From Weimar to America

The Backgrounds of German Classicism and its Influence in America

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1. Introduction

"Wie sich alles in der Welt ändert: so mußte sich auch die Natur ändern, die eigentlich das griechische...

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In 1773, the German philosopher Herder called upon the poets of his age to become “the New Athenians of Europe”. In his words, the spirit behind art—the daemon that Plato had described—had been perverted into a mockery of its former self. It was not enough in Herder’s eyes to repeat the stories of the ancient world; the poets must rediscover the spark of truth that the ancient Greek poets had sought to capture. An appeal to the literature of antiquity was echoed by classicists all over Europe, but the Germans living in the second half of the eighteenth century had more to prove than the other peoples of Western Europe, who had long literary traditions. In Germany, “Literature alone seemed untouched by the intense intellectual and artistic activity apparent everywhere else” (Willoughby 10). In order for the German poets to come into their literary inheritance and receive the respect they deserve, their works must be revolutionary according to Herder. They must brush away the smears that more modern poets had put on the works of the ancient world and capture the inherent spirit of

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1 “Just as everything in the world changes, so must have also changed the nature, that actually had brought Greek drama into being. [...] and naturally things faded away into fables, to editing, to become means to an end. One could fetch ancient stories or certainly a foreign one from other nations, and dress it in the given style: that would accomplish everything except creating a lasting impact: consequently there was no soul in it: hence it was also no longer [...] the object any more. Puppets, afterimages, monkeys, statues, in which only the most focused mind could find the daemon, which the statue inspirited. Let us now (because the Romans were too dumb, or too smart, or too wild and extravagant, to establish a fully Graecized theater) transform into the New Athenians of Europe, and the point will become, I think, obvious.”
Greek drama. With a youthful enthusiasm, several German poets responded to Herder’s call to become new Athenians. Their revolution was a literary period uniquely German known as *Sturm und Drang*. From this storm arose a group of elite poets who would come to develop a new authentically German literature, the Weimar Classicists, so called because of their association in the city of Weimar.

At the same time that the Germans were mounting a revolution to establish a literary tradition distinct from the old guard of other Western European nations, the Americans of the age had their own revolution to wage and their own unique tradition to found. Although the German Classicists’ opinions on America varied, an American literary movement found kinship with the men from Weimar, although some decades after its last luminary died. Just as the Germans of the late eighteenth century worked to create a specifically German literature to rival their European peers, Americans of the middle nineteenth century were faced with the same task.

This paper begins with discussion of the revolutionary philosophy behind Weimar Classicism and then follows an overview of the classicists’ writings on America. In the final section, I review the reception of German Classicism in America and how it influenced the Transcendentalism movement that similarly wanted to establish an authentically American literary tradition. German translations given in footnotes are my own work unless otherwise noted.

2. Revolutionary America and Revolutionary Weimar

„... man wünschte den Amerikanern alles Glück und die Namen Franklin und Washington fingen an am politischen und kriegerischen Himmel zu glänzen und zu funkeln. Manches zu Erleichterung der
The term *Sturm und Drang* originates from a play of the same name written by the German author Friedrich Maximilian Klinger. Published in 1776, this play centered on the main character’s desire to run away and take part in the ongoing American Revolution. In the very first scene, he proclaims, „Ha laßt michs nur recht fühlen auf Amerikanischen Boden zu stehn, wo alles neu, alles bedeutend ist“\(^3\). Although Klinger is a minor poet of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, his choice of revolutionary America as the setting for his play connects the struggles for independence. In America, revolution was waged on the battlefield to secure the blessings of liberty from British tyranny. In the same time period in Germany, the *Sturm and Drang* poets waged a revolution to break away from the overbearing control of the Enlightenment, which posited that, the “intelligentsia [in Germany] had to reject its own heritage and adapt the values of more prestigious societies” (Bluestein 30). But Sturm and Drang influences were more that literary. “When the ‘Sturm und Drang’ agitation was at its highest, it looked as though Germany instead of France was to be the scene of violent upheaval” (Franke 301). This obviously never happened, but the revolutionary spirit of the German literary movement manifests itself in a variety of ways.

