

# The Functionalization of the Figure of the Refugee and the Role of the *Bildungsbürgertum* in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* (2015) and Bodo Kirchoff's *Widerfahrnis* (2016)

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## Abstract

This article shows how in the novel *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* by Jenny Erpenbeck, and in Bodo Kirchoff's novella *Widerfahrnis*, the depicted fugitives are functionalized for the personal development of the protagonists. Although both texts deal with the so-called refugee crisis and the suffering of the refugees, they are still focused on established and white characters from the educated middle-class elite, who are in a personal crisis. In Erpenbeck's novel, Richard, a retired professor, tries to find his role in society and to redefine himself. Kirchoff also shows two intellectual protagonists, Reither and Leonie, who, having experienced personal losses, are looking for meaning in their lives. Through their interactions with fugitives, the characters strive to gain authority over their identity construction and self-perception. Especially for Reither and Leonie, this path to self-knowledge is part of a "coming-of-age" process, as Anne Haemig calls it in her review of the novella in the *Spiegel*. In *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen*, the African fugitives also help the protagonist Richard face his personal crisis in a phase of uncertainty. This results in a hierarchization of precarity, which puts the crisis of the protagonists in the foreground and marginalizes the suffering of the refugees. This contribution argues, however, that both texts in their reference to traditional genres such as the *Bildungsroman* and the novella, and by emphasizing tropes and clichés, ironically reflect upon the role of the *Bildungsbürgertum* in the current discourse on the refugee crisis.

**Title:** »Die Funktionalisierung der Figur des Geflüchteten und die Rolle des Bildungsbürgertums in Jenny Erpenbecks *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* (2015) und Bodo Kirchoff's *Widerfahrnis* (2016)«

**Keywords:** refugees; *Bildungsbürgertum*; Jenny Erpenbeck (\* 1967); Bodo Kirchoff (\* 1948)

Beginning in fall 2015, refugees fleeing from war and terror in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Eritrea and other countries, came to seek asylum in Europe, particularly in Germany. Angela Merkel's decision to open the borders to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015 resulted in huge controversies in German society and, indirectly, the rise of radical right-wing movements building on fear and xenophobic sentiments, and drawing on fears of ›Überfremdung‹

and the loss of a ›German Identity‹. Moreover, the idea of a German ›Leitkultur‹ became re-popularized in social, cultural, and political discourse, functioning as an ideal of German culture that needed to be defended against the ›other‹ cultures entering Germany in the form of refugees, coming as they were, and currently are, from (mostly) Islamic countries. In the fifth of Thomas de Maizière's controversial theses on the German ›Leitkultur‹, published in *Die Zeit*, aspects of education in the sense of *Bildungsbürgertum* are clearly emphasized:

Wir sind Kulturnation. Kaum ein Land ist so geprägt von Kultur und Philosophie wie Deutschland. Deutschland hat großen Einfluss auf die kulturelle Entwicklung der ganzen Welt genommen. Bach und Goethe ›gehören‹ der ganzen Welt und waren Deutsche. Wir haben unser eigenes Verständnis vom Stellenwert der Kultur in unserer Gesellschaft. [...] Kultur in einem weiten Sinne, unser Blick darauf und das, was wir dafür tun, auch das gehört zu uns. (Maizière 2017)

This draws on the idea of a German *Kulturnation*, with literature functioning as an important part of the concept. Germany's self-perception as the ›Land der Dichter und Denker‹ doubtlessly builds on ideas of a moral, cultural, artistic – and national – education (cf. also Franzel 2014: 379). *Bildung*, according to Tobias Boes, is »a central term within [the] philosophical tradition that refers to the organic and teleological growth of an individual« (Boes 2012: 4). However, Boes also states that the idea of *Bildung* is a philosophical »strateg[y] of emplotment« (ibid.: 6) and the focus on *Bildung* as part – or important factor – of a national (German) identity could thus be seen as a response to changes and turning points. The clash between the so-called educated elite and a middle class that feels left behind fuels the controversial discussions about Germany's approach to the global movements of refugees. This also leads to the question about the role of the *Bildungsbürgertum* in contemporary social and cultural discourse, in the fields of literature and cultural studies, about the so-called refugee crisis.

Two important literary contributions to the cultural engagement and discussions about refugees in German society – or, at least, two contributions interpreted and most of all marketed as such – are Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* (2015) and Bodo Kirchoff's *Widerfahrnis* (2016). Erpenbeck's text was on the shortlist for the *Deutschen Buchpreis* in the fall of 2015 and was celebrated as the »Buch der Stunde« (Schmitter 2015: 126). One year later, Bodo Kirchoff won this highly prestigious prize with his novella (cf. Platthaus 2016). Both authors are established authors and the books received a lot of attention in the German Feuilleton. Erpenbeck's text can be read as a post-retirement *Bildungsroman*, a genre that is seen as representing the classical ideal of (cultural) education and German idealism (cf. Boes 2012: 1, 4) – however, the book does not portray a young protagonist and his development, and thereby opposes traditional genre conventions and definitions. By choosing a genre that evokes the idea of *Bildung*, Erpenbeck embeds the topic of a contemporary crisis in a traditionally national genre that focuses on education and moral development. Kirchoff's text is labeled as a novella; accordingly, it is placed within a genre with a long literary

tradition (cf. Steckenbiller 2019: 77), which, for the reader, also leads to certain genre expectations. The informed reader will automatically think about the *Decameron* (1353), but also Goethe's *Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderter* (1795), drawing a connection to both the German tradition of the novella from the nineteenth century and the topic of refuge and refugees. According to Florian Fuchs, »the novella's unique technique of appearing in the world [...] is marked by its ability to turn the mere story of a strange occurrence or character into a symbolic story that becomes applicable anywhere and at any time« (Fuchs 2019: 401). Thus, both authors chose rather traditional genres to examine a contemporary issue of pressing importance – the so-called »refugee crisis« – which leads to the question how the choice of genre interacts with narrative, and how analyzing the role of genre allows for a deeper understanding of the texts.

Although both texts depict the fates and sorrows of refugees, they focus on main characters that are members of the educational and cultural elite in German society. In both cases, the protagonists are established white men from intellectual, *bildungsbürgerliche* backgrounds – Richard, a retired university professor who struggles to find a new role in society, and Reither, a sophisticated, albeit not terribly successful, publisher who had to sell his publishing house and bookstore. The main characters in these texts both attempt to reclaim authority over their self-conceptions, and it is to this end that their encounters with refugees are functionalized. For both Reither and his companion Leonie Palm, their interactions with refugees serve as one step in a process of »coming-of-age«, as Anne Haemig calls it in her review in *Der Spiegel* (cf. Haemig 2016). Quite similarly, the asylum-seekers in *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* help the protagonist Richard to overcome his personal post-retirement crisis (cf. Steckenbiller 2019: 69). Coming-of-age, as Haemig uses the term, is thus meant to describe a concept of aging that connotes a phase of in-betweenness, insecurity, and crisis.

