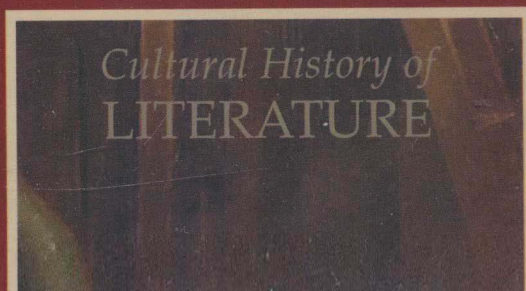




MICHAEL MINDEN

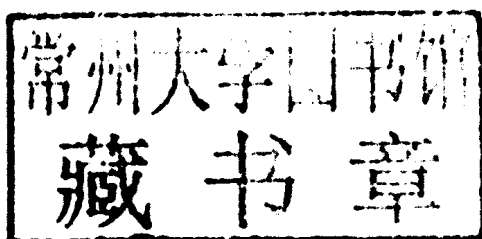
# Modern German Literature



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MICHAEL MINDEN



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# Introduction: Cultural History of Literature

This book is as much about literature as it is about Germany. As a 'cultural history' of German literature, it is a study of literature in German as a variety of social and artistic practices. It is neither literary criticism nor literary history but something in between. I ask what kind of resource many different kinds of writing in German from many different parts of Europe have been in the period one could roughly describe as 'modernity'. I understand this to mean the part of European history that goes from the high tide of the Enlightenment in the middle of the eighteenth century to the end of the Cold War in 1989, when it finally ceased to be possible to believe that capitalism meant freedom simply because it was not state controlled.

Of course, there are aspects of German literature that mark it out as German. Many of these will be highlighted in the pages that follow (and readers can find diverse accounts of the Germanness of German literature in the Further Reading section at the end of the book), but one particular complex of issues bears upon my method, and so it will be mentioned, briefly, here.

The Reformation began in Saxony in the early sixteenth century. Its extraordinarily rapid repercussions throughout the Holy Roman Empire were in part the effect of Gutenberg's invention around the middle of the previous century, elsewhere in Germany, of movable metal type (the basis of printing technology for the next three hundred years). The relevance of this to literature is manifold, not least in the importance Luther attached to reading the Bible and in the introduction of hymns in the vernacular, sung by the congregation, both of which encouraged a direct relationship between words and the experience of ordinary people, no longer mediated by priests. The breaking down of the strict boundary between ministers and their congregation, for instance in the abandonment of celibacy and the existence of households in which the spiritual and secular meshed, and from which children imprinted with this spiritual-secular coding issued, created the conditions for the emergence of a modern literature in German.



There are many reasons why the realization of this potential was delayed by three hundred years, for instance the wars of religion, the attitude of the German nobility to literature in German, and the Protestant distrust of pleasure. But the crucial factor is that the European Enlightenment unlocked it. As we shall see, it was theologians and the sons of pastors who made the new secular German literature of the 1770s, bringing to the Enlightenment carnival of emancipation remarkable powers of introspection and abstraction long held back by piety and political servitude.

These powers of thought, rooted in experience yet turned towards the absolute, liberated the diversity that dwells within the specific experience of individuals and collectives, and thus sanctioned a modern literature as a resource for secular society. Such is the contribution of the East Prussian Protestant minister and theologian Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803; see chapter 1). Furthermore, they delivered a power of abstraction that could *situate* this lived diversity between the human mind and the absolute truth, and such is the extraordinary contribution of the East Prussian Protestant philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).

The point for my method is that this remarkable culture of critical consciousness not only in effect created modern German literature but covered it up again. In the nineteenth century, post-Kantian Idealism – that is, the systematic power of ideas or the organizing power of human consciousness – was enlisted for the purposes of nation-building. In this vast project, the specificity of literature, with its links in modernity to complex individual pleasure and to the marketplace, was neglected in favour of the *ideas* that might dwell within it and require uncovering, especially if they served the purpose of constructing a usable national identity or adding to its prestige.

It is often said that German literature is more philosophical than other comparable modern literatures. This may or may not be true, but my aim has been to correct, as far as I am able, the ‘philosophical’ distortion suffered by specific works and writers in German resulting from the process I have just described. This is not to say that I make no use of social and other sorts of theory where they are helpful and relevant, but they, and I, are there to serve the literature, and not to make it mean anything other than what it says. For this reason also, my interest in questions of German national identity takes second place to my interest in what German literature was actually like, what was written, what was read, what mattered to it (which certainly was sometimes national identity) but, most importantly, what was and is great literature.



