

Karl Lachmann (1793–1851): Reconstructing the Transmission of a Classical Latin Author

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Karl Lachmann was one of the most important figures in the development of modern European theory and practice of textual editions. Though he became most famous for his work in classics (he was a professor of Latin philology at the University of Berlin), he conceived of himself much more as an editor of texts independent of the language in which they were written. Thus he edited texts written not only in Latin (Propertius in 1816 and 1829, Catullus in 1829, Tibullus in 1829, Terentianus Maurus in 1836, Gaius in 1841, Babrius in 1845, Avianus in 1845, and the Roman surveyors in 1848–52) but also in ancient Greek (the New Testament in 1831 and again in 1842–50), medieval German (the *Nibelungenlied* in 1826 and 1840, Hartmann von Aue in 1827 and 1838, Walther von der Vogelweide in 1827, Wolfram von Eschenbach in 1833, Ulrich von Lichtenstein in 1841, and *Des Minnesangs Frühling* in 1857), and modern German (Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in 1838–40). But it was in his edition of Lucretius (1850), published toward the end of his life, that he most clearly enunciated the new editorial principles for which he has become celebrated and that are associated with his name.

This procedure, the first attempt to provide a thoroughly mechanical and systematic procedure for rationalizing and standardizing the choice among manuscripts, and hence among readings, was developed during the nineteenth century and since the beginning of the twentieth century has been known as “Lachmann’s method.” Lachmann’s method is genealogical and mechanical in nature and aims at providing a standardized, rational procedure for editing texts on the basis of multiple manuscripts without requiring that editors constantly use their personal judgment in order to choose among variant readings. Its goal is to determine the filiation of manuscripts, that is, to ascertain which ones have been copied from which other ones: given that every act of transcription is likely to introduce new errors, a manuscript B,

Parts of this introduction develop further certain sections of my introduction to Sebastiano Timpanaro, *The Genesis of Lachmann’s Method*, trans. and ed. Glenn W. Most (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

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if it has been copied mechanically from a manuscript A, will have all the errors that A had (if it does not have all of them, then some of them have probably been corrected during the transcription, either by conjecture or by comparison with one or more other manuscripts, and hence is likely not to have been copied mechanically after all), and it is also likely to have at least one new error of its own; if this can be shown to be the case, then B can be discarded for the purposes of the constitution of the text it shares with A, since B, compared with A, brings no new information that is not erroneous. Lachmann's method is mechanical, both in the sense that it must presuppose the unthinking transcription of manuscripts if it is to be applied to them and in the sense that the determination of relations of filiation is achieved on the basis of simple rules and calculations of probability. Ideally, choices of manuscripts and of readings based on this method will be rational in that they will depend not on the taste of the individual scholar but rather on objective evidence that can be mathematized and evaluated; and hence they will be capable of becoming standardized, since all scholars, young or old, inexperienced or expert, should on principle come up with exactly the same results if they are given the same information. We may interpret Lachmann's method as a defensive reaction to the proliferation of possible source texts, intended to reduce them to a more manageable number, and can identify it as one important element in the professionalization of classics during the nineteenth century, since it established rules that all who wished to be recognized as full members of the discipline could be expected to follow so as to produce uniform and, hence, generally acceptable results.

As has been demonstrated in Sebastiano Timpanaro's seminal work on the genesis of Lachmann's method, many of the techniques and presuppositions associated with it were already well established either among the Renaissance humanists or in the following centuries, especially among the New Testament scholars of the eighteenth century. Its particular formulation associated with Lachmann's celebrated edition of Lucretius was anticipated in most of its essentials by other scholars such as Johann Kaspar von Orelli, Karl Gottlob Zumpt, Friedrich Ritschl, and Johan Nikolai Madvig in the decades before the publication of this work, and in particular almost in its entirety in Jacob Bernays's work on Lucretius of 1847 (and to a lesser extent in Hugo Purmann's of 1846). There is something quite distasteful in the patronizing tone with which Lachmann dismisses the work of Bernays and Purmann, two young scholars who had anticipated most of the discoveries he wanted to claim for himself. Moreover Lachmann's own application of the method, not only in his earlier editions but even in his great Lucretius edition, was generally quite inconsistent and was marked by a number of fundamental errors. In short, Timpanaro

demonstrated, once and for all, both that Lachmann's method was not in fact Lachmann's method (for he did not really invent it) and that "Lachmann's method" was not in fact Lachmann's method (for he did not apply it consistently himself).

