

Michael Schmitt

Literature and Criticism – Immutable Canon or Ongoing Debate?

A precarious trade

Literary criticism can be many things - or at least aspire to be many things - and depending on one's perspective it can therefore readily be seen as either arrogant pontification, or a worthy contribution to spreading the word about new books; for many journalists, however, it is also a singularly precarious line of work. Regardless of medium - newspaper, magazine, radio, TV, internet - it is a hybrid phenomenon. Once - in days long gone - it was regarded as the very acme of cultural criticism in essay form. Over a long period of time it also served as a key factor in determining the success or failure of a book in the eyes of the public. All such considerations are highly contentious these days.

But literary criticism still has its place within supra-regional German-language media, and current claims that this special place is steadily diminishing are also essentially a question of perspective. Compared to the fat years enjoyed by the German media in the 1990s the space allotted to literary criticism has indeed clearly lessened, and the fees paid to its producers are now considerably lower. But anyone dipping into the archives in search of an article from the 1960s soon comes to appreciate just how substantial today's arts supplements still are; back then the supplements even in major newspapers often consisted of just a single page serving to cover everything - theatre, films, books, opinion pieces. And there weren't as many TV and radio stations offering programmes centred on literature. Though it's also true that considerably fewer books were published back then, and the networks linking authors, publishers, readers and the book trade operated at a somewhat slower pace.

Nonetheless, a certain ethos still seems to prevail amongst those engaged in literary criticism: a determination to do one's very best to separate the wheat from the chaff. But there, too, there is a touch of hubris or megalomania, since far too many books are being published these days for the market to be fully covered.

Headlines, and an air of crisis

Over the last one-and-half years there has been no shortage of reports that in a number of German-language media the slots previously allocated to literature in the form of features, reviews or general reportage have once again been slashed or at least put at risk - for instance, a North German Radio (NDR) literature programme in

the case of TV, and the book-review slot on the morning radio show at West German Radio (WDR). Cuts such as these always hit the headlines, not least in the form of admonitions regarding the broadcasters' public service obligations - and in every case they undeniably result above all in a reduced focus on new books while simultaneously imperilling the livelihoods of their authors, and also of the freelance book critics and journalists who out of both necessity and professional commitment read extremely widely and are thus adept at precisely that process that makes literary criticism possible in the first place: making comparisons in order to offer informed judgements.

Similar developments are also observable in the national newspaper sector. These outlets operate in the commercial world and thus have to take a very different approach to turnover and profit, and of course have long been contending with the relentless reduction in their print-runs and competition from the internet.

At the same time, however, it is often pointed out in many of the countries with a Goethe Institute presence that compared to the situation in other places the position of German-language arts coverage can't be *all* that bad given the number of supra-regional media that offer regular literary programmes and book pages. There's no denying that this is the case, especially if we look beyond Germany's borders: any gaps left by Austria's newspapers in the way of book reviews are readily filled by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *Die Zeit* or *Die Welt*, while on the other side of the balance sheet the Austrians and the Swiss can lay claim to the only truly informative German-language magazines for children's and young adult literature (*1000und1 Buch* and *Buch und Maus* respectively). And all of this is readily accessible, and offers coverage that no individual could ever manage on their own.

Even so, we still hear numerous claims of a 'crisis' whenever there is a discussion of the place, purpose and efficacy of literary criticism. No one deserves any blame for voicing such views, however: after all, those who are dedicated to the arts and yet live on the edge economically do have a highly developed nose for these matters - often for very good reasons.

Literary criticism and the zeitgeist

At the same time, however, a very different standpoint is equally tenable: 'Cultural pessimism is bad for the eyes'. This somewhat tongue-in-cheek assertion was made by Wieland Freund in 2011, and can be found in issue 122/1 of the periodical *Neue Rundschau* (S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt 2011, p. 14). The periodical was celebrating its 120th anniversary that year and had asked a number of literary critics to re-read, comment on and update Walter Benjamin's at once famous and infamous 'Thirteen theses' regarding 'The technique of the literary critic', which by that point were themselves a century old.

The first thesis asserted that ‘The role of the critic is to be a strategist in the literature battle’. Whilst this is grandly rhetorical, it also points to the process of ideological-cum-political instrumentalisation that literature and literary criticism can so easily be made to serve. To those well disposed to Benjamin the proposition also reflects a high estimation of the importance of literature and literary criticism. At the same time, however, one cannot fail to notice the extent to which such evaluations and ascriptions are derived from, and even subordinated to, intellectual fashions and extra-literary influences.

