

Hans-Jörg Knobloch

From politics to passion: recent developments in German-language literature

Zusammenfassung

Die deutsche Literatur der neunziger Jahre stand im Zeichen der Politik. Der Grund dafür war die deutsche Wiedervereinigung, die nicht nur einen Rückblick auf die verschwundene Deutsche Demokratische Republik nahelegte, sondern auch eine neuerliche Auseinandersetzung mit der gesamtdeutschen Vergangenheit, insbesondere dem Nationalsozialismus. Das Wiedererstehen eines mächtigen deutschen Staates im Herzen Europas führte überdies in einigen Nachbarländern, vor allem in Österreich und der Schweiz, zu einer heftigen Debatte über die eigene Position, die diese Staaten gegenüber Nazi-Deutschland eingenommen hatten, und diese Debatte schlug sich natürlich auch in der Literatur nieder. Doch mit dem Beginn des neuen Millenniums ist eine Wende zu beobachten: Die meisten Autoren scheinen das Interesse an Politik und Geschichte verloren zu haben und kehren zu einem der ältesten Themen in der Literatur überhaupt zurück: zur Liebe.

Van politiek na passie: onlangse ontwikkelinge in die Duitstalige literatuur

Die Duitse literatuur van die jare negentig van die twintigste eeu het in die teken van die politiek gestaan. Die rede daarvoor was die Duitse hereniging, wat nie slegs 'n terugblik op die verdwene Duitse Demokratiese Republiek tot gevolg gehad het nie, maar ook 'n herevaluering van die Duitse verlede, veral van die Nasionaalsosialisme. Daarbenewens het die feit dat 'n magtige Duitse staat weer in die middel van Europa tot stand gekom het, tot heftige debatte in die buurlande gelei, veral in Oostenryk en Switserland, hoofsaaklik ten opsigte van hulle standpuntinname teenoor die voormalige Nazi-Duitsland. Hierdie openbare diskussie het ook in die literatuur neerslag gevind. Sedert die begin van die nuwe millennium kan 'n ommekeer waargeneem word: dit lyk asof die meeste outeurs hulle belangstelling in politiek en geskiedenis verloor het en na een van die oudste temas in die literatuur terugkeer: die liefde.

*Prof H-J Knobloch, Dept of German, Rand Afrikaans University, P O Box 524,
Auckland Park 2006; E-mail: hjk@lw.rau.ac.za*

In many countries, contemporary German literature is still identified with the work of writers such as Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass, if not Bertolt Brecht, perhaps because Böll and Grass were the last German authors to be awarded the Nobel prize for literature. However, Böll has been dead for more than fifteen years, and Grass no longer plays an important role in the literary life of Germany. At the moment, a heavily subsidised edition of Böll's complete works is being prepared, but his popularity among today's readers is reflected in its print-run of only five hundred copies per volume. When Günter Grass burst onto the scene in 1959 with his novel *Die Blechtrommel* ("The tin drum"), he created a new literary world for the younger generation but many of his critics argue that he has not written a strong line for the last twenty-five or even forty years.

Grass's dwindling success is not a question of age, but rather of the fact that the centre of his narrating has, so to speak, moved from his belly to his brain. The most successful novel by a German author written in 2000 is by a colleague of Grass's who is two years his senior: Dieter Wellershoff. His novel, entitled *Der Liebeswunsch* (which may be translated as "The desire for love"), was universally acclaimed by the critics. It tells the story of two couples whose lives change dramatically when one man falls in love with the other's wife. Similar praise was accorded the novel *Teufelsbrück* (the name of a ferry station in Hamburg) by Brigitte Kronauer, an author already in her sixties. The plot of her novel also concerns a four-way love tie, the difference here being that two women are pursuing a man while the third woman is his lover. The outcome is fatal, like that of Wellershoff's *Liebeswunsch*.

If this does not sound new, let alone avant-gardist, you are right, and yet these two novels do reflect a new tendency in German literature. The literary production of the nineties was characterised by political topics. The main reason for this was the reunification of Germany, which triggered not only a retrospective consideration of the vanished German Democratic Republic but also a revalorisation of the Federal Republic of Germany, since this state had also ceased to exist in its previous form. Besides, the re-establishment of a powerful German state in central Europe led to a new discussion of the national-socialist (Nazi) past. This debate was long overdue; in pre-

vious decades, it had been conducted with a great deal of reluctance in the West, and not at all in the East.