Age and aging have recently been discussed extensively in contemporary research in literary and cultural studies (cf. Vedder/Willer 2012: 254),<sup>1</sup> especially as literary presentation of age have

ein performatives Potenzial, das die ausschließliche Zuschreibung von Altersstereotypen, die gegebene Abfolge von Lebensstufen und auch die Linearität von Lebensläufen produktiv zu verunsichern und in Bewegung zu bringen vermag. Insbesondere für die Gegenwartsliteratur wird das Alter zu einem zugleich ästhetischen und epistemischen Schauplatz, auf dem unterschiedliche Darstellungsweisen und Wissensdiskurse zusammengeführt werden können. (Ibid.: 256)

This article does not aim to discuss demographic changes, the various representations and social construction of age, or the performative aspects of the literary depiction of age – or, for that matter, questions of agency, the aesthetics of »old age style« (Taberner 2013: 199), and the role of temporality and »late-

1 | See also Deiters et al. 2015; Mahr 2016; and Weber 2013.

ness« (Leeder 2015: 3).<sup>2</sup> Although there is a connection between the demographic change and immigration in Germany (Taberner 2013: 4f.), the focus of this article lies on the aestheticized phase of post-retirement crisis and personal development that is portrayed in these texts, as well as the interrelations between this phase, aspects of *Bildungsbürgertum*, and the portrayal of the so-called ›refugee crisis‹. As Christiane Steckenbiller points out in *Futurity, Aging, and Personal Crisis* (Steckenbiller 2019), both protagonists belong to a generation that lived in a time period after the Second World War that is characterized by important developments and political changes, the tumultuous times after 1968, and the division of Germany (cf. *ibid.*: 69). Thus, Steckenbiller reads them as »representative for the views of an aging German or Western society and its attempt to come to terms with the present and the past – Europe’s more recent past, the Holocaust, but also, remarkably, European colonialism« (*ibid.*).

While Steckenbiller contends that »both texts fall short of disrupting current practices of inclusion« and both protagonists do not succeed in overcoming the challenges of contemporary society (*ibid.*: 69), my focus lies elsewhere. I argue that the texts, by foregrounding their protagonists’ personal crises and failures, reflect on the role, the self-doubt, and the identity crises of the German bourgeoisie that tries to reposition itself in response to so-called refugee crises and the discussion about national identity, *Bildung*, and ›*Leitkultur*‹, as well as the clash between conservative and liberal ideas of *Bildung*.

Globalization and the challenges of mass migration also led to the rise of nationalist sentiments and fears of the disappearance of the Western culture that right-wing movements instrumentalize. By portraying migrants and thus ›outsiders‹ as a potential threat, the idea of a strong nation state and assumed protective powers are strengthened. In order to protect its citizens from precarity, the ›other‹ needs to be marginalized. The mechanisms that are used to this end can also be explained by Judith Butler’s and Isabell Lorey’s theories on precarity and the hierarchy of precariousness and precarity. Lorey’s analysis of precarity is a critique of neoliberalism and the effects of governmental precarization which is based on the idea that all life is precarious and in order to create a sense of protection the nation state enforces a hierarchization of precarity.

According to Lorey,

precarity denotes the striation and distribution of precariousness in relations to inequality, the hierarchization of being-with that accompanies the process of *othering*. This dimension of the precarious covers naturalized relations of domination, through which belonging to a group is attributed or denied to individuals. (Lorey 2015: 12)

While Lorey mostly focuses on economic and health-related forms of precariousness, I contend that the longing for a coherent identity is part of the human

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**2** | Notably, as both protagonists are men, one could also analyze these texts in relation to a crisis of masculinity (cf. Bauer 2015). However, this is not the focus of this article.

need for security, both physically and with respect to the stability of ones living conditions and identity. It not only creates a sense of belonging to a group, but it is also used to exclude perceived threats from groups that are seen as worthy of protection from the nation state. Lorey also points out that »normalizing self-government is based on an imagination of coherence, identity and wholeness that goes back to the construction of a male, white bourgeois subject« (ibid.: 30). Following Lorey's analysis, referencing and emphasizing a shared national and cultural identity can create stability for one group and also serves as a tool to exclude and marginalize outsiders as a means of protection.

In *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* and *Widerfahrnis* mechanisms of othering become visible in the protagonists' interactions with refugees as well as in the functionalization of the refugee characters as plot elements or objects of knowledge in the context of *Bildung*. Both protagonists are white bourgeois men who have an identity crisis and the refugee characters help them to overcome this crisis. When interacting with the refugees the protagonists display strategies that are symptomatic of the Western perspective on the ›other‹ that has been criticized by post-colonial scholars:

In the 1980s, when postcolonial studies was becoming established as a going scholarly domain in the North Atlantic academy [...], its project was to criticize (in the hermeneutic language of the day, to deconstruct) colonial knowledge and its assumptions. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) of course in many ways constituted the inaugural move in this enterprise. But the purchase it had on strategies of criticism was made possible not only by the changing global politics of the third world (the decline of national liberationism) but also by a cognitive shift (the cultural turn) (Loomba 2005: 391).

While Richard wants to understand the people and cultural differences he encounters and genuinely wants to help and learn from them, the refugees remain objects of knowledge and the exotic ›other‹. Reither, on the other hand, does not really try to understand the precarious situation of the refugees and distances himself from their sorrows. Ultimately, both are focused on their own perceived precariousness, i.e. their identity crises, which become visible through interaction with the ›other‹ and are overcome by functionalizing said ›other‹.

Accordingly, I not only explore the role of the *Bildungsbürgertum* in these texts, but also critically analyze the functionalization of the refugees' stories for the main characters' personal development, as they are instrumentalized to help the protagonists in their struggle to re-define their identities in a phase where they are searching for new reference points for their identity construction that is no longer rooted in their prior self-conception as members of the bourgeoisie.

However, by referencing genres such as the *Bildungsroman* and the novella both texts place themselves in a long tradition in the Western canon and are associated with Weimar classicism, Romantic nationalism and the image of a German ›Leitkultur‹. By using these traditional narrative forms when writing about contemporary issues such as the so-called ›refugee crisis‹, both texts position

themselves – and their readers – as a part of a *bildungsbürgerlicher* discourse. By exposing mechanisms of othering as inherent in the Western concept of *Bildung*, both texts also reflect on their own role in the cultural discourse about the so-called ›refugee crisis‹, as well as the limitations of their own perspectives as representatives and members of a culturally educated class. This points to the insecurity and struggles of the so-called cultural establishment and the *Bildungsbürgertum* whose self-image and understanding is so deeply rooted in a national – and Western – cultural tradition.

