

6-1-2002

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Recommended Citation

Peitsch, Helmut (2002) "Is "Kulturation" a Synonym for "National Identity"?", *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 26: Iss. 2, Article 10. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1541>

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Abstract

Literature and German Unification by Stephen Brockmann is a pioneering study, even if I am not as sure as the dust cover writer if it constitutes "the first systematic attempt in English to examine the literary consequences of German reunification." Stephan...

Keywords

Literature and German Unification, Stephen Brockmann, German reunification, Germany, reunification, Kulturation

Review Essay

Is "Kulturation" a Synonym for "National Identity"?

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Literature and German Unification by Stephen Brockmann is a pioneering study, even if I am not as sure as the dust cover writer if it constitutes "the first systematic attempt in English to examine the literary consequences of German reunification." Stephen Brockmann does, however, succeed in presenting a clear view of what happened to German literature in the 1990s because of the merger of West and East Germany. In seven chapters he not only covers important aspects, but also outlines the development, since the chapters follow each other roughly in chronological order. From looking back at the immediate prehistory of 1989—the debate about Martin Walser's 1988 speech—in Chapter 1, the argument moves from the unification debate (Chapter 2) and the "Literaturstreit" (Chapter 3) via the Stasi debate (Chapter 4) and the "Bocksgesang" debate (Chapter 5) to the 1989 versus 1968 generations debate (Chapter 6) and the debate on the nation in a globalized postmodern world (Chapter 7). Brockmann goes far beyond previous attempts at an overview, whether in English or in German, in terms of both the material he takes into account and the approach he adopts. In contradistinction to Volker Wehdeking's *Die deutsche Einheit und die Schriftsteller* (1995) and Keith Bullivant's *The Future of German Literature* (1994), Brockmann's book is neither a collection of close readings of individual texts nor a collection of critical essays, although parts of

Chapter One have been printed before (“Literature and Convergence” 1997). Brockmann did not simply bring together his numerous contributions to US American journals in the 1990s which observed what was happening on the German literary scene; most of these articles do not even appear on the list of the works cited (see Brockmann, “The Reunification Debate” and “A Literary Civil War”). His book approaches its topic by putting texts into the context of public debates linking politics and literature.

The wide range of Brockmann’s material becomes obvious when one lists the names of the writers and the dates of their books he most extensively or frequently refers to: 1990 Günter Gaus and Christa Wolf, 1991 Monika Maron, Uwe Saeger and Walser, 1992 Kurt Drawert and Hanns-Josef Ortheil, 1993 Irene Dische, Christoph Hein, Wolfgang Hilbig and Ulrich Woelk, 1994 Peter von Becker, Brigitte Burmeister, Kerstin Hensel, Helmut Krausser and Andreas Neumeister, 1995 Thomas Brussig, Günter Grass, Thomas Hettche and Matthias Zschokke, 1996 Jakob Arjouni, John Erpenbeck, Kerstin Jentsch, Maron, Ingo Schramm and Wolf, 1997 Bernd Wagner. In addition to the narrative prose texts which are at the centre of Brockmann’s attention, other sources taken from an extremely wide range of genres, disciplines and media are used; and Brockmann in no way limits his selection of sources to the ones covered in his collections for *New German Critique* and *Monatshefte*. Very often these sources have never been quoted before—at least in the secondary literature I am aware of; Gisela Elsner’s “Über die sogenannte deutsche Revolution” of April 1990 (61) is just one example. Brockmann’s immense knowledge of the field allows for brief—often highly illuminating—references to dozens of very often unresearched or underresearched texts. At the same time the author acknowledges his indebtedness to earlier interpretations of the German literature of the nineties, in particular to interpretations by David Bathrick (1), Philip Brady (93), Bullivant (2-3), Eva Geulen (129), Irene Heidelberger-Leonhard (209), Andreas Huyssen (79), Claudia Mayer-Is wandy (76,) and T.J.Reed (71). As far as the most prominent literary texts are concerned, Brockmann recommends the articles which he thinks most highly of in the footnotes for

further reading. Polemical references—such as to Hans J. Hahn (76) and Alison Lewis (144-45, 148)—are rare exceptions.

