WHAT TRAVELERS SAW IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY GERMANY

Helmut Walser Smith
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

In the late eighteenth century, a way of seeing Germany focused on cities, states, territories, and people — a surface observable, measurable, countable, and mapable — ceded ground to a conception of country ascertainable through means less fathomable, with poetry — not politics — its source, sound — not sight — its primary sense, and language — not geography — its principal idiom. In his epochal *Cosmos*, published between 1845 and 1862, Alexander von Humboldt suggested this transition, not by distinguishing between “the external world and the imaginative faculty,” or between “the domain of objects and that of sensations,” but in his emphasis, in volume two, on “the impression which the images received by the external senses produces on the feelings and on the poetic and imaginative faculties of mankind.”1 Not merely outside, not just surface, the new way of knowing claimed the country was also something interior: perhaps even (though the word was not yet used) an identity.2 Interior seeing also had profound repercussions for how travelers perceived difference.

I.

As a way to know one’s land, there was nothing novel about travel. Sixteenth-century humanists counted on travel to arrive at empirical observation. They walked or rode horses from town to town, and when they arrived in cities, their first order of business was to climb the stairs of the high bell towers — 332 steps in Strasbourg, 401 in Ulm — in order to see the city in the cradle of the land.3 Humanists surveyed, described, sketched, mapped, and painted the place they called “our Germany,” especially its cities.4 But after the initial “century of intense wonder,” as Stephen Greenblatt calls the sixteenth century, a long period of decline and destruction cut into the earlier curiosity.5 There is no precise measure of this decline. Yet the small number of travel accounts, geographies, and territorial descriptions between 1660 and 1760 suggest a century-long dearth in interest and knowledge about Germany; thereafter an increasing density, followed by an explosion of publications in the 1790s. One index of contemporary travel reports published by Germans about the


3 *The Travel Journal of Antonio de Beatis through Germany, Switzerland, the Low Countries, France and Italy*, 1517-1518, ed. John R. Hale, trans. by Hale and J.M.A. Lindon (London, 1979), 29,50. On Ulm (before the spire’s nineteenth-century completion!), see Johann Georg Keyßler, *Neueste Reisen durch Deutschland, Böhmen, Ungarn, die Schweiz, Italien und Lothringen* (Hanover, 1751), 67.


German lands provides a rough measure: it lists three German-centered reports in the 1760s, twelve in the 1770s, twenty-eight in the 1780s, and sixty-seven in the 1790s.\(^6\)

In the span of two and a half centuries, a quiet revolution in the experience of space and the sense of time had occurred. The change was especially evident in land travel.\(^7\) By the mid-eighteenth century, an extensive network of roads had been built, and the horse-drawn carriage had supplanted two human legs as the primary means of travel. It was also much faster, the increase in speed as much as four fold depending on the route.\(^8\) In 1500, the trip from Hamburg to Augsburg took roughly thirty days, but by 1780, with coach routes crisscrossing the old Empire, that journey could be completed in approximately eight. The sense of space also became more precise. If circa 1500, there were only rudimentary maps, no signs telling people where to go to, or whether they had entered such and such town, from the beginning of the eighteenth century excellent regional road maps helped travelers on their way. They were made in great quantities by the firms of J.B. Homann in Nuremberg or Matthäus Seutter in Augsburg, and then peddled by itinerant map sellers, or delivered through the mail, thus finding their way into homes and becoming among the most widely circulated representations of territorial space in the German lands.\(^9\) Travelers also carried distance displayers (Meilenzeiger), allowing them to see at a glance how far one city was from another, just as milestones precisely paced out distances along heavily trafficked routes. The number of postal stations, where horses could be exchanged, also increased: by the 1760s, there were some 900 separate stations, their location marked on the postal maps of Homann and Seuter with a bent horn.\(^10\) For well-off women, traveling by coach became an accepted form of transportation, as it did for students, merchants (including Jews), and a host of professions.\(^11\)

A new sense of time accompanied the altered relation to space. In the age of Luther, most towns already sported public clocks. The bells tolling above the chaos of the day told people when to eat and when to pray, when to assemble and when to fight, and when to rejoice and when to mourn.\(^12\) The more elaborate clocks ordered not just quotidian but also cosmological time. The enormous clock on the cathedral of Strasbourg, for instance, contained a moving calendar and an astrolabe documenting the changing position of the sun, moon, and planets.\(^13\) The conjuncture reminds us that time, like space, must be cut into equal and measurable units in order to make sense of it,

---

6 Rough calculation based on the extensive online bibliography at the Eutiner Landesbibliothek: http://www.lb-eutin.de. Not included in my calculation are works written by foreigners or works published posthumously, both very significant in terms of numbers.


8 Wolfgang Behringer, Im Zeichen des Merkur, 664-5. The trip from Hamburg to Augsburg, which took roughly thirty days in 1500, took eight days three hundred years later.

