

Refugee Stories in German Literature and Culture of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

On the Trail of Refugees in German Literature

Projektbericht

The fundamental narrative pattern of a refugee narrative consists of someone fleeing a perceived threat from one location to another. Yet I am interested in what happens when this narrative pattern becomes a generator of cultural meaning by initiating negotiations with existing institutions and frames of reference within political orders and thereby gives rise to the conflicts which constitute narratives. In order to describe how the texts under consideration themselves explore the unique narrativity of refugees, in their efforts to plot refugee stories; I analyze how the core elements of narrative fiction are manifest at different junctures in the literary history of refugee narratives. Those core elements of narrative include: articulations of narrative voice, shifting modes of address, sequencing of causality, strategies of affect and attention binding, as well as the topological distributions of semantic spaces within literary models of the world. Through close readings of individual texts and by tracing intertextual references, I emphasize how these features of narratives are impacted by the specific historical (including literary-historical) paths of refugees.

Two interrelated problems driving my research agenda are thus the precarious legibility and narrativity of refugees as

explored within an array of fictional, fictionalized, autobiographical, biographical, and highly-stylized refugee narratives. Not to be overlooked in this context are also those stories that are subjected to the demands of asylum procedures designed to determine whether an asylum seeker's story convincingly depicts a tale motivated by a „well-founded“ fear of persecution in that person's country of previous nationality (as the Geneva Refugee Convention defined the refugee in 1951). This situation is depicted, for instance, in the novels by Seghers and Remarque in the context of refugees from Nazi Germany, and more recently in Sherko Fatah's 2008 novel *Das dunkle Schiff*.

During my year at the Krupp-Kolleg, I was able to make significant progress towards the completion of this large-scale study. The book begins with the start of the literary preoccupation with the refugee paradigm in its modern form in narrative fiction in Germany shortly after WWI, when nation-states devised police measures and legal institutions to deal with unprecedented numbers of refugees. As proof of the literary fascination with the new models of geopolitical identity unleashed after the First World War, a preoccupation with expatriation, extraterritoriality, and Wilsonian self-determination finds expression



Dr. Charlton Payne
war von Oktober 2014 bis
September 2015 Alfried Krupp
Junior Fellow.
Er ist Postdoktorand an der
Universität Erfurt.

Dr. Charlton Payne studied History, Philosophy and German Literature in Athens/Georgia (USA), Berlin, and Los Angeles. He earned his PhD in German Literature from UCLA in 2007. He has taught and researched at the Universities of Konstanz and Erfurt. As of November 2015, he is a visiting researcher in the Department of German at the University of California, Berkeley and a DAAD P.R.I.M.E.

fellow at the University of Erfurt. He is the author of a book on the epic genre and the political imaginary in eighteenth-century German literature as well as of articles on epic citizenship in Goethe, the politics of sensus communism in Kant and Arendt, the problem of asylum in Kleist, and, from the current project, several articles on the literary representation of refugees.

Kurzvita

» Refugee Stories in German Literature and Culture of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries. On the Trail of Refugees in German Literature

My study closely inspects the specific narratives that have formed around the figure of the refugee over the course of the twentieth century. With a particular focus on literary texts written in German, it analyzes their constitutive elements as well as their cultural functions from the perspectives of narrative theory and literary history. Refugee narrative fictions transform and undergo thematic shifts that start with the institution of the passport system around WWI, converge and conflict with both „Heimat“ and

human rights discourses after WWII, and continue through to narratives of a search for refuge under conditions of global migration and the security controls introduced to administer and police these pathways (including the threat of global terrorism). The project is distinct for analyzing the ways in which narratives seek to make the refugee legible as a figure of political life. I show how literary narrations in particular explore what it means to embark on the trail of refugees.

Fellow-Projekt

in depictions of Armenian refugees in Armin T. Wegner's *Die Austreibung* and Werfel's *Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh*. In B. Traven's *Totenschiff*, Stefan Zweig's *Episode am Genfer See*, and Joseph Roth's *Der stumme Prophet* and *Flucht ohne Ende*, moreover, we find imaginative responses to the startling phenomenon of statelessness with which the international community was confronted after the war.

