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Endless Toil? Exploring Multifarious Approaches to Literature and/in/as Work

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Abstract:

This volume is devoted to exploring relationships between literature and work, two terms that assume a variety of meanings amongst the individual contributions. It is comprised of undergraduate and graduate student papers first presented at the 7th Student Congress of Comparative Studies at Ludwig Maximilian University Munich and characterized by a high degree of eclecticism, with articles ranging from Plato's notions of work and 'the work' in his literary criticism, to analyses of work in pirate fiction after 1700, to 'work on myth' in contemporary popular culture. While the variety of topics and case studies has a somewhat dizzying effect, each individual article is clear and compellingly argued. A highlight is Wolfram Ette's concise introduction on groundbreaking theoretical contributions to the topic.

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Stevanović, Vid; Purschke, Elisa; Fixemer, Maria & Christiane Schäfer (eds.): *Literatur und Arbeit*. Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2018. 250 pages, 39.80 EUR. ISBN: 978-3-7329-0381-8.

Abstract:

This volume is devoted to exploring relationships between literature and work, two terms that assume a variety of meanings amongst the individual contributions. It is comprised of undergraduate and graduate student papers first presented at the 7th Student Congress of Comparative Studies at Ludwig Maximilian University Munich and characterized by a high degree of eclecticism, with articles ranging from Plato's notions of work and 'the work' in his literary criticism, to analyses of work in pirate fiction after 1700, to 'work on myth' in contemporary popular culture. While the variety of topics and case studies has a somewhat dizzying effect, each individual article is clear and compellingly argued. A highlight is Wolfram Ette's concise introduction on groundbreaking theoretical contributions to the topic.

The editors of *Literatur und Arbeit* (*Literature and Work*) make clear in their foreword why the volume required a general title: it was their intention to explore multiple relationships between, on the one hand, literature of any and all time periods and nationalities and, on the other hand, the endless ways in which work has been, and can be, defined. The volume consists of articles written by undergraduate and graduate student participants in the 7th Student Congress of Comparative Studies, which was held at Ludwig Maximilian University Munich on June 17-19, 2016. The editors framed the topic of the event with three main themes in mind. Firstly, they were interested in papers that explored *literary representations of work*, from Hesiod's depiction of Herculean work and Protestant devotional literature to social realism and contemporary, neoliberal stories about work as a form of self-realization (see p. 9). Secondly, they wanted to explore the *work on a literary text*, i.e. the work of writing, asking questions such as 'How does a given author work on his/her text?' and 'Is the production of literature commensurable with an economic understanding of work?' (see pp. 9-10). Lastly, and as an extension of the second theme, they wished to probe the nature of *literature as work* – to discuss how the

production of literature came to be framed as a socially valid form of work in specific socio-historical contexts and also consider whether reading can be framed as a form of work that completes the process of literary production (see p. 10). This multidirectional framing demonstrates the wealth of research possibilities that the topic of ‘literature and work’ opens.

This expansive topic has, indeed, yielded a volume consisting of a multitude of highly specific interpretations, approaches, and source materials both theoretical and literary. The sprawling result is eye-opening, but also unwieldy due to the sheer number of directions offered. The volume’s articles are divided into four respective sections: “Arbeit am Ursprung” (“Work at the Origin”), “Dialektische Lektüren zwischen Entfremdung und Aneignung” (“Dialectical Readings Between Alienation and Appropriation”), “Scheitern und Schöpfung” (“Failure and Creation”), and “Arbeit und Performanz: Geschlechter- und professionelle Rollen” (“Work and Performance: Gendered and Professional Roles”). These individual sections are comprised of very distinct takes on the relationship between literature and work. To provide but one example: in section one, Daniel Hoyer discusses the concepts of work and ‘the work’ (*Werk*) in relation to Plato’s literary criticism; Philipp Kastropp discusses Plato and Nietzsche’s respective re-workings of the work of their philosophical ‘fathers,’ namely Parmenides in the case of Plato and Plato in the case of Nietzsche; Benjamin Dupke examines “work on the myths of patriarch and patricide” in the video game *Apotheon* and TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess*; finally, Fabian Widerna’s article, simply titled “Finish the Job,” is a “metareflection” on work as portrayed within the *Deadpool* Marvel comic trilogy. Each article defines work differently, and it is mostly not understood in any economic sense of waged or salaried labor. Instead, we encounter what are often loose understandings of work in the sense of re-working, revising, deconstructing – ‘the work on’ certain topics and ideas that literary texts undertake.