The politicisation of literature was also encouraged by the so-called *Historikerstreit* (“Historians’ dispute”) of the mid-eighties, which was incited by conservative circles aiming at building up a new German self-confidence. This politicisation was further strengthened by the debate about the East German writer Christa Wolf who was the darling of West German critics until the fall of the Berlin Wall but who, much to her amazement, suddenly had to face the wrath of her former admirers. The real reason behind the sometimes vicious attacks on her was the fact that she was not in favour of German reunification; she had hoped for the preservation of an independent communist state, albeit reformed, in East Germany. The debate on her status in the GDR quickly escalated into a debate about the role played by intellectuals under the Communist regime (cf Anz 1995), especially since quite a few of the East German writers sympathised with Christa Wolf’s view. They complained about West German arrogance and called the reunification an *Anschluss*, meaning “annexation” — a term which, in German, is heavily loaded, being used to refer to the annexation policy of the Hitler regime, especially the annexation of Austria.

The public euphoria about the fall of the Berlin Wall had hardly ended, when in the East a nostalgia for the lost homeland arose, despite the fact that it had, throughout its existence, often been the target of anger and disdain. These feelings are reflected in many novels of the nineties by East German writers, notably female writers who, more than their male colleagues, were missing the warmth of close friendships which, under the oppressive Communist regime, had developed into almost a cult phenomenon. Christa Wolf herself hardly veiled her disappointment in a novel modifying the classical myth of Medea (Wolf 1996). The only prominent West German writer sharing such grievances was Günter Grass who, in his novel *Ein weites Feld* (“A wide field”), blamed his West German compatriots for — in his view — the “winner’s mentality” with which they had taken over matters in East Germany. He became entangled in a heated debate with the most powerful German critic, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, who was shown on the front page of a leading German magazine tearing Grass’s book to shreds.

Most of the other West German writers refrained from dealing with this sensitive issue, so much so that the feature sections of newspapers impatiently called for the *Wenderoman* — novels which should take the most recent event in German history as their central theme. The *Wenderoman* has thus far not been written, although many novels have touched on the subject. It will probably not be written in the near future because serious writers refuse to be dictated to by the critics.

The West German writers did not eschew politics but were more focused on the past, on the role their fathers had played during the Nazi period. The first West German government under Konrad Adenauer believed that the best way of dealing with the past was not to address it at all. So it was not until about 1960 that this subject was raised in German literature. Only towards the end of the sixties were more urgent questions about the involvement of the older generation in the crimes of the Nazi regime asked by the younger generation. (In fact, these questions featured prominently in the student rebellion of 1968). Then, in the nineties, in the second phase of the campaign to shed some light on that darkest chapter of German history, the questions were posed with less hatred, and the ruthless treatment of the fathers by their sons in the late sixties was even criticised.

This is exactly how Bernhard Schlink approached the subject in his novel *Der Vorleser* (“The reader”), which was published in 1995. Schlink, like his protagonist, a member of the generation of ’68, distances himself from the fierce condemnation of the fathers by their sons during the student movement, and even goes so far as to seek to understand the evil deeds of his main female character who, as an inspector in a concentration camp, was responsible for the deaths of many Jews. The explanation given by the author is the woman’s illiteracy, surely not a common reason for being turned into a tool of the Nazi extinction machinery. Although Schlink stressed that he had not tried to excuse her, he was accused by some critics of “sympathy with the devil” (Wandrey 1995: 33). In this regard, Schlink’s grippingly narrated novel may indeed be debatable. On the other hand, by not merely depicting a bloodthirsty monster, he succeeded in triggering many new discussions of the Nazi era. The fact that “The reader” had even greater success in the USA than in Germany may

serve as an indication that it was not perceived abroad as a cheap attempt to exculpate Nazi criminals.

