

## THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN PROMOTING A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY: THE AUSTRIAN CASE

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### Abstract

This essay examines the efforts of Austrian writers to make their fellow citizens more tolerant of recent immigrant groups. Postmodern discourses on identity, diversity and cultural difference have shaped debates in Austria about multiculturalism and have encouraged Austrian writers to challenge concepts of national identity and cultural homogeneity and to insist that multicultural and marginalized voices be heard. Like their counterparts in other countries, they encourage the

celebration of difference. In their literary works as well as in political essays both in print and on the world wide web they play a leading role in speaking out against anti-foreigner sentiments and intolerance and they present models of a multicultural and multiethnic Austria in which not only Austria's historical minorities such as Jews, Roma and other groups from the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, but also more recently arrived immigrants and refugees can live together and mutually enrich each other's cultures and lives.

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Like other European countries, Austria has experienced migration in the last decades not only from Eastern Europe but also from Muslim and African countries and has become increasingly a multicultural and multiethnic society. As in other European countries, however, there has been a resurgence of extremist right-wing political parties hostile to foreigners. Throughout Western Europe right-wing nationalism as represented by Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, the Livable Netherlands party in Holland, and the Northern League in Italy has won votes by exploiting fears that foreigners are stealing jobs, causing crime, and undermining a country's way of life. Austria too has been plagued by similar political developments, as the rise of Jörg Haider's anti-immigration Freedom Party demonstrates. From 1999 until its defeat in the November 24, 2002 general elections it formed a ruling coalition in the Austrian government with the ÖVP (the Austrian People's Party). In this paper, I will examine the crucial role that Austrian writers are playing in attempting through their works and through their political engagement to counter these developments and to fight against stereotypes and prejudices. By speaking out for a tolerant, multicultural society that is willing to accept recent immigrant groups and is able to appreciate and respect their cultures they provide strong, ethical leadership. In their literary works, their political essays, and their speeches they sharply

criticize anti-foreigner sentiments and intolerance and they present models for a multicultural and multiethnic Austria in which not only Austria's historical minorities such as Jews, Roma, and other groups from the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, but also more recently arrived immigrants and refugees can live together and mutually enrich each other's cultures and lives.

As in other Western European countries, postmodern discourses on identity, diversity, and cultural differences have shaped debates about these issues in Austria. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which was "a watershed in the recent thinking about cultural difference,"<sup>1</sup> and the work of such postmodern philosophers as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari stimulated thinking about identity and otherness and promoted a respect for the cultures of groups different from one's own. Their thinking has encouraged writers and critics to view the majority discourse critically and to give voice to groups that are marginalized. The work of Charles Taylor in Canada gave an influential philosophical justification for multiculturalism by positioning it within the liberal tradition of political thought.<sup>2</sup> Such postmodern discourses have shaped debates in Austria about identity and multiculturalism and have encouraged Austrian writers and critics to challenge concepts of national identity and cultural homogeneity and to insist that multicultural and marginal voices be heard. Like their counterparts in other countries, Austrian writers

encourage “the celebration of difference and heterogeneity and the assertion of plurality as opposed to reductive unities.”<sup>3</sup> For Austrian writers integration means social and political equality for minority groups: it does not mean that migrants should give up their cultures.<sup>4</sup> In their model for integration they stress “equality and respect for cultural differences.”<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary Austrian writers have long been concerned about many of their fellow citizens’ lack of tolerance for anyone they perceive as an outsider. Ilse Krüger remarks, for example, that some Austrians have again found a common scapegoat; they blame foreigners for any injustice they experience in their lives.<sup>6</sup> Marie-Thérèse Kerschbaumer believes that the postwar concept of an ethnically homogenous national state has created a climate in which ethnic groups are rejected. She fears that in such a climate potential crimes against weaker groups already slumber.<sup>7</sup> The writer and filmmaker Ruth Beckermann blames the postwar focus on “We Austrians” for creating an atmosphere hostile to minorities.<sup>8</sup> She not only holds Haider and the new populism responsible for the marginalization of minorities in Austria but also blames what she terms the frantic search for a homogenous Austrian identity<sup>9</sup> for creating in the post-World War II years a climate that makes it difficult for Austrians to accept cultural, religious, and ethnic differences. Many Austrian writers believe that today’s treatment of

foreigners stems from Austria’s Nazi past. In their view, the intolerance against minorities that led to Austrian complicity in the murder of its Jewish and Roma fellow citizens in the Nazi years still influences Austrian identity and leads to racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism. Ruth Beckermann notes this continuing racism when she observes that Blacks have become the Jews of today.<sup>10</sup>

