
MLA Annual Convention, Washington, D.C., January 6–9, 2022

**Entity:** LLC 19th- and Early-20th-Century German

**Organizer:** Petra McGillen, Associate Professor of German Studies, Dartmouth College

**Moderators:** Petra McGillen and Vance Byrd, Frank and Roberta Furbush Scholar in German Studies, Associate Professor and Chair of German Studies, Grinnell College

**Short Panel Description:** We invite papers that critically engage the 19th-century notion and practice of Vielschreiberei from a variety of different angles, ranging from the aesthetics of mass-produced poetry and prose to digital-humanities methods of quantifying literary productivity.

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**Speakers and Abstracts:**

Ilinca Iurascu, Associate Professor of German, University of British Columbia:

*Everyone Their Own Printer: Hektography and the Multiplication of Vielschreiberei*

Despite its ample use over the course of the 19th century, the term *Vielschreiberei* increasingly takes on two distinct meanings after 1850. If Wolfgang Menzel’s history of German literature (1828) still employs it as an indictment of both poetic and bureaucratic overproduction, by mid-century the bellettristic and administrative applications of ‘excessive writing’ no longer coincide: whereas in the former context, the term continues to be organized around aesthetic categories (where “viel” predominantly remains code for lack of literary value), in the latter understanding, the label registers – in a narrower sense - critical attitudes towards the proliferation of paperwork at the heart of the labyrinthine German judicial and administrative systems. In this latter sense, *Vielschreiberei*, often coupled with the equally incriminated *Vielregieren*, becomes the “bürokratisches Unwesen” attacked (but also amplified) by the writings of cameralist reformers. Beyond the circulation of theoretical texts on the subject, the period is marked by the rapid rise of technical solutions, prefiguring Taylorist modes of workflow and data management capitalism. Most of these involve document multiplication technologies – from calligraphy to mimeography and from blue prints to the electric pen – but none of these seem as successful (and successfully forged) than hektography (patented in 1879), a practical, handy, DIY method of obtaining dozens of copies of handwritten documents by means of applying the sheets of paper onto a gelatin plate that bears the impression of the original. The hektograph (also advertised under its alternate name, the *Vielschreiber*) thus promises to reduce the manual labour involved in the production of multiple handwritten copies, indeed to entirely do away with (bureaucratic) *Vielschreiberei* (“Die Vielschreiberei ist vollkommen beseitigt,” as promotional ads put it). My focus will be not just on the rise and fall of this particular technology of document reproduction and the
inevitable textual proliferation it generates in administrative contexts; rather, I will suggest that, due to its immense popularity around the 1880s, the Vielschreiber crosses over from the late 19th c Wilhelmine office to the (literary) writer’s desk, where it is deployed towards new strategies of simultaneous textual dissemination and manuscript circulation.

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Malika Maskarinec, Assistant Professor of German Literature, Universität Bern:

*Love in an Age of Vielschreiberei: Affect and Paperwork in Keller’s “Die mißbrauchten Liebesbriefe”*

Gottfried Keller’s “Die missbrauchten Liebesbriefe” is perhaps the most incisive contemporary account and critique of the nineteenth-century phenomenon of Vielschreiberei. Keller published the novella in 1865, at which point he had given up supporting himself as a literary author and was instead employed, in the position of Staatsschreiber, as the canton of Zurich’s best paid bureaucrat. Against this biographical background, I propose to read the novella as a reflection of a bureaucratic division of labor and practices of paperwork including anonymous authorship, copying, and Protokolfführung. Vielschreiberei, the novella suggests, has as much to do with effective paper management as with the act of writing itself.

Drawing on Ben Kafka’s recent *The Demon of Writing*, in which he demonstrates how the pervasive presence of bureaucracy in modernity and the frustrations it inspires calls for myth-making, I furthermore intend to argue that “Die missbrauchten Liebesbriefe” thematizes not only the materiality of paperwork, but also the affective investments at stake in it.

