

# THE EMERGENCE OF THE MODERN GERMAN NOVEL

*Christoph Martin Wieland,  
Sophie von La Roche,  
and Maria Anna Sagar*

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CLAIRE BALDWIN

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CAMDEN HOUSE

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## *The Emergence of the Modern German Novel*

This book treats both the literary history of the modern German novel and theoretical considerations about gender and eighteenth-century narrative strategies. It attempts to overcome a twofold division in scholarship by treating Christoph Martin Wieland's *Geschichte des Agathon* and Sophie von La Roche's *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim*, the two novels generally considered to be foundational in the development of the German Bildungsroman, in conjunction, rather than as examples of unrelated traditions, and by considering the reciprocal influence of fictional and theoretical writing dealing with the developing genre of the modern German novel. Baldwin also examines Wieland's *Don Sylvio* and Maria Anna Sagar's *Karolinens Tagebuch* and analyzes how gender as a relative construct functions in each of the four texts. In so doing she shows how the new German novel of the 1770s aligns reading and narrative practices with gendered attributes to establish narrative authority and cultural legitimacy for the new stories of identity they explore. The interpretations proceed from an analysis of the ways that reading and narration are represented in the novels, and in their poetological prefaces, to show that the texts take up, challenge, and contribute to contemporary literary and social theories of the novel.

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Jean Honoré Fragonard

*A Young Girl Reading*, c. 1776, oil on canvas

Gift of Mrs. Mellon Bruce in memory of her father, Andrew W. Mellon

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## Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT the beginnings of the modern German novel around 1770. It investigates the narrative strategies developed in novels by Christoph Martin Wieland, Sophie von La Roche, and Maria Anna Sagar to defend the modern novel as a respectable literary form and to participate in contemporary debates over its influence as a genre. The following chapters examine the metafictional nature of texts by these three writers as a kind of practical poetics that positions them within eighteenth-century critical discussion on the genre and investigates relationships between the novel and various types of novel readers. These questions and the issue of gender and genre that was so central to the controversies over the novel in the eighteenth century are addressed by considering novels written by male and female authors together in the common contexts of eighteenth-century novel theory, eighteenth-century theories of gender, the cultural demand to justify the novel, and the emergence of the German novel described as modern. In the past, literary scholarship on the modern German novel has tended to examine novels written by men separately from novels written by women. This book seeks to bridge that divide by bringing together novels traditionally identified as foundational for those separate, gendered canons; it seeks thereby to offer a new look at the beginnings of the modern German novel.

Despite the popularity of the genre, eighteenth-century novelists felt compelled to defend their texts against charges of moral impropriety and against the stigma of low literary status. To assert a place of cultural, social, and literary legitimacy not hitherto accorded it, the novel aimed to reinvent itself: the good modern novel sought distance from what was considered novelistic. Indeed, the term "novelistic" had been used broadly to designate all that was anathema to dominant Enlightenment aesthetics and to contemporary cultural taste, as in the disparaging definition Johann Georg Sulzer gives for *romanhaft* in 1771 in his encyclopedic *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste in einzeln, nach alphabetischer Ordnung der Kunstwörter auf einander folgenden Artikeln abge-*

*handelt*: “Man nennt eigentlich dasjenige so, was in dem Inhalt, Ton oder Ausdruck den Charakter hat, der in den ehemaligen Romanen herrschend war, wie das Abentheuerliche, Verstiegene in Handlungen, in Begebenheiten und in den Empfindungen. Das Natürliche ist ohngefähr gerade das Entgegengesetzte des Romanhaften.”<sup>1</sup> Sulzer programmatically opposes “the natural” to “the novelistic,” a clear example of his ambition to use his compendium to establish aesthetic standards and to codify aesthetic theory. He ascribes to each term a distinct literary style that he links to its particular historical position: the novelistic harks back to an age of tasteless immoderation, while the natural denotes a superior modern sensibility. The natural, which Sulzer aligns with “truth” and poetic progress, will ultimately triumph over the novelistic even in the modern novel itself: “Da sich in unsren Zeiten der Charakter der Romane selbst dem natürlichen Charakter der wahren Geschichte immer mehr nähert, und unsre Schriftsteller es sich immer mehr zur Regel machen, ihren Geschmack nach den Alten zu bilden . . ., so ist auch zu erwarten, daß es [das Romanhafte] sich allmählig unter uns gänzlich verlieren werde” (4:101).<sup>2</sup> To win poetic accolades, the eighteenth-century German novel must, then, renounce its legacy, realign its literary affiliations, and transform itself into a genre that promises truth. According to Sulzer, the antidote to the artificiality of the novelistic is to be found in classicism; contemporary authors are enjoined to emulate the ancients to lend authority to their narratives. Yet the positive possibilities implied in this assessment of the modern novel find no official corroboration in Sulzer’s encyclopedia, since “the novel” as a genre is deemed unworthy of an individual entry and so denied formal literary status. In Sulzer’s vision of literary history, the novel will rid itself of the characteristics he defines as novelistic in the process of its transformation into a viable modern form.

