

Australian Literature in the German Democratic Republic: Reading Through the Iron Curtain

Edited by Nicole Moore and Christina Spittel

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THIS VOLUME OF ESSAYS IS AN ENGAGING STUDY OF THE RECEPTION OF AUSTRALIAN literature in the GDR, the former East Germany. It explores the remarkable story of the publication and reception of Australian literature in the GDR by a state sponsored 'publishing combine' consisting of writers, editors, government officials, and censors. Some ninety-five titles by Australian authors dot the short history of the GDR from the early 1950s until that nation's demise with German unification in 1990. Some titles, such as Marcus Clarke's convict narrative *For the Term of His Natural Life* had a long and highly successful publishing history in the GDR, running into multiple reprints. Others such as Frank Hardy's *Power Without Glory* (translated into German in 1952) paved the way for a steady stream of communist and social realist writers to travel to an ideologically congenial East Germany in the 1950s and 60s. Novels like these were refracted through a particular interpretive matrix in the GDR, remediated by publishers for pressing ideological purposes. As translators and cultural intermediaries, editors and translators in the GDR, often Anglophone academics, interpreted the history and culture of Australia as doubled: 'geographically exotic' yet 'politically retrograde', a utopic experiment whose depredations indexed the exploitative system of world-capitalism.

In their illuminating introduction to the collection editors Nicole Moore and Christina Spittel argue that in the GDR Australian literature emerges from the shadows of a centre-periphery model of world-literature in which literature from the global south struggles for recognition unless it becomes intelligible to the metropolitan centre. By contrast in the newly formed GDR left-nationalist Australian writers are celebrated for making a vigorous contribution to social realism, a pedagogically motivated antifascist aesthetic. Moore and Spittel point out, however, that the GDR perspective on Australian literature is more than an historical curiosity. The episteme into which Australian fiction was recuperated by the translative energies of GDR publishers demonstrates that Australian literature was 'international' before it was national. The GDR enthusiasm for

writers such as Marcus Clarke, Franky Hardy, Katherine Susannah Pritchard, Judith Wright, and Dorothy Hewett reminds us that the promulgation of an internationalist proletarian literature is a pre-phenomenon of world literature as we now conceive it. Nor does the volume assume a *parti pris* on the politicised historiography of the Cold War. Its varied essays by German and Australian academics are not satisfied with providing a cautionary tale of how a monolithic state-sponsored ideology developed a publishing apparatus with willing collaborators from amongst the pro-communist intelligentsia. However organised and effective the GDR regime of literary censorship may have proved, an older idea of the GDR as a *Kulturnation* educating its working class readership into congenial world literatures remained a motivating force. As Siegfried Lokatis argues in an illuminating chapter on the book industry, GDR publishing was not a 'closed system'. Censorship and aesthetic control were to some extent mitigated by the prestige of established writers, such as Christa Wolf, and an ongoing commitment to an internationalist literary culture in the Cold War context of rival soft diplomacies. There could be a 'dynamic interplay' with publishing structures given the size and relative autonomy of some state sponsored publishing houses and their continuing hunger for content with minimal licensing fees. Each new publication in a voluminous industry extended the room for manoeuvring such that, by the 1970s, modernist literature (e.g., translations of Virginia Woolf) had become more acceptable.

In some productive ways, GDR readers were inoculated against theoretical fashions. Where postcolonial criticism has had difficulty recognising the progressive dimensions of white settler writing, the GDR refraction of Australian literature was interested in its withering critique of the capitalist settler state, and remained partly beguiled, as a utopian experiment itself, with Australian egalitarianism and working class solidarities. There is also the critical interest of collectivist reading practices to consider given the privilege in Anglophone literary criticism extended to alienated and 'suspicious' as opposed to connected and affective reading practices, fruitfully analysed by critics such as Rita Felski. Spittel and Moore, indebted to the sociologically informed analyses of John Frow, enthuse that this is 'reception history in all its wildness'. The volume is dedicated to exploring resulting problematics. To what degree, when we are reading the mandatory 'Afterwords' (*Nachworte*) to translated Australian titles usually written by GDR academics justifying the book's publication, are we dealing with the 'power of reading regimes'? If we are used to (or weary of) the celebration of the alterity of the literary, what is the value of a reading practice that seeks to 'pre-apprehend' the meaning of the text in order to disperse the threat of excessive formalism and explain the book's contribution to a coherent social imaginary? What quantum of sense or textual meaning remains after translation and ideological remediation? Were GDR and Australian readers really reading the same books? I'll mention just a few chapters in this volume that are dedicated

to exploring whether cultural regulation and control produced reified ideologies or whether we can meaningfully speak in Emily Apter's terms of a 'contact zone' of source texts and their creative translations, a process that does not leave the original text as a matrix of stable significations.

