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Owen Evans. *Mapping the Contours of Oppression: Subjectivity, Truth and Fiction in Recent German Autobiographical Treatments of Totalitarianism.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006. xi + 356 pp. $100.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-420-1719-1.

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Autobiography against Adversity

The autobiographical genre has fallen in and out of critical favor many times over the course of the two hundred or so years of its existence. At times its authors were accused of being too focused on themselves and of not having anything substantial to say; at other times the autobiographies of "great men" were criticized for being too preoccupied with history from above. Autobiographies have been lauded for contributing to the self-understanding of a nation; then again their writers were chastised for being merely individualistic. The last thirty or more years of autobiography scholarship mirror these ups and downs to some degree. Initially, scholars focused considerable energies on distinguishing the genre from its fictional counterparts, especially the *Bildungsroman.* Moving beyond genre and canon-oriented scholarship, critics then shifted attention to the autobiographical texts of specific groups, most notably members of the working class and women. For the past decade or so, inquiries driven and shaped by the autobiographers' identities have lost some of their appeal in favor of approaches that are encompassing rather than delimiting, treating the by now classical identity categories of gender and class, race, and sexuality as one aspect among several. Gradually, the emphasis on truth, which has governed both the popular and critical reception of autobiographies from the genre's inception in the eighteenth century, has subsided and shifted to issues of textual analysis, the confluence of fact and fiction, and the blurring of generic and artistic boundaries. Most recently literature scholars' interest in memory and its complex workings has given new impetus to the study of autobiography.

Owen Evan's book about German autobiographies written in response to twentieth-century totalitarianism, which refers to Nazism and to GDR socialism, is an example of this development away from strict genre definitions and identity politics toward an interest in memory and its representation in literature. In his study, he discusses the autobiographical works of Ludwig Harig (*Weh dem, der aus der Reihe tanzt* [1990]), Uwe Saeger (*Die Nacht danach und der Morgen* [1991]), Ruth KlÃ¼ger (*weiter leben* [1992]), GÃ¼nter de Bruyn (*Zwischenbilanz* [1992] and *Vierzig Jahre: Ein Lebensbericht* [1996]), GÃ¼nter Kunert (*Erwachsenenspiele* [1997]), Christoph Hein (*Von allem Anfang an* [1997]), Grete Weil (*Leb ich denn, wenn andere leben* [1998]) and Monika Maron

(*Pawels Briefe* [1999]). The list makes clear that genre definitions are applied loosely, and that the divide between novel and autobiography, fiction and fact, is deliberately permeable. All of these texts were published in the 1990s, suggesting that the time of their publication plays an important role in how these life stories are presented. It is Evans' aim to show that, despite many claims to the contrary, autobiography still has an important role to play in the age of postmodernism. In detailed analyses he shows that all of these texts combine fact and fiction, and, furthermore, that they all, in different ways, helped their writers sustain and assert a sense of self against experiences of oppression that stifled individuality and, in the cases of Ruth KlÃ¼ger and Grete Weil, threatened the writer's life. Some texts, most notably Maron's *Pawels Briefe* but also Kunert's *Erwachsenenspiele*, recount lives lived under two totalitarian regimes. Evans' careful interpretations of the individual texts are informative and engage productively with existing criticism. His readings not only advance our understanding of the autobiographical text in question but also place it into the context of the writer's work and life, stressing the important yet varying meanings of family, language and *Heimat* in these accounts. Each chapter stands on its own, and, depending on whether one wants to learn more about a specific author and text or is interested in the larger argument about autobiographical writing in the aftermath of totalitarianism, the book is insightful in its entirety but also in its parts.

For theoretical background and foundation Evans relies heavily on the work of Paul John Eakin, a distinguished scholar who has been publishing on the subject of autobiography since the mid-1980s and has, over time, developed and refined his argument that autobiography should not be read for its truthfulness but rather for the ways in which it constructs lives through story telling and writing. Autobiography, Eakin argues, is relational, which is to say that the autobiographical subject is not an autonomous self but, rather, a subject defined by its relationships to others. Evans returns to the work of Eakin time and again throughout his study, showing its pertinence for the texts analyzed in this volume.

Evans, who is neither interested in coming up with yet another genre definition nor trying to determine the truth content of the individual narrative, treats the eight authors and nine autobiographies under consideration as separate texts whose common thread is the author's use of autobiography as therapy of sorts and as coping strategy. Whether the text is as seemingly non-committal as Kunert's *Erwachsenenspiele*, as highly fictionalized as Hein's *Von allem Anfang an*, as provocative as KlÃ¼ger's *weiter leben*, or as focused on family relationships as Maron's *Pawels Briefe*, Evans argues that all of these autobiographies bear witness to the oppression their authors experienced and that they deploy the writer's subjectivity as an antidote to the threat to individualism, and, in the case of Ruth KlÃ¼ger and Grete Weil, to the writer's life. This is, of course, a feature of autobiography that one finds in other contexts as well, in particular with women autobiographers who assert their subjectivity in environments that do not credit women with individual identity. Evans's study illustrates that totalitarianism could not destroy the enlightenment notion of individualism and that postmodernism may have refined our understanding of subjectivity but has not fundamentally called the concept into question.

Evans preempts the predictable objection against equating National Socialism and GDR-style socialism through his use and definition of the term totalitarianism. He refers, among others, to the work of historian Michael Burleigh, who argues that both systems have in common a "fundamental psychology" (p. 15) that oppressed individualism. From the authors' need to assert individualism under pressure derives, according to Evans, an authenticity that runs through all texts, whether they are traditional autobiographical accounts or novels with autobiographical content. Historians or political scientists might take issue with this shift away from political structures to their psychological effects, but for autobiography scholars, based on the evidence presented here, this is a convincing move. Evans' study seeks to rehabilitate autobiography in the age of postmodernism both against the plethora of trivial autobiographies that have flooded the market in the past decade and against the assumption that truth, or, in his preferred term, authenticity, no longer matters. His choice of texts that respond to Germany's two twentieth-century totalitarian regimes ground his argument in a historical weightiness that is hard to argue with. Evans' carefully crafted and well researched study raises the questions about whether or not individuality, at the end of the twentieth century, needs adversity to assert itself.

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