
Part of Peter Lang’s “Austrian Culture” series, this volume takes on a variety of topics within the scope of twentieth-century Austrian literature. The main part of the book can be divided into four sections: a prologue; Part One, consisting of seven essays; Part Two, which features brief samples of three contemporary writers’ work and a survey essay on each writer; and an epilogue. In their preface, the editors present two main thrusts that they see in the book’s project: first, to argue for the conceptualization of an Austrian literature, separate from “German literature,” under which rubric German-language writing tends to be categorized; and, second, to focus on “proto- and post-Fascist ideology in Austria, with both its early Anschluss mentality and later Anschluss denial spanning most of the century” (ix). Indeed, this “Lebenslüge” (ix) appears several times in the contributions, although not in any systematic way. Despite the opening shot across the bow of German Studies, scholars of German-language literature will likely find this a useful volume. It encourages an awareness of the non-German within German Studies and focuses on literature that is worthy of more attention.

The contributions in this unusual volume take a crenulated path between the start and finish of the book, moving on a trajectory that is unexpected if one reads in order. The prologue, by Klaus Zeyringer, is a polemical yet dated and mostly convincing essay arguing for “Austrian literature” as a concept. Zeyringer points out the all too common subsumption of “things Austrian” within “things German” as well as many incorrect labels, misunderstandings, and prejudices, which have disadvantaged Austrian literature. At long last, Zeyringer does make the suggestion (in his concluding section, “Seven Theses—and One More”) that the term “German-language literature” should be used more widely in order to make room for the many German literatures that exist. At the other end of the volume one finds a charming epilogue by the late Harry Zohn, longtime Brandeis University professor and translator as well as the original editor of the series in which the present volume appears. Zohn writes of his lifelong affinity for his native Vienna and simultaneously and compellingly urges one to become acquainted with the myriad cultural developments, which shaped his life and advanced from an Austrian epicenter.

In Part One, we find essays on early Modernism, the interwar period, exile writing between 1933 and 1945, fiction of the 1970s and ‘80s, contemporary fiction, post-1945 poetry, and film adaptations of literature. Jacqueline Vansant’s contribution, “Facing Austria’s National-Socialist Past: Film Adaptations of Literature,” is a cogent essay, in which she surveys filmic adaptations of literature and then focuses on one in particular, Susanne Zanke’s 1981 reworking of Marie-Thérèse Kerschbaumer’s Der weibliche Name des Widerstands, which, according to Vansant, “attempts to question the ways in which the past is reconstructed, while illustrating the difficulties of representing this particular past in an Austrian context” (163). The occasionally selective Austrian memory with respect to National Socialist victimhood is emblematic for the kinds of topics that are and should be interrogated in volumes like this.
Quite interestingly, Part Two provides a “mini-reader” of sorts, in that it contains short works by, and survey essays on, Barbara Frischmuth (“The Dalai Lama’s Laughter”), Elisabeth Reichart (an excerpt from Nightmare Tale), and Erich Wolfgang Skwara (excerpts from Tristan Island and The Secret Kings). These primary texts are eminently readable and worthy of wider exposure; it is fitting that they are included here.

Save some original quotations, the entire book is in English, which corresponds to the editors’ goal (as described in the preface) of making both the critical essays as well as the primary texts available to a greater readership. Unfortunately, the translation (carried out by ten various translators) is frequently uneven. Following the essays are information on the contributors and a limited index of names.

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