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The Remodeling of the Literary Profession and Its Role in the Making of Modern German Culture in Late 18th Century

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This essay discusses the rise of German literature in late 18th century adopting a socio-semiotic approach to culture. The core issue raised by the author is that the awakening of a national German sentiment and the rise of a German-language high culture are basically a social process located in the literary field – a process centred on reforming the literary profession and controlling the literary market, through transforming and monopolizing literary production and taste.

The six decades between the 1770s and the 1830s are viewed as the Golden Age of German *Kultur*: an era of unrivalled achievement and a formative breakthrough of a Romantic-oriented national German culture. In the course of these decades, textual and specifically literary practices were assigned a central role, and, consequently, became the most sanctioned representatives of German *Kultur*. While the endeavour to produce a German-written high culture was already central to earlier intellectual pursuits throughout the 18th century (Grimm 1983), before the 1770s German literature was hardly an entity in its own right, let alone a match for contemporary cultural superpowers such as the French and the English. And yet by the turn of the century it is said to have reached its peak: its canon had been formed, and for the first time German literature gained international recognition (Hohendahl 1989). Moreover, having previously focussed predominantly on importing and translating texts, the German-speaking literary community began to yield its own original literary output which was translated into other languages, and its leading figures were subsequently accepted into the global-European pantheon.

This unprecedented blossoming of German-written literature at the turn of the century occurred long before a unified German *socio-political* entity had been envisioned. In fact, German-written literature believed

to have been the cultural basis on which a united modern German state was conceived and consolidated throughout the 19th century.[1] True, as claimed by Peter U. Hohendahl, in his *Building a National Literature* (1989), it was not before 1835, after Goethe and Hegel had passed away, that a sense of having reached a cultural crest was acknowledged, and a canon of German classics was formed. Clearly, though, this was the culmination of a process that had begun decades earlier. While preceding generations of German intellectuals were unable to anticipate their standing in the future German canon, they nevertheless were very active in negotiating it – by struggling to establish new forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1985; Guillory 1993), and changing the power structure in the cultural arenas in which they were active.

As the ongoing canon debate tells us, this kind of process is always the outcome of social struggles of underprivileged groups fighting for recognition and access to leadership positions (Gates 1992; Guillory 1993). However, the problem with the canon debate seems to be that it often takes for granted the presence of explicit ideologies and worldviews, assuming a straightforward nexus between such ideologies and literary dynamics (Sela-Sheffy 2002). Evidently, the meteoric rise of German literature in late 18th century had everything to do with the then-burgeoning German national sentiment. However, this linkage was by no means straightforward. Proceeding from a socio-semiotic approach to culture, and in line with practice theories (notably Bourdieu; also Swidler 1986), I view literary production (or any other kind of culture production) not simply as reflecting a *Zeitgeist*, but rather as constrained and generated by cultural repertoires, which are available sets of options for action at given points in time and space (Even-Zohar 1997; Swidler 1986). As such, these options serve as common pools of resources on which people draw in all areas of life.

From this perspective, two points should be stressed in perceiving literature as a cultural institution. First, the preeminence of literary activity in fuelling socio-cultural change is by no means self-evident. Rather, it is just one among many other cultural activities, through which, depending on the specific circumstances, social groups may organize themselves, and claim recognition and status. Second, literary activity consists of not only producing texts (typically viewed as its ultimate goal), but also of a whole repertoire of practices – from reading

1. The pivotal force of a preceding unified German national *culture* has long been observed, for instance, with the observation that «Bismarck would have never been able to create the political unity, had our classical writers not founded prior to it the spiritual unity» (Goldstein 1912, p. 20; my translation).

habits and other uses of texts, through social- and market-networking, to patterns of personal conduct, lifestyles and career trajectories.

Proceeding from this theoretical framework, in this article I examine the socio-cultural conditions that gave rise, at this historical momento, to such forceful energies in the German literary field – which consequently came to be central in establishing a new social figuration (Elias 1978). Let me state my argument in advance: at this particular time and place the awakening of a national German sentiment and the rise of a German-language high culture were basically a *social process located in the literary field* – a process that centred on reforming the literary profession and controlling the literary market, through transforming and monopolizing literary production and taste.

