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**George Washington, Frederick the Great, and  
the Emergence of National Literary Cultures:  
A Transatlantic Comparison**

**Introductory Remarks**

This essay offers a comparison of two central political and cultural figures in transatlantic history and culture, George Washington and Frederick the Great.<sup>1</sup> It places them in the context of developments in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which saw the emergence of new nation states and, in their wake, the emergence of new national literary cultures. The United States and Prussia were newly founded nation states that had not existed before the eighteenth century. Their leaders George Washington and Frederick the Great were widely perceived at the time as embodying their respective nations as well as the enlightenment ideas on which they purported to be based. These two leaders also, less obviously but nevertheless significantly, influenced the national literary cultures that co-emerged in this process of new nation-building on both sides of the Atlantic. The essay addresses this curiously under-researched transatlantic relationship in two main parts.

In the first part, drawing on the only existing systematic study on the subject by Jürgen Overhoff,<sup>2</sup> the essay argues that George Washington and Frederick the Great had much more in common than is usually assumed in spite of their obvious differences in personality, life and political orientations. They shared crucial enlightenment ideas of reason, freedom, and just government, even though their paths of the enlightenment led them in different, indeed opposite directions, and the reality of political-social practice in both of these states often blatantly contradicted those ideas. In this comparison, the essay integrates new research in George Washington studies, which suggests

that the traditional, one-dimensional image of George Washington as a rather uneducated military leader and pragmatic man of action needs to be revised, and more emphasis should be placed on his life as a man of letters with a hitherto underestimated affinity to culture, education, and the arts.<sup>3</sup> In this context, a comparison with Frederick becomes more plausible than at first glance, since Frederick was likewise not only a successful general and, at times ruthless, military leader but was famously, if exaggeratedly so, considered in his time as “philosopher on the throne.”<sup>4</sup> The comparison sheds new light on both Washington and Frederick, who were not simply the iconic founding fathers that retrospectively could be claimed for nationalistic agendas, as patriotic myths would have it. Rather, they were cosmopolitically minded leaders implicated in unresolved contradictions between national self-interest and enlightenment ideals, who nevertheless participated in a spirit of intellectual and cultural exchange beyond the ideological confines of individual nationhood.

In its second part, the essay connects this historical with a literary perspective and addresses the significance of these political leaders for the new national literatures which, with some temporal delay, emerged in response to the new developments in the political scene. This relationship between political leadership and literary culture is of course not unidirectional, let alone deterministic. Literature and the arts respond as much to their own internal aesthetic and stylistic developments as to the political-historical circumstances in which they are situated. Also, the United States with its political independence had already been established, at least in principle, as a unified nation, whereas Prussia was still only one core state within a multi-state Germany that went through a highly contested process of nation-building long into the nineteenth century. And yet, in spite of the obvious differences, there are some revealing parallels between the two emergent nations in that, already early in their development, calls were made for distinct national literary cultures that would be the cultural equivalent of the political independence that had been gained or was to be gained in the future.

In these attempts to establish independent literary cultures, George Washington and Frederick played a considerable but ambivalent role. On the one hand, they inspired the rise of a patriotic form of celebratory literature that elevated the nation to a supreme value for culture and the arts, as in the ‘rising glory poetry’ of post-revolutionary America, or in the nationalistic literary circles that emerged in Germany after the Napoleonic wars. On the other hand, this form of literature tended towards propaganda, stereotypes and ideology which, paradoxically, prevented it from achieving the internationally recognized literary stature to which they claimed to aspire. The great authors and works of literature that did finally gain this stature in the German

*Goethezeit* and in the American Renaissance, respectively, basically turned this paradox into the principle of their creativity. They created a form of national literary culture which was, in its very core, defined as transnational and cosmopolitan. Precisely in the ways, therefore, in which these literatures and writers developed in critical autonomy from the direct influence of political leaders or ideas, they corresponded much more to the transnational, cosmopolitan ideas of George Washington and Frederick than those writers who had deferentially tried to imitate their examples.