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Ervin Malakaj, Assistant Professor of German Studies, University of British Columbia:

*Industrial Print Culture, Precarious Authors, and the Rise of the Literary Agent*

Some 19th-century critics of the conditions that gave rise to Vielschreiberei were more concerned about the material repercussions of mass-produced literature than about aesthetic quality. Considering the perspective of the literary agent is a case in point. For instance, between founding the Bureau für Vermittlung literarischer Geschäfte (1868–1902), which was likely the first long-standing German literary agency, and editing the agency’s periodical *Der literarische Verkehr* (1869–78), the Berlin-based publisher Otto Löwenstein (d. 1896) actively shaped a major part of the literary enterprise of his time. The central mission for both his agency and his periodical was to tend to the intellectual, creative, legal, and material needs of writers. In the context of proliferating publication venues 1850s onward—a time that also saw increased protections for some sectors of the print industry through the founding of new (e.g., Verband der deutschen Buchdrucker) or expansion of older associations (e.g., Börsenverein des deutschen Buchhandels)—Löwenstein thought that writers were left to their own devices, often at the mercy of market needs in ways that devalued their contribution and also exploited their precarious status. His agency and its periodical were thus conceived as venues that could remedy authorial precarity through advocacy that entailed recommendations.
and negotiations for honoraria, publication venues, and other support structures. In my presentation, I will examine the role of Vielschreiberei as articulated in the advocacy discourse that Löwenstein advanced. As a cipher for proliferating markets, Vielschreiberei was less a problem to be solved from the perspective of a literary agent than a matter to be “managed.” For cultural agents like Löwenstein, Vielschreiberei pointed to a strong demand for literature at the same time as it revealed structural inequities that turned literary writing into a risky business for writers who sought to make their living from it. By studying Löwenstein’s work, I will demonstrate how literary agents, far from seeking to eradicate, in fact aimed to manipulate—even amplify—Vielschreiberei.

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Michael Swellander, Visiting Assistant Professor of German, University of Iowa:

Substituting Tin for Bronze: How Censorship Made Vormärz Authors Publish Longer Books

The infamous provision of the 1819 Carlsbad Decrees that books of twenty octavos (320 pages) could be published without prior review by the state censor was an important condition for the composition of some of the most well-known Vormärz-era books. The provision, ironically referred to in critiques of it as “Zwanzigbogenfreiheit,” was seen as isolating emancipatory politics on the book market (“Zwanzig Bogen kauft man nicht,” wrote Robert Prutz), but also as a poetic and historiographical opportunity. Heinrich Heine states frankly in the final Reisebilder volume (1832) that he had appended a conclusion primarily to fill a final octavo and take his book over the 320-page threshold. The book’s overlong form, he insists, results from the demands of the times, or “Zeitnoth.” Here “Zeitnoth” carries the double significance of Heine’s rush to publish before his work could be suppressed, as well as the sense that his book, though made defective by a writing process he compares to substituting tin for bronze in sculpture, bore an irrepressible mark of the times. Heine suggests, as authors of Young Germany and the radical generation of 1848 would later, that the literary defectiveness of books with enforced length reflected an essential political, social, and aesthetic defectiveness of the present. My talk will discuss how three books, by Heine, Karl Gutzkow, and Ferdinand Freiligrath, respectively, approached the 20-octavo provision in different ways and will explore how state-imposed linguistic and material excess were integrated into their poetics of political critique. As Heine suggests his tacked-on conclusion has historiographical import, I argue that the essay appended to Gutzkow’s 1835 novel Wally, die Zweiflerin, whose content is typically considered immaterial to the novel, reflects on the historiography and politics of realism central to it while also lengthening the book. Freiligrath’s 1844 poetry collection, Ein Glaubensbekenntniss, is also historiographically self-conscious, using eccentric formatting (extensive fly-title pages, wide margins, etc.) to exceed 320 pages and become, in Freiligrath’s words, a “case” (“Einzelfall”) for a future history of censorship. This discussion will show how the Carlsbad Decrees, while limiting and isolating political speech in the German Federation, also encouraged poetic innovations.

