

The American Dead End of German Literature

Matthias Politycki

After his best-selling Weiberroman (1997), the fictional record of a male protagonist's views on gender issues in Germany's 1970 and 1980s, Matthias Politycki entered the debate on contemporary German literature by staking out new territory for the '78ers generation (as opposed to that of the '68ers). Politycki's essays echo his generation's call for a new aesthetics in German literature, one that neither sells out to the "trivial" best-seller narratives influenced by (American) creative writing schools nor remains aloof from its contemporary German readership. Instead, German literature needs to find its own voice by inventing both a language and a narrative technique that is entertaining, yet sophisticated. A trained "Germanist," Politycki is often attacked for his polemics against the current literary scene, which also target high-profile critics and publishing houses. His similarly controversial position on the "Americanization" of German language and literature should be read within the context of his call for a new European aesthetics.

Is it not doing well, the most recent German literature, now that we don't even know how to keep up with all those trendy new movements (such as pop literature, the renaissance of the narrative, New German Readability, and the so-called *Frolleinwunder*)? Oh yes, German literature is finally doing well again, the only question is, how long will this last? Today's German literature faces immediate extinction, since there seems to be a lack of new themes and since its language, the German language, is becoming increasingly estranged from that which it is trying to depict, from "reality." We now lack vocabulary for significant portions of our lives, because we have become too complacent to invent new terminology and because we render our own vocabulary senselessly into Anglo-sized or Americanized idioms, whose rich, century-old meanings and connotations we cannot fully comprehend let

alone use effectively. This is why we receive “reality” as a second-hand commodity, a commodity crafted by someone else, for someone else, while our own linguistic identity slowly begins its descent into oblivion.

Meanwhile, we are well beyond just assimilating a few words or expressions. It now has to be a full phrase or sentence—thereby slowly abolishing our grammatical structures, as well as, more importantly, the very core of our language, which determines the way we think and feel. Our self-manipulation has grown so sophisticated that, I submit, in most cases we are completely unaware of it.

One small example: “*Das macht Sinn*” swept over Germany like an epidemic a few years ago, as a direct translation of “it makes sense.” Within months, the centuries-old “*Das hat Sinn*” was completely eradicated. Is this a purely arbitrary process? Certainly not. “*Es hat Sinn*” carries the slight connotation of something positively “German.” It *has* sense, all by itself, completely without our intervention, just as the idiomatic lamp in Mörike’s poem: Whether or not we gaze at it, whether or not we imply any sense or meaning for it, it carries its meaning in itself, it rests within itself, perhaps it just *seems* to rest within itself, by just shining for itself—we’ll never know for certain. In any case, there seems to be some deeper force at work, justifying the meaning of a thing or a process in itself. You may consider this an eccentric overinterpretation. But perhaps you’d like to take the opposite, the clear-cut, simple phrase “it makes sense,” and ask yourself: Who is this person supposed to be, he or she who first has to make, or create, sense or meaning? Can it be us, who inspect a matter for as long as it takes us to logically dissect it into its individual units? What hypocrisy! And if it is not us, in any case someone or something has first to become active in order to create sense or meaning—some fateful “it”! Whoever or whatever “it” is that “makes” sense, we see here the full extent of the discrepancy between Anglo-American rationalism and German romanticism. I consider the functionalist-operative term of “making” sense completely lacking the modesty of “having” sense or meaning, and no matter how cool I’d like to be, something in me revolts.

The sum of those individual examples of linguistic deindividualization, however, constitutes a whole paradigm. And this is what I am concerned with, as someone who not only depends on the German language but also loves it. If this, my, our language loses its power to assimilate, it will expire, just as when Latin slowly dissolved—and something very beautiful emerged, that is, Italian. In our case, it’ll be “Anglogerman-Newhighpidgin,” which also means no less than the beginning of an “Anglogerman-Newhighpidgin” literature. However,

the necessary by-product, the end of a German literature, seems less desirable to me, which has nothing to do with any kind of reactionary nationalism, quite the opposite. Let's not leave this highly problematic subject to those who could misuse it, let's instead claim it for ourselves!

But, of course, the problem never was a purely linguistic one. With the end of World War II, Europe (and, actually, most parts of the world, with the possible exception of Bhutan or Burundi) was recolonized by the United States, which at first was probably good and necessary. After a few decades of cultural imperialism, however, the face of Europe has changed radically. We now know this face of ours much less than ever before, whereas we know the American Midwest not only up to the last corner of its living room furniture but also down to the bottom of its bowls of popcorn, which are being consumed in those living rooms, while the living room of, let's say, a Finnish peasant is as foreign to us as the interior core of the individual popcorn. But who knows, perhaps there would be more to discover in the interior of a popcorn than in the entire popcorn bowl, and certainly more than in the Midwestern living room, where those popcorn bowls are being emptied by us and for us—the audience of TV soaps—exactly the same way, day in and day out. By now, we can even simulate a Midwestern living room scenario when we're at the movies, where we, eating popcorn, watch others in their Midwestern living rooms, eating popcorn, watching movies.

