

**Christine Meyer. *Questioning the Canon: Counter-Discourse and the Minority Perspective in Contemporary German Literature.***

**Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021. Pp. 350.  
ISBN: 9783110674361.**

ANNELIES AUGUSTYNS

*annelies.augustyns@uantwerpen.be*  
*University of Antwerp, Belgium*

National literary canons have always elicited much critical debate. Creating and updating a canon indeed constitutes an important intervention in the self-understanding, the symbolic capital and the identity of a nation. If this “nationalist instrumentalization” of literature (2) can lead to major controversies, it can also pave the way to fruitful discussions about literature and its ability to reflect and challenge current problems. One of the biggest issues of such a normative system is that it simultaneously includes and rejects a number of works and authors. In recent decades, the Western literary canon has been criticized as insufficiently diverse: not all societal groups are represented in it, even when the prevailing cultural diversity of the population would call for their presence. This is precisely what Christine Meyer addresses in her book *Questioning the Canon: Counter-Discourse and the Minority Perspective in Contemporary German Literature*, where she investigates literary works by so-called German language minority writers. She explores to what degree they feel represented by the national literary canon, to what extent they accept or even contest the alleged universal values portrayed in canonical texts. In doing so, she sheds light on how they interpret their own literature within this seemingly deep-seated national tradition. As a professor of German Studies at the Université de Picardie Jules Verne in Amiens (France), with research interests that

revolve around twentieth- and twenty-first-century German language literature – more specifically intertextual and intermedial practices, transcultural phenomena, minority literature, postcolonialism, canon (critique) and memory studies –, Meyer undoubtedly seems the right scholar to investigate these questions and “counter-cultures” (1), as she calls them. In order to examine how German language literature by writers with a so-called migration background have reread and reworked canonical literary texts, Meyer relies on a corpus of three non-native German language writers originating from Syria and Turkey: Rafik Schami, Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Feridun Zaimoglu.

Meyer thus refers to “Migrationsliteratur,” though she could also, as she herself concedes (4–6), use such terms as “Gastarbeiterliteratur,” “Ausländerliteratur,” “Literatur der Betroffenheit,” “Migrantenliteratur,” “Migrationsliteratur,” “interkulturelle / transkulturelle Literatur,” “hybride Literatur,” “Literatur des Dritten Raums,” “Literatur der Postmigration.” This terminological diversity reflects an ongoing debate triggered by efforts to avoid stigmatization, while testifying to the desire to foreground the writers’ underlying ethnic and allochthonous status. These terms underline the idea of a cultural gap between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ between Eastern and Western Europe. They suggest foreign writers are at best relegated to the role of informants about their culture of origin. Such essentialist way of thinking in terms of “us” and “them,” generally manifest in Western culture, is deeply rooted in German society. Although Meyer chooses one of the possible terms – “migration literature” (9) –, she does not treat the authors of her corpus as minor or marginal subjects; on the contrary, she regards their works as literary productions in their own right. She therefore first introduces the authors of her corpus (17–19), although her selection lacks a clear justification. Meyer states that authors who come “from countries that find themselves in a distinctly asymmetric relationship of power with Germany that are seen by majoritarian society as problematic, e.g. Turkey, Iran, and the Arab States [must be considered and discussed]. [...] the question of the minority position presents itself with greater insistence because it is there that rejection and marginalization are the most virulent in society for both ethnic and religious reasons.” (14) But does this only count for writers stemming from these countries? Could it not also characterize authors with, for example, an African background? Another question raised by Meyer’s approach is the justification an exclusively spatial categorization that excludes writers from other underrepresented, marginal groups, such

as gays and lesbians. If – as Meyer states on page 20 – gender aspects are addressed, why was an additional female author not included among her examples? These issues could have been dealt with in greater depth in the introductory part of the book.

Meyer predicates her research on postcolonial and transnational approaches. Such postcolonial perspectives have a longer tradition in the Anglophone and Francophone world than in the German-speaking cultural realm. Meyer even refers in this respect to “canon wars” (30). Postcolonialism has long been perceived as hardly relevant to German language literature. An explanation for this “blind spot in current German studies” (12) is provided in the theoretical part of Meyer’s book – more specifically in chapter one, “Postcolonialism and the Canon,” which concentrates on the specificities of German history. Compared to other European countries, Germany experienced a shorter colonial history. Furthermore, it only became a nation in 1871, i.e. much later than other countries on the same continent. In this respect, Helmut Plessner called Germany a “*verspätete Nation*” (belated nation). Moreover, the traumatic memory of the Nazi period plays an important role in the country’s relationship to its own history and to its identity as a nation. In a way, the memory of the Holocaust overshadows people’s awareness of Germany’s colonial domination. Meyer also observes that immigrants who moved to Germany during the 1950s came from countries that had been colonized by other European powers or had not been colonized at all (e.g. Spain, Greece, Turkey). In other words, they were not former subjects of the German colonial empire, which explains the lesser interest the topic generated in Germany. Moreover, Germany has faced a tumultuous history in the second part of the twentieth century with the division of the country in two separate entities, FRG and GDR, leading to a subsequent reunification in 1990. At that point, Germany faced a kind of rebirth of nationalism: the country wanted to redefine itself as a “*Kulturnation*” (32). As a result, an engagement with the legacy of German colonialism did not really take place. As a consequence, migration literature has not been extensively viewed from a postcolonial perspective in Germany, which points to the highly relevant contribution of Meyer’s work to the reconfiguration of the national canon. Regarding the latter, the author proposes a cursory classification, according to which she identifies a “major” and a “minor” line. Representatives from the “major” – or dominant/conservative – canon comprise among others Goethe, Schiller and the brothers Grimm. The fact that Goethe and Schiller belong to the

