

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

GERMAN POETRY

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Medieval German Literature

Overview

The origins of German literature, unlike the origins of the Romance literatures, retreat into the margins of the Roman Empire. In his *Germania*, the Roman historian Tacitus provides us with our first extensive account of the German tribe, the Germani, and gives us the sense of a warlike but socially organized people, whose strength and virtues were in some ways to be emulated by the increasingly decadent Romans. From that first semi primitive exposure to the great world, to the first individual voices of German literature, would require a millenium of tribal jostling, linguistic development and branching out from the native Germanic tongues—which were totally foreign to the Latin language families—and arguably a synthesis of pagan with the gradually adopted Christian culture, from which would come the rich and original textures of the literature we now consider German.

The first genres to meet us, in this new literary world, are epic and lyric poetry. The epic tradition in Middle High German, the Classical period (1180-1250), is of two distinct kinds: court and popular. The court epic is written for the nobility—with noble patronage—and is accordingly polite and cultivated, frequently sprinkling French words; the tales that are told typically—as in the epic *Parzifal*, by Wolfram von Eschenbach (1170-1220)—concern chivalry, and the high honor and courtliness culture implied by chivalry. The popular epic tradition, exemplified by *The Niebelungenlied* (1200 A.D.), blends ancient Germanic tales of warfare, revenge, and court life, with an overlay of Christian values, which blend forcefully, providing a ‘folk epic’ closer to Homer’s work than was anything produced out of the court tradition. The traditions of lyric poetry, in mediaeval Germany, are preserved from two major groups: Minnesingers, ‘singers about love,’ who emulated French troubador poetry, and whose greatest exemplar was Walther von der Vogelweide (1170-1230 A.D.); and Mastersingers, who flourished in the 14th and 15th centuries, were best represented by Hans Sachs, and who were an organized guild of professional traveling poets. Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) will stand in here for the brilliance of the German mystical tradition, which expressed itself in a poetry that qualifies it as the highest literature.

Nibelungenlied

Archaic German Literature. The origins of German literature lie in Norse and Icelandic saga, and embody rich traits: powerful mythological forces in conflict, ruling the world; subtle as well as bellicose personal relations embodied inside that mythic dynamic. Some of this material is neither Christian nor drawn from Classical Antiquity and therefore opens us to perspectives on humanity and nature which have not been incorporated in the mainstream of Western culture. These valuable insights take us back to pre-Christian Europe, with its rich cache of ‘pagan’ (largely Norse) myths, and yet that stratum of early Germanic poetry is itself blended with the growing chivalric tradition of Christian poetry, which is by the time of the *Nibelungenlied* proving to be a growing component of the ‘Germanic life view.’ Thus we find, in this epic collated and written down around 1200 A.D., a culturally blended creation, with work of extreme antiquity—dragon-slayer motifs as in the tales of Perseus in Ancient Greece—joined to Romantic chivalric love, jealousy, and vengeance.

The narrative of the *Nibelungenlied*. The work in question embodies historical memories that go back to the court of the Burgundians, who in the 4th century A.D. were foes of the declining Roman Empire; and continues on to incorporate elements of different stages of very late German mediaeval culture, as well as a great deal of fairy tale (*Maerchen*) and folk legend. (It might be added that the manuscript itself has been through numerous historical periods: lost entirely by the end of the 16th century; rediscovered in the 18th century in a manuscript dating from the 13th century.) If at times the epic seems to be bursting at its seams, and running over its edges in repetition and randomness, that is because the narrative pays homage to so many different traditions. It is also, incidentally, because the consistent verse structure—four rhyming lines, each divided by a caesura, the fourth line consistently longer by one stress; over an extent of 10,000 lines—serves wonderfully to keep the ear focused on the stanzaic structure.

The main characters. The narrative centers on a few main characters—whose force, and sharp profiles, hold the fabric together. Siegfried the dragon slayer is an archaic form, the hero ready for action but prudent and ultimately a tragic victim; the hero who has rendered himself invincible—except for one tiny Achilles’ heel—by bathing in the blood of the dragon he has slain; Siegfried’s eventual bride, Kriemhild, whose beauty and primal sense for revenge—she avenges the murder of her husband, Siegfried—are from archaic legend; the villain hero Hagen, who is both a image of faithful vassalage, and of unreserved brutality; the dwarf Alberich, to whom the treasure of the *Nibelungs* is confided, and who is himself right out of the jester entourage of any mediaeval prince; the crafty Etzel (Attila the Hun, in fact) at his Hungarian court, the center of the intrigue which undergirds the second Part of the poem. In this lengthy and passionate pastiche of plots and sub plots, in which love, treachery, magic and courage compete for our fascination, we are immersed in the world of mediaeval Germanic feeling, nostalgic and contemporary pride mixed, and find ourselves engaging with those fierce archaic virtues of pride, independence, vengeance and stubbornness which were uncompromising to a degree fascinating to our more ‘complex’ age.

The German *Iliad*? The material of the *Nibelungenlied* has played to many tunes: Wagnerian opera, National Socialist self-glorification, and today, of course, cartoons and pop Siegfried songs. In the end all of these efforts miss the intra-secular richness of this historical pastiche, which has been called the German *Iliad*, in the sense that like Homer the anonymous author of this German lay brings together historical materials and personages from many different versions of his own culture.

Reading

Primary source reading

There are numerous excellent translations into English: three are included here:

Hatto, A.T., *The Nibelungenlied*, 1964.

Raffel, Burton, *Das Nibelungenlied*, 2006.

Edwards, Cyril, *The Lay of the Nibelungs*, 2010.

Secondary source reading

McConnell, Winder, ed. *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied*, 1998.

Further Reading

Mueller, Jan-Dirk, *Rules for the Endgame: the World of the Nibelungenlied*, 2007.

Original language reading

Ehrismann, Otfried, *Nibelungenlied: Epoche—Werk—Wirkung*, 1987.

Suggested paper topics

Betrayal, jealousy, and revenge all play central roles in the *Nibelungenlied*. It is as though, even in the fairly 'archaic' literary milieu of this work, the drivers are all drawn from the passions. Can you isolate the elements that seem to you most clearly part of the 'archaic' world? Can you do a little research on the Burgundians, whose role as enemies of the Romans in the 5th century, takes us into classical antiquity?

We noted that the *Nibelungenlied* has been called the *Iliad* of Germany. Do you feel that this German epic, like Homer's, concentrates on a single topic—like The Battle of Troy—and makes salient points about that topic, like the moral decision facing Achilles at the end of the epic? Or is the *Nibelungenlied* more diffuse than the *Iliad*? Less in control of its diverse assembled materials?

EXCERPT Beginning of *Nibelungenlied* www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1151

In the Netherlands there grew the child of a noble king (his father had for name Siegemund, (1) his mother Siegelind), (2) in a mighty castle, known far and wide, in the lowlands of the Rhine: Xanten, (3) men called it. Of this hero I sing, how fair he grew. Free he was of every blemish. Strong and famous he later became, this valiant man. Ho! What great worship he won in this world! Siegfried hight this good and doughty knight. Full many kingdoms did he put to the test through his warlike mood. Through his strength of body he rode into many lands. Ho! What bold warriors he after found in the Burgundian land! Mickle wonders might one tell of Siegfried in his prime, in youthful days; what honors he received and how fair of body he. The most stately women held him in their love; with the zeal which was his due

men trained him. But of himself what virtues he attained! Truly his father's lands were honored, that he was found in all things of such right lordly mind. Now was he become of the age that he might ride to court. Gladly the people saw him, many a maid wished that his desire might ever bear him hither. Enow gazed on him with favor; of this the prince was well aware. Full seldom was the youth allowed to ride without a guard of knights. Siegmund and Siegelind bade deck him out in brave attire. The older knights who were acquaint with courtly custom, had him in their care. Well therefore might he win both folk and land.

