

The German Historical
Novel since the
Eighteenth Century

The German Historical Novel since the Eighteenth Century:

More than a Bestseller

Edited by

Daniela Richter

Cambridge
Scholars
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INTRODUCTION

DANIELA RICHTER

On its front page, the weekly news journal *Die Zeit* from July 21, 2016 featured an illustration of the world map going down a water fall. Looming large above it was the headline “Worauf wir uns noch verlassen können” (“What we can still rely on”)¹. The paper was referring to the seemingly incessant stream of unsettling news that week, beginning with the massacre in Nice, France, the military coups in Turkey and its defeat, and the case of a seventeen-year old Afghan refugee, attacking train passengers near Würzburg, Germany. In the face of these atrocious events, the section entitled *Politik* featured an article by Gero von Randow, in which he turns to literature for advice during these trying times. Among the books he refers to is Stefan Zweig’s *Die Welt von gestern* (The World of Yesterday, 1939-1941) and Thomas Mann’s *Zauberberg* (The Magic Mountain, 1924), both of which look back to a tumultuous and horrific past and try to make sense of it. The article ends with “Nein, es ist nicht alles schon da gewesen. Die Vergangenheit belehrt uns auch nicht über die Zukunft. Wohl aber darüber, was man falsch machen kann.” (“No, it has not all been here before. The past does not teach us about the future. But it does teach us about what we can do wrong”). The lesson that von Randow draws from the above mentioned writers is the importance of maintaining a sense of rationality and objectivity, especially when it is so easy to give in to feelings of panic and blind hatred. Even though this article does not constitute a scholarly reading of literature, it does nevertheless reaffirm the relevance of literature, in particular literature that conveys a historical dimension. Literature is not only a source of personal entertainment, but can provide guidance, helping us to make sense of what is happening around us and our role in this world.

The treatment of German historical fiction, and the historical novel in particular, within scholarly literature is generally not very enthusiastic. The traditionally skeptical and often denigrating stance of literary scholars and critics stands in stark contrast to the overwhelming popularity which this genre did and does experience since its beginnings in the eighteenth century. In fact, the historical novel has become so popular on the German

literary market, that it has been given its own section in every book store. This popularity of historical novels is part of a larger infatuation with history also reflected in an increased offering of historical TV-series, such as Showtime production *The Tudors* (2007-2010), which did very well when broadcast in Germany, or the popular German TV production *Die Wanderhure* (The Whore, 2010) and its sequel *Die Rache der Wanderhure* (The Revenge of the Whore, 2012). In addition, more historical documentaries, such as *Terra X* and the ZDF-series *Die Deutschen* (2008-2010) have long been a staple in the German TV program, but also ever more spectacular historical exhibits and museums, which aim at directly engaging their visitors.²

Narrating history is clearly an endeavor in which both writers of fiction and historians have staked their interest. As one surveys academic writings on historical fiction, one central question becomes apparent: what does historical fiction contribute to the depiction of a historical subject that historiography cannot or does not want to deliver itself?³ This is a question more often investigated by historians than literary scholars.⁴ According to Katja Stopka, historians explore and value historical fiction for its ability not only to reach a general and large audience, but also for its greater ability to give voice to individual and personal experiences, especially regarding difficult subjects connected with trauma and experiences of war, genocide, and terrorism (86).

British historian Brian Hamnett thinks along similar lines and values historical fiction for its ethical and artistic dimension and its ability to shed light onto the complex relationship between “religion and culture, law and violence, and the individual and society” (31). He argues that historical fiction provides causality to seemingly disconnected series of events in the past (31). According to Hamnett, historical fiction is also preserving regional histories, cultures and identities, an endeavor that is it at the same time a “pan-European enterprise,” with writers of historical fiction reading and influencing each other (55).

Some historians, like Rudy Koshar, have paved a new way by reading non-textual historical markers as historical text. His work on German monuments thus looks not so much at the buildings themselves, but at the narrative of memory of which these so-called *Erinnerungsorte* ‘places of remembrance’ constitute a considerable part. Koshar’s analytical gaze encompasses the “interactions between consumption, leisure, and memory” (7), the same nexus at which we find historical fiction, to create a more comprehensive and multi-faceted account of memory culture in Germany.

Projects like these are predicated on a shift within historiography itself, in which Hayden White and his *Metahistory* (1973) played a key role. White, who used terms such as 'poetics' and 'imagination' in his account of nineteenth-century European history, presented all historical writing as discourse shaped by the concerns of its time, and not as an objective reporting of dates and facts.

Literary scholarship, for a long time, regarded the historical novel as nothing other than trivial. Its popularity among readers became one of the leading arguments against the genre. The accusation that writers use history merely as a colorful backdrop or costume in their novels, is one that has remained constant throughout the ages. At times, the more acerbic opponents of the genre, such as nineteenth-century critic Rudolf von Gottschall, even termed it an aesthetic virus (55).

In recent decades, scholarly focus has begun to broaden its scope and has increasingly turned its attention to popular forms of literature.⁵ Literary scholars have found creative ways to bridge the chasm between canonical literature and the vast amount of non-canonical works, a chasm that has been traditionally considered very wide within German literary studies.

Günter Mühlberger's and Kurt Habitzel's *Projekt Historischer Roman* at the University of Innsbruck, is one of those early projects that took a completely new route towards investigating literature. Working with a database containing 6300 historical novels written between 1780 and 1945, Mühlberger and Habitzel used statistical analysis to arrive at an overview over trends, themes and publication numbers of historical novels within that time frame. Significant peak periods were thus identified and the historical periods, which were favored by writers at a particular time. This new approach to literary scholarship paved the way, particularly within nineteenth-century literary studies, to work with texts, such as journal publications, in the form of databases. This immense corpus of texts, which heretofore had been inconceivable to tackle, was now opened up to reveal new insights, especially on topics, such as representation and public reception of any given issue.