9 Behringer, Im Zeichen des Merkur, 499-508.

10 Behringer, Im Zeichen des Merkur, 656, 40.

11 Behringer, Im Zeichen des Merkur, 479.


13 Carlo Cippola, Clocks and Culture (London, 1967), 44.
and just as artificial grids of longitude and latitude allows a visualization of an area’s extent, the counting of time by hours, minutes, and seconds enables an estimation of duration. By the seventeenth century, clocks had shortened their daily error from fifteen minutes to fifteen seconds; and around 1690 many new clocks came with minute hands, suggesting that time was not just intermittent, the sound of the hourly church bell, but constant and precise. Clocks were also no longer the preserve of church towers and municipal halls. In the early eighteenth century, the Black Forest had become a center for the production of pendulum clocks designed for homes, a small fraction of which were the famous cuckoo clocks, in which the call of a bird announces the hours. Pocket watches also became widely available and a de rigueur accessory for a man of standing. The uninterrupted sound of pendulums and escapements reminded of the fast passing of time.\textsuperscript{14} A general increase in pace followed, signaled by the proliferation of schedules, timetables, directives for officials to keep to the minute, and enlightened admonishments not to waste time but to fill it with industry. Even barracked soldiers moved with greater purpose, their marching speed increasing from 60 steps per minute in the army of Prince Leopold I of Anhalt-Dessau at the beginning of the eighteenth century to 114 steps per minute a hundred years later.\textsuperscript{15} By the end of the eighteenth century, carriages often left major cities many times a day; and in the densely trafficked roads of southern Germany, arriving could be calculated to the hour.

The day was also extended. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, major cities, like Hamburg, Berlin, Vienna, Hanover, and Leipzig had installed public oil lanterns, providing sources of light to urban corners otherwise illuminated only by personal lanterns or when torchbearers walked by. One could not, as a student claimed of Amsterdam in 1690, “pass through the crowds of people just as in broad daylight.”\textsuperscript{16} But the 1600 lanterns that went up in Berlin, to take one example, certainly changed the habits of the city, allowing public life, mainly for young men, to flourish into the hitherto dark hours. Taverns, coffee shops, and evening salons thrived in the new zones of illumination. The lighting remained restricted, however. Other cities adopted it only slowly. Frankfurt am Main did not put in public lighting until the Seven Years War, Nuremberg not until the end of the eighteenth century, and small cities and towns like Zwickau and Schwäbisch Hall were not illuminated until after the Napoleonic wars. Light, spectacle, perhaps in this sense enlightenment, remained tied to geographies of court and city.


bypassing the rural world, where at least three quarters of the people still lived.

II.

Perhaps the slow onset of nighttime illumination had something to do with the silence about rural towns, villages, and the people who lived in them. Until the 1770s, there were virtually no extended musings about the beautiful countryside, no appreciative hymns to the rural world, and no sympathetic reflections on the peasantry. Typical, instead, were the chronicles of Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach, polyhistor, student of Thomasius at Halle, who traveled through lower Saxony on his way to Holland and England in 1704. While giving extensive descriptions of cities and courts, he noted of the spaces in between only the distance traveled in German miles. In his extensive, multi-volume travel journals, Uffenbach mainly described curiosities, like the Greenland goose, two tigers, and a pair of lions (including an
especially endearing lioness) in the possession of the Duke of Hessen-Kassel.\textsuperscript{17} He also noted inventions, from massive cranes, to especially delicate weighing scales, to tiny mathematical instruments. He reported on newfound natural wonders, like Baumann’s Cave, and listed artistic treasures, as if providing an inventory for future travelers. Most of all, Uffenbach paid close attention to architecture, inspecting in each city the major churches, monasteries, municipal buildings, armories, theaters, schools, libraries, mills, and ramparts.

Exceptions to the exclusive focus on courts and cities are few, partial, and revealing: one is the unpublished journal of Albrecht von Haller, a young Swiss medical student now famous for penning one of the earliest poems praising the Alps. In his journey of 1725-1727, Haller was much impressed by the bounty of the land and the piety of the people of Württemberg; he also commented on their economic welfare, thinking they would be advantaged if the princes did not cordon off so much forest and land for their hunting amusement, especially as “wild boars and fallow and common deer are here so common as tame domestic animals.”\textsuperscript{18} Haller also had an eye for the ruined landscapes of the war-torn Palatinate, where “the churches are mostly burned down, the houses patched, everywhere rubble, many vineyards deserted, and poverty all around.”\textsuperscript{19} Another exception, in part, was the published travel report of Johann Georg Keyssler, an enlightened scholar of antiquities. Keyssler’s account, \textit{Travels through Germany, Bohemia, Hungary, Switzerland, Italy and Lorraine}, published in 1740-1741, similarly hints at a new appreciation of natural beauty, correcting the many travelers who see in Switzerland “little else than a confused chaos of barren rocks, craggy mountains, perpetual snows and gloomy valleys.”\textsuperscript{20} Like Haller, Keyssler remarked on social conditions, especially in Tirol, where “the commonality…are under a necessity of seeking bread in other parts,” and parents, before sending their young ones away, indelibly mark their child’s arms “with a needle or by point of knife” so that when they return many years later consanguinity may be ascertained.\textsuperscript{21} Yet if Keyssler’s keen eye rendered his account revealing and rich, his social insights made up the smallest part of his travel log. Mostly, he provided inventories of noble treasures, descriptions of the armories of minor princes, and lay accounts of architectural monuments.\textsuperscript{22}

When Germans travelled through Germany they overlooked — in the main and with the above qualifications — the people. Instead, travel reports recounted princely gossip, the condition of libraries, animals in zoos, and all manners of whalebones, sabre tooth tiger teeth, and
insects collected in curiosity cabinets. Travelers hazarded scattered remarks about religion, and sometimes took note of the bounty or barrenness of the land. Mainly, with respect to the rural world, there was silence. Diversity, as regards populations, was not considered. The people are not what travelers saw.