In the above-mentioned issue of the *Neue Rundschau* (p. 8) Helmut Böttiger epitomised the issue thus:

That was [...] the tune that was sung at the time, and today’s tune simply has a different melody. The claim about the critic as ‘strategist in the literature battle’ in the Weimar Republic could be said to correspond more or less to today’s imperative that brand names be included in literary texts, or to the assertion that there is no longer any division between serious culture and pop culture; that is the coinage we happen to deal in today.

This quotation itself dates from ten years ago, and demonstrates how rapidly time passes and how rapidly central aspects of the situation can change. The inclusion of brand names in literary texts as proof of their actuality and relevance has much in common with the traditions of popular literature. The challenge to the neat division of literature into ‘the serious’ and ‘the entertaining’ - a challenge that has been under way for a very long time now - is an attempt to undermine the elitist conception of culture favoured in various circles - and it is clear that around 2010–2011 the diminishing role of the previously dominant traditional media was already entering into society’s Big Conversation thanks to the internet and the emergence and powerful impact of blogs, reader reviews, the comments of Amazon customers, etc.

But Helmut Böttiger’s laconic observations have a decidedly positive side, demonstrating as they do that the leading ideas on literary criticism expressed in the prevailing media at any given time can serve - and always have served - as a useful means of assessing the ‘temperature’ of the conversation going on within society as a whole. The way we see books - both new ones and any older ones that appear to have gained fresh relevance - can’t be separated from the way society sees itself. Thus it may well be the case that all these fluctuations do not by any means manifest the rise and fall of competing dogmas, but rather a kind of cultural evolution, a process whereby the nature of a society and its literature is reflected in the conversation that it has both with and about itself.

And right now we can once again see a readily surveyable and absolutely prototypical example of this process in the form of the fiction shortlist for the 2021 Leipzig Book Prize.

Representation and the writer's art

The fiction shortlist was published on 13 April and comprised five books, four of them by women writers and one by a man: Iris Hanika's *Echos Kammern* ('Echoes, chambers'; Droschl), Judith Hermann's *Daheim* ('Home'; S. Fischer), Friederike Mayröcker's *da ich morgens und moosgrün. Ans Fenster trete* ('as each morning and moss-green. I go to the window'; Suhrkamp), Helga Schubert's *Vom Aufstehen* ('About getting up'; dtv), and Christian Kracht's *Eurotrash* ('Eurotrash'; Kiepenheuer & Witsch).

Not so very long ago the list might well have been regarded within the German-language context as a distinct step forward in matters of emancipation and hence been duly celebrated as a gain for women in the literary arena. In 2021, however, the debate about the list immediately took off in a quite different direction. The very next day, in the 14 April edition of the newspaper *taz*, Dirk Knipphals declared that, whilst he fully acknowledged the quality of the five books in question, the shortlist had in effect shut itself off completely from current debates about society and literature. He acknowledged that insofar as the jury's task had been to select 'literary works of art' they had indeed completed their job successfully - but he immediately added that in so doing they had closed their eyes to everything that really mattered in the spring of 2021 ([Nominierungen für Leipziger Buchpreis: Jury macht Schotten dicht](#)). For, in his view, debates about books *qua* debates about social inequities deal with quite different topics, such as the issue of classicism, or specific books such as Sharon Dodua Otoo's novel *Adas Raum* ('Ada's space'; S. Fischer) or Mithu Sanyal's novel *Identitti* ('Identitty'; Carl Hanser); they deal, in other words, with the exclusion of economically underprivileged sectors of society, with questions of the representation and participation within society of people of colour, with overt and covert racism, with intersectional discrimination.

Whilst there is still ongoing heated debate in the Federal Republic about the under-representation of women in leading roles of all kinds and their inferior earnings, and whilst the problem of combining childcare and a career remains largely unresolved, emancipation in the sense of women getting their fair and ardently longed for share of placings in cultural signifiers such as book-prize shortlists no longer appears to rate as a burning issue - other considerations have shifted the focus elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the novels on the shortlist do not by any means devote themselves to vapid topics. Judith Hermann's *Daheim* is the story of a middle-aged woman that positively bristles with up-to-the-minute issues such as social interaction and the threat posed by climate change. Helga Schubert's *Vom Aufstehen* moves back and forth between her present life in freedom and life as it was in the German Democratic Republic, in the process recalling cultural milieus sabotaged by the Stasi, and fundamental arguments about what constituted a 'right' relationship between an author and the state - a state wholly controlled by the SED, the 'Socialist Unity Party'. And Christian Kracht's *Eurotrash* - in many respects a reworking of his previous literary themes - can be seen as an attack on a world in which money appears to be the only thing that matters.

