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Introduction to the special issue

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Introduction to the special issue

Abstract

Two seemingly superficial questions prompted the initiation of the present extensive survey of contemporary German poetry: what difference has 1989 made to lyrical voices both East and West...

Keywords

superficial, questions, poetry, contemporary German poetry, German, Germany, East, West, German poetry, 1989, lyrical voices

Introduction

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Two seemingly superficial questions prompted the initiation of the present extensive survey of contemporary German poetry: what difference has 1989 made to lyrical voices both East and West? And why is German poetry relatively unfashionable now after the striking achievements and (by obviously rarefied standards) fame of many poets in the 1970s? It turns out that these questions point in all the essential directions. For the best work of the 1970s “new subjectivity” can be seen as a productive synthesis of important currents in twentieth-century German poetry: the rigorous formalism associated with Benn and Eich; the political stream flowing from Brecht and the young Enzensberger into the torrents of the 1960s; the delight in urban landscapes as opposed to the self-conscious Nature of the Goethean canon; and the general Expressionist-modernist reveling in the grotesque expansion and disintegration of the bourgeois self.

If the present volume makes any one thing clear, it is that the word “synthesis” would be wholly inappropriate for today’s literary condition. But neither are we looking at mere eclecticism. If the energies of the 1970s expressed a confident reintegration of German literature with European modernism, what the events of 1989-90 have done is to reopen all the old questions about Germany and German identity. Authorial responses are too diverse to categorize. We publish here an almost day-to-day analysis by the East German poet Elke Erb of the impact the changes had on her. Yet for the equally East German (but long emigrated) Günter Kunert, 1989 seems to have marked no clear *cæsura*. As so often, the cultural situation is vividly illuminated by Enzensberger, who shows how inescapable the “German question” is for a poetry that would retain its hard-won political dimension. And the fact that Enzensberger offers, not solutions nor even proposals, but only

relentless diagnosis and vivid imagery, suggests the sense of mission uniting the disparate voices heard in this volume.

For German poetry can never be divorced from German history and the perpetual socio-linguistic unease that accompanies consciousness of that history. Whatever the word used to designate this unease (“responsibility” is no longer the fashionable term), the condition imposes difference on poets writing in German. If we juxtapose the first and last essays of the volume, we see that difference enacted—in antithetical ways. For Amy Colin’s German-Jewish women poets from the Bukovina, “language was the only territory from which they could not be expelled.” This modernist trope may seem utterly remote from the “electronically mastered world” of Erk Grimm’s media-conscious writers: far from being any kind of home, language must be ruptured, assaulted, inverted, in order to yield authenticity. Yet, as Grimm warns, all such assaults can and do themselves become mere mannerisms; and in German culture the consequences cannot be shrugged off. For Germany is not just any advanced country; its history is more threatening, its rigidities more conspicuous, its politics never free of implications for others.

Marginality, exile, resistance: such words would be unlikely to dominate discussions of contemporary American poetry. Yet they remain indispensable to German literary culture, even as the convulsions they invoke recede behind the facade of material comfort. For what is always in process in Germany is the literary “construction” of a public identity. As Nora Alter shows, a seemingly technical term like montage has a focused meaning for Erich Fried’s work: through the ceaseless criss-crossing of fables and time-lines, however stylized, the task of constructing “the” German story is kept open and the forces that would repress that task, or declare it obsolete, are held at bay. And so “montage” remains a relevant term for the procedure of all these poets, in play from the moment specific images are chosen, specific moments frozen in textual time. For in Germany the personal is indeed the political, forever or at least until that national story can be told that would enable “privacy” to regain a legitimate meaning. For now German poets, even as they speak in the first person, drive their language to construe a sentence, even a phrase, of that story of the future.

We are especially grateful to Günter Kunert and to Gerhard Falkner for permission to print a selection of poems, some for the first time, and to Elke Erb for her extended meditation on some of these large cultural issues in the context of her personal creativity.