## JENNY ERPENBECK'S *GEHEN, GING, GEGANGEN* – THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE REFUGEE AS A CATHARTIC AND EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

The first text I address here is Erpenbeck's *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen*, published when the ›refugee crisis‹ was most prominent in political, social, and cultural discourse. It received generally good reviews (cf. Lühmann 2015; Moritz 2015), and Buchzik describes the novel in the *Spiegel* as a text that »einen wichtigen Beitrag zur Flüchtlingsdebatte [leistet]« (Buchzik 2015). Friedmar Apel praises Erpenbeck's text in the FAZ as a »gründlich recherchierte[n] Tatsachenroman, [...] [der] an der Schwelle einer dramatischen Ausweitung des Flüchtlingsproblems wie der politischen Auseinandersetzung damit [erscheint]« (Apel 2017). However, the *Feuilleton* criticizes the documentary-like style and educational tone of the novel, its perspective (cf. Granzin 2015), and its »Vorsätzlichkeit« (Magenau 2015) – indeed, Wolfgang Schneider (*Deutschlandfunk Kultur*) even describes the text as »überholt« (Schneider 2015).

Recent scholarship on Erpenbeck's novel also focuses on the protagonist's relationship with the African refugees with whom he interacts. For example, both Stefan Hermes (cf. 2016) and Johanna Vollmeyer (cf. 2017) criticize how the protagonist Richard treats the men as his research subjects and objects of knowledge and Steckenbiller comments on the colonialist views and the exoticism inherent in Richard's perspective (cf. Steckenbiller 2019: 73). Hermes also emphasizes the protagonist's paternalistic and colonial attitude (cf. Hermes 2016: 182) while Vollmeyer argues that Richard needs the ›other‹ – the refugees – in order to (re-)construct his identity (cf. Vollmeyer 2017: 198f.). The novel's focus is indeed on its main protagonist Richard, as the reader only has access to his perspective; accordingly, the thoughts and stories of the refugees must be told through him.

While Brangwen Stone focuses on »trauma and empathy« as »the stories and experiences of exile and displacement in the literary canon, and German history, establish points of empathic connection between Richard and the refugees« (Stone 2017: 12), Monika Shafi sees the novel as an attempt to »foster comprehension, empathy, and perhaps even encourage action on behalf of the refugees« (Shafi 2017: 186). She also reads the novel as a critique of the laws and structures that regulate German and European treatments of migrants and asylum-seekers, and their connections to concepts of the nation state and cosmopolitanism. Shafi

argues that the novel offers »an alternative, postnational vision of inclusion and community« (ibid.: 187). Shafi also sees Erpenbeck's text as »comprehensive approach to globalization« (ibid.: 188) and an agent in social and cultural discourse; however, her focus lies on the ethical role and impact of the text (cf. ibid.: 187). Shafi, Ludewig and Steckenbiller all see Richard as a *Bildungsbürger* (cf. ibid.; Ludewig 2017: 270; Steckenbiller 2019: 70) or even as »bürgerlichen Repräsentanten einer breiten Mittelschicht« (Ludewig 2017: 270), but they do not explore the reference to the genre of the *Bildungsroman*.<sup>3</sup> However, this connection is relatively plain to see, as the protagonist experiences substantial educational, moral, and personal development (cf. Shafi 2017: 187; Hermes 2016: 184; Ludewig 2017: 272) that changes and forms him, and, as Steckenbiller points out, also educates him about colonialism and imperialism (cf. Steckenbiller 2019: 74).

The German *Bildungsroman*, and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as one of its most famous examples, present, according to Karl Morgenstern in 1819, »German life, German thought and the morals of our time« (Morgenstern 2009: 655). Not surprisingly, the *Bildungsroman* has been criticized as a genre that represents a Western or German ideal, but according to Boes, other scholars see the *Bildungsroman* as a »literary response to changing times in which individuals have to secure their own place in the world rather than find it pre-given in tradition or inheritance« (Boes 2012: 4).

Boes argues in *Formative Fictions* (2012) that the *Bildungsroman* has a strong connection to the »rise of modern nationalism« (ibid.: 3), and he also points out that the *Bildungsromane* he analyzes,

respond to turning points in the history of German nationalism [...] by trying to give what I shall henceforth call a »national form« to the narrative trajectories of their protagonists. Yet despite the fact that harmony and teleology are among most-often enumerated qualities of traditional *Bildungsromane*, none of these novels ultimately succeed in giving a definitive form of the collective experience that they articulate. There is always some kind of remainder, some identity claim that resists nationalism's aim for closure in what [...] we can identify as the normative regime of the nation-state. These remainders are the novels' »cosmopolitan« elements. (ibid.)

This means that *Bildungsromane* resist an established normative framework in a way, while also having a strong connection to the self-image of the *Bildungsbürgertum*. As Wilhelm Vosskamp states, »Der Bildungsroman ist darin eine Allegorie des deutschen Bürgertums, als er die Doppelheit von selbstbestätigender Homogenisierung, und kritischer Selbstreflexion in seiner Geschichte zu

**3** | Ludewig draws a connection to a »Bürgerlichkeitsdiskurs« (Ludewig 2017: 270) and the developments in our current »gesellschaftlichen Mitte« (ibid.), however she does not read the novel as a *Bildungsroman*. Instead, she interprets the focus on the body in the lake as »unerhörte Begebenheit« (ibid.: 272) and for her, the parallel to the refugees drowning in the Mediterranean Sea inspires Richard to become active (cf. ibid.).

verbinden vermag« (Voskamp 2009: 141f.). Boes thinks that the criticism of and the contradictions within the *Bildungsroman* are a reflection of larger issues in the field of (German) literary studies, namely the need to distance itself from national essentialism, but at the same time define its own scope and field in globalized approaches to world literature. In his analysis, Boes also points out what he calls Morgenstern's »performative« understanding of *Bildung*« (Boes 2012: 5), the effect on the reader, and he ultimately claims that »any attempts to give a national form to the life of a protagonist will always resist fulfillment in institutional structures [...] and they will always remain internally asynchronous, thereby revealing cosmopolitan character« (ibid.: 7).<sup>4</sup>

Building on this analysis of the *Bildungsroman*, I argue that Erpenbeck's *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* draws on traditional ideas and concepts of the German *Bildungsroman* to point to the larger contradictions within the field, as highlighted by Boes. By creating an ironic distance between the narrator and the focalizer, the problematic perspective of the protagonist is exposed, but through the choice of genre, the text also critically reflects on its own role and perspective of the *Bildungsbürgertum* in contemporary discourses about the so-called »refugee crisis«. Richard is shown as a character who attempts to learn from his encounters with refugees, but, in the end, fails to break out of his old ways of thinking.