A word about the tension between literature and history. My guiding principle in writing has been to navigate a way between two competing contemporary perils. These are, on one side, the subordination of history to literature that I was brought up to regard as natural, to which I unfortunately incline personally, and that, on a sophisticated level, vitiates much theoretical discourse of recent decades. On the other side, there is the temptation to contextualize away the specificity of literary 'events', to fall victim to the delusion that the responsible and life-affirming duty of the scholar in the humanities can only be discharged by the kind of 'research' that in fact takes its template from the natural sciences (where it has an entirely different modality and function) because that is the template grant-awarding bodies most readily understand.

It comes down to a question of narrative, and here we may engage again in some specifics of German history. The first two chapters deal with literature as a more or less defined (if varied and changing) entity from about 1750 to about 1890. The third, on the transition between 1890 and 1916, begins to register how any seamless literature–history narrative would distort the true facts of the matter. The national narrative points, under Prussian leadership, towards European dominance, while culture, resonating with the cultural Modernism elsewhere in Europe (particularly in those parts of the German-speaking lands not following Prussia into the sunset), begins to dispute the ineluctable quality of this narrative and insist instead upon the need to think, feel, see and do otherwise. The last three chapters then abandon chronology – not, paradoxically, to downplay the importance of historical events, but on the contrary to give them their real due. The Great War revealed how precarious European institutions, both visible and invisible, both political and moral, were. In this context, the German experience was one of a story traumatically and incomprehensibly interrupted. These chapters – on the Literature of Negation, literature under totalitarian regimes, and literature under democratic capitalism – chart the fate of the oppositional tendency that became dominant in literature at the end of the nineteenth century. This tendency could do nothing tangible to prevent or correct the calamities consequent upon the hypertrophy of technology or value-neutral economic processes. Instead, literature was subordinated and scattered, but took new forms and continued to provide testimony to human resilience and to the will to live and make new values among the wreckage of the old.

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## A European German Literature

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the best-selling novelist and theorist of realism Gustav Freytag described the earlier Golden Age of German literature as a soul without a body. He regarded it as miraculous that the writing of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1748–1832), Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), and the whole ensuing cultural attitude that became famous in Europe by the name of ‘Romanticism’ could have come about before there was a definable Germany. It was surprising that this could have happened in advance of the subsequent political maturity of modern Germany with which Freytag and his colleagues identified themselves. Yet, despite the late feudalism of small duchies, bishoprics and principalities and the sclerotic institutions of the Holy Roman Empire (to which Napoleon finally put an end in 1806), there was a German cultural identity, based upon a shared language, that went back in various ways to the Middle Ages, and which had been particularly strong since the Protestant Reformation. The very social and political deficits of the German lands in relation to France and Great Britain were the strongest elements in a powerful desire for a public German culture that transcended random political and national boundaries.

The desire among educated Protestant Germans for a modern cultural identity realized through the resource of the German language coincided with the wider European interest of the late eighteenth century in individualism and interiority. This coincidence is behind the particularly intense and fertile symbiosis between German writers and European culture from the 1770s onwards. Several factors are at play here. First, there is the pressure-cooker effect of this urge for collective and personal identity, each intensifying the other, pushing up against social and political forms generally uncongenial to it. With the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, however, local allegiance to progressive states, of which Prussia and Weimar are different kinds of example, gave shelter from the storm, both politically and financially. They provided a base from which to rein back the alarming results of the revolution, aesthetically

at least, without discarding the ideals that inspired the revolution in the first place.

At the same time, the efflorescence of German writing represented in successive waves by Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724–1803), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811), Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) and others, coincided more immediately than could be said to be the case with the original Golden Ages of France, Britain or Spain with the modernization of the publishing industry. A self-consciously aspirational literary culture therefore sought to find an accommodation with the new market for literature. In this it was not entirely successful, yet this lack of success highlights a discrepancy between cultural values and pragmatic circumstances immanent in European cultural history to this day.

These factors make of the first great phase of German literature – before its ‘soul’ becomes ‘embodied’, to recall Freytag’s simile, in modern German political nationalism – a magnification of the hopes, tensions and accommodations within post-Enlightenment modernity more generally. Under the name of ‘Romanticism’, what one might term the first symbiosis of German literature with that of Spain, France and Britain offers the rest of Europe after 1815 not only a model for nationalism, but also an alternative to the rise of industrial culture and utilitarianism, which is paradoxically at the same time a sphere of activity and production – modern literature – admirably suited to capital exploitation.