III.

In 1769, the novelist, publisher, and Aufklärer Friedrich Nicolai set off on a journey whose “main goal,” as he wrote “was: to observe people.” In the history of German travel, this was a novum. Packed with a host of inventions (including an odometer one could affix to the axle of the wagon, a writing table built into his coach, a fold out

---

bed, and “a kind of fountain pen one could carry in a pocket.” Nicolai took a land route south from Berlin, through Leipzig, Nuremberg, and Regensburg, then traveled by barge down the Danube to Vienna, where they spent four weeks in the “capital” of the Empire.24 Thereafter, he doubled back towards Munich, Augsburg, Ulm, Stuttgart, and Tübingen, before heading southwest through the Black Forest and to Schaffhausen on the Swiss border.25 It was not yet the halfway mark of the journey. Left were the cities of Switzerland, Strasbourg, and the route back through Frankfurt am Main and Hanover.26 During the trip, which lasted seven months, Nicolai kept a diary, now lost, that served as the basis for the twelve volumes that stopped with Nicolai’s entry on Schaffhausen on the Swiss border; the twelve volumes, in other words, constituted only the torso of a travel journal whose surface thoroughness knew no equal.

Nicolai believed in encyclopedic knowledge and precise statistical counting. He therefore offered table after table on such diverse topics as the measurement of distances, the price of grain, natality and mortality, the numbers of secular and religious corporations, the volumes housed in public and private libraries, the tally of theatergoers, and much else. “Germany,” he wrote in a prefatory letter, “consists of so many large and small countries, in which everything is different, position, climate, constitution, physiognomy and character of the inhabitants, religion, science, art, industry, and customs.”27 Its people, moreover, “are full of prejudices, mostly unfounded, against each other, and even hate each other, without truthfully knowing why.” Travel descriptions, Nicolai believed, would help Germans “bear and love one another.”28

Like no other eighteenth-century German traveler before him, Nicolai thus framed and focused on diversity. Yet prejudice, especially thick across religious lines, marred his account. He perceived pious Catholics as dull-witted and superstitious, monks as vile creatures with faces “twisted and disfigured,” and pilgrimages as “disgusting, uninteresting spectacles,” in which “so much time is lost in such miserable pietistic idleness.” He saw a nation divided not only in belief

24 Nicolai, GW 15, Beschreibung einer Reise durch Deutschland und die Schweiz im Jahre 1781, vol. 1, 16, 21.
25 Nicolai, GW 15, Beschreibung einer Reise durch Deutschland und die Schweiz im Jahre 1781, vol. 1, 16, 21.
27 Nicolai, GW 15, Beschreibung einer Reise, vol. 1, viii. The letter is addressed to Christian Konrad Wilhelm Dohm, who in 1781 published Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden, the work that initiated the debate concerning Jewish emancipation.
28 Nicolai, GW 15, Beschreibung einer Reise, vol. 1, viii. On the national idea behind Nicolai’s travels, see Françoise Knopper, Le regard du voyageur en Allemagne du Sud et en Autriche dans les relations de voyageurs allemands (Nancy, 1992), 84-88. On Nicolai’s central role in the publishing of the Enlightenment, see Pamela E. Selwyn, Everyday Life in the German Book Trade: Friedrich Nicolai as Bookseller and Publisher in the Age of Enlightenment (University Park, PA, 200).
and religious practices but also in its folkways, reading habits, and appearances. There was nothing self-evident in Nicolai’s emphasis on the impenetrable nature of what the historian Etienne François has called the “invisible border.” Traveling through the German southwest in the 1760s, the enlightened Catholic abbot Martin Gerbert noted instead the peaceful coexistence of religious groups, as in Biberach where Catholics and Protestants shared the same church, or the religious convivencia of any number of southwestern imperial cities, such as Lindau, Kempten, and Kaufbeuren.

Prejudice also occluded Nicolai’s view of ordinary people. It is true that unlike most enlightened travelers, Nicolai wrote as much about commoners as about the dignitaries he met in the cities or the curiosities he encountered at court. Yet the view was typically a glance stolen as he sped through villages in his coach. Sometimes the glance lengthened into a gaze. Yet he always seemed to see dull faces, miserable huts, indolence and idolatry. When two round-hatted Tyrolean peasants with brown vests and suspenders boarded his ferry in the Upper Austrian town of Engelhartszell on the Danube, he “observed them long and precisely and hardly saw anyone so stupid and bigoted.”

