

In Germanic lands

Olivier Mannoni

‘*Outre-Rhin*’ – across the Rhine: the expression commonly used in France to designate Germany is not only imprecise and restrictive, it has always profoundly annoyed me. It suggests that Germany’s western border ends in Bonn, that it includes at most the northern Rhineland and, at a pinch, the region around Frankfurt am Main, because of its stock exchange. And this has not changed, not even after reunification and the transfer of the capital to Berlin.

People may have a similar view of German literature. In France, there is still a widespread misconception that it is drab and grey, like the Saarland countryside on a foggy day in February, wise and sententious like a Sunday homily in rural Bavaria. Many publishers have asked me if a book they intended to publish was ‘too German’... Was Dostoevsky ‘too Russian’? Shakespeare ‘too English’? Miller ‘too American’?

My journeys through German literature have revealed to me so many detours, so many brilliant, surprising and thrilling splendours, that I sometimes have to force myself not to respond too sharply to this type of question.

After my initial, fascinating contact with German literature as a French schoolboy – with Schiller, Hölderlin, Mörike and, the epitome of modernity in schools and academia, Thomas Mann – I discovered my first ‘literary scene’ far from the Rhine and the French border, on the banks of the Elbe. The place was Gorleben, which had been designated as a site for storing and recycling nuclear waste material (and which was subsequently set up).

“*Wendland, a Republic of Letters*”

An early type of protest camp, the Republic of Wendland, was declared. A constant round of meetings, debates, parties and children’s entertainment was held by Germans who had absolutely nothing in common with the anthracite suits and refined speech of the Bonn Republic. When I arrived at the camp, aged twenty, I was on a kind of voyage of initiation, my own European tour. My journey brought me to Hans-Christoph



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Photo: Françoise Mancip-Renaudie*

Buch, who lived nearby, and who drove me to the camp in a wheezy old 2CV. Peter Schneider, Jürgen Theobaldy and Uwe Johnson were there or had passed through this place. The Republic of Wendland (I still have the passport) was a Republic of Letters. I spent an entire evening talking politics (this was the time of *Besser rot als tot*, “better red than dead”, a time when the United States and the Soviet Union seemed to be preparing for nuclear confrontation in central Europe). After I got back, in the same old 2 CV, zigzagging a little after the booze-laden discussions, after I left the Elbe and the searchlights of the East German police on the other bank scouring the surface of the water, my view of Germany had changed.

My reading then moved away from the classic paths and, despite my immense respect for the previously-mentioned authors, I started seeking out more contemporary writers: Heinrich Böll, Siegfried Lenz, Günter Wallraff, Friedrich Christian Delius and a handful of others. But also, and above all Günter Grass who, along with many other Gruppe 47 authors, posed the question of how and

whether the German language should be saved. *The Danzig Trilogy* moved me deeply. *The Rat*, a literary, Dantesque vision of an ecological apocalypse, convinced me that literature was still able to have an effect on the world. And much later, with *Too Far Afield*, that it could still be insolent and corrosive.

“Is German literature too German?”

More than its political aspect, it was exactly this tartness – this sardonic side – which guided my research into German literature and my translation choices. Once I had embarked on this voyage, I entered a literary universe worthy of the brothers Grimm, and which, rather than tracing the line of the Rhine, went at times to faraway lands: the explosive eruptions of Thomas Bernhard from Heldenplatz in Vienna, the exuberant imagination and wonderful writing of Swiss writers Hugo Loetscher or Martin Suter, the incredible poetry of Milena

Michiko Flašar, the Austrian daughter of a Hungarian father and a Japanese mother, who tells the story of the meeting of a Japanese *hikokomori* and a *salaryman*, Frank Witzel's hallucinating fantasies of a paranoid universe that was still called Germany, the quest of Austrian Robert Menasse in the country of Babel that is the European Commission, or the terrifying depictions by Franzobel, another Austrian, of the story of *The Raft of the Medusa*. And then there was Ingomar von Kieseritzky, incredible scion of a noble Baltic family and one of the most caustic writers I have ever encountered, and his unforgettable *The Book of Disasters*. Another was Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* and his detective stories with their never distant past; Patrick Süskind with his smells and his music. The teetering constructions of Arno Schmidt or Walter Kempowski, another mad collector. The list of imaginary wonders unfurled under our eyes by German-language literature goes on and on.

So, is German literature 'too German'? On the contrary: for a translator, it presents a fabulous palette of sensitivities, genres, styles and talents. *Outre-Rhin* is like the map of a fabulous country, peopled with caves, enchanted lakes, magnificent sagas. And with the blood-curdling tales that provided the foundation on which all these writers built their creations. The German tragedy has given birth to one of the most abundant and richest literatures in Europe. Let's hope that it will be able to face the brown mists that are again weighing on all German-speaking countries – and on our own.

Over 700 German titles are translated and published every year in France, placing the language third behind English and Japanese (including mangas). This figure has been stable for years. Sales of German literature have been highly successful in recent decades: for example, Günter Wallraff (*Lowest of the Low*), Patrick Süskind (*Perfume, The Double Bass*), Daniel Kehlmann (*Measuring the World*), Martin Suter for most of his novels and, just recently, Robert Menasse with *The Capital*.

*Translated from the French
original by Miriam Watchorn*