During the NS period, definitions of collective identities with murderous consequences consorted with the absurdities of the passport system and as a result generated powerful literary treatments of the plights of refugees. Most startling is Menzel's *Flüchtlinge*, which appropriates the predominant discourse of ethnic belonging and a minority's right to self-determination in international law, in this case applied to ethnic German settlements in formerly Russian territories, for NS ideology. On the other hand, this period is better known for the texts of the famous exile authors such as Remarque's *Liebe deinen Nächsten*, *Arc de Triomphe*, *Die Nacht von Lissabon* and Seghers' *Transit*. During this period classically referred to as the great era of German exile literature, we find not only a proliferation of narratives, but also a curious non-narrative impulse heading into the postwar era. A look at non-narrative modes of communication in Adorno's aphorisms, Arendt's essays, and Brecht's poetry and *Flüchtlingsgespräche* reveal that these non-narrative impulses converge with the rise of an international human rights regime and the definition of a refugee codified by the Geneva Refugee Convention of 1951 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights upon which it is based.

Postwar Germany became the home of many refugees and displaced persons, as well as for provocative stories about them, for instance, in Grass' *Blechtrommel*; Hans

Werner Richter's *Sie fielen aus Gottes Hand*; and in selected texts by Arno Schmidt; Seghers' *Umsiedlerin* and Heiner Müller's drama of the same name; later, Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*. Here I am concerned with discerning which features distinguish more experimental literary texts from, for instance, family melodramas or generic stories of lost *Heimat*. And I trace those points of topological reference that emerge for the telling of refugee stories as alternatives to the narrative of a lost „Heimat.“

In the contemporary era, which for heuristic purposes can be said to start after 1989, we find a renewed interest in fictions of the „flight and expulsion“ of ethnic Germans after WWII. Exemplary of this trend are: Treichel, *Der Verlorene*, *Menschenflug*, *Anatolin*; Jirgl, *Die Unvollendeten*; Grass, *Im Krebsgang*; Hein, *Landnahme*; Kempowski, *Alles umsonst*; Herta Müller, *Atemschaukel*. At the same time, these stories focused on the history of „German“ refugees intersect with a proliferation of global and transnational refugee narratives. These include refugees from the Iraq war and the new regulation of movement under the sign of a threat of global terrorism after „9/11“ in Sherko Fatah's *Onkelchen* and *Das dunkle Schiff*; the resurgence of violence towards ethnic groups in former Yugoslavia and the changing of Germany's previously liberal asylum laws in 1993 depicted in Stanišić's *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*; and the re-visiting of exile from NS-Germany through a transnational lens in Ursula Krechel's *Shanghai fern von wo*.

My tour through the vast literary history of refugees, in search of their traces in narrative form and figural representation, is guided by an interest in the specific form of knowledge produced by literature. Literature is a potential medium of knowledge: a privileged sphere for reflection on social concerns, for exploration of alternative scenarios, the testing of their

plausibility, and the imaginative modeling of experiences of others to which we might not otherwise have access. Regarded in this way, literary history is an important component of historical epistemology. Refugees seem to generate a desire for literary narratives, but this form of attention also comes with ethical responsibilities. For refugees do not only embody the mere human being who reminds us of the shortcomings of existing definitions of citizenship, the impasses within our system of international political relations, and the necessity of continually rethinking our political categories and of questioning the narratives that legitimate existing political institutions. Literary texts can also call upon readers to pay more attention to the ways stories are told about refugees, as well as to the fact that we are also talking about human beings and not simply reflections of political concepts. Such text exhorts us to examine the phrases and images we draw upon in order to make sense of a world with refugees.