### 2.1 The Founding of a Nation

In 1773, when Herder called upon the poets of his age to become the new Athenians of Europe, his desire for a new world order is apparent. In Herder’s time, there was no German

\(^2\) “…one would wish the Americans all the best and that the names Franklin and Washington begin to shine and sparkle in the political and martial heaven. Some relief for humanity has come…”

\(^3\) “Ha! I will only feel right standing on American soil, where everything is new, everything has meaning.”
nation, but rather a collection of “almost two thousand discrete territories of varying size and political systems, each ruled by its own sovereign” (Bluestein 30,31). This political disunity was a lingering result of the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), which had “degenerated into a defensive alliance of the feudal states against the overbearing pretensions of Austria for territorial supremacy. It had become a purely selfish war of private and dynastic interests, and it was waged almost entirely with foreign mercenaries, whose only thought was plunder.” (Willoughby 11). This political milieu influenced Herder’s philosophy to such an extent that he “based his view of the development of mankind upon the fundamental idea of national individualities” (Franke 319). That is to say, he viewed a strong and coherent national identity as the key to human progress. Moreover, this identity was a common gift, not the private property of nobles.

2.1.1 Herder and Goethe

Herder’s message can be seen as the moral from Goethe’s play *Iphigenie auf Tauris*:

“We must realize our own native cultural situation as an artistic symbol glorifying mankind; we must learn to wield our own particular character self-consciously.” (Bennett 207). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is recognized as a distinguished German of letters, and Herder’s influence on Goethe’s own development was profound. First meeting him in 1770 while Goethe was a student of law in Strasburg, “[Goethe] was drawn by Herder into an orbit of powerful new masters: Homer, Pindar, Shakespeare, Ossian, Hamann, the English novelists, Sterne and Goldsmith.” (Lange 62). It was four years later that Goethe published his masterwork of *Sturm und Drang: The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Goethe himself claimed, “His experiences with Herder were the most important in his life” and that “Herder had turned [him] from frivolous
dilettantism toward a concern for the important issues of German culture” (Bluestein 38).

Although some doubts exist as to whether the younger Goethe fully understood Herder’s message, the universality yet authentic Germanic nature of his work is evidence of Herder’s influence. However, the issue after *Sturm und Drang* is his how Herder believed a national literature could be formed.

### 2.2 The Volk and Nation

“In the *Ideen [zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit]*[^4], [Herder’s] most important work, the history of mankind is pictured as a series of national organisms, each one ‘growing like a tree on its stem’. After a period of growth each national organism matures, makes its contribution to the general scheme of things and then sinks into senility, making way for others which pass through the same cycle.” (Ergang 85)

This organic sense of nationalism and the progress of humanity conflicted with the Enlightenment’s notion that civilization was at its apogee and that progression would only be achieved by replacing the myths and superstitions of the peasantry with rationalist philosophies (Bluestein 30). Herder would have no part in such belief. For him it was the segments of a nation’s population — the *Volk*— removed from not only formal education but also the influence of the established arts, which “effectively germinated a nation’s culture” (Bluestein 28). For the Germans, combating the transnationalism of the Enlightenment and sponsoring the idea of a German *Volk* first came by establishing German as a legitimate language for artistic expression.

#### 2.2.1 The German language and “espirit”

“Both France and England could look back with pride on a great literary past, but Germany at the beginning of the eighteenth century had not yet emerged from the tentative imitations of the Renaissance. Both politically and intellectually it was negligible, and the French Jesuit Bouhours could, in 1671, formulate in all seriousness the question whether a German might under any circumstances possibly have ‘espirit’.” (Willoughby 15)

[^4]: Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Humankind
In the period after the Thirty Years’ War, French had become the language of German courts. German writers were encouraged to use “Latin or French and to avoid using German in their work. The elite had despised German as a barbaric dialect good for ‘miners and hunters’ but not for sophisticated intellects” (Bluestein 34). This treatment by Germany’s own intellectuals led to a self-fulfilling prophecy that supported Bouhours’ assertion that there was no German ‘espirit’. During the early eighteenth century, there was a gradual shift, towards a more conscious use of German by intellectuals. In 1730, Gottsched, a professor at the University of Leipzig published his Versuch einer kritischen Dichtkunst vor die Deutschen, which provided examples of how German writers could effectively use their native tongue in their works. However, even in Herder’s time, the prejudice against the German language still existed. It remained for his generation “to create a German literary tradition, and drama was especially important as an object of this feeling because the proudest achievements of France and England were in that field.” (Bennett 64). And because the German language is “the expression of the collective experience of the group”, it should be a national language to express the true German soul (Ergang 87). Thus for the German poets, the creation of a truly German literary tradition was intimately associated not only with national identity, but with the notion of a completely and fully developed humanity—a true “espirit”.

