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Literature on Trial

The Emergence of Critical Discourse
in Germany, Poland, and Russia,
1700–1800

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Preface

This book is a comparative study of the genres of literary criticism in the eighteenth century, a time when modern criticism, its fortunes intertwined with emerging national literatures, was just coming into its own. More generally, it is a history of the rules of literature in the broad sense and, by the same token, of the discourse (literary criticism) that both followed them and codified them for literature in the narrow sense. Criticism emerged as the literary rule-making and assessment that itself followed literary rules, by overlapping with, and carving for itself a space within, or on the margins of, the literary. It took shape as a rule-based discursive practice by creating an object within the broad field of 'letters,' an object still known as 'literature,' and by subjecting it to judgment. But because it is still intimately connected to literature, criticism is not in the position of absolute arbiter that escapes all the laws to which it submits the literary. My approach was, accordingly, to draw attention to it as a rule-bound practice, subjecting the history of criticism – a discourse of judgment according to literary rules – to a set of these very rules, *the rules of genre*.

As for the choice of texts, I relied on the history to suggest what was worth looking at. The corpus, in other words, was chosen according to the literary-critical canon as it came to be. But my interest gravitated to those texts that were not simply typical representatives of a genre, but that worked – and played – at the borders of existing genres, occasionally flirting with literary ones. They can be called 'transgressive,' because they did something new. But as creative 'exceptions' that lay at the felt limits of the emerging discourse (when these limits were hazy and in flux), these samples served to codify the new institution/discipline, to set its generic standards. In sum, the project involved looking at canoni-

cal texts that reflexively formed the critical (not to mention the literary) canon, particularly texts that do not fit in the now-standard genres, that do not follow their rules (though they helped lay them down and have become part of the canon), but that, historically and now, render the distinction between literature and criticism problematic.

Of broadest interest, I think, will be the theoretical introduction, which lays out a framework for understanding discursive practices through genre. While criticism as a discipline appears at first to be an anomaly insofar as it arises by defining itself vis-à-vis a (changing) category of texts, which it aims to sort through, to reflect on and interpret, and finally to judge – is this not also true of the discourses of history, anthropology, sociology, political theory, and related sciences? And are not the theoretical and philosophical approaches *within* (as well as *to*) these disciplines a result of textual reflection and criticism by their practitioners, who labour ceaselessly to define them, to reinvent them, to compensate for their blind spots, and to respond to various ‘crises’ they face? Indeed, I would contend that the separation of the evaluative function from the literary evident in the present study not only produced the distinction between literature and literary criticism, it also made criticism the growth factor of most modern knowledge discourses. To look at these disciplines in their evaluative mode would mean considering writing in more or less established yet dynamic forms, obeying specific conventions and standards. So, while specific, the genre approach employed in this volume can be extended as a method of study to other fields of knowledge.

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(e) G.A. Bürger's 'Herzensausguß über Volkspoesie' [Outpourings from the Heart on Folk Poetry] (Leipzig, 1776)¹⁴³

'Herzensausguß über Volkspoesie' is the second and longest part of Bürger's 'excerpt-text' *Aus Daniel Wunderlichs Buch* [From Daniel Wunderlich's Book]. It stands out as the only self-contained piece. It begins in an unbroken series of image-laden rhetorical questions conjuring Apollo and the Muses. The exclamations that follow (e.g., 'But how little the German muses have done so until now!') suggest that an enumeration of German shortcomings is forthcoming. Instead, however, Bürger proceeds to lament the 'trivial learning' (*Quisquiliengelahrtheit*) of a German clerisy focused on things non-German. The critique of education as attendance to foreign customs and achievements and 'join[ing] the clique' (*zünftig zu sein*) is contrasted with the native wisdom of the 'unlearned' folk.¹⁴⁴ Bridging the subject of literature and the