Until his retirement, the starting point of the story, the protagonist Richard was a professor of »Klassische Philologie« at the Humboldt-Universität in Berlin and the head of his department. He is portrayed as man who likes a certain routine; for instance, he always eats one slice of bread with honey and one slice of bread with cheese every morning (only on Sundays does he treat himself to a hard-boiled egg) (cf. Erpenbeck 2015: 32). His wife died 5 years ago, and the lover he took in the following years was unfaithful and left him. Richard feels alone and struggles to find something meaningful to occupy his mind, as he does not know »wie lange es dauern wird, bis er sich daran gewöhnt hat, Zeit zu haben« (ibid.: 9).

Needless to say, education, and »German, European, or Western cultural history at large« (Steckenbiller 2019: 70) play an important role in Richard's life. Once he is alone with all his books and moving boxes from his former office in his department, he realizes that his education and knowledge might not mean anything now that he is all by himself; »auch das, was man Bildung nennt, alles, was er weiß und gelernt hat, ist von nun an nur noch sein Privateigentum« (Erpenbeck 2015: 15). He believes in a constant aspiration to wholeness; »für alles gibt es eine ideale Form, für die profanen Dinge des Lebens ebenso wie für Arbeit und Kunst« (ibid.: 24), but he does not yet know his new role in society. Thus, Richard needs something that helps him to achieve this wholeness. When Richard hears about asylum-seekers protesting on the Alexanderplatz, he is fascinated by their attempt to become visible by refusing to reveal their identities, as it reminds him of the *Odyssey* (cf. ibid.: 31f.). He wants to learn more about them.

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4 | For an extensive analysis of the *Bildungsroman*, see Kontje 1993.

The way Richard approaches the group of refugees is based on his self-image and self-conception as a researcher who – especially at the beginning – does not reflect on his Eurocentric perspective (cf. Ludewig 2017: 273). He informs himself about geographical aspects of Africa and develops a questionnaire that he uses to learn more about the refugees (cf. Erpenbeck 2015: 51). Moreover, he attempts to understand and characterize them through concepts and knowledge that he has acquired through his own classical education. He compares the refugees to characters from Greek mythology or artworks and gives them names of characters from medieval literature, for instance »Der Mond von Wismar« (ibid.: 283), »Apoll« (ibid.: 84), and »Tristan« (ibid.). His only way to ›read‹ them, at first, is to capture their stories and interpret them through the lens of his own education (Roth 2018a: 215f.).<sup>5</sup> Some reviews of the book criticize this attitude as highly problematic. Buchzik, for instance, writes:

Leider kommentiert Richard permanent die Geschichten der Flüchtlinge und versucht sie auf seine gutbürgerliche Lebens- und Leserwelt anzuwenden: Auch Blanscheflur starb bei Tristans Geburt, konstatiert der emeritierte Professor, als ein verwaister Flüchtling ihm seine Geschichte erzählt. Auch Mozarts Tamino wurde geprügelt und davon abgehalten, weiterzugehen, sinniert Richard, auch Goethes Iphigenie war letztlich Emigrant auf Tauris – auf den Gedanken, dass zwischen Emigration und Flucht ein Unterschied bestehen könnte, kommt Erpenbecks Protagonist nicht. (Buchzik 2015)

Additionally, in his description of the refugees, Richard often re-enforces a certain exoticism and romanticizing of the ›other‹ (cf. Erpenbeck 2015: 191; Ludewig 2017: 282); for instance, when he repeatedly highlights the men's skin colour (cf. Hermes 2016: 183), when he expresses his fascination with the cultural differences and practices he notices (cf. Steckenbiller 2019: 73) or the objectification and racialization of the teacher from Ethiopia (ibid.: 74). Although he is curious about their stories, he interprets them through a Western lens and sees them as objects of knowledge that he can acquire. Accordingly, the refugees are assigned an identity from outside and thus become objects of knowledge (Young 2003: 11–13, 18) – a knowledge to which they do not have access (ibid.: 14, 18) as long as they are outside of the discursive system. Richard attempts to learn from them, first by making them his research objects, and only later does he notice that German institutions exclude them from accessing knowledge themselves.

Steckenbiller, Theele, Hermes, and the Feuilleton criticize Richard's behaviour and attitude as examples of Eurocentrism and of a concept of *Bildung* that promotes a (re-)colonizing, Western view on education. Steckenbiller – referring to Frederick Beiser (2006) – defines the concept of *Bildung* as »a Romantic ideal, aimed at restoring wholeness in society through political unity, individual self-cultivation, and aesthetic judgment« (Steckenbiller 2019: 71). She sees the

**5** | The attempt to make the refugees and especially their names accessible for Richard was also pointed out by other scholars, for instance Ludewig (2017: 273) and Steckenbiller (2019: 73).

novel as »a critique of knowledge production and [...] the Eurocentric focus inherent in the concept of *Bildung*« (Steckenbiller 2019: 70f.), as »*Bildung* [...] culturally roots Richard in the German middle class but also alludes to the orientalist and Eurocentric focus inherent in Enlightenment thinking« (ibid: 71). While I agree with these observations, I claim that the text exaggerates Richard's Eurocentric view and his tendencies to ›interpret‹ the refugees' stories and experiences within the framework of his Western – and German – cultural education in order to create a self-critical layer in the text. Through an ironic distance, created by the narrator, the readers are able to clearly identify Richard's problematic behaviour and critically reflect on the Western concept of *Bildung*. One example of this is a sequence in the text in which the narrator comments: »Apoll, Tristan und der Olympier bekommen nun ihren Platz in einem deutschen Wohnzimmer mit Couchecke, Fernseher, Obstschale und Bücherregal« (Erpenbeck 2015: 117). Steckenbiller notes that it is »not clear whether Richard shares this ironic view« (Steckenbiller 2019: 73); however, I contend that by ironicizing and criticizing Richard's approaches to understanding the refugees' sorrows and experiences, and his interactions with them, the text distances itself from Richard's view and draws the readers' attention to the inherent difficulties that Richard encounters in his interactions with the African men. While he tries to support the refugees and to learn more about their culture, his prejudices, as well as his continuing feeling of intellectual superiority rooted in his education and self-image as a scholar, become visible. By exposing Richard's problematic perspective and through its educational tone, the text draws the readers' attention to its own problematic role in public discourse about the ›refugee crisis‹. While literature plays a role in the public sphere – and can possess »ethical power« as Shafi puts it (Shafi 2017: 187) – Erpenbeck's text, by exaggerating Richard's *bildungsbürgerliche* perspectives, shows a certain self-awareness, as the text is written by an established white author who, herself, is part of an educated class.

