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## German Literary Studies and the Nation

It would not be quite accurate to say that nationalism began to shape or influence German literary studies in the early nineteenth century, when the field was first coming into being. Rather, German literary studies, or *Germanistik*, was a form of nationalism in itself; it articulated, supported, and sought to substantiate nationalist ideas. Linguists, editors, critics, folklorists, legal historians, and ethnographers retrieved and restored Germanic texts, mapped out the grammars of Germanic languages, constructed a German canon, told histories of German literature, and collected information about Germanic customs and traditions—all efforts dedicated to the delineation of a German culture worthy of preservation and reverent attention. The project of the early Germanists was to allow the nation to appear, to reveal its historical depth, represent its particular character, and convey its authentic voice. In this sense, early *Germanistik* was the quintessential nationalist enterprise.

Contemporary Germanists in the United States obviously do not identify as German nationalists, but the scholarly program that eventually resulted in the institutionalization of a nationally focused discipline in the early nineteenth century still underlies and to some extent directs what they choose to focus on. Despite the particular trajectory and unique challenges of German literary studies in a North American setting (Hohendahl 7–17; Hermand 266–74), a nation with a supposedly distinctive national culture continues to serve as the discipline's frame; humanistic study remains structured, or departmentalized, along national-linguistic lines. Two senior scholars, one in history and one in literary studies, recently admitted this dependence of German studies on the national paradigm, in a cowritten retrospective commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the German Studies Association: "Writing as we are in the spring of 2016, the importance of Germany *qua* Germany [...] and with it the vitality of German studies in North America, seem unlikely to fade away any time soon" (Applegate and Trommler 490). If we are to believe these two former presidents of the GSA, the broader field's vitality is closely correlated with the fortunes of the nation-state project to which it remains attached.

The aim of this paper is to uncover the discipline's nationalist origins and to argue that contemporary German literary studies in the United States, while much transformed, remains utterly reliant on the national paradigm, and must remain so if it is to continue to exist. Earnest devotion to the nation has been replaced by skeptical interrogation, but the object of attention, or, rather, the very

frame of academic work in German literary studies—namely, the national paradigm—has persisted, and, in my opinion, must persist, if in new and critical ways. While German literary studies cannot disentangle itself from the nation, it can develop into a more reflective enterprise, and has in many ways already done so. German literary studies should, I argue, continue to move from being a directly nationalist endeavor to being a critical, reflexive one, while at the same time recognizing that it cannot leave the national paradigm fully behind without dissolving itself.

### The National Paradigm

Germanistik became possible with the articulation and growing influence of a certain “social ontology” around 1800—that is, a certain conception of how humanity is composed, what constitutes its fundamental social elements (Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making* 16). According to this social ontology, associated with Johann Gottfried Herder, humanity consists of communities, each of which is bound by a culturally distinct shared identity. These communities are, in a word, individualities, the traits of which have evolved historically through the continual interaction of a group with a unique combination of conditions, such as climate, geography, neighbors, and an accompanying set of local problems. The world is not inhabited by humans who are the same everywhere and who live more or less arbitrarily under different governments. Rather, it is populated by a variety of linguistically contoured and culturally cohesive human collectives, whose lives can be traced historically and whose particular traits and commitments become legible in language, art, and artifacts (Berlin 218–19).

In the nationalist imagination, then, the word *Volk* does not refer to a mere crowd but to a vital human grouping circumscribed and held together by language, norms, traditions, and treasured cultural expressions. Or perhaps it would be better to always speak of *Völker*—that is, multiple peoples, each with its own history and particular habits and qualities, which are distinct from those of others. Different virtues are distributed across different countries and cultures, none of which embody a universal model of excellence. What we have instead is a variegated texture of historically rooted competencies and values. The distinctiveness of the various peoples further manifests itself most clearly in artistic genres, which means that poems and songs are not only vehicles of entertainment and edification but media of disclosure. We come to learn about the character or spirit of a people primarily through its art, the product revealing the producer. These evolved communities are, finally, worthy of attention and respect because they place individual subjects in a longer history, embed them in communal solidarity, and provide them with a cultural identity, thereby saving human beings from disorientation, social isolation, and inarticulacy (Nipperdey 5).