But the fact that we find ourselves at the beginning of the end of not only a German *speaking* but also a *German*-speaking culture seems well established by now. A certain Natan Sznajder even claimed recently in an article entitled “Amerika, Du hast es besser” (America, you’re better off) that the United States had made certain after 1945 “that we all [and he means all Europeans] were able to become Americans”¹—were able to, past tense! And since this seems to be a fait accompli for the sum of our culture, it certainly cannot be kept out of literature. Even as readers, as writers, and as novelists, we are in a constant process of self-“Americanization.” In German bookstores, the creative-writing imports from the United States abound, and according to several influential critics at home, our German literature would do much better if only we’d learn to use those same proven techniques. But what if German literature is not incapable of learning, but rather just doesn’t want to go down this road? To deliver an entertaining one-way novel where, after one quick read-through, nothing remains—is this the kind of literature worth writing for a non-American?

So they come across the Atlantic in their cream-colored suits, the

Tom Wolfes, usually not offering more than the forced facade of their dandy-like appearance, and in German feuilletons aren't even embarrassed to lecture us on European literature! But who the hell is Tom Wolfe? Certainly not someone whose writing I'd miss for one day, either as a reader (who likes to be skillfully entertained) or as a writer (who likes to learn about new techniques).

It's time to counteract this trend. U.S. literature by Wolfe, Boyle, Auster, etc., which for years now has dominated sales in Germany (and I am here not speaking of writers such as DeLillo, Gaddis, or Brodkey), is terribly boring in its calculated state of continued excitement. We already know all of these stories from TV soaps and the advertising industry, so why read them, since they have nothing to do with our lives? Because of their highly rated entertainment value? But entertainment is now available in German literature for the same price, and besides, as Martin Hielscher, editor of Kiepenheuer & Witsch, once remarked, "entertainment value is more a side effect of an interesting text; the real question is whether or not it can provide us with an actual experience."

No, literature in Germany is certainly not in any kind of danger, and I'm not concerned with the "world status" of any kind of German literature. Only individual authors reach world status, and on this level it really doesn't matter where they're from. But if the world is interested in them, it may actually be their regional origin that makes them so interesting, and this is what annoys me: Not only do we want to be the "better" Americans, but we also voluntarily give up our so-called national identities, not in order to foster an international synthesis of world culture, as some people claim, but in order to foster the worldwide imperialism of a U.S. monoculture.

Now, don't think of me as a proponent of some kind of either leftist or rightist anti-Americanism, but what seemed appropriate yesterday may be wrong today and, returning to German literature, may tomorrow be a death sentence. In the meantime, we are not only deciding on the concept of "Germanness," however that may be defined, we are also dealing with our identity as Europeans, as the entire "old world" turns into a pseudo-United States. We have begun to neglect each other, ceased to be interested in one another, to engage with each other, we have recently become ignorant of each other. Translations today usually favor mediocrity, texts written in an ordinary, easily digestible, and cheaply translatable style. From such books, no longer conceived in an original way, and thus no longer capable of conveying the unique world of an author, or of an entire culture, from such books

we only learn what we already know. I am referring here to the absence of “learning” (in terms of an aesthetic experience), drastically interfering with a reader’s curiosity about other, neighboring, cultures. Some publishers even go so far as to say that we now have a harder time understanding our immediate neighboring cultures than U.S. culture and thus more often than not decide against contracting a translation. Something fundamental seems to have been lost here, the idea that it is precisely the specific “otherness” of a book, even if it is difficult to translate, that makes it attractive and that inspires us to read in order to find out about something different from our own experience. Because of this confusion, the non-German speaking world today is under a gross misconception concerning contemporary German literature, the conception of some sort of Grass-Süskind-Schlink literature. And who knows what misconceptions our image of French literature may contain, not to mention Finnish literature. We probably only perceive those non-German texts that might as well be from the United States—I am here, of course, speaking in general terms only—and wouldn’t it be important to counteract those trends with a new pride as Europeans? Otherwise, we may soon be not only at the end of a German literature but rather at the end of *any* non-U.S.-type literature.

My counterproposal envisions a European aesthetics, which imagines itself on equal footing with that of the United States. Once we have reached the era of postnational literatures, our aesthetic judgment based on contemporary German literature will at any rate no longer be sufficient, and we won’t have a choice except to go with a European vision. A European vision, however, that reaches beyond Cape Gibraltar and the Ural Mountains, since “European aesthetics” should not simply be equated with a new form of regionalism but is meant to serve as a new model. But if we continue to avoid the question of our own perspective, an attitude easily camouflaged as progressive liberalism, we German writers should at least be consistent and should engage *Faust II* using creative-writing techniques and then translate it into Anglogerman-Newhighpidgin, so that people will still be able to understand it. And we should, of course, always turn up in cream-colored suits, so people may still recognize us as writers.