Several events in the Austrian Second Republic such as the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi Anschluss (annexation) in 1988 and the celebrations for Austria’s millennium in 1996 accelerated an active confrontation with the Nazi past and gave momentum to the debate about how postwar Austrian identity had been formed and what role Austria should play in the New Europe. A major catalyst was Kurt Waldheim’s campaign and election to the presidency of Austria in 1986. This campaign, in which information about Waldheim’s involvement in the Nazi years came to light, was troubling because not only did it show that many Austrians refused to accept any responsibility for their complicity during the Nazi years but it also brought latent anti-Semitic prejudices and xenophobia to the surface, an issue that Peter Henisch addresses in his novel *Steins Paranoia* (1988; *Stone’s Paranoia*, 2000).<sup>11</sup> Another important catalyst that politicized Austrian writers and showed them the urgency of addressing intolerance against minorities was the

murder of four Roma in Oberwart in February 1995. They were killed by a booby-trapped bomb when they tried to remove a racist sign bearing the words “Roma back to India” that had been put up outside their settlement. For many writers this was shocking proof that prejudice against minorities leads to violence.

The electoral success of Jörg Haider’s Freedom Party in 1999 made the debate about what kind of society Austria should become even more urgent. Many Austrians view Haider as a dangerous right-wing extremist. They fear that by promoting a homogenous Austrian society his Freedom Party creates an atmosphere in Austria that is hostile to foreigners and minorities. Through Haider’s leadership the Freedom Party grew from a marginal party into sharing the ruling coalition with the Austrian People’s Party. In his campaigns, Haider promised to stop immigration. He claimed that immigrants take jobs away from Austrians and are responsible for crime. In the 1999 election, slogans on the Freedom Party’s campaign posters included “Stop foreignization” and “Stop the abuse of asylum.” One poster showing Haider and his candidate for prime minister proclaimed “Two real Austrians,” a slogan that emphasized his politics of exclusion. In addition to his history of anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi remarks, Haider is infamous for his anti-immigrant comments. He has declared, for example, that Africans who come to Austria are drug dealers,

that Turks are involved in the heroin trade, and that Russians are expert in blackmail and muggings, to mention only a few such offensive statements. Haider’s followers have expressed similar prejudices. For example, the Freedom Party’s spokesperson for security, remarked in a parliamentary debate in 1999 that Black Africans don’t only look different but are different: it is their nature, she claimed, to be especially aggressive.<sup>12</sup> Such prejudices expressed openly by political leaders have resulted in racist remarks, and even racist behavior, becoming acceptable among portions of the general population.

Although Haider’s success was short lived—in the November 24, 2002 general elections the Freedom Party lost three-fifths of those who voted for it in 1999—it spurred strong protests. Human rights groups such as the Democratic Offensive and SOS Mitmensch organized large demonstrations and regular Thursday evening marches in Vienna to protest against Haider’s policies and against racism and xenophobia and to argue for a civil society and for new elections. They learned to use the World Wide Web effectively to publicize the demonstrations, to disseminate speeches and essays critical of Haider’s policies, and to make people aware of racist and xenophobic attacks. Websites such as that of the Society for Political Enlightenment publicize crimes against foreigners such as the attack in 2001 on two African students who were

studying at the University of Innsbruck and an incident in 2002 when skinheads beat and then urinated on a Turkish man.<sup>13</sup> In this opposition to political developments, contemporary Austrian writers played a prominent leadership role. The signed protests against the ruling coalition and racist policies read like a “who’s who” of the Austrian contemporary literary scene. At the demonstrations, writers such as Doron Rabinovici, Elfriede Jelinek, and Marlene Streeruwitz gave speeches, attacking the racist policies of the Freedom Party. Even a non-political writer like Evelyn Schlag took issue with political developments in her country, as her recent novel *Das L in Laura* (2003; *The L in Laura*) demonstrates.

