

Tom Cheesman, ed.. *German Text Crimes: Writers Accused, from the 1950s to the 2000s*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013. 242 pp. \$70.20, cloth, ISBN 978-90-420-3690-1.



Reviewed by Andrew Brandel

Published on H-SAE (November, 2013)

Commissioned by Michael B. Munnik (Cardiff University)

German literary culture remains a topic of considerable scholarly attention within a variety of fields, from intellectual history to *Germanistik*. The extensive role of the cultural bourgeoisie in formations of national identity is a mainstay of commentary on German public consciousness, and it has renewed significance for a country grappling with its past, present, and future in public and private ways. In this new edition in Rodopi's German Monitor Series, Tom Cheesman and the contributors to *German Text Crimes* bring an emerging and important theme to the fore of scholarly discourse on intellectual and artistic life in postwar, and occasionally post-wall, Germany. This volume assembles an eclectic range of commentators from philosophical, historical, literary, and theater studies, and an exciting array of cases, not limited solely to the arena of codified law. The contributors often speak powerfully to key issues in the contemporary German literature, picking up the nuances of complex matters, including the vulnerability of various groups in a country still wrestling with its "self-recognition as a 'post-

migrant' multicultural space," power relations in the construction of memory, and the boundaries between life and art (p. 8).

Duncan Large's chapter offers a fresh perspective on the overseas, postwar reception of Martin Heidegger's thought and association with Nazi politics. Large follows the movement of Ulster poet Tom Paulin through a series of critiques of Heidegger's late writings and political activities, importantly through "ontological rootlessness" (p. 34). The chapter is distinguished by its emphasis on the "literary" rather than "philosophical" realms of reception, though a thorough review of the relationship between art and thinking in Heidegger's philosophy may have added an interesting dimension. Paulin appears to be a poor reader of Heidegger, misunderstanding central concepts, misquoting his favored source (Hubert Dreyfus), and committing German language errors in print. The essay's significance is in unpacking the category of "texts' crimes" to the spaces between the lines and their "extra-textual" transformations, but this may prove a missed op-

portunity to explore how Heidegger's ideas seeped into literature and criticism in less conscious, more tacit ways. Áine McMurty, however, examines a subject that has received relatively little attention--the posthumous publication of Ingeborg Bachmann's Nachlaß *Ich weiß keine bessere Welt* (2000) by her siblings and nephew, the executors of her estate. The chapter begins with a historical exegesis of the critical outcry concerning the executors' "crime"--alternately the muddying the art of German poetry's "high priestess" with unfinished texts and personal issues, an invasion of private life, or poor editorial work. McMurty convincingly argues that, rather than being an affront to Bachmann's oeuvre and its movement, the volume reflects a stage in the development of "symptomatic linguistic modes" as experimental technique for expressing political critique. Following Sigrid Weigel, this is effected through parallelism with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer on the alignment of the body, the political, and (for Bachmann) language. The struggle to identify an aesthetic solution to the persistence of violent natures and crises of self-consciousness that accompany cycles in the reconceptualization of victimhood and guilt left Bachmann unable to speak; her Nachlaß is testament to this struggle.

Chapters by Katharina Hall and Stuart Parkes develop the theme of contested politics of memory regarding National Socialism and the Holocaust while tactfully separating crimes against literature from those against history. Parkes tracks the reassessment of Martin Walser's works following charges of anti-Semitism in his *Tod eines Kritikers* (2002) in light of an earlier call for the "normalization" of Germany (insinuating a hypersensitivity to potential transgressions against the memory of victims). The manuscript was submitted uncorrected to a newspaper for serialization and met with immediate accusations of anti-Semitic sentiments manifest in a character bearing uncanny resemblance to the Jewish critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki. Public and literary critical outrage erupted around an open letter by the paper's

editor, Frank Schirrmacher, refusing the novel on ethical grounds. Parkes endeavors to show that the novel's use of Jewish stereotypes was less pronounced than similar publications, highlighting German unease regarding relationships with Jews. While he concedes aesthetic criticisms, Parkes suggests that Schirrmacher's motivations were dubious and unrelated either to aesthetics or ethics. Like Parkes, Hall's account of the reception of Bernard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* (1995) begins with a diachronic analysis. Schlink's text is compared to Gunther Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* (1959) and Patrick Süßkind's *Das Parfum* (1985) not only for its commercial success but also for its depiction of a morally dubious central character. Three phases mark *Der Vorleser's* reception: a generally positive period lauding the novel's ethical achievements; a second, critical phase challenging its moral qualifications; and finally a largely positive phase emanating from the United States and United Kingdom with notable objections, including those of Hall herself. Juxtaposing these positions, Hall concludes that the seeming inextricability of distinct judgments of criminality within critical logic--those against humanity and against art--speaks to the desire for the reintegration of these fields.