Richard experiences his own learning process as a new, fresh start, and the narrator comments: »Der emeritierte Professor, der [...] an einem Tag so vieles zum ersten Mal hört, als sei er noch mal ein Kind« (Erpenbeck 2015: 70). Richard is the main focalizer and the story is told from his perspective, but in some instances – like in the quote above – the narrator becomes visible, commenting on Richards experiences. This creates a distance between the text and its protagonist that allows the text to critically comment on Richard's behaviour and views on a metalevel. For Richard, his friendship with the African refugees is a way to fill his life with meaning, to transition from a self-image that was strongly connected to his work as professor, to a new self-image defined by his post-work life. Thus, the refugees help him to ›come of age‹ in the wake of his late-stage, post-retirement crisis of identity. The people he encounters and the stories they tell him help him to reflect on his achievements and the failures in his personal life, as well as on his own prejudices (cf. Roth 2018a: 216). The group of asylum-seekers not only bring Richard and some of his friends closer together again, but they also become like a second family to Richard, as their sorrows and losses makes

him think about his own life and the losses he experienced.<sup>6</sup> In comparison with the stories of sorrow, violence, and despair that the refugees experience, Richard's own losses appear self-inflicted, yet they are still always in the centre of the novel. This becomes apparent when comparing the refugees' perception of time with Richard's. As I argue in an earlier article (cf. *ibid.*: 215-216), Richard does not know how to fill his time after retirement, despite his unthreatened agency, while the refugees are forced to wait and do nothing, having suffered a loss of agency as a result of being categorized as refugees. By drawing these comparisons, the text exposes Richard's privileged position (cf. Shafi 2017: 191-193; Steckenbiller 2019: 68, 80), as he has the possibility to fill his time and find fulfillment while the refugees are dependent on the system and can only move forward with outside help. Accordingly, when Richard helps the refugees to fill their time by giving them tasks, he actually helps himself, as he feels more useful and less lonely.

This becomes even clearer at the end of the novel, when Richard's biggest regret is revealed. In *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen*, as well as in *Widerfahrnis*, the loss of children or the decision not to have children plays an important role. As before, the suffering of ›the other‹ opens up an avenue for the protagonists to talk about their own losses (cf. Roth 2018a: 218). In the last section of the novel, Richard tells his guests that his wife had an abortion because he did not want children at that time. He felt ashamed when she bled in the S-Bahn train after the procedure (cf. Erpenbeck 2015: 348), but not for asking her to abort the child. Richard, after all these years, has now learned to talk about his feelings and admits that he hated his wife at that moment because he was scared that she might die. In learning more about the refugees' fates and their losses, he becomes more able to talk about his own losses and regrets (cf. Roth 2018a: 218). He can move forward with his life, having found a new task to occupy his time – that is, a group of people he can teach and who will learn from him. The refugees, however, do not have the chance to move on the way Richard does. Richard really wants to support the refugees and cares about them, but in the novel, they are ultimately functionalized as a way for Richard to re-orient himself, as he needs the asylum-seekers to find answers to his own questions (cf. Buchzik 2015).

Although he genuinely wants to help the refugees, his own development and learning process ultimately stays the main focus of the text; ›the other‹ is merely a way for him to learn. Steckenbiller states that Richard has »a chance to re-evaluate his own embeddedness in *Bildung* and in Germany's and Europe's

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6 | In *Die Rolle der Literatur und Literaturwissenschaften* (cf. Roth 2018a), I also show how Richard's experiences are paralleled with the refugees' fate, which exposes a certain hierarchization of precarity. There, I focus on the themes of time, mobility/movement, language and knowledge, and the metaphoric use of water, which could not be included in this article due to restrictions on length and the focus of this analysis. Ludewig also mentions how the parallel between the body in the lake and refugees drowning in the Mediterranean Sea exposes that the loss of the lake as a place of leisure activities and fun is portrayed as »betrauenswürdiger« (Ludewig 2017: 271) – which is another example of a hierarchization of precarity in the novel.

postwar historiography« (Steckenbiller 2019: 72); I would confirm that although he does undergo personal development and questions the priority of academic achievements in his life (cf. Erpenbeck 2015: 295), his identity and self-image remain rooted in a Western concept of *Bildung*: »Wenn Vernunft wirklich feurige Materie wäre, wie von Diogenes als Erstem angenommen wurde, so sähe man es doch am besten daran, wie über die Jahrhunderte hinweg der eine Nachdenkende die Gedanken eines anderen aufnimmt und versucht ihnen das Eigene hinzuzufügen« (ibid. 297).

In summary, I read the novel not only as a coming-of-age (in Haemig's sense) novel, in that it portrays its main character in a phase of insecurity and crisis, but also as a reference to the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. While Janzen states that Richard's development is more relevant in »the private sphere« (Janzen 2018: 280), and for Steckenbiller the text shows the »failure of Willkommenskultur« (Steckenbiller 2019: 80), I make the case that the novel has to be read in the context of its genre. By focusing on a character that undergoes a personal and educational development by functionalizing the foreign ›other‹ to this end, it points to the problematic Western perspective on education and educating foreigners that are questioned in times of global migration and de-colonization. Richard is portrayed as an example of a member of the *Bildungsbürgertum* who attempts to learn and challenge his views, but who nonetheless fails to do so because he cannot fully think beyond the categories and approaches of his education. As Shafiq points out, Erpenbeck's former texts already show »a commitment to history, memory and ethics« (Shafi 2017: 203). *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* not only has a didactic stance, as some critics point out, but also challenges the tradition of the classical *Bildungsroman*. Accordingly, I would claim that Erpenbeck, by associating her novel with a genre such as the *Bildungsroman*, positions herself and the readers – who recognize the references Richard makes in the text – as part of the *Bildungsbürgertum*. Thus, the text challenges the readers to question their own perspective.

