Briefly Noted

Heinz Schlaffer

Die kurze Geschichte der deutschen Literatur
Munich: Carl Hanser, 2002. Pp. 158.

Schlaffer’s essay presents a welcome, if not overdue, challenge to how we have come to read and write German literary history, but it poses more questions than Schlaffer may have intended. If nothing else the essay points to the kind of questions that need to be asked about the construction of the canon defined as German literature if the discipline is to survive. Schlaffer’s central thesis is as simple as it seems persuasive: German literature’s deep motive has been secularization. Once the transition and translation of this project have been achieved, he claims, literature has run its course and, emptied of all religious energies, slowly fades away into the dusk of modernity. And why not? The thesis of the transformative power of religious into poetic energies has stood in good stead in social and philosophical theories for some time. But as scientific and value neutral as such a thesis might seem, when applied to the complex of literature it calls for the kind of conviction or belief that, for a skeptic, may be just one religious belief too many.

Certainly the way Schlaffer describes the origins of modern German literature as an episode of empowerment that endowed language with the redemptive powers traditionally reserved for church and religion does address some key moments in the formation of German Enlightenment, classicism, and romanticism. And it can even be stretched, as Schlaffer argues, to some episodes of Weimar Germany thanks to Nietzsche and the expressionists. The problem is that this secularization thesis rests on assumptions of a particular view of social and cultural development that seems curiously anachronistic. Relying on German culture and literature’s alleged “Sonderweg,” Schlaffer applies an explanation whose widespread currency and whose theoretical flaws inform his account with a speculative note that contributes more to eclipsing than to clarifying its claims. For such an approach advances assumptions on normality and exception in a manner that determines the outcome of his argument but provides little analytic support. Instead Schlaffer’s argument hinges on a construction of the history of German literature that raises the question of how to address historical specificity in the first place. Although there is certainly some appeal in the attempt to construct Ger-
man culture as a biotope immune to historical development as it thrived in an ontological bubble all by itself, such a view is obliged to shut out much of what recent and not so recent findings have demonstrated to be crucial aspects in the formation of modern German literature and culture.

Read as a symptom, however, Schlaffer's essay is a remarkable reminder of how profoundly German literature remains defined by the history of a discipline that claims near-exclusive authority to its interpretation. Indeed Germanistik, as the discipline has been called for a long time, a name and project now repeatedly challenged, is as much a problem in this equation. As a national enterprise Germanistik has historically set an agenda for research and interpretation and with it a canon that has become increasingly under attack. Although Schlaffer's reservations against a new historicist agenda may not sound unreasonable, the problem of the selective scope of Germanistik has limited if not hampered Germanistik itself. The criteria for what is read as German literature and what is not have more than ever become an urgent question, and any historical approach, as Schlaffer so impressively shows, is exposed to the danger of simply reproducing traditional views and values, albeit with the now fashionable postwall sauciness often welcomed as the new German allure that many people had so nostalgically been waiting for.

But it is not until Germanistik itself is allowed to come into view as part of the problem in the debate on German literature that the discussion on this theme can be addressed in critical fashion. If Schlaffer shares this blind spot with many others, it only shows that the "law of lateness" (Gesetz der Verspätung) he likes to cite (78, 132) betrays some of the belatedness of Germanistik as a discipline privileged to outlive itself as a Sonderweg and habitat of academic existence still untroubled by the course of history.

If Schlaffer's argument holds true, mass unemployment of Germanists is not just a threat but an imminent possibility. But again, such withering of a discipline may have other reasons altogether—among others, the unwillingness of its representatives to rethink their own mission, claims, and visions. Maybe the end of Germanistik is another beginning of literature? At least, it would signal the end of a discourse that has been lingering for perhaps too long. Maybe endings are not bad but the chance for new beginnings—supposing one still desires to think along a binary logic of endings and beginnings, a logic that literature, and certainly current German literature, has called into question for some time now.

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