

A History of German Literary Criticism, 1730-1980

Edited by Peter Uwe Hohendahl

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Edited by Peter Uwe Hohendahl with contributions
by Klaus L. Berghahn, Russell A. Berman,
Peter Uwe Hohendahl, Jochen Schulte-Sasse,
and Bernhard Zimmermann

Translated by Franz Blaha, John R. Blazek,
Jeffrey S. Librett, and Simon Srebrny

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First published in Germany in 1985, *Geschichte der deutschen Literaturkritik* was quickly recognized as the most original and comprehensive study to date of a proud critical tradition including such giants as Lessing, Goethe, and Heine. Now translated into English, it will serve as a model for a new approach to literary history in America and elsewhere, one emphasizing the connections of criticism with other public discourse.

In *A History of German Literary Criticism, 1730–1980* five scholars concentrate not merely on aesthetics and intellectual history, as previous writers have done, but on the development of literary theory and criticism in its social context. They seek to connect the evolution of critical discourse with larger developments occurring at the same time in the economic and political sectors of society, developments that in turn have a profound effect upon mass communications. Hence, this history takes into account the wide range of variables that influence literary production, consumption, interpretation, preservation, and taste.

The editor, Peter Uwe Hohendahl, is a professor of German and Comparative Literature at Cornell University and is the author of *The Institution of Criticism* (1982) and other works.

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Preface

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THIS study was originally written for a German-speaking audience—taking into account and critically responding to the specific viewpoints and interests of German students of literature. While the history of criticism has conventionally been considered an integral part of literary history in the United States, this has not been the case in Germany; there, a rather narrow concept of literary criticism has discouraged scholars from devoting much energy to the history of criticism. Since in Germany “literary criticism” (*Literaturkritik*) has *grosso modo*, at least since the late nineteenth century, been understood as a specific form of journalism, thus excluding rather than including literary theory and academic criticism, a comprehensive treatment of the history of German literary criticism in the broader Anglo-American sense of the term was not available before the original publication of this study in 1985.

The American edition means to make this work available to English-speaking students of literature outside the narrow circle of experts of German literature. Hence, numerous smaller changes had to be made in order to adapt the presentation of the material to an audience less familiar with the facts of German literary and social history. Among other things, the translation of the German terminology—especially that of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—proved to be a difficult task. Therefore, in some instances the original German term is given in parentheses to indicate that the English word can only approximate the meaning of the German term.

With respect to its content, the American edition is unabridged and follows the original German text rather closely. Its purpose is twofold: first, to provide the English-speaking reader with a comprehensive overview of German criticism; second, to introduce a distinct approach to the more general problem of conceptualizing literary evolution. While traditional histories of literary criticism either focused on the development of literary theory and aesthetics or emphasized the achievements of individual critics, our study underscores the institutional grounding of criticism: that is, its embeddedness in the literary public sphere. This approach, we believe, has certain advantages. It has enabled us to go beyond a purely descriptive presentation of facts, concepts, and ideas; in particular, it has allowed us to explore the social and political dimensions of criticism without forcing them into a rigid base/superstructure model. Our viewpoint encourages a more serious and more concise analysis of the structure of literary communication in the public sphere.

We want to thank Franz Blaha, John R. Blazek, Jeffrey S. Librett, and Simon Srebrny for their considerable labor as translators, which required not only excellent linguistic skills but also a great deal of familiarity with the subject at hand. Also, without the generous support of Katharina Gerstenberger, the project assistant at Cornell University, it would have been far more difficult to complete the manuscript.

