—that is, until about 1870—style was no less a part of the field of history than theory and methodology. It is significant that as late as 1873 Karl Hillebrand disparaged Gervinus’s achievement by attacking his style. The alleged clumsiness of Gervinus’s writing was for Hillebrand a sign that his history of literature was obsolete. By disputing the general intelligibility of Gervinus’s famous history of literature, he hoped to dislodge it from the public consciousness. The question of presentation, to which we will return, proved a political issue.

The change from a public discipline with general cognitive interests

\footnote{Rudolf Haym, Gesammelte Aufsätze, ed. Wilhelm Schrader (Berlin, 1903), p. 83.}
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To a specialized field of scholarship was evident after 1848 in the discussion of methodology; on the organizational level, it was not complete until after the founding of the Reich. The relationship in chronology is anything but accidental. This change was not simply a process within the scholarly study of history which could be characterized as positivism. It was, rather, the reverse: the earlier positivism, exemplified by Wilhelm Scherer, reflected the change in institutional structure. Because literary history fulfilled a public function in the Vormärz, and even after 1850, it was bound—as was literary criticism—to the destiny of the public sphere. Until it began to conflict with the new ideology of the Reich in about 1870, its public task as politically reasoned literary history was substantiated through its theory and methodology. Hillebrand’s polemic against Gervinus, published in 1873 in the *Preussischen Jahrbücher*, is a good source of information for the attack on earlier literary history. Its opening sentence makes no secret of the critic’s destructive intentions: “It must seem an almost unsolvable mystery to the upcoming generation how a writer without style, a scholar without method, a thinker without depth, a politician without foresight, and a person ultimately without magic or strong personality could have gained an importance in German history, in the intellectual, moral, and political history of Germany, which only a very few men could boast of over the centuries.” Even though in a footnote the editors of the journal—Heinrich von Treitschke and Wilhelm Wehrenpfennig—dissociated themselves to some extent from the author’s views, this hardly changes the fact that one of the most important liberal journals was criticizing the historian to whom liberal reasoned historiography owed some of its crucial impulses. What characterized this scathing review was that it did not stop with a discussion of theory and methodology, as earlier criticism had—for example, Danzel’s—but was directed equally against Gervinus the writer and politician. Hillebrand’s ultimate goal was to call into question the character and function of literary history as it had been introduced and practiced by Gervinus. What annoyed him was Gervinus’s immense influence, which was attested to by Schmidt, the most prominent Nachmärz historian of literature, in his obituary for Gervinus. “I belong to the generation most strongly affected by his work,” Schmidt acknowledges, “a generation of youths still engaged in study when it appeared.” In his article, which includes some critical remarks, he concludes that Gervinus’s history of literature is one of the classic writings of the German nation. Schmidt

saw its value less in the information it contained, which seemed to him outdated, or its methodology, which had changed, than in the thought process Gervinus manifested in it. In this sense, he regarded his own works as a continuation of Gervinus’s history of literature or, conversely, Gervinus as the precursor of national-liberal literary history. Accordingly, he avoided criticizing Gervinus’ political position, which after 1850 increasingly contradicted the consensus of the profession. Because Gervinus, an erstwhile supporter of the constitution, did not join in the pro-Prussian turn of the Gotha group and later spoke out against the founding of the Reich under Bismarck, he was almost totally isolated among his colleagues in 1870. Hillebrand’s polemic must be viewed against this background. It was directed against the now undesirable political implication of liberal reasoned historiography. In so doing, Hillebrand sharpened Gervinus’ moderate position by putting it in a broader context. He linked it with the radical tradition of the Enlightenment and represented Gervinus, against Gervinus’s express intent, as an ally of Börne. Thus he was able to denounce the historian, who belonged to the center right in 1848, as a disguised Jacobin: “At heart, both [Gervinus and Börne] proceeded from completely French points of view . . . ; except that the one stopped with 1791, and the other with 1793.”

Gervinus would not have recognized himself in this characterization, which contradicted his true nationalist sentiments. Still, it contained a grain of truth. Both the critic Börne and the historian Gervinus saw it as their task to exert political influence on public opinion through literary discussion. Accordingly, Hillebrand’s criticism of Gervinus’s style and method was but a prelude to his real accusations, in which his political difference from Gervinus was spelled out. When Hillebrand criticized the clumsiness of Gervinus’s presentation and found fault with his subjective method, and when he singled out Gervinus’s historical concept of south German liberalism as a failure, his real aim was to criticize the connection in Gervinus’s work between scholarship and politics. Characteristically, Hillebrand pronounces Gervinus’s reasoning concerning the goal of history unfruitful and plays Hettner’s *Geistesgeschichte* off against Gervinus’s teleological concept of history. It is “unfruitful, because they [Gervinus’s reasons] do not convey the impression of an independent, significant personality; they do not illustrate aesthetic laws; they do not explain the causes of the success or failure of historical or literary achievements; they merely state what relationship those achievements had to the partisan interests and partisan emotions of Herr Gervinus in 1840 (or 1853).” Quite apart from the questionable

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aspect of this characterization, which hardly fits Gervinus, Hillebrand's polemic has an unmistakable purpose. It aims to relate the development of a critical position to "partisan emotions," that is, to an attitude that is irrelevant from a scholarly point of view. And conversely, it suggests that an objective, neutral position is appropriate in scholarship: "On the other hand, Gervinus's disputatious nature struggled against aesthetic contemplation and the historical neutrality that would have been necessary to do justice to the various manifestations of the national spirit in works of literature. . . . The historian—if he is not, of course, of Schlosser's school (like Gervinus)—takes the world as it is and tries to understand it, as a botanist does his flora; the systematizer tries to dictate to the world what it can and cannot do." Hillebrand recognizes and at the same time misrepresents Gervinus's intentions. Since Gervinus, following the earlier idealistic tradition (represented by Humboldt and Hegel), proceeds from a substantive concept of history, neutrality is a methodological impossibility. But this does not mean that Gervinus saw himself as a systematizer. On the contrary, his historical method can be defined as a criticism of idealistic systematology. The accusation of system building, popular since Haym's criticism of Hegel, is basically aimed at the critical claim put forth in Gervinus's theory of history: that it distinguishes strictly between the facts of history and historical truth. Hillebrand, in contrast, demands that the historian conform to the facts, that he recognize the true processes. Thus he cannot forgive Gervinus for failing to acknowledge, as did most of his profession, that the Prussian victory over Austria was the "greatest revolution since Luther," instead regarding it as a civil war wanted by the government, not by the Volk. He denies Gervinus's late historical criticism any scholarly value. Yet in the end, Hillebrand is honest enough to admit openly that his polemic has a political basis. It is only superficially a discussion of scholarship and questions of theory and method. The real point of contention is a metatheoretical one—the function of literary history. Gervinus's expectation that literary history would politicize the literary public sphere provoked vehement protest in 1873, because the once hoped for political consequences were no longer acceptable. "It is a real question," Hillebrand writes, "whether it is desirable for every citizen to take an active part in state affairs, whether there are not more immediate and higher duties than civic ones, whether such participation might not even be dangerous for an unqualified person; Gervinus's notion of the modern state as a necessarily democratic one is highly debatable." The classification of citizens as qualified or unqualified, a specific aspect of late liberalism not altogether-

6 Ibid., pp. 392, 401, 411, 425.
er lacking in Gervinus, had a target that was not openly stated: the proletarian masses. Characteristically, Hillebrand considered absurd Gervinus’s thesis that contemporary history was carried by the masses, and to stifle such ideas he referred to the shaping force of historical personalities. So self-evident was it to him in 1873 that history is made above all by people that he did not bother to substantiate his point of view.

As the obituaries for Gervinus state, his concepts of history and the history of literature left so clear a mark on the next generation that it could not avoid coming to terms with his great example. Even more than Leopold von Ranke, whose method became the great model to follow after 1870, Gervinus exerted a strong influence on the young, because in the striking formulations of his history of literature and his Historik (1837), he assigned literary history an important task within history as a whole. It was this theoretical and methodological achievement, imperfect though it was when measured against the demands of the following generation (represented by Danzel and Hettner among others), which first made it possible to define the public function of literary history. By conceiving the historical process as a uniform evolution that could express itself equally in different spheres and media, Gervinus saw an inner, rather than a merely mechanical, relationship between literary and political developments. Gervinus defined the political function of literary historiography as the clarification of this relationship. He first presented his interpretation in the introduction to his history of literature (1835) and later, with greater theoretical reflection, in his small Historik (1837).

**Reasoned Literary History**

Gervinus’s argument for the history of literature begins with a criticism of scholarly studies and documentary investigations that lack not only a talent for presentation but a true historical point of view linking the past to the present. For Gervinus, only the cognitive interests of the present are able to raise the investigation of sources to the level of history. The choice of German literary history as a subject is justified in his view by its special position within German history. It alone possesses a certain measure of completeness that can make it a guiding principle for the present: “It has reached a goal, if there is any truth at all to be learned from history, from which one can successfully glimpse a whole, from which one can receive a calming, indeed an uplifting, impression and derive the greatest instruction.” Gervinus justifies his choice of subject by arguing that German literary history, in contrast to political history, represents a meaningful whole that can be narrated:
"The highest goal of any complete series of events in world history can be reached only when the idea striving for expression in them has really been accepted and an essential improvement of society or humanity has thereby been achieved."  

Let us once again clarify the nature of this relationship between literary history and contemporary interests, the precise character of which would have to be determined: the present can learn from the past only when the latter brings forth an idea that the present can follow. The historical point of view, which legitimizes a link with the past, is based on the idea that shapes the material and holds it together. To this extent, the aesthetic point of view has to mediate between the present and the past; only when an event can be understood and depicted as a work of art can any meaning be drawn from it. Historical truth, which makes the depiction of history worthwhile, does not exist on the level of fact; rather, it becomes visible through the presentation of the idea, which absorbs the material. Even though Gervinus occasionally falls back on a pragmatic, didactic interpretation of history, his concept of literary history is inconceivable without a substantive concept of history. This point of view is made clear in his Historik, and especially in his reference to Humboldt's essay "Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers" (On the Historian's Task) (1820–21). For Gervinus, the historian's work falls between the poet's and the philosopher's. Like them, he must separate the inessential from the necessary: "For by his ability to recognize what is necessary in a given series of facts, the historian places himself in the domain of the philosophers; and there is no danger at all in this, if only he will retain his basic feeling for the factual and not try to become a historical philosopher, or even a philosophizing historian, but simply a thinking historian." There is no need here to consider to what extent this statement is directed against Hegel and all attempts to create a historical construction, since we are concerned less with the contrast between Gervinus's approach and the philosophy of history than with their similarity with respect to the empirical interpretation of history. What Gervinus says in his Historik about the difference between a chronicle and a historical presentation applies, of course, to the history of literature as well: facts are the point of departure, but only a view of what is essential can afford insight into historical connections, which in turn make possible a unified presentation. Gervinus is convinced that these ideas are not constructions of the historian, but rather are inherent in the material itself. Thus the circular argument that ideas can only be derived from facts whereas facts can only be given order.

with the help of ideas is for him not a significant circularity. In examining the material, he thinks, the ideas become accessible: “As soon as the historiographer makes the growth and development of such ideas the main thread of his historical work, he is granted the finest insight. He does not impose the idea on his material; rather, by losing himself freely in the nature of his object of study, by considering it with a purely historical understanding, the idea emerges from the subject itself and is transferred to his reflecting intellect.”