Now he was of the strength that he bare weapons well. Whatever he needed thereto, of this he had enow. With purpose he began to woo fair ladies; these bold Siegfried courted well in proper wise. Then bade Siegmund have cried to all his men, that he would hold a feasting with his loving kindred. The tidings thereof men brought into the lands of other kings. To the strangers and the home-folk he gave steeds and armor. Wheresoever any was found who, because of his birth, should become a knight, these noble youths were summoned to the land for the feasting. Here with the youthful prince they gained the knightly sword. Wonders might one tell of this great feast; Siegmund and Siegelind wist well how to gain great worship with their gifts, of which their hands dealt out great store. Wherefore one beheld many strangers riding to their realm. Four hundred sword-thanes (4) were to put on knightly garb with Siegfried. Many a fair maid was aught but idle with the work, for he was beloved of them all. Many precious stones the ladies inlaid on the gold, which together with the edging they would work upon the dress of the proud young warriors, for this must needs be done.

The host bade make benches for the many valiant men, for the midsummer festival, (5) at which Siegfried should gain the name of knight. Then full many a noble knight and many a high-born squire did hie them to the minster. Right were the elders in that they served the young, as had been done to them afore. Pastimes they had and hope of much good cheer. To the honor of God a mass was sung; then there rose from the people full great a press, as the youths were made knights in courtly wise, with such great honors as might not ever lightly be again. Then they ran to where they found saddled many a steed. In Siegmund's court the hurtling (6) waxed so fierce that both palace (7) and hall were heard to ring; the high-mettled warriors clashed with mighty sound. From young and old one heard many a shock, so that the splintering of the shafts reechoed to the clouds. Truncheons (8) were seen flying out before the palace from the hand of many a knight. This was done with zeal. At length the host bade cease the tourney and the steeds were led away.

Parzifal (Wolfram von Eschenbach)

Wolfram von Eschenbach. Wolfram von Eschenbach (1170-1220), the author of *Parzifal*, was a serving knight—that is a man at arms in the service of a provincial lord, a position on which he prided himself far more than on his role as poet. (As one of the greatest of the minnesingers he was thus by poetic as well as military profession, a creator constantly on the move.) From the little we know of his background, we believe he was born in Bavaria, near the city of Ansbach, that he found his way eventually into vassalage under a certain Hermann von Thuringia—with whom Walther von der Vogelweide was also connected—and that he composed his work—*Parzifal* itself, and two lesser verse pieces, *Willehelm* and *Titurel*-- in the first quarter of the twelfth century. (This work thus belongs to the era of the Minnesingers.)

Parzifal. *Parzifal* is the first major work of German imaginative literature to tap directly into the Christian tradition, which, as we see in the *Nibelungenlied* and the work of a Meistersinger like Hans Sachs, was not yet fully at home in German culture. (Christian sacramental symbols are widely scattered throughout that literature, but the background against which we read those symbols seems rural and pagan.) Von Eschenbach's work is vast and ambitious, an extensive tale through the personscape of Arthurian legend, search for the grail (which for the protagonist *Parzifal* is a sacred rock), pregnant encounters with the Fisher King, Amfortas, who suffers from the lance that pierced Christi's side, and that pierces his own, and, throughout it all, a gradual growth in *Parzifal*'s own maturity and insight—though he mocks himself throughout, claiming, for instance, that he is 'illiterate; and permitting himself startling comic digressions. This vast epic stretches to 24, 810 lines, staged in the conventional four stress lines in rhyming couplets. (Though clearly, in fact, von Eschenbach was literate, it is likely that this minnesinger creation was backed up by oral presentation.)

The Grail background of the epic. *Parzifal* itself deals with the Grail legend, which refers to the legend of the chalice (or stone, or salver, or jewell) which had been preserved from the time of Christ's Last Supper: a relic worship given its strongest Mediaeval form by Chretien de Troyes, in his *Perceval*. The elaborate story concerns a Knight on a spiritual adventure quest, and in both epics—those of Chretien and Wolfram--ultimately involves a transformative encounter with the Holy Grail, the chalice (or other relic) alleged to have been used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper. (Though the meaning of the grail itself is cloudy in *Parzifal*, and to a large part this sacred symbol serves as a useful literary quest device.) While in Chretien's *Perceval* we are concerned with the education of a crude young knight, Wolfram introduces us to a quest character who is untutored but not stupid; working his way to self-understanding through a fundamentally 'religious' milieu.

Wolfram and the meaning of his work. Read *Parzifal*, please, with an eye for the thriller story in which ultimate Christian mystery is embedded. Do you find this text of contemporary (to us) interest? What is most living in it? To note: Richard Wagner also made *Parzifal* into an opera, loosely but powerfully modeled on the blending of hero quest and sacred symbol

Reading

Primary Source Reading

Hatto, A.T, *Parzifal. Wolfram von Eschenbach*, 1980.

Secondary Source Reading

Hasty, Will, *A Companion to Wolfram's Parzifal*, 1999.

Further Reading

Groos, Arthur, *Romancing the Grail: Genre, Science, and Quest in Wolfram von Echenbach's Parzifal*, 1995.

Original language reading

Bumke, Joachim, *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, 1990.

Suggested paper topics

Does Wolfram's work, in *Parzifal*, reflect the minnesinger tradition to which we customarily assign Wolfram? What connections do you see between the lyrical work of Walther von der Vogelweide and Wolfram? Is the work of either writer deeply infused with Christian motifs?

What do you make of the kind of untutored but intelligent quester to whom Wolfram confides his narrative of a quest for the Holy Grail? Do you take this to be the author's self-portrait? What kind of self-transformation, then, do you take to be implied in the effort to find the grail?

EXCERPT <http://products.ilrn-support.com/wawc1c01c/content/wciv1/readings/parzifal.html>

Thus, Parzival parted from them, and courteous he now might bear
His knightly garb, and he knew them, the customs of knighthood fair.
But alas! He full sore was troubled with many a bitter pain,
And the world was too close, and too narrow with width of the spreading plain,
And the greenswald he thought was faded, and his harness had paled to white;
So the heart of the eye constraineth and dimmeth awhile the sight.
For since he had waxed less simple somewhat of his father's lore,
The desire of the man for the maiden, in his wakening heart he bore;
And he thought but of fair Liassé, that maiden so true and sweet,
How never her love she proffered, yet with honour the guest would greet.
And wherever his horse, might turn it he took in his grief no heed,
And if slowly it paced or swiftly he thought not to guide its speed.
Nor many a field well-fenced nor wayside cross he found;
Nor chariot-wheel nor horse-hoof had furrowed with tracks the ground;
Untrodden the woodland pathway, nor wide was I ween the way,
And he knew not the hills and the valleys — Full oft shall yea hear men say,
'Who rideth astray, in his wandering the lost axe may often find.'
They lay here unnumbered round him, if for axe ye have trees in mind.
Yet tho' far was the road he journeyed yet he went in no wise astray,
And thus from the land of Graharz he rode through the livelong day,
Till he came to the kingdom of Brobarz thro' mountains wild and high —
When the shadows of evening lengthened, and red flushed the western sky,
Then he came to a mountain torrent, and the voice of the raging flood
Rang clear as its waves rushed foaming round the crags that amid them stood.
So he rode adown by the waters till he came to the city fair
Which a king had bequeathed to his daughter; 'twas the city of Pelrapär,
And I wot that tho' fair the maiden who bare of that land the crown,
Great grief and small gladness had they who dwelt in that noble town!
Like an arrow that swiftly speedeth from the bow by a strong arm bent,
The waters onward rushing on their downward pathway went;
And a bridge hung high above them with woven work so fair,
And the stream it flowed swift to the ocean — Well-guarded was Pelrapär,
As children in swings delight them, and swing themselves to and fro,
So swung the bridge, yet ropeless, youthful gladness it scarce might know!
And on either side were standing, with helmets for battle bound,
Of knights e'en more than thirty, and they bade him to turn him round,
And with lifted swords, tho' feeble, the strife would they gladly wait,
They thought 'twas the King Klamidé whom they oft had seen of late,
So royally rode the hero to the bridge o'er the field so wide —
And thus to the youth they shouted, and with one voice his arms defied,
Tho' he spurred his steed full sharply it shrank from the bridge in fright,
But ne'er knew he a thought of terror — To the ground sprang the gallant knight.
And he led his horse by the bridle where the bridge hung high in air,
Too faint were a coward's courage so bitter a strife to dare!
And well must he watch his footsteps for he feared lest his steed should fall —

