

THE MOBILE WRITING DESK

Tanja Dückers

When I was fifteen, I wanted to become a writer because I imagined that I would be able to stay at home at my writing desk and organize all the confusing disorder in my head by putting it down on paper. Spitzweg's picture of the lonely writer in the quiet garret continues to influence me and those of my generation. I could never have imagined to what extent authors – those who have really made writing their profession and main source of income – are, or have to be, public figures. The writer's daily business nowadays is made up of television appearances, radio interviews, portraits on web magazines, readings, photo shoots, talks with pupils and students, discussion panels, debates at home or overseas – and also: writing in foreign places, living and working with a mobile desk.

More and more writers in Germany are earning a living with scholarships. Foundations, associations, institutions – wealthy individuals, too – invite writers to work far away from their own writing desk. Concepts and terms such as "grant-hopper", "writer-tourists" and "scholarship-existence" are already rampant. But how does one explain this increase in the number of scholarships, who really benefits from them, and what does this writing "on the road" mean with regard to literary creativity?

Ever since Reunification the profession of writer has become enormously popular in Germany. Mind: not literature as such, but the profession of writer. Literati have been turned into celebrities. Where the figure of "the writer" in the 70s and 80s was still mainly embodied by such sullen old men like Handke and Grass (they always seemed to have been old) and where fashion-conscious writers such as Rainald Götz were rather singular exceptions, in the nineties a group of young writers (men and women) emerged, for whom literature and fashion, writing and worldliness, introverted writing and extroverted appearances no longer excluded one another. Writers were discovered and marketed by the media in unprecedented ways. At the end of the nineties, two writers even modelled for the clothes company Peek & Cloppenburg. This development was favoured by the New Economy bubble in which nineties Germany found itself at the time. Never before was so much advertising money poured into books, audio CDs and similar products. Many publishers explained the more aggressive advertising of writers by claiming that the cost of foreign, in particular English-language titles

had become too expensive for them, and that they thus preferred to build up German authors and publicise their books.

Suddenly it became more attractive for many cities and municipalities, but also for institutions and foundations, to show off their own resident writer. What many writers saw as an altruistic invitation was often in fact nothing but a clever advertising campaign for the host. Of course there are also long-standing institutions with long traditions of endowments. Important houses such as the Künstlerhaus Lukas in Ahrenshoop or Wiepersdorf (near Berlin) have often been threatened with closure because of financial straits and cuts in funds, or have actually had to shelve their scholarship programmes temporarily. And yet a writer will still function as a billboard for many hosts. Before accepting a grant, very few writers ask themselves whether they can really identify with the institution in question. And yet their name will later appear in its publications, on its website and so on. Publishing houses too advertise the number and renown of scholarships which a writer has received. Many publishers welcome endowment-sponsored publications as free advertising for their writer.

Moreover, many scholarship announcements are marked by an unpleasant didactic tone: writers are seen as poor little lambs, who should be grateful to be offered a bed, a table and a lamp and to be moved to a "new" and "exciting" environment. In other words, most hosts assume that writers lead solitary existences, live as bachelors, don't have children, don't have favourite meals, don't have allergies, can live and work in any climate and – although one actually denies them any form of sensibility – react quite indifferently to their surroundings, the furniture, the layout, the temporary workplace, the new writing desk, etc.

One problem is the selection of writers. Many heads of institutions based abroad – such as the Goethe institutes – have been living outside Germany for so long that they lack a close view of the literary business and can't judge whether authors are worthy of being invited or not. Their choices are based on the cultural pages of the big newspapers and on recommendations. I was thus once invited to Sao Paulo with a book entitled "Café Brazil" – the book referred, however, to a café by this name in Berlin. Nevertheless, I took pleasure in the trip to Brasil.

Because of the distance to the motherland and its literary scene, there often emerges a kind of *Feuilletonliteratur* propaganda, i.e. literature dictated by the major papers's cultural pages. Only those writers get invited, and thus get chosen as unofficial representatives of Germany, whom a few literary popes and cultural tsars have already blessed at home with a seal of

approval. This can lead to a certain monotony, lopsidedness and boredom in programmes. But the major problem with what at first sight appears to be such generous scholarships is the fact that writers are expected to do two things during their stay which, however, positively exclude one another: to write a crowning new work – and to show a barely-contained interest in their new surroundings, their new fellow-men, the other country (for overseas scholarships); one should even follow a language course, no: one should already have followed one, at home... and of course, during the stay one shouldn't keep on spinning some old yarn, but one should get "inspired" by the new surroundings. The host, of course, would like to be able to say about the new bestseller: "This book could not have been written without our scholarship".

That explains the endower's preference for applications which clearly refer to the writer's interest in this or that specific place. Were a writer to be honest and simply write that "at home the phone keeps ringing, the neighbours are at the front door and the kid is getting on my nerves: I just need a four-week break, to finish off the novel", he or she certainly would not get the coveted scholarship.

