Refugee Narratives in Contemporary German Literature and Culture

No longer guaranteed the rights of a citizen of a nation-state, the refugee presents the international community with the merely human being of human rights. In legal terms, however, the human of human rights is itself only legible as a violation of rights. Refugees in other words paradoxically embody a mere human being insofar as they represent the inhuman in political life. The concrete representation of this paradoxical condition requires the complexity of perception and density of meaning found in literary narrative. Operating as a meta-text of the law, the literary fictions of refugee narratives analyzed in this study tell vivid stories of (in)human persecution and struggles for social integration. Literature and law rediscover their shared origins in the rhetorical figure of evidentia, highlighting a communicative function of literature and negotiating the intricacies of historical depictions of the refugee that combine local and global political imaginaries. The project thus focuses on the way contemporary German literary texts explore the psychological problems of refugees and questions of social integration and assimilation – both in light of challenges to narrativization posed by the refugee phenomenon and in light of the frameworks set by historical representations of refugees throughout the twentieth century. It traces a genealogy within twentieth-century German literature which shifts between local and global confrontations with refugees and their stories of expatriation and integration. If the refugee’s loss of legal status can be regarded as a loss of the voice of the citizen, then refugee narratives can be seen in certain cases as exploring what it means to lend a narrative voice to refugees and their experiences. The question of voice – who speaks and what the narrating instance consists of – is one of the central objects of the study of narrative, and is indispensable for an investigation of both fictional and factual refugee narratives. Moreover, it is necessary to explain what types of genre or narrative conventions are available for the telling of refugee stories, and why certain narrative patterns are favored in particular contexts over others. Within this conceptual and methodological framework, my project is more precisely concerned with expatriation narratives, on the one hand, and integration narratives on the other, but most importantly with the heterotopic situation of the refugee between these two narrative poles. While the project focuses on German-language literary texts of approximately the last twenty years, which range from local memories and family histories of the second world war to stories of asylum seekers from the Yugoslavian and Iraq wars of the 1990s, these contemporary narratives can only be interpreted with attention to both the history of discourses surrounding the refugee in the twentieth century and the shared or contested narratives that constitute refugee stories as a European as well as a global phenomenon. This is due to the aspects of historical and personal memory explored in contemporary narratives (above all with respect to experiences and effects of the second world war in Europe) as well as to the international or transnational nature of the refugee phenomenon itself (as a figure who by definition crosses national borders).