One generation earlier, such a politically incorrect approach would probably not have been regarded as tolerable. However, it was also used to considerable effect by the Austrian writer Christoph Ransmayr in his novel *Morbus Kitahara*, also published in 1995. Half a century after the Second World War, the public debate about it had been opened again in neighbouring countries, as well. This time, their own position towards Nazi Germany came under scrutiny. The Austrians, for instance, eventually had to admit that they were not only Hitler's innocent victims, as they had long pretended to have been. However, Ransmayr does not seem to be interested in unearthing past crimes. On the contrary, he appears to support those who, in Germany as well as Austria, demanded that fifty years after the end of the Second World War, the accusations and indictments referring to the Holocaust and German war crimes should cease. But it would be wrong to see his novel as a contribution to the so-called *Schlussstrichdebatte* ("final stroke debate") which raged through German newspapers in the nineties. He is more interested in the endless chain of force and violence, of victims turning into perpetrators, and in finding ways to break this fatal chain. And this in a language which — if a subjective judgement is permitted — is unparalleled in today's German-language literature. He shot to fame in 1988 with his book *Die letzte Welt* ("The last world"), a novel about the banishment of the Roman poet Ovidius Naso by Emperor Augustus. No other work written in German has been claimed for postmodernism as often as this one, probably because it is historical and modern at the same time, inseparably collating layers of time. In *Morbus Kitahara* (the title referring to an eye disease) Ransmayr uses the same technique: although it is quite obvious that he is targeting Austria and Germany and dealing with National Socialism and the Holocaust, his novel is ostensibly situated in a timeless no-man's-land. In this way, he not only succeeds in creating archaic structures but also in alienating the content in an almost Brechtian fashion.

Most historical and political novels of the nineties approached their subject in a more realistic manner. Many writers moved to Berlin, the new German capital, in order to catch the ambience of the

“Berlin Republic” as Germany was now being called. Berlin novels and family sagas from the First World War to the present became more and more fashionable — reason enough for some writers to seek new pastures. Towards the end of the millennium, there were indications of a new development. In 1998, a young writer by the name of John von Düffel made his debut as a novelist by publishing *Vom Wasser* (“About the water”). He narrates a family saga, too, but in his novel, the two world wars play only a marginal role. He is much more interested in telling stories than in elaborating history, and therefore a mythical, fairy-tale-like figure, which emerges intermittently from a river, plays a more important role than Adolf Hitler.

Was this the magical realism, demonstrated so perfectly by South American writers, of which the critics had been dreaming for years? Writers in German-speaking countries (or should we rather say in the western world?) have to face the problem that their highly industrialised, highly bureaucratised societies seem to be running out of myths as well as of any material worth being processed as literature. One writer has even argued that the problems of a young generation have never been as irrelevant as those of today’s German youth (Biller 1991: 65), while others have asked whether they really had to travel to the end of the world to find the plot for a useful novel (Köhler 1996: 177). Be that as it may, some writers have tried to overcome this dilemma by including magical elements in their stories. The most successful example of this type of literature is Patrick Süskind’s novel about a perfume-maker in eighteenth-century France who, himself completely scentless, possesses an absolute sense of smell and kills young girls for the sake of creating the perfect perfume. Süskind’s novel *Das Parfum* (“The perfume”) was published as early as 1985 but revealed its influence on other writers only some years later, after it had been translated into more than twenty languages. Like Ransmayr’s “Last world”, it is often claimed for postmodernism but at the same time clearly shares features of Latin American magical realism. It may not be merely coincidental, either, that the story of Ransmayr’s *Morbus Kitabara* reaches its fatal conclusion in South America.

Referring to Süskind, Ransmayr and others, one critic pointed out that German-speaking writers wrote only about lost, distant worlds and asked whether they could not find useful plots anywhere

other than in the past or in fairy-tales (Hage 1989: 34). One could perhaps agree that the German critics themselves had called for some kind of magic realism but the question indeed touches on a problem: the last three novels by Hanns-Josef Ortheil, regarded by many as one of the most talented of German writers, deal respectively with Goethe's mysterious lover during his Italian journey (1998), the tragic fate of a Viennese painting genius modelled on William Turner (1999), and the first production of Mozart's "Don Giovanni" in Prague (2000) — all three erotic novels about the world of the arts, located in the late eighteenth century without any reference to the present. There can be little doubt that such escapism is tantamount to a retreat into the lowlands of light fiction.

The correlation between politics and literature cannot be simply measured. However, it seems as if the sudden end of the reunification euphoria in both parts of Germany and the scandal surrounding the so-called "chancellor of the unity", Helmut Kohl, had a dampening effect on the interest of German writers in politics. In any case, at the beginning of the new millennium, a tendency towards private themes can be recognised in German literature.

