

*Critique Today:
The University and Literature around 1968**

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Berlin has become *the* German place of remembrance for 1968. In other cities, too, students, artists, and professors rose up against authoritarian ways of life and institutions, pointing to the “fascism” of the Nazi period that their parents wished to repress. But remembrance likes the beauty of appearances, and the revolt in Berlin was initially colored by something unreal and playful, a counterpoint led to its conclusion, something both bounded and experimental. This something was lost between 1967 and 1969, though it was even less present outside of Berlin, perhaps because of the delay with which the revolt spread beyond the city. The “fictive element of Berlin” of which Hans Magnus Enzensberger spoke lay within a temporary delimitation of its space—perhaps, and paradoxically so, because paths were especially short within the politically imposed limits of West Berlin.¹ In this Berlin, one single large public sphere arose for a short period of time in a tight space. Berlin could become, in its remembrance, a symbol for “1968” precisely because the politicization of social spaces dominated the kinds of thinking that would abolish old borders. The great auditorium of the Free University of Berlin, called “Audimax” for short, became the paradigmatic symbol of this “Berlin.” It was an agora, a public space in which students and poets, professors, revolutionaries, and politicians met: Erich Fried, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Reinhard Lettau, Peter Schneider, F. C. Delius, and Horst Christoph Buch were often seen here. Neither before nor after this time did a university auditorium acquire such importance. The old boundary between the university and the outside world seemed to have been suspended.

I would like also to begin, however, with a second observation. Hardly ever in history did literature, a certain literature, inspire so much trust in its power to change things as it did in the years around 1968. It was admitted into public space. This trust created a demand that authors met in different ways. The young poets of the revolt were not the first engaged authors of the Left. They were preceded

* Translated by Michael Thomas Taylor.

1. Christoph König, “Berliner Gemeinplätze,” in *Protest! Literatur um 1968* (Marbach: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1998), pp. 87–180.

by writers who mostly attended meetings of the Gruppe 47, including Günter Grass and Alfred Andersch. But these engaged, older writers were soon joined by younger individuals who saw a positive future exclusively in terms of a revolutionary change of society in the Federal Republic. Enzensberger was certainly the smartest and most prominent among them. The authors of the Gruppe 47, by contrast, were politically engaged as *citizens*—for example, in the 1965 election campaign for the Social Democratic Party. But they separated *how* they wrote from their political activities. When Hans Mayer equated good literature with engaged literature, as he did at the meeting of the Gruppe 47 in 1966 in Princeton, he was greeted with laughter. Today, we know from Grass's example that his style derived from the attempt to remain elegantly silent about his own brown history—precisely in order to maintain his *political* freedom of action. To me, this seems to be the basic meaning of his recently published autobiography, *Peeling the Onion*.² The truth that strove to come to light in Grass's novels for the very reason that they were—as literary works—personal was not meant to interfere with the author's politics. That is why Grass integrated his resistance to the truth into the works themselves. But Enzensberger and those like him wanted to join theory and practice: literature should itself be political action. Their position, which they shared with the raging students, was sworn to serve reason and argumentation. Among their icons was Theodor W. Adorno, against whose theory they ultimately—and theoretically—developed their aesthetics. Something else should also be mentioned: instances of spontaneous, subversive, often playful actions without any further theoretical justification that occasionally demanded aesthetic dignity as action. These were associated with the name of Dieter Kunzelmann, among others, as well as with the American underground poetry that was often read and imitated in Germany. The wit of action thus conversely found its way into poetry.

Literature provided options that its interpreters exploited. As author and editor, Enzensberger joined two central options of the time in a kind of “double bind.” These correspond to his roles as editor and poet: on the one hand, analysis under the pull of Marxism; and on the other, hope for a flash of critical insight. Especially in his role as an editor, Enzensberger was also an author; he documented analyses and composed documents so that their sense came to light in the composition. This is the *raison d'être* for the journal *Das Kursbuch*, which Enzensberger began editing in 1965. This journal quickly became the most important publication in the protest movement. “The journal,” one reads in a leaflet, “is open to new prose and poetry,”³ but where literary mediation fails the *Kursbuch* will try to grasp the immediate precipitation of realia: in protocols, evaluations,

2. Christoph König, *Häme als literarisches Verfahren: Günter Grass, Walter Jens und die Mühen des Erinnerns* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2008).

3. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Ankündigung einer neuen Zeitschrift,” *Kursbuch* 1 (1965), p. 2.

reports, files, polemical and unpolemical discussions. The hope of the *monteur* expresses itself in these lines: if the right things have been brought together, then this montage creates a "moment . . . unrevised and enigmatic, about which I could not say what it means." In such instants, the sense of this tumult of paper can nevertheless reveal itself. But the montage gains truth only under certain circumstances. The artist wants to protest and only uses materials that themselves sustain forms of protest. Via these materials, the artist stands in direct connection with the revolutionary movement, and it is the order of this movement that guarantees the truth of poetic meaning. Enzensberger thus collected documents of others that have a particular *orientation*—a critical orientation, which should spare him the task of writing an explicit commentary.