Nicolai based his deductions on the “science” of physiognomy, defined in broad terms as the “talent to discern from the outward appearance of a person his inner constitution,” as the Swiss doctor Johann Casper Lavater put it, and in narrow terms as the study of a person’s character by considering facial shape and expression. With Lavater, Nicolai shared a materialist premise — not “I think therefore I am,” but thinking presupposes the body, which is conditioned by the environment. He also believed the world is knowable by what appears to the senses; and that physiognomy, far from an exercise in prejudice, was a form of empiricism. Nicolai therefore followed Lavater’s logic concerning the shape and slant of human heads, the curvature of the lips, and the tapering of the neck, and believed that people could be read in this way. In the context of the time, there was even something democratic about the procedure. Not what caste one belonged to, or even the color and finery of one’s costume, but the exterior body, which humans share regardless of station, betrayed the nobility or baseness of a person’s character.

Nicolai saw the divisions of Germany as refracted through faces, especially of women, who Nicolai believed were not as mobile and therefore less likely to alter their “national physiognomy.” Of the Catholic city of Bamberg, he noted that the faces tended towards “the
uniformity of a limited national physiognomy” whereas in neighboring Nuremberg and Erlangen, both cities Protestant, more people possessed “perpendicularity in profile.”35 In Linz, he noted that young people had “something delicate, fine, soft,” but “when the years of their youth have passed, something fleshy, the muscles more hanging than taught.”36 The closer he came to Vienna, the more feminine the physiognomy of the people seemed — a result, he opined, of their tendency to enjoy delights and pleasures of all kinds. The femininity of the Austrians stood out against the Bavarians. “Here (in Bavaria) one saw among the common people many coarse, sure-handed guys with brown faces” and “lipless or very small lipped mouths; in Austria more pouting, kiss lips.”37 The admixture of Catholicism also altered the physiognomy of the people. In bi-confessional Augsburg, “the strangest of all the old cites,” the Protestants can be differentiated from the Catholics at first glance,” with the “Protestants approximating the Swabian national physiognomy, the Catholics the Bavarian.”38 For Nicolai, Swabian connoted mainly positive characteristics of satisfaction, calm, and generosity. The beauty of the women also impressed him.

If Nicolai’s insights seem superficial, they conformed to common opinions of a period when silhouettes were a widespread fashion and the markers of human diversity not yet set. Physiognomy was but one expression of this indeterminacy. In the 1770s, European scholars also debated the importance of skin complexion as an inner marker of worth, with major figures, like Count Buffon, Carl von Linné, and the Göttingen naturalist Johann Blumenbach dividing humanity into dermatological classes. In the 1795 edition of his epoch-making The Varieties of Mankind, first published in 1776, Blumenbach referred to these differentiations as “the national differences of color,” of which there were five: white, yellow, copper color, tawny, and tawny to jet black. In the well-powdered Europe of the 1770s, white skin still had a specifically aristocratic association, and was only beginning to be connoted in terms embracing European peoples to the exclusion of black Africans, Asians and the indigenous peoples in the Americas.39 Through the writings of Johannes Winckelmann, who believed the whiteness of Greek statues reflected “the noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” of cultivated perfection, whiteness assumed a new aesthetic reification — in art, but also in the perception of human beauty, with the exterior reflecting an ideal of inner perfection.40 Focusing on facial shape, skull size, and skin color, and the relationship of beauty to virtue, the German discussion of human variety partook of a wider, trans-Atlantic debate, conducted at the height of the slave trade and

36 Nicolai, GW 15, Beschreibung einer Reise, vol. 2, 256.
37 Nicolai, GW 17, Beschreibung einer Reise, vol. 6, 488.
38 Nicolai, GW 18, Beschreibung einer Reise, vol. 7, 32, 101, 62.
39 On this, see Valentin Groebner, Der Schein der Person: Steckbrief, Ausweis und Kontrolle im Mittelalter (Munich, 1992), 99-102.
carried on in Latin, French, English, and Spanish.41 A modern thinker, Nicolai traveled through Germany with eyes conditioned by the fundamental assumption of this wider debate, and this was, as Immanuel Kant put it with respect to physiognomy: that one can “judge what lies within a man, whether in terms of his way of sensing or his way of thinking, from the visible form and so from his exterior.”42

Nicolai spent four long volumes of his journal on Vienna, the capital of the Holy Roman Empire and easily the greatest city of eighteenth-century central Europe. Nicolai was not impressed with the city. He admitted that Vienna’s 3445 lanterns illuminated the night when Berlin remained sparsely lit.43 And he conceded that Vienna’s art museums contained fine galleries of Dutch and Flemish painting, including van Dyck and Rubens, ordered according to school, so that looking at the masterworks effected more than “temporary amusement of the eyes.”44 Otherwise, he thought Vienna closed to outside developments, impervious to enlightenment (except perhaps in music), hectic and cruel (he was especially critical of late baroque animal baiting), and loud (the church bells pealed without interruption). In literature and drama, the Viennese had little to boast — not one writer, in Nicolai’s opinion, that deserved the attention of the rest of Germany. He also complained that they engaged in constant gambling, eating, drinking, and merrymaking. In a word, the Viennese were shallow — not wrong, then, of the Viennese reformer Josef von Sonnenfels to call Nicolai’s judgment a “national insult.”45

