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Crossing Boundaries: A Theory and History of Essay Writing in German, 1680-1815 by John A. McCarthy

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MCCARTHY, JOHN A. *Crossing Boundaries: A Theory and History of Essay Writing in German, 1680-1815*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1989. xiv + 346 pp. \$35.95.

The term “crossing boundaries” refers to essayistic writing as bridging the gap between conceptual rigor and poetic inspiration. It also expresses what McCarthy sees as an essential ingredient of the essay: a dynamic interaction between the writer’s intentions and the reader’s encounter with new ideas. Finally, the title refers, self-reflexively, to McCarthy’s own interdisciplinary method.

McCarthy approaches his subject from a series of angles, which for the most part correspond to chapters in the first part of the book: a general discussion of the essay as the most appropriate genre for an age desirous of teaching critical thinking and promoting social change; issues in the generic approach to literature; similarities with contemporary theory, including reader-response criticism and Habermas’s concept of communicative action; a definition of Enlightenment that counters various one-sided interpretations; a sociological account of the modern revolution in reading habits along with the increasing importance of the public sphere; and a discussion of the rhetoric of prose in the early eighteenth century. The connecting link in these short chapters is the dual importance of writer and reader. After reflecting on essayism from these various perspectives, McCarthy turns to analyses of individual essays by some two dozen writers. The primary emphases here are rhetorical strategies and essayistic features.

A significant overview of an important genre, *Crossing Boundaries* makes a number of interesting claims. McCarthy recognizes within the genre of the essay a continuity from late Baroque (Thomasius) to Romanticism (Adam Müller) and so asks us to reevaluate our splintering of literary history and nonrecognition of common elements. Though future research should not be content until it reaches a unity of *unity and diversity*—as McCarthy does not—there is nonetheless a moment of truth to his claim, and it is refreshing to see someone counter the fashionable emphasis on difference at the expense of continuity. Another challenging thesis is that a theory and practice of essayistic writing existed already in the 1680s, some seventy years earlier than is normally acknowledged, and before British and French models were introduced

to Germany (which elicits revisions of our sense not only of the German essay but also of the development of the German language [Blackall]). Also of great interest is the consistent attention to future areas of inquiry, in part facilitated by McCarthy’s pioneering work, which itself exhibits a thorough account of secondary literature and of his position within various traditions.

Specific insights of value might also be noted: 1) a refutation of simplistic views of the Enlightenment that—blinded by a naive belief in overnight change—fail to see subtle, progressive moments, that reduce the Enlightenment ideal of truth to an encyclopedic accumulation of knowledge rather than critical thinking, and that regard the Enlightenment view of reason as an elevation of merely instrumental reason and thereby fail to distinguish within reason a form of just and communicative rationality; 2) the humbling insight that Enlightenment texts offer prolepses of many of our contemporary notions about the ethics of reading; 3) some very good detailed analyses of individual essays, above all by Wieland and Kant; 4) attention to unjustly neglected essays by von Berlepsch and von der Recke; and 5) an implicit argument for the value of the essayistic genre within our curricula.

True to the spirit of McCarthy’s designation of his book as essayistic and his account of essayism as necessarily fragmentary, I offer some criticism. Raising the interesting question of where to place the essay in a generic system, McCarthy—drawing on Staiger and Rittkowski—opts for a concept of authorial attitude rather than one of form or content, which he then reinforces with the way in which qualities of writing are received by the reader. Essayism becomes a fourth genre (or mode) along with epic, lyric, and dramatic, and the essay is considered a species, much like tragedy. But the characteristics of the essayistic—to the extent that McCarthy develops them via production and reception aesthetics—are not unique to the essayistic mode and could apply to a wide variety of artforms: the desire for consciousness raising, a skeptical and ironic stance, the mediation of thought and rhetoric, experimentation, audience awareness, and hermeneutic perplexity. The “essay” is not given a distinct definition and is sometimes used interchangeably with “essayistic,” sometimes not. Characteristics are introduced enumeratively, little attempt is made to distinguish essential from merely frequent features, and specific examples lack qualities that otherwise appear to be requisite (von der Recke, for example, is