## **BODO KIRCHHOFF'S *WIDERFAHRNIS* – THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE REFUGEE AS AN ›UNERHÖRTE BEGEBENHEIT‹**

Kirchhoff's text also takes a classic format, that of the novella, which has a reputation of being a genre that is »unpublishable,« or least unpopular on the literary market (Fassler 2012). The title *Widerfahrnis* – as well as the form of the novella – addresses a readership that has some knowledge of the genre and accordingly certain expectations;<sup>7</sup> as Helmut Böttiger from *Die Zeit* states:

Das Wort ›Widerfahrnis‹ steht nicht im Duden, dafür aber bei Heidegger – das ist einer der Schlüssel zum Geheimnis. Ein anderer ist die ›ungeheure Begebenheit,‹ die die

7 | For an overview of more contemporary variations of the novella, see, for instance, Meier 2014.

tradierte Form der Novelle verlangt und die hier gezielt in den Bereich am Mittelmeer gestrandeter Flüchtlinge verlegt ist. Im Moment ist dies das brisanteste politische Thema und es wird geschickt verknüpft mit dem Lebensgefühl wohlsituerter, in die Jahre gekommener Kulturbürger, die aufgeklärt, desillusioniert und sehnsuchtsvoll sind und deshalb anfällig für Melancholie und Schmerz. (Böttiger 2016)

Additionally, John Smith discusses the genre of the novella using Heidegger's concept of the »Seyn« (Smith 2012: 417); »in the *uneigentliche* form of the *Novelle*, in the irony of the *unerhörte Begebenheit*, something happens, takes place, *ereignet sich*, whereby what is really of interest to us as human beings comes properly into its own« (ibid.: 423, emphasis in the org.). In *Widerfahrnis*, this event is an encounter with a refugee girl who changes the protagonist's path, but in doing so also makes something »unheard«, something lying beyond the love story of the protagonists, finally heard. Similar to Erpenbeck's text, the connection of a traditional genre and a contemporary topic, adds another layer to Kirchhoff's text. According to Fuchs,

[n]ovellas do not introduce us to people who turn from strangers into acquaintances with each additional page. To have something happen before us is their goal or, better yet, to have something happen to us. The relationality of novellas does not allow us to distance ourselves from what happens in them, unlike how we would from an anecdote, nor do they allow us to distance ourselves from ourselves, like the novel's drive for identification. (Fuchs 2019: 401f.)

This would mean that the text that focuses Reither's view and experiences is – on another level – not actually about him, but the readers, which creates a certain self-reflexive irony. By making Reither's perspective our perspective, the text exposes broader issues, and a critical layer, that go beyond the novella's internal scope. As Fuchs states, »through a form designed to interfere, a novella proposes a dilemma of civic life that does not fit into the accepted social norms of its time« (ibid.: 402), which, very similar to Boes' analysis of the *Bildungsroman*, creates a potential to resist the normative idea of consistency and closure.

For Ulrich Rüdener from the *Süddeutsche*, *Widerfahrnis* is a text in which the author continues his »Erkundungen der Lebenskonfusion reiferer Männer«. He also reads the book as a »Verfallsbuch, [denn] es beschreibt den Verfall alter Kulturtechniken [...], den Verfall des eigenen Lebens, des eigenen Körpers, und das kurze Aufblühen der Liebe« (Rüdener 2016). Although the »refugee crisis« plays an important role in the story's development, the novella is – as Christoph Schröder emphasizes in *Die Zeit* – »kein Kommentar zur Flüchtlingskrise« (Schröder 2016). It does, however, instrumentalize the refugees that are portrayed in the text for the main characters' development, and shows how their »vermeintliche Nächstenliebe [...] von außen betrachtet, ebenso gut als purer Egoismus gelesen werden [kann]: Da sind zwei, die die Chance wittern, die Lücken in ihrem Leben doch noch zu schließen« (ibid.). While Ivo Theele emphasizes the potential the work has to educate readers about encounters with the

›other‹ (cf. Theele 2018: 64), Steckenbiller states that she does not see any »examples of humanitarian and compassionate forms of engagement with the current challenges of mass displacement and Otherness« (Steckenbiller 2019: 75). For her, the text focuses on »border crossings and surveillance mechanisms, and [the] protagonist’s suspicious and detached attitude toward refugees (cf. *ibid.*: 75). As Steckenbiller points out, Reither is not portrayed as a sympathetic character and does not display any empathy towards the migrants and refugees he encounters (cf. *ibid.*: 76). While I agree with her observation of Reither’s personality, I argue that the story is not about the refugees – they merely function as a narrative tool, or as a means to trigger the main characters’ personal development.

Reither, the protagonist of the novella, is portrayed as an educated man having a love of literature and language; for example, during his career he chose to publish and sell only those books that he deemed sophisticated enough. Appropriate to a protagonist so concerned with the depth and quality of literature and language, the story is told through an authorial voice that comments on stylistic aspects of the text and the subjunctive at the beginning, creating the impression that the narrator is editing the story while telling it. The story begins to unfold when Reither meets Leonie Palm, a former hat maker who lives in the same housing complex, as she appears on his doorstep late one evening and asks him to join her book club (cf. Kirchhoff 2016: 12f.). For some critiques, that is the initial ›unerhörte Begebenheit‹ in the text (cf. Theele 2018: 59; Steckenbiller 2019: 77). Later, it becomes clear that she saw him taking a book from the library – a copy of the novel that she wrote to cope with her daughter’s death (cf. Kirchhoff 2016: 51, 59). The pair then decide to embark on a spontaneous trip to a lake nearby to see the sunrise there, but then continue driving all the way to Sicily.

A journey to Italy raises associations with Goethe’s *Italienreise* and the importance of Italy, its art, and culture for Weimar classicism, and, as Theele puts it, a ›bildungsbürgerliche[r] Sehnsuchtsort« (Theele 2018: 59):<sup>8</sup> Italien

lässt sich [...] auch im kulturellen Gedächtnis verorten – und dies insbesondere in der Vorstellung des deutschen Bildungsbürgertums (zu dem Reither und Palm zu zählen sind). Dort ist Italien ebenfalls ein Sehnsuchtsort, ein imaginiertes ›Arkadien‹ [...] mit weit zurückreichender Tradition, das vor allem in zahlreichen (literarischen) Reiseberichten Niederschlag gefunden hat und deren zumeist idealisierte Beschreibungen bis in die Gegenwart fortwirken. (*Ibid.*: 60)

Theele also draws an interesting connection between the traditional educational journey to Italy and Reither’s and Leonie’s experiences. In both cases, the encounter with the foreign ›other‹ is stylized as a tool for personal development and represents the desire for personal and cultural growth. However, in *Widerfahrnis* the utilization of the ›other‹ is exaggerated, as neither of the protagonists is actually interested in learning anything about the ›other.‹

8 | See also Garber 2012.