In 1998, when John von Düffel made his debut, another young writer, Judith Hermann, published her first work *Sommerhaus, später* ("Summerhouse, later"). These melancholic stories do not deal with politics either but with the feelings and everyday problems of ordinary people. It was striking that notably young readers, who are said by sociologists to be deserting politics in numbers, acclaimed Judith Hermann's book. Her stories re-animated a genre which in German literature had been dead for a long time: the short story — not so much in the sense of the American short story *à la* Hemingway but rather of a story of twenty or thirty pages. Often, they even resemble concentrated versions of entire novels, like Bernhard Schlink's stories published in 2000 under the title *Liebesfluchten* (which can mean "Escapes for the sake of love" as well as "Escapes from love" — indeed, both meanings apply to Schlink's stories, his first book after the global bestseller "The reader"). The difference between these two books is significant in respect of the turn-around of German literature in recent years. Schlink has not completely abandoned political subjects

but they now play second fiddle to themes relating to personal relationships, as the title *Liebesfluchten* indicates.

In fact, love is the most dominant topic of modern German literature. However, the way in which the topic is used reflects the fast-changing reality of Western societies. All the new novels and tales about love have one thing in common: its limited duration. At a time when the partner-for-a-certain-period is replacing the partner-for-life, the writers pay much more attention to the failing love affair than to the eternal love which writers of previous times liked to glorify so fervently. In some of these stories, love is based on false presumptions from the beginning, as in the novel *Liebediener* by the much applauded young author Julia Franck where the female protagonist falls in love with a young man who turns out to be a call-boy (the title *Liebediener* being a punning translation of the word “call-boy”).

In the great old love stories, love was usually terminated by death — illness, murder or accident — and thus immortalised. In many of the new love stories, love comes to an end simply because the lovers fall out of love, and when this happens, it does not help to blame anybody. “At some point, something went wrong,” the male protagonist and narrator in a story by Swiss author Peter Stamm comments after his girlfriend has left him, adding: “I don’t know what I did wrong”.¹ In order to protect himself or herself from the disappointments and wounds which still accompany such separations, some characters prefer to limit the initial relationship to the sexual contact. So, a young woman in another story by the same author tells her companion: “Actually, I would like to sleep with you but only if you promise me that you will not fall in love with me again”.²

However, there is also another species of love story in recent German-language literature — to return to where I began: to the novels *Der Liebeswunsch* by Dieter Wellershoff and *Teufelsbrück* by Brigitte Kronauer. As has been mentioned already, *Der Liebeswunsch* (“The desire for love”) concentrates exclusively on the changing rela-

1 Irgendwann ist etwas schiefgelaufen [...]. Ich weiß nicht, was ich falsch gemacht habe [my translation, H-J K] (Stamm 1999: 81).

2 Eigentlich würde ich gern mit dir schlafen. Aber nur, wenn du mir versprichst, dich nicht wieder in mich zu verlieben [my translation, H-J K] (Stamm 1999: 65).

tionships between two couples: two men and two women. Wellershoff has used a famous novel as the basis for his construction, Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* ("The elective affinities"), which, by means of a crosswise love affair between two couples, tries to exemplify Goethe's belief that the mutual attraction between man and woman follows the same principle as that between chemical elements. Wellershoff has taken care not to follow his original too closely, but the connoisseur will enjoy the many more-or-less hidden allusions and references to Goethe's novel. Even the language is provided with a certain patina and the reader is allowed to guess whether the author is using this somewhat antiquated language seriously or as a subtle parody.

So, Wellershoff's novel belongs to a genre which is becoming increasingly popular in German-language literature, associated with the term *Literatur-Literatur* (meaning "literature based on literature"). However, *Der Liebeswunsch* can also be read without any knowledge of Goethe's novel because the author also makes use of a tool which is anything but new: psychology. He illuminates the actions and reactions of his characters with so much psychological empathy that the literary meta-level almost disappears. If psychology in German-language literature was ever "out", surely it is "in" again, and it is only logical that psychology will play a major role again when writers turn away from politics and start focusing on the private life of select groups of characters.

Brigitte Kronauer is another example of the *Literatur-Literatur* genre but her novel *Teufelsbrück* differs significantly from Wellershoff's. In her foursome, a handsome but somehow dubious young man is passed from one woman to the next until the last one shoots him. This sounds rather trivial but that triviality is part of Kronauer's literary technique. She plays with various genres from the grand love tragedy to the banal partner-swapping story. Sometimes her novel resembles a fairy-tale, sometimes a detective story, and leaping to and fro in this way, she exploits the whole treasury of romantic poetry including its vocabulary, while the plot, albeit entertaining, seems rather irrelevant to her.

What all these books based on literature have in common is that they offer two different levels of reading. At the same time, the return to the old masters underlines what can be said in general about

German-language literature at the beginning of the new millennium: that it is far from revolutionary. One may call this postmodern, but little is achieved with such labels.