The endowers's longing for texts written *in situ* is all the more absurd when one considers that very few scholarships extend over a period of two or three months. Even half a year is not enough to write a novel set in Paris, New York, Berlin or Schöppingen (in Nordrhein Westfalen). In other words, following on the end of the scholarship, the writer is expected to keep travelling, which is both costly and expensive, and this at his or her own expense.

Writers are often asked to write an essayistic or journalistic piece about their place of residence. This is often the case with scholarships for urban writers. And the task is often so demanding that the writer can hardly put his own work first. There are endowers who ask for reports on one or other "regional event" twice a week. These are almost always contributions which the author will never be able to put to any other use. The writer is often legally bound to the host and can't use the text elsewhere (albeit for a limited period of time).

A further problem is the fact that many writers no longer write novels on subjects with which they really wish to get to grips – instead, they reside in places and countries which they otherwise, without the invitation, would never have visited. In turn this is reflected in their choice of subject, their research possibilities, and thus in their artistic output. This might be described as a "friendly takeover" since of course no writer is obliged to accept a scholarship

or get inspired by a place, but financial, geographic or institutional circumstances often impose this.

Endowers are usually very proud when authors refer to the place where they wrote. They seem to ignore that one could also see this as a form of latent manipulation – in particular, when the demand is made for texts relating to the region etc. They quite enjoy their role of patron of the arts.

It is desirable that writers and intellectuals go abroad, but at the same time one can't expect them to act as politicians, as junior ministers of foreign affairs. There has been a growing tendency recently to view writers as substitutes for an authority lacking in other fields – primarily politics and religion. In recent years, with their rise to the status of media celebrities, writers have been expected to be able to answer all questions about life. Politicians, entrepreneurs, clergymen have suffered a loss of credibility in recent years. But writers are expected to have a direct, intuitive connection to the universe, to all unanswered questions. The priests of today are artists, who, after their readings, get to hear lifestories, private dramas and long confessions.

How can we prevent war in future?

How can we put an end to the war of the sexes?

When will the Germans really put the trauma of the Second World War behind them?

Why is there never peace in the powderkeg of the Middle East? Why, Frau Dückers?

When, do you think, is God going to experience a real renaissance?

Do you believe that atheists are cynics? Considering how distant to the world artists are, are they cynics?

How is the dialogue between cultures, which is increasingly turning into a clash of cultures, going to develop in the coming decades?

What do you think of Putin's Russia? Please, Frau Dückers, what can one do for the freedom of the press there? Please, I'm anxious to hear what you have to say!

And what do you think of the "Aggressive Far East"? Will my daughter have to learn Chinese?

What's your opinion on man's ability to forgive?

Are you afraid of death?

In the past years I was asked these and many other questions by expectant readers.

But of course, many institutions want to take advantage of the contemporary glorification of artists. There is what has to be described as a naive confidence in the belief that writers can say something interesting about every city, every region, every country, every history. One gets invited to old trainstations and abandoned industrial regions, to lonely islands and to big cities: and everywhere one is expected to be both sociologist and seismologist, both political analyst and historian, and to be able to understand and clearly convey the essence of a place. It's plain infotainment that the writer is expected to deliver. No one wants to read – nor have to sell – the thick history books or the specialized sociological studies which abound in every region. The author should deliver a few impressions in an easily readable form which each and every one can appropriate.

One should remember that fifty years ago neither Thomas nor Heinrich Mann, neither Bertolt Brecht nor Lion Feuchtwanger wrote about California – the state which was their refuge during their exile from the Nazi terror. They all wrote either about Germany or about their specific experience of exile. They produced essays, but neither novels nor plays relating to their new home. It isn't so easy to write about a country in which one is a foreigner, or remains one. The question as to how one could be in a position to portray or capture in writing a region or a country after a three-month scholarship remains open.

Germans are still number one as regards travelling. The combination of bad weather, long winters and high income seems to spur Germans on to this mobility. Perhaps there is here in Germany a particular interest in texts written from the traveller's point of view, from the point of view of the one who's abroad, because so many Germans can share this experience. There is hardly a single German student who has not spent at least one term abroad. This would still be seen as something quite exceptional in other countries, even within Europe. And there's no other country with so many prizes and scholarships for writers. Not only Germans, but German writers too travel more than their colleagues in other countries. Whether one likes it or not, it is thus that only a literature of breathlessness, of transitoriness, of transit can be commissioned. Perhaps one should describe the literature of recent years, which is set overseas, as transit writing or as travel writing. Or perhaps as snapshot literature.

I once had a very positive experience: I had been invited to Israel by the *Kulturstiftung der Länder*. When I returned from the Negev desert, where I had spoken to Bedouins, Professor Frank Stern came to me and said: "Please do me a big favour: after your trip, try not to write a novel about Israel".

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