The essay thus addresses issues that involve various wider research agendas which obviously cannot be addressed in their full implications within the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, combining them in the condensed space of a comparative analysis reveals aspects of mutually relevant historical and cultural developments that otherwise remain outside the range of scholarly attention. One of the significant points of this transatlantic comparison is that it indicates a shared legacy of German American relations that may have surprising relevance in the context of a contemporary political and cultural landscape characterized by the return of narrow nationalisms on both sides of the Atlantic.

## I

At first glance, George Washington and Frederick could not be more dissimilar in their character, lives, and political agendas. George Washington was the founder of a modern democratic republic, Frederick an absolutist ruler in Europe. Frederick was the son of a tyrannical father, highly contradictory in his personality, with both liberty-loving and repressive character traits, a soldier yet with a strong literary-musical inclination, openly homoerotic<sup>5</sup> and sharply critical of dogmatic Christianity. George Washington, who had lost his father at the age of eleven and grew up with a dominating mother, was a surveyor and clever land speculator besides being a successful military and political leader with a belief in the foundational role of Christian religion and morality for his independent new republic.

Nevertheless, in spite of such evident differences, a comparison between the two leaders also reveals significant parallels that only move into focus in a transnational extension of national political and cultural history. George Washington and Frederick the Great were contemporaries who were leading figures on the political stage of the world at their time, and their lives and actions were involved in events that shaped the century. Frederick lived from 1712 to 1786 and ascended the throne in 1740, so his active political life overlapped with that of Washington for more than 30 years. While the literature on each of these historical leaders fills whole libraries, there is an

astonishing lack of research on their relationship. There is so far only one book-length study on the subject by Jürgen Overhoff published in German, titled *Friedrich der Große und George Washington: Zwei Wege der Aufklärung* (Overhoff 2011). As Overhoff points out, George Washington and Frederick the Great as leaders of the United States and of Prussia respectively were celebrated in their time as personifications of two model states based on enlightenment principles.

Both of these states had emerged from protestant traditions yet practiced religious and intellectual tolerance. Both derived their legitimacy from a rational consensus between the ruler and the ruled—one in a democratic-republican form, the other monarchic. Both were based not on ethnic identity but on a culturally diverse community of citizens. The United States, though predominantly Anglo-Saxon, was multiethnic from the beginning; Prussia's citizens were not only Germans but also Poles, Bohemians, and Huguenots that were elsewhere persecuted for political or religious reasons. The language of Frederick's court was French, his guests there often major figures of the French enlightenment. As George Goodwin writes in a review of Tim Blanning's biography of Frederick, he "was an autocrat, not a despot" (Goodwin 2016: 65). And in his useful entry on Frederick on the Mount Vernon Library website, Jamie Slaughter aptly describes Frederick as a "renaissance man in the age of reason," who was important to the U.S. and the world beyond his military accomplishments, abolished judiciary torture and press censorship, and created "laws on religious and social freedoms that were fundamental in defining the concept of liberty." (Slaughter).<sup>6</sup>

Of course, these new enlightened nation states were highly idealized versions of themselves. In the case of Prussia, the imposition of military discipline and the subordination of citizens to the authority of the state contradicted the emancipatory idea of the enlightenment that Kant had famously defined in his treatise "What Is Enlightenment" as "mankind's exit from its self-incurred immaturity", whereby "immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another" (Kant 1784: 481).<sup>7</sup> In the case of the U.S., the continued practice of slavery and the exclusion of women, the poor, and non-whites from political participation represented a source of long-term cultural divides and posed a conspicuous contradiction to the self-proclaimed ideals of the republic.