2.3 Towards Human Perfection

Herder insisted that in order to create a nation’s formal literature, it needed to be based on the creative accomplishments of its folk. Herder was not arguing for imitation but rather that “folk materials provide an ideological connection rather than a model for literal emulation”

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5 Essay on a German Critical Poetic Theory
Identification and acceptance of folk tradition is the first stage to developing a national literature. Herder attempted to further this by publishing a collection of *Volkslieder* (folk songs) in 1778. For a poet appealing to the national soul, he must be wary of submitting “to artificial rules and regulations, and imitation of the ancients or of other nationalities [which is] fatal to genuine progress” (Ergang 97). A poet must establish a harmony with the *Volk* ‘esprit’, but still maintain originality and spontaneity. Herder argued that once this has been accomplished, a true humanity is revealed, which is truly universal in its scope.

### 2.4 German National Drama

“If my voice had any power and could be heard far afield, how fervently would I urge all those who contribute to the civilizing of mankind: Do not offer us mere platitudes about ‘improvement’! That is mere paper culture! If possible, act and create institutions.”

“Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie* (1774) (Lange 100)

The new challenge of developing a truly German literary tradition while maintaining the careful balance between national soul and originality was seized by the two major poets of the *Sturm und Drang* movement: the aforementioned Goethe as well as another *Sturm und Drang* poet, Friedrich Schiller. Goethe joined Herder in Weimar in 1775 after being invited to join the court of eighteen year old Duke Karl August. Weimar soon lent its name to the German Classicism movement because the city “was one of the few small feudal communities which, unlike the powerful, French-oriented Berlin establishment of Frederick the Great, was ready to draw on young German men of letters and administrative ability into its midst, and through them to develop an enlightened elite capable of assimilation into the aristocratic society” (Lange 93). By 1776, the Weimar amateur theater “had been started as a competitive German effort alongside the aristocratic French-speaking theater group” (Bennett 100). The poets
produced several national dramas performed during this period, three of which are analyzed here.

2.4.1 Goethe’s Iphigenie auf Tauris

First written in a prose version in a span of six weeks in 1779, Goethe himself performed the male lead on its opening night (Lange 102). A final verse version was produced some years later in 1786 after his formative journey to Italy. “[Iphigenie auf Tauris] represents a clear departure from [Goethe’s] earlier style, even in the first version; it was undoubtedly his major creative effort in the service of the temporary amateur theater at Weimar (1776-83) [...]” (Bennett 97). The play is a retelling of the Euripides’ play Iphigenia among the Taurians, but it is no imitation. As Schiller—who had translated the Greek version into German—later wrote this drama is “so amazingly modern and un-Greek, that one can’t fathom, how it was possible, to ever compare it to a Greek work” (Peacock 89). Goethe’s vision uses his characters to further “faith in reason and ‘natural feeling’” and, in the end, this vision “has virtually obliterated the Graeco-Taurican milieu” (Peacock 79, 76). The two dramas share main characters only in name, and a plot only when necessary. His innocent heroine Iphigenie struggles with the bloody history of her broken family, in a poetic vision of the German national soul struggling to deal with the splintered nation. Goethe does not merely intend his [Iphigenie auf Tauris] as a model for what the German theater might accomplish; in fact the plot of Iphigenie is meant to symbolize the birth of such a theater“ (Bennett 100). In the end, Iphigenie defies the fate assigned to her as a priestess in charge of human sacrifice and avoids killing the man who turns out to be her brother, Orestes. Goethe achieves a “poetic image of the human soul reaching
out for heavenly perfection” (Prudhoe 173). His attempt at writing for his German theater a truly German piece of literature, even if framed in a Greek story, is a success.