Berlin as a place of remembrance and literature as a form of political practice were thus closely aligned in 1968. The spatial opening for which this Berlin still stands expresses a conviction shared by scholars and poets—a theoretical position or thought that demands, as it becomes clear, to be critically interrogated. The question that I would like to pose, and from the perspective of the present, is of a scientific-theoretical nature: Which institutional and methodological paths are necessary to preserve the critical potential of literary criticism, especially while maintaining distance from the creativity of critical poets, which is a creativity that principally overwhelms critical reflection and thus founds a form of aesthetic reflection that goes beyond philosophy? Or, to put it more precisely, how did literary criticism take up the options of "analysis" and "instantaneousness" that Enzensberger practiced? How can these paths be continued into the present? This question concerns the university's understanding of itself and the poetics practiced by scholars.

From its conception, the German university was opposed to the sphere of politics. In accordance with the Protestant doctrine of two kingdoms, which allows the prince to be reprimanded from the safety of the pulpit by the very pastor whom he pays, the university always understood itself to be an autonomous institution, whose independence from politics is threatened only when its own members renounce the scientifically required distance from both politics and their own values. Yet almost all the professors in the Nazi period did just this, thereby creating the impression that the institution was itself socially dependent.⁴

By contrast, examples such as that of Walther Rehm—a Germanist who began teaching in Freiburg under the Nazis—show that not much happened to scholars who remained unruly and criticized those in power, as long as they were not Jewish. Yet the university could be a protective space. In 1968, the necessary boundary between science and politics became truly blurred, and willfully so. The

4. For more information, cf. *Internationales Germanistenlexikon 1800–1950*, ed. and intro. Christoph König, 3 vols. and CD-ROM (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003).

Nazi past of university fathers was brought to light, but inasmuch as the students believed the university to be dependent upon the forces of capital, they thought that university reform could take place only as sociopolitical reform, meaning that the mere politicization of the university would solve all problems. In this, they agreed with the politicized poets and scholars of the day. Within the Free University of Berlin, the AStA, or General Student Committee, sought to create a so-called “critical university” with the aim of “intensifying political practice”⁵ that would reflect the political function of poetic, cultural, or disciplinary knowledge. This did not sit well with most professors: the conservative reactionaries did not like it because they did not want to see their values exposed; the liberal-progressive professors did not like it because they saw the only possibility of improving their science to lie in a critique of knowledge, and this meant in the best sense a *historical* critique of knowledge. A transfer of democratic procedures to the university seemed all too simple, because the students lacked the knowledge necessary for scholarly discourse.

In this situation, there was a professor who raised his voice—a professor who was born in 1929 to an assimilated Jewish family in Budapest but barely avoided being murdered by National Socialists in escaping to Switzerland, where he studied in Zurich after the war; a professor who did not come from within the institution, though he had directed the Institute for General and Comparative Literature at the Free University since 1965. His name was Peter Szondi.⁶ In his Institute, he hung a poster that read: “Egoism. Asked what he thinks of the ‘Critical University,’ Professor S. responded: ‘A lot. That’s why I’ll do it myself.’” Szondi’s goal was to create an institutional position within the institution of the university that would avoid understanding itself in terms of the institution. He might have imagined a *writing desk* rather than an institute. Szondi’s “egoism” is theoretically anchored in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this enlightened sense, Szondi understands comparative literary criticism as a discipline that would dissolve itself. In principle, this would be an ideal discipline for him: “Anyone who for himself ignores the boundaries that have been passed down by traditional philologies and thus contributes to the abolition of comparative criticism does, on his own account, just what the discipline invited him to do in the first place.”⁷

5. Cf. König, “Berliner Gemeinplätze,” p. 153.

6. Cf. *Telos* 140 (Fall 2007), a special issue on *Peter Szondi and Critical Hermeneutics*. For a general introduction, see Christoph König, *Engführungen: Peter Szondi und die Literatur* (*Marbacher Magazin* 108), 2nd rev. ed. (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schiller Gesellschaft, 2005). For Szondi’s political statements concerning the university, see *Peter Szondi. Über eine “Freie (d.h. freie) Universität”: Stellungnahmen eines Philologen*, ed. Jean Bollack et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973).

7. König, *Engführungen*, p. 77.

On July 7, 1967, Adorno delivered, on the invitation of Peter Szondi, a lecture entitled "On the Classicism of Goethe's *Iphigenie*."⁸ In a sketch for the lecture, one reads: "Form shifts into the center as medium in order to do justice to civilization. Against what is raw."⁹ Adorno's classicism lecture is aimed from the beginning against that which is raw. At first sight, civilization seems to be the solution. Yet Adorno knows that forms of civilization can ossify and annihilate their original purpose of liberating the subject. He interprets classicism as a style of which the subject takes control so as to wield it against that which has ossified. This style can thus be natural, but it has no staying power because the aristocracy that formed it was a merely historical appearance: Goethe's drama rests upon this tension. Goethe thus reduces the antinomy of classicism to membership in a certain social class. Yet for Szondi, this style becomes the ethical foundation of a philological practice that, from the writing desk, turns against the Institute or the University that it has already defended against a penetrating politicization. Szondi possessed a unique style, a genre of scholarly essay, dialectically sharpened, that he himself created. Philology as a form of life. In this sense, Szondi could say to the students who wanted to interrupt Adorno's lecture: "I ask those among you, ladies and gentlemen, who don't want to hear the talk as you have announced—or more precisely, as the SDS [Socialist Student Association] recommended to you—to leave the room. After a few minutes, Professor Adorno will then speak, and he will say something about Goethe's classicism that is less classical than would ever be admitted by those who quote Mao's sayings today no differently than their grandfathers quoted the sayings of Weimar's Princes of Poetry."¹⁰

