

# George Gottfried Gervinus, Excerpts from the Introduction to *The History of the Poetical National Literature of the Germans* (1840)

## Abstract

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George Gottfried Gervinus (1805–1871) was one of the liberal nationalist political professors who did much to shape German political culture in the first half of the nineteenth century, both as a historian and through his political engagement. Gervinus was among the seven University of Göttingen professors who lost their positions after they protested the scrapping of the constitution of the Kingdom of Hanover by its new king in 1837. Afterwards, Gervinus went on to teach at Heidelberg and was elected to the Frankfurt National Assembly in 1848. The second edition of his *The History of the Poetical National Literature of the Germans* [*Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen*], from which this introduction is taken, was dedicated to brothers [Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm](#), who were famous both for their German fairy tale collections and for being fellow members of the Göttingen Seven. Gervinus's five-volume work did much to establish the modern canon of German literature, with its culmination in the contrasting twin geniuses of classical Weimar, [Goethe](#) and [Schiller](#), and its emphasis on the merits of modern German literature in general. On the whole, Gervinus's collection makes clear that he linked the revaluation of German literature to the political and cultural project of German nation-building in this period. From the perspective of intellectual history, his work is significant in expanding the scope of historical scholarship from purely political to cultural material, and in presenting an approach to literature that embeds authors and works in the broader political and cultural currents of their respective historical eras.

## Source

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### Introduction

I have undertaken to tell the story of German poetical literature from the period of its first emergence until the point when, after myriad destinies, it best and most precisely approached the most universal and purest character of poetry, and of art more generally. I had to seek its origins in times from which only the faintest traces of its existence remain; I had to follow it through periods where it tolerated the unworthy yoke of monastic oppression, then took the most perilous turn under the licentiousness of the knights, and was then laid in chains by native tradesmen and often subjugated by invading foreigners, until, supported by a more universal enlightenment, it freed itself in moderation, becoming its own master and soon retaliated with vengeful conquests against its previous subjugation. A single picture will attempt to illustrate the fates German poetry suffered, the obstacles put in its way, how it accepted some and overcame others, how it grew internally stronger, what fostered it externally, and how it finally acquired its own peculiar value, recognition and power.

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It appeared to me, however, that no one had thus far treated the history of German national literature from a viewpoint worthy of the subject matter and appropriate to the present state of the nation; it appeared to me that such a worthy understanding of the subject was difficult or even impossible to attain following the traditional path. Much the same might be said of the political history of Germany. To be sure, the most incredible efforts have been made, and the weightiest tomes compiled to create monuments to the nation, but the higher people built them, the more indifferent the at first broadly

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assembled public became, and gradually dispersed. The cause was none other than the memorialization of the early period alone, which compared it with covert or explicit accusations to a time and a race that, even if it did not represent great outward glory in contrast to that of its predecessors, yet knew compensatory merits in its inner life, and precisely therein perhaps felt the seed of future deeds sprouting, whose silent growth it did not wish to allow to wither. While these political historians lacked characters like Möser, who were stamped with the true mark of German nature, with which he encompassed the most separate qualities of his multifarious people and dealt with the same dedication and salutary thoroughness with the oldest and newest, with the narrowest needs of his immediate environs and the great problems of world trade and a gigantic state administration; while we lacked minds who, like Spittler, instead of always pointing with irascible acclaim to our ancient times, which we are increasingly aware of having moved beyond with every new illumination, would have informed and encouraged the forward-looking people with the past and the present; while a treatment of national history productive for the present therefore failed to emerge because of the absence of such men, who would have known how to write for the current generation, the situation in literary history was worse still. To be sure, men whom the fatherland counts among its greatest scholars, and who have left and will leave behind the most unforgettable traces of their efforts, have devoted their life's work with unmistakable assiduity and stamina to the very eras that also found so many attentive observers, industrious editors and enthusiastic admirers. More recent German literature, however, was ignored. The historians of national literature consequently nearly all limited themselves to the older era, but almost none appeared whose work even in these parts so much as hinted at the existing, excellent preliminary research, let alone that one could have learned of the poetic and other works of that period from our literary histories. Recent German literature, however, so rich, flourishing and diverse, appeared almost everywhere in these historical works as a sterile field yielding nothing; for here, where what was needed was direct study and assessment from the sources, and where no mediating scholar provided ready-made judgments, nobody could offer any assistance. And yet! To top it all off, how different the circumstances were here in contrast to political history, which in recent times has become so insubstantial that it is more to be disdained or ignored. But here an entire century lay behind us, in which one of the most remarkable changes in the intellectual realm of one of the most ingenious nations on earth had occurred, a revolution whose most visible fruit was the return from the ugliest barbarism to true, healthy taste in art and life, and whose greatest fruits will only emerge and be enjoyed in who knows how many centuries. Therein lay the greatest challenge of the age: not to allow it to pass a second time, as we did with the Reformation, an eternally remarkable epoch in our history, without at least attempting to leave for posterity a somewhat worthy narrative of the events of that time, which like the former will exercise an immeasurable influence upon the history of European humanity and has already begun to do so. That we did not do this after the Reformation era, that we have not yet attempted it this time after the efflorescence of our literature, that we devote our research only to our people's early works in the state, the sciences and art, appears to me a result not of coldness or ingratitude, or the nation's dominant penchant for ancient times, but rather of the nature of our history itself, which can be easily explained. More recent times and their history play upon such an enormous stage that an overview and mastery of the manifestations only becomes possible from a great distance. Those fine days have passed when a Thucydides, blessed with a happy old age, could first enjoy the still existing manners of that honorable time of the warriors of Marathon, then follow with unwavering interest the thirty-year spectacle of the greatest upheavals in outer and inner life, and finally observe through many years the aftereffects of these upheavals and record them all in one great work. The similar period with similar causes and effects that in the Athenian world passed in a single century, expands not in each new state but in the new Europe, whose parts cannot be understood without the whole, to encompass we cannot yet say how many centuries, we, who already see more than three centuries of related movements behind us. Since the dissolution of the Empire, we have more than perfectly completed the ancient times of our people; the files are closed. Despite the nation's estrangement from its early history, this must serve as sufficient admonition and encouragement for our historians to devote all their efforts to those times with which we now need to come to terms, whose repercussions are becoming ever fainter, whose