2.4.2 Schiller’s Maria Stuart and Wilhelm Tell

Where Goethe’s focus was “nature and human affections, Schiller’s was history and human aspirations” (Franke 335). Although Schiller and Goethe had both been a part of the Sturm und Drang revolution, their correspondence did not begin until 1794 when Goethe wrote to Schiller offering friendship. During this period, Schiller had left his past as a poet behind him and focused on the study of history, becoming a professor of the subject in Jena. Over time Goethe convinced Schiller to return to plays, and in 1799, Schiller moved to Weimar to supervise the production of his debut play Maria Stuart (1800). During this time, “[Schiller’s] own artistic mission is to write a definitive, perhaps therapeutic, tragedy of self-consciousness…” (Bennett 189). Maria Stuart centers on the titular Scottish monarch, as English Queen Elizabeth I imprisons her due to her claims on the English throne. Because Maria Stuart will not submit to Elizabeth’s will, Elizabeth signs a death decree. Even though her failure to submit to Elizabeth inevitably led to her death, Maria Stuart ends the play morally superior, “a tragic version of Iphigenie” (Bennett 206). However, this work is not an imitation of Goethe’s heroine. Maria Stuart is not an inherently righteous soul, but when she asserted her independence in the face of Elizabeth’s tyranny, her moral integrity was well established and held fast. In Schiller’s eyes, “the force of history as a negative as well as positive impulse produces that interplay of individual responsibility and collective action, of ‘natural’ energies and moral principles [which] returns again and again as the central precondition of freedom”
(Lange 161). Individual freedom was the highest good, and it was through his art that Schiller wanted to provide his audience freedom:

“True art, however, is not merely a transitory game. It is seriously concerned not merely to provide man with a momentary dream of freedom, but rather to make him free, really, here and now; and it does this by awakening and developing in him the power to interpose an objective distance between himself and the sensible world, which otherwise merely oppresses us as gross matter or blind force, the power to transform the sensible world into a free work of the spirit, and so to dominate the material by the ideal. Schiller “Über den Gebrauch des Chors in der Tragödie” (1803) (Bennett 193)

This is most apparent in the last play he completed before his death, *Wilhelm Tell* (1804). Purposely a ‘popular’ play, Wilhelm Tell is about the Swiss folk hero and legendary archer who defies the Austrian occupation of his homeland and works to support the rebellion that eventually leads to the creation of an independent Switzerland. At the onset, Tell resists joining the conspiratorial bond, but the Austrian representative’s “capricious command that he shoot an apple from his child’s head compels Tell to reconsider his passive confidence in a ‘natural’ social order; he decides to do away with the tyrant” (Lange 160,-1). With *Wilhelm Tell*, Schiller took a folk tale about a national hero and created a universal hero, appealing not only to the German consciousness but also to the entirety of humanity’s common dream of freedom’s victory over tyranny. To Schiller “true human freedom is not contained in a general state of determinability but rather exists in the particular self-determining action itself” (Bennett 215,-16).

2.5 Summary

In Sturm und Drang “at last, the revolutionary spirit of the age had found a body suited to itself” (Franke 340). But after a revolution, it is necessary to establish a new order. Herder

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6 “On the Use of the Chorus in Tragedy”, printed as a foreward to his tragedy *Die Braut von Messina*
offered a plea to the German poets of the age to create a truly authentic German literature. His appeals to a Volksgeist (folk soul) aroused wide interest as he tried “to stimulate national self-respect and national pride and also to excite a spirit of national independence in Germany” (Ergang 122). The response was a renaissance in Weimar: a conscious creation of what is now called the “classical” age of German literature whose ripple effects are still seen today.

3. Weimar and America

Den Vereinigten Staaten

Amerika, du hast es besser
Als unser Kontinent, das alte,
Hast keine verfallene Schlösser
Und keine Basalte

Dich stört nicht im Innern
Zu lebendiger Zeit
Unnützes Erinnern
Und vergeblicher Streit.

Benutzt die Gegenwart mit Glück
Und wenn man eure Kinder dichten,
Bewahre sie ein gut Geschick
Vor Ritter-, Räuber- und Gespenstergeschichten
 [...] 7
~Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1827)

With this poem, written after the passing of the Monroe Doctrine, Goethe supports the independence of America and warns it to avoid the narratives that keep Europe stuck in the same conflicts time and again. The German Classicists lived to see many of the major events in

7 To the United States:
America, you’ve got it better/ Than our continent, the aged one, / You have no decaying castles/ And no basalt. You’re not troubled deep inside, / During lively pursuits, / By useless old remembrance / And vain disputes. Use the present day with luck / And when you read your children poetry, / Keep them a good lot/ From tales of bandits, knights and ghouls. [...]