Russell West-Pavlov's chapter, the second in the volume, is about the hugely successful German translation of Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of his Natural Life* in 1957. It argues that this translation history is a good example of how the GDR formation of a 'cross-border' canon should remind the 'custodians' of Australian literary history to look beyond the naturalised borders of Australia as an island nation. *For the Term of his Natural Life* (*Lebenslänglich*) went through eleven reprints in the GDR, between 1957 and 1972, published by Volk and Welt. Its carceral thematics were reinterpreted in an afterword by the institutionally powerful English studies academic Anselm Schlosser, Head of English at Humboldt University and close to the seat of political power in Berlin. West-Pavlov suggests that like many with the role of doctrinal enforcement, Schlosser's function in his commentary maybe have been to police interpretive boundaries, particularly given some possible thematic leakage of the novel's carceral island motif for an East German audience soon to see the erection of the Berlin wall. Schlosser renders Clarke's novel as the depiction of a colonial prison for exploited labour whose telos could only be the fascist concentration camp, entirely ignoring a long history of anti-Semitism. Yet Schlosser was an Anglophile and an urbane literary critic and could not help but give Clarke's novel a Dickensian pedigree and debate putatively bourgeois questions of literary quality. Rejecting purely national and historicising frameworks, Schlosser compares Clarke's achievement to the work of Defoe, Fielding, Smollet, Hugo, and Poe, thus lending the novel high-cultural legitimation. West-Pavlov's resonant point is that Schlosser's oscillation between anxious interpretive pre-apprehension and nuanced literary appreciation indicates just how 'fractured' and 'contradictory' the notional work of cultural surveillance could actually be when mediated by a textual encounter.

Nicole Moore's chapter on the success of Frank Hardy's scandalous Roman à clef *Power Without Glory* in the GDR after its publication in 1952 ponders the fascinating, sometimes ironic reception history of the novel. Hardy's favourable reception in the GDR is a good instance of where translation from a source culture to a target culture produces a 'mutual elliptical refraction' of both cultures. In Australia the novel was litigated as libellous and thus necessarily defended as 'fiction', its storyline often localised as a political history of Melbourne. East German reviews of the book, enthralled by the famous libel case surrounding its publication and the legacy of censorship in Australian literary history, understood its near repression as instance of capitalism censoring manifestations of working class culture. In the GDR the text's concerns were

reconfigured along more allegorical lines as embodying the corruption at the heart of a capitalist nation. Moore muses that this universalising interpretation is arguably more aligned to Hardy's original intentions.

There is an excellent chapter by Christina Spittel discussing the emergence of a transformed scene of reading in the GDR during Erich Honecker's presidency (1971-1989) and the thaw in political relations after the election of Whitlam. It focuses on the publication of the short-story anthology of Australian writers *Erkunden* in 1976 which went into a print-run of 80,000 copies. The collection was organised by the Australian literature enthusiast and head of the English division at Volk and Welt, Hans Petersen. *Erkunden* portrayed a much more diverse Australian literary imaginary with contributions by Hal Porter, Colin Johnson, Frank Moorhouse, Peter Carey, Vicki Vidiikas and others. Its 31 contributors captured the spirit of an urban counter-culture and the perspectives of migrant and indigenous authors, offering a literary cornucopia that could 'easily counter any ideological packaging'. Spittel suggests intriguingly that this polyphonic collection may have found a congenial reception from the youth of the GDR. East German students, although they may not have been able to freely protest like their West German confreres, understood themselves as part of a progressive *Lesenation* (reading nation), a liberal, countercultural post-68 'discourse community'.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter of all is that by Leah Gerber who pointedly sums up some of the collection's implicit distaste for the binary logics of Cold War politics. Her chapter is critical of the middlebrow writer Anna Funder, who helped to perpetuate the dismally reductive perception of the GDR as 'Stasiland', the title of her sensationalist 'faction' novel. Gerber is frustrated not just with *Stasiland's* numerous factual errors that had to be corrected before its German translation but Funder's willingness to serve as self-appointed guardian of appropriate accounts of the GDR. This lest we lapse into a misguided Ostalgie that fails to celebrate the fall of communism as the passing of a great evil from the world. Gerber juxtaposes Funder's 'brutal rigidity' on the Stasi compared to with the more nuanced position of the British historian Timothy Garton Ash, who interviewed the Stasi and argued that many were transformed by their experiences. Funder harshly critiqued the 2006 film *The Lives of Others* as pure fantasy, a false representation of an unyielding system. Timothy Garton Ash points out that some Stasi protected those they were spying on, others became disillusioned and none of them, as far as he was concerned were simply 'evil men'. Gerber indicts *Stasiland* for positioning Australia as ineffably distant from East Germany, betraying almost complete ignorance about the reception of Australian literature in the GDR or the history of cultural exchange detailed in this volume. Indeed, *The Lives of Others* is something of a parable of Australian Literature in the German Democratic Republic. Faced with a resistant otherness,

a core of individual personal expression they are charged with observing and remediating, even seeming apparatchiks can develop a complex, invested and transformative relationship to their subject matter, one of the insights of post-Benjaminian translation theory. This is a rewarding and enterprising volume with an unusual degree of internal dialogue for an edited collection. It is itself a fertile, open-ended cross-cultural exchange between German and Australian contributors, all of them dedicated to a new, theoretically informed internationalism in Australian literary studies.

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