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Biechele, Werner

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**Stepchildren of German Literature? Political
causes and cultural consequences of the
way to handle German-language Literatures
of South-East Europe in Germany**

Werner Biechele

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Requests and orders for issues can be made to the following address:

*European Research Unit
Aalborg University
Fibigerstraede 2
DK-9220 Aalborg O
Denmark*

*Phone: +45 96 35 84 38
Fax: +45 98 15 11 26
Email: kaa@ihis.aau.dk*

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**Stepchildren of German literature?
Political causes and cultural consequences
of the way to handle German-language
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Werner Biechele

Recently Alois Wierlacher stated that the main aim of intercultural Germanic philology is 'to find out and acknowledge the global variety of cultural differences in relation to literary perspective and plot and to give them a chance to speak productively'.¹ This means for the German culture, especially the literature, to accept that besides the German-language literature of the Federal Republic of Germany, Austria and Switzerland there is a German-language literature of Romania and Hungary and that in some of the new states of the former Soviet Union German-language literature is written for a potential readership of 1-2 million people speaking German as their mother tongue. Furthermore, a German-language literature is developing in small dimensions in the Alsace, in Canada, Luxemburg and in Belgium which is worth the chance to speak in the whole German-speaking territories. In these countries literature is regarded as an 'important carrier of language and information, a basis for conversation and a means for the intercultural self-understanding'² as it was formulated by Alexander Ritter in 1980.

One aspect of this kind of literature is its function as self-education and self-affirmation of the minority, with responsibility for their community. Another aspect is to create a literature at the same level as the national literatures in the German-speaking countries, to show 'Welthaltigkeit' and aesthetic variety. During the last decades the first aspect has had a special importance for the German-language literature of Eastern Europe because speaking in public was a learned rite in Socialism, an 'Orwell like speaking',³ as it was named by the Romanian writer Richard Wagner. In these countries people were trying to keep the real language at home, in their private spheres and to have this language sheltered by arts and literature as a contrast to the language of the society. Among the best examples are the poems and tales written by the members of the Romanian 'Aktionsgruppe Banat'.

Restrictions in arts and culture, a logical consequence in all former socialist states, also caused damage to the literatures of the nationalities, by having a negative influence on the possibilities for receiving German-speaking nationality literature of South-East Europe in the forty years of existence of the Stalinist-characterized state GDR. This was especially difficult

because occupation with literature, e.g. in Romania, unavoidably led to civil disobedience, to an open conflict with the society. In the Federal Republic of Germany the reception of German-language nationality literatures of Eastern Europe had to face other difficulties; a missing reference system meant reading beyond the necessary context and led to misunderstandings, sometimes to misinterpretations in general. A public with a true interest for these literatures could be found only to a limited degree. This literature from Eastern Europe, written in German language, was not able to win a self-evident place in the cultural communication system.⁴ The German literature from Romania, historically founded by names like Rose Ausländer, Paul Celan or Oskar Walter Cisek, managed to some extent to catch up with the development of West European literatures. The reason for this being that nearly all Romanian-German authors of the present time, beginning with the members of the so-called 'Aktionsgruppe Banat', from Herta Müller and Richard Wagner to Werner Söllner and the lyric poet Franz Hodjak, live in Germany today. Other literatures of nationalities like the Russian-German or the Hungarian-German, which try hard to find a cultural profile of their own, were and are hardly noticed; recently the Hungarian-German author Ludwig Fischer complained that German cultural institutions invite Hungarian institutions to stay and study German culture and social life in Germany but they never invite the Hungarian-German ones.⁵ The lacking interest in both German states had both different and similar causes; the political involvement especially of Romanian-German authors against the totalitarian ruling systems in Eastern Europe was an object of suspicion only in the GDR. The suspicion of provincialism in a regional literature must be seen as one reason for the widespread refusal to notice these literatures in both German states, another is the complicated position of the German minorities in Eastern Europe in the conflicts between the political systems since the thirties and, finally, we can mention the disturbed relationship of the Germanic philology in Germany to the German-speaking literatures abroad.