Minnesingers

Minnesang. The 12th and 13th centuries witnessed the development of a refined poetry, Minnesong or Love Song poetry, promoted within the scattered feudal courts of the many Germanic lords who were vassals of the Holy Roman Emperor; poetry deeply influenced by the contemporary French troubador tradition. (Of nationhood we cannot yet speak, nor will we, in the case of Germany, for another more than 600 years, when Bismarck gives a kind of administrative unity to the scattered elements of the German nation, centered around local princes and their courts; rather the Europe in formation, in the time of the Minnesingers, was porous and truly international, since in fact it was pre national.)

French troubadours. While the French singers and musicians were the innovators in their kind of wandering minstrel poetry, by the end of the twelfth century the German minstrel tradition had evolved its own patterns, and the courts and culturescape of the land were crowded with performers—who were of course a substantial element of the ‘entertainment’ any culture requires for itself. You will at once see the distance of this refined lyric tradition-- much of it romantic and inspired by the Troubadour tradition of Southern France-- from the potent epic mind of the *Nibelungenlied*. (Although you may notice a strong resemblance of the two kinds of Germanic texts to one another, oh the question of love and passion. The devoted cult of woman is conspicuous in the German Mediaeval culture mind, as it was throughout Europe—often as a byproduct of the cult of the Virgin Mary—at this time.)

Von der Vogelweide. Walther von der Vogelweide (1170-1230 A.D) is a good model of the sophisticated work, which emerged from this movement. The minnesang movement, which lasted over two centuries, eventually playing out into the very different Meistersinger tradition—was while not entirely aristocratic commonly located among the vassals of the princely German courts of the time. Walther, like many of his contemporary wandering court poets, was what we could call a ‘knight,’ not a fighting man but an armed defendant of his court, and, in addition, a noteworthy patriot in the local sense—which included strong antipathy to the Papacy, as well, apparently, as participation in the Crusades.

Von der Vogelweide, the poet. Vogelweide was a master of romantic poetry, as well as of nature poetry, epigrams and songs, and like others of his craft he wandered throughout the Europe of the day reciting and presenting his work. (One might think of a kind of mediaeval Rock Star.) If you read the translation of his poetry carefully, and compare it with the original, you will begin to see how close his Middle High German is to English, and how craftily he handles it. Do you see the magic of the particular verse below? The image is of the most common. The beloved, asserts the poet, is locked in his heart, and cannot escape. The key to the heart is lost. Nothing could be more simple. Yet listen to the rhymes interact, as the rhythms plays out:

Middle High German original	Modern German	English
Dû bist mîn, ich bin dîn:des solt dû gewis sîn. dû bist beslozen in mînem herzen. verlorn ist das slüzzelîn: dû muost immer drinne sîn!	Du bist mein, ich bin dein:dessen sollst du gewiss sein. Du bist verschlossen in meinem Herzen. Verloren ist das Schlüsselein: du musst immer darin sein.	You are mine, I am yours, Of that you may be sure. Deep within my heart You're safely locked away. But I have lost the key And there you'll ever stay

Reading

Primary Source Reading

Jackson, B.G., *The songs of the Minnesingers*, 1965.

Secondary Source Reading

Sayce, Olive, *The mediaeval German lyric, 1150-1300*, 1982.

Further Reading

Taylor, Ronald, *The Art of the Minnesinger*, 1968.

Original language reading

Hahn, Gerhard, *Walther von der Vogelweide. Eine Einfuehrung*, 1986.

Suggested paper topics

Do the Minnesingers, as a group, seem to you closely bound to the nature of the society in which they flourished? Was their mobile, performative life the byproduct of a culture in which small court entertainments, scattered across the German landscape, provided venues and support for 'wandering minstrels'? Do the internationally performing music groups of our day provide some kind of contemporary parallel to the world of the Minnesingers?

In what ways does the work and world of the Minnesingers resemble that of the French troubadours, who were their predecessors and 'models'? Were the social backgrounds of the two styles of minstrelsy significantly different? Were the pervasive themes of the two poetries different? Try to explain what differences you see.

EXCERPT <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/under-the-lime-tree/>

Under the lime tree
On the heather,
Where we had shared a place of rest,
Still you may find there,
Lovely together,
Flowers crushed and grass down-pressed.
Beside the forest in the vale,
Tándaradéi,
Sweetly sang the nightingale.

I came to meet him
At the green:
There was my truelove come before.
Such was I greeted —
Heaven's Queen! —
That I am glad for evermore.
Had he kisses? A thousand some:
Tándaradéi,
See how red my mouth's become.

There he had fashioned
For luxury
A bed from every kind of flower.
It sets to laughing
Delightedly
Whoever comes upon that bower;
By the roses well one may,
Tándaradéi,
Mark the spot my head once lay.

If any knew
He lay with me
(May God forbid!), for shame I'd die.
What did he do?
May none but he
Ever be sure of that — and I,
And one extremely tiny bird,
Tándaradéi,

Who will, I think, not say a word.

Meistersingers

Meistersingers as a guild. The Mastersingers were a guild of craftsman poets, who took their inspiration from the mediaeval minnesingers, desiring to sustain the tradition of public poetry and its entertainment. But the Meistersingers—that is the singers who worked for ‘masters’ in the craft system culture-- attempted to recreate the minnesinger tradition within a later society—that of the Northern Renaissance—which was already home to a middle class economy, and in which the mediaeval traditions of wandering singers, like the French Troubadors or German minnesingers, was far in the past, in effect at least two centuries in the past. The Meistersinger tradition developed into a craft guild organically from local and church choirs as they expressed themselves from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries. It cannot be overstressed that this new tradition was an artificial graft onto the minnesinger tradition.

The rules of the guild. For the Meistersingers twelve outstanding Middle High German poets served as exemplars and models—among them the best known to us was Wolfram von Eschenbach (d. 1216). Working from such models, Heinrich Frauenlieb established the first Meistersinger school at Mainz, in the early fourteenth century. By the fifteenth century the movement had spread throughout Germany, and Nuernberg had become the leading nucleus of the movement. By that point the Meistersinger organization was highly developed—as was the case with all guilds in the German craft culture of the time. Each Meistersinger cell consisted of a Meister—the chief in charge of the productions of his ‘unit’—and two degrees of subordinates, who had privileges corresponding to their position on the performance ladder. (For example, the Master alone was permitted to invent new tunes and new verses to fit them, while the two lower ranks of performers were responsible only for ‘copying.’) However the Master himself was not free for much invention. A law book (Tablatur) laid down the kinds of poems that were permissible for the guild, the rhymes that were acceptable, and listed a great number of mistakes to watch for. (When performances were given by the guild, four judges customarily evaluated, from behind a curtain, the correctness, euphony, and freedom from error of the performance.)