problem of German education is not only their obvious interdependence but also the metaphor of *Kapital* (the word is used by Bürger virtually in our modern sense of 'intellectual capital'). 'For the most part it [trivial learning] remains dead capital; and how can coin that often has no intrinsic value at all, and whose impression has long since gone out of fashion, go into circulation?' Bürger relates the muses' neglect of German poets to the prevalence of this kind of worthless learning among the literati; the latter is antithetical to *German* poetry. 'By rights, the German muse should not go off on learned journeys, but rather stay home and learn its natural catechism by heart.' Conversely, the appreciation of German culture is the way to true German literature, and Bürger uses folk poetry in support of this approach. Ancient folk songs, for instance, 'present to the maturing poet a very important opportunity of studying art that is naturally poetic' ('OHFP' 255). The weaker articulation of German literary character is due, first, to its weaker political cohesion relative to other modern nations with advanced literary cultures, and, second, to a combination of the ignorance of German authors with regard to the richness of contemporary local German life and language as revealed by their aspiration to 'paint not human, but heavenly suns; in the manner [of] ... other ages and climes' (254). These are the lessons of Herder's historical relativism. Let us examine more closely *how* Bürger's argument is put forward.

The text could be fairly categorized as an essay, were it not that it belongs to a larger work that is, moreover, quite self-contained. Complicating its generic classification is its frequent recourse to hyperbole, ridicule, and absurdism to make its points memorably. Consider, for instance, how Bürger describes the German familiarity with foreign cultures: 'We are thoroughly acquainted with their fields and forests, cities and villages, temples and palaces, houses and stables, their kitchens, cellars, attics and rooms, wardrobes, coffers, and heaven knows what else' ('OHFP' 253). The physical objects on this list stand, of course, for specific customs (religious rituals, cuisine, or fashion), which German travellers eagerly adopted. Their infinite extent ('and heaven knows what else') suggests the absurdity of such foreign cultural 'study.' Consider also this portrayal of Germany's 'infant' poets attempting to mime divine inspiration: 'they stand on a precipitous crag, throw their head back in ghastly ecstasy, roll their eyes ...' But Bürger addresses these poets directly when referring to their misguided complaint about the 'sloth of the audience'; he speaks here from the position of an experienced writer who has appealed to this audience (254). The audience,

which is potentially 'the whole people,' is the only 'natural' (*natürliche*) source of inspiration. It is that 'Book of Nature' held open for the poet who wants to explore its 'imagination and sensibility.' At this point, Bürger's rhetoric becomes frenzied at the possibilities of such natural education. He vents a long, uninterrupted concatenation of imperatives, emphases ("Truly!"), and promises. 'Let this be the real ultimate height [*non plus ultra*] of poetry!' – poetry of *universal* interest, resonating with 'the refined sage' as much as with 'the rude forest dweller,' and – lest this range seem exclusive – with the 'lady' and the 'daughter of nature.'¹⁴⁵

The next passage imagines the rather dogmatic reaction of the sceptics among 'the makers of poems and theories,' who smile 'in wise condescension' at Bürger's call to German poetry's universality (he later addresses them, perhaps also condescendingly, as 'My dear people' ['OHFP' 254]). His comments here are cautious, prefaced twice by the phrase 'I have a feeling' (*deucht mir*). The passage also contains an amusing personification of poetry, or rather, of several of its demoted genres (e.g., didactic poem and epigram) as entities 'about to jump up and cause an uproar.' Bürger introduces here the distinction between the art of versifying (*Versmacherkunst*), the realm of wit and understanding (*Witz und Verstand*), and poetry proper (*Poesie*), the realm of imagination and sensibility (*Phantasie und Empfindung*) – even as he stresses that their delimitation is not absolute. At one point, he equalizes the two by insisting they 'dwell side by side as peaceable neighbors' or even 'go hand in hand as friendly neighbors' – in other words, that they are in unison. As if this were not enough, they 'borrow dishes, pots, brooms and yardsticks' (here the metaphor turns absurd), and are allowed to 'speak the same language, distinguished only by dialect, as it were!' Ultimately, however, Bürger is merely proposing that *Versmacherkunst*¹⁴⁶ be given a fairer share of recognition. Again, the 'art of versifying' is personified, but this time as a 'dignified' and 'nice woman.' Along with the preceding paragraph, where, among the imagery already mentioned, we are told to seize the 'magic wand' of poetry and where 'golden arrows' fly before our eyes, this is the most visually rich segment of Bürger's essay.