However, there is one polemic which runs through the whole book, one which, for me, is difficult to address since I am one of the targets of this polemic.

Brockmann takes as his point of departure the assertion that literature continues to play “a political role” in Germany that would be ‘unthinkable’ in other Western countries (1). Referring to literary historians like Helmut L. Müller, Wolfgang Emmerich, Wehdeking and myself (2-4), Brockmann levels against us the criticism that we have been reluctant to view this specificity of German culture—which he claims to have been visible in East and West Germany—“from an overarching national or historical perspective” (4). Brockmann himself finds this perspective in Friedrich Meinecke’s concept of the “Kulturturnation” (10) whereas he reads my analysis of the political usage of the term in the “Neue Ostpolitik” in the following way: “Peitsch . . . even seems to imply that it was Brandt who invented the concept of the *Kulturturnation*” (202).

There seem to be two related problems: the first concerns the specificity of the political role of German literature, the second the appropriateness of the term “Kulturturnation” to understand this role.

Between the opening and the conclusion of Brockmann’s book, there is clearly a difference, if not a contradiction, as far as the comparison between German and other Western literary cultures is concerned. Whereas at the beginning Brockmann follows Bullivant in arguing an absolute difference (“unthinkable”), at the end, when openly speaking as a US citizen, he refers to novels which inspired political movements in the United States (173-74) and also to the fact that there have been ‘culture wars’ ‘in an increasingly fractured and discordant American politics’ and that literature has played an important role in these wars (177). When Brockmann finally takes a stance as a US American, his position on the German question is not to decide the issue, but rather to define German identity as a tension between normalization and insistence on the abnormality (190-91); however, because of the

involvement of US literature and culture, he goes a step further when he now generalizes this “insecurity” (193) into the global or postmodern condition. He calls into question the polemical line of the whole previous argument by stating: “it is no longer clear what either ‘normal’ or ‘nation’ means concretely” (193). Hints at this impasse can be seen in Brockmann’s very contradictory use of Meinecke’s term (Meinecke *Weltbürgertum* 10).

This can be seen from three examples on two pages (184-85): German Literature as ‘Kulturnation’ is presented first as ‘the non-political side of the political’ (184), then as “the imaginary” unity in “political disunity” (185), finally as “the difference”—from other European countries—“that, in turn, guaranteed identity” (185). In my view, Brockmann’s adoption of a Meineckean perspective comes down to reformulating social and political issues in terms of “nationhood”—as the dust cover puts it in carefully neutral fashion. This work of reformulation already becomes obvious in the Introduction when one compares the beginning and the end: What is called “a political role” (1) has been replaced with “a profound role in helping Germans to locate the place of their nation in history” (21).

Two points can be made about the appropriateness of Meinecke’s term: first, Brockmann ignores the intense debate in historiography about the validity of the concept; second, he identifies cultural nation with national identity.

Even for the period of German history for which Meinecke coined the term, the distinction between cultural and political nation has been questioned most massively, for instance by historians, sociologists, and political scientists of such diverse orientation as Reinhart Koselleck (“Zur historischen”), Otto Dann (“Begriffe” 72-73), Otto Kallscheuer and Claus Leggewie (“Deutsche KulturNation” 112-13). But also outside the German academic debate captured in Hans Peter Herrmann’s volume *Machtphantasie Deutschland: Nationalismus, Männlichkeit und Fremdenhaß im Vaterlandsdiskurs deutscher Schriftsteller des 18. Jahrhunderts* (12), the clear-cut opposition between a cultural and a political definition of the nation has been called into question elsewhere: in France by Tzvetan Todorov (*On Human Diver-*

sity), in the USA by Seyla Benhabib ("Eine spannungsgeladene Formel") and, in particular, in the comparative work of Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt ("Die Konstruktion" 22).