So what could this be, what I’d call “European aesthetics” for lack of a better expression, though I am aware that it may sound single-mindedly? At any rate, it is not meant as a geographic category—I am thinking of Nabokov here as an example. And, of course, it cannot be about the introduction of a unifying normative aesthetics to foster European unification as a sum of all the specific national characteris-

tics. It is rather about the opposite, about the discovery of deeply rooted “European” characteristics within all the national specifics. Why not start by looking at France, which has always proven productive for Germans! With this, we may just as well have reached the end of German literature, but I’d consider a fully “Europeanized” end to be far preferable to the impending partially Americanized end now quietly under way. Thus, what could we propose as cultural common denominators to combat the dominance of the creative-writing aesthetics? Here are a few suggestions.

1. Commitment to *detail* instead of an exclusive commitment to plot. Narrative strategies that are not just functional but are ends in themselves that do not require any particular reason—as, for example, with respect to the construction of the plot as a whole.
2. A feeling for *atmosphere* instead of maximizing the amount of information that is being mediated. An atmospheric concentration, not as a retarding element that impedes the narrative flow but as pleasure, a pleasure that adds to the narrative itself.
3. The art of the *nonnarrative* rather than always insisting on stories, stories, stories. Now that even the Germans have learned the American lesson, the nonnarrative should again be understood as an important part of the narrative, the seemingly purposeless beyond any kind of story line.
4. *Multiply coded texts* instead of just textual surface. The story line of a narrative may be sufficient for 90 percent of readers, but it can only be the surface of a “European” text. The other 10 percent are moved by the thing itself: the stimulation of allusions, the choice of metaphors, the use of aphorisms, the playful reconfiguration of established narrative structures, characters, scenes, motives, rhetorical figures, even individual words. In a European text, a long tradition is embedded, not as a burden or barrier for readers but as an additional pleasurable offering for those who know the rules of the game and feel inclined to participate.
5. *Indirect fulfillment of expectations*. To not immediately satisfy reader expectation is more interesting, more productively unsettling, and forms a more lasting impression. When someone buys a ticket for a buggy ride but in the end returns from a roller coaster ride, he will probably have had an important experience.
6. Mediation of an *experience* instead of pure entertainment, in order to deliver more subtle pleasures than just the suspense of a

good story. A book can transform its readers, a book can provide an experience of intense joy, well beyond its entertainment value. Of course, entertainment is a prerequisite to draw a reader in.

7. A *slow-paced* unfolding of the narrative rather than creating suspense from the very first line. If you invest in a broader scope at the outset, you can really speed up later on. A slow pace is also—contrary to assumptions—the opposite of boring or draining reading, whereas the hysterical and artificial creation of suspense (a dead body on the first page, then another one every thirty pages) is indeed uninteresting, since it's usually done much better in film.
8. An emphasis on *style*, instead of using words purely for their narrative function, a rhetorical structure that may also appear disturbing. Every book conceived using European aesthetics is by definition unique, whereas a product of a creative-writing school is always a copy of other success stories, a product of a compromise designed to draw in as many readers as possible. Perhaps we could agree that a certain amount of friction and initial obscurity is characteristic for European literature?

Obviously, such suggestions are not exactly met with enthusiasm these days. Eurocentrism in times of multiculturalism? In times of a weak euro dollar? In times of a general weariness of all things European fueled by the empty jargon of our so-called political leaders? Admittedly, the thought of a European aesthetics seems rather annoying, especially now that German publishers are, astonishingly enough, finally focusing on German literature again. But it is necessary, nevertheless. Till now, the eternal debates on the current state of German literature have barely managed to go beyond the prejudices linked to an outdated aesthetics mainly centered on the Gruppe 47. This house-cleaning has been more than necessary. And now? We're more or less empty-handed, since current literary criticism has been reduced to judgments of taste. A new phase in the debate would be crucial, a phase in which new criteria are suggested.

Whoever wants to misunderstand me may do so. Yes, indeed, the buzzword of a “European aesthetics” is nothing but a cover name and meant to sound like really old hat, something that may already have existed in ancient Greece. This old hat seems to have gone out of fashion with all the craze about baseball caps (or tailored suits, but that is a different story, the story of those who say, “hi, I do pop literature,” and will be told some other time). My entire appeal for a European

narrative comes down to that which has always been expected of great literature—because we are about to abandon those expectations.

In the end, our choice is between a hostile or a friendly takeover, since German literature as we know it will no longer exist in the near future. We are thus living in a time that will soon come to an end. For those who do not just want to enjoy this end, for those who desire to retain some of what is about to expire for a new beginning, for those it may be worthwhile to think along the lines of a new European aesthetics.

Translated by Agnes C. Mueller

NOTES

“Der amerikanische Holzweg: Am Anfang vom Ende einer deutschsprachigen Literatur” first appeared in *Frankfurter Rundschau* 66 (March 18, 2000): ZB2. This is the first publication in English.

1. Natan Sznajder, “Amerika, Du hast es besser,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 29, 1999.