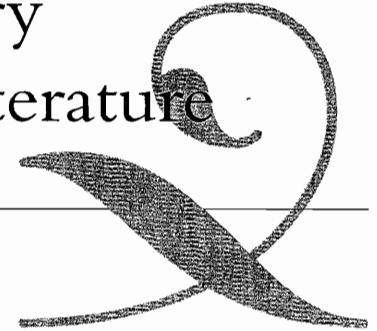# A New History of German Literature

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those idols are indestructible. The only way to abolish our false gods is through faith in the one true God.   ·

Ultimately, Karlstadt's teaching reveals the impossible bind of solafideism. If only faith can save us, then, it is true, the flesh is of no avail. And yet, to imagine that one can dispense with this unavailing flesh is only to adopt a false trust, a *falsch vertrawen*, that mires us ever more deeply in sin. The flesh cannot save us, but to seek to renounce it will surely damn us, for "to ensnare the conscience with laws in these matters is death for the soul" (LW 40, 90–91). What Karlstadt's "abomination" shares with the papacy is not simply a doctrine of works but a strategy of fetishization. To deny the flesh is only to make its hold on us absolute; it is to turn the dead letter into a spiritual law. It is to transform the merely flesh into the deadly fetish.

Images, Luther writes elsewhere, are "neither here nor there, neither evil nor good, we may have them or not as we please" (LW 51, 81–82; qtd. Christensen 47). As with all matters of the flesh, the trouble doesn't merely arise when, like the papists, we imagine using these "minor, external things" to our spiritual advantage. Equally problematic is any insistence that such things work to our spiritual detriment. Whether prescribed or prohibited, whether used or rejected in our efforts to be holy, the flesh becomes our idol. As such, it is no longer an external, minor thing, but instead the absolute and inward fetish that defines us. Both sides, iconoclast and papist, seek to resolve that New Testament strife of flesh and spirit—the one side through ascetic renunciation, and the other by surmounting the flesh on the way to spirit. The two sides fail equally, delivering themselves to a flesh whose claims are the more insistent, the more intractable for the effort. Both sides, iconophobic and iconophilic, radical reformer and papist, drown in a flesh that has taken the place of God.

For Max Weber, it is such fleshly "drowning" that, in its Protestant guise, characterizes that "ethic" so crucial to the rise of capitalism. Weber argues that an iconoclastic worldview makes possible the notion of worldly calling and enables the rationalization of one's conduct in the world. In this way, Protestant asceticism and its injunctions against idolatry work paradoxically against themselves, since they ultimately lead to a capitalist spirit of time management and acquisition. In no way did Martin Luther anticipate this most worldly consequence of Karlstadt's iconophobia. But it is equally fair to say that Luther's theology was similarly unprepared for the world a Karlstadtian asceticism would help to create. Given his doctrine of a whole man utterly riven between the embodied world of space and time and the world of God's word—a doctrine that, impossibly, forecloses participation in the world at the same time that it precludes transcendence—it seems in hindsight inevitable that Luther's (mis)readers would ultimately prove more influential than Luther himself.

See also 1523, 1570, 1666, 1670 (collegia pietatis)

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Lisa Freinkel

1523

In the preface to his translation of the Old Testament, Martin Luther assails contemporary German usage

Luther's Bible and the Emergence of Standard German

"But this Martin Luther didn't just give us freedom of movement, he also gave us the means for movement; for he gave the Spirit a Body. He gave the Word to Thought. He created the German language. This happened through his translation of the Bible" (Heine 1973, 38–39). In this quotation from the great poet Heinrich Heine, himself a converted Jew, we see one of the main strands of thought concerning Martin Luther's contribution to the history of the German language. That this opinion was not restricted to literati but was also held by language scholars can be seen in a quote from one of the fathers of *Germanistik,* Jacob Grimm (admittedly a younger Jacob Grimm), in the introduction to the second (1822) edition of his *Deutsche Grammatik (German Grammar).* After essentially dismissing, for historical-grammatical purposes, most works written in German between the 13th and 18th centuries, Grimm is careful to note that the writings of Martin Luther are *not* included in this evaluation. Indeed, Luther's language, because of its noble, almost miraculous purity, also because of its mighty influence, must be considered to be the "kernel and basis of the New High German language-foundation" (36).

This remarkable conjunction of the linguistic with the religious can be found not just among Luther's supporters, but also among his detractors. One of his foremost contemporary Catholic critics, Hieronymus Emser, responds in one of several open letters to Luther's claim that the New Testament does not mention priests and bishops: "Now I am disconcerted with the monk for this reason, that our priesthood, in Latin *sacerdotium,* in his translation is not called a priesthood any more, *episcopus* not a bishop, *presbyter* not a priest, and the gobbledygook Doctor not only wants to teach us a new faith, but also a new German" (Enders 1892, 137–138).