Next, Bürger distances himself from *Versmacherkunst* since 'It is the weal and woe of poetry [*Poesie*] that are near to my heart' ('OHFP' 255). The rest of the essay is therefore devoted to poetry proper – by which he means particularly lyric and epic genres. He then turns to extolling the poetic qualities of popular songs, and commends those who have

already recognized them (an allusion to Herder). *Volkslieder* are said to be 'the true outpourings [*wahre Ausgüsse*] of indigenous nature both in imagination and feeling.' Recall the titular 'outpouring' which becomes, in a sense, the signifier of Bürger's personal take on the essay, underlining its sentimental motivation. Assuming that this wording in relation to 'natural poetry' is not accidental, Bürger analogizes between his heart-felt expression and native poetry. Terms like *Herzensausguß* or *Herzens Ergiessung* were not commonly used to describe the style/form of literary-critical reflections (the only other instance of which I am aware occurs in the title of Ludwig Tieck's [1773–1853] and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder's [1773–98] *Herzensergiessungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbrüders* [Outpourings from the Heart of an Art-loving Friar] from 1797). The use of a term that connotes strong subjectivism and sentimentality in the title conveys the author's passion for his subject. It is a departure even from the discourse of the 'cultivators of sensitivity' (like Lessing, Gellert, or Klopstock), and certainly from the self-identification of standard formal exposition. Bürger's writing is a metaphoric outpouring also because it is involuntary or self-indulgent, and for this reason has to be, as he will say near the end, hemmed in if he is to conclude.

Again, Bürger turns to imagery to express the virtues of folk poetry, without however remaining blind to the deficiencies of the oral tradition in toto. Even when he urges others to invest the time necessary to 'separate the gold from the dross,' he cannot be faulted for selective appreciation. Naturally, not all popular songs can have the universal appeal he envisions for true poetry; not all are thus 'suitable for imitation as a whole, nor for the common reader' ('OHFP' 257) (their selection would clearly involve difficult decisions). Moreover, the dynamics of the oral tradition are such that the ancient gold needs to be not only isolated but also rid of incrustations. Bürger's own formulation is, in fact, less metaphoric, as he makes explicit reference to the 'critical' mind needed to 'restore the ancient reading' obscured by 'heterogeneous incrustations,' a reading potentially lost (255). Popular poetry is in need of discerning critics to make it shine.

Bürger adopts a more personal approach to convince the reader of what his own experiences had imparted to him, namely, the *natural* beauty of *Volkspoesie*. He recalls, somewhat wistfully, listening to it 'beneath linden trees in a village, at the laundry, and in spinning rooms' ('OHFP' 255). Indeed, there the location of his ear relative to the singers is left ambiguous (did Bürger spend time in spinning rooms listen-

ing to them?). The metonymic application of the ear and especially the collapsing of that presumed (class) disparity might strike one as lyrical – and quite to be expected from such a popular poet. His feelings for the *Volk* are strong enough to put the notion of poetic distance into question; his ear can perceive and his mind appreciate their songs as if he partook in their culture, accompanying the singing women at their work. The closeness he feels is expressed also in his solicitude: ‘Rarely has a ditty, as they call it, been too nonsensical and absurd not to have offered at least something, even if only a brush stroke of magically rusty coloration, which edified me poetically’ (255). (A very similar assurance/recommendation recurs at the end of the text: ‘Some of those I heard had true poetic merit as a whole, many in individual passages; I am sure the same is true of far more I have not seen’ [257].) This vivid foray into oral culture, which Bürger breaks off after identifying lyric and epic poetry with ballads and romances and a remark on the quality of native recitation, resumes two paragraphs later, where *Volkspoesie* functions already as a general term that groups together German folk songs and Homeric epics.

Next to be personified is ‘so-called higher lyric poetry’ which resists such classification (‘OHFP’ 255). It is imagined as conceited and recalcitrant. Bürger questions its status by noting that it is not uncommon for such works to appeal to the people, the representatives of the ‘earthly race.’ This observation strikes at the core of the ‘high’ versus ‘low’ literature controversy. ‘That which is not for the people may take itself off wherever it wants,’ even toward the divine. Its fate is of no interest to Bürger; his love is reserved wholly for the human. He strengthens his resolve – which he calls a judgment (*Urteil*) – by adding, somewhat absurdly, that he would make it ‘even if I were such a son of the gods myself, for I am more concerned with my beloved human race than with gods or sons of gods’ (256). What follows is a paragraph of humble effusions concerning the glory of the monotheistic God, God’s original design for poetry (which poetry can approach by its appeal to the people [*Popularität*]). (Bürger’s diction resembles at such points Hamann’s.)