Hans Sachs. The most renowned of the Meistersingers, for us, is Hans Sachs (1494 A.D.-1576 A.D.), who was born of a humble family in Nuernberg, and at the age of fourteen began his apprenticeship as a shoemaker—thus placing himself inside one of the craft guilds of the city. At the age of seventeen, Hans Sachs began his career as a traveling journeyman, and on one of his journeys he stopped in the city of Wels, in Austria. There he was discovered—for the excellence of his singing—by the Emperor Maximilian, who was passing through town. Thanks to this chance encounter, Hans Sachs was eventually removed to Muenchen, where a linen weaver took him over as a guild craftsworker, and where Hans was able to launch a lengthy and prolific career as shoemaker-poet. (In all he created over 6000 ‘pieces of literature,’ of every sort—for he burst out of the bounds prescribed by the guild—from religious tracts to poems, from epigrams to sacred plays. One of his finest poems was written out of his vast admiration for Martin Luther, *die wuerttembuergische Nachtgall*, the Wuerttemberg nightingale.) Sachs grew from the Meistersinger craft position into an ambitious poet for whom the strict rules of the craft were never far distant, and proves that, even in such a derivative and mechanical tradition as the Mastersingers created, local energy was possible. We also owe the renown of Sachs to the (fairly humorous) treatment of him we find in Wagner’s only comic opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg*, 1868.

Reading

Primary Source Reading

Aylett, Robert, *Translations of the Carnival Comedies of Hans Sachs*, 1995.

Secondary Source Reading

Hauser, Arnold, *Social History of Art, Vol. I.*, 1999 (reprint.)

Further Reading

Classen, Albrecht, *Urban Space in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age*, 2009.

Original language reading

Klein, Dorothea, *Bildung und Belehrung. Untrsuchungen zum Dramenwerk des Hans Sachs*, 1988.

Suggested paper topics

Do you see a continuity between the Minnesingers and the Meistersingers? On the face of it the differences seem dramatic. Do they result from the differences of social milieu between the two literary movements? Was the mobile

courtly song/poetry tradition more fitted to poetic creation than the crafts guild people's tradition of two centuries later?

Are you familiar, in your own time, with efforts to include the creation of the finer arts under a 'guild system,' or something like it? Do Writers' Unions, such as they exist today world wide, and such as were prevalent and influential during the Cold War in Eastern Europe and Russia, provide some kind of parallel to the world of the Mastersingers.

EXCERPT <http://www.poemhunter.com/hans-sachs/>

Why Art Thou Thus Cast Down, My Heart?

Why art thou thus cast down, my heart?

Why troubled, why dost mourn apart,

O'er nought but earthly wealth?

Trust in thy God, be not afraid,

He is thy Friend who all things made.

Dost think thy prayers He doth not heed?

He knows full well what thou dost need,

And heaven and earth are His;

My Father and my God, who still

Is with my soul in every ill.

Since Thou my God and Father art,

I know Thy faithful loving heart

Will ne'er forget Thy child;

See I am poor, I am but dust,

On earth is none whom I can trust.

The rich man in his wealth confides,

But in my God my trust abides;

Then laugh ye as ye will,

I hold this fast that He hath taught,--

Who trusts in God shall want for nought.

Yes, Lord, Thou art as rich to-day

As Thou hast been and shalt be aye,

I rest on Thee alone;

Thy riches to my soul be given,

And 't is enough for earth and heaven.

What here may shine I all resign,

If the eternal crown be mine,

That through Thy bitter death

Thou gainedst, O Lord Christ, for me--

For this, for this, I cry to Thee!

All wealth, all glories, here below,

The best that this world can bestow,

Silver or gold or lands,

But for a little time is given,

And helps us not to enter heaven.

I thank Thee, Christ, Eternal Lord,

That Thou hast taught me by Thy word

To know this truth and Thee;

O grant me also steadfastness...

Thy heavenly kingdom not to miss....

16th Century German Literature

As we enter the sixteenth century we must note that while England, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Italy were by this stage moving vigorously into the rediscovery of the Classics, and the power of their Romanic tradition, the Germans—but one cannot refer to them as such, for they were still four centuries away from nationhood—were barely starting to harvest their cultural traditions. And yet, complexly enough, there was cultural movement, from with the ‘Germany’ of the sixteenth century, which was to have exceptionally far reaching effect on subsequent centuries throughout Europe, indeed throughout the world.

From the very first, the humanist movement took a unique direction in north-central Europe. In the first place the revival of classical literature, especially Latin, was for Italy—and to some extent for France and Spain—a revival of its own past glories, while for Germany the Renaissance was of foreign origin. Furthermore humanism appealed primarily to the intellectual elite in Germany, who could speak Greek and Latin, whereas it appealed to a far wider audience in the countries where the languages were derived from Latin. Instead of an Italianate Renaissance, it might be said, Germany turned with fervor toward a kind of religious Renaissance, the Reformation.

It should not, though, be assumed that humanism made no headway in Germany. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1455-1522) and others became great scholars of classical languages. The invention of the printing press, in the mid-15th century, did much to stimulate reading and learning, and at least fifteen universities were founded in Germany between 1538-1545 A.D. Martin Luther himself was a friend to classical learning, except where it clashed with his religious beliefs.

17th Century German Literature

The historical event of huge importance for Germany, in the seventeenth century, was the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), which was brought on by the Hapsburgs’ renewed attempts to stamp out Protestants—thus, by the continuing inter faith conflict opened up Martin Luther, and a century after the Reformation mired in power-turf issues which were decidedly not theological. The Protestants were aided in the war by Denmark, Sweden, and France, and once again they won freedom of worship. Such freedom, however, was dearly bought. Germany was so utterly devastated and so nearly depopulated (about two thirds of the population perished) that it was unable to recover for nearly a century.

The century was for the most part literarily barren, with important exceptions made for the religious/visionary poetries of Jacob Boehme and Angelus Silesius, and the fascinating novel *Simplicissimus* (1669) by Grimmelshausen.

Angelus Silesius

Introduction to Silesius. "I am like God and God like me. I am as large as God. He is as small as I." Angelus Silesius (1624-1677) plays off of the identity of God and man. (Silesius was off and on accused by the Church of pantheism, of believing that the world exists as God, but that God is more (the animating force) than the world.) Who was this 'Silesian Angel,' and why was he such a source of distress for many theologians in his time?

The life and perspective of Angelus Silesius. Angelus Silesius, the 'Silesian Angel' as he christened himself later in life, having changed his name from plain German to suggestive Latin, was born in Breslau in 1624, only three years after the death of Grimmelshausen. His father was a military man of some distinction, a member of the lower nobility, and the future Angelus was sent to the prominent Elisabethsgymnasium, a promising preparatory school in Breslau; his education was excellent. For higher studies Angelus was sent to the University of Strasbourg and to the Netherlands, where he became aware of the mystic thinking of Jacob Bohme. Meanwhile, following an inclination strong in him since childhood, he had converted to Catholicism, and been ordained; in 1663, he also pursued medical studies on an advanced level. This well credentialed and brilliant young man was then appointed Court Physician to the Duke of Wuertemberg, a position which promised him a good career, but the chemistry of the appointment was not effective. Silesius began to speak out critically against Lutheranism, in this court which had strong Lutheran leanings, and, above all, began to enter more frequently into the visionary condition. In the end Silesius was fired from his court position, and the rumors of heresy, which were quick to follow in such cases—think of Eckhart and Jacob Boehme, both of whom were victims of smear campaigns—and retired to a Jesuit retreat house where he spent the rest of his life.