Equally extreme, though less religiously motivated appraisals of Luther's contributions have not been lacking either, both pro and con. The scholar Wolfgang Jungandreas (1947) is often cited as an all too ardent admirer of Luther's influence on the German language (see especially p. 71), while the oft-reprinted work of Arno Schirokauer has frequently been criticized as going too far in the other direction. Notable about many of these assessments is the

use of emotion-laden labels for Luther and his biblical language which reflect the evaluators' own religious and aesthetic prejudices and detract attention from the larger areas of agreement. They also discourage any attempt to discuss the nature of the questions they try to answer, and even less to answer them with a close look at the evidence.

Vocabulary and doctrinal differences aside, Emser found Luther's Bible translation to be so good that he plagiarized it for his own Catholic Bible. And while Jungandreas entitles the relevant section of his book "Luther as the Creator of the New High German Literary Language," the facts we actually find discussed in that section have led other scholars to the more modest appellations of "mediator," "expediter," or "catalyst."

As for posing the questions correctly, a good place to start would be with the phrase "Luther's translation of the Bible." On the face of it, this expression implies that a single man is responsible for the contents of a single work. Yet we know that this simplifies the case. While he was acknowledged by all his collaborators to be the genius in charge (Kluge 1918, 60–61), he did in fact have close collaborators who concerned themselves with every aspect of the Bible translation throughout the many editions published in Luther's lifetime. Among these collaborators must also be counted the printers who published his work and whose preferences clearly influenced Luther in the course of his endless revisions.

This brings up the second point. Luther's Bible was a work in progress throughout his life, a work that underwent thousands of changes during that period. In addition, after its first appearance in Wittenberg (in 1522 in the form of the September Testament, a translation of the New Testament), it was quickly reprinted, in both approved and pirated editions, and many of these editions imposed more or less important changes on the language of their model (this is most obvious in its translations into Low German). Thus, at least as far as language is concerned, one can hardly speak of a monolithic "Luther Bible."

This more complex understanding makes the question of Luther's influence on the German language more complex as well. In general, it seems sensible to break this question down into at least the following sub-questions: (1) Did the fact that Luther translated the Bible into German make a difference in the history of the German language, especially with regard to its standardization? If so, why? (2) Did the specific linguistic phenomena in Luther's own Bible translation influence the direction of that standardization? If so, which ones? (3) Where did these linguistic phenomena come from, and to what extent was their choice or their combination Luther's own?

As to the first question, I believe there is general agreement. Luther's Bible translation, along with his other German writings and the writings of others participating in the ferment of the Reformation, broadened irrevocably the range of registers and functions for which German, rather than Latin, was the preferred linguistic vehicle. Yet, if German was the appropriate language for

most functions in the new Germany, some degree of standardization became urgent. In addition, the overwhelming popularity of Luther's Bible had a tremendous effect on the number of books printed in German, which, in turn, put special pressure on the printers, for economic reasons, to attempt some kind of supraregional language.

Why was Luther's Bible so popular? Even such a skeptic about Luther's originality as Schirokauer acknowledges the crucial factor: Luther had both the desire and the literary talent to convey to people of every station, but especially the common people, the message of the Christian Bible in their own language.

It really should come as no surprise that translating the Bible well was more important to Martin Luther than to his predecessors. His theological premises actually pushed him in that direction. If the relationship of a human being to God was to be mediated by no other human being (for example, popes or priests), but was supposed to be as direct as possible, and the Bible was the Word of God, then it was in every human being's interest to be able to understand the Bible. Two things, at least, follow from this: (1) the Bible should be as widely distributed as possible; (2) it should be available in a way that makes people want to read it, and that people understand.

If these objectives are combined, as they were in Martin Luther, with an extraordinary ear for language and a literary talent unparalleled in his place and time, the results can be, and were, equally extraordinary. Luther was obsessed with the right way to translate the Bible, as evidenced in his many letters to colleagues and friends and, therefore, also with the "proper" way of writing and speaking. His judgment on the preachers and writers of his day can be seen in the following quotation from the 1523 preface to his Old Testament translation: "And I have read no book nor letter up to now in which the right kind of German language can be found. Nobody tries to speak proper German either, especially not the chanceries of the lords and the hack preachers and puppet writers, who allow themselves to think that they have the power to change the German language." On the level of style, there is no question that Luther served as an important model to his contemporaries and continues to serve as one up to the present day. He released written German from the dry forms of the chancery and brought it closer to its spoken roots. Many of the metaphors and proverbs in his Bible translation belong to the core treasury of the modern language.

Yet surely it takes more than this to be the "creator" or "father" of the German language. What of the form of language? What of its syntax, its vocabulary, its inflectional categories, its spelling, even its pronunciation? What was Luther's influence on all of these? Obviously these questions cannot be answered without looking at standardizing tendencies in German before, during, and after Luther's time, and asking what would have been different had Luther not lived.