Between 1987 and 1991 I worked as a Germanic philologist in Hungary; when I and others took an interest in the Hungarian-German literature and wanted to work scientifically in this field, we often found sceptical reactions because we came from the GDR. This scepticism we could understand because we knew that the GDR had, in the forty years of her real-socialist history, never been very interested in determining her own relationship with the German-tongue populations, not even in the officially friendly and allied foreign countries. A process of complete suppression of history had been put into effect and it became evident that only what served the politicians of the leadership received its favours.

In this sceptical distance endeavours to handle the literatures of the German minorities, showed by Germanic philologists and diplomats of culture from the GDR, had very little impact. These developed a great interest in these literatures mostly as a result of their professional work in the countries.⁶ Nevertheless, there was no intensive scientific analysis of these literatures at any time.

Horst Nalewski, in the eighties a German lecturer at the university of Bucharest, has described the situation in a way which is also relevant in relation to the Hungarian-German literature:

Die Germanistik der DDR scheint sich - aus Gründen, denen wir hier nicht nachgehen können - kaum mit der 'auslandsdeutschen' Literatur zu beschäftigen. In den Buchhandlungen kann man allerdings - um auf eine dieser Literaturen zu sehen - Werke rumänien - deutscher Schriftsteller finden: von Oskar Walter Cisek und Erwin Wittstock, von den Jüngeren: dem vor kurzem verstorbenen Franz Storch, von Arnold Hauser und Georg Scherg. Und das zweibändige Schriftsteller-Lexikon gibt Auskunft über wichtige rumänien-deutsche Autoren (Aufl. 1974). Der Verlag Volk und Welt und der Union-Verlag haben eigenständige Erzählungen und Romane rumänien-deutscher Schriftsteller ediert; und es gibt eine gute Zusammenarbeit des Bukarester Kriterion-Verlages (der deutschsprachigen Abteilung) mit mehreren Verlagen der DDR. In gewisser Hinsicht also relativ günstige Voraussetzungen für eine Kenntnisnahme. Doch dies ist noch keine Rezeption / ... / geschweige denn eine einfügende, urteilende und wertende Aufnahme innerhalb der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteraturen. Das käme unserer Germanistik zu, möchte man unbefangen feststellen; auch, wenn man Gelegenheit hatte, die damit verbundenen Probleme etwas einzusehen. Das weltliterarische Interesse und das Interesse an den deutsch-sprachigen Literaturen jenseits der Sprachgrenze wären die zwei Seiten einer Medaille, die in ihrer Ganzheit Germanistik hieße. Es bedeutete schon viel, wenn wir uns dieses komplexen Problems bewußt würden.⁷

A similar interest in the Hungarian-German literature can be identified at this time, too. Nalewski did not want to analyse the reasons for the described reluctance of the German philology in the former GDR, he registers the problems but he does not articulate them explicitly, because he is fully aware of the political background in the past and present times. The lyric poet Ralph Grüneberger was more willing to articulate the facts in a clearer way. In the summer 1989 he wrote a review of a collection of poems, written by the Romanian-German writer Franz Hodjak, published under the German title *Sehnsucht nach Feigenschnaps*. This review was published in the periodical 'Sinn und Form' in 1990. Grüneberger wrote in relation to the alliance of the Kingdom of Romania with the Hitlerist Germany during the Second World War:

Und dies hatte die verheerende Folge, daß das bewahrte Deutschtum in Rumänien vom verderblichen Nationalismus infiziert wurde und viele Auslandsdeutsche auf einmal deutscher als deutsch sein wollten. Und die unter Waffen kamen, kamen auch unter die Moral der Waffen. Allein 300 Rumäniendeutsche gehörten in Auschwitz zur Wachmannschaft.⁸

And with reference to Dieter Schlesak, former sub-editor of the Romanian-German periodical 'Neue Literatur', published in Bucharest, he added Schlesak's remarkable comparison:

60.000 Banater und Siebenbürger dienten in Himmlers Armee. Ihr 'Heil'-Geschrei war der Grabgesang der Rumäniendeutschen.⁹

The writer Franz Hodjak has never overcome his historical experiences entirely. In the same way as in his poems the literary works of Herta Müller have this history as a foundation. In the shortstory *Niederungen* she deals critically with the traditional system of values of the Banat-Swabian population:

Wie ich zu dieser Haltung kam? Dabei hat meine Biographie eine große Rolle gespielt, und zwar die Tatsache, daß mein Vater seinerzeit in der SS war, mein Onkel war sogar der Dorfideologe in den 30iger Jahren.¹⁰

In nearly the same way the Hungarian-Germans had been at the mercy of the policy of the Hungarian fascist leader Horthy whose nationalism, as the Hungarian Germanic philologist János Szabó wrote in 1987, was made one of the principles of his state politics. Karl Kurt Klein pointed out early in the thirties that the German literature written abroad had been realized as a basis for the so-called 'völkische Erneuerung', as a national-pedagogic catalyst for the 'formation of a superstate consciousness of all Germans'.¹¹ The Bohemian-German writer Josef Mühlberger mystified the 'agrar-romantisch-völkisch' authors as 'Flurhüter geistigen Bodens'.¹² In the last issues of the Germanic annual book DDR-CSFR, published under the title *Brücken* in Prague, one can find contributions to the Bohemian-German history of literature.¹³

The Germans abroad and their literature had been compromised in this way as a result of their seizure by fascist spirit. After World War II the Germans abroad were all of them condemned as guilty. Thus, Alexander Ritter noticed further reasons for the reluctance of approaching the literatures of German nationalities when he described the political misconception in the scientific self-understanding of the Germanic philology in Germany:

Das Wissen um die früheren kulturpolitischen Implikationen dieser Thematik und die Befürchtungen, auch bei sachlicher Beobachtung und Darstellung im eigenen Land und international mißverständlich begriffen zu werden und nicht beabsichtigte Emotionen wie Proteste hervorzurufen, hat erst in den letzten Jahren Autoren, Literaturwissenschaftler und Verleger den Mut finden lassen, wieder über die Literatur deutscher Sprache im Ausland nachzudenken und zu publizieren.¹⁴

We have to see this past as the background for the fear to get in touch with these Germans abroad and their literatures as observed within the political leadership of the former GDR. In 1964 the society '*Neue Heimat*' had been founded with the aim to support Germans who lived outside the German borders in order to give them help in the cultivation of German language and literature and to retain their customs and their national identity as well as establish links with their native country. This society had been disciplined very quickly by having its financial means reduced and the organization soon became insignificant; from

1975 onwards the work was restricted to written contacts. The members who wanted to have further official contacts had very often to establish these in secrecy, even when conditions had been created not only to dissociate the nationality-German literatures from the historically caused scepticism. The following comment, given by the Romanian-German writer Gerhard Csejka in 1977, expresses his political point of view at this time, and he stands for many of the Romanian-German writers in the seventies: 'Der heutige rumäniendeutsche Schriftsteller vertritt nach außen hin nicht eine rumäniendeutsche Gesellschaftsform, sondern eine Gesellschaftsform Rumäniens. Die Leistungen und Interessen der Rumäniendeutschen können heute unmöglich von den Leistungen und Interessen Rumäniens geschieden werden'.¹⁵

Richard Wagner described the aims of the 'Aktionsgruppe Banat' in the first half of the seventies in a similar way. It can be read in an interview for the Hungarian-German weekly *Neue Zeitung*, given in Budapest in 1990.¹⁶

It is out of the question that the literatures of the nationalities constituted a danger to the communist systems in Romania and Hungary in the seventies. In the eighties two very different aspects determined the attitude of the official GDR with regard to the German-speaking literatures in Eastern Europe. In Romania the increasing state terroristic formation of the Ceausescu regime, which included intensified suppression of the national minorities, turned many Romanian-German authors to dissidents in the eyes of the official GDR. Therefore, these voices had to be silenced in the interest of retaining the system. This policy was the same as the policy towards the writers of their own country. In Hungary, Kádár had introduced a process of democratization in the eighties, a process which the political leadership of the GDR looked upon with suspicion. The process in Hungary, which included a policy of the nationalities, influenced the cultural policy of the GDR, which was a very restrictive policy - as can be established by corrections in the writing of the history of literature. Jiri Vesely has referred to this fact with regard to the German-speaking literature in the former Tschechoslovakia.¹⁷