hardly tentative or indeterminate). As with the definition of genre, an abstractness exists in *Crossing Boundaries* that sometimes limits the development of detailed insights. At times this reader would have preferred that McCarthy delve more fully into specific issues rather than simply reassert in an infinite variety of ways that essayistic writing is a matter of process and that the recipient of essayistic prose must read creatively and think critically. A critique of Enlightenment thinkers—to balance the just elevation of their virtues—is also absent; not raised are questions such as whether essayistic writing ever becomes an escape from rigorous and disciplined thinking; whether the stress on “how to think” and “how to read” sometimes shades questions of objectivity and of the content of what is thought and read; whether the Enlightenment notion of truth as unreachable—except in an infinite approximation—doesn’t already presuppose criteria for proximity and distance, truth and falsity, which are themselves taken to be true and obtainable; and whether the essayistic negation of all absolute truths is itself an absolute truth or a self-canceling proposition. Finally, McCarthy’s principles of selection are sometimes explained, sometimes seemingly arbitrary.

Accessible to comparatists and—when not self-reflexively evoking the dangers of writing or falling into repetition—clear and well-written and not without its own rhetorical force, the book is a significant contribution to our understanding of the German essay, of value to students of the essay and of the Age of Enlightenment, not only students of their nexus.

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TIMM, EITEL. *Ketzer und Dichter. Lessing, Goethe, Thomas Mann und die Postmoderne in der Tradition des Häresiegedankens.* Beiträge zur Neueren Literaturgeschichte 88. 3. Folge. Heidelberg: Winter, 1989. 118 pp.

Ein schmaler Band über ein großes Thema. Der Verfasser hat jedenfalls Mut: auf knappem Raum werden neue Interpretationen von Werken wie Lessings *Nathan der Weise*, Goethes *Faust* und Thomas Manns *Doktor Faustus* angeboten. Der Ausgangspunkt ist Gottfried Arnolds *Unparteyische*

Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie (1699-1700). Timm will gegenüber der theologischen Orthodoxie und dem Rationalismus eine dritte Traditionslinie des deutschen Denkens (und Lebens) seit dem frühen 18. Jahrhundert nachweisen: die Tradition des Ketzertums. Während die neueste Forschung Spinoza als Ahnherrn wieder zu Ehren gebracht hat, geht es Timm darum, die Bedeutung des speziell Christlichen herauszuheben, und das auch gegenüber der Säkularisations-These. Es ist keine Frage, daß man, einmal aufmerksam geworden, das Wort “Ketzer” allenthalben findet, und daß der Angriff auf die Idee der Orthodoxie, nicht nur spezielle Orthodoxien, typisch für die deutsche Geschichte seit dem 18. Jahrhundert ist. Es ist ebenso richtig, daß die Bedeutung der Religion und Religiosität nicht unterschätzt werden darf. Und schließlich hat man die Traditionslinie von der Mystik zum Pietismus und zur Romantik lange genug herausgestrichen. Timms kühner Angriff geht also gegen starke Befestigungen. Er scheut sich auch gar nicht, Gewährsleute heranzuziehen, die man sonst lieber kritisch-distanzierend nennt als zur Unterstützung heranruft: Bäumler und Spengler vor allem. Auch kehrt er die Kategorien des Öffentlichen und Privaten gegen Habermas um: überhaupt polemisiert er gegen das, was von Hegel und Marx herkommt.

Diese Bemerkungen zeigen bereits, daß das Buch nicht langweilig ist. Es verfährt seine These der Bedeutung Arnolds mit Beharrlichkeit und muß polemisieren, um sich dafür Freiraum zu schaffen. Timm statuiert eine direkte Linie von Arnold zu Lessing und Goethe; aber er behauptet nicht, daß Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Thomas Mann und Sloterdijk direkt auf Arnold zurückgreifen, sondern daß sie in einer bei ihm anfangenden Tradition stehen. Zum Ketzertum zählt Timm, wenn ich es richtig sehe, ein bestimmtes Geschichtsbewußtsein: die Degradation von einem einmal erreichten Niveau; die Degradation des Christentums und der Christen geschieht vor allem durch die Koalition mit der weltlichen Macht: es wird Kirche und sogar Staatskirche. Die Ausgrenzung aus der Institution, die Größe des Außenseiters, seine Leidensfähigkeit, sein Ungenügen am Wort, sein Streben nach einem unerreichbaren Ziel sind Merkmale des Ketzers. Der Ketzer verwirft auch die anti-offizielle Gemeinde, wie pietistische Konventikel, die nichts als neue Institutionen sind, und verharrt in der Vereinzelung.

Timms Argumentation klingt überzeugend. Was man bei ihm liest, leuchtet ein. Die Fragen kommen später. Das hängt mit Timms Vorgehen zusammen.