The characters and lives of these two leaders also showed some remarkable similarities in spite of their differences: Both Frederick the Great and George Washington were successful generals whose strong personality had decisively helped to unify their nations; both respected each other for these qualities as military leaders and reacted to each other with mutual admiration. Washington had in fact ordered a large bust of Frederick from London

for Mount Vernon, which in the end was not delivered for logistical reasons.<sup>8</sup> Frederick in turn repeatedly expressed his high respect for George Washington's exceptional skills and courage as a general. There is a well-known legend that Frederick sent a sword to George Washington in 1780 with the inscription "From the oldest General in the world to the Greatest."<sup>9</sup> Even though the historical evidence is doubtful, a sword believed to be a gift from Frederick was apparently kept in the Washington family and had its moment later in history when John Brown captured the sword, together with two pistols of Lafayette, from the great-grandnephew of George Washington during his raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859 (Andersen 1861). In the Seven Years' War—in America the French and Indian War—Frederick and Washington had been de facto allies, since Prussia fought together with Britain against an alliance of France, Austria, and Russia and thus kept a significant number of French troops bound to Europe, which decisively diminished their forces in America. In various letters to Europe, George Washington inquired about the military fortunes of Frederick, who like Washington took extreme risks and was often on the brink of defeat but came out victorious in the end due to a mixture of daring and luck. In the Revolutionary War, the contribution of Baron von Steuben as General, who had served in Frederick's army, brought Prussian military expertise to the Continental army when, on the recommendation of Benjamin Franklin, whom he had met in France, von Steuben joined George Washington in Valley Forge in 1778 at a critical phase of the war. One of the books Washington read with special interest at that time of crisis was Frederick's *Instructions for His Generals*, which had been translated into English (Hayes 2017: 187). As Kevin Hayes concludes in his study *George Washington: A Life in Books*: "According to the popular perception of him in North America, Frederick the Great possessed many of the same qualities Washington admired and sought to cultivate in himself" (Hayes 2017: 104–5).

These transatlantic resonances go beyond military qualities. The long-standing image of George Washington as a plain, rather uneducated man of action has been relativized recently, even though of course he didn't have the same brilliance and lively exchange with the international intellectual elite as a Franklin or Jefferson. However, as Scott M. Cook and William Earl Klay argue, there is sufficient evidence from Washington's letters that "he had a solid understanding of the core ideas" of enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and the founder of the Scottish enlightenment, Frances Hutchinson, who not only influenced Jefferson in the writing of the Declaration of Independence but also George Washington in his emphatic advocacy of education for the future of the republic (Cook and Klay 2014: 46). The liberal education that he endorsed was not merely utilitarian but included history, philosophy and foreign languages. In a well-known message to Congress in 1790

Washington told the assembly: “Nor am I less persuaded, that you will agree with me in opinion that there is nothing which can better deserve your patronage than the promotion of science and literature. Knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness” (qtd. in Cook and Klay 2014: 47). Frederick would have agreed, even though he was influenced by French rather than British enlightenment thinkers.

On a personal level, both George Washington and Frederick the Great shared a bibliophilic passion for books and libraries. Both cherished landscape gardens and were themselves gardeners; both loved animals and especially their dogs; both recognized their own limits as human beings but believed in divine providence as the guiding force of history which had put them in their positions; both wished to be buried in their representative residences in Mount Vernon and Sanssouci respectively.

The differences between the political systems they represented, however, became increasingly evident in the course of the Revolutionary War, when the newly achieved American independence from the British king entailed a radical criticism of all monarchic-autocratic political systems, a process which also changed the long-standing mutual admiration of the two leaders, notwithstanding a trade treaty between the two countries in 1785, which formally made them allies. This alienation is reflected in a letter by George Washington to Lafayette in the year of Frederick’s death in 1786. In the letter, Washington still spoke highly of Frederick as an unsurpassed model as a soldier and political leader. But he criticized the “blot” in Frederick’s “great character,” which consisted in his autocratic rule that allowed that “one man should tyrannise over millions”(Washington, *Letter to Lafayette* May 10, 1786).<sup>10</sup> Frederick in turn saw the American experiment with growing disapproval because of the chaos and social anarchy that he predicted would be its eventual outcome.