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American history. Although *Sturm und Drang* and the American Revolution were contemporary, “it is clear that the American Revolution had no share in producing the revolutionary spirit in German literature” (Walz 231). The literature of the classicists rarely addresses America in anything other than a cursory manner, but there are some incidents elsewhere worth note.

### 3.1 Schiller and America

In his works, Schiller extolled the virtues of individual freedom. This so appealed to later Americans, that a century after his death celebrations of his work and philosophy (“Schiller Gedenkfeier”) were held in several cities all over the country. At the Chicago *Gedenkfeier*, plans for a statue of him were unveiled and it was eventually erected in Lincoln Park. Despite this attention “in fact there are but scant allusions to America in Schiller’s writings and correspondence, and these few are mostly innocent of any feeling for the political portent of her history” (Carruth 132). In his letters, he repeatedly mentions his desire to visit America. His untimely death made this impossible, but because his works “proclaimed the worth of all mankind [...]*, Schiller expresses most fully the American spirit” (Carruth 143).

### 3.2 Goethe and America

In 1826, many years after the death of Schiller and Herder, the son of Duke Carl August of Weimar, traveled to America and kept a travelogue of his journey, which the still living Goethe read with great interest upon his return. One chapter in particular of the travelogue significantly influenced the social utopia described in the 1829 edition of *Goethe’s Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*. In Goethe’s perspective, „im Verhältnis zu Europa ist Amerika jünger,

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8 *Wilhelm Meister’s Travel Years*
freier, chancenreicher” (Gille 275). However, Goethe’s representation of America in *Wanderjahren* is far from a factual description, but rather a construction of a mythical counter world to Goethe’s present-day Europe (Gille 273).

A scholar of the 1930s commented that “until 1807 Goethe’s occasional references to America were almost exclusively scientific”, but this assertion has been challenged by more recent scholarship that argues Goethe’s work is replete with allusions to America which suggest he long held an interest in the new world (Jantz 516). What is clear is that the older Goethe “professed an extraordinary interest in the United States” which led him to host and converse with many American visitors, many of whom were Harvard students completing their studies in Germany (Melz 247). It was reported that Goethe was well informed about all aspects of the New World—geology, climate, geography, economy and politics. Overall, the older Goethe saw in America—in his own words—the potential for “growth without limitations” (Melz 249).

4. Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism was a uniquely American cultural epoch that emerged from New England in the early nineteenth century. Different people in different times have defined it in different ways. A scholar of the movement tried to encompass its many dimensions by describing it as “a warm and intuitional religious, aesthetic, philosophical and ethical movement—the American tributary of European Romanticism—a theoretical and practical way of life and a literary expression within the tradition of ‘Idealism’—a new humanism based upon ancient classical or Neo-Platonic supernaturalism and colored by Oriental mysticism” (Koster 2).

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9 “Proportionally to Europe, America is younger, freer and more promising.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson, a major figure of the movement, said in his Boston lecture of 1842, “The Transcendentalist”, that his definition was simply “Idealism as it appears in 1842”. Although much can be said about the impact of German Romanticism and Kantian philosophy on the movement, the ideas of Herder and the works of Goethe and Schiller (sometimes falsely accused of themselves being Romanticists) were extremely influential on the movement’s development.

4.1 German Classicism arrives in America

In New England, knowledge of the German language was severely limited. Even at an institution like Harvard, the study and knowledge of the language did not begin in any significant sense until 1825 (Goodnight 14). However, the figures of German Classicism became known earlier through translations of their works, although with a significant delay. In magazines prior to 1795, there existed seven references to Goethe’s Werther, but none to any of his other works or any works of Schiller (Goodnight 17). At the turn of the nineteenth century, Americans were first beginning to see the Sturm und Drang works of Goethe and Schiller. The reviews were seldom favorable. One reviewer “after attacking all of Schiller’s early dramas, contended that even Germany regarded him as a second-rate artist” (Vogel 13).