Within this heterogeneous and transient cultural space two groups in particular have attracted the attention of critics and historians (Hohendahl 1988): there were the Early Romantics, clustered around the Schlegel brothers, who became prominent leaders of literary fashion at the turn of the century (Heine, *The Romantic School*). However, they were preceded, between the 1770s and the 1780s, by a group of young intellectuals known as the *Sturm und Drang*, who are held to have brought about the German cultural revolution (Vaughahn 1985; Pascal 1953). By far the most dominant and prolific figure linking these two acclaimed phases of the German literary upheaval, is that of Johann Wolfgang Goethe, whose name, in fact, was conferred on this era (the *Goethezeit*; Boyle 1991). Focusing on the earlier phase of this process, and bearing heavily on Goethe's own documentation of it in his autobiography (Goethe, *Autobiography*), I enquire into the great appeal of the literary occupation at the time that made the Germans invest so much energy in it, and the structural transformation within the literary field which was conducive to their becoming agents of social change.

The German Socio-Cultural Space in the Second Half of the 18th Century

1 Class Structure

The emergence of a national German culture during the 18th century is usually perceived within the context of the tension between an ascending bourgeoisie and a declining aristocracy. For this analysis I follow the cultural approach of Norbert Elias (1978) and Henri Brunschwig (1974), who argued that during the 18th century, textual activities in general – and literary pursuits in particular – had become central op-

tions of social mobilization for the German middle class. According to Elias, the so-called German revolution, in contrast to the French, was essentially a *literary movement,* since the class tension was not played out as a fully-fledged *political* struggle (also Bruford 1965). Because of a sharp class division, with an impoverished aristocracy intent on preserving its privileges, the German bourgeoisie was excluded from all political activities, and practically barred from those channels of class mobility that were available to other Western bourgeoisies (Sheehan 1989; Vierhaus 1988). At the same time, however, in the wake of the Enlightenment, there rose an educated German-speaking middle-class, whose services in the growing bureaucratic and educational systems soon became indispensable (Blackbourn 1991; Elias 1978; La Vopa 1988). Thus, bourgeois elements became principal to everything connected with written culture, qua clergymen, lawyers, clerks, teachers and professors, as well as publishers and book dealers. The text-writing expertise of the latter consequently became their major social resource. According to Elias, these people, who were scattered throughout the German-speaking territories, were able to gain collective consciousness and self-assurance as a social force only in terms of *the profession of letters*: «at most» he writes «they could 'think and write' independently; they could not act independently» (Elias 1978, p. 18).

From 1770 onwards, younger middle-class generations were increasingly inclined to rely on their educational skills for social mobility. This was mainly the privilege of the learned bourgeoisie, mostly those operating in the field of law and in the civil service, as well as university professors and professionals (Brunschwig 1974; La Vopa 1988). However, educational skills were also a means to social ascent for lower-middle-class business and craftspeople. A well-known example is that of Kaspar Goethe, father of Johann Wolfgang, who was the son of a *nouveau riche* tailor and an innkeeper's widow who inherited her late husband's money (Boyle 1991). Within the time span of one generation, thanks to his academic education in Law, and subsequently through the adoption of certain highbrow cultural manners (including a journey to Italy and holding a respectable collection of books), Kaspar Goethe was able to marry into an upper-class family in Frankfurt am Main, and even had some prospects for a political career (ultimately blocked by internal politics). Similarly, although Johann Wolfgang Goethe was born into an already-bourgeois family with prospects for an educated career and a «good» life, the self-same sense of opportunity for negotiating one's own trajectory and improving one's status was not alien to him as a young person. In his autobiography, he describes his home-town friends, who

were not exactly of a low, but of an ordinary, type. […] I listened to them with pleasure when they spoke of the manifold ways and means by which one could gain a living: above all they loved to tell of people, now very rich, who had begun with nothing. Others to whom they referred had, as poor clerks, rendered themselves indispensable to their employers, and had finally risen to be their son-in-law; […] We all liked to hear this; and each one fancied himself somebody […] (Goethe, *Autobiography*, Book v, p. 181).

Eventually, such aspirations were also nurtured by «poor students» of the lower strata (La Vopa 1988), who were able to build on writing-related occupations as clergymen, teachers and tutors, scribes or translators. In describing his young companions, Goethe is especially fascinated by the kind of resourcefulness displayed by one of them, by the name of Pylades:

The circumstances of his parents would not allow him to go to universities; but he endeavoured to acquire a fine handwriting, a knowledge of accounts and the modern languages, and would now do his best in hopes to attaining that domestic felicity (Goethe, *Autobiography*, Book v, p. 181).