One of the most vocal writers to articulate the goals of a civil society has been Doron Rabinovici, who was born in Israel. Rabinovici has long spoken out against anti-Semitism in Austria and as early as 1995 he warned about the growing influence of Haider and right-wing extremism in Austria.<sup>14</sup> After the formation of the government coalition with the Freedom Party, Rabinovici spoke at numerous demonstrations. In a speech on February 9, 2001 he sharply criticized the Freedom Party’s emphasis on the “real” Austria with its implications that other Austrians do not belong. He criticized Haider and his party for excluding all those whose name, religion, and skin color seem to them alien. In Rabinovici’s view, the image

of a “real” Austria is an image of an undemocratic, racist Austria.<sup>15</sup> In other speeches he deplored the racism that led so many to vote for Haider and his party. Rabinovici is troubled that the policies of the Freedom Party are directed against the weakest groups in the country and he fears that, if there are no protections for minorities, political terror can arise. He worries that the Freedom Party’s politics not only undermine the principles of parliamentary democracy but also the foundation of the European Union, which, in his opinion, was built on the memory of National Socialist crimes and the rejection of extreme right-wing racism to prevent such crimes happening again.<sup>16</sup> In a speech on June 17, 2000 Rabinovici argued for an inclusive society. He called for a rainbow coalition and stressed: “Our rainbow is not only colorful but we are also the spectrum of a more humane future.”<sup>17</sup>

Other writers have also been active in giving speeches at large demonstrations against racism. In a speech at a demonstration on the Heldenplatz (Heroes’ Square) in Vienna on February 19, 2000 the novelist Marlene Streeruwitz argued that anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and hatred for women are closely related. Through despising women, she believes, people learn also to despise foreigners.<sup>18</sup> Like Streeruwitz, Elfriede Jelinek, who is particularly known for her sharply satirical dramas, links hostility to women with hostility to foreigners. In

both cases, she points out, biology is misused to justify arguments that women and minorities are inferior. Basing prejudice on biological factors means that an individual can never be accepted because he or she will always be considered different. In other speeches, such as on November 12, 1999, at a demonstration against racism and xenophobia, Jelinek spoke out against the Freedom Party's manipulation of people's fear of "foreignization." In addition to her sharply worded speeches, Jelinek also attacks Haider in her dramatic monologue *Das Lebewohl* (2000; *The Farewell*).<sup>19</sup> Although in protest against the political climate in her native country she did not allow her plays to be produced in Austria, she gave permission for this monologue to be performed in Vienna on June 22, 2000, before one of the Thursday demonstrations against Haider and his policies. In this monologue, Jelinek juxtaposes a text that Haider wrote when he gave up the party leadership and returned to Carinthia with passages from Aeschylus' greatest work the *Oresteia*. By contrasting the majestic poetry of Aeschylus with Haider's clichés she deflates and ridicules Haider and all he represents.

In response to such criticisms, Haider counterattacked. He not only reviled his critics as "Nestbeschmutzer" (those who foul their own nests) but also took some to court for slander and libel. One example of his hostile relationship to his critics is the lawsuit

for slander that Haider brought in 1996 against Johannes Mario Simmel, who had accused him of incitement to hate, but Simmel was later acquitted.<sup>20</sup> Another such example is the lawsuit Haider brought recently against the political scientist Anton Pelinka. Because they hope through their criticisms to make Austria a more open and tolerant society, Austrian writers and other opponents regard Haider's epithet for them of being "Nestbeschmutzer" as a title of honor.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to direct political involvement, another strategy that contemporary Austrian writers employ to try to make their fellow citizens understand and be more accepting of recent immigrants is to make them aware of the rich cultural heritage these immigrants bring. One of the leading writers to employ this strategy is Barbara Frischmuth. In her literary works such as the novels *Das Verschwinden des Schattens in der Sonne* (1973; *The Shadow Disappears in the Sun*, 1998)<sup>22</sup> and *Die Schrift des Freundes* (1998; *The Writing of the Friend*), her translations from Turkish, and her essays, Frischmuth hopes to foster cross-cultural understanding and nurture "a genuine interest and a readiness to become spiritually and emotionally involved with the Other."<sup>23</sup> Her belief in the importance of intercultural dialogue and her background in Turkish and Islamic cultures have made her one of the leading mediators of Islamic cultures in German-speaking countries. In her