For quite some time before Luther, strong tendencies were at work toward

a supraregional standard written language, especially in the primarily southeastern chanceries of the Holy Roman Empire. These tendencies reached a high point under the Emperor Maximilian I (1459–1519) and his powerful chancellor Niclas Ziegler, whose writing practice was disseminated in a stream of imperial documents throughout the German-speaking regions. Although this emergent southeastern standard deliberately avoided spellings, forms, and words that betrayed a narrow dialect origin, it still showed more general characteristics of southeastern German dialects—spelling, vocabulary, and inflection were necessarily influenced to some extent by regional speech.

Despite the regional idiosyncracies, "gemeines Deutsch" (common German) invariably influenced the chancery of the Saxon electors. By Luther's time, the written language of east-central Germany had already absorbed numerous linguistic characteristics of the southeastern German "standard," necessarily giving up many linguistic features characteristic of the spoken dialects of that region. It is thus incorrect to assume, as many scholars have, that the language of Luther's Bible was somehow a direct outgrowth of the spoken dialects of east-central Germany, and that Luther established the language of Meissen–Upper Saxony as the standard German language. Regardless of the extent of Luther's influence, the emerging Standard German was, and to a great extent still is, a written language.

What did Luther himself say about the form of his language? The most famous quote is from his *Tischreden* (*Table Talk*): "I don't have a certain, special, individual language in German, but use the common German language, so that both the Over- and the Netherlanders can understand me. I speak according to the Saxon chancery, which all princes and kings in Germany follow; all imperial cities, princely courts write according to the Saxon chancery and that of our prince, and that's why it is the most common German language. Emperor Maximilian and Elector Friedrich of Saxony have thus pulled the German languages together into one certain language in the [Holy] Roman Empire." Given the earlier quotation from his Old Testament introduction, Luther is obviously talking about form here, not style. But it is also clear that, despite obvious differences, he discerns some kind of overarching unity in the writing traditions of the southeastern and Saxon chanceries, a unity arrived at before Luther himself came onto the scene.

Yet Luther was clearly also aware of the differences, and of the fact that in his own writings, especially the Bible translation, choices frequently had to be made, between words, forms, and spellings. And it is here that many scholars see his major contribution to the emerging standard. As a mediator between north and south, Luther obviously chose those phenomena he felt would gain his Bible the widest acceptance throughout the German-speaking realm. Often his choice fell on southern forms, in line with the already widespread acceptance of those forms. But in numerous other cases, for example, when a widely accepted northern word presented itself as the alternative to an equally widely accepted southern word, he chose the northern form.

Once made, the choice did not necessarily stick. Thus, although Luther initially followed the southeastern practice of dropping a final weak -e vowel in word roots and grammatical endings, in his Bible translation he ultimately reintroduced this vowel in line with east-central German written (and spoken) practice. This so-called *Luther'sche -e* (Lutheran -e) has contributed importantly to the preservation of the inflectional system (for example, plural or subjunctive markers) that distinguishes New High German from other Germanic dialects.

A comparison of Luther's Bible with a contemporary (southeastern) Catholic one reveals that, where the two make different choices, Luther's is usually much more in line with the modern standard language (Kluge, 33–35). This is certainly not to say that Luther always made the correct choice (a teleological notion one frequently encounters in these discussions); for example, Luther holds to a vocalic distinction between the preterite singular and preterite plural of many strong verbs that has been abandoned in the standard language, and had been abandoned by numerous contemporaries of Luther (thus Luther has *stieg, stigen* "he, they climbed" as opposed to the modern *stieg, stiegen*).

The linguistic level in modern German most often cited as showing the influence of Luther's Bible is the lexicon, including both word choice and word formation. It is far less easy to show any direct influence in the areas of syntax or inflection (the syntactic patterns he used can be found in many contemporaneous writings, the "Lutheran -e" was not just Luther's, and then there are the wrong choices such as *steig*). In a fairly recent (1990) article, von Polenz has made an interesting case for Luther's central role in the (northern-oriented) pronunciation principles of the German literary language, based not so much on his written Bible translation as on his own oral practice and that of his students.

On the whole, there seems little justification for calling Luther the "creator" or "founder" of the modern German language. But there is also little justification for the position taken by Schirokauer and others that Luther was basically irrelevant to the formation of the standard language. Moreover, one should keep in mind that it has now been more than 450 years since the last edition of the Bible was printed that Luther personally oversaw. Although in its time, it surely came closer to a living standard language than any other book, languages change. As early as the 17th century, some of the language Luther used was perceived as rare or obsolete (and thus hard for common folk to understand). Despite some revisions this situation has only gotten worse since then. The interesting question is, what should be done about it? Revise Luther's text extensively in the light of the modern language, even retranslate, or leave it as it is (with some apparatus allowing modern readers to decipher it)? It seems clear that Luther personally would have chosen the first option. While he certainly was capable of using a sacral style in his biblical ·passages, a style that often deliberately evokes a poetic feeling of ritual and even antiquatedness, he would hardly have wanted the whole Bible to end up conveying that feeling. Certainly he wanted the common folk to understand it.