

2016

Transitions: Emerging Women Writers in German-language Literature

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Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Hill, Alexandra M., "Transitions: Emerging Women Writers in German-language Literature" (2016). *International Languages and Culture Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 8.
http://pilotscholars.up.edu/ilc_facpubs/8

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Transitions: Emerging Women Writers in German-language Literature

Edited by Valerie Heffernan and Gillian Pye. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013. 235 pages. €50,00.

Women have never been more involved in the German-language literary scene than they are today, whether as authors, publishers, editors, or readers. Yet literature by women remains underrepresented in scholarship, a particularly grievous state given the post-1989 boom in publications by women authors. Valerie Heffernan and Gillian Pye set out to redress this deficit in their edited volume *Transitions: Emerging Women Writers in German-language Literature*, and they succeed in assembling a collection of ten articles and an introduction that firmly situates itself as an authoritative contribution to scholarship on German-language women writers.

In their well researched introduction, Heffernan and Pye begin by substantiating their claim that more and more women are participating in Germany's book industry. They also point to the increased number of female winners of literary prizes and the greater media interest in women authors. Their overview of scholarship on women writers of the last twenty-five years, while highly valuing these scholarly contributions, makes a strong case for a continued and systematic investigation of works by German-language female authors. In the remainder of the introduction, Heffernan and Pye consider several trends that emerge in these contemporary works: family narratives (specifically the matrilineal *Generationenroman*), "changing notions of Heimat" (11), globalization and its effects on the local, and changing concepts of gender and the body. By engaging with these themes, Heffernan and Pye link the introduction to the articles that follow, and they further provide the thematic umbrella of the volume: transition, conceived in the broadest sense to encompass geographic, physical, emotional, economic, temporal, and other identity-based shifts.

The ten articles follow a similar structure: each opens with contextualizing information about one author, and the body of the article engages deeply with one text. The authors wisely avoid making the one text representative of the author's oeuvre, just as the collection as a whole avoids coverage and making generalized claims about women's writing. While the term "emerging women writers" is perhaps inaccurate for some authors discussed here (I would argue that Jenny Erpenbeck, Julia Franck, Kathrin Schmidt, and Juli Zeh are more established than emerging), many articles introduce less well known authors to watch out for, such as Eleonora Hummel, Larissa Boehning, Lea Gottheil, and Ilma Rakusa. This point is not to quibble with the editors' choice of words but to point to the value of the scholarship on both groups of writers.

The articles explore a wide range of topics, which can be roughly grouped under the themes listed in the introduction; each article is interesting to read on its own. Daphne Seeman considers a female protagonist's attempts to preserve a multi-generational, predominantly masculine family narrative in Eva Menasse's *Vienna*. Her article is also an excellent example of how each contributor to this volume does a fine job of contextualizing her author/work within German-language literary traditions. Linda Shortt uses family memory to explore questions of home and belonging, as she focuses on two novels by Eleonora Hummel about Russian Germans' (in)voluntary displacement. In the third article of the collection, Heffernan uses Julia Franck's *Lagerfeuer*, which is set in the liminal space of a displaced persons camp in Berlin Marienfelde (West) in the 1970s,

to explore post-war questions of identity in transition. Engaging with a dimension of German history still under-represented in scholarship on women authors, Emily Jeremiah looks at *Lichte Stoffe* by Larissa Boehning, a novel about the granddaughter of an African-American GI. This novel brings together identity, history, globalization, nomadism, and hybridity, ably explored and critiqued by Jeremiah. Taking a radically different approach to considering history, Gillian Pye looks at everyday objects and places in works by Jenny Erpenbeck. This fascinating article argues that focusing on “the life of things” enables Erpenbeck “to offer a panoramic, but simultaneously intimate view of historical experience” (112).

It would be inaccurate to say that the following articles turn away from history; the German, Austrian, or Swiss past remains a factor in each narrative discussed in this volume. Yet Elaine Martin’s analysis of the “new-economy zombies” in Kathrin Röggla’s *wir schlafen nicht* is firmly grounded in the neoliberal present. Martin argues that, “by allowing the absurdity of the New Economy existence to be revealed through the mouths of its very victims,” Röggla articulates a powerful critique of the neoliberal marketplace (145). The next two chapters treat novels that engage with illness, which in both cases serves as an opportunity for transformation. Siobhán Donovan’s analysis of language in *Sommervogel*, by Lea Gottheil, shows that both military and natural metaphors are used when discussing the protagonist’s metastasized breast cancer: while the military terminology is more common, the natural imagery—especially when coupled with memories of childhood—becomes a source of inspiration for life after cancer. Kathrin Schmidt’s *Du stirbst nicht* charts the “physical, linguistic and emotional recovery” of the protagonist after an aneurism leaves her “paralysed and suffering from amnesia and aphasia.” Deirdre Byrnes argues that the transitional space of the hospital, the blending of present and past, and the “enigmatic figure of the transsexual Viola” destabilize the protagonist’s identity but create the opportunity for creating a new self (169). The novel *Spieltrieb* by Juli Zeh is also clearly tied to the neoliberal, post-9/11, global present, argue Carrie Smith-Prei and Lars Richter. Known for being politically active and tying politics to her creative work, Zeh’s novel explores otherness (both national and linguistic), non-normative relationships, and power dynamics in this tale of a teacher and two students. In the final article of the collection, Carmel Finnan discusses Ilma Rakusa’s first and autobiographical novel *Mehr Meer*, which is based on Rakusa’s memories of living in various Central and Eastern European countries throughout her childhood. Returning to these locations as an adult evokes feelings of affiliation with language, sensory experience, and place, even as it problematizes clear notions of nation and belonging. Here many of the articles’ common themes come together: ideas of home, the global present, family, memory, and a gendered selfhood.

The individual chapters’ contextualizing information makes a good starting place for anyone interested in the authors, but the depth of analysis in the articles satisfies readers already familiar with the authors, too—a difficult balance, achieved! Overall, this book is a welcome and needed contribution, and I predict it will become a cornerstone for future scholarship on German women writers.