Wolfgang Hardtwig's and Erhard Schütz's collection of essays *Geschichte für Leser: Populäre Geschichtsschreibung in Deutschland im 20. Jahrhundert* (History for Readers: Popular Historiography in Germany in the 20th Century, 2005) represents a combined effort by historians and literary scholars to approach non-academic historical writing. Hardtwig articulates the opportunities for a new analytical approach which the study of these works initiates despite the fact that the works discussed in this collection encompass works of historical philosophy, memoirs and

biographies, and therefore cannot be termed historical fiction *per se*. The essays ask completely new questions, and explore issues such as the critical and reader reception of these works, the mechanisms underlying this reception, and the publishing background (15).

This trend towards a greater collaboration between history and literary studies is written into the projects featured in Barbara Korte's and Sylvia Paletschek's series *Historische Lebenswelten in populären Wissenskulturen/History in Popular Cultures* whose first volume *History goes Pop: Zur Repräsentation von Geschichte in populären Medien und Genres* (History goes Pop: About the Representation of History in Popular Media and Genres) appeared in 2009. The series in general, and this volume in particular, uses the term *Geschichtskultur* 'history culture' as the base for its individual essays, which explore a wide array of cultural expressions, such as historical fiction and non-fiction, comics books, computer games, documentaries and films, as well as museum exhibits and historical reenactments. The premise of *Geschichtskultur*, allows for an examination of the public's historical consciousness and the different interpretations of history at different points in time (11).⁶ All essays share a focus on popular media, which is crucial in the dissemination and development of *Geschichtskultur*. These media allow for general access to historical material presented in an entertaining way and thus allow people to engage with it in a multi-sensory fashion. Central to this approach is the understanding that this kind of popular dissemination is at the same time configuring historical knowledge itself (Korte, Paletschek, "Geschichte" 15).

In literary scholarship studies such as Brent Peterson's *History, Fiction, and Germany: Writing the Nineteenth-Century Nation* (2005) also follow new trajectories to present literature within a wider context of forms of cultural expression. Peterson's interest in the development of nineteenth-century nationalism in Germany is based on White's concept of the inherent constructed nature of historiography. Therefore, Peterson leaves aside the old debate about fact vs. fiction in order to focus on the larger cultural process that created in the minds of the Germans the notion and image of one German nation combined with a sense of identification with that same nation and its cultural and historical heritage. As Peterson demonstrates, this process was very much influenced and shaped by historical fiction.

Hans-Edwin Friedrich's recent collection of essays *Der historische Roman: Erkundung einer populären Gattung* (The Historical Novel: Exploration of a Popular Genre, 2013) widens the scope to look at works of popular historical fiction from Victor von Scheffel's *Ekkehard* in the

middle of the nineteenth century, to contemporary German writers such as Iny Lorentz, Tanja Kinkel, and Christian Kracht. Even though the individual essays do not necessarily present us with drastically different methodological approaches, the fact that popular historical fiction is examined using the established analytical methodology of the field of literary scholarship represents an encouraging and important step in and of itself, pointing the way towards expanding the field of literary scholarship in general and the study of historical fiction in particular.

This is also the task in which this present collection of scholarly essays participates. Chronologically it draws an even wider arc than the works previously mentioned by going back to the late eighteenth century and extending to contemporary historical fiction. This collection also draws a wide arc by encompassing popular historical novels as well as works by canonical writers. Even though the approaches taken by the scholars in the individual essays differ widely, all essays are united in their emphasis on contextualizing the historical novels in terms of the historical period which they portray, the period of their publication, and the respective writers' creative vision. The scholars' multi-faceted perspectives allow for a representation of the historical novel with its tenuous and numerous ties to often contradicting concepts and fields of interest; fact and fiction, personal and communal, past and present.

Whereas the beginnings of the German historical fiction in general lie in the Middle Ages with Heinrich von Veldeke's *Aeneasroman* (1170), the genre of the historical novel, as we know it today, has its beginnings in the late eighteenth century. According to Hugo Aust, the genre develops in tandem with a change in historiography towards a more empirical methodology. While historiography was thus beginning its process of specialization, the historical novel developed in the opposite direction, disseminating historical material in a way that it reaches and educates a general readership.

Julie Koser's essay on Benedikte Naubert, widely considered to be the foundress of the German historical novel, therefore marks the beginning chapter in this collection. Naubert, who published anonymously, wrote during the late eighteenth century, a period when literary production in tandem with the literacy of the upper and middle classes was increasing dramatically. Young women were a new and growing group of readers, and among the most voracious readers of historical fiction. By situating Naubert within this realm of a booming popular literature, Koser is expanding the time frame for a popular historical culture as stipulated by other scholars such as Korte and Paletschek, who see its beginning within the nineteenth century (18). Naubert's reflections on historical fiction and

its role in society show that this rare prolific and published female writer felt herself part of a distinct historical literary movement. As a true member of the Enlightenment, Naubert moreover stressed the educational value of her novels while also being keenly aware of the precarious tightrope she walked between the realms of fact and fiction. In a close reading of Naubert's novel *Walter von Montbarry* (1786), which takes place during the time of the crusades, Koser highlights the inherent tensions and juxtapositions in the depiction of the Oriental/Muslim and European/Christian.

As Mühlberger and Habitzel note, it is around the middle of the nineteenth century, after a brief hiatus, that the historical novel experiences a second surge in popularity (11). This period is the focus of the essays by Jason Doerre and Daniela Richter. During this period the form of the historical novel was reconfigured by writers in different, and often contrary, ways, a development that resulted in a large variety of subgenres.⁷

One of these subgenres was the so-called *Professorenroman*, which is the focus of Richter's essay. The nineteenth-century German Egyptologist Georg Ebers is the most prolific representative of this subgenre. His bestselling novel *Uarda: Historischer Roman aus dem alten Ägypten* (*Uarda: Historical Novel from Ancient Egypt, 1877*) is, despite its setting in ancient Egypt, a reflection on contemporary social and political concerns, as they were perceived by the German *Bildungsbürgertum* 'educated middle class.' Despite the predominant entertainment value of the novel—very popular with female readers because of the prominent romance plot—*Uarda* can also be read as social commentary on such issues as the *Kulturkampf* 'cultural struggle' and the perceived juxtaposition of science and religious faith. Besides presenting contrasting views on faith and institutionalized religion, Ebers also negotiates in the novel his ideal of political leadership through the character of Ramses II. By depicting Egypt's political situation in ways that parallel that of the German Empire, Ebers has his pharaoh work towards peace and national stability, even expressing his own role within the state in strongly democratic terms.

