

Theses on Literary Modernism (1887)

Abstract

Literary modernism sought to embrace modern society in all its manifold conflicts, contradictions, and forms. While German literature had traditionally embraced forms from the past, particularly from antiquity, modern literature – like other modern arts – captured the present and reflected the innovative spirit of a dynamic and changing society. Originally written in 1887, this document supports the claim that new ideas in the arts conflicted with established norms of artistry in Wilhelmine Germany. This anonymous proponent of literary modernism rails against the “dilettantism” of traditionalism, arguing for an unvarnished realism that reflected the conditions and dilemmas of everyday life.

Source

The independent literary association “Through!,” located in Berlin, has asked us to publish the following statements:

The independent literary association, convened under the name and campaign slogan of “*Through!*” and comprised of young poets, writers, and friends of literature, does not have any binding statutes. The literary views of its members, however, are illustrated by the following statements, which at the same time represent the character of all modern writing:

1. All relevant indicators currently suggest that German literature has reached a turning point in its development and that an original, significant epoch is about to begin.
2. All literature should clarify artistically the spirit of contemporary life, and thus one of the tasks of today’s writer is to give poetic form to all meaningful forces, including those striving towards meaning, illuminating both the bright and shadowy sides of contemporary life. At the same time contemporary writers should strive towards the future with prophetic and pioneering ideas. Consequently social, national, religious-philosophical, and literary struggles have become the main elements of contemporary literature, while at the same time this literature refrains from aligning itself tendentiously with political parties and movements of the day.
3. According to its essence and its substance, our literature is a modern one. It emanates from a worldview, which, despite many other conflicting views, is gaining each day in importance. This worldview has resulted from the following sources and developments: German idealistic philosophy; natural science, which is successfully revealing the secrets of nature; and the technical advance of cultural development, which excites and animates all forces, transforms matter, and bridges all gaps. This worldview is humane in the pure sense of the word and it influences above all the development of new forms of human society, which are taking shape in different ways in our present epoch.
4. While dedicating itself to the careful cultivation of the relationship between all members of the world literature family, German literature must strive towards the individuality appropriate to the spirit of the German people.
5. Modern literature should portray humankind with uncompromising truthfulness, in flesh and blood and with its passions, while at the same time observing the limits dictated by each individual literary work. Even more importantly it should strive to enhance its aesthetic effect through the grandeur and reality of natural phenomena.

-
6. Our highest artistic ideal is no longer to be found in antiquity, but rather in the modern era.
 7. Given these fundamental principles it appears that a struggle is called for to combat the following elements: outdated imitative classicism, the spreading disease of literary exquisiteness, and blue-stocking inspired dilettantism.
 8. Movements that strive towards a decisive, healthy reform of the reigning literary circumstances are to be viewed as a positive support for modern literature. One such movement seeks to create a literary revolution on the basis of modern aesthetic principles.
 9. Aesthetic criticism appears to be an important and indispensable weapon in the struggle to initiate a new blossoming of literary culture. The purging of this culture of unqualified, ignorant, and malevolent elements, and the development of a mature criticism are thus, together with genuine artistic production, to be considered as the main task of a modern literary movement.
 10. At a time like the present, when any new poetic movement characterized by an unusual vitality tends to engender a concerted opposition, it is essential that all like-minded individuals join together—not to build cliques or even schools, but rather in a common struggle towards mutually accepted literary goals.

Source: Anonymous, “Thesen zur literarischen Moderne”, in *Allgemeine Deutsche Universitätszeitung* (1887), cited in Gotthard Wunberg, *Die literarische Moderne: Dokumente zum Selbstverständnis der Literatur um die Jahrhundertwende*. Frankfurt am Main, 1971, p. 1.; reprinted in Jürgen Schutte and Peter Sprengel, *Die Berliner Moderne 1885–1914*. Stuttgart, 1987, pp. 186–88.

Translation: Richard Pettit

Recommended Citation: Theses on Literary Modernism (1887), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:document-726>> [September 26, 2025].