Goethe’s Werther was received with acclaimed by the public, but was critically panned. Interestingly, a picture representing a scene from the novella hangs in Washington’s home of Mount Vernon—“an indication of the popularity of the book in the young republic” (Vogel 13). Due to the fact that the translation of most German works occurred in England, the War of 1812 brought a sharp downturn in the importation of translated German works, but by 1817 the North American Review and Christian Examiner started publishing “lengthy reviews of
German works in the original” (Goodnight 33). This group soon led the establishment of chairs of German language and literature at leading educational institutions. Bias against the classicists remained, but by 1833 new scholarship emerged and the classicists found new supporters in the transcendentalists.

4.2 On Goethe

“Schiller, Wieland, Klopstock, and those other literary giants who have made Weimar the Athens of Modern Europe, have long rested in the silence of the tomb. Of that constellation, one star only, but that the brightest of all yet remains [Goethe], shining on with a pure and steady lustre, amidst the flood of softened and reflected light that still lingers over the horizon where those kindred stars have set”

“Professor C. C. Felton, Review of Iphigenie auf Tauris (1830, Christian Examiner) (Vogel 18)

Transcendentalist scholarship, like most others of the day, was primarily promulgated through a literary journal, The Dial. First published in 1840, The Dial’s first editor was Margaret Fuller. Before her time at The Dial, the transcendentalists—although sympathetic to Goethe—had only parroted the criticism that Madame de Stael had of him, namely she “disapproved of his moral offenses and his aloofness from everyday life” (Vogel 64). In 1834, Emerson wrote that Goethe had led a “velvet life” in the court of an Archduke, and “the Puritan in me accepts no apology for bad morals in such as he” (Braun 150). The irreligion of Goethe’s work and a misunderstanding of his principles fueled the charge that he had “a criminal indifference to the welfare of mankind” (Goodnight 81). Fuller attacked such argument vehemently in Volume 1 of the journal (1841):

“Historically considered, Goethe needs no apology. His so-called faults fitted him all the better for the part he had to play. In cool possession of his wide-ranging genius, he taught the imagination of Germany, that the highest flight should be associated with the steady sweep and undazzled eye of the eagle.”

[...]

“Did Goethe value the present too much? It was not for the Epicurean aim of pleasure, but for use. He, in this, was but an instance of reaction in an age of painful doubt and restless striving as
to the future. Was his private life stained by profligacy? That far largest portion of his life, which is ours, and which is expressed in his works, is an unbroken series of efforts to develop the higher elements of our being."

Fuller, the stewardess of transcendentalism, “may justly lay claim to the title of being the strongest and most effective defender Goethe had in America” (Braun 148). It is no wonder then that she took to heart the task of freeing “American Literature from a mere slavish imitation of European—chiefly English—models” and insisting that “poetry should have its foundations deep in personal experience, in life itself—that it should flow from the human heart, and not be a mere product of intellect” (Braun 1). Through her admiration and study of Goethe, Fuller had—likely unconsciously—adopted the Herderian philosophy of literary development.

Fuller’s influence on the minds of transcendentalism was shown by a marked shift in tone that Emerson had while reviewing Goethe. In Emerson’s “praise of Goethe there was a reserve, a protest spoken or unspoken”, but despite this, he began to call the German “the pivotal mind in modern literature, for all before him are ancients, and all who have read him are moderns.” (Braun 153, 2). In his Representative Men (1850), he grouped Goethe “The Writer” with the likes of Plato “The Philosopher” and Shakespeare “The Poet”. He critiques Goethe by saying that he could never be “The Poet”, “as ‘The Writer’ he lacks holiness and therefore ‘can never be dear to men’!” (Melz 250). Likewise, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow has a similar perspective on Goethe, which he expresses in his Hyperion (1839), a novel likely modeled on Goethe’s own Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (1796). Longfellow wrote “the artist shows his character in the choice of his subject. Goethe never sculptured an Apollo nor painted a Madonna. He gives us only sinful Magdalens and rampant Fauns” (Braun 153). However
Goethe left his mark on Longfellow, who earlier “indulged with predilection in the idyllic, romantic contemplation of life, only to turn later to sterner issues” (Rose 221).

4.3 On Schiller

The Death of Schiller
'Tis said, when Schiller's death drew nigh,
The wish possessed his mighty mind,
To wander forth wherever lie
The homes and haunts of human-kind.

Then strayed the poet, in his dreams,
By Rome and Egypt's ancient graves;
Went up the New World's forest streams,
Stood in the Hindoo's temple-caves;

Walked with the Pawnee, fierce and stark,
The sallow Tartar, midst his herds,
The peering Chinese, and the dark False Malay uttering gentle words.