As the *Professorenroman* already indicates, two dominant trajectories become visible in the historical novel of the nineteenth century. The first is the interest of the German bourgeoisie in self-representation and the second is the dominance of national themes, even in those novels, whose plots are situated in non-German contexts (Aust 88-89). First and foremost among these was Gustav Freytag novel cycle *Die Ahnen: Bilder aus der deutschen Vergangenheit* (*The Ancestors: Images of the German Past*,

1859-1867), which aimed at drawing a panoramic picture of the German past. Other historical novels focused on reflecting national history through the lense of local and regional history, such as Theodor Fontane's *Vor dem Sturm* (Before the Storm, 1878).

This is also the approach of Hermann Sudermann, whose novel *Katzensteg* (Cat's Bridge, 1890) is explored in the essay by Doerre. Sudermann's novel critically engages with the theme of nationalism in a narrative style that lets Doerre argue for its inclusion into naturalism, a literary movement usually associated with drama, not prose fiction. Doerre's reading of the novel furthermore challenges existing conceptions of the nineteenth-century German historical novel by elaborating on the political left-liberal criticism expressed by Sudermann. In his narrative, which is based on a local legend from East Prussia, Sudermann positions his educated, rational main protagonist, a decorated officer of the Napoleonic Wars, and the narrow-minded, boorish village population around the question of nationalism. Through a close reading of the novel as well as his comprehensive contextualization of *Katzensteg* within Sudermann's oeuvre and the critical reaction to both, Doerre emphasizes the politically critical and subversive potential of nineteenth-century historical novels.

Following a second larger hiatus during the time of World War I, publications of historical novels again increased in its aftermath (Mühlberger, Habitzel 12). Not surprisingly, it is the theme of war which dominates these novels as can be seen in the essays by Carl Gelderloos and Vassilaki Papanicolaou. In this period there is again a greater diversification of the genre ranging from the *Bildungsroman* 'novel of education' to the generational or family novel, as exemplified by Joseph Roth, to the war novel and even forays into the genre of the legend (Aust 113). As the essays in this collection demonstrate, this period saw the greatest degree of experimentation with concepts of narrativity and character depiction.

Gelderloos focuses in his chapter on Alfred Döblin and that writer's reinterpretation of the biographical genre in his novel *Wallenstein* (1920). Döblin radically reconfigured the concept of the historical character. By drawing on Döblin's theoretical writings, Gelderloos investigates the various implications of this new conceptualization of subjectivity in the context of the historic epic. Döblin breaks with the traditional focus on the interiority of the literary subject and, by subverting the dichotomy between exterior and interior, configures his protagonists as collective beings, whose actions are depicted as encompassing more than the single individual. Acting against this notion of collectivity is a tendency towards

fragmentation and both together result in a complete destabilization of the subject. Döblin's renegotiation of the character of Wallenstein, emerges as part of a larger project aimed at reconfiguring the individual subject in other literary genres as well.

The urge to rethink narrative conventions is also at the center of Papanicolaou's essay on Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) and Hermann Broch's *Der Tod des Vergil* (The Death of Virgil, 1945). Papanicolaou argues for a reconsideration of these two novels as historical novels by critically engaging with elements and aspects of the historical novel as he sees them reflected in both works. Both Broch and Hesse aimed at portraying history as a process rather than a series of individual events and persons. Both writers emphasized a universalist approach to the depiction of characters and societies, and introduced an element of spirituality. The figures of both Gautama Siddhartha and Virgil are, similar to Döblin's Wallenstein, presented as fragmented and are often represented through secondary allegorical characters. There is a strong tendency towards escapism in both works, but it carries positive connotations, symbolizing the writers' efforts to break with historical determinism and thus implicitly illustrating their attempt to break free from the conventions of the historical novel as a genre.

The theme of liberation carries over to the following essay by Sean Eedy on the theme of nostalgia in post-*Wende* novels. Novels dealing with the theme of the German reunification and its aftermath have so far been largely relegated to their own separate niche within German literary studies. Discussing them in the context of the German tradition of the historical novel, indicates the next logical step in the process of further integrating these works into the larger literary framework and points towards a new way of positioning post-*Wende* fiction in the future.

By focusing on Christa Wolf's *Leibhaftig* (In the Flesh, 2002), Thomas Brussig's *Helden Wie Wir* (Heroes Like Us, 1996) and Ingo Schulze's *Neue Leben: Die Jugend Enricho Türmers in Briefen und Prosa* (New Lives: The Youth of Enricho Türmer in Letters and Prose, 2005), Eedy analyses the connection between memory, nostalgia and historical authenticity. The essay illustrates the complex and nuanced ways in which each author approaches the East German past. Far from producing simplistic *Ostalgie*, each writer reflects on the inherent subjectivity and general imperfection of memory. In fact, all three writers consciously draw attention to the constructed nature of memory and nostalgia, while at the same time stressing the authenticity of memory as perceived reality. Each work employs a variety of narrative perspectives and/or narrative levels to portray the inherent struggle of coming to terms with the East

German past. This complicates the long standing conflict between historical truth and fiction, a dichotomy which the historical novel has been negotiating almost since its beginning. The generational differences between Brussig and Schulze on one hand and Wolf on the other hand, add another layer to Eedy's reading of the three novels.

