Really Existing Utopias: Trends in 21st-C German-Language Writing by Women

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I am interested in how authors serve as reference points for ideas of belonging and shared experiences in society, both through their literary work and in what their authorial persona represents more broadly. This encompasses how they might literally present themselves in various physical places and media outlets, but it also entails how other individuals, and indeed entire institutions and sectors, attribute certain discursive roles to them. Much of this is starkly gendered, in ways that draw in much larger institutional structures, as well as physical objects, places and more intangible ways of perceiving the world. In the following few pages, I set out the central conceptual tool I have developed to explore such a complex picture: four different modes of authorship that, each inflecting one another in different ways, drive both what literature looks like and how people engage with it. My central premise is that the matrix provided by these modes generally allows us to articulate how authors contribute to and are shaped by discourses of home and belonging in contemporary German society as part of a much large collaborative cultural project. More specifically, the matrix of modes also allows us to chart gradual historical change in a way that is sensitive both to gender and to the co-existence of multiple models of authorship. There is not space here to discuss the specific ways in which contemporary women writers have engaged with these dominant discursive trends, but these can be explored in discussion at the seminar.

Theorizing Literary Authorship and Social Belonging: Modes of Authorship

As my very brief introduction implies, the interlinked questions of literary agency and authorial intent are located in the biographical individual and also extend far beyond them. This poses a significant challenge to any study of authorship that wants to conclude something tangible about its broader effects for the evolution of literature on the one hand and society on the other but must now shuttle back and forth between the two in a way that risks becoming circular. 'Modes of authorship' provide common ground in terms of expressing agency and intent – someone appears to write in a certain way for a certain reason – but also allow for differing perspectives on that writing and conflicting kinds of use by others. A mode of authorship, then, refers to the attitude that accompanies that act of authorship and allows it to be seen, whether this underlying attitude resides in the biographical author, in any of the

other individuals engaging with the author and/or her work, or indeed in the way material objects or historical traditions align around the act of authorship. Perhaps I should add at this point that a central tenet of all of my work on authorship is that the act of authoring a text entails far more people than the individual generally referred to as 'the author'. I see authorship as an iterative process that draws in multiple people, places and institutions as literary texts are repeatedly brought to life in different contexts as part of a much broader human-led activity. In fact, the more a literary text begins to circulate in the wider world, the less direct influence the original author has over it anymore.[1]

With regard to the production and reception of literature in Germany, I have established four principal modes of authorship across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: the celebratory, commemorative, satirical and utopian modes. I have developed these by distilling attitudes displayed in and around German literature and culture to a basic set of elemental blocks. I took as broad a brush as I possibly could and found there were four categories that I couldn't do without. A comparison might be to Franco Moretti's 'waves' in the context of classifying world literature, albeit with the caveat that I arrived at my findings through a markedly analogue methodology (directly reading and analysing a lot of books, speeches, media material, archival records, etc.), as opposed to Moretti's big data approach. These inductively defined modes helped me express both continuities and change across the 20th and 21st C, as well as extend back into the 19th C when accounting for a full spectrum of authorship. They also made me a lot more aware of the highly gendered nature of the German-language literature network, as it became clear both what the modes might generally allow and what they historically did not allow. I shall pick up on this point in my closing paragraph, as well as hopefully in our live discussion. First, then, the four modes in more detail.

The **celebratory mode** of authorship could be seen as the natural resting position for all literary endeavour. Subject to increasing extension and appropriation as the twentieth century progresses, this mode articulates both how authors themselves and the many other participants in a literature network value literary endeavour. As a consequence, it is structurally endemic to many of the mediators within the literature network: the very act of

[1] Rebecca Braun, 'The World Author in Us All: Conceptualizing Fame and Agency in the Global Literary Market Place', in special issue on 'Literary Celebrity', ed. R. Braun and E. Spiers, *Celebrity Studies,* 7:4 (2016), 457-75; Tobias Braun, Rebecca Braun, Emily Spiers, eds, *World Authorship* (Oxford: OUP, 2020).

publishing a book displaying an author's name is itself an act of inherent celebration, for example. It is fundamentally reliant on a singular conception of the author as the source or origin of a literary work, even when the actual processes of collaborative promotion belie this notion. At this basic level, all engagement with the work of an author happens within the celebratory mode of authorship, regardless of whether that engagement is positive or negative. Thomas Mann is a prime example of how this mode has evolved over the course of the twentieth century. In his public speeches from before and after WWII Mann variously draws on nineteenth-century conceptions of the author as a pre-formed genius around whom an evolving sense of cultural achievement can coalesce for a certain community of readers and writers. However, he also moves beyond the Romantic model as a simple focus for adulation to consider the difficulties public acts of celebration cause for individual authors, demonstrating how the celebratory mode is as much something to be reckoned with as to be directly displayed by a writer.