When I came to Greifswald in October of 2014, refugees had not yet become the so fervently reported and hotly debated topic that it became a little less than a year later in Germany. The slogan of an „Age of the Refugee“ seems to ring as true today as it did when it was announced at the end of the Second World War. Amidst the growing media buzz surrounding my topic (which I have been researching well before this recent surge of interest), I was especially grateful for the space of scholarly meditation mixed with an atmosphere of collegiality provided by the Krupp Kolleg. Not only did my work find an engaged audience among the other fellows, the inquisitive community and supportive staff of the Krupp Kolleg, but I received invaluable feedback from the inspiring group of literary scholars in Greifswald as well. From the start, Professors Eckhard Schumacher (of the Institut für deutsche Philologie) and

Eva Blome (of the Interdisziplinäres Zentrum für Geschlechterforschung) immediately welcomed me into the circle of literary scholars in Greifswald. Professor Schumacher gave me the opportunity to discuss in his colloquium a freshly written chapter on Sherko Fatah's novel *Onkelchen*, which I also delivered as my fellow lecture in the Kolleg. In the summer, he invited my mentor from the University of Erfurt, Professor Wolfgang Struck, to his colloquium to present with me a paper that the two of us are writing together on statelessness and seafaring in B. Traven's novel *Das Totenschiff*. In addition, Professor Blome invited me to discuss an essay of mine on Kleist's *Verlobung in St. Domingo* with students in a seminar. I especially enjoyed the many lectures and workshops they organized over the course of the year. Being accustomed to working in interdisciplinary settings, I was also intrigued by the range of scholarly events



Abb. 1: Professor Dr. Eva Blome und Professor Dr. Eckhard Schumacher im Gespräch mit Dr. Charlton Payne während seiner Fellow Lecture im November 2014



Abb. 2: Im Februar 2016 war Dr. Charlton Payne erneut zu Gast im Kolleg und richtete eine Internationale Fachtagung zum Thema „Flüchtlinge in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur“ mit aus.

hosted by the Krupp Kolleg: for instance, the lecture series „Ethik der Psalmen“ and „Tristan und Isolde.“

In addition to the scholarly setting of the Kolleg, I would like to mention in closing how much I enjoyed the concerts, cultural festivals, and film screenings offered in and around the Krupp Kolleg. Here I also have to express my gratitude to Dr. Rainer Cramm for his friendly

patience in helping me improve my table tennis game. Thanks to this propitious scholarly and social environment, I made important strides in both my research and career. Newly written book chapters and publications attest to this progress. Furthermore, I have also been invited to guest-edit, along with my Australian colleague Professor Jesper Gulddal, a special issue of *symplokē*, a leading journal of cultural theory, on the topic of „passports.“ For the period following this year as a Fellow of the Krupp Kolleg, I successfully applied for funding to complete my book through the DAAD P.R.I.M.E. program. With its support, I will be a visiting researcher in UC Berkeley's German Department for a year during 2015–16 while simultaneously employed in the Department of Literature at the University of Erfurt. The year in the Alfred Krupp Wissenschaftskolleg will always hold a special place in my memory – both personally and professionally – and I am grateful to everyone who made it possible.

„Passports“: Special issue of *symplokē* Vol. 24.2 [2017], guest-editor together with Jesper Gulddal.

„Verbalizing Silence and Sorting Garbage: Archiving Experiences of Displacement in Recent Post-Yugoslav Fictions of Migration by Saša Stanišić and Adriana Altaras“ (co-authored with Diana Hitzke), *Edinburgh German Yearbook 9. Archive and Memory in German Literature and Visual Culture* (2015).

„Ist der Flüchtling der neue Held des Kulturbetriebes?“ Deutschlandradio Kultur, 03.06.2015.

„Decisions. Alfred Andersch's Manifesto of the Gruppe 47“ in: *Manifeste. Speerspitzen zwischen Kunst und Wissenschaft*. Ed. by Ralph J. Poole and Yvonne Katharina Kaisinger. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014, 49–64.

„Der Pass zwischen Dingwanderung und Identitätsübertragung in Remarques *Die Nacht von Lissabon*.“ *Exilforschung. Ein internationales Jahrbuch* 31 (2013), 335–346.

Ausgewählte
Veröffentlichungen