

Review

Author(s): J. Leal and J. J. White

Review by: J. Leal and J. J. White

Source: *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (Jan., 1997), pp. 257-259

Published by: Modern Humanities Research Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3734788>

Accessed: 09-06-2016 10:03 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Modern Humanities Research Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Modern Language Review*

contributors, many of them authorities in their respective fields, range in length from half a column to several pages and are supplemented by copious illustrations, an internal cross-referencing system, and an exhaustive index of names. Unfortunately, the index of names is not complemented by a subject index, an omission which, in the absence of headwords of a general or generic nature, unnecessarily limits the ways of using the encyclopaedia. To take a simple example: the list of headwords does not contain one for 'Arbeiterdichtung' and although there is, for instance, a highly informative entry on *Das Proletarische Schicksal*, an anthology of poetry by 'Arbeiterdichter' first published in 1929, this is a connection that the non-specialist user of the encyclopaedia is unlikely to make. Otherwise, this volume constitutes an excellent reference tool which, when used in conjunction with Thomas Meyer's *Lexikon des Sozialismus* (Cologne: Bund-Verlag, 1986) and Frank Trommler's *Sozialistische Literatur in Deutschland* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1976), will open up, for both the specialist and non-specialist, innumerable pathways through the (still!) fascinating field of German socialist cultural history.

UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

ROB BURNS

The Future of German Literature. By KEITH BULLIVANT. Oxford and Providence, RI: Berg, 1994. viii + 206 pp. £34.95.

This book is to some considerable extent a response to the events of 1989 and their aftermath. The largely unforeseen collapse of the GDR, and, by extension, of its literary and cultural superstructure, soon gave rise to a host of post mortems and stocktakings, not to mention literary feuds and expressions of recrimination (the most notorious being the controversy surrounding Christa Wolf's *Was bleibt*). Most of this activity was retrospective: in the new climate, literary history and biographies were rewritten. But the challenge of German unification also stimulated extensive conjecture about the future. On the eve of the Day of German Unity (3 October 1990) the *FAZ* published a piece by Frank Schirrmacher entitled 'Abschied von der Literatur der Bundesrepublik', his assumption being that just as the end of the GDR had *de facto* marked the end of its literature, so the new united Germany would make a break with the literary tradition(s) of the old Federal Republic. In the same year as Keith Bullivant's study, Reinhard Baumgart concluded his *Deutsche Literatur der Gegenwart* with a section called 'Die Zukunft?'. 'Nichts ist deutlicher und schärfer', he argued, 'als der Einschnitt, den die Jahre 1989 und 1990 auch in die literarische Geschichte der Bundesrepublik gesetzt haben, und nichts verwirrender als die Ungreifbarkeit eines deutlichen Anfangs nach diesem deutlichen Ende.' The question, and it is one that Schirrmacher, Baumgart, and Bullivant all seek to answer, is: in what direction will the new literature develop?

The timing of Bullivant's study would appear apposite. Enough time has passed since the events of 1989 for their effects on all aspects of life in the new enlarged Germany to have become visible and, in literary terms, for patterns of post-'Wende' response to have emerged. It is one of this volume's strengths that it clearly presents the various tendencies apparent in the reaction of writers and critics in both East and West to reunification. However, the fact that none of the main chapters is devoted exclusively to literary developments in the 1990s indicates that it is not the book's only, or even its primary, aim to engage in the critical equivalent of futurology. Bullivant grounds his speculation in the firmer terrain of literary history. That is to say: the main method he uses to clear the mists from his crystal ball is to look not forward but back over forty years of FRG/GDR writing, with a view to

establishing the patterns that will continue to manifest themselves in the literature of the new Germany.