The life trajectory of the *Sturm und Drang* writers, Johann Heinrich Jung (known as Jung-Stilling; 1740-1817) and Friedrich Maximilian Klinger (1752-1831), to mention but two, are typical examples of such dramatic ascent of self made personalities: Jung-Stilling, a son of a poor peasant family, who worked as a tailor, and served at a very young age as an elementary school teacher and a tutor, was able to study medicine, during which period his livelihood was never secured. He later became a respectable citizen thanks to his liberal profession and his marriage to a woman of standing and property, and, no less importantly, thanks to his literary and intellectual connections. Klinger was the son of a poor widowed laundry woman in Frankfurt am Main, and was fortunate enough to have access to academic education thanks to a generous patron in Giessen, which eventually led to a brilliant literary career as well as a military one (Brunschwig 1947, pp. 29, 40, 139, 215; Goethe, *Autobiography*, Vol. i, Book ix, pp. 402-404; Vol. ii, Book xiv, pp. 237-239).

Yet the other side of these new opportunities for social mobility that opened up to the young generation was, according to Brunschwig, the sense of living in limbo, lacking both solid career paths and desired life-trajectories. Despite some success stories of the lucky few, by and large, the limited offer of jobs and the meagre earnings attached hardly enabled members of this younger generation to comply with their high demands and expectations. Brunschwig portrays a bleak picture of the cultural situation in Prussia in the last third of the 18th century, where

large numbers of ambitious students, mainly of lower class origin, had little chance to pursue a proper career with decent pay, and were unable to break through the twilight zone of their undervalued, temporary occupations (notably as private tutors).[2] The result was constant sense of insecurity, disorientation and ongoing changes in educational as well as occupational tracks, which, in Brunschwig's view, was a symptom of the Enlightenment crisis. These young intellectuals lacked «any very definite notion of the sort of occupation likely to suit them: officials, soldier, merchant, it is all one to them» (Brunschwig 1947, p. 147). This situation, he concludes, fostered fertile ground for the return of irrationality as a prevailing mentality and lifestyle, namely, the cult of spontaneity, impulsiveness and lack of rules – or what Brunschwig calls a belief in «the miraculous» in all areas of life, expressed in an endless quest for the lucky strike: «They will do anything whatever to satisfy their hunger for fame; the sole exception is that they will have nothing whatever to do with the occupation to which they seemed destined from birth» (Brunschwig 1947, p. 147). In this context he also sees the appeal of the literary world for the young generations, that is, in offering the faster short-cut, if only as a fantasy, not only to earnings but mainly to status, bypassing the obstacles in the extant hierarchical trajectories.

2 Cultural Repertoire

However, while in Brunschwig's historical-psychological analysis the formation of this malleable mentality was a direct response to a socio-economic crisis, his view lacks insight into the constraints of cultural resources, namely, the behavioural and emotional repertoire imposed on these young people in the social spheres in which they were moving. It should be remembered that well into the middle of the 18th century, in Germany «culture» means a cross-European court culture, centrally modelled on that prevalent in France (Brudford 1965; Elias 1978). This upper-class sphere was a typical example of cultural provincialism; the «civilized» language, taste and manners were all French, as was the dominant neoclassicist literature. The court of the Prussian king, Friedrich II, was an epitome of such French-oriented provincialism. The king's hostility towards the German language and literature is well-known. Not only did he ignore this culture's achievements, as

2. German private tutors were apparently in the most humble situation, and were certainly inferior to the imported French ones (Vaughan 1985, p. 70).

required of an elegant «man of culture», he also claimed to be unable to speak the German language properly (Ward 1974, p. 124). This typically provincial genteel culture was the environment which gave rise to the German-speaking bourgeois intelligentsia. Although these culturally provincialised individuals aspired to become part of the Frenchfied high culture, their access to its required standards was ultimately limited. Despite of the fact that, as educated bourgeois, many of them were fairly well acquainted with civilized taste and the French-Latin lore, they were doomed to social inferiority, and remained forever on the receiving end, with no prospect for full integration into this culture, let alone for taking a lead in it. Goethe describes his encounter with this cultural conservatism and snobbery, as he saw it, experienced as a social barrier for a young law student in Leipzig, the citadel of the German Polite Society at the time:

> For the student of any wealth and standing had every reason to show himself attentive to the mercantile class and to be the more solicitous about the proper external forms, as the colony[3] exhibited a model of French manners. […] and many subject of the state, educated at the government schools or other gymnasia, and hoping for preferment, did not venture to throw off the traditional customs. […] At first this kind of life was not repugnant to me, […] but […] I was soon forced to feel that the company had much to find fault with in me, and that, after dressing myself in their fashion, I must now talk according to their tongue also; faults in me […] (Goethe, *Autobiography*, Vol. I, Book VI, p. 272).

Following Elias' argument, it so happened that the sense of an alternative *German*-based identity emerged from social frustration in the face of the kind of civilized dread of the then-ruling class and their exclusion of those who were «almost there» but were finally unable to break through. German *literati*, so the argument goes, were disposed to capitalize on their German language knowledge and skills in creating their own space of distinction.