Italy is also a place that, for Reither, is connected to memories and sorrows from the past (cf. *ibid.*), and Leonie seems to be a way for Reither to overcome this pain. At first, the act of travelling is more important than the destination. However, it becomes clear that Reither actually wants to arrive somewhere; not Sicily, not home, but rather at a new life with Leonie. However, the spontaneity and playfulness that he enjoys with her can only exist because they do not have a fixed destination. When they stop in Catania, they meet a nameless girl who turns out to be the most important ›unerhörte Begebenheit‹, in the novel, marking the turning point for Reither's and Leonie's relationship: »Plötzlich wird alles anders, die Reise braucht nun ein Ziel oder zumindest eine Richtung« (Rüdenauer 2016). Reither first spots the girl from the balcony of their apartment in Catania, which, as Steckenbiller points out, not only symbolizes a certain hierarchy, but also Reither's »discomfort« (Steckenbiller 2019: 78), as he seems to perceive her as a threat (cf. Kirchoff 2016: 123f.). She sees and follows him to sell him a necklace (cf. *ibid.*: 123-125). When the nameless refugee girl comes into their life, Reither seems to lose authority over the trip, and his life, once again. Although Leonie made many decisions for him during the trip, this was a positive loss of control for Reither; an uncertainty, a spontaneity that made him feel alive. Now, as Leonie turns her focus to the girl, the child's well-being becomes the centre of all decisions for the travelling couple.

Nonetheless, the girl helps Leonie and Reither to reach a new level of intimacy, as her appearance and Leonie's decision to let her stay in their apartment gives the pair an excuse to share a bed (cf. *ibid.*: 147-153). By using the girl as enabler of their sexual conduct, the text exposes the selfishness in their actions. Especially, since Reither still sees the girl as an obstacle, something that disrupts the union between him and Leonie. Accordingly, although he reluctantly agrees to take the girl with them, he remains skeptical of the situation. While Reither initially wants to bring the girl to an institution for asylum-seekers, it becomes clear that Leonie wants to take care of the girl as some kind of substitute for her own daughter. She persuades Reither to bring her back home to Germany with them. However, her motivations appear to be selfish: »Allerdings wirkt der scheinbare Akt der Barmherzigkeit gewaltsam und besitzergreifend, das Mädchen selbst hat keine Mitsprache, wird zur rettenden Projektionsfläche zweier Menschen, die in ihrem Leben zu viel verloren haben« (Kämmerlings 2016). This lends support to the idea that, given that the girl does not have a language with which to communicate with others, and so effectively has no voice, both Leonie and Reither are guided solely by their personal reasons for helping the girl. Reither likes the idea of being the girl's benefactor; when he watches her eating an orange, he thinks: »ein schönes Bild, und warum nicht auch künftig dieses Bild in der Nähe haben, das Mädchen besuchen und ihr etwas mitbringen, etwas geben, mehr als eine Apfelsine, Brot und Käse, eine Tüte Chips, einen Gutschein fürs Kino, ein Buch, das sich zum Vorlesen eignet, um die fremde Sprache zu lernen« (Kirchoff 2016: 169). This emphasizes Reither's philanthropic attitude and desires, which are more for his own benefit than the girl's. Although he, for a moment, wants to consider the girl's wishes, he changes his mind in order to please Leo-

nie (cf. *ibid.*: 170). With Leonie, the text does not offer a more empathetic alternative to Reither, as she is also motivated by her own desires.

After Reither reluctantly agrees to take the girl with them on the ferry back to mainland Italy, the girl starts to panic and wants to exit the car; however, Reither, in a desperate attempt to hold her back, grabs her rather aggressively, and she slices his hand with her necklace and escapes (cf. *ibid.*: 188f.). While Leonie embraces this opportunity to help the girl, following her immediately, for Reither she opened old wounds that he had buried in the past (cf. *ibid.*: 192-194). Reither realizes then that he has not only lost the girl, but also Leonie, and cries: »Es gab [...] keine Leonie [...], die ihn hätte erlösen können, und auch kein Mädchen von sonst wo, mit dem vielleicht alles sinnvoll geworden wäre« (*ibid.*: 201). This shows how Leonie and Reither both needed the girl to make sense of their lives and to cope with past trauma. However, while Leonie mourns her lost child, Reither merely wishes to be young again; accordingly, his trip with Leonie served as an escape from the reality of his age. Their flight south, and its supposed benefits for the pair, is interrupted when refugees heading north cross their path (cf. Theele 2018: 60) – in particular, by the young refugee girl. Thus, the story is not about these refugees per se, as they merely serve a function for the couple's personal development.

This becomes even more apparent when Reither runs into another refugee, Taylor from Nigeria, who is in hiding with his wife and baby. Taylor appears like a *deus ex machina*, a »vom Himmel gefallener Helfer« (Kirchhoff 2016: 205); the man not only treats Reither's physical wounds, but also gives him a chance to heal emotionally. Reither compares Taylor and his family to the holy family and envies them (cf. *ibid.*: 210). They offer him a chance to assuage the guilt he holds as a result of his poor conduct toward Leonie and the refugee girl by helping them. On the way to the train station, Reither sees Leonie again; however, the couple fails to reunite, with Leonie revealing to Reither that she is very sick and continuing her journey without him.

Ultimately, the novella is a story about fleeing from crises, but it is not a portrayal of the »refugee crisis« as such. It combines two stories about flight in order to emphasize the protagonists' very personal crises – Reither from the realization that he is aging, and Leonie from her illness and the loss of her child. Similar to *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen*, the refugees in the story facilitate the main protagonists' attempts at re-orientation. Unlike Richard, Reither finds himself alone in the end, but his journey to Sicily and his encounters with Leonie and the refugee girl nonetheless have a cathartic function for him, as he learns how to deal with his past and reflect on his own personal development along the way. However, unlike Richard, Reither shows no moral development or change in his attitude towards the refugees. Steckenbiller states that Reither is »echoing neoliberal sentiment« (Steckenbiller 2019: 80), and I would add that Reither, unlike Richard, represents a *Bildungsbürgertum* that derives its self-image from being part of a cultural elite, but he is not willing to question his beliefs or views. Accordingly, the refugees in the novella serve mainly as opportunities for self-heal-

ing, or function only as plot devices, for instance when the nameless and voiceless girl represents the ›unerhörter Begebenheit.«

On the textual level, this interpretation exposes the functionalization of the refugee characters in the novella. The focus on a couple from a cultural and educational class, even more obvious than in Erpenbeck's text, creates a hierarchy of precarity. Reither's and Leonie's flight south is entangled in the refugees' flight north, but ultimately the sorrows of the refugees are marginalized in order to explore the protagonists' inner struggle. However, similar to *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen*, the interplay between story, the readers, and genre expectations points to another layer in the text. Some of Kirchhoff's other texts have already dealt with current political and social issues in a similar way; for instance, *Erinnerungen an meinen Porsche* (2009), in which he satirized the 2008 financial crisis by putting his characters in a setting that reminds an informed reader of Thomas Mann's *Zauberberg*. By choosing the genre of novella, Kirchhoff not only appeals to a certain readership, but also points to novella as a genre that challenges traditional frameworks and resists clear interpretations using said frameworks. As Fuchs states,

the relational impact of a novella is clearest when one attempts to interpret and extract its central problem, which will always differ from the next, suggesting that no matter what her interpretation, each reader will be left with an unresolvable residue at the end. [...] From the view of literature, this volatile residue can only provoke what literary theory tries to do [...] to describe how literature appears in the social sphere. From the view of the social sphere, however, this residue of the novella is one in which the form ultimately takes the shape of an autonomous actor in the public sphere. (Fuchs 2019: 403)

Furthermore, Fuchs draws a connection to Hannah Arendt's concept of the ›enacted story‹ (cf. Arendt 1998: 181-188) by claiming that a short novella can occupy a role as an ›autonomous actor in the public‹ (Fuchs 2019: 403). Applying these two notions to *Widerfahrnis*, this emphasizes the role of text (and its author) as part of the public discourse about the ›refugee crisis‹. However, by addressing and shifting the responsibility to ›extract its central problem‹ (ibid.: 403) back to the reader, Fuchs also exposes the insecurity and perceived state of crisis of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, as its old frameworks no longer provide clear answers (cf. ibid.).