Nicolai also commented on the aesthetics of town and country in Germany. His descriptions were less sensitive and more predictable than those of talented contemporaries, such as Johann Kaspar Riesebeck, who in his pseudonymous Letters of a Traveling Frenchman on Germany to his Brothers in Paris (1783) depicted as sublime the mountain cliffs at the foothills of the Alps, or Georg Forster, who in his Views of the Lower Rhine (1791), hazarded an early, if guarded, appreciation of the decidedly un-classical, and therefore un-beautiful, and as yet unfinished cathedral of Cologne.46 Yet Nicolai more faithfully reflected enlightened ways of seeing. He deemed ugly what seemed raw and uncultivated, like the Thuringian Forest, its mountains covered with pine trees “giving a monotonous and cheerless view,” or the “bad marshy fields, bearing only a miserable sour grass, which even the cows do not prefer,” west of Munich; or the “dense growths of pine and spruce” in the deep Black Forest, which Nicolai dismissed as “unfathomable woods not in the least handled by scientific

41 See The German Invention of Race, ed. by Sara Eigen and Mark Larrimore (Albany, 2006).
42 Cited in David Bindman, Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century (Ithaca, 2002), 95.
43 On Erlangen, Nicolai, GW 15, Beschreibung einer Reise, vol. 1, 163; and on Vienna and Berlin, Nicolai, GW 16, Beschreibung einer Reise, vol. 3, 211-213.
44 Nicolai, GW, 16, Beschreibung einer Reise, vol. 4, 501.
45 Sonnenfels cited by Nicolai, GW, 16, Beschreibung einer Reise, vol. 4, 895.
forestry.” The darkness especially dismayed him. In the wooded hills near Schaffhausen on the Swiss border, he recounted “the shine of the moon, which stood high behind the mountains, providing just enough muted light between the dense dark trees and the high reaching cliffs to allow us to see how ghastly the place was.”

The Description of a Journey through Germany and Switzerland in the Year 1781 was the most ambitious attempt of the eighteenth century to consider Germany as a whole, even if it mainly represented a north German, Protestant view on the Catholic south. Initially popular, the work started with subscriptions reaching over a thousand and early volumes going into multiple editions. Subsequently, however, its popularity waned, a result perhaps of its sheer bulk, but also because it stood at the end rather than the beginning of a way of seeing Germany. “Nicolai still travels, he will travel long.” Goethe and Schiller wrote in a caustic distich, “but in the land of reason he can no longer find the way.” The winds of intellectual change had left Nicolai unmoved, Goethe and Schiller opined, except that he remained the mortal enemy of all that was beautiful in the new art, poetry, and philosophy. Criticism more savage still came from the university town of Jena, where a young philosopher criticized Nicolai’s travel journal for pedaling banalities with regard to religion (“there are Catholics, and they really are Catholic”), and for the presumption that the Enlightener could comment on anything, whether he understood it or not, once he had simply seen it. “[Our hero] was simply incapable,” the sardonic critic wrote, “to go even a line under the surface and to the interior of whatever object.” The critic was Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and the elder Nicolai had written a persiflage of his and Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling’s idealism, rendering ridiculous their new “I philosophy.” The exchange, however impolite, got to the heart of the matter — whether a place can be known by examining its surface, as if moving along a life-sized map, or by probing its interior as expressed in its thought and literature. To understand a people, Fichte averred, one must probe deeper.

IV.

Genuine interest in the people was hardly self-evident. In early modern times, the people of a nation comprised different estates, with the mass of the people, the peasantry, constituting the lowliest and least important caste. Rustics might be pitied for their burdens, or examined for their exotic customs, but never extolled for their virtue. This had been true at the time of Luther, and a quarter of a millennium later little had changed. Travelers saw the common people from their fast-moving coaches:

---

47 Nicolai, GW 15, Beschreibung einer Reise, vol. 1, 64;
49 Horst Möller, Aufklärung in Preussen: Der Verleger, Publizist und Geschichtsschreiber Friedrich Nicolai (Berlin, 1974), 112.
50 Friedrich Schiller, Gedichte, ed. Georg Kurscheidt, in Friedrich Schiller, Werke und Briefe, vol. 1, ed. Otto Dann et al. (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), 600.
52 Nicolai, GW 20, Beschreibung einer Reise, vol. 11, 121-2.
Keyssler pitied them; Lavater studied their shapes, and Nicolai reflected on how to improve their lot. No German Aufklärer wished to step out of his coach and walk among them. Yet by the 1770s, the period of Sturm und Drang, a sentimental sense of the people had begun to set in. One can see this in the contented, industrious English peasants in the paintings of Thomas Gainsborough, or in the depictions of upstanding French families rendered by Jean-Baptiste Greuze. Rousseau was the source of this new sentimentality, which also drew on the encounter with peoples in the South Pacific. One may speculate that the “agricultural revolution,” aided by the beginnings of a general warming of the climate, also contributed to a sense that the rural population was finally winning its battle against harsh nature. In England, where artists painted yeoman farmers in an unthreatening countryside, the scales had already tipped, with widespread undernourishment and even famine visiting the countryside less and less frequently. The result, as the historian Wolfgang Hardtwig has suggested, was the coming to a close of a strict European division between the prosperous civilization of the cities and the raw fight for subsistence that characterized the countryside, so that for the first time denizens of cities could imagine their rural compatriots as belonging to the same cultural universe.