Nonetheless Lachmann's preface to his Lucretius edition came to be regarded as an epoch-making work; it was required reading for generations of classics students, many of whom report the profound impression it made on them. This was certainly not due to the ease and convenience of its style and presentation: the text is written in a Latin that is abstruse and contorted even by the standards of nineteenth-century scholarly German prose written in that language—part of the difficulty is that Lachmann must use an antiquated Latin vocabulary to describe modern matters and concepts for which in fact the vernaculars would offer more precise and less ambiguous terminology. Nor is it due to the clarity and linearity of its exposition: Lachmann's argument moves in circles of variation and repetition, and he spends much of his time criticizing his predecessors with humorless asperity. Both of these features, to be sure, helped make the text a highly successful instrument of academic professionalization and scholarly indoctrination: Lachmann's rebarbative Latin excluded nonexperts from understanding his claims and following his method, while his pitiless condemnation of the carelessness and dishonesty of most earlier scholars set a high standard of scientific rigor and probity by which later ones were to be judged.

But the main reasons for the success of the preface, and with it that of the method, were two other ones. First, Lachmann had the good fortune to present his method by means of the case of Lucretius, whose poem had survived from antiquity in only a single manuscript, had never become a school text, had not enjoyed broad popularity during the Middle Ages, and had become really fashionable only during the fifteenth century. The result was that there were very few ancient manuscripts of it and that Lachmann could for the most part exclude any possibility of contamination (the comparison of a copy with more than one source, which immediately renders difficult or impossible any mechanical procedure of copying), while he could largely ignore the many Renaissance copies that were highly interpolated and emended in order to present a fluent—though of course inauthentic—text. If Lachmann had tried to apply his method to a more widely disseminated author such as Virgil or Ovid, he would have failed and no one would have remembered him. And, second, Lachmann began his preface with a minute description of what he called the "archetype," the manuscript that served as the source of all existing copies. That manuscript had been lost: it survived only in the copies that had been made from it directly or indirectly. Indeed, even whether that archetype ever existed as a single real manuscript has been doubted by a number of scholars. Yet Lachmann described

in the most precise detail its physical format and composition—where it came from, when it was written, what kind of script was used, how many pages it had, how many lines there were on every page, which pages had been left partly blank and which ones had been inadvertently transposed, and so forth. All of these features he inferred not from inspection of the manuscript (it did not exist for him to examine it) but from calculations he based on the existing manuscripts that descended from the archetype. And yet he presented this description with a peremptory assurance that led many later German scholars, as they themselves attested, to imagine the physical features of that non-existent manuscript with an overwhelming visual vividness.

Lachmann's method experienced its greatest success in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many of the editions of Greek and Latin classical texts produced in that period attempted to replicate the method that Lachmann had applied to the case of Lucretius, but only occasionally did they achieve success, given that the authors in question did not lend themselves to this kind of mechanical editorial procedure. Furthermore, in the middle of that century a version of the method came to be applied, with euphoric hopes, to the search for genealogical relations within the Indo-European family of languages, but this was followed in the last decades of that century by a wave of disillusionment and skepticism in both disciplines. The discovery that the method was fully applicable only in a relatively small number of cases of ancient texts led some textual critics to misapply it by artificially reducing the number of witnesses they took into consideration and hypothesizing filiations on the basis of inadequate evidence or none at all, and others to emphasize instead the importance of those many situations in which the method could not be applied safely because target texts had not been copied mechanically and exclusively from single sources. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the general reaction against Positivism in all the human sciences had led to a widespread distrust of Lachmann's method among many classicists, especially outside Germany. Medieval studies in particular has largely moved beyond Lachmann's assumption that most texts went back to a single written standard form that was then transmitted only by writing and mechanical copying and has instead come to emphasize the orality and fluidity of medieval composition and transmission. Nonetheless, the method remains not only a rational procedure, but the only rational procedure to apply in cases of closed transmission, with few manuscripts and no contamination of any of them from more than one source, when what the editor is seeking to identify is the earliest ascertainable form of a text and not the various transformations it went through in the course of its reception and transmission. Even today, various forms of "neo-Lachmannism" continue to proliferate and enjoy success in textual studies.

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