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Introduction

IN Germany today it is still not obvious why or how one would write a history of literary criticism. To be sure, German historians of literary criticism no longer need to justify themselves explicitly, but they cannot assume—as can those working in the Anglo-American or French traditions, for example—that their readers will immediately acknowledge and comprehend the importance of their project.¹ If the history of literature has itself become a problematic genre, hardly noticed beyond the academic public sphere, the history of literary criticism is that much more problematic. Not even professional critics seem to be interested in it more than occasionally. This is intimately tied up, of course, with the present status of literary criticism. As long as texts that refer to other literary texts are regarded as “secondary,” one cannot expect that their representation in literary history will be granted more than a modest corner.² The situation is aggravated by the split—customary since the nineteenth century—between literary criticism (*Literaturkritik*) and literary scholarship (*Literaturwissenschaft*), between feuilleton (newspapers and magazines) and university.³ Literary scholarship has, of course, pursued its own history in the attempt to shed light on contemporary methodological discussions, even if a considerable number of lacunae remain.⁴ But journalistic criticism is not, apparently, worthy of becoming the object of scholarly historiography. The feuilleton, written for the moment, seems too fleeting and weightless to merit remembrance. The limitation of the German term “literary criticism” (*Literaturkritik*) to the evaluation of

current literature in the mass media (newspapers, magazines, radio) by no means corresponds to the entire spectrum of what it claims to name. The history of literary criticism is not identical with the history of the *feuilleton* or even of the reviewer's trade. But this insight is not yet a sufficient answer to the question, how do we define "literary criticism"? What are the objects to which our investigation refers?

Historians of literary criticism are faced with a double difficulty: first, they cannot unthinkingly adopt *today's* linguistic usage for the definition of the field of their investigation; second, the history of literary criticism cannot be modeled on the history of genres. These two problems are of course intertwined. For example, it would be possible to treat the history of criticism—as one treats the history of comedy or of the short story—as the history of a particular genre. This approach has its own seductiveness, for it would allow us to integrate criticism into literature as a whole, of which criticism would constitute one component genre. The historical analysis of criticism would then become an intraliterary task, dealing with the considerable but also reassuringly familiar difficulties of the history of genres. A closer look, however, reveals that this approach underestimates the heterogeneity of its materials. The forms in which literary criticism has historically appeared—review, commentary, polemic, essay, dialogue, reportage, and finally also literary history—hardly permit its conceptualization as a single genre. Perhaps the history of the review could be written as the history of a particular genre—but not the history of criticism. The category "criticism" is not even a generic term for a range of subgenres but rather—to introduce a preliminary definition—*public communication on literature* comprising both description and evaluation. And it is not necessarily a disadvantage that this definition includes literary history.

So abstract a definition remains unsatisfactory, however, because it doesn't say anything about the medium and function of communication. We all think we know what literary criticism is, because we are familiar with its contemporary forms and problems, but can we universalize this "knowledge"? Does it correspond to criticism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example? These questions allude to the historicity of the concept. As soon as we admit that the category of literary criticism is not transhistorical and immutable, we can no longer describe the history of criticism as the unfolding of an

Idea that merely expresses its essence in various forms. We can neither arbitrarily project the contemporary concept of literary criticism back into the past nor erect the texts of a particular past epoch—for example, the epoch of Romanticism—as the origin and standard of all criticism. In our time, such constructions would face considerable difficulties of self-legitimation.

As long as the institution of literary criticism possessed unquestioned legitimacy, teleological conceptions of its history seemed appropriate. Historians either declared the present to be the culmination of all prior developments or chose a particular historical epoch other than their own as the center with respect to which all prior history became ascent and all posterior history became decline. The crisis of literary criticism between 1967 and 1976, which shook the foundations of the institution, meant the end of these teleological conceptions.⁵ The criticism of criticism desolated and thus laid bare the institutional foundations that everyone had blindly considered self-evident. If “bourgeois criticism” was abruptly declared dead, this did not mean—as the New Left had prophesied—the end of German literary criticism but was rather an incentive to interrogate the institution critically.⁶ The interrogation concentrated on the relationship between the function of criticism and the social structure of the Federal Republic of Germany. Our project presupposes and in part arises out of this crisis of literary criticism and the lively debate that at once manifested and aggravated it. The object of our study is accordingly *the genesis and transformation of a literary institution*. The new perspective required by our object induces us to push traditional questions of the history of ideas into the background in order to foreground questions that were not traditionally posed: What is the status of literary criticism within the literary system in general? What specific tasks are assigned to it? Which media are considered appropriate to these tasks? What procedures does criticism develop for the analysis and evaluation of literature? Who takes part in this communication? Which particular social groups or classes dominate the discussion in a given place and time, and which others are excluded? These are some of the questions a history of literary criticism must confront today.⁷