How can this contemplative attitude, reminiscent of Ranke, be joined to the engagement, the political activism, that Gervinus calls for elsewhere in his Historik? There he describes the historian as a partisan of destiny, a natural champion of progress. He can “not easily avoid the suspicion of sympathizing with the business of freedom, because freedom, after all, is equivalent to a feeling of power, and because it contains the element that he breathes and in which he lives.” In his own advertisement of 1835 for his history of literature, Gervinus spoke with the same decisiveness about the serious problem of the objective style that was becoming widespread in historical scholarship. Here, as in questions of methodology, Gervinus’s logical inconsistency cannot be overlooked. He did not succeed in developing a formally consistent position. On the one hand, he emphasized his confidence in the objectivity of historical ideas, which the historian merely has to follow as an observer; on the other, he emphasized the subjectivity of the scholar, whose judgments are clearly injected into the material. This formal contradiction was not apparent to Gervinus, because in his view the subjective element of the historian emerges inevitably from the subject matter. Inasmuch as historical events are themselves a directed process—that is, a progression toward humanity—a reconstruction of the past offers the historian guidance for the future. The observer is part of this process, transmitting essential historical ideas whose past effectiveness he has reconstructed. For this reason, he is a partisan of destiny, someone who has allied himself with the objective process of history because it accords with the historian’s subjective endeavors.

In Gervinus, resistance to objectivism, and thus protest against Ranke and his school, is not a plea for individual caprice, much less for historical impressionism. When Gervinus emphasizes his subjectivity, he sees himself, in full agreement with the liberal concept of the public sphere, as a participant in a public discourse that makes headway precisely because different points of view are competing. Truth—aesthetic no

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8Georg Gottfried Gervinus, Grundzüge der Historik (Leipzig, 1837), pp. 33, 70.
9Ibid., p. 94.
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less than political truth—is revealed through public Räsonnement. Thus even in his own advertisement of his history of literature, Gervinus emphasizes the function of his subjective opinion as a challenge to the public: “I have to make it absolutely clear to the reader what mine [his point of view] is; then he will recognize his own more easily, will not unjustly criticize me and my opinion, and will instead allow it to stand beside his own.”

What the succeeding generation of literary historians often called in Gervinus dogmatism and moralizing, Gervinus himself saw as necessary reasoning. The historian had a twofold obligation with respect to literature: to reconstruct leading ideas and to take a public stand as the only means of bringing the past into contemporary discussion. The similarity to Börne and the Young Germans, which Gervinus would have emphatically denied, is obvious. Just as Börne made literary criticism a medium of political reasoning, Gervinus made literary history a participant in political discussion. Like the Young Germans, he assumed a close relationship between literature and life: only a strong political life could result in a period of aesthetic flowering. Thus he writes at the end of his history of literature (1842): “Civic life is the only thing that still hinders free development; and until it is reformed, we will wait in vain for a great period of any kind.” Gervinus does not regard this attitude as voluntarism, but rather as the inevitable result of the historical process itself, which points beyond literature to political obligations. The mechanistic and undialectic character of this position is, indeed, evident in his criticism of Young German literature. His criticism goes wrong because it keeps to the artistic concept of Goethe’s period; in other words, because it fails to reflect in its form those changes that Gervinus himself wanted.

Because Gervinus held to his principles even after 1848 and refused to consider the unsuccessful revolution an important turning point, he became a problem for the younger generation of historians. He exposed himself most of all in the introduction to his Geschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts (History of the Nineteenth Century), because he radicalized and democratized his liberal concept of freedom rather than restricted it. He characterized the new epoch as a period of transition from the supremacy of the nobility to the rule of the many, and he emphasized in his treatment of the Napoleonic period that “princely reforms from above cannot be built upon, and for the people only that

11Gervinus, Geschichte der deutschen Dichtung, 5:666.
freedom is a reliable possession for whose acquisition and affirmation they themselves have worked."12 The defeat of the bourgeoisie in 1849 was for him obviously not the basis for a theoretical and methodological revision. On the other hand, although they were indebted to the liberal tradition and by no means denied Gervinus's importance, younger historians such as Schmidt and Haym (who remained in contact with Gervinus and tried to recruit him for the Preussischen Jahrbücher) modified their concept of history.

Postrevolutionary Literary History

Until recently, postrevolutionary literary history has received less attention than the achievements of the Vormärz. The reasons are obvious. In attempting to revive the progressive tradition of literary scholarship, the West German left and the Marxist German studies of the German Democratic Republic have made Nachma rz historiography seem primarily a decline and fall: to the extent that postrevolutionary liberalism turned its back on its radical tradition and conformed, literary history became increasingly more conservative and at the same time poorer. Thus Bernd Hüppauf, citing Hettner, Schmidt, Gottschall, and Haym as examples, traced a descending line, a process of theoretical and methodological decline, which essentially came to an end with the founding of the Reich.13 His presentation makes a direct connection between the development of German liberalism (seen as the ideology of the bourgeoisie) and the evolution of historical scholarship. There is no disputing that crucial changes occurred after 1850. But if they are construed within the framework of a model of decline, the result is a one-dimensional view in which the contradictions disappear from the dialectic process. The ideological and critical approach that seeks to demonstrate the superficiality of postrevolutionary literary history is in danger of underestimating the methodological and theoretical problems inherent in scholarship. The change in the function of literary history needs to be investigated from within as well as from without.

No postrevolutionary historian or critic understood this change in function more clearly than Prutz, who made structural changes the subject of analysis in Die deutsche Literatur der Gegenwart (1858). In contrast to Danzel and Hettner, he did not limit himself to a discussion of method and theory but instead subjected the Vormärz concept of literary history to a critical-historical investigation, which concentrated

on function and from that perspective was able to explain the change historically. He characterized the literary history of the 1830s as follows: “The important thing was to shake the nation out of the one-sided literary culture, the abstract aesthetic interests, in which it had hitherto moved and to lead it toward the praxis of public life; the important thing was to strip literature of the absolute power it had hitherto exercised among us and to bring theory and praxis, literature and life, poetry and reality, art and the state into a proper, natural relationship with each other.” Prutz rightly brings two aspects of this literary history to the fore: its negative-critical character and its political character: “Literary history became a criticism of our national life in general; books were held responsible for actions.” From the perspective of 1858, this reasoned (rasonierende) literary history seemed the (unsuccessful) literary preparation for the Revolution of 1848.

Prutz’s early historical works were unmistakably indebted to this concept of literary history; his criticism of moral-political methodology is a self-criticism. This self-criticism is the result, among other things, of his historicization of the history of literature. By contrasting the critical phase of the thirties and forties with the affirmative literary history of the twenties, Prutz was able to emphasize the linkage of a prevailing concept with a given historical situation and thereby to underscore its limitation. This reconstructive stock taking led to his criticism of the history of literature; as he did in the case of belles-lettres, he denied it a political function. Prutz concluded that the political defeat of 1849 did not fulfill its obligation to bring about political emancipation and national unity. He now rejected the emphatic idealism of the liberal model: “We really have other and more pressing things to do now than to read books and listen to verses. We have to study history and national economics in order to prepare ourselves for the practical issues that will be presented to us in the long or short run by destiny.”

In this reordering of the relationship between theory and praxis, literary history was deprived of its political function; for if practice had to be left to its own resources, if—as Prutz assumed in 1858—solutions to practical political problems no longer resulted from literary theory and history but from practical activity, there was no longer any compelling need to force literary discussion. The relationship between literature and the sociopolitical sphere was now reversed: only a healthy social and economic life would give rise to a healthy literature. Significantly, Prutz no longer distinguished between literary history and literary criticism, because the public task of critics and historians was essentially identical.

Building a National Literature

According to Gervinus, contemporary Germany needed to effect a transition from an aesthetic to a political culture. Prutz repeated this argument, but with an essentially different purpose:

For our classical writers have given us a valuable clue to how these difficulties can be overcome, how these seemingly irreconcilable contradictions can be resolved. What they accomplished in the aesthetic realm is precisely what the nation must now do in the realms of history and political praxis. This is the real character of our classic epoch, this is why it bears that name, and this is above all the unforgettable, priceless inheritance it has bequeathed to us: that it imbued the foreign Hellenic form with the German spirit and thereby created a new, third entity, which is just as German as it is Greek, and in which the noblest and most amiable qualities of modern and ancient times are mingled and reconciled.

A similar task is assigned to German politics. No longer should a totally new entity be created; instead, traditional forms should be filled with the German spirit. Goethe's time is no longer considered the flower from which political fruit must develop, as it is by Gervinus. By analogy it becomes the model for political theory and praxis. Classicism is now the lasting heritage to which the political liberalism of the Nachmärz can refer, ostensibly by doing what classicism had done in the fields of literature and art. The critical adoption of classicism has surreptitiously turned into an affirmative theory of inheritance.

The change in function described by Prutz in his *Literatur der Gegenwart* can be characterized as the dissolution of the service rendered by literary history to the political public sphere. In the fifties neither Prutz, Schmidt, nor Haym thought it sensible to make direct use of literature or literary criticism in order to achieve political and cultural ends. Culture and politics were once again conceived of as separate spheres, and it was gradually accepted that the cultural public sphere should be regarded as an epiphenomenon of the social structure. It would be precipitate, of course, to assume that this reorientation of liberal historiography necessarily led to the acceptance of Ranke's concept of history. Schmidt felt indebted above all to Gervinus, and despite his great admiration for Ranke's literary achievement, he regarded him with skepticism. When Schmidt compares Ranke and Gervinus, he takes Gervinus's part and declares himself for the tradition of reasoned historiography. "From the moment German historiography entered the field of general literature," Schmidt argues in the third book of his history of literature, "it was predominantly Protestant, enlightened, Prussian, bourgeois, and liberal." This tradition of reasoned history was em-

15Ibid., p. 21.
phatically embodied by Christoph Schlosser and his student Gervinus. Characteristically, Schmidt stresses Schlosser’s moral integrity: “What Börne tried to do on a small scale, instinctively and without preparation, Schlosser carried out on a large scale, with thorough knowledge and mature understanding. His moral criticism, which was initially directed against the German nature, he then applied equally to all fields of history.” In Schmidt’s view, Gervinus’s literary history belongs in the same category: “But the ‘History of Literature’ is more than a work of art; it is an act, a necessary and important step toward the liberation of our spirit.”