The final three essays focus on the popular historical novel in Germany throughout the last two decades. These works share several things in common, such as their thematic focus on the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. This thematic trend began in Germany with the publication of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* in 1982 (Friedrich 7). The trend continued with the successful 1986 novel *The Physician* (in German: *Der Medicus*) by American writer Noah Gordon, followed in 1989 by Ken Follett's *The Pillars of the Earth*. In 1993 Tanja Kinkel was among the first German writers to produce a historical bestseller with *Die Puppenspieler* (The Puppeteers). Ever since then, there has been a steady and ever increasing offering of German popular historical novels, whose plots are mostly set within the German-speaking region. These novels, long a staple on the German literary market, have only recently made their appearance in academic literature, which, at this point, is still trying to create a conceptual framework in which to categorize and further analyze this ever growing corpus of novels.

The essays in this volume can be seen as part of this scholarly endeavor. Katya Skow's, Waltraud Maierhofer's and Debra Stoudt's analysis is based on a large number of historical novels published within a given time frame of about fifteen to twenty years. They each chose one theme to trace throughout their selection of novels in order to analyze the development of this topic as well as to further contextualize these novels by looking at their reception, the authors' own creative vision and other forms of cultural institutions and events which also provide information on these historical themes.

Debra Stoudt's essay on the depiction of German mystics in popular historical fiction is comprehensive in its chronological approach, taking stock of all historical novels dealing with German mysticism and its representatives not only in German-language novels, but also including Danish, Dutch and English-language publications. The depiction of German mystics, such as Hildegard von Bingen and Meister Eckhart, began in the early twentieth century. After a hiatus between 1940 and 1990, they are now again regularly appearing as main protagonists in historical novels focusing on the Middle Ages. The German mystics make attractive protagonists for writers of historical novels, because of their well documented lives and the writings they left behind. Moreover, they

appear predestined as protagonists by their position within society. Mystics, like Hildegard or Meister Eckhart, were what we would today consider a public person, already famous or infamous during their life time. In addition, they were connected to various social groups. They tended to come from aristocratic families, belonged to the educated elite, and stood between the religious and secular powers of their time, often opposing one or all of them.

In the detailed synopses of the different novels, Stoudt describes the way in which each historical novel approaches these historical figures. A trend towards greater historical accountability on the part of the fiction writers becomes apparent as writers are increasingly providing glossaries and even references to the individual writings they consulted. Another important insight is that these religious figures, who lived lives of relative seclusion, are not portrayed as such, but as political activists who challenge the existing power structures. Historical writers are thereby creating fictional characters which make it easier for contemporary readers to relate to.

The trend towards depicting characters who oppose existing power structures, particularly in novels situated within the German medieval or early modern period, is a central issue in the essays by Skow and Maierhofer as well. Both scholars look at popular historical novels published in Germany within the last twenty years and focus in their analysis on the issue of gender.

Waltraud Maierhofer analyzes the theme of the witch hunts in recent publications of historical novels. Beginning in the 1970s, in connection with the rise of the feminist movement, the topic of the witch hunts gained prominence also within the realm of popular literature and culture. The witch hunts are not only among the most thoroughly researched historical topics, but are also widely commemorated through cultural events, such as exhibits, plays, guided tours and institutions, such as museums and research centers. Maierhofer provides an overview over witch hunt novels in both adult and young adult fiction from the 1990s until today. She positions the novels within a comprehensive framework consisting of author statements, references to internet fora, such as histo-couch.de, as well as cultural events and institutions. Regarding the topic of witch hunts, there is also a tendency for the respective authors to work very closely with historical source material, often citing specific archives. In some cases, the novels are shown to take on a scholarly role as well by making archival material public for the first time. Over the years, the theme of the witch hunt has moved away from a purely feminist focus. Today, both male and female authors write about this topic featuring both male and

female protagonists who are portrayed as victims of these persecutions. Particularly in the works of young adult fiction, the authors connect the theme of the witch hunt to contemporary times, and present their characters and plots in the wider context of scapegoating and bullying, thus consciously emphasizing the deeper, social and psychological processes underlying these historical occurrences.

Finally, Katya Skow's essay focuses on the issue of gender as she looks at historical novels written by German female writers within the last fifteen years and their mostly female readership. Her interest lies in female protagonists of historical novels mostly focused on the Middle Ages, who are presented as professionals in a wide array of fields, most of them traditionally associated with men. The basis for Skow's analysis consists of about nineteen historical novels which thematize women's professional roles. This focus is reflected in the title of these novels, such as *Die Safranhändlerin* (The Saffron Trader, 1997) or *Die Pelzhändlerin* (The Fur Trader, 2004). Apart from a close reading of the various plots, factors such as the titles, which are analyzed from a sociolinguist point of view, and the books' appearance, particularly their cover illustrations, are also taken into consideration. Skow sees these novels as potentially influencing women's sense of identity by giving preference to their roles as mothers over their professional roles. The essay provides a critical reading of these novels, which Skow sees as providing unassuming readers a false sense of women's history.

Throughout all these different essays, the historical novel emerges as a genre that continues to engage not only vast numbers of readers, but is increasingly capturing the interest of academic scholarship as well. Apart from its portrayal of distant pasts, the historical novel has an even closer relationship to the time period in which it was written and has proven itself as a particularly valid indicator for studying a period's social culture. Given the currently lively and vast scene of German historical fiction, the task of accounting for it from a scholarly perspective has only just begun.

Notes

¹ All translations, if not otherwise indicated, are by the author.

² See Elke Götsch-Elten for a more detailed discussion of the phenomenon of Germany's current historical enthusiasm. Korte's and Paletschek's series of scholarly monographs and collections of essays entitled *Historische Lebenswelten in populären Wissenskulturen/History in Popular Culture*, which started in 2009 is wholly dedicated to this intersection between popular culture and history.