If we approach the material with these questions in mind, the field of investigation widens considerably. The history of the institution of criticism can by no means be described on the basis of literary docu-

ments alone. Rather—and this is one of its most difficult problems—it must coordinate literary, social, and political data. Both traditional literary history and reception aesthetics have been aware of this problem, but they have not been able to arrive at any satisfactory solutions, because they have treated extraliterary data as mere “background” material. The treatment of context as “background” certainly enables one to write a social history of the critic or his public. It also sanctions specific investigations of the influences of the book market on the goals and strategies of criticism or of the connection between political ideology and the evaluation of artworks. However, although dissection of the problem into partial problems makes these isolated problems easier to solve, it does not necessarily lead to a satisfactory history of criticism. For such a history cannot content itself with establishing a *monocausal* relation between extraliterary data and literary-critical texts; rather, it must demonstrate literary-critical communication *itself* to be a social phenomenon.

The project of demonstrating the specific communicative sociality of literary criticism requires first of all the investigation of the literary-critical discourse: that is, the argumentative and rhetorical strategies by means of which critics attempt persuasively to evaluate and organize literary works and authors. The analysis of discourse allows us to witness the interpenetration of linguistic communication and social function. But it allows us to witness this interpenetration only if it explains in terms of sociohistorical, communicative function why a certain period privileges certain forms of criticism (for example, the authorial portrait or the polemic) and why at a given place and time particular argumentative structures predominate (for example, the associative procedure of the *feuilleton* of the late nineteenth century). Historical transformations frequently become visible at this level which remain invisible at the level of general aesthetics or literary theory. (On the other hand, historical transformations in the theory of art and literature do not necessarily express themselves at the level of the literary-critical discourse.) In other words, by means of the analysis of literary-critical procedures, the difference between literary theory and literary criticism becomes more strikingly apparent than by means of traditional analyses. We take our distance from a model in which critical practice is nothing but the application of theoretical insights, in which the history of literary criticism recounts nothing but such in-

sights and their applications. The relation between theory and criticism proves, in fact, to be decisively more complex. Although theory and criticism seldom fail to interact in some manner or other, theory by no means predominates over criticism in all literary-historical periods. Whereas classical periods prefer to submit literary-critical practice to aesthetic laws, this is not the case at all for other historical phases.

Once we analytically separate literary theory from criticism, we may be tempted to write the history of criticism as the *history of taste*. The literary taste of the recipients, as represented by the critic, would then take the place of aesthetic theory. But this approach to the history of criticism, invoking as it does eighteenth-century notions of criticism, is as reductive as a model that operates in terms of the history of theory. Such an approach reductively and anachronistically restricts the notion of critical discourse to the mere reflection of the opinions and feelings that predominate among the public. The problem is the same whether one takes these opinions and feelings to be irreducibly and opaquely given data or reduces them further to group mentalities. In both cases one must fail to conceptualize the specific communicative function of criticism.

A similar reduction results when one equates the social history of criticism with the sociology of the critic. We do have to take the social position of a critic into account if we want to understand the function of a literary-critical text. But it is not sufficient to classify the critic socially—for example, as the member of a particular social group. Such crude classifications can at best contribute to the preliminary delineation of a communicative sphere's borders. One cannot arrive in this manner at concrete functional analyses.