As a result of these limiting conditions all attempts to approach the Hungarian-German literature by the GDR scientists in the eighties had to adapt to this cultural policy and ideological pressure. Oskar Metzler and his book *Talks with Hungarian-German writers* can represent this development. For Metzler these talks were the result of the rapid development of the Hungarian-German literature, and he saw this development as closely connected to the policy of Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, the former communist party of Hungary.¹⁸ Helmut Rudolf believes that the Hungarian-German literature might develop its consciousness of language and history 'as a result of the influence of the socialist society by which it is surrounded and to which it is closely connected'.¹⁹ And Jürgen Engler writes 'the basis for the lively cultural activities of the Hungarian-Germans today' would be 'the Marxist-Leninist nationality-policy of the party and state in Hungary, which guarantees the national minorities economic, political and cultural development'.²⁰

This praise must be seen as the tribute necessary to get the chance in the GDR to approach the literatures of the German nationalities in Eastern Europe in a scientific way. It does not take the enforced renunciation of customs and language in the forties and fifties into

account, and it does not focus upon the deficits of the Hungarian communist party policy of the nationalities. In mentioning this, our intention is not to denounce these scientists. We only reflect upon how they were dependent upon the party and the cultural policy of these communist systems, and our reflection is made possible after the political changes in Eastern Europe.

The increasingly reactionary and doctrinary policy, used also in cultural policy, to save the stalinist system and the use, of the historical involvement by the Germans of Romania and Hungary in the German national-socialism as a suitable alibi, are the reasons for the reserved attitude in the GDR policy towards the Germans abroad. These literatures were not a new subject for the Germanic philology of the GDR after the changes in 1989, but the new situation opened entirely new dimensions to focus upon these literatures without any ideological pressure.

In relation to the fact that the willingness and the capability of a state to secure the rights and dignity of minorities are important criteria for the evaluation of a state and for its international reputation, the foundation of a '*Kuratorium zur Unterstützung deutscher Minderheiten bei der Erhaltung und Pflege ihrer Kultur*', on April 2nd, 1990, was a signal to treat the German minorities in a new way. The board of trustees is independent from political parties, it is going to look into cultural traditions, customs, to find out new cultural interests of the German minorities abroad, and it will support scientific works with the aim to give more information about their historical and present life. Protected by this board of trustees which continues in the united Germany, a history of the Russian-Germans was published under the title *Rußlands Stiefkinder*, in 1992.²¹ For the first time a broad German public was able to inform themselves about the fate of this part of the German population.

The unification of Germany in 1990 furthered a cultural process, the continuation of which we follow with great interest in the new Bundesländer. Focussing upon German minorities abroad is no longer just a tolerated task (which is declined by the Goethe Institute by reference to its responsibility for the non-German-speaking people abroad) but there will be an aim to inform the citizens in the home country about the life, the social situation and the problems of German minorities and to promote publications about the cultural performances of people who belong to German minorities abroad. Doing so, the Germanic philologist will find a conflict area which, up until now, has caused latent working problems for the nationality-German authors; it is the tension between the focus on history and tradition by the elder people and the search of new points of orientation by the younger ones. Within an overcome system of values the difficulty is not to cease 'where the maize fields have ended',²² to use a word spoken by Herta Müller. It is necessary to demand that library texts can reach out to more than an audience of specialists and to be seen as not only sociological but also aesthetic phenomena. That will be the case with texts which not only stress the retaining of customs but understand literature as a 'process of self-information' and 'a discourse of being on one's own'²³ in order to widen the relationship to real life and the scope of action for the texts. The latest novel by Herta Müller *The Fox has always been the Hunter*, which lays open the mechanisms of the former Romanian Secret Service 'Securitate', is one actual example. Especially the works of Herta Müller and Richard Wagner can prove

the thesis, expressed by Alexander Ritter, that the 'gap between the offered literary works and the expectations of the readers' can open, 'when the literary works are searching for international acknowledgement, an acknowledgement they use for finding a point of view of their own.'²⁴ Richard Wagner, who in the book *People without signals. To the political upheaval in Eastern Europe* stated that he would never have become a writer, if he had had a chance in the former Romania to go into politics.²⁵

But in general we must emphasize that this German language literature, written abroad, is received in a very limited way in the united Germany too. One can discover that by comparing the total edition of the book series *Auslandsdeutsche Literatur der Gegenwart*, published by Alexander Ritter; it has been reduced to 800 - 1000 printed copies per book. This corresponds to the edition figures of the Germanic specialist literature. Furthermore, serious scientific work on the history of literature of these German-speaking literatures abroad, in the form of unprejudiced analytical works on the literature of today, including aesthetic questions about production, reception and impact, still remains to be done. One reason for this omission is that the set of criteria, used by German philology in Germany, does not take into account the different historical and cultural roots and the different needs and tasks of the German literatures abroad, i.e. the regional conditions of production, reception and distribution of these literatures.

