5. Adding Stones to the Edifice
Patterns of German Biography

Despite disavowals in its country of origin, there is such a thing as a great German biographical tradition. Why, then, do we not hear more of it, and what has happened meanwhile to the art of biography in the German-speaking lands? Inevitably, comparisons are made with the Anglo-Saxon tradition of biographical writing and scholarship. These are of only limited help. For German comment on Anglo-Saxon literary or scholarly traditions tends to notice only two things. One is the sense of continuity, the unbroken succession of literary modes, the straightforward acceptance of institutions that are deemed satisfactory and that ‘work’. The other is a certain lack of depth or bottom, a tendency to dwell on the surface, even to pursue readability and general accessibility at the expense of high seriousness and reflection. Thus, in the art of biography, the Anglo-Saxons, it is said, get on with the business of writing, insouciant of charges of reductionism or positivism, and even deserve a measure of grudging admiration for such moving and doing.

The Germans, it is maintained, do not have such an uninhibited relationship to past traditions in any field of intellectual endeavour.

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Political considerations are made partly responsible for this. While one should not lightly underestimate their effects, they are not the only factors for discontinuity. In purely formal terms, biography has never been fully accepted into the scheme of German poetics. To some extent, the answer lies in the nature of the German biographical tradition itself. It has always been seen as part of historiography, so that its development belongs rather to ‘Wissenschaftsgeschichte’ (‘History of Science’) than to belles-lettres. Thus, Thomas Carlyle belongs fairly and squarely to English literature as well as to historical writing, whereas Leopold von Ranke, the most readable of the German historian-biographers, does not.

Then there is the function of this biographical tradition. It is not just the record of great names, but a hierarchy of cultural role models, canonical literary figures and representative individuals. As a determiner of national moral values — spiritual and political — it does more than merely memorialize. It is one of the many intellectual institutions before 1871 that speak for a German nation not yet politically in being but which coalesces in cultural terms around a shared linguistic and historical heritage. ‘Representatives of the nation’ can thus become focal points for all kinds of aspirations not yet underwritten by actual political institutions. Gustav Schwab’s much-read biography of Friedrich Schiller, for example, aligns itself with a visible sign of national greatness, the first statue erected to the poet’s memory, in 1840. And it is not by chance that so many German liberal aspirations before 1871 centred on public celebrations of Schiller’s life and works, of which biographies are one important manifestation.

It is also not fortuitous that the great age of the German biography is roughly 1830–90, spanning the period that gave us works as disparate as Johann Gustav Droysen’s life of Alexander the Great (1833), Herman Grimm’s of Michelangelo (1860–63), Ranke’s of Wallenstein (1869), and Erich Schmidt’s of Gothold Ephraim Lessing (1884–92), the years leading through reaction and revolution up to the ‘Gründerzeit’

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2 Gustav Schwab, Schiller’s Leben in drei Büchern (Stuttgart: Liesching, 1840).
4 Johann Gustav Droysen, Geschichte Alexander des Grossen (Berlin, Finke, 1833).
5 Herman Grimm, Leben Michelangelo’s (Hanover: Rümpler, 1860–63).
6 Leopold von Ranke, Geschichte Wallenstein’s (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1869).
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5. Adding Stones to the Edifice: Patterns of German Biography

(‘founding period’) of the Second Empire and its apogee. All relate in their several ways to these processes and refer to them. Droysen reflects on the nature of the ‘monarchic organism’,\(^8\) Grimm on the role of great men in the events of history, Ranke similarly on the relationship of the individual to the general development of an epoch, Schmidt on the emergence of German literary culture. Each one is a kind of monumental ‘Representative Man’ for which Carlyle’s *The Life of Friedrich Schiller* (1825) provided an early model. This would link the German biography to the high seriousness of the Victorians. But the German biographies also reflect the nineteenth century’s awareness that the Life forms an entity in itself around an ‘organizing centre’ \(^9\) that aggregates and co-ordinates the individual events that befall it. In that sense, nineteenth-century biographers are heirs to the insight, enshrined in German idealist and Romantic thought, that the individual is the visible and tangible representative of the total forces — intellectual, moral, historical — of an age or culture. Thus the Life and the Works reflect one another, support each other, and in the final analysis bear the same relation to the ‘Ganzes’, the totality.

