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18th Century German Literature and its Authors. An Introduction

The beginning and end of the 18th century saw two crucial turning points in German literary life. Around 1700 courtly late Baroque reached its high-point, coinciding with the Early Enlightenment, which was heavily influenced by France and in particular England, and which questioned for the first time the rationality of divine order. By around 1800 the Enlightenment as understood by Immanuel Kant – “use your own mind” – had touched upon all areas of society. At the same time however, classical authors and romantics began to shift attention away from the utilitarian thinking of the Enlightenment philosophers, whom they despised as rationalists, and onto the autonomy of art.

Although one cannot simply equate the 18th century with the era of Enlightenment in Germany, the period did see a smooth transition from the Early Enlightenment that originated in the universities of Halle and Leipzig, to the Late Enlightenment, whose most famous protagonists were Friedrich Nicolai and his friends in Berlin. The various tendencies, events and groups within literary life were essentially all tied up with the Enlightenment, and later on with the emancipation of the bourgeoisie: the Hamburg “Patriots” around 1720, Johann Christoph Gottsched and his Leipzig school, the Halle Anacreontics, the Copenhagen circle of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, latter on the *Hainbund* in Göttingen, the genius era of the *Sturm und Drang*, the cult of sensitivity, and finally the impact of the French Revolution on German literature, which has wrongly been termed the Jacobin revolution.

During the course of the 18th century German literary language slowly took shape, poetic theory and aesthetics fell under the influence of Enlightenment philosophy, and ancient poetic styles and genres were adopted and adapted, with didactic poems and fables being the most popular forms at Enlightenment’s peak. The bourgeois tragedy overcame the rigid conventions of the heroic tragedies and academic dramas of previous centuries, and the theatre increasingly came to regard itself as a moral institution and in some places enjoyed considerable esteem as a national theatre. Fiction increased in popularity as the century progressed, and sophisticated narrative works began to be published alongside widely-distributed light fiction, including chivalrous epics, ghost stories, love stories, and stories about robbers.

The book market underwent comprehensive reform in the second half of the 18th century with the abolition of the mediaeval barter system and the introduction of a net payment system. The Leipzig Book Fair became the centre of the book trade, with Leipzig book dealers playing a very active role in the Enlightenment. Following the Seven-Years’ War, book production increased dramatically in Germany. Whereas around 1,700 only approx. 1,000 new books were published each year, primarily in Latin, by the end of the 18th century this figure had increased to 6,000, almost all in

German. Latin no longer played an important role in public life. At the beginning of the century the market had been dominated by theological literature. By the end of the century, however, belles-lettres had taken over, and the book trade came to be characterised by novels and stories, poetry compilations, plays, fables and anecdotes, alongside Enlightenment literature, magazines and almanacs.

The Enlightenment in Germany was primarily enlightenment through books. People in towns as well in the countryside demanded books, and not just the ruling cast of society, but also women, officers, merchants, and students. This growing demand meant that production too had to increase accordingly, and the result was a reader revolution during the last decades of the century that gradually spread through more and more layers of society, resulting in the creation of an established market for belles-lettres. Readers wanted to be entertained, but reading was also used as a way of acquiring knowledge and facts. The fact that the “reading craze” was discussed in magazines shows the change that was taking place and how a multi-layered reading culture was gradually establishing itself. Other elements of the culture included the establishment of reading rooms and reading societies whose members could get hold of the literature they desired. Soon the first commercial lending libraries were established, remaining in existence until far into the 20th century.

Apart from the book dealers and publishers, printers and binders, also participating in the book and reading culture at the time of the Enlightenment were, of course, the writers themselves, in the case of belles-lettres, poets and authors. They mostly belonged to the bourgeoisie, with aristocratic authors being fewer in number. The majority wrote and published in their spare time, i.e. outside working hours. They were primarily academically-trained civil servants and lawyers, as well as ministers, and the middle of the 18th century saw the appearance of the first “free” authors, i.e. authors who attempted to live from their literary earnings. Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, often quoted as an example of such an author, is in fact not a good example. Although he pursued no normal profession, he lived from the money handed to him by the sovereigns. Adolph Freiherr Knigge on the other hand succeeded in supporting his family during the last two decades of the century with his writing, until finally securing a regular income as a county administrator in Bremen.