Functional analyses do, of course, require the formal description of composition, rhetoric, and argumentation in literary-critical texts. But this procedure can arrive at sociohistorical insights only when it is combined with considerations of the contexts of such texts. For example, both the Enlightenment and realism preferred to argue from literary norms and then measure the literary work against these norms; however, we cannot infer that this preference functioned the same way in both contexts. As soon as we take into account the specific historical situation, we can easily show that the functional status of the deductive procedure differed considerably in the two cases. But how can we determine further the connection between text

and context without having recourse to the vague notion of "background"?

At present, various models are available whose mutual compatibility is certainly not beyond question: systems theory (Niklas Luhmann), ideology critique (Louis Althusser), and critical communications theory (Jürgen Habermas, Karl Otto Apel). Whereas systems theory conceives literary criticism as a subsystem within the cultural system, ideology critique conceives literary criticism as an apparatus of determinable social function within the system of ideological state apparatuses.⁸ Finally, for communications theory, literary criticism is one of the institutions that helps constitute and articulate the public sphere (*die Öffentlichkeit*). We assume ideology critique and communications theory to be potentially compatible.

The following study is essentially determined by the sociohistorically based model of the public sphere. We hardly need to emphasize that this model is indebted to Jürgen Habermas's pathbreaking investigation, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Structural change of the public sphere; 1962). The fruitfulness of the category of the public sphere for the analysis of the history of literary criticism was already recognized in the early 1970s. And Peter Gebhardt has recently reemphasized the central significance of this category for the historical interpretation of literary criticism. Of course, one must take into account that Habermas's model, which developed further the earlier work of Reinhart Kosellek, has been criticized and modified by later research.⁹ Habermas's critics have attacked above all his notion of the genesis of the bourgeois public sphere but also his theory of structural "deterioration." Not without reason, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* has been accused of failing to distinguish adequately between the theory of the public sphere and its historical reality.¹⁰

For example, Jochen Schulte-Sasse has recently pointed out that the literary public sphere did not simply, as Habermas argues, prepare the political public sphere by promoting public communication. Schulte-Sasse shows that this literary public sphere simultaneously represents a "publicly organized and accepted experience of subjectivity which not only renounces its supplementation by critical-rational discourse but directs itself precisely *against* this discourse as against the alienated will-to-domination characteristic of instrumental rationality."¹¹ This objection points out a problematic element of Habermas's early theory.

Habermas assumed that the genesis of the bourgeois public sphere was closely involved with the genesis of capitalism. From this assumption comes his strong emphasis on rationality as the critical instrument that dissolves traditional society. The purpose of public discourse is for Habermas the rational communication between mature (*mündigen*) private individuals (in a modern society). Habermas thus fails to consider—in contrast to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Dialectic of enlightenment)—that this rationality had already become the object of criticism in the medium of literature during the Age of Enlightenment. This difficulty would dissolve if we assumed that it was precapitalist conditions that brought forth the classical model of the bourgeois public sphere. Thus Annette Leppert-Fögen, building on Hans Medick's interpretation of Adam Smith, has taken the position that the classical model of the public sphere is based predominantly on the life of the petty bourgeoisie and craftsmen under precapitalist conditions.¹² If we accept this argument, we can understand the critique of capitalist instrumental reason—which was already formulated by the second generation of the Enlightenment—as a defensive strategy against the incursion of the rational capitalist calculus. The classical public sphere is not merely, as Habermas assumed, concerned with overcoming feudal life practices but is equally directed against capitalist purposive rationality, which is interested not in maturity (*Mündigkeit*) and humanity but in social effectiveness.

The history of literary criticism must take these objections seriously. It will have to distinguish between the model of the public sphere and the structure of the public space in which literary-critical communication actually happens. Above all, it has become clear that the abstract conception of the bourgeois public sphere offers a frame that is much too crude for the description of finer historical nuances. The significant alterations of the literary-critical discourse between 1830 and 1840, for example, cannot be explained merely by reference to the model of the bourgeois public sphere.

