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978-0-521-86766-5 - The Cambridge Introduction to German Poetry

Judith Ryan

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
German Poetry*

German poetry has long held a special place within the Western literary tradition. Its major achievements include Luther's hymns, Goethe's unequalled poetic versatility, the Romantics' lyric songs, and the challenging poetry of Hölderlin, Rilke, and Celan. Combining readings of traditional poems with fresh examples, Judith Ryan conveys the rich rewards that come with reading German poetry. Organized thematically, the book demonstrates the significance of the poems in their time while also showing their resonance in later periods. The nuanced readings in this book serve as ideal examples for close engagement with the primary texts. Quotations are given in the original German and translated into English prose. Special sections give guidance on how to approach an unfamiliar text and how to compose a close reading; an appendix on German metrics and a glossary of technical terms are also provided, along with further reading for those ready to explore more widely.

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Preface

German poetry has a special appeal, one attested to by the many musical settings of poems in the German language. At one point, I had imagined writing a chapter on that phenomenon, but it soon became apparent that a book of this size could not possibly do justice to it. Instead, this *Introduction to German Poetry* restricts itself to poetry in its own right, presenting some of its high points and central concerns. Rather than devoting separate chapters to forms and genres, I have arranged the contents according to issues and problems. Because of the emphasis German studies places on the history of literature, the chapters follow a sequence that accords broadly with literary periods, yet without being inflexibly tied to them. Larger issues often come to a crux at a specific time, and are thus most effectively treated by starting with that time period. While the focus is primarily on the poems themselves, these texts are often best illuminated by reference to the period or movement in which they originated. The more we know about German Romanticism, for example, the more easily we can recognize its characteristic features in specific poems and decide what elements of a given poem need extensive commentary or can be explained more briefly.

Some types of poetry – long poems that are not found in most anthologies of German poetry – are not treated here. In most cases, the poems treated are short enough to be cited in full, or else not so long that the reader cannot easily find lines or stanzas quoted in a broader discussion. In the main, the chapters focus on well-known poems, texts that have been frequently anthologized and that can be readily located in libraries or online. Nonetheless, I have also injected a small number of less familiar poems into the discussion, in the hope of expanding the canon and attracting readers to texts they might not otherwise have discovered.

Although the book treats many poems in depth, none of the readings is intended to be complete or self-sufficient. Each poem is discussed from the angle of vision suggested by the overall topic of the chapter in which it is placed. To have done otherwise would have resulted in detours that would have led too far from the main arguments of the chapters. Much reading in the critical

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literature informs my readings of the poems, and I owe a great debt to scholars who have paved the way. The suggestions for further reading that follow the last chapter indicate major items from which I have profited and from which others will also learn a great deal. In each case, I have tried to include articles or book chapters in English as well as selected items in German. While trying to keep the individual poetry readings up to date, I have refrained from scholarly notes or a complete bibliography. My aim is, rather, to keep the discussions fresh and appealing.

The opening chapter is intended as a guide to reading German poetry. By examining four short poems of increasing levels of difficulty, it demonstrates different ways of entering a poetic text and how to build up an analysis of the text as a whole from the chosen starting point. The opening poem, a ballad from the Romantic period, illustrates how even a text in simple language can reveal unexpected complexities. The final poem, an evocative text by Nietzsche, is considerably more challenging, but I show how we can make sense of it by beginning with its most problematic elements.

The main chapters pinpoint issues in German poetry that are crucial to the German tradition. It makes “cuts,” as it were, into the spectrum of German poetry in order to expose moments when its characteristic features and special contributions appear in sharp relief. Each chapter is organized around an intellectual problem central to the study of poetry in general and German poetry in particular. The issue of “originality,” for example, is approached through texts by Goethe and his contemporaries that illustrate the tension between tradition and innovation. The problem of poetic unity is approached through the German Romantic lyric, a reference point for subsequent poetry in the language. Other topics treated include the medieval song-lyric, devotional poetry, political poetry, and the complex question of “poetry after Auschwitz,” among others.

The concluding pages of each chapter look forward at poems written later than the period from which the bulk of examples in that chapter are drawn. In this way, the reader will see that no issue ever fully disappears from the German tradition; rather, it takes different forms at different times. This is most strikingly the case with medieval German poetry, which frequently appears in anthologies but is often not covered, or covered only cursorily, in German poetry courses. I believe that we should not allow the de facto divide between medieval and post-medieval literature to stand unchallenged.

This overall scheme allows the book to range widely, without any need to discuss every major German poet or create a continuous narrative about the German lyric tradition. Not every poem is treated in equal detail: some receive close analysis, others more glancing attention. By including prose translations

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of the texts cited, the volume aims to make German poetry more accessible to students at different levels; but I do not shrink from more complex poetic material. The opening chapter is more overtly pedagogical in approach, but the principles articulated there also underlie the subsequent chapters. My hope is that the book can be used for systematic study, but also for browsing and the sheer pleasure of making discoveries. Even readers familiar with German poetry may happen upon a new text or two. I pay tribute to serendipity by making the first poem I discuss in this book a text I found long ago at the back of a high-school German reader (to my disappointment, our class was reading only the prose material at the front). Naturally, I see that poem differently today, but it is the one that sparked in me a long fascination with the German poetic tradition.

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In February 2009, I had the great good fortune of spending four weeks at the Liguria Study Center in Bogliasco, Italy. It was an extraordinary opportunity to engage with a group of scholars while also enjoying the unusual hospitality of the foundation. In a spacious studio with a view of pine trees and the brilliant blue sea, I wrote Chapter 5 of this book. Anna Schuleit, a fellow during that session, was instrumental in organizing brief talks, performances, and art shows by the residents, and I am indebted to her initiative for the chance to present a short version of my thoughts on Mignon's song.

I am deeply grateful to my friends in medieval studies who advised me on Chapter 2, "Poetic roles in early song-lyrics." In particular, I wish to thank my colleague Eckehard Simon for his initial encouragement and the care with which he read and commented on a draft of the chapter. Christopher Young, of Cambridge University, organized an informal colloquium on medieval German poetry during a visit of mine to Cambridge in June 2010; I am indebted to him, his colleague Mark Chinca, and their students, Sarah Bowden, Ken Fockele, and Esther Laufer, for a stimulating discussion of key poems. Christopher Young also gave unstinting advice as I developed the chapter. In addition, Markus Stock of Toronto University and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht offered

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Charlotte Szilagyi read the manuscript carefully, eliminating inconsistencies, checking details, and thinking along with me about my approach to the poems. Doris Sperber chased down numerous articles in the library and from interlibrary loan, often at short notice; she was also an attentive reader of page proofs during the final phase. Vanessa Ryan read and commented on Chapter 1, and Lawrence Joseph followed the progress of the entire manuscript over its long period of gestation.

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