

LITTLE-KNOWN DOCUMENTS

Archive of the Poet and Writer

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VON GOETHEINTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
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Introduction

Scholars often credit Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as the originator of the idea of “world literature,” but his contribution to another core concept of modern literary studies has received comparably little attention. In the essay translated here for the first time, “Archiv des Dichters und Schriftstellers” (“Archive of the Poet and Writer”), published in 1823, Goethe formulated the concept of the *Nachlass*, the archival collection of a writer’s posthumous papers. It would be hard to overstate the importance of the *Nachlass* as a literary practice since the nineteenth century or its relevance to contemporary debates on the relationship among philology and literature, literary archives, and the politics of cultural memory. In this context, Goethe’s essay plays a key role. Its impact reaches far into the modern era of the twentieth century and indeed our present, where contemporary authors’ archives are sold on a global market.¹

In the German context, literary authors’ collection of their own papers for archival purposes became an object of theoretical consideration only around 1800. More than any other writer of his day, Goethe offered a model for the deliberate fashioning of one’s own *Nachlass*, through his autobiographical writings, the authorized edition of his complete works, the publication of his correspondence, and, above all, through the meticulous organization of his personal archive.

In “Archive of the Poet and Writer,” first published in Goethe’s journal *Ueber Kunst und Altertum (On Art and Antiquity)*, Goethe reflected directly on these activities. Here, Goethe reported his satisfaction at the completion of a project: a young man “well acquainted with library and archival work” had managed to bring together all of Goethe’s papers into “perfect order,” “particularly those pertaining to my writing life, in which nothing should be neglected or dismissed as unworthy.” Two points are well to be emphasized, as they proved enduring: Goethe’s explicit connection between work and biography, and his emphasis on the total preservation of documents related to his “writing life.”

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In both his theory and practice of the literary archive, Goethe linked a “policy of self-administration” (Vismann 114) with a program of (biographical) self-historicization. This program had three characteristics: an understanding of himself as circumscribed by what is archivally retrievable, a belief that he would be inevitably an object of thorough philological inquiry, and an assumption that this inquiry would ideally serve to reconstruct the genesis of his written works.

With this in mind, Goethe sought to fashion his literary afterlife through the organization of his papers. He put together a network of trusted “friends who will care for my posthumous papers” and for whom his personal archive had been perfectly prepared. This network included the philologist Friedrich Wilhelm Riemer, who continued Goethe’s program with the publication of archival documents after the poet’s death. Riemer saw the value of these publications—which also included correspondence and personal recollections—as originating from his physical proximity to Goethe. In Riemer’s view, his personal familiarity with Goethe gave him a privileged understanding of the poet’s work (Kruckis 457).

It was well-known, however, that Goethe’s family limited access to his papers for decades. As late as 1875, the influential philosopher and intellectual historian Wilhelm Dilthey lamented the lack of an authoritative biography built on the basis of Goethe’s papers: “This is a loss for the entire nation, as only a full understanding of his biography can make the entire Goethe belong to the nation” (“Goethe”). In Dilthey’s view, only the archived *Nachlass* could ensure philology’s methodological soundness, and only access to Goethe’s original manuscripts could foster a “vital” understanding of the poet and his work. It is not surprising, then, that Dilthey called for the establishment of “central archives for literature” in Germany (“Archive” 9).

After the death of Goethe’s last grandchild in 1886, the archduchess Sophie of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach obtained, as instructed in his will, Goethe’s *Nachlass*. That same year, she proposed the foundation of a Goethe archive, with the aim

of creating a comprehensive biography of Goethe and a standard edition of his works on the basis of the inherited manuscripts. As Goethe had anticipated more than fifty years before, his curated *Nachlass* proved crucial in both undertakings.

The intervening half century had seen an increasing professionalization in handling posthumous papers, culminating in the institutionalization of the *Nachlass* within the literary archive. Besides the Goethe Archive in Weimar (after 1889, the Goethe and Schiller Archive), the Schiller Archive and Museum was founded in Marbach at the turn of the twentieth century.² Neither limited itself to collecting and cataloguing the papers of Goethe and Schiller, and, soon after their founding, one could already observe a growing interest in collecting “contemporary” material, as well. As the first director of the Goethe and Schiller Archive remarked in his speech at the opening ceremony of the archive building in Weimar in the summer of 1896, the archive should remain receptive to “all that is excellent from literature, and above all poetry” (Suphahn 6), open even to the posthumous papers of recently deceased poets.