Seen in these terms, the German biographical tradition might appear to be the product of national liberalism, its function to annex the lives of the great for the sake of overarching cultural and political ends. Schmidt’s monumental life of Lessing could serve as a prime example. It is not for the faint-hearted: it is huge, ‘philological’, painstaking, supremely ‘wissenschaftlich’, and it sets the capstone (if that is the right image for so weighty a work) on nearly a century’s proclamation of Lessing as the founder of modern German literature and thought.

But had the biography, the heir to both positivism and historicism, become crushed under the weight of its erudition? Friedrich Nietzsche, speaking of a ‘biographical epidemic’,\(^{10}\) seemed to think so. And others, who shared Nietzsche’s disdain for diligent philology as an end in itself and applauded his remarks on mere progress or utilitarianism — the

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8 Droysen, *Geschichte*, 538.


harnessing of art or scholarship to an ‘official’ culture — would have concurred. Instead, if there were to be ‘Lives’, they must be of the aristocrats of the mind, representing timeless poetic genius; they should be sufficient in themselves, adequate in their powers of utterance, beholden to no tradition; they should transcend mere influence and be explicable only in terms of the epoch on which they stamped their individuality — figures such as Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Ludwig van Beethoven or Richard Wagner. The German biographical tradition comes to an end as it bifurcates into accounts of unapproachable genius (e.g. Friedrich Gundolf’s studies of Caesar, Shakespeare, Goethe or Stefan George) or popular (and immensely readable) accounts by the likes of Emil Ludwig or Stefan Zweig.

All along, however, the biography had had a competitor in the form of the scholarly apparatus to those historical-critical editions, or the volumes of edited correspondence, that are in many ways the greatest German contribution to scholarship. There is an unwillingness to make this corpus of material readily available to the non-specialist reader, an unease at the potential loss of scholarly standards. There are inhibitions at material being allowed to float freely in the narrative mode. A good example would be August Wilhelm Schlegel, of whom there has never been a biography: Schlegel, companion to Madame de Staël, following her from Coppet to St Petersburg and back, whose Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur/Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature had proclaimed Romantic doctrine ‘from Cadiz to Edinburgh, Stockholm and St Petersburg’.

Comtesse Jean de Pange, coming from another biographical tradition (and perhaps a little too close to its André Maurois wing) documented Staël and Schlegel. But Germany has produced volume after volume of edited correspondence, its apparatus fairly bristling with biographical facts. Schlegel was captious, vain (Byron disliked him, a sure sign), generally unattractive as a person (so was Staël), but his Life has never been structured or documented except through the letters. This is not an isolated example.

13 When I originally wrote this article in 2002, I little knew that I was to write the first extended biography of Schlegel. See Roger Paulin, The Life of August Wilhelm Schlegel. Cosmopolitan of Art and Poetry (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0069
After 1945, commentators were in fairly broad agreement that there was no going back to what many now claimed was a nineteenth-century discipline, although many of the older biographies remained in print. Friedrich Sengle’s *Wieland* (1949) remained for long the only large-scale literary biography combining readability, empiricism and scholarly reassessment. It has not found many successors, if any. German biographies often are anti-biographies, breaking with older, discredited conventions, amalgams of fiction and autobiography. The conventional form requires some sense of conviction. Thus, in the eyes of one critic (and historian of biography), Golo Mann’s splendid *Wallenstein* (1971) takes us little further than the nineteenth century! This remark was not intended to be a compliment: it was not the same as a modern Anglo-Saxon biographer hearing a flattering comparison with Elizabeth Gaskell or Hallam Tennyson. It illustrates the discontinuous and problematic tradition of historical or literary biography in Germany. Indeed, the potential German biographer might instead be told that he or she is breaking taboos, is entering a terrain not accessible to theory or scholarly criticism, is challenging modern anti-narrative positions, is positing an ‘individual’ where Freud or Foucault have told us that there is, properly speaking, no such thing. Above all, he or she may learn that this kind of thing is best left to the Anglo-Saxons and their tradition of the Lives of the Poets. While I do not rate highly the chances of a revival of German biographical writing, I am encouraged by an increasing willingness to explore what there once was. The rest of this chapter therefore focuses on one aspect of that ‘German biographical tradition’, one that involves the relationship between hagiography and national literary canon.