Brockmann's equation of "Kulturation" and national identity becomes clear when he asks those at whom his polemic is addressed, i.e. those who are blamed for ignoring Meinecke's "overarching" perspective: "How does this widespread resistance to the national square with a concept of writers as the privileged articulators of national identity?" (11). My own answer—in the book (*Vom Faschismus zum Kalten Krieg*) to which the author often refers—is that national identity is a concept of the 1980s—which emerged in all Western countries under specific social and political conditions. It seems to me risky to equate this new concept with the old Meineckean one because this equation means projecting back a discourse of identity into periods in which completely different terms were used to articulate social and political concerns in the language of "nation." The questionability of equating "Kulturation" and national identity is highlighted by the two implications of the concept of identity which Brockmann decides to foreground: identity as story-telling (9) and identity as a psychological concept (12). Both implications are certainly far from Meinecke's notion of the "Kulturation," and both rely heavily on the equation of society and individual which is at the centre of the discourse on identity since the advent of neo-liberalism in the years of Reagan and Thatcher, or to be precise, of the time when Reagonomics and Thatcherism worked, as Stuart Hall (*Ausgewählte Schriften* 179) and others have shown, as authoritarian liberalism by articulating the market and the nation:

Thatcherism . . . has powerfully organized itself around particular forms of patriarchy and cultural or national identity. Its defence of "Englishness," of that way of "being British" or of the English feeling "Great again," is a key to some of the unexpected sources of Thatcherisms [sic] popularity. Cultural racism has been one of its most powerful, enduring, effective—and least remarked—sources of strength. (*Critical Dialogues* 236)

"National identity," whether in Britain or in the FRG, is not something which is given; it has been only recently constructed. Thus

critics who avoid the term can be seen as deciding not to naturalize the complex articulation of class, gender, and race which usually is brought under this heading. Brockmann, however, argues—for most parts of his book—this givenness and therefore advocates using the language which normalizes the most recent form of nationalism. He goes even further, declaring: “the negation of national identity is paradoxical because it tends to eliminate the basis on which political engagement becomes possible” (15-16). His advice to those interested in political engagement to take on board nationalistic rhetoric calls on widely shared, but nevertheless wrong views: first, that the nation was an official “taboo” in the old FRG (17), second, that by becoming nationalists ourselves we are preventing “hooligans from becoming more radical nationalists (17), third, that “liberal nationalism” (19) is the most realistic option. All three views can be proved wrong by the facts of the so-called unification. It was based on the constitutional claim to unification which had never been given up by the main political parties of the FRG. This unification was based on the institutional racism of the laws on citizenship. Only in the sense that it happened, can it be called “realistic” to search for legitimacy in terms of liberalism.

Although Brockmann does not shy away from using at one stage the former foreign minister Kinkel’s statement on “auswärtige Kulturpolitik” to justify the nationalization of the political role of literature (177), what is more to the point is the intellectual support Brockmann seeks from US American scholars like Andrei S. Markovits and Simon Reich (207) as well as Russell A. Berman. Berman’s catchy phrase that nationhood indicates “life beyond reification” (18) can be seen as an example of how criticism is turned into uncritical approval, No—into Yes—saying: Lukacs’s concept of anticapitalist critique is used as an advertisement for nationalism.

Concentrating as he does on prose fiction, Brockmann takes some inspiration from Benedict Anderson (20, 184) and Homi K. Bhabha (200); but what is completely missing in the bulk of the argument is any resonance of the poststructuralist questioning of identity—for instance in the way Chris Weedon and Glen

Jordan do when dealing with German cultural politics. They define culture as that dimension of all economic, social and political institutions (power relations) which legitimates social inequality (class, gender, race) by constituting unconscious subjectivity and conscious identity, a sense of self, through signifying practices which form subject-positions (Weedon and Jordan 5, 8, 15).