## Enlightenment identities

In the 1720s, the Leipzig university professor Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700–1766) launched a cultural campaign in support of the dignity of the German language. Leipzig at that time was the literary capital of the German lands, and from here Gottsched’s campaign adumbrated the authority and set the terms of reference for a recognizably modern institution of literature in German Protestant areas from East Prussia to Switzerland. Gottsched’s attention was particularly turned towards dramatic literature since the theatre is at once a tangible public event and a cultural medium. Gottsched and his wife, Luise Adelgunde Victorie, née Kulmus (1713–1762), wrote tragedies and comedies and, in cooperation with the first serious modern German theatre director Friederike Caroline Neuber and her husband Johann, laid the groundwork for the later cultural revolution of the 1770s which was expressed largely in the forms of dramatic

literature, taking its traditional literary historical name, the 'Sturm und Drang', from the title of a play published in 1776.

The symbiotic moment in the case of the Gottscheds and the Neubers in the earlier part of the century was one between German needs and French influence. Gottsched, in converting a relatively modest local organization of German-language poets into the *Deutsche Gesellschaft*, wanted to emulate the *Académie française*. The plays he and his wife produced were largely based on classical models in the French manner, while his reform of German literature followed Boileau's *Art poétique*, that is to say a regular and prescriptive model for the 'kinds', the forms and themes, of literature, such as to make them an appropriate vehicle for the civilizing ideals of reason and order emanating from the French Enlightenment.

Luise Gottsched's most famous play, *Die Pietisterei im Fischbein-Rocke* [*Pietism in a Whalebone Skirt*, 1736], was a rationalist satire upon the gullibility, hypocrisy and bigotry of Pietists. The second wave of symbiosis that enriched German literature was intimately bound up with precisely the area of experience the rationalist dramatist had controversially lampooned.

Pietism was a development within the Protestant persuasion away from dogmatic Lutheran orthodoxy in the direction of the practical cultivation of good works, collective immersion in scripture, and personal worship. Despite its emphasis upon private devotion and its aversion to the official Protestant establishment, its influence spread throughout the Lutheran parts of the German-speaking world, sometimes with official state approval. In the early decades of the eighteenth century, Philipp Jacob Spener and August Hermann Franke introduced Pietist pedagogical initiatives at the University of Halle, and Nikolaus Graf von Zinzendorf founded what became a famous religious community at Herrnhut in Saxony. Pietism came to be associated with deep, life-denying introspection in the later part of the century and was in itself opposed to modern secular literature.

Despite this puritanical remoteness from secular life, the importance that Pietism attached to reading and to individual experience (in the heart of which revelation was sought) and its opposition to cold authoritarian dogma from which it sprang as a movement were congenial to the psychological formation of individuals who contributed decisively to a new sort of literature.

This literature provided the common ground upon which personal and national identity came together. In the widely read writing of Klopstock (*Der Messias* [*The Messiah*], first three cantos 1748; *Oden*, 1771), religious

feeling, at once highly personal in the Pietistic inflection and something with which all Protestant Germans could identify collectively (Herder called *Der Messias* the first classical German book since Luther's Bible), fused with the noisy rebuttal of rule-bound literary dogma. It was at once specific to German identity and another point of symbiosis, since Klopstock's main model was Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Eschewing rhyme as trivial and using the then unfashionable hexameter in his epic and free rhythms in his lyric poetry (of which 'Die Frühlingsfeyer' ['Spring Celebration'] of 1759 is a good example), Klopstock identified literature as something other than a bourgeois version of courtly refinement or public entertainment. It became a medium in which serious issues – the big questions in life – and a broad swathe of *das Volk*, in other words 'the nation', could be addressed. It was the portal through which the 'soul' of Protestant affect entered German literature.

The confluence of religious sensibility with personal affect in lyric poetry is a chief characteristic of German literature from Klopstock onwards. It reflects the popularity of Pietist hymns and resonates in the extraordinary suggestive power that the famous *Lieder* of nineteenth-century Romantic composers add to the words of lyric poems. Modern German lyric poetry not only carries the range of reference from small to sublimely large ('Staub, und auch ewig' ['dust and yet eternal'], as Klopstock wrote of the nature of man in the ode 'An Gott'), but it retains the range of appeal from popular to hermetic, often in the work of the same poet.