At this juncture, Bürger returns to his earlier contention that the muse of *Volkspoesie* is not the ‘pseudomuse’ (*Aftermuse*) – or, worse still, the maid of the muses – it is taken to be. He considers this degradation of the folk song, ballad, and romance genres abominable considering that ‘after all it is she who has sung’ the great epics of the past from Ariosto to Homer (‘OHFP’ 256).¹⁴⁷ ‘It’s true!’ he adds for emphasis, in advance of any scepticism to this claim. Although those individual works are

'no longer in harmony with the *German* people,' the spirit of *Volkspoesie* certainly is. The passage turns into an appeal to national sentiment: 'We are Germans ... who should not make Greek, Roman, cosmopolitan poems in the German tongue ...'¹⁴⁸ (in the span of five lines, 'German' appears six times). Again Bürger taunts the younger generation of poets who do not obey this rule, repeating their injudicious complaints about a lazy audience. Again we hear of their 'cloudy learning' and remoteness from 'the human race in this vale of tears.' Again we hear a challenge and a promise: 'Give us a great national poem of the kind described, and we'll make it our vade mecum [*Taschenbuch*]' – a guide or reference not to foreign cultures, but to the native one. His critique does not end there; the young poets are now targets for ridicule as thoughtless, boring manipulators. His caustic parting words to the 'naive poetic youngsters' end with a patronizing 'from now on don't forget it: folk poetry, just because it is the ultimate height [*non plus ultra*] of art, is the most difficult of all' (256–7). Yet, as we have seen, Bürger's essay is far from containing open aggression; several ideas are repeated in the muted form of a reminder or reassurance. For all its announced emotional verve and stylistic effusiveness, the text's structure turns out quite disciplined. All the points seem to have been made, and the most important, pertinent, and immediate ones, with which the text opens, are repeated toward the end. This recurrence gives the text closure.

I have left the most important matter for the end. Who, indeed, is *Daniel Wunderlich* – the individual from whose book this text claims to derive? No actual person of that name who would warrant this distinction is known to have existed. In that case, 'Daniel the Fantastical' may well be the fictitious saviour of old folk songs, whom Bürger envisions at the end of his essay and whose consequence is implied throughout – an anthologist for whom he has looked 'in vain.' The dream of this 'German Percy'¹⁴⁹ is what finally checks the flow of Bürger's outpouring ('OHFP' 257). He is to be no ordinary collector but 'a man who understands art' and who, 'in the process' of gathering its 'remnants,' is to 'uncover the secrets of this magic art more than has happened until now.'

Within two years' time, Nicolai answered Bürger's call by publishing a travesty of his 'dream' folk-song collection. He entitled it *Eyn feyner kleyner Almanach vol schönerr echterr liblicherr Volckslieder, lustigerr Reyen unndt kleglicherr Mordgeschichte, gesungen von Gabriel Wunderlich weyl. Benkelsengerinn zu Dessaw, herausgegeben von Daniel Seuberlich, Schusterinn tzu Ritzmück ann der Elbe* [A Fine Little Yearbook Full of Beautiful

Genuine Charming Folk Songs, Merry Rounds, and Lamentable Tales of Murder, Sung by Gabriel Wunderlich ...]¹⁵⁰ – the German spelling and punctuation a caricature of sixteenth-century popular idiom.¹⁵¹ Nicolai's *Vorbericht*, or notice to the reader, is an explicit parody of the 'Herzensausguß,' composed in the same exaggerated diction. The choice of songs in *Eyn feyner kleyner Almanach* is meant to ridicule Bürger's excessive valorization of folk traditions as the measure of poetry by exposing them as grotesquely primitive. Nonetheless, the *Almanach* contributed to preserving artefacts otherwise likely to be lost. More importantly, the project backfired by stirring the literary and philosophical anti-Enlightenment to organize itself (Verweyden).