

H-Net Reviews

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Oliver Simons, ed. *Deutsche Autobiographien, 1690-1930*. Berlin: Directmedia Publishing, 2004. 1 CD-ROM. Alphabetical table of contents, table of authors, illustrations. EUR 75.00, ISBN 13-978-3-89853-502-1.

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A Digital Library of Lives

The interest in writing, reading, and theorizing autobiography persists beyond trends in literary or historical research. A quick scan of bookstore tables, online stores, book reviews, and bestseller lists provides ample evidence for an enduring curiosity about the lives of others. In addition to their value as resources for historians, social scientists, and scholars of literature and language, autobiographies satisfy a need to know about those with whom we are historically and culturally related as well as about those whose life circumstances are radically different from our own. One response to these needs and interests is Directmedia's publication of *Deutsche Autobiographien, 1690-1930*, edited by Oliver Simons. On CD-ROM and now also in downloadable format, this collection offers access to a compendium of autobiographical works across four centuries by German-speaking men and women from many walks of life.

Directmedia has been publishing digitized reference works, literary, historical and scientific texts, and image and music collections in the Digitale Bibliothek series since 1997. The 180 complete autobiographical works, with their equivalent 76,000 book pages, collected in *Deutsche Autobiographien* would take up several library shelves, to say nothing of the effort, expense, or sheer impossibility of assembling the material, some of it never reprinted since its original publication. In this format they are readily available, accessible, and affordable for individual students, scholars, and general readers.

Even a digitized anthology, however, imposes some size limitations, and in his introduction, Simons explains

the parameters of the collection. The earliest text, August Hermann Francke's *Lebenslauf*, dates from the late seventeenth century, a period of transition from earlier to more modern forms of self-description. As Peter Alheit and Morten Brandt have noted, the individual's awareness of the self as grounded in a particular social group with prescribed functions had begun to give way under the pressure of upward social mobility and geographical dislocation.[1] Life was increasingly seen as a journey. By the late eighteenth century, autobiographical forms were based on the idea of personal development, a notion closely related to the German concept of *Bildung*.

The physicist Wilhelm Wien's *Ein Rückblick* (1930) and the Germanist Georg Witkowski's *Erzähltes aus sieben Jahrzehnten, 1863-1933* (2003; completed in 1937-38) are the chronologically final texts. According to Simons, the choice to end the collection around 1930 simply avoided copyright restrictions. At the same time, of course, the significant number of intervening years makes it in some ways easier to see the autobiographies as situated in the era-specific social experiences and interpretive practices of their time. The break in the early 1930s also obviates dealing with the new autobiographical modes that would evolve in the wake of the coming upheavals.

Within this time frame, Simons chose a variety of authors whose autobiographical writing would reflect the experiences, desires, and disappointments of highly diverse social groups (p. 3) and "nicht nur die Aufzeichnungen namhafter Persönlichkeiten ... denn gerade in

unerfüllten Lebenslaufen spiegeln sich sozialhistorische Erfahrungen" (p. 13). Certainly the range of authors in *Deutsche Autobiographien* spans not only several centuries, but also boundaries of profession, gender, and social class. In addition to the broad categories suggested by the subtitle of the anthology ("Arbeiter, Gelehrte, Ingenieure, Künstler, Politiker und Schriftsteller"), a table of authors includes figures specifically described as "Dichter," "Maler," "Romanautoren," "Komponisten" and "Musiker," "Herrscher," "Unternehmer," and "Naturwissenschaftler," "Sozialdemokraten," "Generale" and "Offiziere," among others. Together with more obvious selections (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* [composed 1808-31]) the collection includes the eighteenth-century philosopher Salomon Maimon, the twentieth-century waitress and Social Democrat Mieke Biedenbach, and the memoirist of mental illness, Daniel Paul Schreber. In the alphabetical table of contents, one finds Heinrich Heine next to Carl Hagenbeck and Bertha von Suttner cheek by jowl with Otto von Bismarck. Socially marginalized groups, women, members of the working class, criminals, and even a para-psychologist are included along with statesmen, scholars, judges, and theologians.