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The emergence of German literary biography — Lives of the Poets — in the late eighteenth century has to be seen in the context of a national identity that was not fully realized until three or four generations later. Its background is a tentatively emerging national canon, centred on but a few commanding figures. There was, of course, agreement on a supranational canon — Homer, Dante, Tasso, Ariosto, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Ossian — but Germany had produced nothing commensurate. The different critical schools in the German-speaking lands could not agree on indigenous models. Outstanding figures were few. The many lives of Martin Luther — some fifty between 1546 and the end of the eighteenth century — reflected the concentration of German spiritual and intellectual culture in the Protestant heartlands; while Joachim von Sandrart’s memorialization of Albrecht Dürer accorded a German painter a pre-eminent status, akin to Raphael or Michelangelo.\(^{18}\) Much of the biographical activity of the period was, in any case, conducted in the spirit of learned compendia or necrologies. One might have to search diligently among the dross to find nuggets of excellence.

Where individual names did provide the focus for an emergent literary canon, other traditions of biography had to be invoked. The first German poet to become part of this new canon was Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, the author of *Der Messias* (1749–73) and as such the most translated German author of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Klopstock converge the Homeric, the Miltonic, the Youngian, all strands of ‘original composition’. But this achievement can only be fused with the Life through another strain of biography: hagiography. It is, of course, no longer veneration per se, but the structuring and schematizing of a life around considerations of edification, amplification and transfiguration. The rich seam of pietism can be tapped and merged with the inspirational theory of poetry and the aspirations of national cultural renewal. Thus, Klopstock is also the first major modern German poet to be the subject of a biography during his own lifetime.\(^{19}\) And it is Klopstock more than any

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other canonical figure who receives the accolade of ‘divine’,\textsuperscript{20} analogous to the Renaissance ‘alter deus’ or ‘divino artista’ but now harnessed to the religious connotations of genius. Like the prophetic patriarch Edward Young, to whom Klopstock had once addressed an early ode, age and venerability (Klopstock lived to be seventy-nine) go hand in hand with the biblical virtues which his Life illustrates.

The ‘minor canonizations’—in the form of biographical prefaces—of poets from the Klopstock circle who died young and without the fulfilment of age show a similar insistence on the association of life and works.\textsuperscript{21} It informs much of the discussion of individual poets or artists as suitable models for a literature that is not merely national in name but which illustrates the national virtues (also sung by Klopstock) of honesty, loyalty or forthrightness of mind. Schiller’s stringent review of the works of the Sturm und Drang (‘Storm and Stress’) poet Gottfried August Bürger (1791) also makes this link, placing severe obligations on the poet’s individuality if he is to rise to the supreme challenge of reflecting humanity as a whole. And the Romantic imitation of Giorgio Vasari, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck’s Herzensiumpfungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders/Heart’s Outpourings of a Lay Brother Devoted to Art (1796) regarded all personal aberrations or freakishness as a barrier to ultimate artistic greatness.

Klopstock’s life centred on the fulfilment of Der Messias. After his death, the religious poet and his epic poem could merge in symbiotic form under the heading ‘representative of the German nation’.\textsuperscript{22} The same could not, however, be said for Lessing. Lessing had died in 1781, not much over fifty. In contrast to Klopstock, he had led a shifting and unstable existence, subject to exigencies and deprivations, some of his own making, often due to his generosity. Yet his life, too, could be made to suit the record of his works, an achievement which an early biographer saw fit to compare with Christopher Columbus’s or James Cook’s.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{20} ‘Von diesem Göttlichen’. See Klammer Schmidt, ed., Klopstock und seine Freunde (Halberstadt: Bureau für Literatur und Kunst, 1810), iv.