## CRISIS OF THE *BILDUNGSBÜRGERTUM*

In my past and more recent research, I focus on the literary depiction of adolescence and migration (cf. Roth 2018b), and analyze both as states of crisis, aestheticized as productive, creative, and subversive phases of in-betweenness with a normative stance. The two texts that I analyze here show a process of ›coming-of-age‹, to use Haemig's term again, in this case referring specifically to the

process of aging. The protagonists each experience a state of crisis and insecurity post-retirement while they are trying to re-establish a sense of identity after the loss of the intellectual and social interaction that characterized their pre-retirement lives, and in so doing are searching for social, cultural, and emotional reference points in their past and present alike. Through this, they learn to deal with losses from their past and cope with the fear of losing parts of their identity. In both texts, education in the sense of cultural and artistic *Bildung* is an important aspect of the protagonists' identity construction. Their encounters with refugees are portrayed as an important opportunity for the protagonists to grow, both emotionally and emphatically, in that they help them both to find ways to cope with their losses and regrets, and to offer them new goals and tasks going forward. *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* is thus, in a way, a *Bildungsroman* – or *Entwicklungsroman* – portraying the developments of a man who has already undergone an academic education and seems to have achieved the goal of a stable and established self, but now struggles to find his new role in society, post-retirement. Through his interaction with a group of refugees, Richard not only learns more about different cultures and breaks free of his routine, but also reflects on his own attitudes towards ›the foreign‹ and the unknown. However, the novel itself has a certain educational attitude, or ›gestus‹, something that has been criticized by other literary scholars and critics (cf. Birrer 2015; Hermes 2016). *Widerfahrnis*, unlike *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen*, does not attempt to educate the readers about the situation of asylum-seekers in Germany or Europe at large. The story is about flight, but the focus is on two people fleeing from the emptiness in their lives (cf. Theele 2018: 59), rather than the so-called refugee crisis. Kirchhoff's novella approaches the topic of the ›refugee crisis‹ in a way that is different from Erpenbeck's novel, yet, as I have shown, they are very similar in their focus on well-educated male characters in a state of crisis and their subsequent attempts at re-orientation.

As I show in my analysis of these texts, if they are read as texts about aging as a state of crisis exemplary for Europe and the Western World (cf. Steckenbiller 2019: 82), they also hint on a fear of the loss of identity rooted in a particular concept of *Bildung*. In doing so, they shift the focus away from the refugee and put the post-retirement crisis of the white educated man in the foreground, establishing a hierarchy of precarity, as the suffering of the refugee becomes marginalized (cf. Butler 2009; Lorey 2015). Thus, the ›refugee crisis‹ in these texts is inscribed in a crisis of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, demonstrating a concerning continuance to approach, read, and re-colonize the sorrows and experiences of the ›other‹ through Western cultural codes. But what does this mean for the role of the *Bildungsbürgertum* and the idea of a German ›Leitkultur‹ discussed at the beginning? Is it just a coincidence that these books, written by established authors, approach contemporary issues the way they do, and that they are well-received and promoted by the literary market?

According to Steckenbiller, Richard and Reither as representatives of an aging post-war generation »are re-evaluating their lives and [are] reflecting on time in general, which in both texts is a time without future« (Steckenbiller 2019: 80).

She reads the protagonists' fear of time as a generational anxiety or the fear of being useless (cf. *ibid.*) and losing »ontological security in conjunction with speed and progress« (*ibid.*: 82) in a capitalist, globalized society. Accordingly, she sees the two texts as »literary examples [...] calling attention not just to the transformation of postwar society itself, and to a new age that comes with new challenges, but also to the inadequacy of the male perspective and the coping mechanisms we have used to work through the past« (*ibid.*), solely focusing on German and European history to understand current developments in the world.

While I agree with this interpretation, my analysis that builds on a previous project of mine from 2018 goes one step further, as I argue that through the choice of genre, both texts evoke associations with Weimar classicism and the idea of a German cultural nation. In both texts, the protagonists embody certain aspects of *Bildung* and the *Bildungsbürgertum* that are negotiated in times of global mobility and migration. While Richard represents a version of *Bildung* that incorporates and engages with foreign culture, Reither is portrayed as a *Bildungsbürger* who does not want to engage with change and would rather be »entfernt von der Welt, all ihrem Elend, selbst was vor der eigenen Tür geschieht« (Kirchhoff 2016: 5). In both texts the refugee characters are functionalized for the main protagonists' development and as a means to overcome their sorrows and fears. Their fear is not necessarily rooted in a fear of the »other«, but it is only able to be overcome through a functionalization of that selfsame »other.«

By connecting traditional genres that are also associated with Romantic nationalism with current controversies related to migration and globalization, both texts critically engage with the role of the *Bildungsbürgertum* in current political, social, and cultural developments. By exposing Richard's problematic behavior, *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* challenges the readers to re-think their own perspectives and points out the issues with applying Western scholarly methods without being aware of their inherent cultural biases. *Widerfahrnis* has a more melancholic tone, but it clearly shows Reither as character whose lack of empathy isolates him in the end. Ultimately, both texts display the identity crisis of members of an educated class, who – through their encounters with refugees – struggle with making sense of their own roles in society and the moral challenges that disrupt their lives.

I see these two texts as two representatives of a larger trend, as is, for instance, *Die kommenden Jahre* (2018) by Norbert Gstrein, another established German-language author. In this novel, refugees are again functionalized for the protagonists' personal development, and it portrays an educated couple (a glacier scholar and an author) who fight over the intellectually and ethically right way to treat refugees. Accordingly, I see these novels as part of the literary contribution to the larger discussion on how to reconcile the idea of a German national culture with the urgent need to further the process of de-colonization and meet the contemporary socio-political challenges of our time – such as the so-called »refugee crisis«.

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