Sulzer’s attempts at categorical clarity and his exclusion of the novel as a distinct entity expose tensions in the theoretical assessment of the novel that vexed critics, authors, and general readers. Nonetheless, many eighteenth-century theoreticians as well as subsequent literary historians have concurred with Sulzer that there was a qualitative generic shift around 1770 that marked the emergence of the modern German novel, in which the reformed genre successfully distanced itself from the negative associations of its history to establish itself as respectable: by 1774, exemplars of the

form are identified in Friedrich von Blanckenburg's important treatise *Versuch über den Roman* and are celebrated as novel, rather than novelistic, and as innovative, not imitative. How did the novel assert itself in the face of literary and moral prejudice to attain cultural legitimacy at this time? How did the demands to define the new novel through negativity influence both fictional narratives and the understanding of what a novel could be? Seeking answers to these questions, this book examines the reciprocal relation between the theoretical discourse on the novel and the novelistic interpretation of such theory at this particular historical juncture.

By the 1770s, public opinion on the novel was expressed and shaped through many channels, including moral weeklies and other journals, pedagogical literature, reading circles and salons, medical treatises, iconography, and juridical tracts and documents, but not least within the novels themselves. Their prefaces generally drew on such topoi as a manuscript fiction or an authorial disclaimer to shape the reception of the texts they introduced. These prefaces commonly affected conformity with the reigning theoretical positions, including the demand for verisimilitude, and defended the novels against common aesthetic and ethical reproaches.<sup>3</sup> However, subtle and sustained reflections on the novel's changing status are also embedded in the body of novels themselves. These metanarratives emphasize the novel's self-conscious fictionality and justify its existence given the charges of the impropriety and danger of imaginative literature, and of the novel in particular. Furthermore, metanarratives not only underscore the novel's condition of fictionality, they also elaborate specifically on what type of fictions they embody and how they wish to be understood. Their narrative liaisons with existing literary traditions, genres, styles, and theoretical stances, and the pedagogy they offer their implied readers, position and define individual texts and the modern novel itself as an emerging genre. Investigating these metafictional narrative strategies that comment on and underpin the novel's generic innovation in the context of the vociferous debates of the period is an important step towards a fuller understanding of the novel's attempts to secure its modern literary status.

The emergence of the modern German novel in the last third of the eighteenth century was accompanied by rising literacy rates and an exponential increase in the number of novels published. There was a wide variety among the novels and there were many

different narrative approaches to the predominant themes of love and adventure.<sup>4</sup> In response to this variety and proliferation of texts, scholarship has distinguished numerous sub-genres of the novel. Yet several authors and their novels stand out as innovative and historically noteworthy for their role in generating the new traditions of the German novel that later came to be differentiated by the infelicitous terms *Bildungsroman* and *Frauenroman* (women's novel).<sup>5</sup> Although these terms are inadequate as descriptive categories and certainly do not account for the great breadth of novel production at the time, they have been and remain important and consequential terms in literary criticism. Their widespread use both historically and in contemporary scholarship makes clear that modern German novel production, since its beginnings, has often been perceived and described as having two histories, one male and one female. Significantly, the first tradition or sub-genre of novels, written almost exclusively by men, has not always been recognized as gendered, whereas the second, those written by women, has been defined by gender and too often dismissed as a parallel, yet secondary development.