The visions of Silesius. Visionary thinking, among members of the clergy, inevitably leads to official nervousness. (We see, in our own day, the time consuming protocols that proceed any ratification of miracles or the saintly condition.) in the case of Silesius, the records of visions fitted exquisitely into the prosody made available to him in time by the elegant works of Martin Opitz (1597-1639), who had dominated the scene of German poetry in the seventeenth century, and had particularly reshaped the technical direction of the craft, by introducing the French alexandrine line as the standard line for German poetry. Silesius moved directly into this verse form—the translations to be found below, in our excerpts, don't attempt the difficult challenge of putting Silesius into alexandrines in English. In any case, in the 1650's when Silesius decided to ask permission to have his poems published—as a priest he required an imprimatur—he was granted it, and in his 1676 his collection of 1500 short poems, aphorisms, and epigrams, *Der cherubinische Wandersman*, was published. Most of the work there was in rhyming alexandrine couplets, often arranged—through syntactical inversion, wordplay, learned allusions—to conceal a hidden and mystical meaning. The reason for the secrecy can perhaps be sensed from the brief excerpts offered below. 'I am as large as god/ he is as small as I': this leitmotif, with which we opened the entry, pervades Silesius' poems, and contributes even to the simplest of his pieces a paradoxical richness.

Borges and Silesius. The brilliant Argentinian writer and poet, Jose Luis Borges, viewed Silesius as a chief inspiration. Put in English, the Silesian verses—'The rose is without a why; it blossoms because it blossoms'—were for Borges the summary of Silesius' (and his own) view of life.

Reading

Primary source reading

Angelus Silesius: the Cherubic Wanderer, trans. Shradly and Schmidt, 1986.

Secondary source reading

Wehr, Gerhard, Angelus Silesius. The Mystic, 2011.

Further reading

Sammons, Jeffrey, Angelus Silesius, 1967.

Original language reading

Walz, Herbert, Deutsche Literatur der Reformationszeit: eine Einfuehrung, 1988.

Suggested paper topics

What, from your own experience, could be threatening to any church about the kind of 'pantheism' or 'panentheism' (check the term) attributed to Angelus Silesius? Meister Eckhart and Jacob Boehme, who preceded Silesius, both reviewed, deepened, modified the notion that man and God are intricately interwoven. Does this position, which Silesius reaffirms, leave room for Trinity, Crucifixion, Redemption?

You will have noticed that the high literature of the early period of German literature intersects at many points with religious thinking. Does the Reformation period seem to you especially replete with the religious imagination? Is the impression correct, that the purely literary imagination, the creative force behind art for its own sake, is irrelevant in such a period as the seventeenth century in Germany?

Excerpts

en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Angelus_Silesius

GODHEAD

BEING IS NOT MEASURED

Turn wheresoe'er I will, I find no evidence
of End, Beginning, Centre or Circumference.

GOD NEVER EXPLORETH HIMSELF

The Thought and Deed of Deity
Are of such richness and extent
That It remaineth to Itself
An Undiscovered Continent.

IN THE SEA MANY ARE ONE

A Loaf holds many grains of corn
And many myriad drops the Sea:
So is God's Oneness Multitude
And that great Multitude are we.

ALL INTO ONE AGAIN

The All proceedeth from the One,
And into One must All regress:
If otherwise, the All remains
Asunder-riven manyness.

18th century German Literature

The 18th century, especially the second half of it, is arguably the richest period in German cultural life, and the period of its influence over world wide culture, to this date. Although the country was still a hodgepodge of more or less independent states bounds together in a loose confederation, Prussia began to emerge as the dominant power, and glimmerings of a national consciousness began to appear. In the Seven Years War (1756-1763) the brilliant leadership of Frederick II (the Great, ruled 1740-1786) enabled Prussia, assisted by troops from Hanover and subsidies from England, to withstand the armies of France, Austria, and Russia.

In Germany, as in most of the other European countries, rationalism and deism were beginning to attract many adherents. These systems of belief were opposed first by pietism (a revival of simple piety, plus religious emotionalism) and later by Rousseauism. The theories of Diderot and Rousseau about democracy, the rights of man, and individual liberty led to no political upheaval in Germany—but in the social and intellectual realms Rousseauism imposed on rationalism helped to foster the indigenous movement known as Sturm und Drang (Storm and Stress) ‘which had as its objectives a reform of political and social life and a regeneration of literature.’ After mid century there was a burst of great writing—one thinks of this as the Classical Age of German literature—Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, Herder, and from there, passing into the following century, the rich contributions of Germany to the Romantic movement, and to its philosophic drivers, Kant and a lineage of greats

Klopstock

Klopstock's Work. Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1723-1803) lives into the century beyond, and in many ways is evidence of energies fermenting the future, in Enlightenment German thinking. It is not that he was fully aware of these gifts fermenting inside himself, for his great passion, from early on in life, was to complete a masterpiece, *Der Messias* (The Messiah), which was to link him to the efforts of John Milton, in *Paradise Lost* (1667), which were part of the great past. What powers Klopstock, as poet, could carry into the future of literature were to come from his lyric poetry—his volume of *Odes* (published in 1771) is today much more appreciated than his *Messias*, of which a distinguished scholar wrote that ‘of all the religious poems of the world, the *Messias* is unquestionably the most monotonous and difficult to read.’ (Of his lyrics, an equally notable critic observed that Klopstock was ‘the greatest lyric poet between Walther von der Vogelweide and Goethe.’) Who was this Klopstock?

Klopstock's Life. Klopstock was born in 1724 in Quedlinburg, eldest son of a lawyer. In 1739 he was sent to the outstanding classical gymnasium in Schulpforta, where he made his first acquaintance with Homer's epics—largely through the translation of the Swiss writer, Bodmer—and began conceiving of a long epic poem of his own, which was to gestate into the *Messias*, the thirty cantos of which would not ultimately be published until 1773, although sections of the work were appearing from 1751 on. For University Klopstock went to Jena, where at first he was to study theology, at which he was a brilliant thinker, but one endlessly going back to his epic visions. After Jena he spent some time working as a private tutor, then went to visit Bodmer in Zuerich. At that point a conflict of lifestyles—Klopstock was always the active one, social and expansive, a superb horseman—divided the two men's tastes, and as Klopstock, in the manner of literary men in his time, was sizing up his opportunities for the next move, among the princely court supporters, he drew the attention of King Frederick V of Denmark, and went to Copenhagen. His pleasure, and soon sadness, were wrapped up in this trip north, for on the way he met his wife Margaret Moeller, who died four years later—leaving him, in sadness, with the memory of the happiest years of his life. Not much later, the King of Denmark died, and Klopstock returned to Hamburg, to spend there the remainder of his life.

The achievement of Klopstock. The *Messias*, by general agreement, foundered on the impossibility of its theme, to dramatize and hallow Christ's Redemption of the world. (Milton had tried the challenge, in *Paradise Regained*, and by general consent was much less successful than in describing the drama of the Fall.) It is, though, noteworthy that in this huge epic, 20,000 lines, Klopstock made a prosodic decision which was game changing for German poetry. Instead of composing in French alexandrine lines, the ruling Latinized form of French classical literature, Klopstock created in hexameters, the verbal form of Greek and Latin poetry. The result was a greatly invigorated inheritance for future German poetry. In his lyrics, however, he carried his historical presence further, by reaching out, in genuine feeling—that is, relatively free of the neoclassical icing required at the time—to express feelings, about poetry, friendship, love, nature, which are of a very promising freshness, and pervaded by fully realized religious feeling.