As it is often the case with peripheral, yet resourceful, cultural groups, at first their default strategy was that of imitation (Sheffy 1999). Paradoxical though it may appear, the passion for a distinct *German-language* high culture first originated, as Gunter Grimm argues (1983), precisely from conformity with what was taken to be the cosmopolitan, French-Latin oriented canonical culture as their frame of reference, rather than from any sort of «primordial nationalism», as it were. It was, accord-

3. This is how Leipzig was called «because a large and influential portion of its citizens were sprung from a colony of Huguenots» (note in the original text; Goethe 1969, Vol. I, Book VI, p. 272).

ing to Grimm, the attempt, already initiated in the previous century, to cultivate a domestic version of the very same classicist repertoire, with an aspiration to matching its achievements and finesse. The numerous German reading clubs and language societies which mushroomed throughout the 17th and 18th centuries (Grimm 1983; Van-Dülmen 1992) were engaged in an effort to create a parallel version of the same neoclassicist literary style and poetical language in German. Along these lines, Eric Blackall (1959) describes the literary debates during the first half of the 18th century, which revolved around questions of imitation and generic classifications, and which were for the most part rooted in the neoclassicist polemics on which they drew for legitimation.

This prevailing strategy of imitation began to change only in the last third of the 18th century, when growing circles of young Germans became more confident in the value of their educational expertise, and more responsive to cultural influences other than mainstream French Classicism. A major alternative source of literary inspiration and legitimation became available to them through English poetry and its trends of primitivism and sentimentalism, increasingly translated into German.[4] In the 1770s, the German-speaking intellectual and literary field was already prolific and stratified enough to give rise to an avant-garde movement such as the *Sturm und Drang*.[5] At the time, young German intellectuals were asserting their reputations by overtly rejecting the tyranny of Frenchified high culture, evoking instead their allegedly indigenous cultural coarseness, turning this stigmatic property into an asset. According to his recollections, Goethe's disillusion with the German Classicism project had actually begun a few years earlier, during his experience as a student of law and literature in Leipzig. Taking the stance of a young inexperienced lad speaking an Upper-German dialect (Goethe, *Autobiography*, Vol. I, Book VI, p. 268), he reports a sense of awkwardness and distaste towards what he calls an affected, dogmatic intellectual atmosphere, devoid of any authentic spiritual

4. See Goethe's description of the influence of English literature on his milieu: «[…] such gloomy contemplations, which lead him who has resigned himself to them into the infinite, could not have developed themselves so decidedly in the minds of the German youths, has not an outward occasion existed and furthered them in this dismal business. This was cased by English literature, especially the poetical part, the great beauties of which are accompanied by an earnest melancholy» (Goethe, *Autobiography*, Vol. II, Book XIII).

5. The term initially came from the title of a play by Friedrich Maximilian Klinger (1776). Earlier formative texts were an anonymously published pamphlet entitled *Von deutscher Art und Kunst* (1773) which held three essays by Herder, Möser and Goethe; Goethe's revolutionary play *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773) and his *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774).

merit. He then voices a call for «unaffected Germanhood» as a powerful justification, at least in retrospect, for German students like himself to discredit the authority of the then prevailing proponents of German Neoclassicism, who controlled the academic as well as the public sphere. He accentuates this sentiment through a sarcastic account of the legacy of Johann Christoph Gottsched, the eminent literary critic and university professor in Leipzig, whom he sees as the embodiment of cultural falseness and vacuousness:

> The Gottsched waters had inundated the German world with a true deluge, which threatened to rise up, even over the highest mountains. It takes a long time for such a flood to subside again, for the mire to dry away; and as in any epoch there are numberless aping poets, so the imitation of the flat and watery produced a chaos, of which now scarcely a notion remains. To find out that trash was trash was hence the greatest sport, yea, the triumph of the critics of those days. Whoever had only a little common sense, was superficially acquainted with the ancients, and was somewhat more familiar with the moderns, thought himself provided with a standard scale which he could everywhere apply (Goethe, *Autobiography*, Vol. I, Book VI, p. 273).