After the French Revolution inaugurated the era of popular sovereignty, these large-scale ethnic, cultural and linguistic communities became increasingly poli-

tically salient, because national membership could now help delineate the boundaries of a citizenry. The nation, with its shared language, history, and province in the world, emerged as a suitably contoured and cohesive self of collective self-determination and the still-dominant political form of the nation-state rests on the notion of the people as sovereign entity, citizenry, and ethnic community (Wimmer, *Nationalist Exclusion 2*). In this age of collective self-government, which is still in many ways our age, political rule could only achieve legitimacy when the people ruled, but the people only ruled through the government of ethnic and linguistic like over like (Wimmer, *Waves of War 1*).

This post-revolutionary, nationalized world comprised individualized communities that existed on a more level cultural playing field (Casanova, *The World Republic 75*). Greek and Latin, the prestigious classical languages, should make room, Germanists insisted, for the exploration and teaching of the vernacular. Great works of antiquity no longer stood as models to be emulated but were re-framed as expressions of cultures located in time and space, as instances of national genius, and placed alongside artistic creations from other periods and peoples. Aesthetic forms and standards were seen as intrinsically local and historical, expressive of particular societies rather than normative for all. The aim of the student of culture, therefore, should not be to attend to transhistorical templates of excellence; instead, s/he was to consider artifacts as expressions and, hence, the exclusive possessions of a particular people (Gille 31).

This shift from the classical and universal to the native and local appears in an anecdote told by August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben, who is now probably most known (if known at all) as the author of the “Deutschlandlied” and other songs, but who was also a prolific scholar of Germanic literature. At an early point in his career, Hoffmann was a young classicist and visited the city of Kassel to inspect antique sculptures. While in the museum, he encountered Jacob Grimm, the historical linguist of Germanic languages and collector and editor of folk tales, legends, myths, and legal antiquities, who grew up and worked in Kassel until he assumed a professorship in Göttingen and, later, in Berlin. Fallersleben reports that during the conversation, Grimm asked him a question that made him abandon classical studies and devote himself to the study of Germanic languages and literatures. This simple but consequential question was, “But is not your fatherland closer to you [than Italy and Greece]?” (Fallersleben 47–48). By asking this, Grimm does not dispute the beauty of the artifacts Hoffmann has come to contemplate or the greatness of the classical tradition. But the choice of a topic of study should no longer be determined by aesthetic excellence alone, but by one’s proximity to the subject matter, even by national belonging. The scholar must immerse himself in that which is originary and native, “das Ursprüngliche” and “das Einheimische” (Feldbusch xxv–vi); only such intimacy, Grimm believed, would secure the necessary motivation and ensure full epistemological access. Indeed, Grimm himself spent a lifetime devoted to the recovery of a fragmented and recondite but nonetheless radiant Germanic past (Toews 323).

But what could be the relevance of the Grimms and their position today? Do we in any way share their celebration of fatherland, their eager turn to the Germanic past? Of course not; the idiom sounds alien, embarrassing, even disturbing, in its emphasis of quasi-tribal ancestry. And yet without the reorientation so clearly and insistently voiced by the Grimms and the members of their discourse network, the concept of a Germanic culture would not have been introduced, gradually accepted, and eventually established as a discreet area of study at the German research university, the hallowed institution in which humanistic study crystallized—and then froze—in a range of disciplines that still remains recognizable to us (Sheehan 247).

Today we do not share the Grimms' idiom, but we do still operate in an academic realm staked out on the basis of the premises they articulated—namely, that there is a diversity of cultural individualities rather than one uniform humanity, a non-hierarchical plurality of tongues rather than a small set of clearly superior classical languages, and historically changing and culturally expressive aesthetic forms rather than a fixed set of timeless and placeless models of artistic excellence. The discipline owes its existence to a modern social ontology and an associated relocation of cultural attention and value around the nation form (Blanning 336), a consequential reorientation that justified the establishment of humanistic disciplines along linguistic-national lines. The nation as the bearer of cultural variation (Moretti 12): this fundamental premise has shaped and continues to shape the institutional focus of German literary studies in the United States (McCarthy 32–33).

Before outlining what I think is the proper response to this deep disciplinary history, I will spend some time reviewing the three traditional components, or cultural nation-building tools, of early Germanistik: the study of the German language, the construction of the German literary canon, and the formation of German literary historiography.