One consequence of the fact that these literatures do not meet with a good response in the German general public in Germany and especially that they lack the attention by literary critique and science, is the danger of their permanent separation from the system of literature, to which they refer by means of language. The weak links with the literature in Germany further the development of a closed system of production and reception in the countries of origin, a system without sufficient challenges and thus without enough promoting elements. This difficulty is not only characteristic of the German literatures in East-Middle-Europe, it is typical of the East-Middle European culture as a whole, if we follow Richard Wagner who writes:

Die ostmitteleuropäische Kultur versteht sich nicht als Zentrum, um das andere kreisen würden, sie empfindet sich als Rand. ... Sie blickt von sich weg, um zufrieden und doch hoffnungsvoll zu sich zurückzukehren. Ihre Innovationen trug sie seit der Jahrhundertwende in den Westen. Erst dort erschienen sie ihr glaubhaft, und von dort konnten sie dann in akzeptierter Form zurückkehren. ...

Ostmitteleuropa genügt sich nicht. Es braucht die Bestätigung von außen. Sobald es seine Wurzeln bei sich selbst suchte, steuerte es seine Annullierung an. Die Wurzeln, die sich zeigten, waren zumeist folkloristisch. Wo sie allzu unkritisch aufgegriffen wurden, gebar das Folkloristische den Nationalismus.²⁶

With this the wheel turns full circle. In the decades of communist rule in Eastern Europe the movement of the East-Middle-European cultures from East to West and back was shut down, followed by deficits of civilization which are also reflected in the rapid developing vulgarity

of Eastern European cultures one can notice today.

In such a vacuum which can come into being for the German literatures abroad both because of the lack of communication with the German cultural space in Germany and because of the absence of a critical exchange at the national level, there will remain the danger of a flooding by literary amateurism. This danger has to be met by intensifying the neglected communication with the German literatures abroad. In this connection it would be of special interest to ask what contributions a Germanic philology abroad could bring to the field of intercultural hermeneutics and literary studies. This seminar, the whole European Research Project, initiated at Aalborg University, seems to be suited to lead this intercultural dialogue Europe-wide.

Notes:

- 1 Wiederlacher, Alois: 'Toleranzforschung. Zur Forschungsplanung interkultureller Germanistik', in: *Jahrbuch DaF*, Vol. 18, München 1992, p. 13.
- 2 Ritter, Alexander: 'Deutschsprachige Literatur der Gegenwart im Ausland', in: *Deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur. Ausgangspositionen und aktuelle Entwicklungen*, (Ed. Manfred Durzak), Stuttgart 1981, p. 633.
- 3 Wagner, Richard: *Völker ohne signale. Zum Epochenbruch in Osteuropa*, Berlin 1992, p. 32.
- 4 Cf. Hockl, Hans Wolfram: *Offenheit hat überzeugt. Zur NS-Geschichte der Deutschen im Südosten*. Metzingen 1990, p. 94. Hockl answers the question, why it is so difficult for authors of German language from South-East Europe, to find publishing houses in Germany:
 1. Unsere Anliegen sind kaum gefragt.
 2. Die Darstellung unserer Situation unter anderen Völkern interessiert wenig.
 3. Volkstum und Volksbewußtsein wird abgelehnt.
 4. Ein gepflegtes Deutsch wird weitgehend abgelehnt.
 5. Gefragt ist ein großer Leserkreis. Die Donauschwaben sind ein sehr kleiner Leserkreis.
 6. Die Grauzone der modernen Lebensverneigung ist heute 'in'. Ich versuche immer wieder, dieses Grau zu erhellen. Ich betrachte das Leben positiv.
 7. Ein Gütezeichen der modernen Literaturszene sind Fäkalienausdrücke. Von dieser Kloakenliteratur halte ich mich fern.
 8. Ich schreibe so, daß mich jeder aufmerksame Leser versteht; das ist nicht so bei vielen hochgelobten modernen Texten.
- 5 Cf. Reißmüller, Johann Georg: 'Vergessene Minderheit? Wie die Ungarndeutschen heute leben', in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Munich, No. 11/1993, p. 11.
- 6 We refer to e.g.:
Nalewski, Horst: 'Ein halbes Semester Sommer. Moderne rumänien-deutsche Prosa', in: *Weimarer Beiträge*, 29/1983/10.
Metzler, Oskar: *Gespräche mit ungarndeutschen Schriftstellern*, Budapest, 1985.