By avoiding the issues of class, gender, and race—which, I think, need not be raised in the quoted terminology—Brockmann implicitly subscribes to the blood and soil definition of Germanness which regulates citizenship and which was at the core of what he insists on calling “reunification”: We are in fact dealing with a country of immigration which has not recognized itself for what it is and which absorbed the population of another country purely on the grounds of a legitimacy that was simply “ethnic.” Whereas the author very polemically explains his preference for the term ‘reunification’ (162, 171-72, 199) he does not demonstrate an interest in the consequences of the process in terms of class, gender and race power-relations: “The ‘wieder’—in the word ‘Wiedervereinigung’ served as a linguistic reminder of history, of ‘once-again-ness’” (171-72). There is no mentioning of West German migrants’ literature, nor any attention to the specific commitment of East German women writers like Hensel or Burmeister. On the contrary, they are marginalized (85).

Brockmann also avoids dealing with another consequence of unification: the response of writers to what became the first war the united Germany was going to launch, the war in Yugoslavia. Even Markovits and Reich whose plea for liberal nationalism might have served as a non-literary model for Brockmann’s book address the continuity between the “naturalness” of the so-called unification and the diplomatic recognition of the break-away “nation states” of Slovenia and Croatia, although they couch the “überparteilichen Konsens” in a language which tries to disentangle the new liberal nationalism from the old illiberal one:

Deutschlands Alleingang in dieser Frage hatte allerdings mehr mit den liberalen und wilsonistischen Impulsen des Landes zu tun als mit den traditionellen Sympathien der deutschen Rechten

für Kroatien und der ebenso eingefahrenen Feindschaft zu Serbien.

Germany's independence initiative on this question certainly had more to do with the liberal and Wilsonian tendencies of the country than with the traditional sympathies of the German Right for Croatia and its just as deeply-rooted enmity toward Serbia. (Markovitz and Reich 173)

Instead of breaking up the "imagined community" along class, gender and race lines, Brockmann constructs the national identity of the German "Kulturnation" as a family narrative: "East Germany was uncanny in the Freudian sense: that which was at once alien and familiar, at once dead and undead, at once hidden and obvious" (172). Through constant reference to a "Freudian" (12; see 94, 133, 142-43, 158, 160, 189) understanding of identity, Brockmann suggests a "coming of age" (158) of a "healthy" (123, 161) individual—the new Germany—which is no longer "obsessed" (146) either with the "insane" father—Nazism—or with the "prodigal brother" (161)—GDR socialism. Instead it enjoys harmony and unity in the present because it has "escape[d]" (125, 127) from its "sodomasochistic" (190) "superego" (94, 133)—the critical opposition of writers who laid claim to the "antifascist" (123) role of "conscience of the nation"—with its "hypertrophy of guilt" (12):

The distance of two generations from Nazi crimes made it possible for the first time to deal with the past honestly. The double "coming to terms with the past" now necessary with respect to Nazism and Stalinism might well mean not an erasure but a heightening of historical sensitivity. (162)

Without any irony and without realizing that the kind of metaphors used and the stance taken belong together, Brockmann tries to prove his Freudian family narrative by stating: "It is not coincidental that many observers in the West, fascinated by the events of 1989 and 1990, used genetic terminology to grasp what was happening" (161-62). Most of the elaborations of the family metaphor occur when Brockmann comments on essays by Hans Jürgen Syberberg, Botho Strauß, or Hans-Joachim Maaz; regu-

larly, when the metaphor comes into play (127, 133, 161), Brockmann's own text becomes indistinguishable from the other writer's position, even if there is some criticism made against him.

As for the reading of the fictional texts, this "grand narrative" of Brockmann's book means that he concentrates on the story line, the configuration of characters and their emplotment; in order to link text and context, Brockmann emphasizes the psychology of family relations mainly in terms of generations.

In spite of my disagreement on the core argument of the book as far as the naturalization of the socio-historical construct "national identity" and its problematical equation with "Kulturation" are concerned, I have found in each of Brockmann's chapters not only a wealth of information, but many very stimulating ideas, not least some which challenge the "overarching" argument.