³ The comparison between historiography and historical fiction has been a crucial issue in scholarship for some time. For more detailed discussions refer to Berger,

Brook, Hamnett, Korte and Paletschek, Lämmert, Maurer, Peterson, Stark, Stopka and, of course, Hayden White.

⁴ In his article “Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Literatur für die Geschichtswissenschaft: A Historian’s View” (About the Usefulness and the Disadvantages of Literature for the Field of Historiography: A Historian’s View) Gary Stark articulates the great importance which literature has played in historical research. Writers of fiction were and are regarded as “both influential shapers and sensitive registrars of the larger intellectual currents and general mental climate of their times” (19).

⁵ Evidence of this new attention to popular genres can be found in Lynne Tatlock’s *Publishing Culture and the “Reading Nation”* (2010), Charlotte Woodford’s and Benedict Schofield’s *The German Bestseller in the Late Nineteenth Century* (2012), and Helmut Schmiedt’s *Dr. Mabuse, Winnetou & Co.: Dreizehn Klassiker der deutschen Unterhaltungsliteratur* (Dr. Mabuse, Winnetou & Co.: Thirteen Classics of German Entertainment Literature, 2007).

⁶ Korten and Paletschek explain that this approach to studying history is very recent in the German academic context, but has a longer tradition in Anglo-American scholarship. In the future the authors envision a continuation of this type of scholarship across national boundaries.

⁷ Together with this variety of historical novels, there was also a proliferation of historical fiction in general and non-fiction historical texts, much of which was presented in periodicals. In their article “Nineteenth-Century Magazines and Historical Cultures in Britain and Germany,” Korte and Paletschek point to the pivotal role of periodical publications in the widespread dissemination of historical fiction, but also of information on events, exhibits, and recent archaeological discoveries.

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CHAPTER ONE

LOOKING EAST: CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN BENEDIKTE NAUBERT'S *WALTER VON MONTBARRY*

JULIE KOSER

Writing during one of the most transformative periods in modern German history, Benedikte Naubert (1756-1819) was strategically poised on the cusp of two significant cultural developments: the rise of the historical novel and the gradual autonomy of history and Orientalism as academic disciplines in their own rights. The author of more than thirty historical novels, two collections of fairy tales, numerous short stories and poems, as well as countless contributions to literary journals, Naubert is decidedly the most prolific woman writer in the period spanning the Enlightenment to Romanticism. Despite the notable success and popularity of her works during her own lifetime, it was not until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that German feminist scholars exhumed Naubert and her impressive body of work from relative literary obscurity and drew renewed attention to her formative contribution to German culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹ While scholarly inquiries into Naubert's fairy tales have resulted in extensive cataloguing and analysis, far fewer works have tackled her sizeable corpus of historical novels, despite Naubert's title as the founder of the modern German historical novel.² Within this nascent field of research, Naubert's participation in Orientalist discourses of the Enlightenment via the genre of the historical novel has remained buried until now.³ This chapter addresses this scholarly lacuna in its examination of cross-cultural encounters between Christians and Muslims of the Crusades and the trope of the "enlightened sultan" in Naubert's novel

Walter von Montbarry. Großmeister des Tempelordens (“Walter de Montbarry. Grand Master of the Knights Templar”; 1786).

The details of Naubert’s life and career distinguish her in many regards from contemporaries. Born 1756 in Leipzig, Christiane Benedikte Eugenie Hebenstreit was raised in a family culture that valued education and intellectual inquiry.⁴ After the death of her father, a professor of medicine and a practicing physician, Naubert’s mother and older half-brothers assumed responsibility for her education, which provided her with a solid foundation in philosophy, history, and the classical languages Greek and Latin, all subjects uncharacteristic for the education of most eighteenth-century women. Beyond the instruction she received from her siblings, Naubert was also an autodidact, who taught herself English, French, and Italian, skills which later proved indispensable in conducting research for her historical novels. The family’s extensive personal library offered her unfettered access to a seemingly limitless and diverse source of materials and provided her with inspiration and resources for her literary pursuits.⁵

Further solidifying Naubert’s iconoclastic status are the circumstances surrounding her literary activity. At the age of twenty-three, she published her first novel, *Heerfort und Klärchen* (“Heerfort and Little Clara”; 1779), launching a successful career spanning almost four decades, even as her eyesight began to fail toward the end of her life. Like many women writers of this period, financial concerns most likely factored into Naubert’s decision to put pen to paper to support her family after the deaths of both older brothers (Henn, Mayer and Runge 337). Yet, her decision to marry later in life—she was forty-one—and the fact that she had no children of her own,⁶ not only set her apart from most women of her time but also enabled her to immerse herself in her writing and to maintain a lengthy career, albeit under the veil of anonymity. These personal details may account, in part, for her ability to publish multiple novels a year, in addition to her short stories and fairy tales. This is a particularly impressive accomplishment when one considers that her historical novels range between 300 and 1,000 pages in length.⁷

Naubert’s astounding literary productivity is complemented by the equally remarkable range of subjects and historical periods covered in her novels evincing the author’s vast body of knowledge. Her novels present historical events spanning from the fifth century as in *Eudocia, Gemahlinn Theodosius des Zweyten. Eine Geschichte des fünften Jahrhunderts* (“Eudocia, Wife of Theodosius II.”; 1806/1807), to the early eighteenth century as with her work *Fontanges, oder das Schicksal der Mutter und der Tochter. Eine Geschichte aus den Zeiten Ludwig des Vierzehnten* („Fontaine, or the Fate of a Mother and Daughter. A Story from the Times

of Louis XIV"; 1805). However, it is the period of the European Middle Ages and the events surrounding the Crusades in particular which held a special fascination for Naubert as evidenced by works such as *Walter von Montbarry, Konradin von Schwaben. Oder Geschichte des unglücklichen Enkels Kaiser Friedrichs des Zweyten* ("Conradin of Swabia. Or the Story of the Grandson of Emperor Frederick II"; 1788), *Konrad und Siegfried von Feuchtwangen, Großmeister des deutschen Ordens* ("Konrad and Siegfried von Feuchtwangen, Grand Masters of the German Order"; 1792), and *Heinrich von Plauen und seine Neffen, Ritter des deutschen Ordens. Der wahren Geschichte getreu bearbeitet* ("Heinrich von Plauen and his Nephews, Knights of the German Order. Faithfully Recounted According to the True Story"; 1793).⁸ Indeed, in the opening lines to *Walter von Montbarry* the narrator conveys *his*⁹ and the readers' shared enthusiasm for this enigmatic yet compelling world of the distant past:

Wüßte ich, meine Leser! daß ihr jenen Trieb, der mich von meiner Kindheit an zu den Begebenheiten der Vorwelt hinriß, und mir so manche Stunde der Wonne und seligen Schwermuth gewährte, mit mir gemein hättet; wüßte ich, daß ihr gern in dem heiligen Dunkel weiltet, das die Zeiten des grauen Alterthums deckt, und euch an den seltsamen Gestalten ergötzt, die die Geschichte aus jenen Dämmerungen hervorgehen heißt, ich würde glauben, der bloße Titel dieser Blätter müßte eure Neugier reizen, und ihr würdet es gern sehen, daß ich noch einmal die Feder ergreife, um euch etwas von längst verflossenen Zeiten zu erzählen; Märchen oder Wahrheit, oder wie es euch dasselbe zu nennen beliebt. (Naubert, *Walter von Montbarry* 1.7)¹⁰

If I had known, my readers, that you shared the same desire, which transported me since my childhood to events of the distant past, and which afforded me so many hours of joy and blissful melancholy! If I had known, that you too lingered gladly in the sacred darkness that covers the dusty ancient times and enjoyed the curious characters, which history calls forth out of that twilight! I would believe that the sheer title of these pages must excite your curiosity and that you would like to see me grab once more my quill in order to tell you something of these long bygone times, fairy tale or truth, or whatever you prefer to call it.

It is the murky distance separating Naubert and her readers from the medieval period that enables the author to exploit the tension between past and present, history and fiction, fairy tale and truth in her examination of human nature and negotiation with Europe's fraught relationship with the Orient.¹¹ Unlike the reception of the Middle Ages in Romantic circles, Naubert's investment in literary portraits of the period resisted idealizing the past and privileged instead a pragmatic depiction of humanity:

“Menschen, bloße Menschen, wie sie jetzt sind und wie sie jemals waren, werdet ihr sehen. Vielleicht hier und da einen Zug von Tugend, welcher jetzt aus der Mode gekommen ist, aber auch auf der andern Seite, Unordnungen, von welchen unsere Zeiten, dem Himmel sei Dank nichts wissen” (“People, just people, as they are now and as they always have been. Perhaps here and there a trace of virtue, which is no longer fashionable, but on the other hand also disorder, of which our period thankfully knows nothing”; 1.8).¹² Naubert’s historical novels, with their emphasis on the religious conflicts between Eastern and Western societies of the Middle Ages as well as broader issues concerning humankind, reveal not only the shared interests of late eighteenth-century German readers for historical subjects and foreign regions but also the author’s mobilization of the historical novel as a vehicle for social commentary.

Expanding the scholarship on Naubert’s historical novels, I turn a critical lens on the figure of the “enlightened sultan,” or “humane infidel,” in *Walter von Montbarry*, set amidst the political rivalries and religious wars of the Second and Third Crusades between Christian Europe and the Arab Muslim world. In doing so, my reading exposes the tension between the Enlightenment’s promotion of humanist and universalist ideals and the “othering” of the Orient at work in the German cultural imagination as well as the implications of this friction for an enlightened European identity at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, this chapter offers a brief examination of Naubert’s relationship to the still porous concepts of history and fiction as they existed in late eighteenth-century German culture. Only a few decades later the institutionalization of history would assert a decisive division between history and fiction in an attempt to reclaim historical writing as the exclusive purview of formally trained intellectuals.

By recalibrating the focus of research on the historical novel to include the works of a late eighteenth-century German female author, this chapter joins a growing chorus of scholarly voices proposing a reconsideration of the German historical novel’s origins and trajectory. Such a proposition necessarily problematizes claims that discount works of historical fiction published prior to Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814) as employing history merely as decorative drapery and as products of “second- and third-rate writers” (Lukács 30).¹³ Rather than displace Sir Walter Scott as an influential literary architect of the genre,¹⁴ this chapter participates in recent efforts to expand the existing framework of thought about the historical novel’s early life by engaging with an author, whose historical works may better our understanding of the protean nature of the genre as it

existed in the margins between late eighteenth-century *Aufklärungshistorie* ("Enlightenment history") and early nineteenth-century historicism.

Naubert and the Eighteenth-Century Historical Novel

The hybridity characterizing the historical novel as a genre instantiates the ambiguous relationship between history and fiction writ large. From Aristotle's definition in his *Poetics* (335 B.C.E.) of the roles performed by historian and poet, to Hayden White's controversial erasure of the conventional boundaries separating history and fiction in *Metahistory* (1973), to Paul Ricoeur's attempt to strike a balance between these two extreme views in *Time and Narrative* (1985), historians and literary critics stridently have sought to apprehend and decipher the history-fiction enigma. More recently scholars have embraced the porous boundaries of this dyadic structure, or what Brian Hamnett calls "the uneasy relationship between creative imagination and historical accuracy" embodied by the historical novel and more specifically by the historical novel of the late eighteenth century (Hamnett 3).¹⁵ It is the nebulous region surrounding history and fiction which Naubert inhabited and exploited in her historical novels.

The historical novel in the concluding decades of the eighteenth century played a critical role in shaping the German public's ability to draw critical connections between the past and present. History, as it was being conceived of at the end of the 1700s, had not yet been solidified into a rigorous academic discipline, as it would develop under the guidance of the historian Leopold von Ranke. While an overriding transformation in the approach to historical analysis and interpretation began to take shape in the second half of the eighteenth century, it was only in the early part of the nineteenth century that the formal process to institutionalize history as the exclusive domain of university scholars and intellectuals accelerated and assumed dominance (Gooch 5).¹⁶ Prior to this paradigm shift, literary genres like the novel served an important function in satisfying the public's interest in historical subjects (Hamnett 5).