### **The German Language**

The primary task of German departments today is instruction in the German language. Even as language teaching seems like an increasingly embattled enterprise at US universities, we take this activity to be self-evidently worthwhile. Why would an institution of higher learning not offer students the opportunity to study the most commonly spoken European vernacular, a language that provides access to the society and culture of the present EU hegemon, its literary and philosophical heritage, as well as the documents of its modern history? But the rise of German happened over time and thanks to the efforts of, among others, Germanists—which is to say by linguistic and cultural nationalists—who argued for its use as a language of literature and science, carefully traced its origins and development, and sought to consolidate its prestige, partly on the basis of a new conception of the native tongue's importance to the very process of thought.

Some recognizable version of German has been spoken in Europe for a very long time, but it has not always been the premier language of education and culture in German lands. Prior to the nineteenth century, training in Greek and Latin constituted the path of learning (Stichweh 194). To become educated, to gain any kind of reliable knowledge, the student first had to learn the languages in which foundational truths had been formulated—the classical languages. Among the vernaculars, French was the dominant tongue in the pre-Romantic period, the chief language of international communication but also the common tongue of the European aristocracy, embraced with special enthusiasm in the German principalities and lauded as intrinsically superior for its clarity and elegance (Casanova, *The World Republic* 68).

The eighteenth century saw multiple efforts to promote German as a legitimate vehicle of learning in literature, the arts, and the sciences. In 1687, Thomasius held lectures in German at the University of Leipzig, then seen as a daring novelty (Martus 123). The philosopher Christian Wolff wrote in German in the early eighteenth century, and critics such as Johann Christoph Gottsched sought to render German suitable for literary writing—take, for instance, Gottsched's work of prescriptive poetics from 1730, *Versuch einer kritischen Dichtkunst* (Clark 12–21). Toward the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, German advanced to the status of a fitting and widespread literary and philosophical language and became, alongside English and French, a major language of science in the nineteenth century (Roelli). This development was also ideologically supported by the introduction of a new way of determining the suitability of a language for a community of speakers.

In the rhetorical frame in which figures such as Gottsched operated (Weimar 77), language functions as an instrument at the speaker's disposal. The speaker has a purpose and then organizes his speech toward its fulfillment. Speaking involves, in this view of compositional procedures, cloaking thought in adequate language (Vickers 62). This implies that ideas exist prior to the particular structures of language, which can then be assessed for their relative adequacy to purposes.

Herder is often seen as the thinker who overturns the dualism of language and thought by arguing that thinking can only be accomplished through the use of symbols and that language and thinking therefore remain inseparable (Forster 25). Herder and others after him maintain that humans organize their experience through the formation and development of their language, which means that the rhetorical view of language as an instrument for communicating preexisting thoughts must be replaced by a notion of language as constitutive of cognition (Martyn 50). Due to language's intimate relationship to thinking, the investigation of the character of any tongue also becomes the means of exploring a mode of thought; linguistic study is the very key to understanding human experience in its variety (Morton 131–35). Entwined with cognition in this way, language is then also deemed revelatory of cultural specificity: since the national idiom is the medium of collective mental life, linguistic attention reveals the distinctness of its community of speakers.

Combined with a social ontology that postulates the existence of a plurality of culturally separate and territorially rooted communities (Niekerk 156), this epistemological and expressive conception of speech rearranged the traditional linguistic hierarchy, and in so doing placed German in a new relation to its presumed rivals. The best language for any speaker is not the most translucent, elegant, ancient, or esteemed language but, rather, the language spoken by the speaker her/himself and her/his particular community, the so-called mother tongue (Martyn 62). A speaker cannot simply abandon the language learned in childhood for another one, because the alleged advantages of communicating in some superior idiom are always outweighed by the disadvantages of linguistic detachment and inauthenticity (Yildiz 9–10).

Herder, the prophet of linguistically oriented nationalist intellectuals (Hobsbawm 57), argued for German as the indispensable language, for Germans. Yet his arguments for promoting the vernacular also transformed, rather than simply obstructed, the study of foreign languages, casting them as privileged entry points into differently structured cultural worlds and, as such, as vital elements to any exploration of human culture (Forster 89). This assumption ultimately provides the conceptual ground for holistically oriented academic disciplines devoted to languages *and* cultures. Those who teach language hold the keys to a culture in the sense of a singular way of inhabiting the world.