## II

What was the role of literature and the arts in this comparative history of emergent national cultures? George Washington and Frederick’s attitudes to literature and the arts were again comparable to an extent but then again also different. Washington, who like Frederick had written immature love poems in his youth, was an avid reader of a wide range of books, as Kevin Hayes demonstrates in his 2017 intellectual life of George Washington, in which he aims to establish a new perception of the first American president “as a man of letters that is much different from the accepted image of George Washington as a man of action”(Hayes 2017: XIII). Though he was a reluctant writer, many volumes were published in his lifetime, especially consisting

of his letters. In his personal and political rhetoric, Washington heavily borrowed from images of drama and theater in his public self-fashioning, as Ron Chernow observes in his 2010 biography of Washington (Chernow 2010: 125). In his early days of romantic conversations with Sally Fairfax, as Hayes points out, George Washington was introduced to contemporary theories, books, and theater plays; and in his pre-revolutionary life in New York and Philadelphia, he frequently attended concerts and the theater, seeing a wide range of plays from Shakespeare to restoration comedies, which he enjoyed as much as regular visits to dancing events in which he participated with great enthusiasm. As Chernow argues, these facets of his character were later almost completely eclipsed by his public image as a serious, self-disciplined leader of the new nation.

Much more than George Washington, Frederick the Great had a life-long affinity to literature and the creative arts. He was inspired by the French rather than the English tradition of enlightenment writing. He admired the aphorisms and philosophical poems of Voltaire, who was a guest at Frederick's court over three years and a member of the philosophical round table at Sanssouci, the retreat from political strife and 'carefree place,' as Frederick had named it. In fact, leading members of the enlightened *philosophes* were members of or cooperated with the Prussian Academy of Arts and Sciences such as Leibniz, D'Alambert, Diderot, or Moses Mendelsohn. Frederick published many books, all of them in French, including histories of his own wars, but also, before his ascension to the throne, a book titled *Antimachiavel*, edited by Voltaire, in which Frederick aimed to refute Machiavelli's *Il Principe* and his concept of the unscrupulous ruler in favor of a "humane rather than inhuman form of government." In the book, Frederick states: "I will defend humanity against this monster [i.e., Machiavelli] which wants to destroy it" (Frederick 1741, Preface)—a humanist ideal, however, which did not prevent him from invading Silesia only a few months after his ascension to the throne. Frederick also excelled in playing the flute—even though his father had brutally punished him when he tried to learn it in his youth—and was quite an accomplished composer of 121 works for flute and other instruments, of arias and symphonies, which were performed at the court, often with himself as soloist. In a meeting with Johann Sebastian Bach in 1747, he set Bach a theme for a fugue which resulted in Bach's *The Musical Offering* that was composed in the same year, a highly complex musical experimentation with a six-voice fugue as its high point.<sup>11</sup> Frederick redesigned the city of Berlin and built the Royal Opera House Unter den Linden, in which his own ideas about musical theater were to be realized. In fact, he drafted the libretto for an opera about an American topic titled *Montezuma* (Frederick, 1755), which severely criticizes the hypocrisy of the European Christians led by Cortez and presents



the Aztec leader as a model figure of enlightened humanity that resembles Frederick's own public self-image.