\textsuperscript{21} As in the biographical prefaces to the works of Nikolas Dietrich Giseke (1767) and Ludwig Heinrich Christoph Höfity (1783).

\textsuperscript{22} As the preface to his works states: Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, Sämtliche Werke, 10 vols (Leipzig, 1854–55 [1844–45]), I, xxx.

Even so, the individual uniqueness of Lessing’s life could be subsumed under the commonplaces of hagiography and the cult of genius. While Klopstock’s works would, in the eyes of his contemporaries, be dominated by the supreme Messias, much of Lessing’s oeuvre remained to be revealed. Thus the first Lessing biography is a two-volume introduction to works not published during his lifetime. The works therefore suspend the arbitrariness and relative brevity of the life. In the extraordinary letter from Moses Mendelssohn to Lessing’s brother, with which the first volume of the life ends, his achievement is likened to Nicolaus Copernicus, who ‘discovered a new system, and died’. He had achieved everything in the realm of the senses and had passed into the supersensory realm: ‘Like the sons of the prophets, they looked in wonderment at the place from which he went up and was seen no more’. The Jewish hagiography (II Kings 2, 11) — easily merged with its Christian counterpart — equates acceptance into the canon with Elijah’s translation in the whirlwind. It is too good a quotation for Johann Friedrich Schink, Lessing’s next biographer, to miss and he duly repeats it. But Schink’s concern as a biographer is couched in terms of a different, if ultimately also religious, image, that of the monument. Indeed, his biography forms part of a three-volume Pantheon der Deutschen/Pantheon of the Germans, and his stated task is to add ‘a few stones to the edifice begun by German patriotism, leaving the columns themselves to posterity’. Schink’s biography stands free of the works themselves (it is he who is prepared to press the analogies with Columbus and Cook). But to fulfil the patterns of edification, to make the life appear more exemplary and yet more humanly accessible, he adds two plates: one shows the young Lessing’s obedience to his parents, the other his integrity as a pursuer of truth, and both are as such obliquely hagiographic.

Both Klopstock and Lessing enter the canon foremost as German writers in an established German line of achievement. ‘He stands as the first column of German originality’, states an early nineteenth-century

25 Ibid., I, 451.
26 Ibid., I, 452.
28 Ibid., 7.
29 [K. Nicolai], Klopstock: Ein Denkmahl zur Säcularfeier seines Geburtstages am zweiten Julius 1824 (Quedlinburg: Basse, 1824), 6.
Klopstock biography, also finding the monumental image congenial. They illustrate how language and culture establish national bonds, not the scattered multiplicity of political institutions that called themselves the ‘German lands’. Part of the anecdotal — and incidental — material on Klopstock’s and Lessing’s lives recounts how they moved as equals among kings and princes, yet spurned preferments that might inhibit their genius. (This would overlook the negative role of Frederick the Great in the establishment of German literature, or the hopes both placed in the young reforming emperor Joseph II.) It is a variation on Renaissance commonplaces, relevant to readers aware that it was culture, and not so much rulers, that held the nation together. Christoph Martin Wieland, a contemporary of Lessing and Klopstock, found less automatic entry into the German literary pantheon. For some, he might appear too cosmopolitan to deserve the accolade of ‘deutscher Dichter’ (‘German poet’). But the nearly thousand-page biography which his editor, Johann Gottfried Gruber, appended to his edition of the works, removes such doubts by recounting Wieland’s meeting with Napoleon in 1806.\(^{30}\) They converse on the basis of equality, not deference; worldly authority (it is just after the battles of Jena and Auerstädt) acknowledges the power of the intellect — across national borders. Again, this somewhat implausible point is too good for others to miss. Schiller’s sister-in-law Caroline von Wolzogen, in her biography of 1830, embellishes his life-story with the fantasy that Schiller, had he lived, would have encountered the ‘world conqueror’ with equal dignity and composure,\(^{31}\) as the representative of ‘Humanität’ (‘Humanity’). (It is also a tactical ploy to get round Schiller’s marked progression from


rebellious and antiauthoritarian youth to respect for crowned heads in maturity.