In the German lands, the dramatic increase in travel reports, accelerating in the 1780s, taking off in the 1790s, reflected new possibilities of seeing and a new interest in both place and people. Books rolled off the press explaining how to travel, where to stay, and what to see, “since only a few years ago have people begun to understand that it is also beneficial to travel Germany,” as one collator of travel descriptions put it. A few travel journals were written in the old style and described courts and cities. Some mixed the old and the new. In My Travels in the German Fatherland, Johann Christoph GutsMuths, a pioneer in gymnastics and the prophet of freer bodily movement, wrote especially detailed comments on Dresden and Prague, penned reflective accounts of the isolation of the Riesengebirge, and wrote of the miners in the Ore Mountains, even mentioning the pittance children earned in the mines. Spurred by the French Revolution, a number of travel journals assume a decidedly critical stance: this was famously the case in Georg Forster’s Views from the Lower Rhine, which chronicled his journey with the young Alexander von Humboldt through the Rhineland and into revolutionary Holland and France; but it was true too of the unheralded Johann Ludwig Ewald, court pastor in Detmold who appended to a journal of his journey from Hamburg to Lübeck a reverie about a future — in 1898 — when the nations have arrived at an understanding of how to


56 Johann Ernst Fabri, ed. Neue Reisebeschreibungen in und über Deutschland (Halle, 1786–1791), vols. 1–6, preface to vol. 1.

57 Johann Christoph Friedrich GutsMuths, Meine Reise im deutschen Vaterlande: Aus Thüringen ins Riesengebirge zu den Elbquellen und durch Böhmen ins Erzgebirge (Breslau, 1799).
maintain peace and standing armies are mainly engaged in civilian work. Some travel accounts exemplified an altogether new sensibility about village life. Spurred on by the literature of *Sturm und Drang*, and by the travel writer Johann Kaspar Riesebeck’s injunction that “one has to mix with all classes of people that one wants to get to know,” young people ventured from cities and university towns into the rural countryside. In his unpublished manuscript of his wandering with a friend into the Alb between Tübingen and Ulm, the theology student Friedrich Köhler recorded the appearance of the people, the condition of their dwellings (most houses still roofed with straw), customs of rough justice (in the village of Upfingen near Urach a so-called “whore’s chair” [Hurenstuhl] was reserved for unwed mothers), village and peasant food (increasingly potatoes, not just grain, especially after the famine of 1771/2), and the style and color of regional costumes worn on Sundays and on special holidays.

V.

The profusion of travel reports, published and unpublished, tell of a country that in an enlightened age could be known by visiting cities, looking at the physiognomy of its people, inspecting its churches and great buildings, admiring its vistas, marveling at its gardens, viewing its art, and documenting its libraries: in short, by seeing the surface. There was also an interior, discernable in the country’s basic rhythms in rhymes and folk songs, in the coarse, unmannered ways of its people, in the power of common poetry, and in the feeling of the landscape, melancholic and tragic in turn. By the 1790s, young intellectuals were beginning to bring the two ways of knowing together, creating a novel, interiorized sense of country.

In 1793, as Nicolai composed the final volumes of his travels through Germany, an as yet unknown nineteen-year-old student named Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder wrote a series of letters documenting his more modest travels to the forests, mountains, and cities of Franconia. A starker contrast between ways of seeing is difficult to imagine. Whereas Nicolai travelled speedily along well-trodden roads in a horse-drawn coach, Wackenroder rode on horseback or walked with his friend, Ludwig Tieck; the two galloped along paths, trekked up mountains, wandered through back alleys, and climbed into caves. A major intellectual figure, Nicolai intended his weighty volumes for an enlightened audience he had helped to create; Wackenroder, enrolled at the provincial University of Erlangen, wrote to his parents, and asked for money. Announced with great fanfare, Nicolai’s volumes found an eager audience, and were

debated with esprit; by contrast, Wackenroder’s letters remained locked in his family’s papers and closed to the world.

Yet it is the travel letters, first published nearly a century after Wackenroder’s untimely death from typhus in 1798, that signaled the turn in the imagination of place. The turn involved heightened attention to the senses, and the experiential immediacy of natural beauty. “Sensual beauty for the eyes can only be experienced completely by the eyes, in the original nature, or in the copying of the paint brush,” Wackenroder wrote.61 His comparison of the experience of nature with art proved revealing. Four years later, Wackenroder and Tieck would publish one of the most important early documents of German Romanticism, *The Heartfelt Effusions of an Art-loving Monk*, in which the young authors insisted that the true love of art is necessarily opposed to the systematizing of art, that great art is of divine origin, and that the experience of looking at art was akin to prayer.

