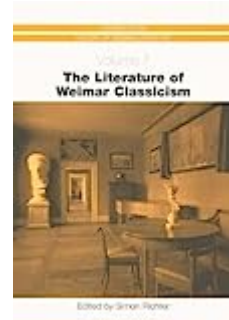




Simon Richter, ed. *The Literature of Weimar Classicism*. Rochester: Camden House, 2005. xii + 407 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57113-249-9.



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Is Weimar Classicism a Literary Period?

All literary histories are necessarily bound by temporal limits. Literary periods begin and end based on historically significant events or conveniently round numbers; for example, the literature of the eighteenth, nineteenth or twentieth century. Several of the ten volumes in the *Camden House History of German Literature* are structured around such markers. However, volume 7 is also limited by geography, which is apparent in its title, *The Literature of Weimar Classicism*. Composed of twelve essays from an international group of scholars, this volume focuses on the literary and cultural production in and around Weimar from Goethe's departure for Italy in 1786 until Schiller's death in 1805. Even though the period is defined by events from the life of Goethe and Schiller, the essays in this anthology successfully move beyond these two central figures and incorporate other writers from the era (Herder and Hölderlin, most prominently), while at the same time not glossing over the centrality of Goethe and Schiller. It is in this balanced focus—an emphasis on those aspects of the works that are unique to Weimar Classicism, and the view that these works “necessarily participate in the traditions and conventions of both the Enlightenment and Romanticism”—that this vol-

ume has its greatest strength (p. 4).

Simon Richter's engaging, approachable introduction provides important background information on the period, both theoretically (as he carefully presents the concept of “aesthetic autonomy” and the central notions of “pain” and “containment”) and historically (as he artfully sketches a portrait of Weimar culture and an impressive array of its major and minor figures). In addition, he effectively sets the tone for the volume—one that both questions the suitability of Weimar Classicism as a literary period and playfully engages Weimar Classicism's “inconsistencies,” “multiple voices” and “contrary ends” that run as themes throughout the volume (p. 39). This tone should not be mistaken to suggest that the volume is not serious or scholarly. To the contrary, this volume presents essays of the highest quality that are (as is fitting of a volume of literary history such as this) accessible to the non-specialist or undergraduate reader. The range of contributions is broad: major literary genres; Goethe and Schiller's correspondence; women authors; visual culture; the intersection of science and literature; aesthetic theory; the interplay between political-historical events

and literature. The chapters that focus on a genre do so in a decidedly interdisciplinary manner. Jane Brown's essay on drama approaches the subject through an examination of Weimar theatrical practice, first outlining the position of theater in Weimar society and then exposing the elements of Weimar theatrical style through a convincing analysis of performance data. In perhaps the volume's most difficult essay for the non-specialist reader, R.H. Stephenson employs the concept of "symbolic pregnancy" in an essay on the novel. He quickly covers an impressive volume of material (herein lies the difficulty for the uninitiated), and builds a formal analysis of the Weimar novel as an expression of the period's "stereoscopic perspective" (p. 231). Cyrus Hamlin argues similarly that German Classical poetry, a designation he consistently challenges, is pervaded with a sense of longing created through the conscious imitation of unrecoverable ancient poetic forms. His essay, which elevates Hölderlin to the pinnacle of German Classical elegy, gracefully surveys the works produced in this imitative mode.

The first three essays of the volume are best considered surveys of the period. Dieter Borchmeyer interestingly dissects the concept of Classicism and the validity of this term in connection with the geographic place named Weimar. In an extremely clear and readable study of the era's fascination with antiquity, Charles Grair summarizes the major works from Winckelmann's initial spark through Goethe's *Italian Journey* and Schiller's "The Gods of Greece," ending with Kleist's assault on classical restraint in *Penthesilea*. Gail Hart uses correspondence between Schiller and Goethe to emphasize the fundamental imbalance in their relationship. In a judiciously critical tone she exposes Goethe and Schiller's categorically different manner of appraising the work of women authors.

In a chapter on women writers in Weimar, Elisabeth Krimmer presents the works, the women and the tensions that authors following the classical definition of the *Bildungsroman* necessarily confronted in their novels. This chapter is a testimony to the continued need for research into these historically significant, yet marginalized figures; Krimmer feels compelled to structure the material as a series of plot summaries, whereas the directly preceding chapter on canonical novels is not equally encumbered. Thomas Saine uses Weimar physical geography to introduce his essay on Herder, which, like many other essays in this volume, takes a moment to consider the term "Classical," ultimately imploding it under the weight of conflicting, contradictory definitions.

In an essay that reads Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* as a "mute performance" in order to recover aesthetics from its own "theoretical shackles" (p. 309), Benjamin Bennett dismisses the notion of German Classicism as nothing more than the works of Goethe and Schiller in their period of collaboration. W. Daniel Wilson examines the political context—specifically the impact of the French Revolution and the end of the Holy Roman Empire—in which the works of Weimar Classicism were produced. Most striking is his reading of Goethe's plays of the period, which sought to preserve the political status quo, while at the same time portraying women in revolutionary roles. Astrida Orle Tantillo provides a novel reading of Goethe's essay on plant metamorphosis that emphasizes his use of the static as a way to approach malleability, which skillfully inverts the traditional understanding of Goethe's scientific writing. Lastly, Helmut Pfotenhauer incorporates Goethe's influence on the visual world of Weimar in an essay that reconstructs the parallels and tensions between Romantic and Classic visual art.

My rehearsal of the contents does not reflect their arrangement in the volume. I would characterize the organization of the essays as progressing from the general to the specific; however, none of the essays narrows to the point that it becomes isolated. Whether the reader chooses to consume the volume in its entirety, selectively pick from the buffet, or lift specific topics from the index, the individual essays overlap and sufficiently complement one another, offering the reader a rich array of choices. The volume consistently challenges traditional notions of this period, bringing together the many strands of research pursued in the last decade and a half of research into the Weimar era. This results in a work that should serve the specialist and the undergraduate equally well.

Additionally, this volume functions well as a reference tool, in that the life dates of authors and date of first publication of works are given in parentheses upon first mention. All passages are given both in the original and translation. Particularly helpful is a delicate translation of Hölderlin's "Brod und Wein" that approximates the metrical structure of the original. One point of criticism is that some of the essays lack a thorough citation of the secondary literature. This is compensated for by an extensive and thoughtfully organized bibliography that should serve to guide readers to more extended coverage of selected topics or authors. Overall, this work is an impressive achievement that summarizes and extends our understanding of this brief, yet vital moment in German literary history.

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