novel *Kai und die Liebe zu den Modellen* (1979;<sup>24</sup> Kai and the Love of Models) Frischmuth makes her readers aware of the difficulties faced by immigrant children who are torn between two cultures and feel at home in neither. In her ten "Ex Oriente" articles published in 1996<sup>25</sup> her goal is to make her readers appreciate the richness and diversity of contemporary Turkish and other Islamic cultures and the contributions writers from these countries have made to the cultures of their new countries. Since the writers she discusses are "border-crossers," those who have migrated from their countries of birth to Europe, they have a unique perspective on their own and on European culture. Frischmuth argues that if people are prepared to understand each other and develop respect for other cultures, they can coexist peacefully, and through her works she hopes to nurture such mutual understanding and respect. By showing the rich variety of Islamic culture in the present and by stressing the different political and social experiences of these authors in their various countries of origin Frischmuth tries to dispel the commonly held stereotypes in Europe of Islamic culture. Through these articles she reiterates her often-expressed conviction that there are more commonalities between the world of Islam and that of the West than would appear from superficial observations.

Another issue of concern to Austrian writers is the injustice of

Austria's asylum laws, which human rights groups have criticized as too restrictive.<sup>26</sup> Like several writers Josef Haslinger takes issue with his country's asylum policies.<sup>27</sup> He reminds his readers that Austria has always been a traditional land of immigration for people from eastern and southeastern Europe. He argues that the restrictiveness of asylum policies is a conscious destruction of the principle of the universality of human rights. According to international laws and treaties, he observes, refugees are defined as people needing protection. Instead of being willing to grant asylum, however, Austria and other European countries have devised strategies to deport them by labeling them as criminals who are in the country illegally. Haslinger urges writers and intellectuals in Austria and throughout Europe to speak out against such policies and against the stereotyping of refugees as parasites and criminals.

Sharp criticisms of the asylum laws and pleas for a more humane treatment of those seeking asylum appear also in literary works. In her novel *The Writing of the Friend*, Frischmuth criticizes the arbitrariness with which petitions for asylum are routinely rejected in Austria. She mentions the case of a woman from Afghanistan whose mother died because of mistreatment by the mujaheddin and whose five-year old daughter was kidnapped and then killed. The woman's petition for asylum was rejected with the rationale that she

herself had not suffered abuse, only her family members.<sup>28</sup> In his play *Ich liebe dieses Land* (2001; I Love This Country)<sup>29</sup> Peter Turrini addresses the treatment of those seeking asylum. Although the play is set in Germany, Turrini wants to point out problems refugees also face in Austria and throughout Europe. His protagonist, Beni, is a black African from Nigeria who has fled political violence there. In Germany, he is put into a detention center for those awaiting deportation where all he says is “I love this country,” a sentence he continues to repeat even after brutal and demeaning treatment, such as a body search for drugs. The guard tells him (using “du”, the familiar and therefore patronizing form of you) that people like Beni come to Germany and deal drugs and he calls them apes. In his novel *Schwarzer Peter* (2000;<sup>30</sup> Black Peter) Peter Henisch also speaks out against the insensitive and harsh treatment of those seeking asylum in Austria. When the protagonist Peter, who was born in Vienna to an African American father and a white Austrian mother, returns to visit his native city after twenty-two years in New Orleans he loses his Austrian passport and his money and is arrested for playing music without a permit. The police, who cannot grasp that a “real” Austrian can be half black, suspect him of being a drug dealer, and he is imprisoned with other asylum seekers. Henisch describes the humiliating and demeaning treatment they endure, from being arrested, to having their fingerprints taken, to being

forced to submit to body searches. Throughout their ordeal they are treated as criminals.