Finally, the academic grouping of languages into clusters or families (Germanic, Romance, Slavic, and so on) represents another heritage from the early nineteenth century—namely, early scholarship in historical linguistics, a specialty of Germanists such as Jacob Grimm. The differentiation of modern-language departments reflects the mapping of the genealogical relationships among languages, which had branched out over time from a common origin. First, scholars who compared multiple tongues, including the perspicuously structured Sanskrit (Pedersen 256–57), began to think of language not as aggregates of many words but as organized contexts in which individual items have meaning by virtue of their placement in an internal architecture—in grammar (Foucault 237). These studies unearthed systematic similarities between linguistic structures, an enterprise termed “comparative grammar” by Friedrich Schlegel (Turner 130). The Bavarian Franz Bopp showed how similarities in conjugation patterns indicate the kinship of languages such as Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and German, and the Dane Rasmus Rask demonstrated how Germanic languages had developed into distinctive modern tongues through a series of sound shifts (Pedersen 242). As a result, languages no longer seemed hierarchically organized from coarse to refined but, instead, emerged as a multiplicity of internally structured, historically evolving organisms in kinship relations with one another.

The most important work for the establishment of Germanistik is probably Jacob Grimm’s massive and never-quite-finished *Deutsche Grammatik*, which uncovered the evolution of grammatical structures and reconstructed the historical ties among the Germanic languages. By treating Gothic, Old High German,

Middle High German, and New High German, as well as Old English, Old Saxon, Old Norse, Old Friesian, Swedish, Danish, Dutch, and English, Grimm recounted the history of changes that defined Germanic languages from their first appearances to the present, argued for their original unity, and set standards for the assessment of the relative antiquity of documented linguistic forms (Benes 119). Through this achievement, Grimm definitively established historical linguistics as a field, while also laying the foundations for the study of the Germanic as a discrete undertaking. German-department faculty today may not recognize Grimm's early nineteenth-century tome as the foundational work of their own discipline, and yet one cannot make a similar claim on behalf of any other book.

Grimm and his contemporaries described and brought order and recognition to the plurality of (Germanic) languages, discovered how they signify by means of their internal structures, and excavated their genealogically related histories. But there was a political dimension to this scholarly project as well. The young Jacob Grimm read Fichte's *Reden an die deutsche Nation* with enthusiasm and suggested it be printed as a pamphlet for wide dissemination (Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm 164). While Fichte did not achieve the linguistic insights of Jacob Grimm and his peers, he supposed that language communities, by virtue of their linguistically evident social cohesiveness and shared difference from other groups, possess a right to self-government (Kedourie 64). In Jacob Grimm, language and political form are similarly linked (Dembeck and Mein 133). Languages are affiliated complex structures—organisms, even—evolving out of and next to each other in historical time. Empirically robust insights into their development would ultimately allow scholars to trace the histories of peoples who speak these tongues and who, by virtue of continuing to speak them, belong together and constitute peoples (Benes 126–27). A linguistic discontinuity between rulers and ruled, by contrast, exposed the illegitimate dominance of one people over another, an important idea for the Grimms, who felt confused and humiliated by the Napoleonic occupation of their hometown, Kassel (Wilhelm Grimm 11–12).

### The German Canon

German language instruction today would not exist without the vigorously promoted historical rise of vernaculars to the status of standardized languages of the European nation-states. From the perspective of the comparative historical study of Germanic languages pioneered by Jacob Grimm, German departments may even seem a little too closely wedded to the language of a very small number of modern countries—basically Germany and Austria and, more peripherally, Switzerland—an attachment that typically excludes a much wider range of Germanic tongues, such as Dutch, Flemish, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, and Icelandic, all together spoken by over 40 million people in Europe. Students in graduate programs sometimes learn to read Middle High German, but rarely Gothic, Old Norse, Old English, or other historical Germanic languages. We are today quite

frequently more monolingual, and more mononational, than the early Germanist promoters of vernaculars.