The challenge. Why was the challenge facing the *Messias* so difficult? Why did Milton struggle to try to deal with the redemption of man, in *Paradise Regained*, and why was he unsuccessful? Can you identify other long poems which attempt to deal with religious matters—not with the religious sentiment but with religious doctrine and sacred history? Would you say that Dante's *Divine Comedy* is an example of what we are talking about? If so, was that work successful, and how?

Reading

Primary source reading

Hilliard, K., *Philosophy, Letters, and the Fine Arts in Klopstock's Thought*, 1987.

Secondary source reading

Kohl, K. Rhetoric, *The Bible, and the Origins of Free Verse: the early Hymns of Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock*, 1990.

Further reading

Lee, Meredith, *Displacing Authority: Goethe's Poetic Reception of Klopstock*, 1999.

Original language reading

Buerger, Christa, *Tradition und Subjektivitaet*, 1980.

Suggested paper topics

Take a look at Boileau's *Art Poétique* (1674) to get the spirit of French neo-classical poetry of the 17th century, the poetry of the dramas of Racine and Corneille. You will see the importance of formal issues, many resting on the model use of the alexandrine line. Klopstock first started to write the *Messias* in alexandrines, then switched to hexameters. What was important about that change? What kind of statement was it about the direction of German poetry? What kind of move was Klopstock making, to redirect German poetry away from the French model?

Are there topics which are impossible to write about in imaginative literature? (I reference Klopstock's effort to deal with the Christian Redemption.) Even Milton had trouble with certain aspects of theology, but why? Is 'sacred literature' not accessible to the imagination? Does this issue come up in our time? What about the case of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*? Is the problem there one of 'blasphemy' or one of the misadjustment of theme to literary imagination?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/hermann-and-thusnelda/>

Hermann and Thusnelda

Ha! there comes he, with sweat, with blood of Romans,
And with dust of the fight all stained! O, never
Saw I Hermann so lovely!
Never such fire in his eyes!

Come! I tremble for joy; hand me the Eagle,
And the red, dripping sword! come, breathe, and rest thee;
Rest thee here in my bosom;
Rest from the terrible fight!

Rest thee, while from thy brow I wipe the big drops,
And the blood from thy cheek! --- that cheek, how glowing!
Hermann! Hermann! Thusnelda
Never so loved thee before!

No, not then when thou first, in old oak-shadows,
With that manly brown arm didst wildly grasp me!
Spell-bound I read in thy look
That immortality, then,

Which thou now hast won. Tell to the forests,
Great Augustus, with trembling, amidst his gods now,
Drinks his nectar; for Hermann,
Hermann immortal is found!

'Wherefore curl'st thou my hair? Lies not our father
Cold and silent in death? O, had Augustus
Only headed his army, ---
He should lie bloodier there!'

Let me lift up thy hair; 'tis sinking, Hermann;
Proudly thy locks should curl above the crown now!
Sigmar is with the immortals!
Follow, and mourn him no more.

19th century German Literature

The conquests of Napoleon Bonaparte dealt a severe blow to the hopes of the German patriots and those who were beginning to make Germany aware of herself as a nation. French domination lasted from 1803-1813. As usually is the case, military attacks did not extinguish nationalist zeal, but fanned the flames higher; and uniting against the common enemy helped to bring the loosely confederated states closer together. Some of the dramas and lyrics of the great poets—especially *Minna von Barnhelm* by Lessing, Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, and Goethe's *Faust (Part I)*; published 1808—gave the German speaking states an illustrious common heritage and emphasized the idea of a common fatherland.

The German armies that helped defeat Napoleon in 1813 had been promised various reforms, including more political liberty and a constitutional government. Their expectations were disappointed. A policy of reaction, inaugurated by Metternich in Austria, was adopted by most of the states; and participation in the government and freedom of the press and of speech were denied to the people. The period of reaction and absolutism continued for several decades, but popular discontent grew so strong that it became open rebellion in 1848. Then some steps toward constitutional government were taken, and some of the absolutist policies were abolished. In 1871 the German people were given quite modern social legislation, under Chancellor Otto Bismarck.

In the meantime, tremendous progress toward national unity was made. In 1815 Austria allied itself with some of the other states in the German confederation; in 1834 the formation of the Zollverein began real unification; and in 1866 the North German Confederation was formed. Finally Germany defeated France in the Franco-Prussian War (1870), and William I was declared Emperor of the German Empire in 1871.

Friedrich Hoelderlin

Life of Friedrich Hoelderlin. Friedrich Hoelderlin (1778-1843) was born in Lauffen am Neckar, in the kingdom of Wuerttemberg. His father, who worked as a church assistant, died when the child was two years old, leaving Hoelderlin to be brought up by his mother, who not long after remarried, to the Mayor of Nuertingen, to which town she moved herself and the family. Friedrich went to school in Neubraun, then went off to the University of Tuebingen, where he decided to study theology. (Two of his classmates were Hegel and Schelling, two of the most remarkable German philosophers of the early Romantic/late classical transition. It is reliably supposed that Hoelderlin exercised life long influence on his two classmates, having inspired Hegel with a fascination for the ancient Greek philosopher Heracleitus, whose theory of a universe of intersecting and self-transforming forces was a foundation for Hegel's dialectical thinking.) During and after leaving University, Hoelderlin realized that he was losing his faith in Christianity—thus in the study of theology—and thus drifted to that last resort activity of the intellectual, a job as a tutor. He was at the same time devoting as much time as possible to writing—which had been his private preoccupation since childhood—and between 83-84, in addition to making a fruitful acquaintance with Schiller and Goethe, he began the writing of what was to be one of his major poetic works, *Hyperion*. (His great love, Gontard, a married woman ten years older than he, entered his life at this point, and would serve as a potent and mythical axis, under the name Diotima, for Hoelderlin's vision of the fusion of Ancient Greek depth with his own quest.) In 1798-1800 Hoelderlin worked on his mythopoetic vision, *Empedokles*, in which, as in *Hyperion*, he returned to archaic and deeply pre rational cult sides of the ancient Hellenic experience. In 1805, however, the condition of his 'hypochondria'—he had had his first episodes in 1800—recurred, more threateningly, and he was obliged to enter a clinic in Tuebingen, from which, after intermittent stays, he was released into the care of a local carpenter friend—a highly educated and well read one—in whose house he remained for the more than three remaining decades of his life.

Friedrich Hoelderlin's Work. Though in his last decades, Holderlin composed a wide variety of wonderful smaller poems, epigrams, odes, he had turned in his earlier work to the long narrative, Bildungsroman type poems, *Hyperion* and *Empedokles*, in which he sought, from the depths of his person, to reconcile the Classicism deeply interiorized by German culture during the Weimar period, in fact throughout the Enlightenment, with the sense of new Romantic possibility .

Hyperion. This poetic Bildungsroman illustrates well why the readers of Hoelderlin have ranged from bewildered to deeply involved. It is set in modern Greece, around 1770, about the time when the nation was on the verge of finding its own independence—freedom from the Turks. Hyperion quests across the land, in search of the idealized Greece of dream, but instead meets only barbarians and primitives. Totally disillusioned he becomes a mountain hermit, and falls into a deep depression from which only the mistress of beauty, Diotima—she who taught Socrates what beauty means-- is able to rescue him. As lovers they unite, until her death, which leaves Hyperion longing and wandering, until, in a moment of powerful pantheistic empathy, he feels his way back to her, they are united, and her essential Hellenic beauty belongs again to the modern soul.