Now, it was by no means accidental that what is regarded as the pioneering genuinely-German literary movement emerged precisely from an ensemble of young German-born students in the border city of Strasbourg (Pascal 1953; Vaughahn 1985). Away from home, their direct encounter with the French language and manners intensified their sense of inferiority and exclusion vis-à-vis this culture. Indulging in an outsider position, they were freer to seek an alternative source for their in-group pride and solidarity – by stressing feeling over reason and assigning to it the extra spiritual value of an «untamed Germanhood» cultural code. «[…] what, more than all, forcibly alienated us from the French», Goethe writes with reference to his Strasbourg group,

> [w]as the unpolite opinion, repeatedly maintained, that the Germans in general, as well as the king, who was striving after French cultivation, were deficient in taste. With regard to this kind of talk, which followed every judgment like a burden, we endeavoured to solace ourselves with contempt […]. Already earlier and not just once we turned to Nature, which taught us not to accept anything but the truth and sincerity of feeling, the strong and direct expression of which were our maxim and watchword with which our little academic gang use to recognize and encourage each other (Goethe, *Autobiography*, Vol. II, Book XI, p. 100).

It was thus hardly a literary agenda *per se* which gave rise to the legendary literary movement of the *Stürmer*. It was a clustering of young Germans, who in 1770 were between the ages of 18 (Klinger) and 26

(Herder),[6] all of whom, with the exception of Goethe, came from the working and lower-middle class intelligentsia in the German provinces. Their academic training was diverse, from theology, to law and medicine. Literary writing and intellectual conversations were their leisure practices, but beyond sharing aspects of common taste and certain vague ideas, they never did come up with a clear literary theory; their poetical production was sporadic, and «the authors [were] more fervent and well-intentioned than talented», says Brunschwig (1974, p. 92). Nor did they have a well-defined political agenda. As Roy Pascal (1953) points out, their scorn for the aristocracy was a sheer provocation of taste and lifestyle. Typically, Goethe's best-seller novel *The Sorrow of Young Werther* (1774), which became an icon of his age, is a manifesto of emotionalism against the societal code of restrictions («Einschränkung»), without an explicit demand for changing the extant class system. The bond among the members of this group – that lasted no more than a decade – was based primarily on personal ties and a sense of shared identity and aspirations, which triggered *cultural* friction with neither a clearly defined program, nor specific achievements.

And yet this coterie was seen from the outset as heralding a revolutionary movement, and provoked extreme reaction from the literary establishment at the time. For Friedrich Nicolai, the influential Enlightenment publisher and critic and great literary authority (Selwyn 2000), its members were the enemy. He was harshly critical of their obscure sentimentalism (his parody of Goethe's *Werther* is a notorious example, see Goethe, *Autobiography*, Book xiii), and accused them of ignorance, bad taste and sectarianism in the way they allegedly wrote for one another, disregarding the potentially broader German reading public (Berghahn 1988, pp. 23, 67). Nicolai's strong reaction attests to the enormous threat this group posed, despite its alleged immaturity, to the existing literary world, and to its role as source of change for the literary profession.

The Structure of the Literary Field

By that time, literary activity had become a central arena for socio-cultural change. This energy generated – and was encouraged by – a structural transformation of the literary space as a field of cultural production.

6. However, it is impossible to identify them as a generational group, since elder people were often also associated with this group (Pascal 1953; Goethe, *Autobiography*, Book ix; Brunschwig 1974, p. 92).

In the second half of the 18th century, a growing division emerged in the German-written literary production: on the one hand, the neoclassicist tradition of canonical poetical genres still prevailed, promoted as an exclusive business for experts. At the same time, there arose and prospered a large-scale literary market of journals and almanacs and volumes of prose-fiction, with thriving book fairs and loan-libraries (Bürger 1980; Kiesel, Münch 1977; North 2008; Schenda 1977). The latter dimension of literary activity was only partly prescribed by the canonical tradition, facilitating the promotion of other types of literary goods not recognized by that tradition, notably the popular novel (*Trivialroman*; Beaujean 1964; Hadley 1973; see Sheffy 1992), discredited by canonical criticism and perceived as trash.

Between these two poles, the practice of literature held an ambivalent status as an occupation, which was thankless both in terms of profit and prestige. At the canonical end, poetically-valued writing was a leisure practice mainly for men of standing. It was hardly a means of earning a living, except for novel writers who wrote for the mass market, evidently without any claim to social recognition (they often published under pseudonyms; to be called a *Romanist* was an insult; Ward 1974, p. 25), or occasional poets, such as students who wrote celebration rhymes to finance their education. Even court poets (a humble occupation that had practically vanished by the middle of the century) were forced to have additional means of livelihood (Ward 1974). Paradoxically, then, the more literature was regarded as a stand-alone, paid profession, the less prestige it was ascribed; it was an additional symbolic resource only for those whose social standing was already secured. «[…] the German poets», Goethe laments,