“major” line will not come up as a surprise and the beautiful cover of the book suggests precisely that. On it, Goethe and Schiller, authors studied at universities worldwide as representatives of the canon, are depicted as forming a statue, with Schami, Özdamar and Zaimoglu portrayed beneath them – as if in their shadow. Although this cover and the title of the book seem to indicate the volume revolves around works from the German tradition, Meyer also refers to authors from the Western canon in general, such as Shakespeare and Bram Stoker. On the other hand, Heine, Brecht, Kafka, Celan, Else Lasker-Schüler and others figure as rebels or outcasts, whose canonicity is construed from a subaltern, marginal position emerging from underprivileged social conditions or Jewishness. As such, these writers belong to Meyer’s “minor” line.

In order to analyze the works of Schami, Özdamar and Zaimoglu in comparison with these canonical authors from both the “major” and “minor” lines, Meyer has recourse to various methodological concepts drawn from different research paradigms, as she explains in chapter two, “Counter-Discursive Strategies: From Metatextuality to Rewriting.” Therefore, Meyer in part relies on poststructuralist theories of intertextuality and palimpsestic writing, while engaging with notions derived from literary sociology. She mainly employs Gérard Genette’s theories, particularly his concepts of “intertextuality,” “paratextuality,” “architextuality,” “metatextuality” and “hypertextuality” (56). To this critical apparatus, she adds her own notion of a conversation with canonical authors, which she calls “dialogue with the dead” (60). Such stance, coupled with the rewriting of canonical texts, acquires much importance in the second part of Meyer’s book.

Entitled “The Canon and Its Discontents: Palimpsestic Re-Inscriptions in Schami, Özdamar, and Zaimoglu,” this second part comprises four analytical chapters, in which the author examines the works of the authors cited above, while trying to answer her initial questions: “What models, what figures of identification do they choose? By contrast, which authors do they choose to differentiate themselves from and why? How do they affirm their adherence to their national culture? How do they signal their difference?” (2). In this context, Meyer devotes two chapters – number four and five – to Özdamar.

For those readers who do not know the authors dealt with and their publications, Meyer first provides biographical information as well as a description of their works. She also usefully summarizes the content of the canonical texts alluded to. Accordingly, the relationships between

the originals and the ways in which they are transposed, continued, commented upon or rewritten become much clearer. However, Meyer here again fails to explain the rationale for her choice of corpus. She provides enlightening close reading analyses, especially in her sections on Özdamar and Zaimoglu. In chapters four, five and six, she often analyzes and quotes parts of their works, which she refrains from doing to the same extent when examining Schami's *oeuvre*. Moreover, Chapter four remains too descriptive, a feature which could have been alleviated through concrete analytical allusions to passages from the text. Each chapter is rounded off with a welcome brief "conclusion" offering an overview of previous discussions.

The three authors Meyer concentrates on mobilize and re-semanticize canonical (German) texts in creative and often also subversive ways. As they challenge the institutions which continue to treat them as outsiders, their works take on political dimensions. They help readers to understand the self and the image of the other, thus promoting a new outlook on well-known authors and their literary production. For Schami, Özdamar and Zaimoglu – as for other postcolonial authors – this revision of the canon finds its source in a reinterpretation of history. As such, it constitutes an act of survival, a "need to establish oneself as a subject" (26). By asserting their knowledge of the classics, these writers position themselves strategically *vis à vis* the marginal place they occupy in literature. In doing so, they legitimize themselves for the German public, while criticizing actual tendencies. For instance, Schami feels it his cultural and social duty to recount Arabia to Germans, thus broadening their understanding of their own society and culture, while rehabilitating the traditional culture of his native region (89). This attitude entails a renegotiation of the writers' relationship to the nation they now belong to, one predicated on challenging and rewriting its foundational literary works. While Meyer refers to "re-writing" or "re-evaluating" canonical texts, the authors considered in this volume also seem to look for protective ancestors or guardians in these well-known texts, as is the case for Brecht in Özdamar's work. Indeed, in the different works that have been analyzed, one can observe a broad spectrum ranging from appropriation based on adhesion to shared values to a form of resistance implying an attack by marginalized authors against hegemonic power. In this sense, these writers' approach to the canon could be viewed as a form of "writing with" or "writing back."

All in all, this monograph perfectly fits the mandate of the de Gruyter series “Culture and Conflict,” in which it is published, as it indeed evidences the profound link between canon and conflict. Keeping literature and discussion about it alive, Meyer’s analyses and methodological choices will certainly inspire scholars to further engage with works by other “minorities” – e.g. women, gays, lesbians, etc... – through a similar theoretical prism. If efforts to avoid thinking merely in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ thus continue unabated, a new canon might eventually emerge.