The biographical commonplaces — of hagiography, of traditional panegyric, of the ‘divino artista’ — that accompany this early stage of German Lives of the Classical Poets, can be concentrated so as to make life and works one ‘single entity’, one ‘symbolic form’, one ‘individuality’. These are phrases taken from Friedrich Schlegel’s *Ueber Lessing/About Lessing* of 1801,\(^{32}\) not a biography as such, but a ‘Charakteristik’, the attempt to reduce to their essentials the adventitious and cluttered details of personality and writings. This symbolic unity is the ideal, not the norm or the reality: ‘the golden age of literature will be when prefaces are no longer needed’ (one might say, biographical introductions).\(^{33}\) As yet, however, the Life was deemed necessary as an accompaniment or corroboration of the Works.

Shortly after Schlegel’s essay on Lessing, Goethe attempted something similar to this ‘Charakteristik’. He, too, was concerned to elevate his subject, the art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, to canonical status. He had no less serious a purpose than had Lessing’s or Klopstock’s sponsors. As an account of the father of modern European Neoclassicism, it is not free of an ideological or even polemical — anti-Romantic — intention. But it records that Germany’s greatest living poet saw the function of biography as a means of making a public statement. His *Skizze zu einer Schilderung Winckelmanns/Sketch towards a Description of Winckelmann* (1805) is not free-standing, but forms the introduction to a collection of Winckelmann’s letters. Goethe’s approach is different from Schlegel’s, in that it refers less to ‘das Ganze’, the whole,\(^{34}\) than to a series of abstract categories, superimposed on the mass of biographical detail (‘ancient art’, ‘friendship’, ‘beauty’, ‘Rome’, ‘passing’). They structure a life that already conforms in some respects to hagiographic patterns (humble origins overcome through higher intervention leading to career and ultimate apotheosis). We do not read the essay to be


\(^{33}\) Ibid., 124.

informed of the mere facts of Winckelmann’s life: there is not a single date in the text. Such account of the life as there is, and of its various stages, is determined completely by the work, and not vice versa: ‘everything that he produces is extraordinary and estimable because his character was revealed in item’. Goethe embellishes and harmonizes. Like Raphael, Winckelmann dies at the apogee of his career: the squalid circumstances of his life in Rome and especially of his death (he was robbed and murdered in Trieste) are passed over. Instead, we have this extraordinary final section:

So war er denn auf der höchsten Stufe des Glücks, das er sich nur hätte wünschen dürfen, der Welt verschwunden. Ihm erwartete sein Vaterland, ihm streckten seine Freunde die Arme entgegen, alle Äußerungen der Liebe, deren er sehr bedurfte, alle Zeugnisse der öffentlichen Achtung, auf die er so viel Wert legte, warteten seiner Erscheinung, um ihn zu überhäufen. Und in diesem Sinne dürfen wir ihn wohl glücklich preisen, daß er von dem Gipfel des menschlichen Daseins zu den Seligen emporgestiegen, daß ein kurzer Schrecken, ein schneller Schmerz ihn von den Seinigen hinweggenommen. Die Gebrechen des Alters, die Abnahme der Geisteskräfte hat er nicht empfunden, die Zerstreuung der Kunstschätze, die er obgleich in in einem andern Sinne, vorausgesagt, ist nicht vor seinen Augen geschehen. Er hat als ein Mann gelebt, und ist als ein vollständiger Mann von hinnen gegangen. Nun genießt er im Andenken der Nachwelt den Vorteil, als ein ewig Tüchtiger und Kräftiger zu erscheinen, denn in der Gestalt, wie der Mensch die Erde verläuft, wandelt er unter den Schatten, und so bleibt uns Achill als ewig strebender Jüngling gegenwärtig.