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circumstances are becoming ever clearer the farther we move away from them. But who in the sixteenth and seventeenth century could have drafted a history of the Reformation, since every new, larger event that flowed from it in the external world made it appear doubtful where everything that had occurred and was occurring would ultimately lead, until the last century began to give a clearer account of it? And who in the years between 1789 and 1830 could have undertaken a literary history of modern times? Scarcely had the translation of Homer created something approaching tranquility after that extraordinary turmoil among our artistic geniuses, and had the classic works of Goethe settled taste and language, when the French Revolution robbed us of his freshest efforts; Schiller died at an early age, and the glaring decline of our belles-lettres into decadence and inanity was at first sight a good deal more daunting than the latest political events, which will increasingly distract us from the comfortable observation of the internal history of our cultivation.

It is thus under the most unfavorable conditions imaginable that I take up the difficult subject of a history that could almost be called contemporary. If anything can comfort the reader, it is that he sees that I am cognizant of the obstacles I must cautiously avoid if I am not to fail miserably. And the disagreeable task has certainly made me cautious, but it could not deter me. I fully recognize how vainly, as soon as it is a matter of productive activities, we moderns strive to measure ourselves against the ancients for whom everything that we have to fetch laboriously from afar and from books was close at hand, and alive, and clearly defined; who tolerated no limitations on inner communication and intellectual activity from the state, nor indeed from their gods, while we could still experience boundaries to intellectual communication, when the outward ones had fallen, so that it would be no wonder if, considering the great obstacles that modern times necessarily pose to any total cultivation, anyone who genuinely cares about true knowledge and education finds that such outward hindrances deprive them of the oxygen to act, stunting and embittering them. That master of history could dare to leave to posterity the history of his time for their instruction and admonition when similar circumstances arise again. He had the briefest historical experience behind and around himself, but its vibrancy and variety, the openness and candor of ancient public and private life, the health of observation and the mass of events that unfolded unchecked and rapidly in a short time and a small space perhaps took him further in his judgment of human nature than all our complex scholarship and our industrious research into the world's fates have taken us in the more than two millennia that have passed since. Those today who do not know how to grasp the spirit of foreign times and nations like his own, who do not fully divest themselves of all limitations in religion and nationality, those who abandon life for books, and forget the spirit of the book for the word, who miss the history of mankind for that of individual peoples and times, who do not encompass the whole and survey with equal boldness and certainty and with a single glance the activities of centuries, but instead seek to measure the world by the small yardstick of their personal or national, scholarly or dogmatic limitations, may not dare to wrestle for the palm in historiography. Things were quite different in former times. The ancients did not have to purchase their wisdom at such enormous distances with such extraordinary efforts and stamina. The historian of the Peloponnesian War could call this struggle between two small states world-shaking, for in those days his people was the world. He could build upon his simple observation, and promise that it would remain forever valid, like his own eye, while we grow up with preconceptions, are nourished by unnatural needs and pleasures, and the causes of no event in the political world lie open before us. Our learning must begin with the return from a corrupt and unhealthy nature to the pure source of humanity, from which the Greeks could trustingly proceed. Only then will we have the right to judge our own time, its history and its prospects; and if such requirements mean that we virtually cease to write history and all that remains is historical research, if scholarship becomes completely divorced from life, this would be sad but quite natural and not at all strange. And yet it appears on the other hand as if we, who are so rich in all manner of experiences, must actually feel encouraged thereby to resume this treatment of history and seek in it vivid instruction for us and our situation. And particularly among us, since we seem to be starting to despise our nation to the degree that people abroad are abandoning their long, traditional contempt for us, among us it finally seems time to make the nation aware of its current value again, to refresh its

