Guide to the René Wellek papers MS.C.003

Finding aid prepared by Special Collections and Archives Staff in 2002; updated by Alexandra M. Bisio, 2014; updated by Zoe MacLeod, 2018.

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**Contributing Institution:** Special Collections and Archives, University of California, Irvine Libraries  
**Title:** René Wellek papers  
**Creator:** Wellek, René  
**Identifier/Call Number:** MS.C.003  
**Physical Description:** 74.5 Linear Feet(75 boxes) and 0.02 unprocessed linear feet  
**Date (inclusive):** circa 1903-1996  
**Date (bulk):** 1930-1996  
**Abstract:** This collection consists of the personal and scholarly papers of Yale University’s Sterling Professor of Comparative Literature René Wellek (1903-1995). This collection primarily documents Wellek’s academic career as a specialist in Slavic and English literature, as well as a historian of literary criticism. This collection contains manuscripts, correspondence, lecture notes, notebooks, reprints, reviews, clippings, and family materials.  
**Language of Material:** English, Czech, German, Russian, Italian, French.  
**Access**  
Processed components of the collection are open for research. Unprocessed additions may contain restricted materials. Please contact the Department of Special Collections and Archives in advance to request access. All student and employee records are restricted for 75 years due to third party privacy issues. Use copies of each audio recording must be made prior to researcher use of the recordings. 48 hours advance notice is required in order to create use copies, which will then become a permanent part of the collection. Contact Special Collections and Archives for further information.  
**Student records**  
Several folders in series 2. manuscripts and publication files and series 3. correspondence contain student records including grade sheets, transcripts, recommendation material, grant applications, exams, and class lists with social security numbers. Best practices suggest that these records be closed for 75 years from date of creation. These records have been removed to restricted box 74. Dummy folders have been placed in the collection with the year the restriction is lifted.  
**Publication Rights**  
Property rights reside with the University of California. Copyrights are retained by the creators of the records and their heirs. For permission to reproduce or to publish, please contact the Head of Special Collections and Archives.  
**Preferred Citation**  
René Wellek papers. MS-C003. Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California. Date accessed. For the benefit of current and future researchers, please cite any additional information about sources consulted in this collection, including permanent URLs, item or folder descriptions, and box/folder locations.  
**Acquisition Information**  
**Processing History**  
**Biographical note**  
René Wellek was an influential literary critic and theorist known for his pioneering work in the field of comparative literature. He taught at numerous institutions throughout his career, including Yale and the University of Iowa. Best known for his works Theory of Literature and A History of Modern Criticism, he was an advocate of the “intrinsic” literary critical method, which rejects the political and social influences on works of literature and stresses the content of the work itself.  
Wellek was born in Vienna, Austria on August 22, 1903 to a Czech father, Bronislav Wellek, and an Italian-born mother, Gabriele von Zelewski. Though Wellek spent much of his early childhood in Vienna, where his father was a lawyer in the Finance Ministry of the Austrian government, the family moved to Prague in 1919, following the end of the First World War and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As a child, Wellek was given a classical education emphasizing Greek, Latin, and history. His cosmopolitan upbringing, however, forced him to master many languages besides his native German, including Czech, French, Italian, and English.  
In 1922, Wellek entered Charles University (the Czech University of Prague) where he studied first Germanic philology under Professors Josef Janko, Arnost Kraus, and Otokar Fisher, before shifting his focus to English literature. Wellek traveled to England for the first time in 1924 to work on his thesis entitled “Thomas Carlyle and Romanticism,” under the direction of Vilem Mathesius at Prague. Two years later, at age 23, he received his doctorate.
Following his graduation, Wellek taught English in Prague until he received a Proctor Fellowship at Princeton University from the Institute of International Education. He remained in the United States for two years, teaching German at Smith College and then modern languages at Princeton. While traveling back to Prague, Wellek stopped in England to study at the British Museum. He discovered manuscript evidence that Samuel Taylor Coleridge had paraphrased and translated large passages from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. His research there led to his first major work, *Immanuel Kant in England*, published in 1931. Returning to Prague in 1930, Wellek began teaching at Charles University as a Privatdozent, or unestablished professor. He married Olga Brodaska, an elementary school teacher, in 1932. They had one child, and remained married until her death in 1967.

As a Privatdozent at Charles University, Wellek taught elementary English, lectured for his now near-blind mentor Vilem Mathesius, and participated in the Prague Linguistic Circle. In 1935, he secured a lectureship in Czech Language and Literature at the University of London's School of Slavonic Studies funded by the Czechoslovak Ministry of Education. While in England, Wellek gave over eighty lectures to British societies to help counteract German propaganda. He remained at the University of London until his salary was cut off when the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia in 1939. Unable to return to Prague, Wellek obtained an initial one-year appointment at the University of Iowa in the English department where he stayed until 1941. While in Iowa, he collaborated with Austin Warren on one of his best known works, *Theory of Literature*, which was published in 1945.