Reading

Primary source reading

Hoelderlin, Friedrich, *Poems and Fragments*, trans. M. Hamburger, 2004.

Secondary source reading

Heinrich, Dieter, *The Course of Remembrance and other essays on Hoelderlin*, 1997.

Further reading

Constantine, David, *Hoelderlin*, 1990.

Original language reading

Heidegger, M., *Eralueterungen zu Hoelderlin's Dichtung*, 1944.

Suggested paper topics

How does Hoelderlin's quest for the spirit of ancient Greece compare to the longing of older classicist/Hellenists, like Goethe and Winckelmann? Can you see what it might mean to say that Hoelderlin is a 'Romantic'? Look into a poet like Lord Byron, perhaps his Childe Harold? Does his address to ancient Greece at all remind you of Hoelderlin's approach?

Read in Hoelderlin's late shorter poems, like 'Bread and Wine' and 'Patmos' and consider the way this poet experiences Christianity. What kind of symbol of the future does Jesus become for him? Does Hoelderlin work toward a fusion of Christianity with ancient Hellenism?

Excerpt www.poemhunter.com/friedrich-holderlin/

Ages of Life
Euphrates' cities and
Palmyra's streets and you
Forests of columns in the level desert
What are you now?
Your crowns, because
You crossed the boundary
Of breath,
Were taken off
In Heaven's smoke and flame;
But I sit under clouds (each one
Of which has peace) among
The ordered oaks, upon
The deer's heath, and strange
And dead the ghosts of the blessed ones
Appear to me.

Heine

Life of Heinrich Heine. Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) was a German poet, critic, satirist, and influential public critic. He was born in Duesseldorf, of a Jewish family, and although he would later convert to Christianity—largely for political reasons due to the anti-Jewish laws in Prussia, and to the lasting displeasure of Jewish readers of Heine—his Jewish fidelities remained a stalwart part of his life. (And an underlying spur to the critical, outsider view he regularly adopted, toward society and government.) His father was a textile merchant and his mother the daughter of a physician. The life that was to sweep up this young man was different from the University Professorship lives common to the major figures of Enlightenment and Early Romantic literature; although Heine was to be sent to the classic universities. He studied briefly at Jena, and later at Goettingen, for Law, in 1821. But his sensitivities were always more attuned to current cultural/political events than to scholarship. (Writing of course concerned him from early on, and as a young man he had had a turn (not very successful) at theater.)

Heine's concern with politics. Heine was from early in life consumed by the political life of his time, as were most of his creative contemporaries. The Napoleonic Revolution, and how it would play out in Germany, was on everyone's mind. This was noticeably so in Duesseldorf, which lay close to the border of Napoleonic France, and which, at Napoleon's defeat in 1815, was returned to Germany. (Heine had an intense attachment to French culture, with which he had been familiar from Nchildhood; and was to pass the last twenty five years of his life in Paris, where he was better known, and more popular than in Germany.) He was ardently attracted to some aspects of the Napoleonic invasion—the introduction of the Code Napoleon as the new law code, and the institution of trial by jury—and was to remain, throughout his life, a friend to the anti-monarchist forces in Germany, who were fighting the persistence there of the culture of small and highly conservative monarchies. To be a participant in Junges Deutschland, the New Germany movement which swept up Heine and many of his contemporaries impatient with fossilized political forms, meant to follow events in France, where the Revolution of 1848 seemed a culmination of dissatisfaction with the Ancien Regime, which Napoleon had ultimately restored in a new form. In France, where Heine spent his last twenty five years, he was widely admired, had influential friends—like Gerard de Nerval and Hector Berlioz—and wrote criticism and poetry voluminously.

Heine's work. Heine was a brilliant satirist and a lyric poet with a wide range of skills. From 1820 he was a publishing fury, creative with lyrics of such diversity that one can only illustrate his genius by a single sample. 'Die schlesischen Weber' 'The Silesian Weavers,' is of typical power and subtlety. The voices speaking in this poem are almost entirely the common voice of the weavers themselves. It comes out that the cloth the weavers are weaving is the shroud of the German nation: into that shroud they are weaving a threefold curse, a curse on the god who has betrayed them, a curse on the king who has let them starve and be shot, a curse on their fake and corrupt fatherland. The brilliance of Heine's poetry is in the slow revelation by the weavers of the details of what they are weaving, a revelation which proceeds at exactly the speed of the prosody. Nietzsche said that only he and Heine knew how to write German. He was right.

Reading

Primary source reading

Heine: *Selected verse: Dual Language Edition*, trans. Peter Branscombe, 1987.

Secondary source reading

Sammons, Jeffrey, *Heinrich Heine: A Modern Biography*, 1979. (The classic study in English.)

Further reading

Youens, Susan, *Heinrich Heine and the Lied*, 2011.

Original language reading

Hinck, Walter, *Von Heine zu Brecht: Lyrik im Geschichtsprozess*, 1978.

Suggested paper topics

To what especially do you attribute Heine's inclination to and gift for irony? Does it derive from his outsider status? From his dual French-German cultural background? From his lifelong oppositional stance in politics?

How does Heine deal with being Jewish? Does it bring a flavor of its own to his lyrics? Does he suffer racial inequities? Examine the question of Anti-Semitism in German literature. Has it deep historical roots there, or is German Anti-Semitism a by product of recent events in Germany?

Excerpt www.poemhunter.com/heinrich-heine/

E'en As A lovely Flower
E'en as a lovely flower,
So fair, so pure thou art;
I gaze on thee, and sadness
Comes stealing o'er my heart.

My hands I fain had folded
Upon thy soft brown hair,
Praying that God may keep thee
So lovely, pure and

.
A Palm-tree
A single fir-tree, lonely,
on a northern mountain height,
sleeps in a white blanket,
draped in snow and ice.

His dreams are of a palm-tree,
who, far in eastern lands,
weeps, all alone and silent,
among the burning sands.

20th Century German Literature

The political and military history of Germany during the first half of the 20th century, is so well known that only the briefest outline should suffice. Under Kaiser Wilhelm II Germany began WW I in 1914. Decisively defeated by the Allies in 1918, she lost all her colonies, Alsace-Lorraine, and some frontier territory. The Republic of Germany (Weimar Republic) was proclaimed in 1919. For fourteen years the nation remained in a deplorable condition: her economy was severely damaged; the government was highly unstable and the people were under a cloud of war guilt. Already as early as 1923 Adolf Hitler made a bid for power in the Beer Hall Putsch in Munich; although this attempt proved abortive, Hitler continued to gain power, and by 1933 he was able to seize complete control of the country. He abolished the Weimar Republic, set up the so called Third Reich, with himself as dictator, repudiated the Versailles Treaty which had ended WW I, carried out a campaign of racial purification, annexed Austria (1937), and part of Czechoslovakia (1938), and began WWII by attacking Poland in 1939. Germany was defeated again in 1945. The division of Germany into East and West, during the Cold War between the United States and Russia, consumed much of the German spirit for the remainder of the 20th century.

George

Life and work of Stefan George. Stefan George (1868-1933) was a German poet, translator, and editor, who was born in Bingen, in Prussia. Already as a teenager he was actively creating poetry, some of it in a private language he invented; thus representative, already, of George's drive toward the pure and hermetic in language. In the late 1880's he found himself for a while in Paris, where he met the eminent poet Paul Verlaine, and became a member of Stephane Mallarme's famed Tuesday soirees, at which many leading French poets appeared. Upon returning to Germany he founded a literary review—*Blaetter fuer die Kunst; Art Journal*—which was to become a style setter for the new and arcane wave of German post Romantic lyric. (It might more precisely be said that the aesthetic forged in the Art Journal was one in which the Symbolist movement—which George was introduced to in Paris—was grafted onto the most recent versions of Romantic poetry. A cult of poetry was under construction here, in which George came increasingly to think of himself as high priest.)