To combat what Henisch calls in *Schwarzer Peter* (Black Peter) the “we are we and the others are the others” (440) mentality, Austrian writers stress that Austria has long been a multiethnic society. As the historian Harry Ritter observes: “There has never been a single *Austrian* identity, despite popular stereotypes”<sup>31</sup> For many in Austria, the Freedom Party’s stress on “real,” by which it means ethnically pure Austrians, is shocking since it evokes memories of the Nazis’ racial policies. Many writers point out that the notion of a single Austrian identity is nonsense. In an interview in March 2000, Peter Turrini, who, as his name suggests, is of Italian heritage, stresses that there are no so-called “real” Austrians in Austria. He observes: “We are a mixture of Czechs, Hungarians, Slovenes, Italians, and the rest of Europe, especially eastern Europe.” As he points out, Austrian chancellors such as Kreisky, Sinowatz, and Vranitzky were of Jewish, Croatian, or Czech origin and therefore, in his view, typical Austrians. He satirizes those in the Freedom Party who changed their names to make them more German sounding, and, according to their thinking, more Austrian.<sup>32</sup> If anyone should leave Austria, he declares, it should be Haider and his party. He intends to remain because he has the typical Austrian name of Turrini (77).

Other writers offer models for how a multiethnic society might function. For some like Barbara Frischmuth, the pluralist former Austrian-Hungarian Empire provides a possible model for their vision of a multicultural and multiethnic Austria. Frischmuth observes: "Austria was never a completely German-speaking country. Instead, Austria was the first model—and not such a bad model, as one recognizes now—for the coexistence of different peoples."<sup>33</sup> Although she regrets that this model of a multinational state failed, she notes that it worked for a long time. She acknowledges that not everyone viewed this state positively but at least at that time "one had to come to terms with one another" (148).

Like Frischmuth, Henisch in his novel *Schwarzer Peter* (Black Peter) offers a model for a future multicultural society but he situates his in the United States in the multiethnic city of New Orleans.<sup>34</sup> Henisch argues for diverse and multiple identities and for an Austria in which such identities are not threatened, singled out, and deported<sup>35</sup> and he stresses that his novel contains an appeal to discover the other.<sup>36</sup> The novel not only contains a powerful plea for acceptance of those perceived to be other but also presents a model for the fruitful and dynamic cross-fertilization of cultures. In New Orleans, Peter's friend Joe introduces him to jambalaya, a favorite, traditional dish that always contains specific ingredients but which, like the city of New Orleans, is

multicultural because different people add different ingredients to the original recipe. Joe calls such interaction between ethnic groups "the jambalaya principle" since all add their own special ingredients to the original mix (245). Henisch uses this jambalaya principle to suggest a model for how different cultures can live together and mutually enrich one another while maintaining a firm sense of their own identities.

As I hope this brief overview has demonstrated, many contemporary Austrian writers are playing an active and important role in fighting against stereotypes and prejudices and in promoting an open, multicultural society that is willing to accept minorities and their cultures. In their creative works and in numerous essays, speeches, and newspaper articles, contemporary writers criticize how minorities are treated in Austria. They feel a strong sense of responsibility for helping to shape the debate about how Austrians should define themselves and their society. They reject the exclusive and homogenous society they believe that Haider, the Freedom Party, and its extreme right-wing supporters promote and argue instead for an inclusive and heterogeneous one. Elfriede Jelinek observes that artists are adamant that the extreme right wing will never again wield power in Austria. She says: "We say it, we write it, we paint it, we show it, never, never again."<sup>37</sup> In an era where there is skepticism about the effective role literature can play in

society, these writers are convinced that literature can indeed have a significant impact on changing society for the better and they take their role of being the conscience of their country very seriously.

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- <sup>30</sup> Peter Henisch, *Schwarzer Peter* (Salzburg, Vienna: Residenz, 2000).
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- <sup>32</sup> Peter Turrini, “Interview mit Henryk M. Broder,” *Ich liebe dieses Land*, 80.
- <sup>33</sup> Gerlinde Ulm Sanford, “From a Meeting with Barbara Frischmuth,” *Barbara Frischmuth in Contemporary Context*, ed. Renate S. Posthofen (Riverside: Ariadne, 1999) 147.
- <sup>34</sup> As Paul Michael Lützeler observes: “If one looks for models of multicultural identity, one is more likely to find them in Australia, Canada, and the United States than in Europe.” In Europe, he notes, multicultural thinking and behavior are less developed than in these other countries. Paul Michael Lützeler, “Introduction,” *Multiculturalism in Contemporary German Literature*, special issue of *World Literature Today* 69. 3 (Summer 1995): 453-454.
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