The 18th century produced around 18 well-known German poets and writers who can be considered part of the Enlightenment, and their works and writings are known, read, quoted and researched to this day. They therefore undisputedly form part of the history of German literature. Their number is small, and before introducing the virtual library of 18th century German literature, it makes sense to list their names here, as they are the principal authors in the broad canon to which reference will be made later: Johann Christoph Gottsched and Christian Fürchtegott Gellert in Leipzig – two leading authors of their time, Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and his friends Moses Mendelssohn and Friedreich Nicolai, Justus Möser from Osnabrück, Christoph Martin Wieland, Johann Joachim Winckelmann – the rediscoverer of ancient art, Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder, in Göttingen Georg

Christoph Lichtenberg, in Zurich Johann Kaspar Lavater, and finally the philosophers of the Late Enlightenment Jacob Wilhelm Heinse, Karl Philipp Moritz, Georg Forster, Adolph Freiherr Knigge, Ulrich Bräker and Johann Gottfried Seume.

Another group of poets and authors of similar size also played a decisive role in the development of German literature in the 18th century. They, however, are nowadays of more interest to German language researchers than to contemporary book publishers. Their names include: Barthold Heinrich Brockes and Friedrich von Hagedorn from Hamburg, Albrecht von Haller from Switzerland, Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger, the Anacreontics Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim, Johann Nikolaus Götz and Johann Peter Uz, *Hainbund* members Gottfried August Bürger and Johann Heinrich Voss, the Stolberg brothers, Ludwig Hölty, the *Sturm und Drang* poets Friedrich Maximilian Klinger, Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz and others. Each one of these authors produced books and poetry, some of which have withstood the test of time, thereby underlining the importance of German literature in the century of the Enlightenment.

Generally literary historical research is limited to more or less this canon of 18th century writers. Another dozen well-known names can be added to them, e.g. Christian Ludwig Liscow, Ewald von Kleist, Gottlieb Wilhelm Rabener, Salomon Gessner, Heinrich Wilhelm Gerstenberg, Karl Wilhelm Ramler, Gottlieb Conrad Pfeffel, Peter Helfrich Sturz, Gottlieb Theodor von Hippel, and Karl Friedrich Bahrdt. Incidentally, the number of 18th-century female writers is very small: apart from the *Karschin* (Anna Louisa Karsch), Sophie Schwarz, and Friederike Lohmann, the others are all but forgotten.

The 18th century produced a far greater number of distinguished poets and authors than the mere 50 mentioned here. The online-edition 18th Century German Literature Online lists 642 authors as the creators of 2,675 books in 4,494 volumes, and makes use of the bibliographical entries in Karl Goedeke's "Grundriss zur Geschichte der deutschen Dichtung" and Leopold Hirschberg's "Taschengoedeke", both of which have been critically edited and supplemented for the purposes of this edition. In addition to the well-known poets and authors, a large number of *poetae minores* have also been included, most of which are only of regional or even local importance. The inclusion of so many unknown or insignificant names needs no explanation in view of the use of the two authorities, Karl Goedeke and Leopold Hirschberg. Worthy of elaboration are, however, the possibilities opened up to users by the online edition. To put it succinctly, they are unique. Users can naturally use the database to find works or texts by a particular author; the advantage compared to looking up the information in a bibliography being that users can not only find the title of a book quickly and see the table of contents, they can also view the full body of the text on-screen.

The online edition contains approx. 1.1 million book pages from the 18th century. As every text, including those in Gothic type, has been electronically scanned and read, each word that is entered can be found in the approx. 4,500 volumes with just a click of the mouse. What this will mean for literary scientific research remains to be seen. At any rate, it will render the contents of the included works accessible in a highly unusual manner.

This online edition, I am sure, will open up new angles to researchers of 18th century German literature. Our thanks therefore go to all those involved in this venture at K. G. Saur Verlag.

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