The theory of the public sphere can be used, then, only in modified form. Its enduring value lies in its capacity to explicate the context of the literary-critical discourse without reducing this context to an aggregate of sociological data. If we understand literary criticism since the Enlightenment as an institution within the public sphere, we can decode its forms and contents. At the same time, we continue to face

the problem of its contemporary crisis, which became visible in 1967 and which is not suspended or overcome merely by virtue of the fact that the literary trade continues to operate. Norbert Mecklenburg has rightly warned against turning the history of literary criticism into a neutral description of the past, against viewing history as a purely objective semiotic realm: "As a supertheory named semiotics of literature, it describes—more or less in terms of the theory of games—literary communication, and therefore also literary criticism and the genesis, expansion, and alteration of notions of literary value. But in this way it falls prey to the illusion of being able to remove itself from its object, instead of reflecting on its role as one of the players in the game."¹³ There are two reasons why such a semiotics is inadequate to its object. First, it overlooks the fact that literary scholarship (academic criticism) is itself part of the institution of literature—specifically, a subinstitution which in the early nineteenth century was largely identical with literary criticism and which remained in later periods in a close, if also tense, relation with literary criticism. Second, the historian who writes about the literary criticism of the past is always also an actor in the contemporary configuration, and it is this configuration that determines his interest in the past. Mecklenburg is therefore right to underscore the necessity of a reflective procedure (which of course must not be confused with a mere dialogue with the great critics of the past).

The extensive discussion about the contemporary fate and the future of criticism in the 1960s and 1970s both addressed the failings of the contemporary institution and presented proposals for the correction of these failings. These proposals included the reintroduction of theory and aesthetics (Heinrich Vormweg), the intensification of the dialogue with the reader (Peter Glotz),¹⁴ and the pursuit of rhetorical forms (Norbert Mecklenburg). The connection of these themes with the history of literary criticism was, however, only seldom mentioned. As a result, the reform of literary criticism remained strangely ahistorical—as if contemporary problems had fallen from the heavens—whereas any serious consideration of the history of the institution makes clear that we are faced with accumulated questions that cannot be solved merely by manifestos nor even merely by intensive reflection. On the other hand, some contemporary critics have called for a

renaissance of certain high points of past criticism, such as the work of Friedrich Schlegel, Ludwig Börne, or Theodor Fontane, as if one could overcome the contemporary malaise by repeating the work of these men. But such appeals are based on problematic inferences, for these critics wrote in and for a form of literary public sphere that no longer exists. A literary-critical practice that does not reflect on this will not be able to grasp its own situation in a late-capitalist (if not postindustrial) public sphere and will thus either make unrealizable demands or overlook new tasks that did not present themselves to the criticism of the nineteenth century. If anything is to be learned from the history of the institution of literary criticism, it is the experience of the *difference*, the discontinuity between the material and ideal conditions of the present and those of earlier phases. The insight into this difference should make us skeptical about the attempt to posit our own standpoint dogmatically as the center of history, as is still implicitly done in René Wellek's comprehensive history of literary criticism (the standpoint there being that of the New Criticism). Such constructions, in which the past becomes the precursor of the present, tend to shove aside whatever does not fit into the desired frame. In contrast, the reflection on historical difference holds open both the present and the past.

If in the 1960s the aesthetics of modernity (such as the aesthetic theory of Theodor W. Adorno) could still be seen as the telos of the history of criticism, the constellation had changed by the 1970s so utterly that this aesthetics no longer seemed self-evident. The extensive debate over postmodernity¹⁵ has shown that the presuppositions of avant-garde aesthetics, which have so strongly influenced most of the advanced literary criticism of the present, have become problematic. These reservations concern above all the assumption—propagated by the neo-avant-garde and also partly by experimental literature—that aesthetic innovation and political change go hand in hand. The dissolution of this assumption inaugurates the postmodern configuration. With the arrival of this configuration, the function of literary criticism is altered in a manner that has as yet hardly been explored. If we assume with Karl Heinz Bohrer¹⁶ that postmodernity consists among other things in the growing proximity of avant-garde and popular culture (distinguished from traditional culture), then not