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Alfred D. White

## Choose not these Vices

Social Reality in the German Novel  
1618–1848

Peter Lang

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# Introduction

The first critic whom I know to have advised the use of literary texts for the purposes of the social historian, before social history had even been invented, is Victor Fournel: the novels of the French *grand siècle*

méritent encore d'être lues et relues, comme d'inépuisables mines de renseignements sur les mœurs et les usages de l'époque, sur les opinions qui s'y reflètent avec plus de vicacité et d'exactitude, et pour ainsi dire avec plus d'abandon familial, qu'elles ne pouvoient le faire dans des romans grecs et assyriens [...]<sup>1</sup>

This argument, not unusual a hundred years ago, has been severely wounded by more modern notions of historical science, but should not be abandoned. In a previous book (White 2000) I set up criteria, albeit vague ones, for taking novels of literary quality as sources of social historical information. Derived from novels dealing with eras for which good non-fictional sources are available, these awaited their test against German novels from earlier epochs, which if my thesis was correct must be capable of ranking a priori as social-historical sources and being incorporated accordingly into the historian's range of data. Here there are fresh difficulties to surmount: particularly changing definitions of truth, the status of novel in the earlier period, and the quality of the novels. In Germany novel achieved the status of a prime literary genre with Goethe, so for the later period I assumed that novel is a possible (or even preferred) vehicle for serious views on society. For the time before *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* this cannot be taken for granted. The novel is socially inferior and generally expected to be aesthetically inferior. Few would argue that novelists between

1 Are still worth reading and reading, as inexhaustible mines of information on the manners and habits of the epoch, its opinions which are reflected there more lively and exactly, with more careless familiarity so to speak, than they could be in the Greek and Assyrian novels (Fournel 1857, 1).