A collection of this size immediately raises questions of definition: what will or should count as autobiography? Simons explains his principles of selection in terms of what is excluded: diaries, which offer no retrospective look at a life; memoirs, except for those nineteenth-century "memoirs" that focus on the life and development of the author more than on the events and personalities of the time; and autobiographical novels, since they lack, in Philippe Lejeune's term, the "autobiographical pact" with the reader that author and narrator are the same person. For purposes of this collection, then, autobiography involves the author's self-conscious look back, or what Georg Misch called "Selbstbesinnung," and the honest attempt at accurate recollection, however fictionalized, constructed, and already determined current theory suggests that process might be.

Autobiographical writing also has a history of its own, and Simons points out that collections of autobiographical texts from the late seventeenth century on have constructed canons of autobiography, setting up certain models of autobiographical narrative, "bestimmte Schreibmuster" and "idealtypische Lebensläufe," as definitive of the genre (p. 6). The conversion narrative, for example, with its forerunner in Augustine's *Confessions* (397-98) is represented here by Francke's pious *Lebenslauf*; but it can also take secular form, as in Jo-

hann Heinrich Jung-Stilling's 1777 autobiography, where the idea of God's providence is rationalized. Simons sees autobiography moving toward what Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf calls a means to the "Autopoiesis des Individuums" (p. 8). A second type of autobiographical pattern is represented by Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, in which Dilthey saw the explication of the development of the self in relation to its historical context: "In der Autobiographie deutet sich das Subjekt selber, es rekonstruiert seine Entwicklung, indem es sich die historischen Beziehungen, in die es verwoben ist, zu Bewusstsein bringt" (p. 8).

With the coming of the twentieth century, however, these older autobiographical patterns of representing the developing self are revealed as illusory. In their very attempt to create meaning, retrospective life descriptions select and distort; and notions of a stable identity crumbled with Sigmund Freud. Simons cites Georg Gusdorf's observations in *Vorraussetzungen und Grenzen der Autobiographie* (1956) that what appears to be the self is a construction based on wishing and forgetting and on the hope for coherence and reasonableness. This process of construction, however, is itself embedded in social experience, and autobiographies reveal patterns of meaning-making that are differentiated by professional status, gender, class, and social and historical circumstances. Here is material to serve as the basis for any number of specific inquiries, especially given the scope of Simons's collection and the tools provided by this digital format.[2]

As with all items in the Digitale Bibliothek series, the software offers a window view with the text area on the right pane and the function area on the left. Left and right panes, which can be individually sized and configured, can also be viewed individually as a single window. The right pane can be subdivided, so that several pages of text can appear on the screen at the same time. Icons on the main menu and sidebars access the many-layered alphabetical table of contents, a table of authors, and an image library of more than four hundred illustrations, primarily portraits of the authors, all of which appear in the left pane. All materials in the function pane are hyperlinked to the relevant texts. Buttons and scroll bars facilitate maneuvering within and between the individual autobiographies and make it possible to retrace a chain of locations previously viewed. And while the texts are not reproduced as facsimiles, any footnotes or other auxiliary materials provided in the originally published work are included as hyperlinks.

The autobiographies themselves are fully searchable. A set of search tools, accessible from sidebars, pull-down or pop-up menus supports simple word searches (“Goethe,” “Krieg,” “Berlin”) using placeholders and operators. The Windows version of the software also supports “thematic searches,” which yield lists of thematically relevant passages. Search results, marked in the text, appear in a list that can be edited, annotated, and saved. In turn, readers can highlight text passages of their own choosing. These markings are also saved in lists that can be edited, annotated, exported, and printed. All lists of search results and marked passages are linked to their textual locations.

While the table of contents offers an alphabetical list of authors, which is handy for readers seeking a specific autobiography, a separate table of authors includes columns giving places and dates of birth and death, and, especially useful, columns of author categories and short descriptions. Each column can be rearranged, so that the table can be searched chronologically by authors’ birthdates, or by terms, so that, for example, it is easy to locate all authors born between 1800 and 1810, or all those described as “Kellner” or “Philosoph.” A search by category shows twenty-seven women, for example, who are additionally categorized as “Schriftsteller,” “Arbeiter,” “Theologen,” and so on. The table employs some twenty categories to characterize the authors, including “Sozialdemokraten,” “Naturwissenschaftler,” “Geisteswissenschaftler,” “Dramatiker,” “Unternehmer,” “Bedienstete,” “Offiziere,” “Politiker,” and “Herrscher,” suggesting again the range of the collection.