Lessing combined a rationalist impulse to reform public culture with indigenous German Protestant individualism. In 1767, by then already famous as a playwright and critic, he agreed to become the dramatic critic (*Dramaturg*) of a project for a national theatre launched by a consortium of leading citizens of the free city of Hamburg. This project took up the initiative of the Gottscheds and the Neubers to create at the institutional level a focus for a German culture to rival that of other European countries, but failed to sustain itself for more than three years, largely due to the reluctance of the government of Hamburg to subsidize it. It is entirely consistent with Freytag's image of disembodiment that Lessing's actual writings for the Hamburg theatre grew more and more remote from their original function as part of a planned national institution, becoming instead founding theoretical documents of a new dramatic literature.

In these and other writings, Lessing developed his ideas about what the theatre should be in contemporary Germany. Less rationalist and dogmatic than the Gottscheds, he was more empirically focused upon realism as a

pragmatic and social value. He took Shakespeare as the polemical counter to French neoclassicism. He wanted to encourage and facilitate an attitude of moral progress without overt didacticism and by fashioning an appeal to the expectations and experience of the contemporary audience. His plays and aesthetic writings explored the possibilities of dramatic literature as a testing ground for practical morality, in which the pleasure of the spectator fused with an increase in his or her sensitivity for others and for the complexities of the competing value systems, both moral and aesthetic, of the time.

Hence with *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767), which became the most performed piece in the repertoire of the Hamburg theatre (and remains popular to this day), Lessing wrote a comedy in which familiar comedy types were nuanced into socially and psychologically differentiated characters, and the traditional comic intrigue, the function of which was to unmask delusion or vice, became a means of investigating the competing and equally valid claims of honour and love. Both in this play and the tragedy *Emilia Galotti* (1772), to which we return below, a realism not only of dialogue, character and plot motivation but also of social and political topicality coexists with the commitment to create serious drama along more or less traditional lines. They are plays in which the given tensions of the time, between Enlightenment and absolutism, empiricism and rationalism, debate and authority, faith and scepticism are inscribed on every level to create complex modern works of art.

While Lessing opposed arbitrary authority wherever he encountered it, in state, church or theatre, he nevertheless assumed, along with his generation, and indeed the next one, that a coherent account of the universe and of man's place in it would be the ultimate outcome of every emancipated investigation. Hence behind his famous demolition of Gottsched's rationalist imitation of French classical tragedy (in the seventeenth of his *Letters on contemporary literature*, 1759), there stands a belief in the timeless authority of Aristotle, just so long as he has been properly understood. Likewise, it is the calling of reason to discern behind the vicissitudes and accidents of empirical experience the work of divine providence. His contribution to German literature resides in the fact, therefore, that his concessions to contemporary reality and rhetorical informality, and his commitment to moral improvement through emotional engagement, rest upon an authority all the more unchallengeable for being ultimately invisible behind the masks of Aristotle, Shakespeare, God: the authority of 'art' as a modern alternative to the dogmas of church and state. This in turn rests upon the assumption of the time that the universe was coherent in

relation to human identity in history, even as the evident dubiousness of this assumption was bound to leave questions unanswered.

The case of Karl Philipp Moritz (1756–1793) provides an especially rich and multi-faceted insight into the cultural pattern that underlies the narrative of German literary history in these decisive decades of the eighteenth century. In his psychological novel, which is also an autobiography, *Anton Reiser* (1785–1790), Moritz provides an account of what it was like for an individual socialized in the pre-modern world to experience the impact of the new culture. Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* [*The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774] was a public discourse of private anguish, a kind of legitimization of inwardness as a reality rather than as a sphere in need of subordination to explicit moral or religious regimens. When he reads it, Moritz/Reiser recognizes his own hitherto inchoate inner life portrayed in public. This felt like an infinitely more authentic externalization and staging of his sense of self than the sermons the young man, brought up in a strict Pietist household but shaped by a modern education, had once so fervently aspired to preach. These could have only ever been a rhetorical performance, a kind of morally sanctioned dissimulation, rather than what now seemed to a young generation to be a public projection of *genuine* personal feelings.

Yet Moritz's autobiographical novel does not just provide an account of this impact which in the 1770s was called the moment of the *Genie* (the word 'genius' used to describe an individual rather than a quality), denoting the discovery of an inner creativity that replaced the need for external authority. It is rather an empirical account of this impact and a diagnosis of it as a psychological and moral shortcoming. It puts the *Genie* back in the bottle. What makes Moritz representative is both an awareness of the power of this emancipatory moment, in which private and collective identities merge and confirm one another, and of the need for it to be contained.