In his concise sketch of the eighties, by analysing Grass, Hochhuth, Heym, Peter Schneider, Walser, and Botho Strauß, Brockmann centres on the East/West convergence as already perceived by writers and critics at the time. The emphasis is on cultural-historical continuity (28) in terms of Germanness which is even presented as justification for the 1990 State Treaty on unification (30; see also 177). However, evidence is also provided for a reception of East German literature which does not fit this bill: international feminist appreciation of Christa Wolf cannot easily be explained in terms of German specificity (29).

At the end of the chapter on the writers' contribution to the unification debate of 1989-90, Brockmann poses as open question: For literature did "union" mean a fusion of strengths, a loss or a fusion of weaknesses (63)? He lays open the "contradiction inherent" in Bohrer's seminal position on Westernization plus reclaim of "spiritual" (60) Germanness. By focussing on media contributions of individual writers, Brockmann avoids raising the question: Why did this or that writer get a voice at this specific moment of what only was to become the process of "reunification"? The way in which he turns from Wolf, Heym and Hein to Biermann and Maron without answering the question—put for-

ward by Martin Arends—why East German writers lost their voice (55) means that he can replace these East German writers with the exclusively West German confrontation between Bohrer, on the one hand, and Grass and Habermas, on the other.

Chapter 3 contains a brisk, very much to the point analysis of the *Was bleibt?* controversy. Once again, Brockmann succeeds in highlighting the contradictions in Bohrer's and his followers' position, and links the "Literaturstreit" to the 1980s historians' debate. He is particularly excellent on Greiner; only very rarely (see Vereinigung 1995), Greiner's misreading of Weber's concepts "Gesinnung" and "Verantwortung" has been exposed:

Ignoring Weber's criticisms of an ethics of responsibility devoid of moral conviction as well as Weber's pragmatic emphasis on coming to terms with the real world by creating a difficult synthesis between conviction on the one hand and a sense of responsibility on the other, Greiner bizarrely criticized an aesthetics of conviction precisely for having too much concern with the real world and not enough concern for the purely aesthetic. Art, Greiner believed, should be above politics. How such a non-political literature might promote responsibility was a secret that Greiner left unexplained. (75)

However, Brockmann takes Schirmmacher's attack on the "supposed German specificity of committed literature," i.e. the "politicization" of literature (78), as proving his own point, even if only in an "ironic" (79) way:

Schirmmacher betrayed his own very German point of view by according to literature a role and function that even the most imperious American critic would hardly have dared to claim for literature in the United States. (78)

Brockmann refuses to realize the political link between the national function Schirmmacher and others ascribed to literature and their insistence on its autonomy. This link, on the one hand, seems to me the explanation which Brockmann blames Greiner for not providing; but because this link is at the centre of literary ideology it might be too much to require the ideologue to lay his cards on the table. Brockmann, on the other hand, aims at linking

the politically liberal and the culturally national without believing in literary autonomy (79)—as his treatment of the Stasi debate shows. Nonetheless, to state irony does not seem enough to me since eventually Brockmann follows Bohrer und Schirmmacher in so far as he nationalizes the committed literature the two critics detest (79).

Chapter 4 presents the Stasi as a "synecdoche" (83) which turns the GDR into a text whose author can be named as the Stasi (84). In Brockmann's reading of texts by Saeger, Drawert, Brussig and Hilbig, an interesting criticism is made of the supposedly "autonomous" poets: They are condemned for despairing of achieving social change (93). Once again the term irony (95) indicates a hesitance to persevere the analysis. The lesson, Brockmann suggests, that can be learned from the Stasi connection runs: You should not place yourselves outside or in opposition to the real process of history (108). By giving away the illusion of "autonomy" (78)—which was proved wrong by the Stasi manipulation—Brockmann arrives at the strong advice to be realistic: The word "real" comes up three times in the last two sentences of the chapter (108) in order to recommend a national grounding of literature.