> […] did not enjoy the smallest advantage among their fellow citizens. They had neither support, standing, nor respectability, except in so far as their other position was favorable to them; and therefore it was a matter of mere chance whether talent was born to honour or to disgrace. A poor son of earth, with a consciousness of mind and faculties, was forced to crawl along painfully through life, and, from the pressure of monetary necessities to squander the gifts which perchance he had received from the Muses. Occasional poems, the first and most genuine of all kinds of poetry, had become despicable to such a degree, that the nation even now cannot attain a conception of their high value: and a poet, […] appeared in the world in the most melancholy state of subserviency, as a jester and parasite […]. If, on the contrary, the Muse associated herself with men of respectability, these received thereby a lustre which was reflected back to the donor. Noblemen well versed in life, like Hagedorn; dignified citizens, like Brockes; distinguished men of science, like Haller, – appeared among the first in the nation, to be equal with the most eminent and the most prized (Goethe, *Autobiography*, Vol. II, Book X, pp. 3-4).

At the same time, the rising market of popular novels made the business of writing increasingly attractive. The growth of this market in the second half of the century has been studied and described at length (Bürger 1980; Kiesel, Münch 1977; Schenda 1977; Selwyn 2000; Ward 1974). Critical discourse on the *Trivialroman* of this period focused primarily on demonizing an alleged epidemic of «trash reading» by an ever-growing readership (Bürger et al. 1982). As I have tried to show elsewhere (Sheffy 1992, 1999), this panic about mass novel *reading* was by far exaggerated beyond its actual proportions. It was, in fact, a reaction on behalf of the literary orthodoxy – the old-style gate-keepers – to the threat of opening up the business of literature to lower-class writers, expressed in the form of cultural snobbery vis-à-vis an undefined «popular» readership. Still, there is no doubt that at the *producing* end, the second half of the 18th century witnessed an unprecedented growth in the production and circulation of books. According to reports of contemporaries, while in 1773 there were over 3,000 books in Germany, at the turn of the century their number reached 10,600, and in 1790 their ratio in the population was 1 book per every 4,000 people (Ward 1974). Naturally, the figures differ from one German state to the other. Moreover, it is assumed that there were many more *writers* than those documented (Ward 1974). Therefore, in spite of an unprotected market, with belated publishing regulations and royalties (Kiesel, Münch 1977; Ward 1974, pp. 93-96), the chance of success was enticing, and even if only few were lucky, many young people were attracted to this field.

Transformation in the Literary Field

Given this situation, it appears that the *Sturm und Drang* movement marked the first effective attempt to translate social frustration into literary action, by using the flourishing literary market as a social force. The enormous popularity of Goethe's *The Sorrow of Young Werther* became a platform for redefining the rules of literary writing as well as for claiming an overall change in cultural norms. This was basically a process of autonomization, to use the Bourdieusian conceptualization (1985; 1996), in the sense that the field of *German* literature had developed an independent evaluation system, accompanied by an internal struggle over its control. This process entailed a twofold effect: on the one hand, it promoted *cultural democratization* – by introducing a new type of cultural prestige as a stand-alone resource, unconstrained by social status as a resource that endowed a poet in whatever social class with symbolic capital intended to surpass that of old-time hegemonic

culture. Yet at the same time, this process also created an *alternative dynamics of exclusiveness* that still guaranteed the accumulation of symbolic capital, albeit now of a different type, in the hands of selected few. In other words, this process generated new, different cultural elite.

In practice, autonomization was achieved first and foremost through a mystification of the literary rules, that is, by obscuring the norms of literary writing and standards of criticism (Sheffy 1992, 1999). As Bourdieu (1985) suggests, this is the ultimate strategy for evading existing authority and establishing new sources thereof in a field of cultural production that obeys «the rules of art» (Bourdieu 1996). In this particular case, this strategy had its most forceful expression when the novel – which until then was considered a lesser popular artefact and had absolutely no place on the list of literary genres (Vosskamp 1973) – was canonized as an art form (Sheffy 1992, 1999). It was precisely the combination of the novel's popularity on the one hand, and its borderline status as a literary form, on the other, which made it the most fitting catalyst for promoting the sense of the «enigma of poetry», on which the German Romantic notion of literature, at the turn of the century, was based (Schulte-Sasse 1988). The same vocabulary of naturalness and authenticity was employed here. Thinking of the novel as «the essence of poetry in prose form» provided the most feasible literary option in defiance of classical rules. It thus served, by the end of the century, the kernel for the literary theory of the Early Romantics (Behler 1978; Blackwell 1983), which crowned the novel as the highest literary form. A purposely vague, fragmented and tautological theory, it coined the notion of the novel as a «natural, universal form», an all-embracing hypothetical genre which, apart from sporadic experiments, was detached from the actual mass-production of prose-fiction at the time: «the Romantic» Friedrich Schlegel wrote «is not so much a literary genre as an element of poetry which may be more or less dominant or recessive, but never entirely absent» (Schlegel, *Dialogue*, p. 101). Its extreme abstractedness and detachment, however, were precisely what made this theory a powerful means of legitimation for the structural transformation in the literary field.