The reception of the novels by Christoph Martin Wieland and Sophie von La Roche can be taken as emblematic of this bifurcation in critical history. Wieland has been seen by eighteenth-century and twentieth-century critics alike as the originator of the first of these traditions and La Roche as the originator of the second. Wieland's earliest novels are commonly cited as the first examples of the modern German novel. *Agathon* especially is taken as a foundational text for the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*.<sup>6</sup> For his contemporaries, anxiously concerned with promulgating a bona fide "original German novel" equal to the fictions already well-established and flourishing in England and France, the young Wieland represented an author capable of achieving international stature by incorporating elements of other European novel styles in texts with their own unique signature. Blanckenburg lauds Wieland's *Geschichte des Agathon* (1766–67; *The History of Agathon*) as the morally instructive story of an individual's path to perfection and he makes this novel the cornerstone of his influential novel theory. Twentieth-century scholars have located the modern innovations and the significance of Wieland's novels in their sophisticated literary techniques, their pervasive irony, and their philosophical perspectivism. Sophie von La Roche was and is

regarded as the first female German novelist on the basis of her successful first novel *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* (The History of Lady Sternheim), published anonymously under Wieland's editorship in 1771. In a striking instance of dividing and gendering the emerging novel tradition, Wieland hailed La Roche's originality in his preface to the novel, but also emphatically designated her writing as feminine in style and content and best suited for a female audience. While he garnered severe criticism from some of La Roche's many admirers for his characterization of the text and its author, his presentation has had a lasting influence on the reception of the novel and thus on the understanding of the early development of the German novel as a whole. Although La Roche's significant adaptation of French and English narrative models has been recognized and the pivotal role of *Sternheim* in the development of German fiction is acknowledged within discussions of *Empfindsamkeit*, twentieth-century scholars, too, have considered La Roche primarily as an innovator in women's fiction and have treated her as the founder of a second tradition of the German novel defined by its exploration of female subjectivity and by the gender of the author.<sup>7</sup> Her status as a precursor to the increasing number of female novelists of the last third of the eighteenth century is also uncontested. Parallel to the story of the origins of the "modern German novel" (by male authors), then, runs the story of the origins of the German "women's novel."

The bifurcation of the German novel based on the gendered signature of the author into two traditions or sub-genres that simply happened to have emerged at the same time has determined how we read its history and continues to define much scholarly work. Although the term *Bildungsroman* has been widely, and loosely, adopted within the critical traditions of other national literatures, where it is often paired with such terms as "female," "ethnic," or "English," criticism on the German *Bildungsroman* has generally excluded texts by women from its purview.<sup>8</sup> Significant studies by feminist scholars in recent years have recovered and reconsidered eighteenth-century German novels by women and have challenged literary histories that have ignored female authors.<sup>9</sup> Yet there is very little critical work that considers together novels associated with one or the other of these gendered lineages and that shows a methodological interest in both the history of German aesthetic theory and gender.<sup>10</sup>

This book argues that it is fruitful to read modern German novels by men together with those by women in a common context, and that to do so illuminates important similarities generally overlooked when the dichotomy between these novels is upheld. Such an approach reveals that the modern German novel is concerned at its origin with the experiences of gendered subjectivity and the ways in which fictional narrative can shape it, and makes clear the influences of gender on the various narrative strategies developed to defend the novel in texts by men and women. Of course the divide constructed between novels written by women and novels written by men reflects real differences in the historical conditions of literary production faced by female and male authors, including their respective opportunities for education, their access to the literary market, and the prejudices encountered by women who ventured to publish. The relegation of women's literary expression to a separate, feminine sphere under the controlling aegis of male publishers and critics mitigated the threat, and thus the transgression, of women asserting a public voice, for example. In addition, the dichotomy reflects differences in the kinds of stories that were told about female and male protagonists in the novels at this time in German history, although the gender of the protagonist did not always correspond to the gender of the author. However, the separation of novels from this time into discrete categories by gender obscures their similarities. One fundamental commonality between the various forms of the modern novel is that they all create and assess the subjectivity of their protagonists in a new fashion and place the portrayal of individual identity at the center of their fictions. With an increasing interest in psychological interpretations, novels tell new stories about the emotional self and explore ideas about gender and identity. When narratives that focus on male protagonists are read as a separate phenomenon from narratives that focus on female protagonists, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that the polarized definitions of gender emerging as dominant in the late eighteenth century were defined reciprocally. Evaluations of literary style also employed gender distinctions that were relational: the masculine was understood as the not-feminine and vice versa. The assertion of these distinctions supported a developing definition of masculine literary style and masculine aesthetic judgment. Thus the new novel explores the discursive formation of gendered traits in stories of modern subjectivity and

employs gendered categories in this exploration to define its own innovative poetics.