In order to experience the beauty of nature, Wackenroder and Tieck climbed the rounded peaks of middle Germany, such as the Ochsenkopf in the Fichtel Mountains, from which the two friends could see the source of the Main River. Precisely when the details were far and indistinct, the expansive views presented “much that is sublime,” with Wackenroder likening the panoramas to paintings in a gallery.62 The son of a jurist interested in mineralogy, and an eager reader of Ossian, Wackenroder was also fascinated by the jagged caves of Franconian Switzerland, of which the recently discovered Rosenmüller Cave was for its stalactites and stalagmites “the most beautiful.”63 Whereas Nicolai had favored the flattened vistas of a well-ordered landscape, Wackenroder was drawn to the unpredictable, sometimes threatening, vertical formations of rock and cliff. But he did not long for nature untouched. Both Wackenroder and Tieck also sought out the ruins nestled among the craggy rocks and hills, such as the Burg Neideck, its medieval walls clinging to the cliffside.

The jagged mountain not the flowered field, ruins not palaces, the medieval not the modern, the suggestive not the complete: these predilections defined some of the elemental differences, if still in embryo, between the young Wackenroder and the elder Nicolai. Stunning, too, was their perception of the people, especially in Catholic Bamberg. Although Wackenroder followed Nicolai in the enlightened critic’s insistence that there was a Catholic physiognomy, he took an altogether different tone towards Catholic ritual, giving us a remarkably sympathetic rendition of holy services across the line of religious division — so

---


62 Ibid., 175.

63 Ibid., 177.
sympathetic, in fact, that a later owner of the letters, perhaps Tieck, struck the passages for purposes of publication. In these passages, Wackenroder marveled at the activity in the crowded cathedral. “Some read abidingly in their prayer books, others prayed standing with the rosary, and still others knelt piously quite close to me,” he recounted, “and the ceremonies, which changed every minute, made a stronger and more wonderful impression on me the more mysterious and incomprehensible they were.” Influenced by Goethe’s aesthetics, Wackenroder also gazed at the many towers, spires, walkways, and statues of the Gothic cathedral, and while he admired the paintings by old German masters, he omitted mention of the famous Bamberg Riders, perhaps because the cathedral’s baroque craftsmen had painted the horse white and the king’s belt and crown gold.

Wackenroder was also the first to rediscover the Franconian city of Nuremberg. Travelers, including Nicolai, had passed through Nuremberg reading the polymath Christian Gottlieb von Murr’s then famous description of the imperial city’s curiosities; it listed all of the city’s scholars and artists, and many of its buildings, churches, and cloisters, evincing pride in Nuremberg’s achievements, but remaining silent, as Nicolai complained, about its decline and embarrassed about its crooked streets and late medieval Gothic appearance. Precisely the old attracted Wackenroder, however. “I cannot but sufficiently wonder at the city,” he wrote, “because one cannot find a single new building, but many old ones, from the tenth century onward, so that one feels placed in ancient times and expects to meet a knight or monk or a townsman...”

Editors’ commentary in ibid., 577.

Editors’ commentary in ibid., 581.

Christoph Gottlieb von Murr, Beschreibung der vornehmsten Merkwürdigkeiten in des H. R. Reichs freyen Stadt Nürnberg und auf der hohen Schule zu Altdorf (Nürnberg, 1778).
in old costume.” Wackenroder called the city “Romantic” — for “with every step one has a view of ancient times and of a work of art in stone or color.” It boasted an abundance of fountains — Nicolai had counted 112 — “some with small towers and many figurines,” and endless crooked streets and alleys flanked by houses confusedly shoved into one another. Wackenroder also admired Nuremberg’s churches, especially St. Lorenz, its central nave narrow and high, and its windows almost all stained glass, “so that the colors seem to burn.” And of course he was astounded by its artists, especially Dürer, whose “Apostles” — in copy — showed Dürer to be a genuine genius, “a German Raphael.”

The gentle comparison suggests the quiet of Wackenroder’s national tone. It was not until the Heartfealt Effusions of 1797 that Wackenroder’s aesthetic sense took on the character of a statement about German art, and Nuremberg the qualities of a program for national renewal in the arts. There we read about “the art of our old fatherland,” and Nuremberg as its teacher, and observe Wackenroder daring the comparison with the city of Raphael: “Are not Rome and Germany both of this world?,” he asked. But modern art in Germany remained too tied to the whims of princes, who prefer “a superficial exercise of the senses,” and it has lost its connection, visibly expressed in Dürer’s art, to “the serious and sublime.” Unlike Albrecht Altdorfer and the painters of the Danube school, who had vanished from artistic discussion in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, Dürer remained in public consciousness — but mainly as the German painter who had mastered Italian technique. Against this conventional wisdom, Wackenroder insisted that Dürer achieved greatness because he remained true to himself, a German at home more among Gothic vaults than Corinthian pillars.