The significance of George Washington and Frederick the Great for the future of the literary cultures of their countries has not yet been extensively discussed. They clearly were inspiring figures that motivated writers to transform the lives, ideas, and achievements of Washington and Frederick not only into numerous biographies but into fiction, drama and poetry. In the case of the United States, among the first of these writers was Phyllis Wheatley, who in 1776 praised Washington, perhaps ironically, as a king-like hero of America (Wheatley 1776). In his chapter on "Presidential Patronage and the Development of American Literature," Hayes comes up with similar examples of the so-called 'rising glory poetry' that celebrated the new nation. Such examples are likewise discussed in the section on verse in W.A. Bryan's *George Washington in Literature 1775–1865* (Bryan 1952), referencing Philip Freneau as the poet of the revolution and citing other writers up to James Russell Lowell, as well as examples from the genre of the drama such as Royall Tyler's play *The Contrast* (1787), in which the character of Colonel Manly in a cast of stereotypical characters was partly inspired by George Washington (Bryan 1952: 268). As Hayes claims, "the birth of a new nation gave a new impetus to the literary culture," and George Washington "created an intellectual climate that fostered the development of American literature" (Hayes 2017: 257)—even though in his chapter Hayes mainly discusses historical and political works such as Belknap's *History of New Hampshire* and similar books, which do not fully bear out this point. In fact, the emergent literary scene still had a hard time coping with the overwhelming dominance of British writers on the American book market. In spite of a remarkable productivity at home and in international networks of exchange and translation, and of the considerable literary quality of some of these writings, they did not yet reach the level of the internationally recognized literary culture that emerged some time into the nineteenth century in the American Renaissance.

In the case of Frederick as well, several writers used his life and times as the material for literary treatments. But the development of German literature in the subsequent decades, which produced writers like Goethe, Schiller, Schlegel, Novalis, or Kleist, went in a different direction from that which Frederick had envisioned. In an address to the German literati in 1780 titled "On German Literature," Frederick had called for a new literary culture that would be up to the standard of world literature—an address anticipating Emerson's similar message to American writers some time later in "The American Scholar" (Emerson 1837: 47–68). What Frederick meant by this standard was the French model of enlightenment literature that had inspired his own thought and writing. However, by the time he gave his speech, that model was



already being superseded in the contemporary German literature of his time in a transition that prefigured the paradigm change from classicist-formalist to romantic-experimental forms of the literary imagination in the *Goethezeit*. The emergence of the new literary cultures was thus not a direct consequence of political developments; rather, they followed their own, often counter-discursive dynamics, which probably had more to do with transcultural and transatlantic networks of literary communication than with the influence of political leaders.

These cross-national currents sometimes took quite divergent paths. The emergent new German literature tried to define its difference and uniqueness by distancing itself from what it perceived as the hyper-formalized classicism of French literature and culture, which had dominated literary and aesthetic taste in the eighteenth century, including the court of Frederick the Great. It turned to Greek antiquity, to medievalism, but also to English literature such as Macpherson's Ossianic poems, which profoundly influenced the *Sturm und Drang* movement, and especially to Shakespeare's plays, as more congenial models that were both closer to nature and to the imaginative worlds of the mind than French rationalism. In its populist versions, this distancing from France later turned into a polemical stance against everything French and fomented the enmity against France as a dominant trait of the German nationalism that developed in the course of the later nineteenth century. The leading writers of the *Goethezeit* mentioned above did not share in such polemics; rather, their attempts to found a distinctively German literature were embedded in the knowledge of the global interconnectedness of intellectual and artistic life, in the knowledge that all great literature is also always world literature. In fact, Goethe was among the first writers who proposed the concept of world literature as a necessary horizon of thinking about the place of literature in culture.<sup>12</sup>

The writers of the American Renaissance, in contrast, tried to define the independence of American literature from Britain, whose influence on the literary scene in the United States was still that of an imperial center on a regional province. As Emerson put it in "The American Scholar," writers "have Shakespeareized now for two hundred years" (Emerson 1837: 53). In their attempt to gain intellectual and literary independence, these authors were looking for inspiration to the literature and philosophy of Germany. Not only writers like Hawthorne or Poe, but the transcendentalists especially defined their new literary-intellectual explorations with categories and in intense intertextual dialogue with German literature. Goethe was an inspirational figure not only for Hawthorne<sup>13</sup> but for Emerson and Margaret Fuller, who learned German to translate Goethe's works into English. The term 'transcendental' was itself taken from Kant's and Schelling's transcendental philosophy. It was especially