Under Goethe's influence, Moritz was the first to propose in theoretical terms the idea of art as autonomous. This conception of art was brought into the mainstream of aesthetic thought by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* in 1790 and by Schiller in his wake. In propounding his theory, Moritz is providing the positive to the negative he had given in *Anton Reiser*. Reiser, his (former) self, was someone who emerged from the grim ordinariness of eighteenth-century Germany into the artificial light of the new reading and writing. He was seduced by it into inventing a false self, a bogus authenticity not just symbolized by, but actually historically embodied in, the exaggerated expectations for the theatre among the generation of the



1770s. The categorical distinctions Moritz devised correct this failing. He argued that the poet as an artist (as opposed to the hack or dilettante) must *not* write with an effect in mind but must achieve a representation of the indwelling (ultimately divine) truth of the original reality or experience. Real poets are also categorically distinguished from those who may aspire to a state of attention in which art can be appreciated but should not confuse this with the ability to create it. Poets are inhabited by a 'Tatkraft' or 'Bildungskraft' ('vigour or formative [creative] energy') that enables them to present the self-contained fullness required of real art. Consumers have the ability to *receive* the autonomous work of art but not to create it.

Yet Moritz held faith with his own experience over *Werther*. It was clearly vital to him to distinguish the *work*, which he always revered, from his bad reaction to it, which he turned into a cautionary tale. There is a similar process of rationalist discrimination when Moritz distinguishes his own literary prose work, the 'psychological novel' *Anton Reiser*, from *Werther*, which he calls poetry or art. This is because it achieves in its central moment the artistic miracle of *portraying* the desire to display without violating the autonomy of art by being the *result* or *effect* of that desire. The legitimation for *Anton Reiser* is not artistic at all but, on the one hand, moral, and, on the other, empirical-scientific.

The case of Moritz thus focuses the following: first, the difficulty for Germans to find a perspective from which to value the modern novel. Moritz had written a superb example of one, but denied it the dignity of art, while his life had been changed by another, but this he idealized. The plays of the *Sturm und Drang* superimposed upon a utopian dream of cultured public institutions the new realism of the empirical and rational Enlightenment. There is a creative mismatch between the aspiration to make a national culture, in which context a national theatre is attractive, and the surging print culture and book market, in which prose literature was at home.

The subsequent development of the serious modern German drama bears out its origin in utopian containment of potentially destructive emancipatory forces. The direction was set in Lessing's last play, *Nathan der Weise* (1779), in which a public theological debate, brought to an end by the combined forces of orthodox Lutheranism and local state power, was diverted into the realm of dramatic literature (written to be read rather than performed), in which an ideal accommodation between the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths and a rebuttal of benighted religious dogma is embodied in characters and blank verse rather than in direct polemic. After

his debut as a revolutionary realist in the 1770s, Goethe's dramas, such as *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (1779–1787) and *Torquato Tasso* (1790), are artificial cultural constructs, highly stylized and remote from popular appeal. In the case of his most famous work *Faust*, on which he worked all his life, we have a sort of monstrous development beyond the popular dramatic form in which it originated in the 1770s in the direction of what Franco Moretti has termed 'modern epic'. By this, Moretti meant a compendious literary work, hybrid as regards genre, undertaking the impossible task of giving a unified artistic account of modernity. For Moretti, the category of modern epic also includes such works as Wagner's Ring cycle, in which the history of nineteenth-century German (indeed European) drama culminated, Joyce's *Ulysses* and Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This is a long way from popular improving entertainment.

Moritz was also representative of the time in that he occupied a position between the popular and the learned. The possibility of making a living as a writer was just beginning for Germans, although this required a tremendous struggle for survival. Moritz retained something of the *Genie* long after it was fashionable and exploited it in the service of his efforts to educate the public. If we add to this the connection he made between poetry and the indivisible unity of the divinity which was theological in origin, he provides a conduit from the source of the German literary revival in a secularized Protestant inwardness, through the defence of this against the threat of vulgarization, to the formulation of something, namely art, that could make sense in the modern world of rationalization, manufacture, trade and the need for distraction. In this he foreshadowed the Romantic movement.

## The virtue of sexuality

The case of Moritz illustrates the context of the stirrings of modern German literature but one essential component is missing. It is the projection on the screen of public culture of what Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) would later call the Dionysian.

When Goethe began to work on the new version of the novel that was to become *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 1796), he developed in it a figure, Laertes, whose unfortunate erotic experiences had made a depressive character of him. Goethe was paying secret tribute to his friend, Moritz, who had only recently died at the age of 36 (see Schings 1983). Moritz's documentary account of subjective partialness in *Anton Reiser* thereby becomes an implied complement to Goethe's novel.