The turn to the medieval world of knights and ladies, the nostalgic longing for the past, and the praise of raw landscape — these features would soon take on greater meaning. In 1799, two years after Wackenroder’s passing, a remarkable group of young intellectuals came together in the small university city of Jena, at the time numbering no more than 5,000 souls. Students and writers, not one over twenty-five years old, they included Wilhelm and Caroline Schlegel; Friedrich Schlegel and his future wife, Dorothea Veit; Friedrich von Hardenberg (better known by his pen name Novalis); and Clemens Brentano and Wilhelm Tieck. There were also philosophers: Fichte had settled here in 1794, and would remain until 1799, when his subversive ideas concerning religion proved too radical for Karl August, Duke of Saxe-Weimar. There was

---

68 Wackenroder, Reisebriefe, 187. He did not have the same view of neighboring Fürth, where in 1792 nearly a quarter of the population was Jewish, and remarked only that “Fürth is a town rife with artisans and Jews. Everyone is busy and has a trade. Jews offer all sorts of things to buy.” Wackenroder, Reisebriefe, 226. Aside from Fürth, Wackenroder did not report on any of Franconia’s so-called Judendörfer, villages where Jews made up a significant percentage of the population.

69 Ibid., 188.

70 Ibid., 187, 188.

71 Ibid., 222.

72 Ibid., 190.


74 Ibid., 92.
also Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, whose early writings took idealism in a transcendental direction. And, in 1801, there was Hegel, as yet a philosophical mediator between Fichte and Schelling.

The intellectual hothouse of Jena dissolved in that year, principally with the early death of Novalis. In the following January, Schlegel would leave Jena and travel to Dresden, where he had first encountered classical art, and on to Leipzig, Weimar, and across middle Germany en route to Paris. In a series of epistles intended for Wilhelm Tieck, Schlegel described this trip as a personal journey, a Bildungsreise, in which he discovered his self and a new sense of his country, which for him was Germany. As he followed the landscape, he knew he could not describe each view, only a few stark impressions, of which the first, strongest, and most lasting was the sight of the Wartburg, perched upon “a single mountain surrounded by forest and enveloped by cliffs and valleys and hills.” Abandoning empiricism, he related what the scene conjured — “the memory of the times, when poetry was here in full bloom and in all of Germany there was a general sense of life, love, and gaiety,” and “one still had a fatherland.” Crestfallen that contemporary Germans, huddled in ordinary houses around country roads, had abandoned their heights, their poetry of old, and their life upon the cliffs, he conceded that “patience has become our primary national virtue and next to this modesty.”

Only one other encounter evoked such nostalgia: the first sight of the Rhine. Foreigners — whether the Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe in her A Journey Made in the Summer of 1794 through Holland and the Western Frontier of Germany, or Abbate de Bertola, poet, scholar, and mediator to Italy of the new German literature — had already word-painted the river in Romantic hues. In his Viaggio sul Reno, Bertola had described the colors and shades, shapes and turns, of the middle Rhine, much as would a “guide through an art gallery familiar to him.” Schlegel, however, rendered the river as a source of “memories of what the Germans once were, and what they could become.”

The Romanticization of landscape evoked an interior, subjective, national feeling — not mere pride in the outstanding features of a country, but a deeper sense of an identity between subject and object, viewer and nature, person and place. If the prosaic starting point of this Romanticizing of the land was Rousseau, its philosophical bearing was in the “productive imagination” of Fichte. Its most faithful mirror was, however, reflected in Schelling’s transcendental idealism, which assumed — contra Fichte — that there really were objects out

---

76 Ibid., 8.
77 Ibid., 11.
79 Schlegel, “Reise nach Frankreich,” 15.
there, and that they had an existence independent of the mind. If philosophy gave the new view shape, poetry gave it expression. “The world must be romanticized,” the young, brilliant, poetically gifted Novalis wrote, in order to find again “its original meaning” and “to give the common a mysterious visage, the known the grandeur of the unknown, and the finite the appearance of the infinite.”

From the very first, this was an operation of salvage, a project of recovery. The Romantics stood for, and pushed forward, a shift in the conception of nationhood from an exterior object of identification — the country one pictured, counted, and described from the comfort of a fast moving coach — to an interior identity, which one felt, and to which, however haltingly and still very qualified, one began to say, “this is who I am.” Paradoxically, the dreamlike, backwards-looking, interiorized view led to more sympathetic accounts of the countryside and a greater appreciation, if still more in theory, for the people. At least in intent, the young Romantics tried to listen to common speech, to consider religious practices in a way that was not merely dismissive, to expand the sense of Germany’s architectural and artistic riches, and to apprehend and experience nature with something more than its utility in mind. All of this led to eyes fixed on greater, if still qualified, diversity. The Romantics also slowed vision down. A half century later, one of Germany’s most acute recorders, Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, understood this well enough. In a remarkable essay entitled the “The Landscape Eye,” a short history of how Germans saw their own country, Riehl derided the “pony-tail period” for its preference for wide-open, neatly manicured, easily traversed, and precisely cultivated landscapes and its blindness to the beauties of the rougher land and its rural people. But Riehl wrote in the middle of the nineteenth century and walked through a small town countryside rapidly vanishing. It is too much to claim he was a Romantic camera. But his realism likewise took in greater diversity, and he understood that light as often obscures vision.

Helmut Walser Smith is Martha Rivers Ingram Professor of History at Vanderbilt University. He the author of a number of books on modern German history, including The Butcher’s Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town (Norton, 2002) as well as The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Race across the Long Nineteenth Century (Cambridge UP, 2008), and the editor of The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History (Oxford UP, 2011). He is currently working on a book on conceptions of the German nation before, during, and after nationalism.