Today, the controversy surrounding 1968 reveals itself to be a disagreement about Adorno that had already begun in 1968, in which Adorno's editorial engagement for Walter Benjamin also played an important role. Criticism concentrated on Adorno's selection of texts and mistakenly recognized a devaluation of the Marxist core of Benjamin's writings in favor of those historical-theological theses of Benjamin that these same critics today take up as central. This can be traced to an understanding of Marxism held by the students, which went unrecognized at the time, according to which political action growing out of the moment sufficed. By contrast, Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* fought against a position outside

8. Theodor W. Adorno. "Zum Klassizismus von Goethes Iphigenie," in *Noten zur Literatur*, vol. 11 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4th ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996), pp. 495ff; published in English as "On the Classicism of Goethe's *Iphigenie*," in Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1992), 2:153–70.

9. Rolf Tiedemann, "'Gegen das Rohe': Ein Schema zu Adornos Vortrag 'Zum Klassizismus von Goethes Iphigenie,'" *Geschichte der Germanistik* 15/16 (1999): 64–71; here, p. 68.

10. König, "Berliner Gemeinplätze," pp. 135f.

of reason, which, as was thought at the time, could be reached spontaneously. The opposition between analysis and immediacy that Enzensberger so perceptively exploited determines the controversy regarding Adorno. For many who base their position on Benjamin, the state of emergency, theoretically bound up with the present moment, counts today as the arch-instance of critique; for them, it is the “trace”—not analysis—that shows the way. One cannot invoke Adorno to legitimize this tradition of critique. It is for this reason that the word “critique” hardly plays any role in memories of 1968. Instead, one speaks of “authenticity” (as does Klaus R. Scherpe) or “anti-differentiation” (as does Jürgen Link).¹¹

Wherein lies today the critical potential of the philologies, meaning the disciplines concerned with literature and language? How can the unsurpassable insight of 1968 into social interests and values be kept meaningful in the present, apart from stubborn ideology-critique and theology? In closing, I would like to sketch two possibilities. They concern the estimation of the institution of the university and the interpretation of literary texts.

In 1968, critique focused upon the university because it passed on social values with a devastating effect that can be seen in German history. One looked for possibilities to eliminate the power of reactionary research. Szondi could, in a way, identify with this critique, which concerned methodology as well as the construction of a canon. But the institution itself was, in the name of democratization, soon called into question. The foundation for a critique of values was thus lost, for the necessary knowledge and reflective capacity can be trained best within the protection of the institution. Two goals opposed each other: first, the aim of changing monopolies of power; and second, the hope that Szondi shared with Adorno, and which was later continued by Jean Bollack in France, for a concrete space of utopia within an autonomous university.¹² Today, of course, this usually means something completely different, namely, an institution that is independent from the state so that it can function according to economic principles. But 1968 provokes a different understanding of the university as an autonomous institution. Limits were placed upon a delimiting critique in order to make critique that much more effective. This thought must be realized today against a general consensus that does not question the institution and uncouples it from scientific work, both theoretically and practically.

Finally, literature was seen to possess a rationality that founds understanding, a hermeneutic premise. According to this position, literature owes its rationality

11. Cf. Klaus R. Scherpe, “Belles lettres/Graffiti,” and Jürgen Link, “Intensität, Entdifferenzierung, Kulturrevolution und Normalismus: Zur Spezifität der ‘Bewegung von Achtundsechzig,’” in *Belles lettres/Graffiti: Soziale Phantasien und Ausdrucksformen der Achtundsechziger*, ed. Ulrich Ott and Romann Luckscheiter (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2001), pp. 9–15 and 69–78 respectively.

12. Cf. Jean Bollack, *Sens contre sens: comment lit-on? Entretien avec Patrick Llored* (Lyon: Éditions La Passe du Vent, 2000).

to a critical analysis of the relationships structuring a capitalist society; yet of all deviations, only a critique of domination was allowed, be it profanely Marxist or melancholically engrossed in a history of catastrophes. In both cases, one diagnosed one's way through the work to arrive at an external construction. Ever since then, aesthetic critique has been emphatically expanded to mean the destruction of sense as authority. Within modernity, this position is opposed by the idea that the subject successively and rationally permeates its own world. This also belongs to the legacy of 1968. What matters now is to free the production of sense, and the critique this makes possible, from external constructions and to seek it out within an aesthetically motivated succession of ideas within the work. The thoughts themselves are thus nothing but critical acts of separation, even liberation. The unbiased perspective of interpretation necessary for such a view can be granted by the style won at the writing desk.