

Review: Stefan Hermes, *“Fahrten nach Südwest”: Die Kolonialkriege gegen die Herero und Nama in der deutschen Literatur (1904-2004)*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2009.

Stefan Hermes' *“Fahrten nach Südwest”* provides an overview and critical analysis of German (i.e., published first in Germany) prose texts that appeared in the ten decades between 1904 and 2004, and that have in one way or another – with varying ideological underpinnings – approached the conflicts and actual wars between *Kaiserdeutsche* imperialists and the Herero and Nama peoples respectively which took place between 1904 and 1908. Taking into account (and sometimes challenging) the previously published monographic studies of this kind by Jörg Wassink, Thomas Keil and most recently Medardus Brehl,¹ Hermes' book satisfies and mostly convinces the informed reader with its immense knowledge of the state of the art in the respective areas of criticism. The methodical set-up of

“Fahrten nach Südwest” and the degree to which it ventures in a new direction in an admittedly intensively researched field may therefore justify the verdict that this is an ambitious, extremely detailed and, as far as the aforementioned abundant research is concerned, absolutely awesome, if not necessarily groundbreaking, contribution to the analysis of Germany-related colonial and post-colonial literature.

Hermes subdivides his subject of study into three historical epochs. The narratives he examines comprise, first, the colonial period itself which lasted until 1915; second the ensuing period from the Weimar Republic – and the revisionist examples of topic-related literature produced in that time – to the end of the Third Reich; third and finally the post-war era after 1945 which is characterized by, initially, a temporal split of the country into two states (the communist DDR and the capitalist BRD), and then the re-unification of both political units, or states, after 1989. The scholar analyses two major literary works from the first period: Friedrich Meister's *Muhérero riKárerera!* which was published as early as 1904 and, more extensively due to the immense popularity at the time of its publication, Gustav Frenssen's *Peter Moors Fahrt nach Südwest* (1906). He claims that Meister's narrative presents the genocidally infested German-Herero-war as a mere background to an otherwise decidedly “adventurous tale” that bears no great importance, formally speaking, to the furthering of either radical political agendas, nor to the formal development of the art of novelistic writing: “All in all the Herero war in

¹ Thomas Keil, *Die postkoloniale deutsche Literatur in Namibia (1920–2000)*, Univ. Stuttgart, Diss., 2003; Jörg Wassink, *Auf den Spuren des deutschen Völkermordes in Südwestafrika. Der Herero-/ Nama-Aufstand in der deutschen Kolonialliteratur. Eine literarhistorische Analyse*, München, Martin Meidenbauer, 2004; Medardus Brehl, *Vernichtung der Herero. Diskurse der Gewalt in der deutschen Kolonialliteratur*, Paderborn, Fink, 2007. Other, more dated monographs worth mentioning here are Joachim Warmbold's *Deutsche Kolonial-Literatur. Aspekte ihrer Eigenart und Wirkung, dargestellt am Beispiel Afrikas* of 1982 (Univ. Basel, Diss.), and Sibylle Benninghof-Lühl's *Deutsche Kolonialromane 1884-1914 in ihrem Entstehungs- und Wirkungszusammenhang* (Bremen, Übersee-Museum, 1983).

Muhénero rikárerá! serves in many long passages as an almost randomly selected backdrop for an entertaining adventure novel” (p. 37).² By contrast, the evaluation of Frenssen’s novella contains more elements that deserve a closer look. Hence *Peter Moors Fahrt nach Südwest* seems to observe, on the one hand, a number of formal requirements of “literary modernism” (p. 86 f.) and thus may be tied up with what Hermes prefers to call (and entitles his chapter as) “colonial modernism”. If this is reminiscent of certain advanced writing modes of the time, Frenssen’s tale, mainly focalized as it is through private Peter Moor’s perspective, is on the other hand characterized by a general justification of an ultimately genocidal war: racism here turns into an eliminatory attitude, and is at the same time in line with tenets that stem from the discourse of social Darwinism. According to Hermes “the understanding of history which underlies the novel is characterised by the central background of modern thinking” which from today’s perspective may appear perplexing and unacceptable. Viewed from then, 1906 passim, however, “Frenssen’s design for a different modernity in which all ‘valueless life’ was to be totally annihilated” was indeed a token of radical racist up-to-dateness (p. 73).³ A nice appendix and

² “Insgesamt fungiert der ‘Hererokrieg’ in *Muhénero rikárerá!* über weite Strecken als beinahe beliebiger Rahmen, in dem eine unterhaltsame Abenteuer Geschichte erzählt wird.”