36 ‘Thus, at the summit of the good fortune he could only have wished for himself, he was removed from this world. His native country was expecting him, his friends awaited him with outstretched arms, all the expressions of affection, so essential to him, all the terms of public recognition, so important for him, waited for his advent, to overwhelm him. And in this sense we may call him fortunate, that he has gone up from the summit of human existence to join the immortals, that a brief moment of terror, a quick second of pain snatched him away from the living. He did not experience the infirmities of age, the diminution of his intellectual powers; the dispersal of art treasures, that he said would happen, if perhaps in another sense, did not occur before his eyes. He lived as a man, and as a man at the height of his powers he has departed this life. Now in the memory of those he has left behind he enjoys the good fortune of appearing always forceful and worthy through and through: for in the shape that a man leaves the world, so he walks
That remarkable image of Achilles, like its biblical equivalent in the lives of Lessing, was not to be restricted to Winckelmann alone. Goethe is clearly making a legend of Winckelmann, laying down the essentials of artistic existence and their application. Winckelmann becomes a symbol, in that Goethe fuses the particular, the Life, with the ancient world and its afterlife, the general. It comes therefore as no surprise to find Goethe’s Achilles passage invoked as part of much more potent cultural myth-making: Gustav Schwab’s life of Schiller (1840). It belongs to the retouching of detail which is so necessary for the construction of literary monuments. The quotation is (correctly) attributed to Goethe and dated 1805, the year of its appearance and also of Schiller’s death.\(^37\) The biographer must somehow reconcile Goethe’s attested close friendship with Schiller with his failure to attend Schiller’s funeral. Goethe, as is well known, hated the panoply associated with death and could not bring himself to join the sparse number of mourners at Schiller’s hurried burial. The resourceful Schwab makes a virtue out of necessity by stating that ‘Goethe stepped forward and spoke to the nation’.\(^38\) But Schwab is merely continuing a hagiography that had even extended to Schiller when living. He recounts the false report of Schiller’s death in 1791, which had caused his Danish friends to create a secular memorial around ‘Freude, schöner Götterfunken’,\(^39\) and later to rejoice at the ‘resurrection of our immortal and deathless Schiller’.\(^40\) Such veneration and legend-making moves effortlessly among the mythologies and cults and plucks at will the images needed for its purposes.

While Lessing and Klopstock found general acceptance in terms of the symbolic unity of life and works, other figures had a less easy passage into canonicity. The Romantics remembered Schiller as their most implacable opponent and found little pleasure in his sanctification by biographers and editors (especially when these included Goethe and Wilhelm von Humboldt). Hearing the threnodic note of a Schiller dying at the height of his powers, they could reflect that their own movement also had its necrology and cult of remembrance, not merely those figures among the shades, and thus Achilles remains ever present for us as a young man, ever striving’. Ibid., 450.

\(^37\) ‘Vor die Nation aber trat Göthe und sprach’. Schwab, Schiller’s Leben, 633f.
\(^38\) Ibid., 663.
\(^39\) ‘Joy, thou lovely spark immortal’, ibid., 366f.
\(^40\) ‘von des unsterblichen und ungestorbenen Schillers Auferstehung’, ibid., 368.
now being enthroned by Goethe and his Weimar acolytes. Ludwig Tieck, as the senior surviving poet of German Romanticism, wished to set the record straight — through the life-and-works approach. The opportunity was afforded by the reissue in 1815 of the works of his close friend Friedrich von Hardenberg, known as Novalis. Part of the last section of the short biography reads:

So starb, ehe er noch das neun und zwanzigste Jahr vollendet hatte, unser Freund, an dem man eben so sehr seine ausgebreiteten Kenntnisse, sein philosophisches Genie, wie sein Dichtertalent lieben und bewundern muß. Da er seiner Zeit so vorgeeilt war, so durfte sich das Vaterland außerordentliche Dinge von ihm versprechen, wenn ihn dieser frühe Tod nicht übereilt hätte, doch haben seine unvollendeten nachgelassenen Schriften schon viel gewürkt und viele seiner großen Gedanken werden noch in Zukunft begeistern und edle Gemüther und tiefe Denker werden von den Funken seines Geistes erleuchtet und entzündet werden. [...] dem geübteren Auge aber bot er die Erscheinung der Schönheit dar. Der Umriß und der Ausdruck seines Geistes kam sehr dem Evangelisten Johannes nahe, wie wir ihn auf der herrlichen großen Tafel von A. Dürer sehn, die Nürnberg und München aufbewahrt’.

Here artistic integrity, religious piety, national pride and genius are conflated. The reminiscence of the Dürer portrait not only invokes a Christian iconography opposed to Goethe’s pagan reference to Achilles; it is a reminder of the religion of art which Tieck himself and his dead friend Wackenroder had propounded as young men, centred on Raphael and Dürer. In the same way as Goethe’s vision of Winckelmann makes its subject into the exemplar of the Classicism that Goethe affirms, so Tieck fashions Novalis according to an image that stresses the Romantic poet, seer and visionary.

41 ‘Before he reached his twenty-ninth year, our friend thus died, whose extensive knowledge, philosophical genius and poetic talent one can only love and admire. He hastened ahead of his time, so that his native country ought to have expected extraordinary things from him, had this early death not overtaken him. The unfinished writings he left have been widely received and many of his great thoughts will in future still inspire, and noble minds and profound thinkers will be illumined and fired by the sparks of his intellect. [...] For the more experienced eye his aspect was one of beauty. The outline and expression of his face approached that of John the Evangelist as we see him in the wonderful great picture by A. Dürer, once to be seen in Nuremberg, now in Munich’. Ludwig Tieck, preface to the third edition of Novalis: Schriften (1815), in Novalis, Schriften. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe, ed. by Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel et al., 6 vols (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960–88), IV, 551–60 (558).
This pattern of commemoration was especially suited to writers whose brief lives denied them the canonical status of those who had had full use of their powers. Gustav Schwab’s accounts of Wilhelm Müller and Wilhelm Hauff,42 both writers who died in their twenties, conform to its general conventions. It could be turned on its head, as Tieck himself did with his biographical introduction to the works of Heinrich von Kleist.43 Despite his admiration for Kleist’s poetic talent, and his tolerant words for a writer who had taken his own life, Tieck cannot find the unity, the symbolic wholeness that Friedrich Schlegel’s account of Lessing had posited. The works and the life diverge and follow patterns of their own, the one leading to the hope of future recognition, the other registering the failure of the person to fulfil the talent with which he undeniably was blessed by nature. This highly influential biographical essay is a factor in the withholding of recognition from Kleist during the nineteenth century and the denial of his place in the canon. His life and works are pulled apart; his qualities of poetic genius are countered by symbolic patterns of light and darkness. Here, Tieck is unable to employ the hagiographic patterns of explication and selective embellishment that hitherto had done service and continued to be potent forces in the establishment of a German national literary canon for the rest of the century. It is not his last word on these matters. Later in the same decade, he was wrapping these biographical devices in a fictional guise, to produce the ultimate ideal ‘Life’: William Shakespeare’s.44 It was intended to suit all the needs of nineteenth-century cultural ideology. Thus, not only Lessing, Klopstock or Schiller, but also the greatest English ‘Representative Man’ may be annexed for the purposes of national role models.

43 Heinrich von Kleist, Hinterlassene Schriften (Berlin: Reimer, 1821) and Gesammelte Schriften (Berlin: Reimer, 1826).
44 Ludwig Tieck, Dichterleben (1826, 1831), most accessible in Ludwig Tieck, Schriften, 20 vols (Berlin: Reimer, 1828–46), XVIII.