Yet linguistic research hardly constitutes the main activity of German departments; teaching and research in literary studies (still) does. And for this activity, there needs to be a literature in German and a German canon, a set of texts deemed valuable on the grounds of their quality, influence, or representativity, taught in advanced German courses (Blackwell 143), listed in graduate-level comprehensive exams, and reinterpreted at conferences. This fundamental material of the discipline, the basis for its claim to responsibility for a discreet area of culture, is to a large extent the legacy of cultural nationalists. It was the early Germanists who began the project of nationalizing literature, of dividing the body of writing not just according to genre, purpose, occasion, or merit but also according to community. Such attention to a national literature, and especially to the construction of a German canon, was the core desideratum of Germanists in the early nineteenth century, and today's syllabi and exam lists are still marked by their efforts.

The nationalization of writing and the canonization of selected literary works faced particular problems in Germany, whose literary tradition was relatively short in comparison to France, Italy, or England. Driven by the pressing need for text, for a national literature of some stature, Germanists developed a range of strategies to counter the dominance of cultural hegemonies. The celebration of near-contemporary geniuses, such as Goethe and Schiller, was one such strategy (Kruckes 451). In addition, collectors and scholars such as the Grimms and their more literary friends Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano believed that some of the gaps in German literature could be filled out by the conversion into print of a declining oral literature, composed of poems, songs, tales, and legends, transformed by admitted or concealed stylization (Schellenberg 18). Arnim and Brentano produced *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, and the Grimms gave the world what is likely its most widely read compilation of folk tales, the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Lampart 172–73). These two books demonstrate how the “vernacularization” of literature (Hutchinson 81) took place partly through the “artificialization” of folkloric forms (Stewart 105). Here, however, I would like to focus on a third avenue of nationalization: the recovery and philological preparation of ancient Germanic texts, preferably in the grander genre of the heroic epic.

The *Nibelungenlied* in particular emerged as the most important literary work in early Germanistik (Härd). It appeared more frequently than any other early text in Germanist university lecture series (Janota 251), and scholars regularly advanced it as the most promising candidate for a pivotal work in building the German-language canon; August Wilhelm Schlegel was a prominent advocate for its wider dissemination. But the *Nibelungenlied* was also significant as a locus for the philologization of Germanics, exemplified by the editorial efforts and analysis of the Grimms' academic ally Karl Lachmann, the scholar who pioneered the transfer of classicist philological methods to Germanic language objects, a move that in itself served to raise the prestige of the German-language canon.



The *Nibelungenlied's* significance for early Germanists rests on several of its traits. First of all, the sheer age of the material satisfied a craving for temporal depth that could serve as evidence of the great antiquity of national culture (Bee-croft 229). In the rivalry with greater European literary powers, such as France, as well as the classical languages, a game in which the currency of time and antiquity was of utmost importance, neglected manuscripts from medieval times were vital to the legitimation project (Casanova, "Combative Literatures" 126). But in the case of the *Nibelungenlied*, the cultural-nationalist appropriation of a deep vernacular past was entwined with the search for a properly glorious national narrative, a specimen of the most grandiose of literary genres, the *Iliad*-like heroic epic (Andersson 28), which recounts in an expansive narrative format the heroic deeds of an aristocratic warrior culture. Every aspiring nation, Goethe writes in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, needs a national epic, and the Germanists worked quite hard to fill that category (von See 309).

At play in this reintroduction of a Middle High German courtly verse narrative as the recovered national epic, emerging from the depth of the German people, is also the premise of expressivity—that is, the notion that the distinctiveness of national cultures shines forth most perspicuously in their literary artifacts. For an early Germanist such as Friedrich von der Hagen, who assumed an academic position in Berlin in 1810 and then in Breslau in 1812, the canonical text appears as the repository of national virtues (Guillory 22). *Nibelungenlied*, Hagen argued, puts on display a national ethic, with characters who exhibit "Gastlichkeit, Biederkeit, Redlichkeit, Treue und Freundschaft bis in den Tod, Menschlichkeit, Milde und Großmuth in des Kampfes Not" (von See 319). The notion that a canonical work enshrines the virtues of an indestructible German national character, poisoned once and for all by National Socialism (Münkler 102–7), is entirely alien to contemporary Germanists, and yet the canonization campaign of Schlegel, Hagen, and others has enjoyed enduring success: the *Nibelungenlied* is still found on reading lists in German graduate programs and still functions as an anchoring point of the canon.