Dirk Knipphals was not the only one to comment on the shortlist, however: on 22 April - one week later - an 'Open Letter Concerning the Leipzig Book Fair Prize' was published (in English as well as German), sporting a long, internationally flavoured list of signatories and echoing Knipphals's key arguments, whilst also enlarging on them with various proposals for improving things in the literary sphere ([Offener Brief zum Preis der Leipziger Buchmesse](#)). This missive, too, acknowledged the quality of the books selected by the jury, who were of course required under the rules of the prize to limit their choices solely to German-language books - but, as Felix Stephan pointed out the same day in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the list of signatories extended far beyond the German-speaking lands, including as it did numerous German Studies academics and literary figures from the Anglo-American area. And this means that we are not only seeing a demand for different themes to be taken into account: compared to the situation hitherto we are also seeing a marked increase in the number of people participating in the debate - and they all react far more rapidly than before. ([Rassismus? Preis der Leipziger Buchmesse in der Kritik](#))

Demanding change and encouraging change

What is being called for here is a quite broad spectrum of measures designed to have a positive impact going forward: more targeted bursaries, diversity as an automatic criterion for literary juries, revision of the modes of access to the literary world at all levels in order to counteract white domination, and, in addition, new reading lists in schools and universities that reflect not merely a 'cis-heteronormative order' but a world that has become much more diverse.

These proposals are an echo of the protests that arose right across the globe in the spring of 2021 in the row about translations of Amanda Gorman's poem 'The Hill We Climb'. The nub of the argument was often the demand that shared experience be declared a key criterion for determining a translator's fitness for the task in hand, and that specific competence in the target language be regarded as a less important factor. The open letter about the Leipzig Book Prize did not go that far, concentrating instead on exploring the conditions that would in future produce a literature better suited to representing the great diversity now apparent in the culture and society of the German-speaking world. That is a different approach - but not a wholly different one. The Open Letter, too, suggested that literary artistry, and with it perhaps the canonisation of literary works by critics and prize juries, should give way to some greater or lesser extent to the representation of actuality and to improved access to literature-creation on the part of minorities. This represents a huge challenge to the traditional remit of literary criticism - a remit that has long been taken for granted and is frequently invoked whenever the notion is questioned that literary criticism exists to provide a rock-solid evaluation of a work's quality. In such circumstances, however, literary know-how tends to get tangled up with a determination to preserve the status quo whenever it is being argued that books and their readers deserve more than a mere systematic churning out of recommendations; that critical reviews are important because they are able to site new books within an overall matrix

constituted by traditional, social and aesthetic coordinates; and that literary criticism is actively promulgating the world's rich diversity... (cf. also [Warum-brauchen-wir-literaturkritik](#)).

The arguments deployed here are all variations of a 'purist' doctrine - but one that has perhaps never actually prevailed in any sort of pure form. For the world of literature and the media has never accorded with the prescriptions of this purist doctrine: literary criticism has never stood apart and separate from the book business, it has always been a profession, an aspect of a business, namely journalism, that is geared to turnover and sales figures, and also privileges the loudest voices and the biggest egos - or, to put it more positively, the subjective responses of critics who aspire to be equal partners in their dealings with writers rather than 'cultural parasites', as George Steiner caustically described them.

An additional consideration is the way criticism and the creative writing whirligig have become so strikingly intertwined in recent decades thanks to literary festivals and reading tours, with critics and writers now routinely sitting on the same stage chatting about some new book or other. Such events change their relationship with one another, generating a certain intimacy in place of the artistic and analytical distance that is ideally called for. This process has also made it increasingly difficult to differentiate literary criticism from other kinds of interaction with literature, for not every debate in the writing world is - or ever was - a debate about literary quality: often, and these days almost invariably, it is about socio-political stances. Critics join such debates with alacrity and relish, but that is plain journalism, and criticism *qua* analysis of literary quality may well not be called for in any form in these circumstances.

New competencies for evaluating new kinds of literature

Something along these lines may well be happening right now. There are new demands within the literary sphere for an unusually rigorous mode of writing, and this goes hand in hand with an equally rigorous reappraisal of existing structures and of the modalities of access for newcomers. Demands are being formulated afresh for things that actually should already be a given, and, most importantly of all, they are being defined anew in relation to specific groups. Driven not least by the powerful forces generated by identity politics there are now outright challenges to the established body of critics, arguing that they lack both the right background and the necessary competence to be able to engage appropriately with the interests of particular social groups and their literature.

