

## The 35th Festival of German Language Literature

Urs Widmer

The Klagenfurt Address on Literature

### **Of the Norm, the Deviation and the Self-Assembly Parts**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Once, at a time when I myself was entering the competitive literary arena and hoped to win a little place in the wide world of literature, I harboured some scepticism regarding competitions like this Festival of German Language Literature. I was afraid of the hurt such competitions inevitably cause, and I thought that no ranking can be drawn up for literature. I still think that today. Yet now I have a more easy-going attitude to competitions in which at the end there is a 'best' author. However, literature does not work on a 'knock out' system in which there is one winner at the end. The question is not whether it is Goethe or Kleist or Büchner. No, the answer to that question is: Goethe and Kleist and Büchner.

Of course we always deal in terms like 'good' and 'bad'. Of course we differentiate, and there *are* differences. We quickly come to agreement that many texts are simply dreadful, although the example of Euripides should warn us. His *Medea*, a masterpiece of world literature, was booed so violently on its first performance that its writer, to avoid a beating, fled to hide behind the altar of Apollo's temple. As far as my personal ranking goes – my own private 'good' and 'bad' – I cannot improve upon the formulation, which is as good as a proverb, and which comes from either Chekhov or Voltaire or my publisher – or from all three – and which says: a good book is one that I like to read, and a bad one is one that bores me.

Of course that is not even sufficient for my own private use. There *are* differences and even if we cannot say *exactly* what they are, why Frank Kafka writes better than . . . well, for simplicity's sake let's say better than all of us here, we will be more or less in agreement that it's like that. So this is how I solve the problem. Rule one ('good books are the ones I like to read') stays, but it is supported or balanced by a second consideration.

No writer chooses freely how he writes. (That's true for women too.) Writing – serious and existential writing – inhabits places which can be painful and where writing is necessary and unavoidable.

In these places we struggle for our words, because we struggle with our inhibitions and what we suppress, and that is why we are not free to write as we choose, or not completely at least. The pressure is too much. Ideally 'it' writes: a text writes itself and we are something like a medium for it. Of course we should not mythologise the state of writing as that of a poet in a trance for whom the text is an unexpected gift. Like everything in the real world, it never appears in its pure form. The rest is graft. Careful attention, a carefree ability to throw away whole pages, and the talent to recognise when the text is what it should be. A feel for the evidence decides when a text is 'ready' and 'good'. There are no more foolproof criteria.

Texts are made of language. Language is not our creation. No – it cannot be, because it is what we all share, that which is available to other people too and

which links us to them. One's 'own language', that high ideal towards which we all strive and which the critics long for when they listen to us, does not exist. Or rather – in a case of a higher irony – it only exists when we are conscious as we write that we cannot have our own language, or only as something leftover or extra or as a fruitful mistake. If we never strive for our own language, then we have a chance of reaching it. (If we start by trying to write 'well' and 'beautifully', then we are lost.) Reading an unknown text, we can say it must be by Thomas Bernhard, by Gert Jonke or by Klaus Hoffer. Our deviations from the language norm make us stand out.

The deviation which defines a text as a literary text arises from the pressure which someone or 'it' (life) exercises on us and which we try to counter by writing. The distorted text, which deviates from the norm, arises from this pressure and – if the adventure has gone well – then delights our readers. 'The wonderful shine of a masterpiece,' says the essayist Walter Muschg, 'is the pain which no longer hurts. A perfect work can no longer bear any trace of suffering.'

Language is a huge self-assembly kit. We take from it with greater and lesser degrees of skill. In day-to-day dealings we do this without thinking twice about it, but we also do it when we write. How could we not? But we handle its parts in very different ways. To some the parts are not enough; others – many, most people perhaps – are completely happy to re-arrange the familiar parts so that for the span of the reading time they look new. That is true of the content too. Those who are happy to assemble the parts of language in the same way as everyone else assembles them, also put together their content from familiar elements. And we like to read these things, *because* they are so familiar. They are what we call the *mainstream*, and the mainstream is nothing to scoff at. It is just that it does not take literature to a new place, nor us.

So this is the second criterion I use to decide between good and bad literature. Bad literature is constructed exclusively from what we are already familiar with, from the common denominators of language and only from them. Every sentence of this language has already been heard. As for the content, it is the same procedure as last year. Good books do not avoid what is familiar at all cost, but their deviations from it cause friction in language, and as a consequence, in content. (Quite the reverse is true too. Perhaps even more so.)

Whichever way you look at it, language is not a static system. It is always changing. Over here a word dies that no one took care of, over there someone introduces something new into the system. That is fascinating – particularly for us, for we react most sensitively to the continual changes in our working materials. Nor do we only absorb the changes, we influence them. That has been true since time immemorial when the first person said 'lion' without a lion being present, creating communication through concepts. There has *never* been a standard language binding to everyone at all times, even if dictators, founders of religions and dictionary makers like Mr Duden would have liked that. Even the language of the German classics – of Goethe above all, who even today when we have gone so far from him, remains something of a yardstick – was never binding for everyone, or even anyone. Goethe's contemporaries found his language irritatingly different to their everyday norms. They preferred the language of August von Kotzebue or Johann Timoteus Hermes, both of whom used the parts in *their* age's self-assembly kits with great virtuosity.

And that is fine. One writer can do it this way, and others can do it that way. We just should not confuse things. And we should not pretend. An honest bestseller assembled from a kit is preferable to a book which simulates great literature but is really only made up of what has been read before, or in other words: is made up of other work. In any case, we would all like to write a bestseller, and do it again and again. But how? If we knew that, we wouldn't all be here.