Understood within the context of the Enlightenment, fictional works engaging with historical events and figures simultaneously played a crucial role in the moral and intellectual development of an emerging German middle-class (Bödeker, Iggers, Knudsen and Reill 13). Reviewing Naubert's "mit Dichtung stark vermischte Geschichte" ("history tightly commingled with literature"; Ak. 459) *Philippe von Geldern. Oder Geschichte Selims, des Sohns Amurat* ("Philippa of Guelders. Or the Story of Selim, Son of Murad II") in the 1793 edition of *Neue allgemeine*

deutsche Bibliothek, an anonymous critic articulates the public's overriding ambivalence toward the fusion of history and imagination:

Und wenn es auf der einen Seite nicht zu leugnen ist, daß bey jungen Leuten durch dergleichen Erzählungen, die Darstellung historischer Thatsachen verwirret werden, und ihr Gedächtniß Scenen aus dem Roman in die Geschichte hineinragen, und damit verweben kann, so wahr ist es hingegen, und Rec. hat es aus Erfahrung, daß denkende Frauenzimmer sogar, sich Mühe gegeben haben, nachdem sie einen dergleichen historischen Roman gelesen, denselben mit der Geschichte zu vergleichen; und dadurch als eine natürliche Folge, ihre Bekanntschaft mit der letztern verstärket haben. Und ist dieses nicht schon genug, um dieser Gattung von Romanen einen Vorzug vor so vielen andern, einzuräumen, mit denen in jeder Messe das lesesuchtige Publikum überhäuft wird? (Ak. 460)

Even if, on the one hand, it cannot be denied that such stories confuse young people's understanding of historical facts and that their memory inscribes scenes from the novel into history and can thereby interweave the two, it is just as true, and the reviewer has it on personal authority, that even ladies of intelligence, after having read such a historical novel, have made the effort to compare it with history. A natural consequence of this process is that their knowledge of history has thereby been increased. Is this not enough to acknowledge the virtue of this genre of novel above so many others with which the public, already consumed by reading mania, is inundated at every book fair?

The interweaving of fact and fiction undertaken by the historical novel is perceived at once as potentially dangerous but also edifying: the negative effects are offset by the pedagogical benefits. Touting the positive influence historical novels can have on young female readers, the reviewer simultaneously complicates the educational gains by giving voice to social concerns of *Lesewut* ("reading mania") to which the female reader was considered particularly susceptible. This Janus-faced response is not only indicative of the broader public's attitude toward the production and acquisition of knowledge but it also conveys the gendered discourse informing late eighteenth-century discussions of the novel as a genre.¹⁷ While Naubert shared the optimistic view, "daß Intereße und Belehrung gewinnt, wenn Dichtung an Wahrheit geknüpft wird" ("that interest and instruction win, when fiction is tied to truth"; qtd. in Dorsch 29), her preference for anonymity suggests a strategic maneuver to efface the gendered transgression implied by her engagement with history and the act of writing. Despite the potentially harmful influence of the novel on both female and male readers, Naubert's historical novels played an important

role in the transmission of historical knowledge and the education of society outside institutionalized forms of history (Blackwell 154-55).

As scholars successfully have demonstrated, the historical novel found firm footing as an emerging genre in the last two decades of the 1700s. Mapping the historical novel's trajectory,¹⁸ the University of Innsbruck's database *Projekt Historischer Roman* ("Project Historical Novel") has proved invaluable in determining the prevalence of the historical novel in the eighteenth century. More specifically, the database has enabled scholars to pinpoint the first use of the designation "historischer Roman" ("historical novel") to the mid-1780s and conferring upon Naubert's 1785 novel *Geschichte Emma's Tochter Kaiser Karls des Grossen und seines Geheimschreibers Eginhard* ("History of Emma, Daughter of Emperor Charles the Great and his Scribe Eginhard") the status of breakthrough historical novel (Mühlberger and Halbitzel 7, 9). Mining this data, Marianne Henn has provided a gendered contour to the literary landscape of the genre noting that Naubert, as the only female author to publish between 1780 and 1799, was solely responsible for twenty percent of the more than 128 historical novels appearing during this period ("geschichtliches Erzählen" 287).¹⁹ Thus, Henn provides compelling evidence for what scholars have long claimed to be the case, namely Naubert's standing as the founding mother of the German historical novel.

Cognizant of the mounting tension between history and literature, Naubert approached historical fiction with caution. Reflecting on her role as author in an 1817 letter to friend and publisher Friedrich Rochlitz, Naubert acknowledged the tightrope she had walked in her long career: "Die Geschichte ist meine Fürstin; ich kenne die Ehrfurcht, mit welcher ich mich ihr nahen muß, besonders, wenn sie verschleiert erscheint; mit ihren Zofen der Sage und der Legende kann ich mir schon eher etwas erlauben" ("History is my sovereign; I recognize the deep respect with which I must approach her, especially when she appears shrouded. With her maids the saga and legend, I can allow myself more liberty"; qtd. in Dorsch 113). Whereas the fairy tale, legend, and saga offered Naubert more creative freedom to construct sympathetic protagonists and compelling narratives, the historical novel was far more rigid in the limits it imposed on its author. It was only when sources remained silent or details appeared aporetic that Naubert allowed herself the license to imagine what could have or might have been. In all other regards she claimed to abide by the strict code "die wahre Geschichte nie zu entstellen" ("never to distort the true history"; qtd. in Dorsch 110).²⁰ Naubert's attitude toward the historical novel acutely gauged the sea

change in perspectives that had begun to take root in the first decade of the nineteenth century.