In an increasingly Web-based world, the question arises about the future of the CD-ROM format. An intermediate step beyond its obvious limitations is Directmedia’s offering of the Digibib Plus program, which makes it possible for Windows users to link volumes of the Digitale Bibliothek with each other on a hard drive. Once the software is activated, the resources of several volumes can be viewed and searched simultaneously, without the need to repeatedly insert and eject disks. Other anthologies of literature, cultural history, and historical documents as well as general reference works might also serve as useful links. Simons suggests two: *Deutsche Literatur von Lessing bis Kafka* (Digitale Bibliothek 1) and *Deutsche Literatur von Frauen* (Digitale Bibliothek 45). The access to the Digibib Plus program is free, but requires registration.

In a further useful step, *Deutsche Autobiographien*, along with many other volumes in the Digitale Biblio-

thek series, is also now available in a downloadable format through Zeno.org at <http://www.versand-as.de/shop/index.php?~page=main>. This welcome advance helps avoid the constant spinning of the CD-ROM, when the software does not cache pages ahead. Especially for OS X, there is considerable latency associated with accessing the disk, which the reader experiences every time a page is “turned” or when moving between the text and a table or list.

Finally, the recent addition of the Digitale Bibliothek 5 software allows downloads in a number of formats (PDF, EPUB, XML, HTML, RTF, and TXT) to a range of mobile devices: e-book readers (although not the Kindle), PDAs, smart phones (including the iPhone), and laptops. Digitale Bibliothek 5 may be downloaded at http://www.versand-as.de/shop/product_info.php?~products_id=2001 for EUR 49.90.

General system requirements for the Digitale Bibliothek include MS Windows (98, ME, NT, 2000, XP, Vista); PC from 486; 64 MB RAM; Graphics card from 640 x 480 Pixel with 256 colors; and a CD-ROM drive; or Mac OS X.3.9; Power PC or Intel CPU, 256 MB RAM; and CD-ROM drive. All software is updated from time to time, although Mac OS updates are less frequent. Updates, with the exception of Digitale Bibliothek 5, are free. New products and features are announced and downloadable software upgrades are available at www.digitale.bibliothek.de. Macintosh users should take note that, while volumes of the Digitale Bibliothek can be read and searched successfully on the Mac, the MacDigibib software updates are less frequent; the interface is less intuitive; and some features included in the Windows version are not fully functional with OS X 10.3.9.

Regardless of its software limitations and hardware-dependent formats, *Deutsche Autobiographien, 1690-1930* offers scholars and general readers alike a wide-ranging collection of German-language autobiography from the modern German-speaking world. It creates an opportunity to pursue, within a German context, a wide variety of specific interests and questions; to trace the development of autobiographical forms and conventions and the evolving concept of self in relation to its social surroundings and historical context; and to witness the process by which a life acquires meaning through its constructed autobiographical representation. In its chronological scope and diversity of authors, *Deutsche Autobiographien* offers a virtual history of German-language autobiography. Readers in many fields will find it a useful scholarly resource and a library of fascinating reading.

Notes

[1]. Peter Alheit and Morten Brandt, *Autobiographie und ästhetische Erfahrung* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2006), 16-17.

[2]. Readers of *Deutsche Autobiographien* might want to supplement Simons's brief introductory discussion of the definitional, theoretical, and interpretive challenges

associated with the concept of autobiography with a look at recent work on the theory and history of autobiography, such as Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Autobiographie* (Stuttgart: Sammlung Metzler, 2000) and Michaela Holdenried, *Autobiographie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), both of which Simons cites, or Peter Alheit and Morten Brandt, *Autobiographie und Ästhetische Erfahrung* (Frankfurt, New York: Campus Verlag, 2006). They all refer to texts included in *Deutsche Autobiographien*.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

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