At the centre of Chapter 5, a reading of Woelk's novel *Rückspiel* suggests that the generational opposition between 1989 and 1968 (126-27) as a key issue. Brockmann's interpretation, however, does not succeed in proving the novel's affinity to the kind of "romantic anticapitalism" (115) which has, indeed, returned in the essays of Syberberg (120) and Strauß (132). Brief references to the 1993 Berlin debate (112) and to the fact that there is a New Right reception of Adorno (116) cannot prove the homogenic "romantically anticapitalistic" nature of all criticism of the old FRG. A fundamental flaw of this chapter is Brockmann's tendency to homogenize the nineties criticisms of "1968": there was not only more than one "1968," there were also different criticisms and even different defences of it in the nineties. Although, in his summary, Brockmann states confusion on "all sides" (135), he stresses the reopening of *the* (one) cultural past rather than controversial positions vis-a-vis the pasts.

This homogenizing tendency dominates the reading of one West German and three East German fictions of childhood in Chapter 6. In his reading of Walser, Drawert, Maron, and Brussig, Brockmann spells out his assumptions about the German family narrative. Walser's *Die Verteidigung der Kindheit* is presented as a metaphor for German culture more generally (140), which is seen as marked by postwar intergenerational conflict (141). The fact that in East Germany "father books" about the GDR past appeared promptly after the collapse of socialism—whereas in West Germany it had taken 30 years until "father books" on the Nazi past came out (150), is explained in Freudian terms of "coming of age" (160) and generalized into the family narrative of "reunification" (160-61): the return of the repressed will hopefully lead to the lessening of the pressure of the superego. The books by Drawert, Maron, and Brussig (158) are praised for their attempt to escape without losing insight into the problematic nature of this attempt (150). In this chapter, when discussing the influential essay of the psychologist Maaz, Brockmann takes issue with Alison Lewis's rebuttal of all kind of anticapitalism (144-45).

When calling Ortheil's *Abschied von den Kriegsteilnehmern* an "at least partially correct picture of a postwar generation," Brockmann refers to this generation's "conscious and unconscious desire for an erasure of painful identification" (168) which is criticized in the novel because of preventing the individual placing him/herself in the history of the nation. In order to work out the time and the place of the nation, Brockmann brings together Bloch's concept of "non-contemporaneity" with Freud's model of the psyche as preserving the past in the present (170-71). Although this fusion of a socio-historical concept which aims at making use of the past in the ideological class-struggle and a psychological metaphor seems problematic to me, Brockmann's reading of several novels along the lines of "non-contemporaneity" proves productive. He highlights the "fear of time" which marks Grass's (174) and Fries's (175) novels—and hints at a similar fear in works by Hilbig, Walser, and Woelk (175); Brockmann illuminates a further similarity when reading fiction on the collapse of utopian visions like Erpenbeck's (180) in parallel with the criti-

cal assessment of the triumph of capitalism (183) which can be found in fiction by Hein (181) and Gaus (183). In analyzing the way in which Walser's metaphor of the wound was taken up by Hettche's novel *Nox* (187), Brockmann arrives at the conclusion that there can be no straightforward process of "healing." One of the most provocative features of this chapter is the stance Brockmann takes on some West German critics' call for postmodern entertainment—which they present as an equivalent of globalism and internationalism (172). With wider reference than simply to the public debate on Grass's *Ein weites Feld* which Brockmann sees proving the political role (173)—and that means for him: national-cultural role—of the writer, he states:

While some critics writing after 1989 suggested that in the new Germany literature specifically and culture generally had lost their identificatory political power, such a thesis did not acknowledge the non-contemporaneity of the current situation, which was characterized not just by Bush's postmodern New World Order but also by the return of the national repressed. To a large extent, and in spite of all pronouncements about the "death of literature," Germans even after 1989 saw themselves as a *Kulturation*. (176)

Accordingly, Brockmann envisages the future of German literature as telling stories about an era which by 1989 has become tellable: "The essence of literature is its belatedness, its historicity" (197). Refusing the slogan of the "Wenderoman," Brockmann takes the fiction of Walser, Maron, Grass, Hilbig, Drawert, and Hein (198) as proof that the literature of the nineties has established itself as the "imaginative space for the problematic nation" (198).

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