³ “ist das dem Roman unterlegte Geschichtsverständnis durch zentrale Versatzstücke modernen Denkens geprägt”, “Frenssens Entwurf einer ‚anderen Moderne‘, in der allem ‚unwerten Leben‘ die vollständige Annihilierung bevorsteht”

at the same time a small (and well-deserved) re-discovery of the literary writings of Franz Jung, Hermes finishes the “Koloniale Moderne” part of the study with a short analysis of Jung’s short story “Morenga” of 1913. The scholar concludes “that Jung’s Marxist oriented interpretation of the ‘Herero War’ implicitly places the African resistance fighters on the same level as the economically underprivileged in Europe” (p. 94)⁴, and thus cleverly kills two birds with one stone: he brings in a counterpoise to the conventional conservative, sometimes even right-wing attitudes or tokens of what Brehl somewhat nebulously names the “socio-cultural knowledge”⁵ of the time that speaks from Frenssen’s novella, drawing thus a more balanced and representative picture of the literary output of the Kaiserreich, and he paves the way for his later analysis of other, likewise Marxist inspired narratives ‘made in G.D.R.’

Undoubtedly the most widely known literary text of the next period, the one covering the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, is Hans Grimm’s *Volk ohne Raum* of 1926. Hermes intelligently lays bare the major difference between the bestselling book of the previous period, Frenssen’s *Peter Moor*, and Grimm’s immensely popular 1300-pager. While the most strongly ventilated discourse of the first is that of a scarcely veiled biopolitical radicalism and eliminatory

⁴ “dass Jungs marxistisch orientierte Interpretation des ‚Hererokrieges‘ die afrikanischen Widerstandskämpfer den ökonomisch Unterprivilegierten in Europa implizit gleichstellt”

⁵ “sozio-kulturelle Wissen”, see Brehl, *Vernichtung*: 52 ff.

racism, *Volk ohne Raum* is informed by geopolitical spacism: “The argument inherent in Peter Moor’s *Fahrt nach Südwest* is founded on a predominantly ‘racist’ rather than ‘spatial’ social Darwinism and thus the view of the ‘blacks’ who are portrayed as both biologically and culturally inferior, is one which is supposed to justify their extermination. Opposing this the focus in Grimm’s work is on the presumed overpopulation at home which has made colonial expansion indispensable” (p. 119).⁶

Diametrically opposed to the discourses that pervade Frenssen’s and Grimm’s respective narratives, which after all have in common the aggressive momentum of literally displacing the allegedly inferior cultural Other by means of extermination, Kurt Reck-Reichert propagates a renaissance of seemingly outdated, old-fashioned ideas. Surprisingly so, given the date of publication (1938), *Kampf um Südwest* exposes an “orientation towards a Christian missionary and in part cultural missionary perception of colonialism” as such revives “ways of thinking which dominated (not only) the German discourses on the treatment of the ‘natives’ in the late 19th century”

⁶ “Die Peter Moors Fahrt nach Südwest inhärente Argumentation gründet auf einem überwiegend ‘rassisch’ statt ‘räumlich’ ausgerichteten Sozialdarwinismus, und somit ist es der Blick auf die als biologisch wie kulturell minderwertig entworfenen ‘Schwarzen’, der deren Ausrottung rechtfertigen soll. Demgegenüber liegt der Fokus bei Grimm auf der vermeintlichen Überbevölkerung der Heimat, die eine koloniale Expansion unabdingbar macht.”