However, all this was the culmination of a process which had begun twenty years earlier with the mystification of the notion of literary *competence*. The real revolution of the *Sturm und Drang* lay in creating and legitimizing a new literary ethos. Their message entailed changing the literary practice from a conventionalized profession with an open code and clear normative guidelines, to an undefined vocation, wholly dependent on the personal flair and particular temperament of the extraordinary individual poet. In this context, the cult of the «natural genius» became widely fashionable to the extent that it lost conceptual precision,

since it was functional in framing this new ethos.[7] It provided spiritual justification for the failure of young intellectuals to make a decent career and follow normative trajectories. Economic instability and a contempt for worldly matters and rationally calculated lifestyles, the veneration of whimsical temperament, a retreat to solitude, melancholy, and even sickness – all these elements, which until that time had hardly been considered as virtues, became fashionable, signalling the poet's innate spirituality and burning emotional world. The impact of this fashion is readily appreciated upon reading Goethe's *Werther*, where all of these elements are heavily reflected upon.

True, this «natural genius» was a hypothetical image more than an actual life model. As much as the *Stürmer und Dränger* were effective in revolutionizing their intellectual field, the personality model they envisioned hardly had an immediate effect on the lives of its proponents. The group soon dissipated and each of its members found their own way into society, accepting the still-existing court-oriented cultural configuration. Some of them, like Friedrich Klinger or Heinrich Jung-Stilling, not to mention Wolfgang Goethe himself, had succeeded more than well in gaining higher positions along with acquiring literary fame. Whoever failed to fit into the scheme, like Jacob Lenz, to mention one outstanding example, remained painfully awkward in their eyes. Unlike the rest of the young men who participated in this formative circle, it was Lenz alone who fully implemented the new model of the poet's mental disposition, or in fact was the victim of it, in the context of his real life (Madland 1994; Goethe, *Autobiography*, Vol. II, Book XIV, pp. 230-234). By contrast to the others, he was portrayed by his contemporaries as a mentally disturbed person, incapable of persisting in any career.

7. Goethe reflects, not without sarcasm, on the «genius craze» that swept German culture at the time: «Natural gifts of every kind can the least be denied; and yet, by the phraseology common in those times, genius was ascribed to the poet alone. But another world seemed all at once to rise up: genius was looked for in the physician, in the general, in the statesman, and before long in all men who thought to make themselves eminent either in theory or practice. […] the word *genius* became a universal symbol […]. When anybody rushed into the world on foot, without exactly knowing why or wither, it was called a pass of genius; and when any one undertook an aimless and useless absurdity, it was a stroke of genius. Young men, of vivacious and true talents, too often lost themselves in the limitless […]. With a strange rapidity, words, epithets, and phrases, which have once been cleverly employed to disparage the highest intellectual gifts, spread by a sort of mechanical repetition among the multitude; and in a short time they are to be heard everywhere, even in common life, and in the mouths of the most uneducated; in-deed, before long they even creep into dictionaries. In this way the word genius had suffered so much from misrepresentation, that it was almost desired to banish it entirely from the German language» (Goethe, *Autobiography*, Vol. II, Book XIX, pp. 404-405).

Although, according to Madland, «[h]is enormous productivity during the few years in Strasbourg, […] demonstrates that he spent his days reading, writing, discussing, and finding publishers more successfully than many others in his immediate circle» (Madland 1994, p. 28), she nevertheless agrees that

> Lenz himself is responsible for this image of the suffering and alienated young artist, the incompetent Wertherian individual at odds with society, an image which began to emerge already during his lifetime and accelerated to such a degree during the nineteenth century that it overshadowed his works (Madland 1994, p. 28).

Having apparently taken the sentimental tone of his age too seriously, Lenz is said to have indulged himself in audacious expressions of emotionalism and mental instability, like attempting suicide or falling in hopeless love with unattainable or fictional women. Yet, evidence shows that he was not unaware of the hazardous dissonance between his emotions and reality, turning, in fact, the tyranny of uncontrolled feelings, and the resulting agony, into a life program: «All, the most unbearable state is when I am free of suffering» he writes (cited from a letter to Lavater, 1775, in Pascal 1953, p. 33). But this is an extreme example of how the cultural options of the time were misrecognized. While today Lenz may well have been applauded as a bohemian artist, in the eyes of his contemporaries he was perceived as an eccentric loser.