- Rudolf, Helmut: 'Alltagsproblematik und Literaturwürdigkeit in den Erzählungen des ungarndeutschen Schriftstellers Ludwig Fischer', in: *Német Filológiai Tanulmányok XVI*, Debrecen, 1985.
- Belger, Gisela: 'Wer bin ich?', in: *Signale. Literarische Beilage der Neuen Zeitung*, 3 Jg. Budapest, 13 December 1986.
- 7 Nalewski, Horst, see note no. 6, p. 1804.
- 8 Grüneberger, Ralph: 'Zu Hause in Siebenbürgen, beheimatet im deutschen Sprachraum', in: *Sinn und Form*, 42/1990/3, p. 642.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Citation from Szende, B. and Ferenc Úhrte: 'Blick über die Maisfelder hinaus. Gespräch mit Herta Müller und Richard Wagner', in: *Neue Zeitung*, Ungarndeutsches Wochenblatt, 34/1990/12, Budapest, 24 March 1990, p. 8.
- 11 Klein, Karl Kurt: 'Auslandsdeutsches Schrifttum', in: *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturgeschichte*, Bd. 4, Berlin, 1931, p. 4.
- 12 Mühlberger, Josef: 'Der auslandsdeutsche Dichter', in: *Klingsor 13* (1936).
- 13 Cf. Berger, Michael: 'Von einem Verbot meiner Bücher... ist aber nicht die Rede.' Josef Mühlbergers Publikationsnöte in den Jahren 1933 - 1930, in: *Brücken, Germanistisches Jahrbuch DDR - CSSR 1987/88*, Prague, 1988, pp. 1ff.
- 14 Ritter, Alexander: 'Vorbemerkung', in: Karl Kurt Klein: *Literaturgeschichte des Deutschtums im Ausland*. New edition with a bibliography (1945-1978) by Alexander Ritter, Hildesheim/New York, 1979.
- 15 Csejka, Gerhardt: 'Bedingtheit der rumäniendeutschen Literatur', in: *Reflexe. Kritische Beiträge zur rumäniendeutschen Gegenwartsliteratur* (Ed. Emmerich Reichrath), Bucarest, 1977, p. 49.
- 16 Cf. note no. 10.
- 17 Vesely, Jiri: 'Bemerkungen zur Geschichtsschreibung deutschsprachiger Literatur in der Tschechoslowakei', in: *Brücken. Germanistisches Jahrbuch DDR - CSSR 1987/1988*, Prague, 1988, pp. 96 ff.
- 18 Metzler, Oskar: *Gespräche mit ungarndeutschen Schriftstellern*, a.a.O., p. 6.
- 19 Rudolf, Helmut: *Alltagsproblematik ...*, a.a.O., p. 146.
- 20 Engler, Jürgen: 'Ungarndeutsche Literatur oder deutschsprachige Literatur Ungarns?', in: *Neue Deutsche Literatur* 33/1985/12, p. 161.
- 21 Trutanov, Igor: *Russlands Stiefkinder. Ein deutsches Dorf in Kasachstan*, Berlin, 1992.

- 22 Cf. note no. 10 above.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ritter, Alexander: 'Deutschsprachige Literatur der Gegenwart im Ausland', in: *Deutsche gegenwartsliteratur. Ausgangspositionen und aktuelle Entwicklungen* (Ed. Manfred Durzak), Stuttgart, 1981, p. 651.
- 25 Cf. note no. 3 above.
- 26 Ibid., p. 48 f.