Schmidt’s opinion of Gervinus is not entirely positive. He finds fault, for instance, with his lack of historical empathy, a certain rigidity resulting from the moral-critical ductus of his presentation. Essentially, however, he agrees with Gervinus: the latter’s representation of German literature combined the art of synthesis with a critical rigor that was not lost in empathy with the material, as it was in Ranke’s case. Schmidt shows a clear awareness that the historical school, which was later opposed to the historico-philosophical constructivism of Hegel and his students, had two very different branches: one enlightened and moral, to which Schlosser and Gervinus belonged, and the other cognitive and descriptive, represented by Ranke. His judgment of Ranke leaves no doubt that Schmidt includes himself in the tradition of moral historiography. Thus he objects that “we miss something in him: let us not call it ethical integrity but rather manly earnestness that neither through aesthetic satisfaction nor through personal, perhaps very justified sympathy allows itself to be deterred from being pitiless where it matters. In his criticism of the facts, he shows no leniency; in his ethical judgment, however, he tries with a certain timidity not to allow personality to intrude upon things.” In contrast to a historical awareness that loses itself empathically in its subject and creates historical unity and completeness by means of a mimetic presentation, Schmidt posits a concept in which the personality and ethical judgment of the historian determine choice and order in history. On the occasion of a review of Joseph Maria von Radowitz, he called this point of view the superior one: “Without passion, without the anger of intense conviction, no firm will is possible, but also no secure knowledge.” This subjectivism is not to be confused with impressionism. The subject who makes the judgment is moral and as such is above all a spokesperson for basic human principles. The reasoning historian believes him or herself to be in the service of universal enlightenment carried out by and in history. The

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danger of this approach is not so much vagueness as a doctrinaire rigidity that misses the mark when people and tendencies are judged. This is the very weakness Schmidt criticizes in Gervinus, who occasionally lacks not firmness of will but discretion and maturity in his reflections. 17

Schmidt’s presentation of historiography had already been reduced to individual portraits, and it merely hints at the historical connection that Prutz developed dialectically. For Prutz, the concept of historiography was itself profoundly rooted in history and was accordingly subject to change under postrevolutionary conditions. In Schmidt, however, the history of historiography is broken down into competing traditions and schools, with which he deals in a selective and judgmental manner. Schmidt saw himself as continuing a reasoned moral historiography; this is clearly where his methodological sympathies lay, yet he was not blind to the dangers of this method. Since it did not reflect on its own assumptions, it could easily become doctrinaire. The solution for which Schmidt searched, without expressly saying so, was a synthesis of reasoning and empathy, a combination of Gervinus and Ranke. This combination, however, proved a compromise in which the components were neutralized rather than mutually supported. The correction of moral judgment through empathetic description weakened reasoning without sharpening reflection.

For Gervinus, classic German literature was the humanistic prelude to the political development and liberation of the German nation. Gervinus’s appreciation of German classicism included criticism of its apolitical stance, especially Goethe’s. This approach was taken up by Schmidt. His literary history, too, is critical of classicism and romanticism. The aesthetic perfection reached in Weimar was paid for, in Schmidt’s view, by the separation of art and life, a separation that necessarily led to resignation. He reproached Goethe in particular for having failed in his life’s task. His move to Weimar, flight to Italy, and ministerial service were concessions that deflected him from his real project. According to Schmidt, this was also true of Goethe’s position on contemporary political issues. Goethe was incapable of supporting the French Revolution and the Wars of Liberation: “Nature gave him the strength and disposition to accomplish great and noble things, but in his small though glittering cage he was drained of his courage. No matter how beautiful the songs he sang in that cage, his life and writings awaken in us the feeling that our art will be truly uplifted only when our life is uplifted.” Schmidt’s objection to Goethe was a moral one; Goethe’s alleged aestheticism made him regard literature “as a playful

17Ibid., 3:453, 462, 506.
sideline . . ., which had nothing to do with real life.” Goethe’s life and work are measured by Schmidt against the public tasks of his epoch: “Public affairs are the touchstone of a man’s worth: perpetual self-reflection leads to untruth. As long as we are ruled by the superficial ideals of living beautifully and of coming to terms with tragic conditions through, at best, resignation, Germany as a whole will remain an unproductive nation incapable of flexibility or any historical up-swing.”18

The linking of historical and political criticism in this statement is significant. Schmidt’s point of departure is the public function of literature. To the extent that Goethe and his works shunned or opposed this task, they deserved the reproach, for the very reason that Goethe’s fame made him a national model. For Schmidt, the historian’s task is a descriptive and judicial one; judgment of the past is grounded in the historian’s personal experience. This attitude should not simply be denounced as bourgeois and private.19 Schmidt links the past to the present through the perspective of public morality, which attacks precisely such a private attitude. Thus Schmidt wrote in 1862: “In literature as well as in public life, in the realm of thought as well as in the narrow world of ethics, the chief enemies of freedom and progress are bourgeois pettiness and vague idealism.”20 Bernd Peschken has rightly pointed out that Schmidt’s criticism of classicism has a political core.21 Whether this criticism goes beyond Marx and Engels, as Peschken maintains, may reasonably be doubted, because in socialist theory the perfection of bourgeois society is no longer the critical standard it was for Schmidt. Yet Peschken has grounds for emphasizing that Schmidt’s literary-historical works are in the liberal tradition, which links them to Gervinus and Schlosser. This is evident not least in his critical treatment of classicism. His early works show this reserve more than his later ones; but even in the second edition of his history of literature (1855), Schmidt considers Wilhelm Meister a realistic novel depicting German society in the eighteenth century, and he accordingly regrets the absence in this picture of the bourgeoisie: “But among the classes he describes, we miss most of all the greatest factor in the life of the German people, the bourgeoisie. Its representative, Werner, is a pitiful caricature.”22

Schmidt notes critically that in Wilhelm Meister only the nobility is

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18 Ibid., 1:285, 286.
19 Thus Hüppauf, Literaturgeschichte zwischen Revolution und Reaktion, p. 50.
20 Julian Schmidt, Geschichte des geistigen Lebens in Deutschland (Leipzig, 1862), p. viii.
22 Schmidt, Geschichte der deutschen Literatur im neunzehnten Jahrhundert, 1:231.
allowed to develop freely, whereas the bourgeoisie strives to rise above its station and in so doing loses its inner security. He thus criticizes the cultural ideal at the heart of the novel as being exclusively aristocratic and not the product of the daily reality of the bourgeoisie. Schmidt wants freedom of activity for the individual in the liberal sense, in which economic production and a moral praxis of life are combined.

Wherever the political and social criticism of classicism was retracted we can also expect to find a shift in the formulation of literary history. This occurred in the work of Schmidt in 1866 in connection with Prussian victory over the Austrian army. Schmidt henceforth regarded the polemic against German classicism in his earlier editions outdated. The prospect of a *kleindeutsch* unification put the early history of literature in a more positive light. Moral criticism was transformed into historical affirmation. The nature of this change, however, must be examined more closely. It was not the moral, reasoned approach that changed but its conceptual content. Both Schmidt’s joy over Prussian victory and his silence over the defeat of the liberals in the constitutional conflict indicate that, like the majority of liberals, he had changed his perspective from that of an emancipatory patriot to that of a Prussian nationalist. The model on which Gervinus had based his progressive history of literature was thus equally valid for legitimation of the status quo. In 1866 Schmidt took the existing situation, of which he approved, to be the inevitable result of the literary and political past. In his work, German literature finally became a national mission, but in a sense that was foreign to Gervinus.

This framework remained in effect even where the goal connected with it had long faded. Thus in 1872 Gottschall wrote in the introduction to the third edition of his history of literature that “the literary history of the present is only half *objective scholarship*. The other half tends to have a *practical and reformative effect* and seeks to play a significant role in the development of literature itself; it is like the Attic goddess of wisdom, who appears armed not only with a helmet and spear but also with the aegis that calls forth storms.” Notwithstanding the warlike metaphor, it is clear that this is a diminution in comparison to Gervinus’s approach, indeed even to Schmidt’s: the political mission has turned into a cultural one: “It is the banner of modern culture, which cannot abandon the real poetry of the present if it is to become a poetry of the future.”

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23See Julian Schmidt’s preface to the fifth edition of the second volume of his *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur seit Lessings Tod*, written September 7, 1866; on this see also Peschken, *Versuch einer germanistischen Ideologiekritik*, pp. 88–104.

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nature from Schmidt's politically motivated devaluation and to introduce it into the present as a legitimate heritage. This led him to criticize the moralistic method and to return to romantic criticism, without, however, making the consequences clear. But even in Gottschall, the category of progress that had guided liberal historiography retains a certain significance. This can be said as well of such a moderate national liberal as Haym.25

Method and Ideology

Owing to the comparatively late development of literary history as a scholarly discipline and its not having become established as a university subject until 1848, the discussion of method was still largely in flux at the outbreak of the bourgeois revolution. The dominant model was the reasoned literary history represented by Gervinus, who most clearly expressed the political claims of the liberals. The disillusionment that followed the failure of the revolution was reflected in scholarly discussion as criticism of idealistic historicism—both in its liberal and in its Hegelian form. Danzel's epoch-making essay "Über die Behandlung der Geschichte der neueren deutschen Literatur" (On the Treatment of the History of Recent German Literature) (1849) and Haym's Hegel und seine Zeit (1857) exemplify the new problems and objections that were raised. Both works are evidence of the incipient positivism that for scholarly and objective reasons held that the political criticism of the Vormärz had to be negated. This change must be regarded not only as the expression of a growing conservatism among literary historians but as a confrontation with the unsolved problems of prerevolutionary historical scholarship which could no longer be postponed. The battle was fought on several fronts: between the moralistic camp and the aesthetic camp; between Schmidt and Gottschall; between a teleological and a genetic concept, both eventually leading—albeit along different paths—to positivism, which after 1870 was prepared to give theoretical and methodological legitimacy to German literary history.

The Criticism of Reasoned Literary History

For Danzel, earlier literary history suffered from not yet having gone beyond the stage of dilettantism. Its unscholarly nature was demonstrated by the failure of historians to make a clear, methodical distinc-

tion between the object under investigation and the subject as researched. When historians submerge themselves in the literature of the past, which serves them as material, and appropriate its aesthetic and poetical points of view, they inadmissibly blend their position with the object: "There can be no greater defect in a work of literary history than for it to be based on the opinions and points of view from which the critical writings of the Swiss, Lessing's epistolary essays, Goethe's life, and Schiller's critical essay on naive and sentimental poetry proceed." The passion for objectivity demands a complete separation of past and present: on one side, the literature of the past together with its aesthetic norms; on the other, the historian who records and describes. "The writer of history," Danzel postulates, "must never incorporate into his subjectivity the very thing that he ought to be making objective." In support of this methodological principle, Danzel characteristically no longer relies on the philosophy of history but on psychology, in which precise questions of causality can be formulated.

We are not, however, fundamentally concerned with the establishment of causal relationships, but rather with the relationship of aesthetic and historical points of view. Gervinus had systematically excluded aesthetic considerations from the history of literature in order to maintain a consistent historical position; for him, the aesthetic perspective was identical with a metahistorical approach that subjected all works of art to the same norms. Danzel's criticism follows Gervinus in method: it aims to put the historian on a higher plane, from which aesthetics, no less than works of art, is seen as a part of history. Gervinus's methodical juxtaposition of history and aesthetics was the result of his inability to recognize the historicity of aesthetic theories. Hence he wished to expel them from literary history. Danzel takes the opposite path, adding aesthetics to literary history. The theories of Lessing, Schiller, and Goethe in turn become the objects of historical interpretation. The historian as subject is just as disengaged from these theories as from the artworks of the past. His or her subjectivity is formalized—which has its consequences.

