

Book Review

Daniel Bowles. 2011. *The Ends of Satire: Legacies of Satire in Postwar German Writing*. Paradigms series, No. 2. Berlin, Munich and Boston: Walter de Gruyter. 238 pp. ISBN: 978-3-11-035935-0; ISBN: 978-3-11-038684-4.

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DOI 10.1515/humor-2016-0083

Scholars expecting an addition to the recent history of the concept of satire in German literature may find this book disappointing since it contains few references to the theoretical contributions on satirical writing in the German language. Although Bowles mentions Schiller's paper on *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* and Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, there is no discussion of more recent works in this area. For example, two erudite expositions of the history of satire in German literature (Arntzen's [1989] history and theory of satire in German literature and Brummack's [1971] seminal article on the concept and theory of satire) are mentioned only briefly in the introduction. Indeed, the names of Arntzen and Brummack do not even appear in the index, which nonetheless features such grand theorists of poststructuralism and pop icons as Kylie Minogue and Marianne Rosenberg.

So if this book does not cover the theoretical treatment of the concept of satire in Germany, what is it about? Well, it is an eloquent exposition of the central hypothesis that although satire has disappeared from the literary scene in Germany, it persists in three "textual practices," namely "inversion," "mythification," and "citation" (p.9). Each of these is coupled with an interesting reading of a theoretical text: for "inversion," Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal study of the carnivalesque in *Rabelais and His World*, for "mythification," Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, and for "citation," Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. However, Bowles fails to deliver convincing arguments that these textual strategies are reliably associated with a recognizable "satiric effect." By understanding satire literally as a signifier without an origin (p.209), Bowles has created an empty conceptual envelope into which any text may be inserted with little reference to discursive traditions. As a consequence, he treats differing views of satire with remarkable disregard. For instance, Bakhtin's differentiation of "carnavalesque inversion" from satire is explicitly dismissed with the justification that Bakhtin's text itself should be read as satirical (p.57, 61). Another example of terminological insouciance is Bowles's understanding of "postwar" writing, the oldest text in his literary corpus

having been published in 1983, that is well beyond the established definition of “Nachkriegsliteratur.”

These few observations alone might suggest that the focus of this book is such that it falls outside the normal remit of humor research as covered in this journal. After all, the literary texts in Bowles’s corpus (e. g. Thomas Bernhard’s novels *Woodcutters* and *Extinction*, Elfriede Jelinek’s novels *Lust* and *The Piano Teacher*, and Thomas Meinecke’s *Tomboy* and *Music*) have already been treated as instances of satirical writing, while Bowles’s interest lies more in the textual practices of subversive counter-discourse.

References

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