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## Literatur, Politik, Identität: Literature, Politics, and Cultural Identity (Book Review)

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# H-Net Reviews

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Leslie Bodi. *Literatur, Politik, Identität: Literature, Politics, Cultural Identity*. Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 2002. 606 pp. EUR 39.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-86110-332-5.

Reviewed by Kathrin Bower (Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, University of Richmond)

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*Literatur, Politik, Identität* showcases thirty-five of Leslie Bodi's writings published between 1959 and 2001, ranging from chapter-length articles to three-page notes. Framed by an introductory essay explaining the organization of the volume, and a biographical essay and interview at the book's conclusion, Bodi unequivocally emphasizes the links between his life and his scholarship. Bodi spent his youth and early adult life in Budapest as a multilingual, assimilated Jew with a passion for German literature and intellectual exchange. He lived through the Nazi occupation of Hungary and left Budapest after the failure of the revolution; by 1957, he was in Melbourne, Australia, where he built a career as an interdisciplinary Germanist and established a thriving German studies department at Monash University. Bodi's scholarly interests are almost as wide-ranging as his biography, but common themes connect his entire *oeuvre*. Whether he is writing about Georg Forster, James Cook, or Heinrich Heine, enlightened absolutism in Austria, contemporary Austrian literature, or modern Austrian identity, Bodi constantly points to the links between the concepts that compose the volume's title: literature, politics, and identity.

The collection is divided into five sections, each containing a variety of essays: "German Images of Australia" (on Georg Forster, James Cook, Therese Huber, as well as more general essays on Australia in German literature and German literature in Australia); "Literature and Politics in Germany" (Heinrich Heine, GDR literature, reunification and the Stasi files); "Literature and Traditions of Josephinism" (enlightened absolutism in Austria, censorship practices under Emperor Joseph II, parallels between the thaw of reform absolutism under Joseph II and *glasnost* in the Soviet Union, the links between language and cultural identity in eighteenth-century Austria, and the use of parody in eighteenth-century Austrian literature); "Modern Austrian Literature, Language and Culture" (post-1945 Austrian literature, comic ambivalence,

Thomas Bernhard, Austrian as a standard variation of German, Austria's identity complex as a paradigm, parallels between Austria and Australia); and "Biography" (which includes a biographical essay and an interview). As the preceding list of topics illustrates, Bodi concerns himself with individual personalities and particular historical periods where literary practices assume an overtly political role and where political agendas directly affect the production and dissemination of literature. His other central concern is how the relationship between definitions and perceptions of language and nation influences cultural identity. This last area reflects Bodi's interest in and devotion to both postmodernism and New Historicism, theoretical fields that permeate his more recent writings. Despite his affinity with postmodernism, Bodi's prose is remarkably free of jargon and refreshingly clear. His own multilingualism is demonstrated in the ease of his style in both English and German and is further evident in the scope of the primary and secondary sources he cites. Bodi is impressively well read and up-to-date on many of the recent discussions and debates on national identity and multiculturalism, and his earlier scholarship on enlightened absolutism and the parallels between the political climate of the eighteenth-century Habsburg empire and twentieth-century Eastern Europe is both original and of continued relevance.

The drawbacks to this kind of volume are that the writings are reproduced in their originally published form with no revision or update of the contents, lending some of the essays a kind of Rip van Winkle quality, as if world events had somehow passed them by. The inclusion of multiple essays on the same topic in both English and in German has a downside as well: ideas and themes become repetitive and the rehearsal of the same quotations and turns of phrase makes for tedious reading. The editors of the series would have been better advised to prune back the collection to the most salient essays on each topic. The only advantage to the existing approach

is that it provides the reader with the archaeological pleasure of witnessing the evolution of an idea refined and revised over time, digging forward from the germination of a thesis to its most recent form. The combination of German and English essays is also a mixed blessing (even if the positive endorsement of linguistic pluralism does not escape me), although there is enough overlap in the coverage of a specific topic that even a monolingual reader can get some benefit from the volume.

While Leslie Bodi's scholarship has clearly contributed to the field of Austrian literary and cultural studies and his insights into the relationship between Australia and Austria are productive for considerations of a viable multicultural society, his faith in postmodern pluralism as a healing force in the culture wars appears both optimistic and naïve (terms he himself employs [p. 545]), particularly in light of the latest plagues of ethnic cleansing and religious fundamentalism around the globe.

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