This tendency is clearly evident in Danzel's attempt to methodologically separate the history of literature from that of philosophy. The succession of philosophical systems, which formerly was simply recounted as fact, was so construed by the idealistic philosophy of history as the history of the mind that it logically flowed into contemporary philosophy. The history of philosophy thereby became a means of

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...intellectual self-reflection. Danzel rightly observes that recent literary history has taken over this methodological principle from the idealistic philosophy of history: "The history of modern German literature has intentionally been treated with the understanding that its development casts light on the task of our time; indeed, that it is necessary for it to do so." Danzel continues with a description of reasoned historiography which begins with contemporary interests and looks back at history in order to obtain answers for the future: "Others, who are entirely caught up in the political aspirations of our day, believe that the development of the last century demonstrates that literary endeavors must be followed by endeavors directed toward the restructuring of the state; that a time of literature is a time of action." Although his name is not mentioned, this is undoubtedly a reference to Gervinus. Danzel accuses Gervinus of politicizing the history of literature, of tendentiously manipulating his material by projecting the interests of the present back into the past. The historian—to borrow Danzel's comparison—is like a preacher who uses the Bible for edification: "For a time, works of literary history, as Goethe said of Byron's poems, were suppressed speeches to Parliament." 27

This objection, however, is only noteworthy because of its methodological reasoning, which strikes at progressive bourgeois literary history's weakest point. The complaint that it lacks an empirical foundation, which anticipates the position of later positivism, is not in itself particularly relevant. But it becomes crucial through the theoretical argument supporting it. The aim of creating a synthesis, which distinguishes reasoned literary history from earlier annalistic works, depends on a problematic concept of history, especially with respect to the relationship between history in general and literary history. Danzel summarizes Gervinus' interpretation as follows: "In the treatment of German literature of recent times, the perspective of national development has become dominant. Generally speaking, there is nothing wrong with this. If history is to be more than a superficial stringing together of isolated facts, something has to be there that develops, a substance of which individual phenomena are only modifications; and what should this substance be but the Geist, the mental attitude of a people, either in general or with particular respect to poetic production." 28 As Danzel rightly emphasizes, Gervinus had two prerequisites for the creation of a historical synthesis: the idealistic premise that there existed a developing collective spirit, and the assumption that this spirit could be given concrete form as a national spirit. If, with Gervinus, one assumes that

27 Ibid., pp. 319, 320, 321.
28 Ibid., p. 323.
the historical process involves a developing substance, then it is possible, indeed necessary, to join literature and politics, because both are merely modifications of a single spirit.

Danzel directs his justifiable criticism primarily against a nationally restricted literary history, for he points out that the assumption of national developments leads to fictions, which fail to do justice to the history of recent times because German or French literature can only be understood as part of the broader European literature. His criticism of idealistic suppositions, on the other hand, falters midway. If the idealistic concept of history is problematized, the relationship between social history and literary history breaks down. Danzel’s arguments lean in this direction when he speaks of the various tasks of the spirit, all of which have independent histories. It follows from this that the history of literature must also be viewed and presented in accordance with its own requirements, that is, in accordance with the connection between aesthetic conventions and literary relationships. Danzel’s approach moves toward this conclusion when he begins to conceive of the history of literature as “a kind of art history” rather than as a part of political history: “Its task, without looking right or left, is to trace metamorphoses of poetic production purely from that production itself.” He scarcely touches on the question how this literary evolution is to take place. One possibility he considers is to explain the dynamics of literary production through comparison with contemporary aesthetics and criticism—as the mastering of tasks formulated by aesthetics and conversely as the formulation of new tasks arising from the reading of works of art.

This criticism of Gervinus has two logical results: the emptying and formalization of the investigating subject, whose current interests are to be excluded as illegitimate matters for historiography, and the separation of literary history from general history. The political task as Gervinus had defined it was rejected through a criticism of his method. As soon as the idealistic premises of reasoned history became problematic, historical scholarship withdrew from the public sphere in the name of scholarship and left reasoned history to popular presentations. Henceforth a hiatus was to exist between scholarly demands and political engagement; the latter became independent, so that it was no longer part of literary studies. These consequences, to be sure, were not thoroughly worked out by either Danzel, Hettner, or Haym. The methodological and theoretical criticism of idealism found full expression only in dogmatic positivism, where it took the form of an attack on a teleologically grounded political approach; for then the historian be-

29Ibid., p. 326.
came an exclusively observing subject, whose practical interests had to be excluded.

This is the position arrived at in Scherer’s review of Hettner’s history of eighteenth-century literature (1865). His review is based on a theory of history which Hettner is basically unable to satisfy because he perceives historical relationships not in causal terms but as belonging to the history of ideas. In the forceful argument for empirical research which he directs against Hettner, the youthful Scherer does not include an exposition of his concept of history, but we can conclude from his polemic that he no longer assumes a connection between ideas. History has become material in which facts are causally joined. It is for this reason that he objects to the history of ideas: “The basic category of history, it has rightly been said, is causality. . . . Hettner’s main fault is a lack of motivation.”³⁰ By motivation Scherer means the disclosure of “the governing influences” on individual works, so that the whole becomes clear from the inductive reconstruction of causal relationships. He excludes teleologically grounded generalizations such as those found in Hettner and earlier liberal historiography. The standard of the new generation is no longer philosophy but natural science. Although this new orientation cannot be taken very seriously as a method, it had an important function for the self-understanding of positivist literary scholars: it allowed them to hold on to the concept of progress.³¹

The Aporias of Idealism: Rudolf Haym

The transitional character of late-bourgeois idealism, which though no longer in a secure position did not wish to abandon the idealistic tradition altogether, can best be studied in the works of Rudolf Haym. Haym’s lectures on Hegel und seine Zeit (1857) contributed significantly to making the philosopher a “dead dog,” whose system had become obsolete. This popular influence must be distinguished, however, from the aim and content of his lectures. Haym was by no means prepared to dissociate himself radically from the idealistic interpretation of history. His mild criticism of the Hegelian philosophy of history—which, as we might expect, he accuses of being overly constructivist—adheres consistently to a substantive concept of history. Thus his seventeenth lecture closes with the following statement: “It is

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obviously a step forward if our most recent historiography has again striven to be more factual, critical, and pragmatic, if it has tried to avoid constructing from generalized, transcendent points of view. That it has nevertheless adhered to belief in an ideal development, that it has acknowledged a reason for things and a dialectic for that reason, is, on the other hand, due not least to Hegel and the Hegelian philosophy of history.”

Haym’s analysis of Hegel’s philosophy will be discussed here only insofar as it pertains to methodological questions in historiography. His position is contradictory from the start. On the one hand, he shares the general opinion that the time for philosophical systems is past and tries in his lectures to offer historical criticism; on the other, he cannot and will not dissociate himself from the more general assumptions of Hegel and his contemporaries. In other words, his misgivings are directed not only against the dogmatism of the Hegelian system but also—even if less distinctly—against the metaphysical claims of philosophy, whose legitimacy has itself been made problematic by the course of history. Haym speaks of a “collapse of dogma, a disintegration of concepts that seemed to cling to the firmament of philosophical belief, a dissolution of system, of a metaphysical eternity, in the ruins of human history and human thought—in other words, a temporalization and secularization of what was once considered eternal and not of this world.” This criticism is indebted unmistakably to the left-Hegelian school. But it exhibits a characteristic postrevolutionary modification, in which the political radicalism of the Hallische Jahrbücher has been eliminated in favor of a more moderate position that moves increasingly to the right. Haym’s adherence to idealism results from his defensiveness toward a mechanical materialism that traces back “all phenomena of intellectual life to physiological processes and in the last analysis to material properties.” The ruthless reduction of history by mechanical materialism provoked a halfhearted defense of idealism as doing more justice to history. Idealism had once again been saved by an inability to formulate a differentiated materialistic theory of history; indeed, it retained the critical eighteenth-century form of the Kantian attack on dogmatic metaphysics. This return to Kant, however, which Haym mentioned in the introduction to his book on Hegel, can be understood as a concrete historical criticism that appeals, anticipating Dilthey’s approach, to the movement of the human spirit.

Haym, in his criticism of Hegel, sees himself as progressive. In the name of human and political progress, he argues against a philosophical

33Ibid., pp. 10, 12, 14.
system that ostensibly served to legitimize conservative power in Prussia. In particular, he directs his criticism against Hegel’s legal philosophy. Haym extracts specific elements of Hegelian philosophy and turns them in historical form against Hegel’s system building. They include the idea of progress, the substantive interpretation of history, the concept of a unity of historical phases, and the idea of a universal historical function of peoples. These elements are necessary for the history of literature and ideas; in Haym’s view, this history cannot be left to materialistic presentations. To the extent that Hegelian philosophy had served as a justification of the restorative Prussian state, it had become a rigid ideology that had to be critically loosened. Hegel’s reconciliation of reason and reality made his philosophy of the state suspect, because it transfigured Prussian reality and abandoned the principle of human and political progress. As a liberal, Haym insists on the value of Räsonnement and defends the position of such writers as Humboldt, Dahlmann, and Gervinus against the Hegelian criticism of subjective reason. He thus criticizes the Hegelian philosophy of history—to which he was otherwise more favorably disposed than he was to Hegel’s legal philosophy—for subjecting individual human freedom to the commands of a Weltgeist. Haym finds the Hegelian concepts of freedom and progress unacceptable because they lead to a comprehensive construction of world history in which knowledge devalues life. His criticism of Hegel’s legal philosophy leads to a criticism of the absolute Geist that makes a construction of universal history possible. In Hegel’s system “the free self-determination of men does not insure progress and the realization of human interests; rather, the absolute idea exploits human endeavor purely for its own satisfaction.” Yet this reference to human praxis, which brings Haym close to the left-Hegelian school, does not lead to Feuerbach but back to Kant and Humboldt.

The clearest correspondence of systematic thinking and political self-understanding in Haym is found in his analysis of the Hegelian philosophy of history—specifically, in his call for a historiography that will do justice to humankind’s free self-determination. His basis is Humboldt’s theory of history, which in contrast to Hegel’s allows for the possibility of this emancipation: “This enticing background, this fragrant distance, which made Herder’s, Kant’s, and Fichte’s philosophy of history a practical science and at the same time an ethical admonition to individuals, has—and this is an essential part of it—totally disappeared from the Hegelian picture of history.” Haym defends reasoned historiography against what he considers the excessive theorizing and scholarliness of Hegel’s philosophy. When one therefore speaks, and rightly so, of

34Ibid., p. 447.
Haym’s drawing nearer to positivism, one must also bear in mind that he did so not in order to evade the question of value but, on the contrary, to rescue historiography as a practical discipline. This very aim once again legitimizes to a certain extent the idealism of Hegelian philosophy. Despite all his criticism, in 1857 Haym still held that Hegel, in whom he found “all aspects of world history dominated and ruled by ideas,” had continued Herder’s and Humboldt’s thinking and had thereby helped to overcome a purely pragmatic historiography—not by his constructive approach, which Haym found distasteful, but by his insistence on the public function of history and literary history. This function consisted in formulating a national mission. The introduction to Die romantische Schule (1870) characteristically speaks of the Vormärz as a dream from which Germany has luckily awakened and offers this description of current interests: “A much more serious and practical struggle has begun, the confident, happy work of making progress on the ground of a national independence, proud of its power, which has been won as if by a miracle.” National unification under Bismarck, to which Haym manifestly declared himself reconciled, demanded a stock taking of literature. It became a duty to study romanticism so that the idealistic tradition, which had been neglected in the politically radical Vormärz, could be revived.

Haym approached the newly founded Reich with the conviction that literary-historical work can bring about the progress whose general outlines had been set by the idealistic philosophy of history. There is no hint in his work, however, that national unification is not commensurate with the concepts of human self-liberation he had previously called for. His methodical program for resolving this dilemma deserves closer attention. History for him is neither the history of ideas in the strict sense nor the history of works, because “in them, the double movement of the general and the individual Geist only seems to find definite expression.” The dynamics of history is shifted instead to the activity of the individual, who as producer and recipient creates a field of forces in which ideas and works become fluid: “The real task of historical scholarship is to make these works flow backward and forward, toward their origins and toward their effects. If it is not simply to record facts and depict actions, it must dissolve what has taken place in the how of the event.” For all its emphasis on empiricism, this program sets itself off from a positivism that breaks down literary history into facts. Haym is aware that historical processes cannot be revealed simply by collecting data and calculating factors, but he distrusts pure intellectual history, in

35Ibid., pp. 448, 452.
36Rudolf Haym, Die romantische Schule (Berlin, 1870), p. 4.
which people are merely the carriers of ideas. This position results in a synchronistic outlook: Haym wants to reconstruct the romantic movement from its biographical, psychological, and historical causes, which have to be recorded with “understanding and sympathy.”