Of course, German literary studies in the US today focuses on developments after 1750, while scholarship on the literature of the German Middle Ages languishes (Gentry 283), demoted to the status of a small subfield, and perhaps rightly so (Schlaffer 22–35). The *Nibelungenlied*, once the indisputable center point of a German canon, might now be one of the few medieval works that students have even heard of. And the canon as a whole has also tilted away from literature, from Goethe and Schiller, toward criticism, aesthetics, and philosophy. Today, staples of graduate study in Germanistik include Kant's third critique, Schlegel on irony, Hegel on the end of art, Nietzsche on the Dionysian and Apollonian, Freud on the uncanny, Lukács on the theory of the novel, Benjamin on baroque drama, Adorno on the work of art, and so on. This would have surprised early Germanists, who were linguists, philologists, ethnographers, and legal historians, but not philosophers. Despite such trends, however, we remain the inher-

itors of the Germanist canonization efforts insofar as we are still institutionally committed to the idea of a series of definite high points in *German* thought and literature, which can all be located and understood in a more or less coherent context—namely, that of national culture. There is such a thing as a German philosophical and critical tradition, although it may come to an end (Höslé 307–12).

### German Literary History

For the cultural nationalists who asserted the priority of German literature for Germans, the construction of a national canon was indispensable. But literary history—the attempt to write a continuous, synthetic narrative of the development of national literature from a hallowed origin to the present day—was equally central to the fledgling Germanistik. Literary history satisfies the desire for a continuous narrative that establishes a steady national presence, bridges the gap between ancient canonized texts and the unfolding present, and embeds all of literature in one single consistent historical narrative (Beecroft 233). The canonical text supplies chronological depth and cultural value, whereas literary history provides the narrative of a sometimes-muted but nonetheless uninterrupted evolution of expressive culture over time, thereby securing continuity and coherence, and, hence, the integrity of the field of German.

Germanists have of course augmented and revised the series of canonical authors and added periods. Yet literary historiography depends on the same set of operations: the literary historian specifies a national region; selects authors and works to form a manageable series on the basis of some set of evaluative criteria; divides historical time into periods with reference to salient literary, social, or historical phenomena; and then supplies a narrative arc (Schönert 272–73). Literary history still helps delineate the core area of responsibility, even a disciplinary common ground.

Literary-historical works appeared well before the nineteenth century, but they were typically organized differently—namely, as series of biographical author portraits, bibliographies of publications, or annalistic-chronological records of literary works (Schönert 270). All these formats for organizing information about literature persist—in the form of lexicons and encyclopedias of literature—but they do not involve periodization, consistent context formation, or macro-narrativization to the extent that standard literary history does. It was German scholars and critics in the nineteenth century who introduced a new form of contextual and narrative representation of literature, on the basis of a belief in the historicity of literature itself (Turner 158–66). Works could no longer be seen as instantiations of fixed genres serving set purposes; instead, standards and formats were themselves subject to historical change and local variation.

This new contextualizing and narrativizing literary history, first pioneered by the brothers Schlegel (Weimar 261) and later established more publicly by figures such as Georg Gervinus and Friedrich Christian Vilmar (Behm 227), constitutes

an application of the premises discussed above: plurality, historicity, and expressivity. The idea that humanity consists of a plurality of individualized collectivities, each defined by its particularity, furnishes the literary-historical narrative with a subject: the focus of any literary history ought to be the nation as a particular individuality (Fohrmann 115). Moreover, in accordance with the premise of historicity, this subject has gradually grown into a specific identity, such that it can only be understood and appreciated if one looks at its unfolding over time, a conception that supplies the requirement of a nationally focused historiography. Finally, the notion that literature and the arts are fundamentally expressive of a distinct collective character makes literary history the primary locus of the historically formed national identity. Without its literature, and without a fully developed literary history, the nation will remain ignorant of its history and unique character, deprived of its voice, with only a tenuous and fragmentary self-understanding (Fohrmann 125).

In sum, assumptions of plurality, historicity, and expressivity combine to form a picture of how the national community takes shape through history and expresses itself most clearly and legibly in its evolving literature, which in turn makes the production of literary history an absolutely crucial nationalist task (Weimar 291), even the central mission, for the Germanist. The history of national literature is key to the history of national identity.