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Polly Dickson, Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow, Durham University:

*Counter-Productivity and Overflow: Gottfried Keller as Doodler*

If Realism as a literary mode has been understood to privilege the reflective rather than the productive capacities of text, Realism as a literary movement has been associated with the ‘productivity’ of modern commercial labour practices. Indeed, Realism’s position at the centre of the expanding nineteenth-century book market turned the business of representation into one of seemingly unceasing commercial expansion and authorial productivity. In an 1854 letter to Alfred Escher, Gottfried Keller expresses his uneasiness at this situation, drawing a line between his desire for commercial success and his fear of the excesses of *Vielschreiberei*:

‘Ich werde so die nächsten 5 oder 6 Jahre unabhängig als Schriftsteller existieren können, ohne in Vielschreiberei zu geraten’.

It is from within this context that I focus my attention on the nineteenth-century authorial ‘doodle’ — a figure which can be understood as both counter-productive and non-representational — taking Keller and the playful, irreverent scrawls of his ‘Berliner Schreibunterlagen’ as case study. Authors’ doodles — those playful, irregular scribbles often found in the blank spaces of a manuscript — are invariably erased from the finished text, the printed book. Although Sunni Brown and others have recently hailed doodling as a tool to increase productivity in the modern workplace, doodles found on authors’ documents and manuscripts are more frequently regarded as traces of what Ernst Gombrich calls the ‘pleasures of boredom’. They are considered superfluous to the ‘real work’: both to the work of the text, that is, and to the labour of composition.

Yet, when understood as more than the idle fruits of procrastination, doodles can be usefully examined as critical reflections on labour and compositional practices in literature and art. Keller’s doodles across the ‘Berliner Schreibunterlagen’ both mirror and subvert the dreamed and feared excesses of *Vielschreiberei*. As words, names (Betty Tendering) and figures are endlessly repeated in tangles across the page, fusing image and text in new and unexpected ways, Keller’s doodles generate meanings that do not serve commercial, narrative, or representational ends. Like Heinrich Lee’s own ‘kolossale Kritzelei’ in *Der grüne Heinrich*, Keller’s doodles attest to the dream of an artistic practice freed from the trappings of productivity.

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Hansjakob Ziemer, Senior Research Fellow and Head of Cooperation, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science Berlin:

*A Vielschreiber’s World: Leopold Katscher and the Journalistic Practices at the End of the 19th Century*

Leopold Katscher (1853-1939) was one of the most prolific authors of his time. A truly transnational journalist living and working in European metropolises, he began his career in the feuilleton tradition of the last third of the 19th century. At the height of his career, he was writing about issues such as the consequences of electricity, the founding of utopian colonies in North America, women’s rights in China, or the shadowy world of nightclubs in Berlin.
Relying on a huge personal network across the continent, his publishing activities ranged from newspaper and journal pieces to books and translations of French and English into German. Katscher’s *Vielschreiberei* (prolificness) went hand in hand with playing multiple professional roles—as author, publisher, lawyer, translator, and women’s rights activist—which allowed him to advance a social and political agenda.

This paper explores how Katscher exploited to this end the potential of the feuilleton, derived from its only vague boundaries to literature and academia. By turning to this largely forgotten public figure of *fin de siecle*-Europe, I will argue 1) that *Vielschreiberei* was a highly accepted and journalistic practice at that time, and 2) that the feuilleton provided an open forum that allowed exchange across institutional boundaries and thematic fields which allowed *Vielschreiberei* to prosper. This paper will combine a biographical sketch and an analysis of his publishing and writing strategies within the journalistic world around 1900.

Specifically, by analyzing Katscher’s observational techniques, we can gain insight into how he adapted and adopted his writings to various purposes, and how he positioned himself with regard to novelists and scientists. The reminder of the paper seeks to define *Vielschreiberei* as both a journalistic practice and a social tool to address the general social questions of the day: How do we relate to one another? How does society work? How can we identify social risks and how can they be managed?