And still, even if that cohort of writers did not fully implement this life model in reality, they undoubtedly promoted it as their ideal biography, at least in fantasy. Goethe's *Werther* may be viewed as an idealized shared autobiography of the new generation. All the reality materials in this novel are taken from different figures and events in Goethe's real life (Goethe, *Autobiography*, Vol. II, Book XIII), yet they are constructed as a mythical life-course identified, but never really followed, by the young Goethe himself. Moreover, although Goethe insists that this novel did not create a cultural trend but was merely a reflection of his *Zeitgeist* (Vol. II, Book XIII), it certainly promoted the fashioning of the Romantic Self for future generations.

Furthermore, the construction of this new archetype of the German Poet demanded precedents. This is the logic behind the glorification of Johann Christian Günther (1695-1723), an early 18th-century poet of humble origins who led a scandalous life and died young and penniless, after failing to receive the position offered to him as a court poet. Goethe selects him in retrospect as an icon of the authentic tradition of German Poets, whose natural creativity and uncompromising emotionality allegedly clashed by definition with socio-economic constraints:

When one considers closely what was wanting in the German poetry, it was a material, and that, too, a national one: there was never a lack of talent. Here we make mention only of Günther, who may be called a poet in the full sense of the word. A decided talent, endowed with sensuousness, imagination, memory, the gifts of conception and representation, productive in the highest degree, ready at rhythm, ingenious, witty, and of varied information besides, – he possessed, in short, all the requisites for creating, by means of poetry, a second life within life, even within common real life. We admire the great facility with which, in his occasional poems, he elevates all circumstances by the feelings, and embellishes them with suitable sentiments, images, and historical and fabulous traditions. Their roughness and wildness belong to his time, his mode of life, and especially to his character, or, if one would have it so, his want of fixed character. He did not know how to curb himself; and so his life, like his poetry, melted away from him (Goethe, *Autobiography*, Vol. I, Book VII, p. 284).

Finally, for the Early Romantics, at the turn of the century, this new type of rule-defying, non-conventionalized literary competence, as it were, was already a paradigm, in the context of which the very ability to produce and understand «real poetry» was seen as a rare property of the fittest few. A new mechanism of exclusion, based on a new literary repertoire, had thus been established. The prime authority was now the individual eccentric poet. Accordingly, literary evaluation measures became obscure, revealed only to those few recognized as endowed with talent.[8]

Undoubtedly, this new literary ethos was used successfully in the Romantics' jousting against their contemporary rivals, by blurring the criteria for winning the literary game. The dynamics governing the literary arena in which they jockeyed for position had radically changed from that which prevailed three decades earlier. As Klaus Berghahn maintains (1988), even as late as the 1770s the cultivation and public distribution of taste for literature was still a central concern of literary critics, who profited from the ever prospering book market and educational system. However, at the turn of the century, an alternative,

8. Schlegel's Fragment no. 116, one of the celebrated manifestos of German Romantic Poetry, summarizes this ethos in a nutshell: «The Romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; indeed, this is the essence of its being, that it can always be but in an eternal process of becoming and never be completed. It cannot be exhaustively rendered by any theory, and only a divinatory critique may dare to try and characterize its ideal. Only it alone is infinite, for only it is free and sees as its prime rule the poet's free will which acknowledges no other law above it. The romantic poetical kind is unique in being more than just kind, and to a certain extent it is the art of poetry itself, because to certain extent, all poetry is Romantic, or should be so in the first place» (Fragment 116 from «Athenäum»; Schlegel, *Charakteristiken*, pp. 182-183; my translation).

exclusive German intellectual milieu had already become the ultimate authority in defining the canon of German culture. And since the appeal of commercial popular literature eventually jeopardized the prerogative of this small-scale elitist field of literary production to act as a cultural regulator, the result was the Romantic retreat into ever-growing sectarian aestheticism and abstractedness (Schulte-Sasse 1988). They promoted a distinction ethos which defied any mundane considerations of readership or economic constraints, and which, in Elias' view, has since become the hallmark of the German *Kultur* (Elias 1978). «Everyday life – economy» Schlegel writes «is the necessary supplement of all people who aren't absolutely universal [that is, who only foster their selfish interests]. Often talent and education are lost entirely in the process» (Schlegel, *Charakteristiken*, p. 243; my translation). And in reply to Nicolai's lament cited above, he reveals his cards: «[The readers] are always complaining that German authors write for such a small circle, and even sometimes just for themselves. That's how it should be. This is how German literature will gain more and more spirit and character» (*Lucinde*, p. 201).

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