Hermeneutic understanding is not yet a central issue for Haym. That people and works of art are comprehensible seems to him self-evident. His emphasis on understanding is directed against the system building of Hegelian philosophy. On the whole, for Haym the historical relationship between past and present is still secure. As a historian, he is interested in human progress—in this respect he still belongs to the tradition of reasoned historiography—and he derives his method from this cognitive interest. The misgivings we encountered in Danzel about the scholarliness of this procedure are not found in Haym. It is striking that his approach could be adapted to the changed political situation of 1870. The function of both his concept of history and his method proved alterable. From the perspective of the Reichsgründung (foundin of the Reich), Haym’s history of German literature, no less than Schmidt’s, reads like a prehistory of Bismarck’s empire.

*Positivism and Nationalism: Wilhelm Scherer*

If only Scherer’s history of literature were known to us, we would have to describe him as a follower of Haym. His principles of presentation in it as well as his basic methodological concept are relatively close to Haym’s approach. In accordance with his aim of reaching a broader public, Scherer writes fluently and avoids discussion of troublesome issues in scholarship. Scholarly discourse is consequently relegated to the appendix. The subsequent fame of this history of literature as a leading example of positivism can undoubtedly be attributed more to the reputation of its author than to its structure, in which positivist principles are only partially developed. Its success rests instead on its avoidance of methodical purism and its eclectic integration of that which seems useful for the presentation. Political points of view alternate with biographical ones; problems of social history are joined to those of the history of works. One searches unsuccessfully for a methodological concept, and Scherer has characteristically abstained from writing an introduction expounding his theoretical and methodological premises. The scholarly rigor insisted on by Scherer in his review of Hettner’s literary history is not evident in his own work. Thus a decline is the first impression conveyed by comparing Hettner’s history of literature with Scherer’s. We must not forget, however, that the two works

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37 Ibid., p. 9.
have different purposes. Scherer intended to write a popular history of literature that would replace the successful studies of Vilmar and Gottschall. He attained this goal.

Still, the lack of methodological clarity, the syncretism of Scherer’s literary history, is symptomatic of the connection between theory and ideology in Bismarck’s Reich. A purely scholarly view of the history of criticism cannot grasp the function of earlier positivism, for this approach sees in nineteenth-century positivism only an inconsistent form of scientific principles, which seem obsolete when measured against the theoretical claims of neopositivism. Since it is generally accepted that positivism was supplanted by Dilthey’s hermeneutics, theoretical and scholarly interest in history has usually been restricted to demonstrating its deficiencies, without inquiring why earlier positivism should have been so successful despite its evident theoretical weaknesses. To answer this question one has to keep in mind the historical constellation that shaped the dialectic of methodology and ideology.

Liberal historiography postulated a connection between the development of literature and that of national politics. In Gervinus in particular, German national self-determination appears as the ultimate meta-literary goal of literature. The theory of history that substantiates this connection is idealistic. The collapse of idealism as a compelling Weltanschauung robbed the liberal model of its methodological base and forced literary history to strengthen its insecure foundations. German studies called on positivism for help in supporting and justifying a concept grounded in idealism. It was not that the new method led to a changed concept of national literature but rather the contrary: the familiar concept was to be safeguarded by philosophical positivism. In literary history, this purpose was served by the positivist concept of scholarship, which was oriented toward the natural sciences, and a concept of progress concerned no longer with human self-development but with the development of productive forces in the form of technological improvements. Scherer’s celebration of the natural sciences was an admission that the arts, literary history among them, had lost their autonomy: “The same power that brought railroads and the telegraph into being, the same power that gave rise to an unprecedented flowering of industry, increased the comfort of living, and shortened wars—in a word, that carried man’s domination of nature an enormous step forward—that same power also rules our intellectual life; it does away with dogmas, it transforms the sciences, it makes its mark on poetry. Like a conquerer, Natural Science advances victoriously on the triumphal car to which we are all chained.” The ambivalence in this statement is highly characteristic: on the one hand, it praises instrumen-
tal reason, the equation of progress with dominance over nature; on the other, it shows an awareness that the historical disciplines have become methodologically dependent on the theory of the natural sciences. When Scherer writes that his generation—that is, the generation that began writing in the 1860s—"is not building any systems"\(^{38}\) but is only making use of the facts, the skepticism of Haym and his generation, which took Hegel and the Hegelian school as its point of departure, suddenly turns into a new faith. Scherer heralds a new outlook, which is ostensibly supported by epistemological positivism. He does not make sufficiently clear that a methodologically strict positivism must eventually lead to a fundamental critique of historicism, that is, that positivism is not concerned with historical forces. In particular, he is far from separating facts from values, which is characteristic of all critical positivism.

In the introduction to his history of the German language, Scherer proposes a program aimed at grounding the history of literature positivistically. Referring to Henry Buckle, he expressly rejects the concept of understanding as the central category of hermeneutics. Since Scherer is referring explicitly to a deterministic interpretation of history, one assumes that his presentation will be strictly descriptive and, in contrast to reasoned literary history, completely devoid of teleological argument. But this is not the case. In the same introduction, Scherer calls for a national economic and moral policy, "with which the Fatherland, in flesh and blood as it were, would confront its people with stern demands as well as loving generosity."\(^{39}\) Epistemological interests, previously suppressed, are again in evidence here. The purpose of literary history, as Scherer emphasizes, goes beyond explanation of causal relationships. As in liberal historiography, he assumes that there is a national objective, which becomes the point of departure for a reconstruction of the history of literature. It is from this national literary tradition that Scherer seeks to derive a system of national ethical values which can serve to orient the future. For Scherer, this view is more important than the deterministic concept of history. First and foremost, literature "functions as a medium for a national telos."\(^{40}\) He does not by any means break with earlier historiography in this respect, as is generally assumed by academic historians, but adheres to a teleological concept, even though he has significantly redefined the national task. He now

\(^{38}\) Wilhelm Scherer, "Die neue Generation," in Žmegasč, Methoden der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft, p. 23.


\(^{40}\) Laermann, "Was ist literaturwissenschaftlicher Positivismus?" p. 59.
declares that national unity, as achieved under Bismarck, is the goal of German literature.\(^{41}\) His content is crucially affected by this modification, because the liberal humanism of reasoned literary history has been rejected or else has simply been turned into citations for festive occasions.

It would be wrong, however, to confine this change to Scherer. Restriction to a national literature had already begun in Gervinus, and Schmidt’s and Haym’s works of literary history are markers on the road to the affirmative concept of history of Bismarck’s time. Characteristically, Scherer only partially continues Danzel’s objections to reasoned literary history. He echoes Danzel’s polemic against the essentialist thinking of earlier historicism, but he does not take up Danzel’s criticism of national tradition. The question of scholarly objectivity raised by Danzel is decided in positivism in favor of the object, which is understood as a mass of discovered facts. Yet in Scherer this objectivism is anything but consistent. Because for him interest in history is determined by the ideology of nationalism, the investigating subject is guided not by form, as Danzel proposed, but by content. It can be said that “positivism . . . was a faithful mirror image of the attitudes of the established German middle class of the second half of the century, which had given up the political idealism of 1848 and was contenting itself with its comfortable economic position.”\(^{42}\) Yet this formulation overlooks the active character literary history acquires through the manner in which it organizes, processes, and evaluates its “material.” Since literary history always appropriates the past, whether the historian is aware of it or not, and never merely copies it, methodology becomes the instrument of this process.

Positivism is characteristically blind to this relationship. The catalogue of themes presented by Erich Schmidt in his essay “Wege und Ziele der deutschen Literaturgeschichte” (The Methods and Aims of German Literary History) (1886) restricts the field of objects but not the investigating subject’s position with respect to the object.\(^{43}\) The rejection of metaphysics, taken over by Scherer and his school from Auguste Comte, leads to the exclusion of certain questions still crucial in earlier historicism and to a demand for stricter methodology which is not, however, redeemed in practice. At the same time it blocks theo...

\(^{41}\)A good example of this search for a national tradition is the lecture “Über den Ursprung der deutschen Nationalität” (1873), in Wilhelm Scherer, Vorträge und Aufsätze zur Geschichte des geistigen Lebens in Deutschland und Oesterreich (Berlin, 1874), pp. 1–20.


cal reflection on the requirements of historical insight and especially on the subject’s contribution to it. Scherer’s practice departs here from his theoretical principles. When he is confronted with authors and works, he does what it would be impossible for him to do as a methodical positivist: he makes aesthetic value judgments.

Gervinus’s dictum that literary history is concerned with history, not with aesthetics, points to a theoretical problem that was to plague historians of the next generation. The distinction made by Gervinus is obviously inadequate, for aesthetic judgments are certainly part of history and not outside it. Gervinus’s formulation of the problem is misleading; it results in the impression that treatment of the literature of the past does not give rise to aesthetic questions. His reservations against aesthetics can be understood, especially given the political orientation of his literary history, as a mediatization of art for the benefit of politics. Danzel’s criticism hit the mark when he insisted that a history of literature cannot be written without taking into account the literary norms and conventions that set the standard for production at any given time. Danzel returned aesthetics to literary history by historicizing it. But the relationship between history and aesthetics remained tense in postrevolutionary literary history. Gottschall’s polemic against Julian Schmidt only exaggerated the existing contrast by pitting aesthetic claims against moral ones. In 1860, in the introduction to the second edition of his history of literature, he remarked that “the standards Julian Schmidt applies in his judgment of writers are seldom of an ‘aesthetic’ kind but are taken mainly from the arsenal of moral convictions. As surely as aesthetic criticism should not conceal moral half-heartedness and lack of principle, the unhealthy aspects of literature—especially when they have a deeper relationship to contemporary cultural trends—just as surely is it unable to measure poetic greatness by this standard alone; above all, it must have a sense of the importance of artistic talent.”44 This not unjustified objection to Schmidt’s dogmatism, to be sure, takes the issue of morality out of its context in reasoned literary history; for in Gervinus and Schmidt, the moral judgment of literature is not private but a matter for public Räsonnement. Gottschall’s polemic touches the critical heart of reasoned literary history, which, to put it paradoxically, does not want to be evenhanded, since it has to judge. Gottschall wants to achieve an understanding criticism based on a refined “empathy” (Anempfinden), a delicacy of feeling. This change is not explained entirely by Gottschall’s aversion to moralistic judgment. Behind it lies his intention to dismantle the whole liber-

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al, reasoned model and to replace it with individualized appreciation. Once again opposing Schmidt, Gottschall asserts that liberal historiography sees mainly the broad outlines and seldom takes the individuality of an author into account. By emphasizing the individual, Gottschall calls in question the constructing of historical relationships, crucial for liberal historiography. As contradictory as his introduction is, because on the one hand it argues against the presentation of general tendencies and on the other it supports a tendency—namely, idealistic (instead of realistic) literature—it still exemplifies the theoretical and methodological aporias of postrevolutionary literary history, which led in one direction to positivism and in the other to Dilthey’s reflection on historical insight.