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stunted faith in itself, to lend it joy in the current moment alongside the pride in its ancient times and to instill in it the surest confidence in the future. This can only be attained, however, if we present the nation with its history up to the present day, illuminating it out of itself and the comparative history of other peoples. But not every side of history is suited to this. If they are to prove instructive, the events must have led to some goal, to some caesura. No political history that recounts Germany's destinies up to the present day can be truly effective, for history, like art, must lead to calm, and we must never leave a work of historical art feeling desolate. I would like to see the artist of history, however, who manages to leave us feeling comforted after reading a description of the current political state of Germany. In its inner quality, the history of German poetry, in contrast, seemed to me as selectable as it is worthy of selection, according to its value and the needs of our times. It has, if we are to learn truths from history at all, arrived at a destination from which one can successfully survey a whole, receive a calming and indeed uplifting impression, and draw the greatest guidance. To reconcile the choice of historical subject matter with the demands and requirements of the present, however, seems to me such a significant duty of the historian that, had I considered the political, religious, general literary or any other side of the history of our people to be more suitable or in more urgent need of treatment, I would have chosen this other area, since no historian should direct his energies exclusively to even his favorite subject.

The destination of the history of our German poetic arts to which I alluded lies at the turn of the last century, and it was to that time that my narrative must therefore penetrate. This aim was not one artificially created, tailored to my purposes or substituted, but one rooted in the nature of the matter itself; and although my historical account may pursue all manner of particular aims, should it possess any merit whatsoever, it can and will above all serve the main purpose, the discipline of literary history. The highest objective of any completed series of events in world history can only exist where the idea that strives to manifest itself in them truly breaks through, and where an essential promotion of society or human culture is achieved thereby. If our chosen object is a separate part of an individual time or people, it will in itself offer such a primary point of completion, and this will stand in some unmistakable relationship to it. As to our subject, it was among the Greeks alone that poetry, like all of the arts, was restricted by no religion, no estate and no science. Only there could it unfold the full scope of its noblest forces; only there did it shape manners, belief and knowledge and establish the laws that would apply to all true artistic efforts for later times and peoples. This high point was reached when the Homeric poems had found their final form and the former tragic poets in Athens still preserved the purity of the old art. When the Pythia declared Euripides to be wiser than Sophocles, Greek poetry had reached the most perilous peak; from then on, the idea of works of the imagination gained a dominant influence that nourished and heightened the influence of the philosophical schools and the establishment of belles-lettres among the practical and material Romans. This occurred at the time when Christianity was being preached, which, as the Greek philosophers had done before, opened mankind up to a new inner world of the mind. Now the entire Middle Ages contrasted sharply with the Roman world, and such a moderate and wise nation as the German was required to lead humankind back from the most immoderate squandering of emotions and the most one-sided cultivation of the mind, the most unfortunate aberrations in religion, art, learning and the state to the old prudence, health and calm activity. How the newer nations have done this, how Italy prepared the way for the Germans and why it was reserved for the latter to attain the objective can be demonstrated excellently in every way. I attempt to develop the history of German poetic literature from this perspective. It is one great journey back to the source of true poetic art, upon which all the nations of Europe accompany the Germans, often overtaking them, but in the end fall back, one after the other. We have only the rubble of what was actually a strictly regional and national poetry. Ever since the Germanic tribes encompassed the Latin world during the Migration Period and became acquainted with its culture, the monastic poets first placed themselves alongside or opposite the Christian Latin poets. As soon as historic folk song was recorded in writing, it took the form of the Latin epic, and greater attempts, it seems, occurred only with material from the ancient world itself, which Greek and British monks had processed in Latin. The Italians, Spaniards, French and English remained in various ways stuck in Greco-Roman or Alexandrine education. Only the

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Germans continued on the steeper but more rewarding path and at the time of their finest efflorescence attained Greek wisdom and art, where in this century and the last every great man of Hellenic antiquity found among us a translator, a disciple or a similitude. Goethe and Schiller led back to an artistic ideal that no one had dreamt of since the Greeks; the more they succeeded in this, the more unabashed their admiration for ancient art became despite their growing autonomy, and the more their reverent modesty towards the ancients grew in their surroundings with rising self-confidence. They consciously sought to unite the modern wealth of emotion and thought with ancient form, and this was precisely the point after which art began to degenerate among the Greeks, as I have suggested. Thus, the very same nation that had once appeared ready to erase, along with the old generations, the ideas that Socrates and Jesus Christ had disseminated among the new race in order to cultivate hearts, as well as the seeds that Aristotle had planted for all the sciences, this selfsame nation was now destined first to purify the doctrine of the Messiah, and then to break the poor taste in art and learning, so that our neighbors now loudly proclaim that true cultivation of the mind and spirit can only be found among us, just as only we can mediate all acquaintance with the ancients; and that our literature is now beginning to rule over Europe as visibly as Italian and French literature did before it.

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Source: Georg Gottfried Gervinus, *Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen*, Part 1, *Von den ersten Spuren der deutschen Dichtung bis gegen das Ende des 13. Jahrhunderts*, 2nd revised edition. Leipzig, 1840, pp. 3–12. Available online under:  
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