The volume’s high degree of eclecticism continues with contributions in the remaining three sections, ranging in topics from a reading of Beckett’s novel *Watt* via the philosophy of Alain Badiou and the ‘primitive work’ of the Berlin band *Einstürzenden Neubauten* and its affinity with Dadaist art to the role of work in pirate-adventure novels after 1700 and the reworking of the Pygmalion myth from Ovid to Frank Capra’s film *Meet John Doe*. Each contribution is in itself well written, argumentatively compelling and precise. Collectively, however, the volume has the effect of leaving one’s head spinning without any further anchoring points beyond the fact that each article has something to do with some definition of work in relation to literature.

The exception is Wolfram Ette’s introduction to the volume, which lucidly guides the reader through a series of important works on the theory of work in literature and vice versa, beginning with the conception of work in classical antiquity and ending with a fascinating description of and excerpt from

a 1973 publication of East Germany's Academy of Arts entitled *Poesie und Arbeit (Poetry and Work)*, a documentation of various conversations between East German intellectuals, mostly writers, on how to define the relationship between literature and work (see p. 19). Ette claims that this publication is to this day the most significant contribution to the topic of literature and work (see p. 19). His introduction also cites the work of Hannah Arndt, Erich Auerbach, Karl Marx, and Alexander Kluge and therewith offers a concise set of ideas and ground-laying work on the topic.

Vid Stevanović, one of the editors, concludes the volume with an afterword that begins with a brief discussion of the ways in which relationships between literature and work have paradigmatically changed through and after industrialization. He proceeds with thoughtful reflections on academic work within the university system, which, as he stresses, has since the Bologna reform in Europe in the 2000s turned university education more in the direction of efficient preparation for work within the market economy. Yet, at the same time, it still offers spaces for creative and perhaps less alienated forms of work and knowledge production. While these concluding thoughts are timely and interesting, shifting the focus of the volume from literature and work to university-based knowledge production further lends to the sense that this volume borders on being too loosely conceptualized. Nonetheless, it lays the ground for further research in the field and, as many of the volume's contributors themselves point out, an astoundingly small amount of research on the intersections of literature and work has been conducted. While the possible directions such research can take are virtually endless, explorations of the relationship between work and literature can, as the contributions to this volume demonstrate, illuminate new aspects and overlooked reciprocities of and between the two.

German Abstract:

Endlose Mühe? Erkundung vielfältiger Ansätze zu Literatur und/in/als Arbeit

Dieser Sammelband widmet sich der Erforschung der Beziehungen zwischen Literatur und Arbeit, zwei Begriffen, die in den einzelnen Artikeln unterschiedliche Bedeutungen annehmen. Er besteht aus Beiträgen von Studierenden und Promovierenden, die erstmals auf dem 7. Studentenkongress für Vergleichende Studien an der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München vorgestellt wurden und sich durch ein hohes Maß an Eklektizität auszeichnen. Die Artikel reichen dabei von Platons Vorstellungen von Arbeit in seiner Literaturkritik über Analysen der Arbeit in der Piratenliteratur nach 1700 bis zur ‚Arbeit am Mythos‘ in der zeitgenössischen Populärkultur. Während die Vielfalt der Themen und Fallstudien etwas schwindelerregend wirkt, ist jeder einzelne Artikel klar und überzeugend argumentiert. Ein Highlight ist Wolfram Ettes kurze Einführung in bahnbrechende theoretische Beiträge zum Thema.

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