Scherer’s posthumously published poetics was an attempt to bring together again what had come apart in Gottschall’s work. In 1871, when a new edition of his history of literature appeared, Gottschall spoke of the two halves of literary history: one objective and scholarly; the other practical and reformatory, which seeks to intervene in the development of literature. Under the auspices of a “new impetus in national life,” according to Gottschall, literature assumed the task of creating milestones for the nation’s *via triumphalis*. Scherer, too, emphasized the national task, but rather than contrasting it to the scholarly task, he viewed it as a part of scholarship. In his poetics Scherer grabbed the problem of aesthetics by the horns and tried to find a scientific resolution to the question of evaluation in positivist terms. It can hardly be said that his attempt was successful. Scherer’s early death put an end to his work before he could bring to fruition the ideas he developed in his lectures. The posthumous edition of his work is fragmentary, presenting hardly more than the framework of an approach. Still, it shows the direction of his thinking. Scherer’s polemic against Aristotle characterizes his goal: “Yes, for me—apart from the expansion of our mental horizon, which alone has made us richer than he was—Aristotle is not enough of a natural scientist. He does not sufficiently treat the writing in hand with the cool observation, analysis, and classification of a scientist. He is, for me, too much of a lawgiver.”

The same objection could have been made against Lessing or any neo-Aristotelian theory.

There are two aspects to Scherer’s misgivings which for analytical reasons need to be distinguished: first, the question of the conditions under which value judgments can be made and, second, the question of the scientific grounding for a theory of poetry. Put differently, how can

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the intrusion of personal prejudices into aesthetic judgments be avoided, and how can a universal poetics not derived from specific, historically determined dogmas be substantiated given the quantity of historical material and the diversity of history? Scherer has the same ready answer for both. A theory of poetry should be erected on a base of empirical observations, which are then generalized through induction. By this means he hopes to avoid an a priori construction of the basic categories. Historiographical justice does not result from immersion in an individual object, which thereby becomes unique and incomparable, but from turning something individual into an instance in an inductive series. The same process of methodical induction should justify value judgments in scholarship. The scholarly observer learns to distinguish between personal taste, which is irrelevant for a universal poetics, and empirical investigation of the formation of value judgments. Subjective prejudice is thus transformed by Scherer into a scientific judgment by being objectified, that is, turned into an object of empirical investigation.

To be sure, there is considerable difference in Scherer’s poetics between this theoretical approach and its implementation, a difference explainable in part by the work’s sketchy execution. Nowhere does Scherer do justice to the demands of strict empirical induction; in most cases he merely offers stimulating hypotheses. One has to ask, however, whether Scherer had a strict program in mind at all. His descriptive poetics is more traditional than he imagined, for its central categories are developed from abstract definitions that are only subsequently applied to his material. The result is an abstract schematization that contradicts positivist principles. In another respect, however, Scherer’s poetics represents a break with tradition: if he had consistently pursued it, it would have done away with an individualizing historical approach, for in his poetics objects ultimately become material to be fit into systematic categories.

Scherer’s poetics suggests the break between historicism and positivism which is reflected in Dilthey’s theories. Dilthey holds a special position among the literary historians of this epoch because he no longer takes for granted that historical insight and investigation into literary history are possible, as did, despite their many differences, Schmidt, Hettner, Haym, and Gottschall. The question, then, is whether critical analysis of the aporias of historicism leads to a breakdown of ideology.

*The Crisis in Methodology: Wilhelm Dilthey*

Compared to Danzel’s more stringent, methodical criticism, Dilthey’s first attempts to scrutinize existing literary history are somewhat vague.
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They do not really qualify as criticism, since they are calculated rather to show approval of Gervinus’s, Hettner’s, and Schmidt’s achievements. In his essay “Literaturhistorische Arbeiten über das klassische Zeitalter” (The Historiography of the Literature of the Classical Period) (1866), Dilthey meant to pave the way for his own work by surveying what had already been accomplished. (His essay on Novalis had already been published, and his essay on Lessing was to appear shortly afterward.) But the moment Dilthey poses the questions which tasks literary history should assume and how it can do them scholarly justice, his survey presents methodological difficulties.

Dilthey views literary history as part of cultural development. Presentation of the literature of the past becomes crucial when contemporary readers no longer have the leisure to read the works themselves. Dilthey’s main focus, consequently, is on factual information, for the reader must be able to depend on the historian. The historian’s task is to bring out in his or her material what is of lasting value: “The literary historian has to decide what among the countless piles of written debris is worth saving and presenting in a thorough manner to the man who appreciates only what has proven effective for other people or proves to have an effect on him.” Dilthey’s main emphasis is clearly positive, namely, on the acquisition of a lasting tradition and not on its criticism. This attitude leads to a criticism—albeit a very cautious one—of the reasoned literary history of Gervinus and his students; for reasoned historiography sees its role as that of judge. It subjects the past to a moralistic political judgment that measures authors and works according to the goal of the historical process. Räsonnement, therefore, cannot protect the classic German authors if their works produce an effect inimical to the process of enlightenment. Characteristically, Dilthey regards this very process as subjective. He accuses Gervinus of having abandoned the task of writing pure history by going beyond concern for historical effect in order to make direct value judgments: “Only when he abandoned the point of view of historical effect and its great document, Goethe’s autobiography, did Gervinus go badly astray; when he advanced his own judgments of the value of people, one extending beyond their own time.” Dilthey rejects as morally abstract an evaluation oriented toward the present and favors instead judgment developed, as it were, from the object itself by adherence to the effect it produces in later times. Without explicitly calling attention to it, Dilthey here reverses the perspective, turning it against reasoned literary history: the point of departure for historical work is tradition and the agreed upon canon of significant authors, not the interests of the present.

During this time, Dilthey came close to positivist methodology, as for
example when he demands of objective literary history strict explanations of relationships: “We want to review the chain of cause and effect in which intellectual events run their course in uninterrupted order, as do those of political history. In this case, too, we call for disclosure of the causal linkage of events.” Dilthey never expressly states that this demand could not be satisfied by earlier idealistic historiography. Yet it is noteworthy that, in 1866, among contemporary works of literary history, he prefers Schmidt’s to Hettner’s. For all his recognition of the breadth of Hettner’s knowledge and the power of his presentation, he faults him—as did Scherer—for a lack of causal deduction. Hettner’s treatment is merely descriptive, whereas Schmidt, in Dilthey’s view, offers a dramatic presentation that considers causal relationships more thoroughly and more adequately. At this time, Dilthey found in Schmidt what he himself hoped to realize: an empirically founded history of eighteenth-century ideas freed from the theoretical and methodological principles of liberal historiography. Dilthey was certainly aware that Schmidt’s approach to the history of literature was still strongly indebted to the liberalism of the Vormärz, from which he wanted to distance himself. His approval was possible only because Schmidt had revised his work several times, and in the edition Dilthey read there was no longer much evidence of the liberal engagement of the first edition. Dilthey expressly approved these changes as a gain in objectivity.

There is the same cautious distance from reasoned historiography in Dilthey’s detailed essay on the historian Friedrich Christoph Schlosser, which was published in 1865 in the *Preussischen Jahrbücher*. Dilthey’s critique once again takes the form of a historical appreciation. Using Schlosser’s development as an example, he traces the evolution of historical thinking in Germany and is able in this way to show the limitations of the liberal approach. Dilthey remarks approvingly that Schlosser opposed Hegel’s teleological philosophy of history and sought to establish a unity of universal history only to the extent that he could trace back “the multifarious historical phenomena to their causes or laws and these, in turn, to man’s nature.” Nevertheless, the “development of history as a whole” remains a problem both for Schlosser and for Dilthey, who interprets him. For Schlosser, the goal of history is the perfection of humankind; thus he follows Kant in insisting on humanity’s moral and political progress. But according to Dilthey, this very tie to the Enlightenment is Schlosser’s limitation. He shows himself to be a

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48See also Dilthey’s review of Schmidt’s *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur seit Lessings Tod*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 16 (Göttingen, 1972), pp. 257–60.
"child of the eighteenth century, whose ideal state has 'human rights' as its highest goal." The reasoned historiography of a Schlosser breaks down when faced with the diversity of the spirit. Schlosser "relates literature firmly to his basic idea, moral culture; that is, moral culture as he understands it, in which everything is governed by its direct relationship to active and civic life, in which, as a result, the world of the imagination recedes completely behind the will and sober understanding produced by such a life."49

Dilthey's interpretation establishes a relationship between Schlosser's progressive historical model and his instrumental examination of literature. The principal focus of the liberal historian is effect. In contrast, Dilthey aims to do justice to all phenomena of intellectual life. Unlike Schlosser, who is primarily interested in origins and effects, he insists on comprehending and describing phenomena. This is why he sees Ranke in part as a model for the younger generation. Dilthey admires the power and animation of Ranke's presentation, yet he disputes his constructive and analytical ability: "Ranke often seems to skate on the surface of things: he seems not to further causal understanding, but he is the great teacher just because he does not rely on explanation; his point of departure, rather, is the great world events themselves as seen in their universal relationship." It is never quite clear whether Dilthey considers Ranke's lack of causal analysis an advantage or a disadvantage. He uses the concept of relationship and argues against the concept of causality as a means of clarifying Ranke's method: "The abstract term cause, causality, does not cover what is here called relationship."50

Thus when Dilthey refers to earlier idealistic historicism, he means the descriptive objectivism of a Ranke rather than the tradition of Schlosser and Gervinus.

In the sixties the young Dilthey vacillated between a causal-genetic method and a descriptive one. Positivism, as represented by his friend Scherer, had considerable attraction for him, because allegedly it had broken with the speculative philosophy of history and the idealistic concept of progress. The positivists were no less critical of reasoned literary history than was Dilthey. But the latter eventually decided against positivism and for an independent theory of intellectual scholarship. The reasons for this decision are examined in the following pages.

The crucial impetus for Dilthey's development of an independent scholarly methodology came from his early study of Schleiermacher and the problem of hermeneutics. In his prize-winning 1860 essay on Schleiermacher's hermeneutic system, the young Dilthey set himself the

49Dilthey, 11:154, 157, 161.
50Ibid., pp. 217, 218.
task of incorporating the heritage of romantic literary criticism and expository doctrine into the definition of literary history. Dilthey bypassed Hegel and the Hegelian school, which was still strong in postrevolutionary literary history, and shifted the locus of the problem. Instead of asking whether it is possible to construct a historical totality, he asks whether it is possible to arrive at an objective textual interpretation. These metahistorical viewpoints are not discussed in the essay itself, which adheres strictly to the ideal of scholarly objectivity; that is, it deals exclusively with the presentation of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics and its historical context.