The **commemorative mode** of authorship naturally pairs with the celebratory mode in as much as it also presumes the serious value of an individual author's work and the broader social importance of traceable human experience. It is differently oriented, however. It is rendered distinct by the central role played by different attitudes to the past prevalent in any one setting and the way in which they will determine how this representation is connoted and for whom. Without being inherently more or less ethical or directed than the celebratory mode, there is a markedly greater likelihood that this mode of authorship will be invoked to frame ethical considerations within a culture's sense of self and be oriented towards specific publics. This difference can be grasped with brief reference to the work of Aleida Assmann and further consideration of the case of Thomas Mann. Assmann writes about the 'memory of places', using the term to indicate both the individual human subject's memory of a specific place, and the ability of a specific place to hold memories for numerous individuals and/or collectives for posterity. Further expanding on the term's polyvalency, she explores the different natures of the 'place of generational memory' and 'places of commemoration'.[2] While the former is characterized by the continuity of an unbroken lineage of human subjects engaging with their environment, the latter is defined by an abyss between the past and

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[2] Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.292.

present that poses a challenge to stable narrative constructions. In both cases, however, the memory narrative generated at any one point in time results from an interaction between a historically located interpreting subject and the 'aura' of the place.[3]

In my adaptation, then, the way Weimar appears to its many visitors to evoke Goethe and Schiller is an example of the 'memory of place', whereas a contemporary author like Thomas Mann visibly plays a role in creating a 'place of memory' when he visits each of the various locations around Germany in the immediate post-war period and allows successive symbolic constructions of his authorship to be projected onto him through the link suggested by each locality. As a representative literary intellectual, Mann functions as a gateway for past cultural traditions to be projected onto divergent ideological narratives about the present and near future by the different audiences with whom he interacts in politically specific times and places. The further differentiation Assmann offers between 'places of generational memory', which are primarily marked out by a positive sense of sharing an ongoing history, and 'places of commemoration', which are characterised by traumatic rupture and loss, alerts us to the high stakes around exclusivity and inclusivity within any memory-driven mode.

Against the background of these two modes, which, taken together, drive much of post-war German-language literature, the **satirical mode** can be understood as a corrective of sorts. It should be evident from the above that both the celebratory and the commemorative modes encourage a self-enforcing value-system around the importance of the author and the broader sector in which they exist. While the satirical mode continues the focus on authorship as an individual act, the implicit heroism associated with it is undermined by structural slippage and linguistic play in the context of literary texts and subject to other kinds of performative bombast in wider social discourse. Although one can list significant women writers who have availed themselves of this mode to make a point about the patriarchal nature of both German letters and society (e.g. Gisela Elsner (1937-1992), Elfriede Jelinek (b.1946), Irmtraud Morgner (1933-1990)), the satirical mode does not in itself have a particular affinity with women; in fact, the satirical mode can also play out in astonishingly gender-blind ways, as introspective spoofs undertaken by mainstream publishers and high-profile writers such as Günter Grass (1927-2015) and Martin Walser (b.1927) readily demonstrate.

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[3] Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, p.322.

The core characteristics of the **utopian mode**, by contrast, are derived from a frame well beyond the specifically German literature network. Thomas More's 1516 *Utopia*, which simultaneously evokes 'the good place' and 'no place' in its derivation from the Greek, takes the form of a largely inaccessible island that is conjured up through the reports of a returning adventurer – a better vision of society made possible not through travelling either backwards or forwards in time, but laterally in space. Framed by multiple rhetorical tropes within the fictional narrative as well as a series of fictional letters between More and his collaborators, the whole text is a decidedly literary form of political polemic ultimately designed to make its readers reflect critically on contemporary English social and political conventions. Crucially, authorship is deliberately dispersed across a text which also reaches out directly to the reader as the first part of a dialogic act that is updated each time it is read. The *gestus* underpinning its authorship, therefore, is towards bringing about change for the future, and the principal method for achieving this is to challenge the existing spaces of normative social and political debate with the very notion of a parallel, markedly different realm that is made possible by the literary imaginary as it unfolds collaboratively in the here and now. Although it derives from a challenge to singular literary structures, this mode is just as capable of innovating within real social practices as the other three.

The Utopian Mode and Trends in Contemporary German-Language Writing by Women
Accordingly, in my most recent work, I have been exploring how the utopian mode has become particularly important to a number of quite different women writers, both in terms of how they create an authorial position in their literary texts, and in terms of how they understand their wider social positioning. The writers I have engaged with span a wide range of those who have always been 'at home' in German-speaking Europe to those who have very consciously had to engage with questions of belonging. Common to all, however, is a tendency to question the normative, male German-language canon that has proven so dominant for so long by opening up genres and literary structures to more devolved, collaborative forms. Because none of them have written their texts from the certainty of belonging to this canon, authors such as West German Felicitas Hoppe (b.1960) and Ulrike Draesner (b.1965), East German Ulrike Almut Sandig (b.1979), or the three successive winners of the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize 2011-13 who write in German as a second language, Maja Haderlap (b.1961), Olga Martynova (b.1962), and Katja Petrowskaja (b.1970), make

particularly evident a new approach to authorship that has been gaining ground across contemporary German-speaking Europe. Collectively, they take us away from the seemingly singular (and still widespread) positions of 'public intellectual' or 'social pedagogue', precisely by showing what these positions of necessity cut out in the way they prioritize a particular mix of authorial modes. This is an approach that points to a new attitude of relinquishing control, developing a humbler model of devolved or otherwise participatory authorship, where questions of individual legacy and linguistic mastery are secondary to shared effects in the now. Significantly, there is also a shared emphasis on making things apparent that previously could not be seen or heard, perhaps because they did not fit so readily into the dominant literary discourses on home and belonging that were routinely created within the celebratory and commemorative modes. This extends from the visibility of certain objects and voices in literature to the wider public acknowledgement of collaborative efforts across the supporting literature network. The resulting places and practices of authorship that have asserted themselves ever more clearly in the second decade of the twenty-first century act as a counterweight of sorts to the stifling normative structures in which post-war German publishing had become ossified by the mid-1990s.