Kant's distinction between reason and understanding that was helpful to Emerson in distancing himself from the rational empiricism of John Locke—which he associated with the concept of 'understanding'—and to establish a sphere of 'reason' beyond the merely measurable and quantifiable world, which the transcendentalists explored in their special attention to both nature and the spirit (Pütz 1982: 38–39). In translating these influences into the context of the New World—its uniquely rich natural ecosystems, its enormous future potentials, but also its historical traumas and nightmares—the writers of the American Renaissance in the early decades of the nineteenth century created a new national literature which was at the same time, and in its very core, transnational and cosmopolitan. The cultural nationalism which was sometimes associated with the claim to literary independence was, as in the case of Germany, largely limited to trivialized versions of that claim. This paradoxical double condition of new literary creativity, which the great writers of both cultures demonstrate: that the uniqueness and distinct identity of a national literature only becomes possible through its transnational and ultimately cosmopolitan openness, applies as well to the ways in which one could reassess the legacy of the enlightened nation state as an antidote to the regressive populist nationalisms that resurface in the contemporary political landscape.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Overhoff, *Friedrich der Große und George Washington: Zwei Wege der Aufklärung* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2011). Overhoff gives a contrastive interpretation of the lives, convictions, and political fates of these two leaders in 10 chapters covering different phases in their biography within various thematic aframes such as War and Peace, Fathers and Sons, Education and Recreation, Power and Law, Enlightenment and Maturity, Freedom and Bondage.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Kevin Hayes, *George Washington: A Life in Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> This is a commonly used phrase describing especially the early years of Frederick's reign. See, for example Karl Adam, "Der Philosoph auf dem Thron: Von Krockow schaut auf Friedrich den Großen, <https://imgegenlicht.wordpress.com/2003/01/16/der-philosoph-auf-dem-thron-2003/>, accessed March 27, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Blanning bases his interpretation of Frederick very much on the hitherto neglected role of homosexuality in Frederick's life, thought, and politics. Tim Blanning, *Frederick the Great: King of Prussia*. (London, Allen Lane, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> See Jamie Slaughter "Frederick the Great," Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistorydigitalencyclopedia/article/frederick-the-great/>, accessed March 26, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *What Is Enlightenment?* (1784), quoted from Philosophical Explorations,

<http://braungardt.trialectics.com/philosophy/early-modern-philosophy-16th-18th-century-europe/kant/enlightenment/>, accessed March 26, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Overhoff, 10.

<sup>9</sup> For this legend, see, e.g., an article in the New York Times, “The Sword of Frederick: Tradition in the Washington Family on a Disputed Point” (August 27, 1916): 2, <https://www.nytimes.com/1916/08/27/archives/the-sword-of-frederick-tradition-in-the-washington-family-on-a.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-04-02-0051>.

<sup>11</sup> For more information, and for a contextualization of this meeting in the framework of the enlightenment, see James R. Gaines, *Evening in the Palace of Reason: Bach Meets Frederick the Great in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> “National-Literatur will jetzt nicht viel sagen, die Epoche der Welt-Literatur ist an der Zeit und jeder muss jetzt dazu wirken, diese Epoche zu beschleunigen.” Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (Leipzig, 1836) 1:325.—Goethe’s notion of world literature continues to be referenced in contemporary debates on the subject—see, for example, Hendrik Birus, “Goethes Idee der Weltliteratur: Eine historische Vergegenwärtigung,” *Goethezeitportal*, [http://www.goethezeitportal.de/db/wiss/goethe/birus\\_weltliteratur.pdf](http://www.goethezeitportal.de/db/wiss/goethe/birus_weltliteratur.pdf). accessed March 26, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> For more information on this see, for example, Hubert Zapf, “The Rewriting of the Faust Myth in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown,’” *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 19-40.

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