Like many others, Wellek's traditional academic career was briefly interrupted by World War II. From 1943-1944, he served as director of a program to train interpreters for the U.S. Army. He became an American citizen in 1949.

Having gained considerable notoriety in the United States, Wellek was hired by Yale University in 1946. During his time at Yale, he served as Professor of English, Professor of Slavic and Comparative Literature, and finally Sterling Professor of Comparative Literature in 1952. In 1968, Wellek married Nonna Dolodarenko Shaw, a professor of Russian literature. They remained married until his death.

Wellek was active in a variety of professional organizations throughout his career, including the Modern Language Association, and the Czechoslovakia Society of Arts and Sciences in America. He was president of the International Comparative Literature Association and the American Comparative Literature Association. He was also a founding member of the editorial board for the journal *Comparative Literature*.

Though Wellek retired in 1972, he continued to write into nineties. He continued to work, for example, on his eight volume, analytic survey *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950* into his retirement, eventually dictating the last two volumes while in a nursing-home. Wellek died in Hamden, Connecticut on November 10, 1995.

René Wellek was an influential literary critic and theorist known for his pioneering work in the field of comparative literature. He taught at numerous institutions throughout his career, including Yale and the University of Iowa. Best known for his works *Theory of Literature* and *A History of Modern Criticism*, he was an advocate of the "intrinsic" literary critical method, which rejects the political and social influences on works of literature and stresses the content of the work itself.

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Several of Wellek’s students, including Murray Krieger, went on to become prominent members of the faculty at the University of California, Irvine. The Wellek Library Lecture Series, an annual critical theory event, was named in his honor.


1903 August 22 Born in Vienna, Austria-Hungary
1926 Ph.D. Charles University, Prague
1927-1928 Proctor Fellow, Princeton University
1928-1929 Instructor in German, Smith College, Northampton, MA
1929 Instructor in German, Princeton University
1930-1935 Privatdocent, Charles University
1931 Immanuel Kant in England, 1793-1838
1932 Married Olga Brodaska
1933 The Pearl: An Interpretation of the Middle English Poem
1935-1939 Lecture in Czech, School of Slavonic Studies, University of London
1939-1941 Member of the Faculty, University of Iowa, Iowa City
1941 The Rise of English Literary History
1941-1944 Associate Professor, University of Iowa
1944-1946 Professor of English, University of Iowa
1946-1972 Professor of Slavic and Comparative Literature, Yale University
1947-1959 Director of Graduate Studies, Yale University
1949 Theory of Literature with Austin Warren
1950 The English Romantic Poets: A Review of Research
1960-1972 Chairman of the Slavic Department, Yale University
1950-1972 Sterling Professor of Comparative Literature, Yale University
1955 A History of Modern Criticism: The Later Eighteenth Century and The Romantic Age
1960 D. Litt. Oxford University
1961 D. Litt. University of Rome
1961-1964 President of the International Comparative Literature Association
1962-1965 President of the American Comparative Literature Association
1963 Essays on Czech Literature
1964 Concepts of Criticism
1965 Confrontations: Studies in the Intellectual Relations Between German, England, and the United States During the Nineteenth Century
1966 A History of Modern Criticism: The Age of Transition
1967 D. Litt. Boston College
1966 A History of Modern Criticism: The Later Nineteenth Century
Collection Scope and Content Summary

This collection consists of the personal and scholarly papers of Yale University’s Sterling Professor of Comparative Literature René Wellek (1903-1995). Best known for his works Theory of Literature and A History of Modern Criticism, he was an advocate of the “intrinsic” literary critical method, which rejects the political and social influences on works of literature and stresses the content of the work itself. This collection primarily documents Wellek’s academic career as a specialist in Slavic and English literature, as well as a historian of literary criticism. Some personal material including correspondence, certificates, some family materials, and photographs have also been included. This collection is particularly strong with regard to manuscripts and published materials. There are many examples of his early writing, such as notes, drafts, and research materials from his theses, "Thomas Carlyle and Romanticism," and Immanuel Kant in England, as well as notes, drafts, and proofs from all eight volumes of his landmark A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950.

Also included in this collection is a large amount of correspondence, conference material, lectures, teaching files, notebooks, audio recordings, reviews and clippings, offprints and periodicals, as well as manuscripts and publications from many of Wellek’s colleagues and students.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged in seven series:

Series 1. Biographical and personal material, 1903-1995, .5 linear feet
Series 2. Manuscripts and publication files, 1936-1993, 19 linear feet
Series 3. Correspondence and conferences, 1927-1996, 17.6 linear feet
Series 4. Notebooks, 1938-1986, 6 linear feet
Series 5. Audio recordings, 1973-1978, .5 linear feet
Series 6. Offprints, periodicals, and clippings, circa 1921-1979, 12.25 linear feet
Series 7. Writing of others, circa 1949-1989, 6.75 linear feet

The collection also contains one unprocessed addition:

Accession 2018-070. Unprocessed addition, 1995. 0.02 linear feet

The original order of majority of these records has been retained. Special Collections staff sorted materials in later accessions into the above existing series.