### **German Literary Studies Today**

As the above review of the Germanists' nation-building activities (historical-geographical linguistics, vernacular canonization, national-literary historiography) indicates, the relationship between nationalism and Germanistik is not one of outside influence penetrating a formerly independent pursuit. Rather, this increasingly professionalized academic endeavor was itself a form of nationalism. It might even be more accurate to reverse the relationship between the German nation and the discipline—in other words, to say that Germanistik is the origin of the nation. For who first discovers and promotes the concept of the nation? One answer is the intellectuals, the philologists, the ethnographers, and the historians; the amateur scholars and antiquarians, the schoolteachers with academic interests, the librarians. In many European countries, nation building first went through a “scholarly phase,” characterized by the establishment of associations for local culture, folklore, language preservation, and so on (Hroch 270). Before the explicit demand for national autonomy, which means a government of ethnic and linguistic like over like, comes the discovery of the nation's neglected history, the celebration of its unfairly suppressed vernacular language, the salvaging of its endangered folkways, the cultivation of its expressive literature, the restoration of its native arts and crafts—in other words, the recovery of its sacred particularity. Early Germanists, such as the Grimms, can be viewed as politico-cultural entrepreneurs, who, by introducing the nation's unique linguistic medium, cultural au-

tonomy, and historical depth, successfully crafted a new kind of communal self to serve as a candidate for political self-determination.

But how is this in any way relevant to the present state of German literary studies in the US, which surely must have distanced itself from this context of origin? This question ignores that early Germanistik is still of significance, and has been since its exponents first established the defining national frame for the discipline. Our departments still carry the name *German* or *Germanic*, and our major professional organizations remain devoted to the culture and history, however widely conceived, of German-speaking lands. Whatever topic, material, or problem we choose to focus on, it is linked to the “German,” meaning that it is accommodated within or at least placed in relationship to the national paradigm. The discipline maintains itself by its continual application of—and critical reflection on—the distinction of German versus non-German.

In fact, the postwar expansion of German literary studies by the steady integration of new themes, theoretical formations, and arts and technologies, such as critical theory or film and new media, does not unsettle the national frame, since these new paradigms are then made compatible with the focus on the “German.” In these cases too the national context shows itself to be generative of meaning: to think of films, philosophies, ideologies, and social trends as German, in effect to nationalize a wide range of cultural phenomena, functions as a dependable tool of context formation and sense making, even in a relatively new subfield like film studies (Kapczynski and Richardson). I would even claim that lasting attempts to advance beyond the confines of an earlier German literary studies serve to strengthen the national paradigm because the loss of the methodological coherence guaranteed by the traditional emphasis on historical linguistics, literary interpretation, and literary history is compensated for by the reinforcement of the one stable reference point—namely, the relation of all new materials to the “German-speaking peoples” (Donahue and Kagel 273). Interdisciplinarity confirms the nation’s significance, since the German versus non-German distinction continues to secure the identity of the field. To discuss Frankfurt School critical theory within the frame of broadly defined German studies, in the mode of the journal *New German Critique* (Koepnick 556), entails understanding it as somehow German.

The existence of German-speaking nation-states is an absolutely crucial institutional reality for Germanists. Various German and Austrian entities, such as the DAAD, ÖAD, the Humboldt Foundation, and the Volkswagen Foundation, provide funding for extended research stays, and the German embassy and Goethe Institutes support undergraduate programming. However indifferent Germanists might be to the Federal Republic of Germany, they still contribute to the maintenance of a modest national soft power because they teach the German language to generations of students, manage study-abroad programs together with German partner universities, write recommendations for internships in Germany, and run German film series. Institutionally, we are still beneficiaries and resident representatives of a nation-state.

To state the obvious, German literary studies could not survive as an enterprise of teaching and research if the “German” element were somehow to lose its centrality or be done away with entirely as a category—which means it cannot disentangle itself from the national paradigm that infuses its very existence with meaning. Perhaps tomorrow’s Germanists should collectively admit that the discipline’s conventional materials—German literature, German film, German philosophy, and so on—could be dealt with more effectively and adequately if they were understood non-nationally and were distributed among other disciplines, such as literary studies, applied linguistics, film and media studies, history, philosophy, cultural anthropology, or some future academic fields. But academics rarely abolish their areas willingly.