More information on the young Dilthey’s methodological reflection is to be found in his contemporaneous diary entries, for they reveal clearly the extent to which the question of hermeneutics was for him linked to the question how one understands history. A detailed entry of March 26, 1859—from the time when he was working on his Schleiermacher essay—is noteworthy not least because of the way he links the important theoretical and methodological problems of his generation. By doing so, he is able to clarify for himself the significance of historical thinking (he makes no distinction in the process between history and literary history). This entry shows far more clearly than his later public utterances that Dilthey was well aware of the theoretical and methodological aporias and understood the inner relationship between a methodical approach and the result of a presentation. It was clear to Dilthey that history is the result of a reconstruction: “Insofar as it deals with the course of intellectual life, history is very dependent on the methodology of its historians. This concern for methodology has provoked a furious debate. To consider a work as the expression of an idea drawn from the general dialectic; to atomize the work into multiple motives and starts; to reproduce works, in daguerreotype fashion, within the tiniest space: how varied the historical pictures are that are designed according to such varied principles and with such varied techniques!” Here Dilthey compares the various schools of historiography: the philosophy of history of Hegel and his school, the new positivism, the epiclike historicism of a Ranke. In 1859 Dilthey departs most clearly from the philosophy of history, possibly under the influence of Haym’s book on Hegel. He regards as an illusion the conception of a linear historical development that unfolds according to a “dialectic proceeding in a triad of elements. . . . This rational formation of the world proved to be an illusion in nature and in history. The irregularity of the world knows no other reason than the law.” To be sure, his

51 The work on Schleiermacher is finally available in print in volume 14 of Gesammelte Schriften.
criticism of absolute reason adheres to both the concept of progress and the concept of historical laws in order to have a framework for recording and presenting its material. Dilthey expresses the same basic idea in various formulations: the human intellect advances according to mechanical laws. The historical process is furthered by circumstances, not ideas: "History is concerned with progressive culture. Viewed mechanically, intellectual progress takes the form of a complication of ideas and relationships produced by the reciprocal effect of nations and their historical connection."52 Elsewhere Dilthey speaks of the possibility of explaining the movement of history as a purely mechanical regularity. This reversal in polarity allows him tentatively to renounce earlier idealistic premises without abandoning the concepts of progress and universal history.

But other methodological problems remain unsolved: how can such laws be shown to exist in the history of the spirit, and how, finally, can progress be identified in the ordered flow of history? As Dilthey recognizes, the course of history must be given a direction. Thus he insists that the historical process moves not as a circular but as a linear process. Yet his only support for this assumption is that a differentiation of ideas can be established phenomenally from the historical material. At this point Dilthey brings in hermeneutics and appeals to Schleiermacher. After discussing the various competing methodologies, he adds: "Here, then, is the opinion it will be one of the main tasks of this investigation to substantiate, that the basic principles of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics describe masterfully, for the first time, the one essential side of historical methodology." Although Dilthey initially raises the problem of historiography in more general terms, he discusses it primarily with respect to cultural history and the history of ideas, for which mechanistic positivism is least suited. Before historical laws can be constructed in these areas we have to be certain that we understand the range of ideas encountered in texts. For Dilthey, consequently, hermeneutics is the first, unavoidable step for the historian. Dilthey always viewed the methodical understanding of ideas and systems of ideas as more than a mere review of judgments, for he was concerned with the "first, original impulses" that give rise to thought systems.53

Dilthey characteristically carries the positivist approach to the point where it contradicts its own basic premises. He expressly argues against the exposition of intellectual processes "by an atomistic mechanism of

53 Ibid., pp. 92, 93.
motivations" and calls instead for understanding derived "from man's nature." But if a text is regarded as a manifestation of human activity and a connection is established—in the sense of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics—between the individuality of the author and the structure of the text, the question arises how, in view of this individualizing approach, a universal historical context and the regularity of history can be maintained.

Dilthey recognizes the difficulties to which a hermeneutic grounding of the humanities would lead, and he therefore proposes a combination of hermeneutic and positivist methods. On the one hand, he requires historical methodology to prove that a work, a thought system, is part of a larger historical process—that is, he requires the particular to be subordinated to universal law. On the other, he expects historical methodology to enable us to penetrate the meaning of intellectual statements. Thus Dilthey remains critical of Schleiermacher, whose philological method is too sharply focused on the individual text and its author. In reference to Schleiermacher's interpretation of the New Testament, he notes in his diary: "Schleiermacher's method isolates everything into individualities, conceived as self-contained wholes with their own particular composition, their own particular inner form. To the extent that it pertains to art, this method is justified. . . But the inner law of history demands that continuity should be pursued with absolute seriousness." It should be noted that Dilthey is speaking at this point of the inner, not the mechanical, law of history and is thus at least implicitly admitting that the desired combination of hermeneutics and positivism is not unproblematic. Idealism was not as easily overcome as Dilthey, under the influence of positivist trends, at first assumed. A diary entry of April 1861 shows that in order to conceptualize the historical process, Dilthey adhered to idealistic premises: "In general terms, the historical process means that the inner traits of our ethical and intellectual existence, since they are common to many, constitute forms of this commonality; that like all forms, however, they are not sufficient for the creative spirit, which progresses infinitely, and from various impulses they rebel against it as opposing parties and schools." This statement is undoubtedly closer to Hegel than to Comte; yet it does not lead back to pure spirit but rather to national history and comparative anthropology, from which the basic moral and intellectual traits are to be derived. The form in which this occurs is already clearly distinguishable from the positivist approach. Dilthey differentiates philological and hermeneutical from historical understanding more clearly

54Ibid., p. 93.
in 1861 than in 1859: hermeneutics is concerned with the individual text and its context; historical reconstruction, in contrast, is guided by the position that the work or philosophical system is a branch “of the history of ideas.” Dilthey tries to unify the two processes so that they supplement each other. Construction of the history of ideas (nothing is said about political history) depends on preparatory philological work, which aims at deciphering the meaning of texts.

We now see more clearly what Dilthey’s objection to the lack of objectivity in reasoned historiography means: he leads us to hermeneutics as the method by which works are reconstructed in such a way as to show clearly that they are a unity. The content he draws from them through interpretation he then, as a second step, incorporates into the history of ideas. In this process, the question of truth shifts for Dilthey. He is disturbed by the unexpected moral and political attack of liberal historiography on the content of works; they are measured in terms of the telos of history. Dilthey, in contrast, is at once more and less critical. He is more critical insofar as he recognizes the failure of the moral approach to mediate between its judgment and the work of art; he is less critical insofar as he regards the truth of historical perception as already assured by an understanding of texts and a reconstruction of ideas. But this means that historical tradition has been removed from critical discussion. Dilthey’s turn to political conservatism, which followed the Prussian victory over Austria in 1866, is anticipated on a theoretical level in his studies of Schleiermacher and his early remarks on hermeneutics. Thus he writes in his diary in 1865: “The essence of history is historical movement itself, and if one wishes to call this essence a purpose, then it is the only purpose history has.” In other words, Dilthey shifts the goal of history to history itself—movement becomes the goal—and the historical process thereby becomes truth, of which works and persons are merely the signs.

Although Dilthey’s early theoretical expositions concern history in general, his essays on Novalis, Lessing, and Goethe, which were to appear in revised form four decades later in Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung, apply his observations first and foremost to literary history. Both his choice of authors and his approach to them reflect his intense preoccupation with the basic problems of historical methodology. Dilthey chose a biographical approach, though it was not his intention to write biographies. But at the same time he conceived these essays as a first attempt at composing a literary history of Goethe’s time. This is espe-

55 Ibid., pp. 95, 147, 151.
57 Der junge Dilthey, p. 190.
cially clear from his introductory reflections on methodology in his essay on Novalis, which were largely repeated in his 1867 inaugural address in Basel. In the address Dilthey sums up his observations up to that point by applying them to a specific subject, the history of German literature between 1770 and 1830.

In contrast to earlier liberal historiography, he treats this time span as a closed, homogeneous period: “From a number of stable historical conditions there arose in Germany in the last third of the previous century an intellectual movement that ran a closed, continuous course—that formed a unified whole—from Lessing to the death of Schleiermacher and Hegel.” This concept, a familiar one today, is linked in Dilthey’s lecture to the basic methodological question of the prerequisites for historical cognition. What were the reasons for the homogeneity of the epoch between 1770 and 1830? For Dilthey, its alleged unity was manifest not so much in its opinions and works as in its successive efforts to attain a new view of the world. Dilthey ascribes a specifically German character to this new view. His explanation for a special German status is noteworthy; he takes over an important argument from liberal historiography but uses it in such a way as to change its meaning completely. For Gervinus and Schmidt, Weimar classicism was distinguished by its aloofness from the political problems of the German nation, by its unworldliness, to somewhat overstate the case. Dilthey agreed with this assessment and emphasized Germany’s special situation by comparing it to the development of England and Spain. In those countries, literature came to flower against the background of a strong national state. The great English and Spanish writers approached their material “from the standpoint of an existing national spirit.” Germany, in contrast, lacked national unity; it had neither a political nor a cultural center. The German bourgeoisie saw itself excluded from political participation. Under these conditions, according to Dilthey, cultural life took a very different form: “Thus their urge for life, all their energy in the years when they were at the height of their vigor, was turned inward: personal cultivation and intellectual distinction became their ideals.”

Gervinus had criticized this very tendency in his history of literature and had called for the politicization of intellectual life. With Dilthey, instead, the “German movement,” spanning three generations, assumes the character of a positive national tradition. He speaks of a world view “in which the German spirit can find its satisfaction.” Enlightenment, classicism, and romanticism are presented as three phases of a continu-

58Dilthey, Gesammelte Schriften, 5:13, 14, 15.
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Dilthey's choice of representative authors is striking. In his discussion of the Enlightenment he relies almost exclusively on Lessing, ignoring such writers as Wieland and Klopstock because their work is allegedly not typical of the character of the German Enlightenment. It is still more astonishing that even Kant's fundamental importance for the conceptual exploration and critique of the rationalist program is ignored. What sets Lessing above Kant, in Dilthey's view, is his poetic quality; that is, his intuitive perception as opposed to the conceptual discourse of philosophers. Lessing belongs to the better tradition, as it were, of Spinoza and Leibniz: "Lessing's reading of Leibniz gives life to historical consciousness. From Leibniz's teleological or ideal ground, historical phenomena appeared as the necessary steps of a development whose ultimate goal was enlightenment and perfection." 59

From this perspective, the Enlightenment can no longer be seen as a preliminary stage for Goethe's time, when what was essential—namely, the pantheistic concept of nature—developed through the work of Goethe. The literature of the Enlightenment—and this is what it comes down to in Dilthey—was depoliticized through selection and emphasis. Dilthey similarly minimizes the politically motivated criticism of liberal, reasoned historiography toward German classicism and romanticism; for he ascribes necessity and legitimacy to the development that began with the Sturm und Drang and ended with romanticism. The ideological implications of this have already been pointed out by Peschken in his observation that the unity of the individual and nature in Goethe, which Dilthey emphasized, shows "the congruence of authoritarian monarchical policy with German interests," 60 so that the political work of Parliament becomes of secondary importance. The Prussian victory over Austria sealed the fate of the Prussian liberal reform movement to which Dilthey belonged. 61 The success of his foreign policy allowed Bismarck to ignore the opposition of Parliament and to push through his conservative political concept as the prerequisite for German unification. The majority of German liberals, Dilthey included, were prepared to follow him in 1866.

There is a connection between Dilthey's political decision and his methodological and theoretical reflections (a relationship, incidentally, that cannot have been completely clear to him). His hermeneutical

59Ibid., pp. 13, 19.
60Peschken, Versuch einer germanistischen Ideologiekritik, p. 71.
approach to the history of ideas, which departs critically from the rea-
soned literary history of the liberals, anticipates the conservative
Reichsgründung. Not only has the concept of German literary history
changed significantly but also the theory and methodology of this disci-
pline, which was just beginning to become accepted at German univer-
sities. As different as Dilthey’s approach is from the positivism of the
Scherer school, it arrives at the same result: literary history is put at the
service of the new Reich. In the final analysis it is made a discipline with
the task of legitimation. This is carried out, however, not directly but
indirectly, as criticism of liberal literary history, which openly declared
its political cognitive interests. In the name of objectivity, the com-
prehensive constructions of Vormärz historiography are rejected for the
hermeneutic approach, which upholds tradition.