Naubert's novels evince the amorphous yet tentative union of historical fact and literary imagination characteristic of the 1780s. Her distinctive hybridization of the historical novel, what Kurt Schreinert named the "Zweischichtenroman" ("two-level novel"), sought to strike a balance by fusing the personal lives of fictional protagonists with prominent political events in European history (26). As the titles of her novels almost always confirm, her eponymous hero(ine)s are not the imposing figures recorded in the annals of history but ancillary characters often situated on the periphery of transformative historical events or invisible players shaping the unfolding of events.

Naubert's preference for the average hero, whose personal life was directly impacted by political events, facilitated not only the readers' identification with the protagonist but also focused their engagement with historical events through this personal lens. By privileging the portrayal of an average individual within the framework of history, Naubert's works exhibit what Georg Lukács deemed the defining quality of the nineteenth-century Scottian historical novel:

What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality. (Lukács 42)

Naubert's hybrid technique of interweaving personal, fictional narratives with near faithful renderings of the conventions of a specific historical moment broadened readers' understanding of the past as well as developed their ability to reflect critically on the virtues and social norms informing their own behavior in the present. In *Walter von Montbarry*, Naubert resists merely projecting eighteenth-century German virtues onto the European societies of the Middle Ages. Instead her narrator takes great pains to contextualize the historical circumstances dictating the characters' seemingly irrational behavior and raise the readers' awareness of the social and political forces to which they are subjected. Thus, when the novel's narrator interrupts events to comment on the extreme piety of one of its historical characters, he not only imparts information about medieval Christian society but more importantly cautions contemporary readers against rashly assuming a moral high ground vis-à-vis the past: "aber wo ist der Weise, welcher im Stande ist, sich gänzlich über die Vorurtheile seines Jahrhunderts zu erheben? der nicht zuweilen, gern oder ungern sich

nach demselben bequemen muß?" ("but where is the sage, who is capable of elevating himself above the prejudices of his century? who at times must adjust either willingly or begrudgingly according to the prejudices"; *WvM* 1.96-97). As a whole, Naubert's novels emphasize basic human principles and shared experiences regardless of historical or cultural contexts and necessitated readers to examine their own beliefs and behaviors through a similar lens.

If Naubert's novels not only transmitted historical knowledge but also fostered critical engagement with eighteenth-century cultural norms and social institutions, what critiques do her portrayals of the protracted violence and religious antagonism between Christians and Muslims perform? Examining the construction of the Oriental Other in this work raises pressing questions about Enlightenment discourses in which the historical novel participated in its construction of both an imagined Orient, and German society of the late eighteenth century. In what ways do Naubert's fictional and historical figures complicate exoticized myths and demonizing narratives of the Orient and the Oriental Other of previous centuries? At the same time, how do these literary encounters between East and West and more importantly Naubert's deployment of the trope of the "enlightened sultan" problematize Western Europe's assertions of its status as an enlightened, rational, and secular society around 1800?

The Orient in the German Imagination around 1800²¹

The "Orient," as both a geographical region and a constructed myth, has long captivated the German cultural imagination. The tentative relationship between German-speaking territories and regions of the Levant was characterized by protracted military conflict as well as an intense, sustained fascination with all things Oriental. The period bridging the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries marked a defining moment in Germany's engagement with the Turkish, Arab, and Persian worlds as members of both literary and intellectual communities trained their artistic and scholarly lenses on their neighbors to the East. These fictional, historical, and academic encounters with the East not only contributed to a growing body of knowledge produced about the history, cultures, and peoples of the Near and Middle East but also served as a vehicle for self-reflection and social critique of the institutions and practices defining Western civilization (Syndram 328). Focusing on the crusading culture structuring European-Levantine relations in the Middle Ages, Naubert applies pressure to the over-determined images of the righteous, benevolent Christian juxtaposed with the savage, despotic Saracen that

dominated the German imagination up to the eighteenth century.²² By destabilizing the binarisms of East and West, Muslim and Christian, barbaric and civilized, Naubert's novels participated in humanist discourses of the late Enlightenment transcending ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions and asserting the universal principle of a shared humanity in its reimagining of cross-cultural encounters between Christians and Muslims.

Since the appearance of Edward Said's seminal work on the imagined and actualized colonization of the Near, Middle, and Far East by French and British powers, scholars have sought to address the perceived oversight in Said's assertion that the Orient of the Germans was never "actual" but only scholarly (Said 19). While research by German historians and literary scholars has since established Germany's lengthy and substantive engagement with the Ottoman Empire and Middle East, Said was correct in acknowledging the instrumental role German intellectuals performed in constructing Orientalist discourses of the nineteenth-century that would be mobilized by Europeans to justify their colonial aspirations.²³ These critical works have proved invaluable in reconstructing Germany's "actual" colonial past and active participation in the production of Orientalist discourses, yet their focus has centered almost singularly on works by male explorers, authors, and intellectuals.

Far less attention has been paid to the contributions by German women writers to images of the Orient around 1800.²⁴ Although Naubert wrote during a period in which there were no German colonial enterprises, her novels, which thematized the Crusades, evoked images of the holy wars as a shared colonial undertaking in which German, as well as French and British crusaders, actively participated. Thus, her critical evaluation of these military campaigns and the rhetoric mobilized to justify the violence and bloodshed, necessarily implicates Germans as well as their European counterparts. The popularity of her novels portraying historical events linking Germans with the Near and Middle East must therefore be read alongside more formal, scholarly discourses as participating in the construction of what Kontje terms "German Orientalisms."

Defining Germany's historical and fictional encounters with the Near and Middle East are the martial conflicts of the Crusades. The participation of German crusaders in these religious military campaigns constituted one of the earliest forms of German contact with the Orient with lasting implications for portrayals of the Muslim world. Depictions of the East, which dominated European Christian discourses of the medieval period, were a fusion of hostile crusading rhetoric bent on demonizing the Muslim infidel to shore up financial and public support for the centuries-