Subjects and Indexing Terms

Critical theory -- Archives.
Wellek, René -- Archives
Biographical and personal material Series 1. 1903-1995

Physical Description: 0.5 Linear Feet

Scope and Content Summary
The biographical and personal materials series includes Rene Wellek's certificates, passports, awards, honorary diplomas, some photographs, curricula vitae, narrative biographies, and obituaries. Some family materials, such as family photographs, are included in this series.

Manuscripts and publication files Series 2. 1936-1992

Physical Description: 19 Linear Feet

Access
All student and employee records are restricted for 75 years due to third party privacy issues.

Student records
Series 2. Manuscripts and publication files contains student records including grade sheets, transcripts, recommendation material, grant applications, exams, and class lists with social security numbers. Best practices suggest that these records be closed for 75 years from date of creation. These records have been removed to restricted box 74. Dummy folders have been placed in the collection with the year the restriction is lifted.

Scope and Content Summary
The manuscripts series contains materials related to Rene Wellek's published and unpublished writing on English and Russian literature, Aesthetics, Romanticism, and the history of criticism. Included with manuscripts for Wellek's full length works and articles are lectures for symposia and conferences, reviews written by Wellek on the works of other critics, and entries for encyclopedias. Materials in the manuscripts series include notes and research materials, typescript and holograph manuscripts, outlines, copyedited drafts, annotated offprints, correspondence with collaborators and publishers, proofs, and other publishing material. Of particular interest are correspondence between Wellek and his Theory of Literature co-author Austin Warren, as well as notes, drafts, and proofs from all eight volumes of his landmark History of Modern Criticism.
Correspondence and conference material Series 3. 1927-1996

Scope and Content Summary
This series contains letters, enclosures, and related subject material received by and sent from Rene Wellek as well as conference materials he collected between 1930 and 1995. Correspondence consists of professional, personal, and family material in a variety of languages, including German and Czech. Of particular interest are letters to and from Wellek's colleagues, Austin Warren, Leo Spitzer, Edith Kern, and William K. Wimsatt, as well as correspondence between Wellek and his brother Albert, a noted expert in the psychology of music. Some letters in this series were sent to Nonna Wellek in 1996 following her husband's death in November 1995.

Conference material consists of programs, schedules, notes, lecture drafts and transcripts, and invitations as well as travel documents and itineraries.

Wellek's correspondence and conference files also contain material related to professional organizations and teaching at the University of Iowa and Yale.

Notebooks Series 4. 1938-1986

Scope and Content Summary
The notebooks series contains a large number of notes taken by Rene Wellek on different literary topics throughout his academic and professional career. Included are notes taken for and at lectures, working notes for essays and longer works, holograph manuscripts, as well as general research notes. A notebook containing a manuscript of Wellek's doctoral thesis "Thomas Carlyle and Romanticism" is also included in this series.

Audio recordings Series 5. 1973-1978

Scope and Content Summary
This series contains audio recordings of interviews and lectures given by Rene Wellek. Several recordings of lectures by Nonna Wellek on Russian literature have also been included.

Offprints, periodicals, and clippings Series 6. circa 1921-1970s

Scope and Content Summary
This series contains offprints of articles, full periodicals, and newspaper clippings collected by Rene Wellek. The offprints in this series are both by Wellek and his colleagues. Many of the articles by his colleagues were inscribed to him by their authors. Full issues of journals, often containing articles by Wellek or one of his colleagues have also been included.
| box 14, box 15, | Writing of others Series 7. circa 1940s-1989 |
| box 16, box 17, | Physical Description: 6.75 Linear Feet |
| box 65, box 66, | Scope and Content Summary |
| box 67, box 75, | This series contains manuscripts, essays, book drafts, articles, project descriptions and |
| box 76 | proposals of Rene Wellek's correspondents, colleagues, friends, and students. Many of these |
| box 78 and | works are annotated, accompanied by letters or are autographed for Wellek by the author. |
| accn2018-070 | Unprocessed addition Accession 2018-070 1985 December 8 |
| | Physical Description: 0.02 Linear Feet (1 letter file folder) |
| | Access |
| | This addition to the collection has not been processed but is open for research. Please |
| | contact the Department of Special Collections and Archives in advance to request access. |
| | Series Scope and Contents Summary |
| | This addition to the collection contains a letter from René Wellek to William J. Lillyman, dated |
| | December 8, 1985. |