The critics have played their part in this retro-turn. In the nineties, the so-called *deutsche Literaturstreit* (German literary dispute) had developed into a general debate about contemporary German literature. The critics argued that it was boring and not internationally competitive. They blamed writers for not being able to narrate and for replacing imagination by exuberant rhetoric. These attacks led to the call for a new realism. Some critics demanded that literature needed to be fun again. A few suggested that authors should take over narrative strategies from successful colleagues in light fiction. They pointed backwards at such masters of realism as Theodor Fontane and Thomas Mann, hastily denying the argument that it is impossible to narrate today in the same way they did. One of the critics, Elke Schmitter, even made her much praised debut as a writer by collating Fontane's *Irrungen, Wirrungen* (in its latest English version, "Delusions, confusions") and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in a new novel which she called *Frau Sartoris*, that is "Madame" or "Mrs Sartoris".

Most writers would probably deny that they were influenced by the debate but it did undoubtedly leave its mark. But if it is true that literature has changed to a degree, the critics have surely turned through a full 180 degrees. Perhaps they realised that they were hoisting themselves with their own petard. In any case, they are now presenting a new "masterpiece" to the public every second week. Young authors who have written one small, clumsy book which no publisher would have accepted ten years ago are now being hailed as the literary grandchildren of Günter Grass. In order to be selected as such, all they have to be is young, self-conscious and sexy — in other words, they must have the same qualities as stars in showbusiness because they must be suitable for promotion on TV. This, of course, has a great deal to do with the fast-changing situation in the publishing industry, but that is another story.

Bibliography

ANZ T

1995. *Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf. Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland.* (Hrsg unter Mitarbeit v Bolay C et al). Frankfurt a M: Fischer.

BILLER M

1991. Soviel Sinnlichkeit wie der Stadtplan von Kiel. Warum die neue deutsche Literatur nichts so nötig hat wie den Realismus. Ein Grundsatzprogramm. *Die Weltwoche* 25.7.1991. (Köhler & Moritz (Hrsg) 1998: 62-71).

FRANCK J

1999. *Liebediener*. Köln: DuMont.

GRASS G

1959. *Die Blechtrommel*. Darmstadt: Luchterhand.

1995. *Ein weites Feld*. Göttingen: Steidl.

HAGE V

1989. Zeitalter der Bruchstücke. Am Ende der achtziger Jahre: Es gibt eine deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur — zwölf Bemerkungen zur zeitgenössischen Erzählkunst. *Der Spiegel* 10.11.1989. (Köhler & Moritz (Hrsg) 1998: 28-41).

HERMANN J

1998. *Sommerhaus, später*. Frankfurt a M: Fischer.

KOHLER A

1996. Reisender Schnee oder Realismus ohne Resignation. Die deutschsprachige Literatur und das "Authentische". *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 30.11 / 1.12.1996. (Köhler & Moritz (Hrsg) 1998: 168-179).

KÖHLER A & R MORITZ (Hrsg)

1998. *Maulbelden und Königskinder. Zur Debatte über die deutschsprachige Gegenwartsliteratur*. Leipzig: Reclam.

KRONAUER B

2000. *Teufelsbrück*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

ORTHEIL H-J

1998. *Faustinas Küsse*. München: Luchterhand.

1999. *Im Licht der Lagune*. München: Luchterhand.

2001. *Die Nacht des Don Juan*. München: Luchterhand.

RANSMAYR C

1988. *Die letzte Welt*. Nördlingen: Greno.

1995. *Morbus Kitabara*. Frankfurt a M: Fischer.

SCHLINK B

1995. *Der Vorleser*. Zürich: Diogenes.

1996. *Liebesfluchten*. Zürich: Diogenes.

SCHMITTER E

2000. *Frau Sartoris*. Berlin: Berlin.

Knoblochs/From politics to passions

STAMM P

1999. *Blitzeis*. Zürich-Hamburg:
Die Arche.

SÜSKIND P

1985. *Das Parfum. Die Geschichte
eines Mörders*. Zürich: Diogenes.

VON DÜFFEL J

1998. *Vom Wasser*. Köln: DuMont.

WANDREY U

1995. Frau mit Peitsche. Bernhard
Schlinks 'Der Vorleser' — Proto-
koll der Gefühle. *Das Sonntagsblatt*
15.12.1995.

WELLERSHOFF D

1999. *Der Liebestwunsch*. Köln:
Kiepenheuer & Witsch.

WOLF C

1995. *Medea. Stimmen*. München:
Luchterhand.