I do not mean to claim that we remain forever chained to the particular conceptions of the Grimms and their allies, however crucial their efforts were for the initial establishment of the discipline’s core activities. But since it is impossible to pretend that *German* is not the name for a national language, a national canon, and a national culture, scholarship should sustain itself through an engagement with the historical formation and continued significance of the paradigm to which it owes its existence and yet should not uncritically embrace. German literary studies can choose between abolishing itself in the name of radical critique of the nation and maintaining itself through critical reflection on the multiple processes of nationalization of which it has always been an instrument and a product. In this situation, it may be preferable for German literary studies, the legatee of a nationalist academic project, to transform itself into a reflexive discipline rather than dismantle itself altogether.

It is, I should say, already a critical enterprise. To name a vital example, scholars in German-Jewish studies have long been exploring the heterogeneous nature of ethnic and linguistic identities, and how deadly the insistence on uniform ethnic allegiance and purity can be (Morris 602). Anti-Semitism was not uncommon among the early Germanists, for instance in the case of Wilhelm Grimm (Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm 179). Currently, new studies of multilingualism also seek to expand the compass of German national philology; an obdurate monolingual bias would be ill-equipped to deal comprehensively with the current state of literature from Germany and Austria, shaped as it is by waves of migration and cultural exchange (Gramling 530–31). Nor does the exclusive focus on a modern homogenized national vernacular do justice to the linguistic sensitivity of the first Germanic linguists and literary scholars. Jacob Grimm noted how the standardization of a national language leveled out the regional variation on which his own linguistic insights partly depended (Toews 344). Yet neither German-Jewish studies nor multilingual research explode the national focus; rather, they help create a German literary studies that appreciates the international, transnational, subnational, and suppressed anti-national aspects of culture, which are the undeniable products of the national paradigm.

Scholarly directions such as German-Jewish studies and multilingual studies direct our attention to the numerous gaps and glitches in nationalism’s postulated

isomorphism between ethnic identity, linguistic competence, and political authority. Communal identity, language, and state extension cannot be made to coincide perfectly: states typically harbor speakers of multiple tongues, and their citizenries are not ethnically homogeneous; ethnic groups entertain relationships with close neighbors, intermingle, and comprise multiple traditions; many speakers are proficient or semi-proficient in multiple languages and use them for different communicative purposes in different contexts. The Herderian vision of universalized nationalism cannot be translated into an actual political reality of neatly separated and comfortably coexisting peoples housed by nation-states (Levy 69–70). And if nationalist movements seek to engineer and protect homogeneity without accommodation of minority groups and migrants, tolerance for complex identities, and appreciation of linguistically hybrid artifacts, the consequences are typically brutal.

Against this background, it is easy to understand the cosmopolitan desire to transcend the departmental structure of a German national philology altogether, dismantle the disciplinary machinery of cultural nationalization, and even eliminate the very idea of a language as a “discreet entity” spoken by a discreet people, to be taught to outsiders as a separate, codified foreign tongue (Young 1208). But practically, a radical and comprehensive attack on the nation in its academic manifestation, as opposed to a reflexive “turn” within the nationally defined discipline, would likely only marginalize the literature and culture now grouped and studied under its name (and thereby allow for a greater Anglophone dominance). We may no longer want to commit ourselves to nationality as the optimal carrier of distinctness in a world of cultural variation, but we still do not have a robust manner of preserving—that is, institutionalizing—certain kinds of diversity outside the current departmental structure of a nationally defined literary studies. To denationalize German literary studies thoroughly would just mean to end German literary studies, for no tangible scholarly or cultural gain.

German literary studies was the nationalist discipline par excellence. In the present moment, it ought to remake itself into the meta-national discipline par excellence—that is, into a discipline that more than any other seeks to understand and reconstruct the literary-cultural and intellectual-academic constitution of the nation and the nation-state as the absolutely hegemonic political form of the last 200 years. It is, paradoxically, through such a reflective or even inward-looking turn that the discipline can best contribute to scholarly life at the university as a whole. This turn could take the form of specific projects on processes and tools of nationalization, but it could also emerge as a dimension of each and every contribution in the field. Each scholarly paper, each article on some piece of German literature or philosophy in *The German Quarterly* and its peer journals, stands in a relationship to the vast project of creating, maintaining, and revising a national culture, which means it is also inextricably tied to an epochally dominant political form—this could be admitted and avowed rather than forgotten and ignored.

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