This inclusion of romantic hermeneutics in the theory of history, the
bolstering of the general construction of history by an adequate under-
standing of individual works, has already been brought out in principle
by Gadamer in the chapter on Dilthey in his Wahrheit und Methode,
even though he relies chiefly on Dilthey’s late and fragmentary writings.
For Gadamer, Dilthey’s project represents an attempt to substantiate
the epic historicism of a Ranke by means of cognitive theory: “What his
epistemological thinking tried to justify was fundamentally nothing
other than the epic self-forgetfulness of Ranke.”62 The problems left
unresolved in early historicism, Gadamer says, were taken up by Dil-
they and made into a theme. Thus he considers Dilthey a critical fol-
lower of objectivistic historicism, but still a follower, who was not
critical enough and who became entangled in objectivism owing to the
way he posed his questions.

Gadamer’s approach, however, overlooks the fact that Dilthey was
not merely interested in a general understanding of the past but proba-
bly also had a very good idea of what should be transmitted from the
past. Gadamer’s own traditionalism blinds him to Dilthey’s way of estab-
lishing history and literary history through selection and emphasis.
Thus he fails to see that this “understanding” benefited certain real
interests of society. The appropriation of tradition which mattered to
Dilthey was more than understanding; it was an act of selective con-
struction through which power could be indirectly confirmed. This side
of Dilthey, which becomes apparent as soon as his concept is compared
to the literary history of the Vormärz, is ignored in Wahrheit und
Methode. Gadamer presents Dilthey’s historical awareness as purely
contemplative, not taking into account that his reflection on tradition—
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no longer a matter of course—is accompanied by the question how it should be appropriated. In both method and content, Dilthey decided against reception of the literary tradition he found in the historiography of the Vormärz. In his view, the latter lacked scholarly objectivity. After 1848, however, the concept of objectivity, which Gadamer perceives only on the level of theory and method, was given meaning with respect to content, even though this was not explicitly made clear. The power of postrevolutionary rhetoric lay in its ability to let contemporary substantive interests disappear behind the apparatus of cognitive theory.

The Institutionalization of Literary History

Today, in studying literary history as an institution, one must proceed from the understanding that it is a scholarly discipline taught in universities. The task of contemporary German studies, apart from the training of a new scholarly generation, is primarily to train teachers of German who will transmit the linguistic and literary tradition in various types of schools. As a discipline, literary history is no longer involved in contemporary literary life. The occasional scholar may participate in topical discussions of literature, but the discipline itself is not expected to contribute to the present literary scene. Because of the form of its organization (academic) and institutionalization (scholarship and the training of teachers), the discourses of literary history and literary aesthetics have become separate. Literary history belongs to the academic public sphere, not to the literary public sphere. Symptomatic of this separation is the distrust that exists between Germanists and critics. The separation between academic literary studies and criticism was probably in effect by 1900: on the one side, a positivist scholarly activity that is legitimized through publication and the study of sources, neither any longer of interest to the general public; on the other, impressionistic journalistic criticism that deliberately spurns scholarly gestures and, with forced reliance on romanticism, equates the work of the critic with that of the artist—in other words, that seeks to rescue the critical element by opposing the subjectivity of critics and artists to the reification of scholarly activity. The revolutionizing of literary history owing to Dilthey’s increasing influence after 1900 has done little or nothing to affect this separation, since the history of ideas, with the “objectivity” imposed on it by Dilthey, aims to be part of the academic, not the

63 On the organization of philology and literary history as a subject, see Rudolf Lehmann in W. Lexis, ed., Das Unterrichtswesen im deutschen Reich, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1904), pp. 179–84.
literary, public sphere. Only when *Geistesgeschichte* has come in contact with the George circle—as in the works of Friedrich Gundolf—has a renewed effort been made to address the reading public. Through its style and composition, Gundolf's presentation deliberately provoked the scholarly discourse of positivism.

In the early twentieth century the field of literary history departed markedly from the aims of its first important representatives. Scherer's history of literature and literary essays, despite their methodological claims, are not yet directed exclusively at a scholarly public. His history of literature (1883) in particular is addressed to a broader literary public sphere. Its popular tone is immediately evident in the first chapter, the beginning sentence of which is more reminiscent of a historical novel than a scholarly investigation: "About the time when Alexander the Great was opening new fields to Greek science by his invasion of India, a learned Greek, Pytheas of Massilia, started from his native town, sailed through the straits of Gibraltar, along the western coast of Spain and France, and, passing Great Britain, discovered at the mouth of the Rhine a new people—the Teutons."64 This almost has to be described as a forced popularization, which through its epiclike presentation plays down the methodological difficulties of a history of literature—of which Scherer was well aware—and relegates problems of research to an appendix. Although Scherer puts himself at a considerable methodological and theoretical distance from earlier literary history, he is still tied to its traditional form of presentation. His claim to scientific objectivity does not disguise the fact that he sees himself not exclusively as a scholar and specialist restricted to the university, but as one engaged in the public task of holding a dialogue with a broader public. Scherer—like Schmidt and Prutz before him, or his contemporary Gottschall—is at the same time a historian and a critic, who takes a stand on contemporary issues and involves himself in matters of literary policy. He has no quarrel with the feuilleton.

The unity of literary history and literary criticism was an aspect of the model of reasoned literary history developed in the liberal tradition. An inner relationship existed between the interests of historians and those of critics: literary history was part of criticism, manifesting itself as political criticism. This was true even for conservative authors such as August Friedrich Vilmar, who emphatically opposed the political tendency of liberal historians, and who thereby succeeded only in confirming the political character of literary history: "For him [Gervinus], scholarship was a medium for politicization. The task of the scholar

was to put politics on a scholarly basis.” By the time of romanticism, literary history was not exclusively, indeed not even primarily, aimed at the academic public sphere but rather at a broader educated public. There was a striking discrepancy between the modest audiences at lectures on the history of literature and the number of literary histories published. These works were regarded as part of the topical literature by which the literary public sphere oriented itself. The institutionalization of literary history was by no means dependent on the discipline of German studies, which in any case in its early period was not defined exclusively as literary.

This difference is shown by the organization of the discipline. It is difficult to establish who held the first academic chair in literary history. Hans Joachim Kreutzer’s reference to Prutz, who became professor extraordinarius of literary history at Halle in 1849—a position, incidentally, from which he resigned after a few years—overlooks the fact that Gervinus’s appointment included literary history and that Vischer had become a Privatdozent for aesthetics and German literature in 1835. Nevertheless, there is no denying that in the Vormärz the connection between the academic discipline and literary history continued to be loose. The most important works were written by men from other fields. By and large, the organization of German philology and medieval studies was completed earlier than that of more recent literary history, which because of its political orientation must have appeared suspect to the regional authorities. Even after 1848 the authors of two influential histories of literature, Schmidt and Gottschall, did not belong to university circles but as journalists were instead at the center of the literary public sphere.

Did this institutionalization of literary history, which took place between 1830 and 1848 under the influence of a political mandate (agreement among the literary public on the relationship between literary and political problems), change after the failure of the revolution? So says Karl-Heinz Götzte, who has suggested that literary history lost its public importance soon after 1848. After describing Danzel’s criticism of the literary history of the Vormärz, Götzte observes: “The road that Danzel proposed for taking it out of the public sphere led to noncommitment and the isolation of the ivory tower, which offers an exit only to the right.” Without any doubt, German literary historiography even-

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Institutionalization of Literary History

In some respects, however, the position of the younger generation differed considerably from that of the older generation. The establishment of academic chairs in German literary history changed the prospects of young professionals. Scherer and Dilthey could as a result count on more accelerated academic careers. Scherer’s rapid rise is paradigmatic. This Germanist, who was born in 1841 and initially encountered difficulties as a student of Karl Müllenhoff in Austria, became a Privatdozent in Vienna in 1866. By 1868, when he was twenty-seven, he was already a professor of German language and literature in Vienna. Not much later, in 1871, he accepted a call to the newly founded Reichsuniversität in Strassburg, where he taught until 1877. When he was thirty-six he was appointed to a prestigious chair in Berlin established expressly for him. Dilthey’s professional career was equally dramatic. After receiving his degree in Berlin, he was called to Basel in 1867, but because of his pro-Prussian leanings he did not feel at home there. After only three semesters he left Switzerland and accepted

68 Originally published under the pseudonyms Wilhelm Hoffner and Karl Elkan; reprinted in Gesammelte Schriften, 15:102–16, 205–44.
an appointment in Kiel. He taught there until he was called to Breslau in 1871. Finally, in 1882, he became Rudolf Lotze's successor in Berlin. If his career is compared with that of Haym (b. 1821), it becomes abundantly clear that the year 1848 was a watershed. Haym, who earned his doctoral degree in 1843 with a dissertation on Aeschylus, was at first unable to find an academic position. He was forced to earn his living as a collaborator and editor for Ersch and Gruber's encyclopedia. In 1851, after actively participating in the revolution as a right-center member of the Frankfurt National Assembly, he became a Privatdozent in Halle. Because he was regarded as a democrat, his conservative colleagues put obstacles in his path. He was not made professor extraordinarius until 1860 and was appointed ordinarius only in 1868. Thus the reactionary measures of the government were directed primarily against the older generation, which had been involved in politics in the 1840s. Gervinus's life after the revolution is typical. In 1853, following the publication of the introduction to his Geschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts (History of the Nineteenth Century), he was accused of high treason by the government of Baden and, among other things, punished by withdrawal of the venia legendi. Only with great effort was he able to avoid prison.69 Prutz had similar problems. In 1857, after a speech on Schiller which he gave in Leipzig, disciplinary action was brought against him at the University of Halle, and he was given a leave of absence.

These setbacks, as might be expected, occurred primarily between 1850 and 1858, whereas the rapid rise of the younger generation coincided, significantly, with the new era and the revival of liberalism. As we have shown, literary history still played a crucial ideological role in the preparation of the founding of the Reich. The institutional establishment of literary history at the universities, which may be regarded as secure with Scherer's appointment at Berlin in 1877, led successively—if not yet for Scherer himself—to a divorce from the literary public sphere and to a methodological and institutional separation from topical criticism (the feuilleton). Fontane's critical remarks on the literary value of German studies are characteristic; he maintained that they had no feeling for, or competence to judge, aesthetic and literary questions.70 As a critic, he rejected all scholarly discourse on literature.

In contrast, Dilthey attained the position of leading theoretician in the arts. His work represents a genuine retreat from the general literary public sphere. The publication of his Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaft (Introduction to the History of Ideas) in 1883 was certainly a

69 On the trial, see Walter Boehlich, ed., Der Hochverratsprozess gegen Gervinus (Frankfurt a. M., 1967).
scholarly event of the first order, but just as certainly not a literary event, as had been the publication of Gervinus's and Schmidt's histories of literature. A common model held literary history and criticism together in the years between 1830 and 1870. For all their individual differences, critical and historical writings shared a language. Forms that later diverged into scholarship and the feuilleton were still presented by such writers as Gervinus, Prutz, Schmidt, Hettner, Gottschall, and Scherer as a unified discourse.