(p. 135).⁷ Adolf Kaempffer’s *Das harte Brot* of 1939 shares some of the discourses that Reck-Reichert includes in his novel, “but in contrast to him does not returning to Christian morality and not mentioning the difficult area of interethnic sexual contact” (p. 144).⁸ The mentioning of cross-racial sexual contacts indicates the comprehensive list of topics which Hermes’ study covers (others include the degree to which the events, historically authentic as they are, get focalized by fictitious representatives of the Nama or Herero people; the role of technological gadgets such as machine guns, canons and communications infrastructure; the depiction of other European nations involved in the imperial race for colonies, etc.). Kaempffer’s attempt to link up to the prevalent discourses of National Socialism touches on yet another item: anti-semitism. In the end and after a valuable digression to Kaempffer’s utopian tale *Das erste Jahr* (1940), Hermes concludes however that the novelist’s “handing down of Wilhelmine perception of colonialism could not in the end be made to correspond to the ‘Weltanschauung’ of the new state” (p. 157).⁹

⁷ “Orientierung an einem christlich-missionarischen und zum Teil kulturmissionarischen Kolonialismusverständnis”, “Denkmuster, die im späten 19. Jahrhundert (nicht nur) des deutschen Diskurs um die Behandlung der ‘Eingeborenen’ dominierten”

⁸ “rekurriert aber anders als dieser nicht auf christliche Wertvorstellungen und schweigt zum heiklen Thema interethnischer Sexualkontakte”

⁹ “tradiertes, dem Zeitalter des Wilhelmismus verhaftetes Kolonialismusverständnis mit der ‘Weltanschauung’ des ‘neuen Staates’ letzten Endes nicht in Übereinstimmung zu bringen war”

The post-World-War-II section entitled “Der kritische Blick zurück” has in parts already appeared in the previous volume of this journal.¹⁰ The author had for the publication of this article excerpted the chapters about G.D.R. narratives. This means that he has omitted his analysis of that postcolonial narrative by a F.R.G. writer which the majority of critics – Hermes included – consider the most challenging formally, yet also most rewarding novel that has been written in German about the Empire’s colonial wars in Southwest Africa: Uwe Timm’s *Morenga* from 1978. The G.D.R. novels discussed here are Ferdinand May’s astonishingly early (1962) critical examination of the colonial topic, *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika*, and the last of Dietmar Beetz’s Pieter Willem Hendrik Koopgaard trilogy, *Flucht vom Waterberg* from 1989. Always keeping in mind the discourses that rule and determine the respective societal climates and thus adding a truly diachronic perspective to Brehl’s notoriously Kaiserreich-centered and therefore synchronic endeavour, Hermes introduces Lenin’s colonialism-related positions (p. 160) before he goes on to describe how May, as does Beetz in part, delineate their central characters as eventually victorious black resistance fighters (“Helden des Widerstands” p. 166) or, in the case of Koopgaard, as by themselves ethnically hybrid combatants in an early 20th century Southern African version of class struggle. The driving forces behind the insurrections

¹⁰ Stefan Hermes, “Looking back critically: Representations of the ‘Herero War’ in novels of the GDR (Ferdinand May, Dietmar Beetz)”, *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 5, 2009: 73-98.

of the Nama and Herero peoples are thus well in line with Marxist-Leninist assumptions: “Just as in *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* exclusively economic reasons seem to have provided the impulse for the decision of the Africans to rise against their oppressors in *Flucht vom Waterberg*.[...] In accordance with the materialistic doctrine of history and the expropriation theory which derives from it, it is the business practices of unscrupulous capitalists which deny the natives, who are more or less living a proto-communist society [...], the means to survive” (p. 216).¹¹

Timm’s novel emerges as still the non plus ultra of the surprisingly numerous literary approaches to the issue, avoiding taking explicit sides as it does, but representing the enormous complexity of positions which could back then – and can from a today’s perspective – be taken: the German colonizers are for instance depicted as divided in the question of whether one should exterminate the opponents right away, or exploit them as slave labour (p. 201 f.). By the same token Timm’s strict refusal to focalise the events through the eyes of a representative figure of the ‘culturally other’ Nama or Herero peoples opens up a wide variety of interpretations – and sometimes