How could he rest? even then he trod
The threshold of the world unknown;
Already, from the seat of God,
A ray upon his garments shone;--

Shone and awoke the strong desire
For love and knowledge reached not here,
Till, freed by death, his soul of fire
Sprang to a fairer, ampler sphere.

Then—who shall tell how deep, how bright
The abyss of glory opened round?
How thought and feeling flowed like light,
Through ranks of being without bound?

―William Cullen Bryant (Poems, 1854)

Schiller was more readily accepted in America than Goethe. His “lofty idealism, his ardent patriotism and the absence of questionable realistic tendency in the works of his maturer years” endeared him to the same people who could never be reconciled to Goethe (Goodnight 91). However, Schiller too was haunted by his work during the Sturm und Drang.
period, but after 1834 the popularity of his in America grew steadily. While Goethe found a major support in a female transcendentalist, Schiller also had a woman at his side: Elizabeth F. Ellet, who in 1839 published an entire book discussing his dramatic characters. He was perhaps best known, however, as a lyric poet because more of his poems were translated than any other German (Goodnight 103). Schiller’s popularity was not necessarily met with great admiration from the transcendentalists, though. Emerson had no flattering commentary for Schiller’s individual works, but “called Schiller the man pure gold” (Vogel 86, 87). Fuller, however, wrote that at times she preferred Schiller to Goethe, since “Goethe did not always make her happy” (Vogel 132). She believed the moral messages of Schiller’s works shine through more clearly than Goethe’s. Over all, critical assessment for Schiller was exceedingly positive and endeared him into the American consciousness. In 1833 several of his dramas including Maria Stuart were prepared with critical notes for college classes (Parry 30).

4.4 On Herder

As with Schiller and Goethe, Herder’s work too was assessed according to its moral quality. Favorable articles on Herder in 1835 “did much to dispel the idea that German philosophy, theology, and literature were irreligious and immoral” (Vogel 68). With these favorable articles, transcendentalists didn’t approach him with the same bias they had for Goethe. “Americans interested in his work (among them Emerson, Whitman and Constance Rourke) read him with great accuracy and understood the relevance of his positions for developments in the United States (Bluestein 43). The transcendentalists believed that they must take up the challenge that Herder had given Goethe and Schiller; they must develop an authentic American literature. Many of Herder’s prescribed methods were also relevant to the
transcendentalists: “the emphasis on folk lore as a foundation for national culture; the effort to provided legitimacy for Americans’ English (and vernacular diction) as well as for the reaction against the cultural subservience to Europe (and especially Britain)” (Bluestein 49). Herder’s message found a fresh new audience, and vindicated his belief in the universal nature of his formulations.

5. Conclusion

Both the ideas behind German Classicism and the works of the literary epoch were extremely influential to the budding American literary scene. Just as the men of Weimar sought to create a truly authentic national identity through their literature, so too did the figures of transcendentalism. Both movements traced their genesis to a revolution. Both movements sought to emphasize folk tradition and native language. Both movements sought to address the imposing nature of foreign literature. Given these similarities of situation, the explosion of German literary scholarship during the transcendentalism period was only natural. As Herder would view it, it was a consciously organic development and one that would eventually lead to the progress of humanity as a whole.

Herder’s dream of creating a truly German literary tradition came to fruition with the poets of Weimar Classicism. Although there are certainly other men who made enormous contributions before the classicists, the works of Goethe and Schiller lay at the foundation of German literature. In 2006, a sculpture depicting a stack of books entitled Der moderne Buchdruck10, encapsulated Goethe’s impact in Germany by placing his name not only on the

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10 Modern book printing
largest book but also having his book at the foundation of sculpture. The reception of the classicists in America by transcendentalists only furthered Herder’s vision. Although Puritan influence may have colored many perceptions of the classicists, they were appreciated and accepted on the merits of their works in much the same fashion that the works of pagan Athens were celebrated. Emerson believed that Goethe was the poet who heralded the modern age. If the Athenians and their innovations are considered the foundation of the ancient age, then perhaps the Weimar classicists truly were “the New Athenians”.

Der Moderne Buchdruck from the “Walk of Ideas” set designed by Scholz & Friends, Berlin (2006)
Bibliography