Karoline von Oppen's chapter interrogates the international condemnation of Austrian writer Peter Handke for a series of texts on the Serbian experience of violence. The chapter begins with Handke's receipt of the Heine Prize, controversial because of Handke's call for justice for Serbia (*Gerechtigkeit für Serbien*) following the recent war in Bosnia, which early commentators challenged as a dubious account and even a defense of perpetrators; Handke later rejected the prize. Having rehashed the details of the debate on the ethical and empirical content of the travelogue, von Oppen tries to correct what she sees as misreadings by relocating the text in its historical context--namely, ongoing debates about German/Austrian normalization and their history as perpetrators, introducing a language of responsibility

into the memory politics of normalization. Thus, von Oppen shifts conversation from whether Handke is guilty to why his contribution is illegible to existing discourse. This sophisticated move, as with Parkes's on Walser, highlights the capacity of aesthetic techniques like irony and poetics to introduce uncertainty into normative discourse--though, as Cheesman points out, given the sensitive nature of the topic, such a gesture may itself garner criticism in the long run.

Concerning inheritances of legacies of violence, Julian Preece's chapter addresses the troubling restraint with which texts advocating violence and silence are propagated and received. The essay centers on Franz-Maria Sonner and Thomas Weiss for their use of the trope of murdering capitalists, alongside Rolf Hochhuth's play *McKinsey kommt* (premiered 2004). Preece tracks the presentation of assassination as an acceptable recourse to the otherwise not legally actionable crimes involved in global capitalism. The absence of outrage involved in the portrayal of "the Jew" as the legitimate target of such "justice," on Preece's reading, is symptomatic of a national indulgence in a violent fantasy of revenge against foreign neoliberal expansionism. Such unquestioned fantasies emerge as well in David Barnett's chapter, but through the notion of "Werktreue," or faithfulness to the text, regarding Hochhuth's dramas. Though Barnett's treatment of the concept, through existing literary critical and aesthetic apparatuses and the conclusions he draws therefrom, is limited, his contribution subsists in the analysis of its ethical and legal dimensions. Barnett argues against the use (in legal and ethical terms, in addition to the aesthetic) of the term "violations" when talking about texts by revealing the antinomies that arise from the deployment of its counter-concept. Such conflicts ultimately fall to the nature of the playwright herself, suggesting they ought to "accept their symbolic deaths after all" (p. 92).

David Robb's chapter examines struggles between the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) authorities and songwriters through the cases of Wolf Biermann and the group Karls Enkel. Robb argues that the state's image of itself was so intricately tethered to its inheritance of the revolutionary tradition that it could not bear even parallel artistic imaginations. Ironically mobilizing the state's own mythology and revolutionary Marxist narrative, Biermann and others posited a satirical critique of the real state of life under socialism. Moving between state censorship, public opinion, and increasingly bleak attempts to express freedom through literary techniques, Robb's chapter traces both the state's methods of evaluating threat and artistic attempts to evade crackdown, affording us a more complex picture of the politics of artist production in the GDR. Challenging overly simplistic renderings of associations of anti-authoritarianism, feminism, the grotesque, and the violent, Heike Bartel's essay turns to Charlotte Roche's *Feuchtgebiete* (2008) and Elfriede Jelinek's *Lust* (1989) to undo the assumptive identity between feminist critique and conservative sexuality. Bartel tracks the linguistic features of *Frauenpornografie*, an emancipatory genre, through its original combination of the pornographic with corporeal wit, though she finds both expressions to have fallen short of their ambition: the former for disregarding the tacit suppression of the voice of female desire inhering in the forms' "rhetorical and iconographical codes" and the latter for assuming such a voice is impossible to express in the gender-hierarchical world of cultural production.

While its theoretical contributions at times fall short (or are at least uneven in their success), this book will certainly provide an important touchstone for ongoing study of the relationship between art and politics in a Germany struggling with its identity, its place on the world stage, and its history. On the one hand, its primary shortcoming is that the language of "criminality" goes under-theorized, given its status as the titular

metaphor and its relevance to the German context. The essays are situated against the backdrop of trends in the interstices of law and literature, specifically relative to works on literary scandal as “social and media phenomenon”; however, Cheesman suggests that the collection is distinguished by its attention to “literary facts” concerning the author and the text while undoing the subordination of aesthetics to cultural politics (pp. 1-3). Such a rebalancing may be merited in the wake of postmodernist literary criticism, but the authors in this collection occasionally draw hasty lines between the “literary” and the “extra-literary” or the “aesthetic” from the “political.” If this antithetical reappraisal is to be the volume’s defining feature, it would have benefited from more sustained analytic interrogation. Audiences from anthropological circles might regret the absence of an ethnological voice or ethnographic sensitivity. On the other hand, the essays will likely be of interest both to specialists on literary culture in Europe and to those looking for an introduction to some of the important issues in the field. Students will find many of the cases engaging and provocative for their historical richness, and in a few cases for their challenges to dominant paradigms; and scholars will benefit from its well-researched bibliographies and clear exegeses.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-sae>

Citation: Andrew Brandel. Review of Cheesman, Tom, ed. *German Text Crimes: Writers Accused, from the 1950s to the 2000s*. H-SAE, H-Net Reviews. November, 2013.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39671>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.