¹¹ “Wie schon in *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* scheinen auch in *Flucht vom Waterberg* ausschließlich ökonomische Gründe den Ausschlag für den Entschluss der Afrikaner gegeben zu haben, sich gegen ihre Unterdrücker zu erheben. [...] Gemäß einer materialistischen Geschichtsdoktrin und der sich aus ihr ableitenden Expropriationstheorie sind es die Geschäftspraktiken skrupellose Kapitalisten, die den gleichsam ‘urkommunistisch’ lebenden ‚Eingeborenen [...] die Lebensgrundlage entziehen.“

speculation – about their exact positioning and ethnically encoded manners of grasping the world or, for that matter, their attitude towards the armed conflicts with those that have invaded their native territories. Thus Timm makes his protagonist figure Gottschalk as well as the reader realize and experience, in a paradoxically successful way, that any attempt undertaken by German colonizers of going native – of becoming a hybrid – must fail. This, however, may be an achievement in its own right, (189). “because through the aesthetic of the hybrid, which can be made out on the discourse level, the phenomenon of ‘interbreeding’ which is settled on the level of history is implicitly accorded a positive evaluation” (p. 189).¹²

According to Hermes, Uwe Timm’s narrative towers in such a way over any other simply historical or heavily theory-inspired postcolonial novel that it seems virtually impossible for any more recent narrative to stand a chance against *Morenga’s* aesthetic valour and intelligently conceived formal setup. It comes as no great surprise, therefore, that Gerhard Seyfried’s 2003 novel *Herero* does not, in the scholar’s eyes, match the standards set by Timm. Hermes’ bashing of the surprisingly successful narrative, published as it was a century after the genocidal events at the Waterberg battlefield, pivots on the ostensible “mental primitiveness” (p. 235)¹³ and

¹² “Denn durch die auf der Ebene des Discours vorherrschende Ästhetik des Hybriden erfahren auch die auf der Ebene der Histoire angesiedelten Phänomene der ‘Vermischung’ implizit eine positive Bewertung”

¹³ “geistige Primitivität”

deficient mastery of the German language, finagled by an obviously likewise naive narrator-cum-author, who speaks for the occasionally focalizing Herero representatives, or the all too easy explanation that the war was mainly a result of General Lothar von Trotha’s innate ruthlessness (see p. 244, where Hermes draws a parallel to certain post-fascist attempts to put the entire blame for the lost Second World War on Hitler). Other, competing narratives of the early 21st century do not actually perform any better, though, as the final survey of Stephan Wackwitz’s *Ein unsichtbares Land* (2003) and Christof Hamann’s *Fester* (2003) demonstrate. If any narrative other than those by the long-since canonized U.S. novelist Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (1963) and *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), it is Andrea Paluch and Robert Habeck’s *Der Schrei der Hyänen* (2004) which not only proves that “German novels on colonial subjects which refrain from unreflected exoticism do exist” (p. 255)¹⁴, but actually meets best the numerous other standards which, ever since Timm’s book, must be expected from an aesthetically satisfactory, contemporary literary approach to this particular topic.

As can be seen from this short overview of the content of the monograph under review here, it confronts the reader with some, but on closer inspection not all too much truly fresh, unconventional or otherwise innovative interpretative output. This has in parts to do with the

¹⁴ “deutsche Romane mit kolonialem Sujet existieren, die sich eines unreflektierten Exotismus enthalten”

selection of the primary literature: Hermes' focus is clearly on the canonized and strongly-researched list of 'usual suspects' from Frenssen to Seyfried which, besides, is in the case of *Volk ohne Raum* a not unproblematic choice, given that Grimm hardly mentions the colonial wars that are after all highlighted in the study's title. The shorter digressions about Franz Jung's „Morenga“ or Adolf Kampffer's utopian narrative *Der erste Tag*, uncanonized literary texts as they are, figure as welcome exceptions to this rule and as such do bring in a whiff of fresh air. As far as one can see, there are at least two more reasons for the overall impression that this is an immensely comprehensive and, as far as the consulted secondary literature is concerned, absolutely comprehensive, yet with regard to new insights not necessarily over-abundant study.