As has become increasingly clear over the last five years, a new literature is emerging with unwonted vigour and acerbity that tackles questions of migration, racism and integration into German society, and is written by people who are themselves directly affected by these problems. Their topics are likely to include the endless debates concerning the admission of refugees from Syria and Africa in the years since 2015, and also no doubt the issues brought into sharp focus by the Black Lives Matter and

#MeToo movements. This literature and its proponents offer their readers new theories and new modes of writing. Emblematic of these developments are perhaps Sharon Dodua Otoo's victory in the 2016 Bachmann competition in Klagenfurt, and the debut publications of Senthuran Varatharaja. 2016 also saw the publication of Shida Bazayr's first book, *Nachts ist es still in Teheran* ('It's quiet at night in Tehran'; Kiepenheuer & Witsch). In addition there are the books by Jackie Thomae - *Brüder* ('Brothers'; Hanser Berlin, 2019), and Olivia Wenzel - *1000 Serpentinien Angst* ('1000 coils of fear'; S. Fischer, 2020), and not least anthologies such as *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* ('Your homeland is our nightmare'), published in 2019 and edited by Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah (cf. also Yaghoobifarah's *Ministerium der Träume*, 'Ministry of dreams', Blumenbar 2021), not to mention the speech given last summer in Klagenfurt by Sharon Dodua Otoo entitled 'Dürfen Schwarze Blumen malen?' ('Are blacks allowed to paint flowers?').

And right now, in spring 2021, we have the collection of new articles brought together by Christian Baron in his anthology *Klasse und Kampf* ('Class and the class struggle'; Ullstein, 2021), Shida Bazayr's acerbic and scathing novel *Drei Kameradinnen* ('Three women - three comrades'; Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2021), and the lengthy novels by Sharon Dodua Otoo (*Adas Raum* ['Ada's space']; S. Fischer, 2021) and Mithu Sanyal (*Identitti* ['Identitty']; Carl Hanser, 2021), which in the one case depict the repression of black women throughout modern history, and in the other pose questions about the extent to which darker-skinned people 'belong' or 'don't belong' in a society that rarely takes stock of how 'white' and hence exclusionary it appears to others. Another new feature of this literature is that different problem areas are increasingly being interwoven with one another and acquiring greater impact as a result.

Activism and literature

This may help to explain why the current situation can appear so confusing. For obvious reasons Germany abounds with highly developed critiques - not least within narrative fiction - in regard to National Socialism and indeed also to present-day right-wing extremism, but there is no tradition of any note that could be compared to, say, the English phenomenon triggered some twenty, thirty years ago by the likes of Ben Okri, Salman Rushdie and numerous other successful authors, and sometimes characterised by the catchphrase 'The empire writes back'. There is likewise no tradition in Germany comparable to that of Afro-American literature: the early novels of Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Aras Ören, or Feridun Zaimoglu's *Kanak Sprach* ('"Kanak"-speak), were not based on experiences of oppression anywhere near as tough as those reflected in both the classic and the more recent books by Afro-American authors that are only now - often decades after their original publication - appearing in German translation.

Prompted by the controversy surrounding Amanda Gorman, the literary scholar Christine Lötscher has recently drawn attention once again to the absolute

determination of people to get their voices heard: that, she says, is the truly fundamental political step that has to be accomplished. ([Zähne ziehen. Literatur und Legitimation](#)) Perhaps that is exactly what we are now witnessing within German-language literature, namely in the books of the afore-mentioned younger generation of writers of colour, some of them immigrants, but many of them born in Germany. This may well not be the right time to pass judgement on the ‘artistic quality’ of individual books, but rather to regard the overall mix of these various voices as a background conversation underpinning a belated intellectual modernisation of our society.

We can of course never be entirely sure about these things when we are plumb in the middle of them, but this may well be the moment when openness in the debate - openness about form as well as about content - is something that needs to be not merely passively endured but positively encouraged by those engaged in both the creation and the critique of German literature. We might then quite soon be in a position to start talking once again about ‘literary works of art’, and thus perhaps differentiate reliably between activist rants on the one hand and books of true literary distinction on the other.

Michael Schmitt, Dr. phil. (b. 1959 in Trier) is a Germanist and historian. He began working in the book trade in 1985, and then worked as a freelance editor and journalist. Since 1993, he has worked as an editor at ZDF / 3sat, and as a literary critic for 3sat-Kulturzeit since 1995. He is a freelance critic for NZZ, SZ and DLF, and is a jury member for: the German Book Prize, the Wilhelm Raabe Literature Prize, the James Krüss Prize, Kranichsteiner Youth Literature Scholarship and the “Best 7 Books for Young Readers”.

Translated by John Reddick