The aesthetic of George and his Circle. Around him George promoted the creation of a Kreis, a Circle, of devotees of him and his work; devotees who were expected to call George Meister, and among whom were a few of the best of German poetry. George boldly formulated the qualifications for entry into the poetic priesthood of pure language: 'in poetry... anyone still desirous to 'say' or 'bring about' anything is not worthy even to enter the forecourt of art.' (The reigning mode of this circle was homosexuality, which was George's life-slant, and the purity of poetry seems here to do with the non-parturitive; virginity on all sides, enforced, furthermore, by George's strong recommendation that all the homosexuals in his *Kreis* should remain chaste, like him.) The exclusivity of this *Kreis* was not, however, a sign of indifference to the world situation evolving around every member. George, the aesthete, was also a prophet, by self-proclamation, and in the years during which he saw his country wiped out in WWI, swept into a dull and weak Weimar Democracy, between the two wars, and finally drawn toward an alarming take over of civic life by a prophesied violent solution, was deeply sensitive both to his country's need for a 'way out' of civil chaos and economic, and to the horror of the impending solution—he died in 1933.

The work of George. Consider two poem cycles, *Algabal (Helagabalus)* (1892), and *Das Neue Reich (The New Empire)* (1928), which enter George's reflection on the condition of life itself and of his own world. The first sequence concerns the effete and self-indulgent Roman Emperor, Helagabalus, The work shows a fascination with the ultimate in narcissism—a king who can only relate to a marble statue, being incapable of human relations. And ultimately isolated. The later poem sequence, The New Empire, anatomizes the new Germany of the late twenties, which has suffered nothing but defeats, and which is boiling to promote some overwhelming and catastrophic revenge triumph. 'The poet in times of tumult,' written in 1921, anticipates the coming of a powerful leader surrounded by committed followers. Many such prophetic poems crowd the pages of The New Empire, some predicting precise events, like the substitution of the swastika for the cross. All these later poems appear to speak for a nation humiliated, hopeless, potentially violent, and closing in on itself

Reading

Primary source reading

The Works of Stefan George, trans. Marx and Morwitz, 1974.

Secondary source reading

Norton, Robert, *Secret Germany: Stefan George and his Circle*, 2002.

Further reading

Rieckmann, Jens, *A Companion to the Works of Stefan George*, 2007.

Original language reading

Karlauf, Thomas, *Die Entdeckung des Charisma*, 2007.

Suggested paper topics

Stefan George and his aristocratic artistic Kreis embraced certain plotters—von Stauffenberg at their head—who attempted to assassinate Hitler. At the same time George has been accused of Nazi sympathies. Where do you think the truth lies, concerning George's attitudes toward the Nazis?

As a teen ager, George invented a private language of his own, using words and phrases of his own making. What traces of that youthful impulse do you see in George's mature work as a poet?

Excerpt poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/.../stefan-george-you-like-flames

Thanks

The summer field is parched with evil fire,
And from a shoreland trail of trodden clover
I saw my head in waters thick with mire
That wrath of far-off thunder dimmed with red.
The mornings after frantic nights are dread:
The cherished gardens turned to stifling stall,
Untimely snow of bane the trees filmed over,
And upward rose the lark with hopeless call.

Then through the land on weightless soles you stray,
And bright it grows with colors you have laid,
You bid us pluck the fruits from joyous spray,
And rout the shadows lurking in the night...
Did I not weave-you and your tranquil light-
This crown in thanks, who ever could have known
That more than sun, long days for me you rayed,
And evenings more than any starry zone.

Rilke

The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke. Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) was a Bohemian-Austrian poet, novelist, and voluminous correspondent, who left a deep mark on the introspective (and borderline mystic) lyric of our own century. Rilke was born in Prague. His father, a not very successful military man, and his mother, who came from a well to do Prague family, divorced in 1884, when Rilke was nine. Partly due to this shake up in the family, Rilke found himself consigned to a military academy from 1886-1891. Rilke was not at home in this environment, and could not wait to get out—which he did in 1895-96, when he studied at the Universities of Prague and Munich. It can be said that with the departure from those institutions of higher learning, Rilke set out on a course of lifelong devotion to poetry, as well as love. In 1897 he met and fell in love with Lou Andreas Salomé, the gutsy, attractive, and very talented intimate of Freud and Nietzsche, as well as of Rilke. Rilke remained close to Lou for the next three years, and though they then split up she remained an invaluable guide and adviser to him throughout his life. (Close to Freud, and in her own right a serious student of psychoanalysis, she aided the often self-absorbed Rilke to think more critically about himself.) It was she, after all, who had forced him to change his name from René to Rainer, which seemed ‘more masculine.’ A meeting with Tolstoy, in 1898, greatly expanded Rilke’s sense of the power of art in the world.

The Prose Work of Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke brought many of his lifetime themes into his only work of fiction. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). This work presents the jottings, notations and observations of a young painter living in Paris, in pretty complete human isolation. For some time Malte is struck by the ugliness of Paris, as a vast urban sprawl, but gradually he learns how to look at his surrounding world ‘aesthetically.’ The model for this change in sensibility—which is the turning point into a whole new world view—can be seen in the Baudelaire poem, ‘Une Charogne,’ ‘The Corpse.’ That poem is cited admiringly in the novel and suggests the transformation by which one can come to find the sight of a rotting corpse aesthetically satisfying. Malte’s self-discoveries also include, not surprisingly, a fascination with his own death, which becomes profound and interior to him, and opens him up, strangely, to a power of transcendent love.

Rilke’s poetry. In his *Stunden-buch, Book of Hours*, 1905, Rilke deepens the haunting bond between his prosodic flexibility and the mystical dignity of his thought. In this work he laments the loss of a past—especially the 18th century aristocratic past—which enshrined human values and a sense of beauty, and which set standards of behavior and thought, unlike the crass society of Rilke’s time, with its brainless commercialism, and indifference to valid traditions. Among the bleak casualties of this commercial culture must rank the almost universal forgetting of the interior meaning, and enrichment, of death. *The Duino Elegies* (1923) and *The Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923) show us Rilke at his most mature and powerful, making new myths for our time—myths of the Angelic, myths of the Orphic—deepening his account of the leading place art plays in the making of society, and widening his sense (which is always latent in his work) of the importance of the underclasses in his society, and of their candidacy for artistic greatness. Rilke carries his work far beyond the barren isolation of Malte, into a participatory transcendent world, which all can assay.

Reading

Primary source reading

Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, trans. Robert Bly, 1981.

Secondary source reading

Freedman, Ralph, *Life of a Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke*, 1998.

Further reading

Tavis, Anna, *Rilke’s Russia: A Cultural Encounter*, 1997.

Original language reading

Engel, Manfred, *Rilkes ‘Duineser Elegien’ und die moderne deutsche Lyrik*, 1986.

Suggested paper topics

Why was death so personally meaningful to Rilke? Was this intimacy to death a creative factor in Rilke's poems? Is the death he lives with a depressing death or an inspiring death?

What does Malte Laurids Brigge discover about the ugly aspects of death, as encountered in Paris? Does he find a way to see a rotting human corpse as beautiful?

Excerpt <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/archaic-torso-of-apollo/>

Archaic Torso of Apollo

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,
gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.