In the chapters that follow, I wish to reassess the gendered typology of the emerging modern German novel through interpretations of the strategies developed in the novel's defense by Christoph Martin Wieland in *Der Sieg der Natur über die Schwärmerey oder Die Abentheuer des Don Sylvio von Rosalva* (1764; The Victory of Nature over Enthusiasm or The Adventures of Don Sylvio of Rosalva) and *Geschichte des Agathon* (1766–67), by Sophie von La Roche in *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* (1771), and by Maria Anna Sagar in *Karolinens Tagebuch ohne ausserordentliche Handlungen* (1774; Karoline's Journal with no Exceptional Events). While both Wieland and La Roche have been recognized as literary innovators whose early novels contributed importantly to the formation of a German national literature, and their personal relationship has always been of interest to literary historiography, their novels have not been discussed in conjunction. Instead they have been treated — separately — as the originators of the new gendered traditions of the novel, as sketched above. There has been a striking tendency in German Studies to construct elaborate typologies of the eighteenth-century novel that have served to create distinctions rather than to establish commonalities. The novels I bring together here are often examined in isolation, either as unique accomplishments or as exceptional examples of a particular novel sub-genre, or sub-sub-genre: Wieland, for example, has been read as the author of “pragmatic,” “anthropological,” or “pragmatic-philosophical” texts of development, La Roche as an innovator in the German “epistolary” or “sentimental” novel and the *Frauenroman*, and Sagar, who until recently had been nearly forgotten, as the author of the “rational *Frauenroman*.” This desire to categorize and order the many guises of the emerging modern novel, while analytically useful, also reveals critical discomfort with the multiplicity of forms the emerging German novel could take. But such rigid typologies hinder efforts to consider broader commonalities among novels appearing nearly contemporaneously.

Another feature of German literary historiography further prejudices the perception of the German novel around 1770. The veneration of Goethe has caused the history of the eighteenth-century German novel to be commonly constructed as a trajectory

(or even a teleology) culminating in his texts, which are then understood as the “real” beginning of the modern German novel. Both Wieland and La Roche, for example, are frequently considered, in differing and unrelated fashions, as literary precursors to Goethe: Wieland’s *Agathon* as a step towards *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and La Roche’s *Sternheim* as an influence on *Werther* — if indeed the author is not dismissed from the literary context and primarily remembered for her role as “Mama La Roche,” mother of Maxe, whom Goethe admired and who was said to be one inspiration for his first novel. Although such interpretations do illuminate important aspects of the development of the German novel, their predominance simultaneously overshadows other interesting literary relations.

In choosing to investigate novels by Wieland, La Roche, and Sagar alongside one another, I aim to reconfigure the context in which these texts, and thus the beginning of the modern German novel, are viewed. When these novels are approached in their own right, in relation to each other and to contemporary theoretical discussion, rather than being read through the lens of late-century models (particularly Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*), a new sense of the challenges facing the genre and of its transformation comes into focus. Concurrent with the possibilities of metamorphosis open to the novel is the demand that its authors define and defend their narratives as modern, in relation to new social and aesthetic conceptions of what novels are and what they should be. The novels I examine in the following chapters employ differing narrative strategies to that end, but all are metanarratives, or “metafictions” in the sense theorized by Patricia Waugh: “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.”<sup>11</sup> Metafictional writers, Waugh argues, “all explore a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction” (2). Although her book focuses on the post-modern novel and its difference from the modernist aesthetic, Waugh sees the tendency to metafiction as generically inherent in the modern novel and points to Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1760) as “the prototype for the contemporary metafictional novel” (70). The eighteenth-century metafictions I examine in this study explore theories of fiction and of the novel through their presentations of reading and of narrative production. They thereby