Bullivant structures his survey according to the thesis that literary tendencies in the FRG have largely occurred in ten-year cycles. Within such a framework, he reads the first forty years of German literary history as a movement between two poles: on the one hand, *littérature engagée*, and on the other, apolitical, even reactionary, literature, in which aesthetic concerns remain paramount. In order to preserve his approximation of tendencies with decades, he diagnoses the period up to the end of the 1950s as a 'transitional' phase (p. 33), with the move between the 1950s and the 1960s involving a turning away from the writer's 'self-imposed isolation' to a stance of 'political engagement' (p. 33). Thus far, his argument remains largely uncontentious (though restricted mainly to West German literature), but in his ensuing assessment of the 1970s he takes issue with the orthodox interpretation. He disputes the notion that there was not only a socio-political but also a literary 'Tendenzwende' in the early 1970s, taking strength from Rainer Nägele's caution that 'we should not look for too neat a "fit" between political trends and literary chronology' (pp. 36–37). In particular, Bullivant disputes the significance of the subjective literary trend usually considered characteristic of the 1970s, maintaining that it is by no means a distinguishing characteristic of this decade. Drawing attention to early works by Handke, Bernhard, Wohmann, Bachmann, and Walser, he argues that "'New Subjectivity" in fact pre-dated the Student Movement' (p. 37). In an attempt to disprove that the themes of the so-called 'New Subjective' literature were 'uniquely new at that time' he produces a list of twenty-four texts written between 1953 and 1969 in which 'the "existential problems" posed by modern society were already present' (p. 38). Having thus questioned the dominance of the subjective fiction of the 1970s, he turns his attention to social-critical texts produced during this decade, arguing that the 1970s were in fact a 'thoroughly political period' (p. 39), one which produced literary examinations of the state's response to terrorism, prose-works emanating from debates within the Student Movement and the 'Werkkreis-70', and attempts at coming to terms with the Nazi past. While it has long been recognized that 'Neue Subjektivität' is only one of a number of concurrent literary trends in the 1970s and the decade is not as unpolitical as the large number of subjective texts it spawned might suggest (a point that Bullivant himself has acknowledged elsewhere), it seems that he is here so anxious to offer a corrective picture of the period that he falls instead into the trap of underrating the importance of a substantial part of the writing it produced. Having pleaded for the overridingly political nature of literature in the 1970s, he has established a position from which he can claim that the real break with socially critical writing came in the 1980s. It is only in this decade, according to him, that the ghosts of the 1960s generation were laid to rest. Viewed thus, the 1970s also become little more than an 'Übergangszeit', that is, the real 'Tendenzwende' has been moved forward by ten years. The resultant pattern, no longer a regular alternation, decade-by-decade, between two antithetical poles, but one complicated by major transitional periods, would seem to serve as a dubious indicator of the future of German literature.

On a more positive note, the chapter on the 1980s does contain an informative survey of the works of two of the decade's leading writers, Strauss and Handke. Bullivant helpfully sets their work in the broader context of right-wing literary tendencies in the twentieth century. Indeed, one of the strengths of his entire volume is that it is not constrained by the somewhat artificial demarcation line provided by the end of the war, but points instead to a large number of patterns of continuity

and variation between German literature over the first and second halves of the twentieth century.

In the following chapters there is a shift of perspective. Bullivant focuses on the same period, but from more specific angles: 'Writers and Politics', 'The "German Question"', 'Bonn or Berlin?'. With the concentration less exclusively West German, the line of argument becomes more ill-defined. According to the introduction, the chapters were written 'to be read as more or less discrete pieces' (p. vii). Certainly, these three remain less integrated into the volume's overall structure. It is not always apparent why the genres and issues chosen should be so privileged or what exactly they contribute to the main thrust of the argument, about either past or future literary developments. The section on the 'Liedermacher', while highly informative, is only tangential to the rest of the text and leaves one wondering why this often ephemeral minor genre deserves so much attention.

One of the aims of this volume is to 'help introduce those without advanced reading knowledge of German to important aspects of contemporary German literature' (p. vii). In this it should succeed: its scope is impressive, the number of texts mentioned is enormous, it approaches forty years of literature in both parts of Germany from a number of illuminating angles, and, most successfully, it concentrates in some detail on the most recent period. But for all these virtues, there is a central tension between the title *The Future of German Literature* and the leitmotif of 'What will remain?' running through much of the approach. To venture a balanced prediction of what *will be* on the evidence of what *has been* is not the same as attempting to determine what is likely to survive. The latter is an issue that could possibly be predicated on an intelligent sifting of the past, though that exercise would have to be more inclusive than coverage of *The Future of German Literature*. From this study one would be tempted to assume that 'post-War German literature' was largely synonymous with the German novel, that there had been little drama of note since the Third Reich, that 'Liedermacher' had been more important than poets, and that the journalism of *literati* was as reliable a barometer as literature itself. The trouble with Bullivant's selective approach is that the picture of the period that emerges is necessarily incomplete. The problem is exacerbated by a number of key omissions. Writers or tendencies that do not fit the putative patterns tend to be ignored. Celan, Schmidt, and Jelinek, for example, receive virtually no treatment from a survey aimed at speculating about 'the sort of texts that might endure' (p. 166). Other writers are given an inordinate amount of space. (Uwe Timm may be a neglected writer, but does he merit this much attention in so short a volume?) At one stage, Bullivant admits that 'commercial success is not necessarily a determinant of canonical status' (p. 181), but then, neither is the accolade of the journalists and literature-watchers whose opinions are so copiously documented here. Often it is not clear what (alternative?) canonical assumption plays a role in deciding what in the past may be predictive of future developments. Reception theory has, after all, reminded us of how unreliable such factors always have been, and will continue to be. Certainly, a sense of aesthetic (or even ideological) value does not loom large in the discussions of individual works. However, the main methodological complaint is that the author theorizes insufficiently on the guiding principles underlying his undertaking.

BIRKBECK COLLEGE, LONDON
KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

J. LEAL
J. J. WHITE