First, the methodological structure – at first sight a refreshingly eclectic mix of various currently accepted models, Hermes himself calls it (19) “a certain degree of methodical compilation” (p. 19)¹⁵ – seems to impede, at the end of the day, the desired new grasp of the topic. The mix includes elements of postcolonial theory, a set of assumptions that is presently booming in the English culture and literature departments, but has for various (and sometimes good) reasons not yet found its way to the neighbouring Institutes of German Studies. It includes discourse analysis in its classical Foucauldian understanding, i.e., with an interest in

the (15) “the way in which texts participate in the relevant political and scientific discourses at the time they were written” (p. 15)¹⁶ – examples of this have been mentioned: colonial missionary or blatantly eliminatory fascist as well as, later, Leninist ‘discourses.’ Finally, the study's methodology is indebted to a more “traditional philological approach” (p. 19)¹⁷ that strives to classify the primary texts generically and analyses them with tools and models from modern, Genette-inspired narratology. Especially the outspokenly text-descriptive narratological share and the more culture-interpretative, explanatory frames from postcolonial theory and discourse analysis turn out to be somewhat strange bedfellows rather than usefully combinable and mutually illuminating items. The presence or absence of heterodiegetic narrators, omniscient or (un-)reliable ones as well as the respective modes of focalization (zero focalization? Focalizations ‘through the eyes and perception’ of Nama and Herero figures?) does not necessarily help to substantiate how, and to which degree a historically specific discursive atmosphere enters (or not) the literary texts. By the same token, the narratological typologies achieve little more than a descriptive paraphrasing of that feature which postcolonial criticism singles out interpretatively, as a more than questionable ‘borrowing’ of an indigenous perspective by, as here, (post-)colonial writers from the Metropolis.

¹⁵ “Ein gewisser Grad an methodischer Kompilation”

¹⁶ “Art und Weise, in der die Texte an zu ihrer Entstehungszeit relevanten politischen und wissenschaftlichen Diskursen partizipieren”

¹⁷ “traditionelleren philologischen Ansatz”

Second and as said before, the study positions itself in a contested and intensively researched field. Hermes can only justify his selection of primary texts as well as his methodical approach with difficulty. Sure enough, Thomas Keil's monograph deals with postcolonial texts in German, i.e. those that were only published after the colonial period was over in 1915 that do not, as Hermes' selection of texts, focus on the colonial wars between the German *Schutztruppe* and the Nama or Herero. And sure enough again, Jörg Wassink's book-length investigation restricts itself only to colonial literature in German, analysing it moreover with a theoretically challengeable frame of analysis, as Hermes justly points out (p. 14). While Keil and Wassink thus cover the entire period from the historical events themselves which stand in the centre of Hermes' study, too, it may be argued that their respective theoretical framework is too different from the mix propagated in *"Fahrten nach Südwest"* (and perhaps not strong enough to yield substantial results) to rival with Hermes's endeavour. The rivalry does exist and the challenge is posed, however, in Medardus Brehl's 2007 *Vernichtung der Herero*. For in Brehl's case, it is not only the selection of primary texts that coincides – somewhat against its claim to focus on colonial literature alone – with the one undertaken by Hermes, but also the choice of theory/method: "Diskurse der Gewalt in der deutschen Kolonialliteratur" (thus the subtitle) is likewise an in-depth investigation in the 'discourse analysis' kind of style. Hermes' study thus appears to be somewhat cornered by Brehl's as

the numerous references to the academic precursor's book indicate, complemented as they often are with either a gesture of recognition – "Brehl's worthy work" (p. 14)¹⁸ – or modest opposition, e.g. "Thus Medardus Brehl's remark that all the Herero in *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* have been made 'proletarians polished black' is too much of a generalisation" (p. 175).¹⁹

In summing up, Stefan Hermes has produced a valuable contribution in a strongly contested field of research which succeeds in leaving no stone unturned as far as the existing secondary literature is concerned, and which looks at the primary texts it has selected through the deliberately motley prism of various, not always commensurate theoretical models. Due to this approach, not unprecedented as it is, the output comes across as predictable, repeating certain tenets with a sometimes apodictic and normative tone. Opinions of other scholars appear more than once "alienating" ("befremdlich") or "absurd" in the rigorous eyes of the scholar while one may, with a similar rigor, argue that it is likewise strange for a scholar investigating this extensively investigated field of literature not to strike off, as far as the selection of primary material and methods are concerned, in a really new – that is: strictly unprecedented – direction.

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¹⁸ "Brehls verdienstvolle Arbeit"

¹⁹ "Insofern generalisiert die Bemerkung Medardus Brehls, der zufolge alle Herero in *Sturm über Südwest-Afrika* 'zu schwarz lackierten Proletariern' gemacht werden, doch zu sehr"