Goethe’s vision for the complete organization of his posthumous papers has strongly influenced the practices of literary scholars, archivists, administrators, and writers to this day. For them in particular, this resulted in a kind of predicament. Since 1900 or so, writers had to adjust to the fact that their future posthumous papers would be the subject of professional archiving and research.³ In German literature, this led to different strategies: the systematic organization of one’s manuscripts (for example, in the cases of Thomas Mann and Gerhart Hauptmann),⁴ the detached and critical anticipation of archival practices (for instance, in Robert Musil’s prose collection *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*),⁵ or the attempt to evade archiving through material destruction (most controversially, in the case of Franz Kafka).⁶

But inquiry should not stop here. Putting Goethe’s essay in a global context, comparing it with genealogies of the literary archive in other cultures, and examining the role of writers in these

processes—all these are questions that a global study of the multiple origins of the modern literary archive would have to address.

NOTES

1. On the literary archives market, see Chen.
2. On Marbach, see Dunkhase.
3. See the recent volume on the German history of the *Nachlass* by Sina and Spoerhase.
4. On Mann, see Spoerhase 45–46; on Hauptmann, see Katins-Riha.
5. On Musil, see Wieland, 229–30.
6. On Kafka, see Leader, “Cultural Nationalism” and “Response”; Lepper; Sina.

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Archive of the Poet and Writer

On more than one occasion over the course of my life, I have placed the thirty precious volumes of Lessing’s works before me,¹ lamented that that exceptional man lived to see the publication of only the first of these, and praised his devoted brother, a man of letters in his own right, who could not have expressed his affection for the

deceased any more clearly than he did by tirelessly collecting his works, writings, and even his lesser creations and whatever else was appropriate in order to fully preserve the memory of that unique man, and ceaselessly preparing them for publication.

Under such circumstances, a man who recognizes the similarity of his own case may surely be

allowed to return in his thoughts to himself and take stock of his own successes or failures; what has been done by him and for him, and what, perhaps, remains for him to do.

And indeed, I enjoy the special favor of the guiding spirit, I see twenty volumes of aesthetic works arranged before me in a systematic order,² a number of others that are closely related, several additional works that stand in a certain contradiction to those poetic accomplishments,³ so that I would have to fear accusations that my productivity had been scattered and fragmented, if indeed a man could be blamed who, following the urges of his own mind, but also inspired by the demands of the world, dabbled in this and that, and found ways to fill with manifold endeavors that leisure time that every man must be allowed.

The harm that resulted, of course, was that significant plans were never even set in motion, many a praiseworthy undertaking was left undone. I refrained from carrying out certain things because I hoped to produce something better after more intensive cultivation [*Bildung*], I did not use some of the collected items because I wished for them to be more complete, I drew no conclusions from the material before me because I feared a hasty judgment.

As I more frequently surveyed that great mass that lay before me, as I took in the printed works, some in order, some out of order, some completed, some yet awaiting their conclusion, as I observed how impossible it was to take up again in later years all those threads that one had once let fall, let alone to reconnect those whose endings had disappeared, I found myself plunged into a state of melancholy perplexity, from which, without abjuring isolated efforts, I sought to rescue myself through sweeping measures. The primary task was to sort through all the files that I had kept in a state of relative order, and that had occupied my attention to a greater or lesser degree at one time or another; a neat and proper collocation of all of the papers,

particularly those pertaining to my writing life, in which nothing should be neglected or dismissed as unworthy.

This business has now been completed; an energetic young man, well acquainted with library and archival work,⁴ accomplished the task over the course of this past summer in such a way that not only do printed and unprinted, collected and scattered works now stand side by side in perfect order, but also the diaries, as well as letters, both received and sent, are now contained in an archive, for which I even have a catalog organized according to general and particular categories, letters, and numbers of all sorts, which not only greatly facilitates every task that I shall undertake, but also ideally serves those friends who will care for my posthumous papers [*Nachlass*].

I shall present the contents of that bibliographic-archival catalog in greater detail in future issues, intending in so doing to respond to a number of particular inquiries that have been addressed to me;⁵ but the following essay explains more fully what larger task I was compelled to undertake immediately after that work had been completed.⁶

EDITORS' NOTES

1. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81) was one of the most influential poets, dramatists, and theorists of the German Enlightenment. Goethe refers to Lessing's *Collected Writings* in thirty volumes, published in Berlin between 1771 and 1794. The edition was created by his brother, Karl Lessing.

2. Goethe refers to the twenty-volume edition of his works published between 1815 and 1819.

3. By this phrase, Goethe points to his scientific writings.

4. This refers to Friedrich Theodor David Kräuter (1790–1856), who was a trained librarian and worked as Goethe's secretary from 1811.

5. Goethe speaks of "future issues" of the journal *On Art and Antiquity*. However, he never put his announcement into practice.

6. The essay "Archive of the Poet and the Writer" is originally—that is, in the magazine *Ueber Kunst und Altertum*—followed by the autobiographical "Confessions of Life in Excerpt."