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**“UNBIASED APPROACHES, TOLERANCE AND CURIOSITY  
WERE ONCE THE BACKBONE OF UNIVERSITY CULTURE”**



In this issue of P&I, dedicated to the topic of University writing, we are talking with Prof. Dr. Christiane Maria Binder, the very first professor in English Studies from the former East of Germany to be appointed in the West of reunified Germany, the author of (among many other publications) seven monographs in English and in German, including “Bakhtin Re-Visited: Constructions of Identity Through Time and Place in English and New English / Postcolonial Literature” (2020), as well as a travelogue / an autobiography and two children’s books. A university teacher and a true mentor shared her thoughts about the neoliberal university, the prospects of the socratic method in teaching, and her own “rites of passage” with us. Interview by Olga Dzhumaylo.

**The university novel, which is the topic of our issue, appears to be a hybrid of various genres, among them the traditional *Bildungsroman*. Looking back to your student times, how would you describe the lessons you learned during your educational career?**

In my own life – and I am a child of the Cold War, having lived in the East of Germany during the first half of my life, and in the West during the second – I was supported by state education and my artist-parents, but to the same extent I tried to be successful of my own accord in spite of all kinds of obstacles. If I had given in and just accepted (and relied on) what the outward political and structural circumstances had allowed me to do, my life would have been much poorer. The time span between aspirations as a student in Voronezh in 1975 and achievement as a professor in Dortmund in 2023 was a unique experience. I peeped through a little time window within the great flux of mankind and history. Above all I am thankful for having scraped through, lived out and saved my creativity, been able to draw the least bit of happiness out of every item even in depressing situations (which did not just last a few days, but at times quite a number of years). I take pride in having managed to do all this in spite of experiences of bullying, personal humiliation, political discrimination and existential threats, in having filled that time space of several decades in my own way.

**The university often appears as a satirical micromodel of society, and a “state of the nation”. To what extent does a large number of novels that address burning issues, such as the cancel culture, the influence of social media, the trauma culture, etc. reflect social processes in society that you can observe around you?**

By now the conditions for learning and teaching are drastically changed – and not necessarily for the better in spite of various technological advances. The effects of general trends in society don't leave out universities, in fact combine to impact institutions and people in directions that one cannot regard as healthy or embrace uncritically.

And this is exactly why, at least under the present conditions in Germany, it is difficult for me to see universities successfully performing their roles and functions (changed anyway) in the future: as places of creativity (the more so in my field of expertise: foreign languages, literatures, and cultures). Ghost-writing and plagiarism have always been an issue in my academic subject. But in times of ChatGPT it is becoming almost impossible to adequately deal with issues of plagiarism. And, next to that, how to convince students that certain linguistic, scholarly and creative skills and competences still need to be trained and checked at all? Moreover, the currently available translation tools promote the attitude

in consumers that learning a foreign language has become a senseless and unnecessary enterprise, an effort that's not worth it any more. Why teach it at school and why train future teachers at university then? The pandemic in its turn has made digital or distance teaching an accepted teaching device, though in my academic field it turned out to be rather counterproductive to meaningful interaction and mutual communication: it often thwarts attempts at a lively exchange about foreign cultures and the values associated with them. This requires personal physical contact in talk. Last but not least in Germany education does not really function as an investment in the future, as far as school and university are concerned. First of all, international school assessment tests have proved time and again that our school system is not first rate. Besides, it operates in a way that instead of helping to erase social differences and injustices it still perpetuates and cements them: the success of children and young people in their educational and professional careers still largely depends on the social background of their families. And this means that children are not always necessarily better off in life than their parents used to be! This makes the nature of that kind of education look dubious and principally undermines its fundamental value for life. And education (or no proper education) has immediate and long-term consequences for life!

**I know that you often used the socratic method in class. Today, in the era of an**

**active invasion of artificial intelligence in education, many rely on this ancient form of encouraging critical thinking as an opportunity to preserve the culture of intellectual inquiry itself. How do you assess the changes in the educational environment and the new role of the teacher?**

The socratic method can only be practised if efforts on the part of academic teachers are matched by efforts on the part of students. The students' contribution and concept of their role needs to be questioned as well these days. How is education to work when digital natives (complaining about isolation, but actually often shutting themselves off deliberately from the real physical world that would require social interaction and social competences) are ready to share every item of their personal lives uninhibitedly and unashamedly with the rest of the world, but not willing – when it comes to interpretations of issues of language, literature and culture, the negotiation of meaning in texts – to reveal anything of their own (and individual) attitudes towards life, literature and culture and their stance in life? How can a truly meaningful interaction with academic teachers be established then? Even worse: students may not see the necessity (not to mention the intellectual fun) of such academic encounters at all. Besides, the cancel-culture (apart from its political aims) also points to the fact that generally tolerance and openness towards ,the

other' are ever more declining in society. Why allow other people opinions of their own that differ from yours? This is often perceived as an intolerable, unreasonable demand these days. The social media practice educates people towards liking things anyway (otherwise you are out and expressing an independent opinion is perceived as dangerous and would require civil courage). So in 'real life' such discussions and civilized negotiations are rather evaded and avoided. Add political correctness to all this and you cannot but notice that it has become extremely difficult, at times even dangerous to discuss certain issues openly from different perspectives – and this even at universities! But multiperspectivity, unbiased approaches, tolerance and curiosity were once the backbone of university culture.

**Elaine Showalter once wittily named the university people a 'tribe', which talks the same language and shares the same habits. Is the university still a place that shapes your professional identity and promotes the sense of belonging to a community?**

In education, excellent outcomes are the result of interaction: between institutions and people. Ideally universities create conditions that are conducive to developing the potential inherent in students that are both capable and willing to join and engage in a dialogue. However, if the institution fails to do so the individual has to put

in a greater effort, develop strategies of his/her own to make up for the deficits and achieve the aims in spite of suboptimal conditions.

In the past, in a well-working education, what you did, what you engaged in, what you immersed yourself in used to form your character, your personality, and your identity (as for me, I always say: "I am literature, literature is me!"). Yet if a student expects education to be poured into him/her as if into a vessel, without any essential contribution of his/her own, and if in addition to that he/she adheres to the idea that it is totally unnecessary now to have any active knowledge in your brain because you can google things 24 hours a day, then knowledge, skills and competencies stop being an essential part of your life and your identity (and helping you to survive in a world of insecurity, missing orientation and guidance). In terms of life this means to become a helpless leaf in the wind blowing you away in this or that direction. That was never my stance in life! I always refused to be a victim of people, institutions or circumstances!

So at present I am afraid that today professors (and also teachers at school) rather face empty shells as academic audiences and are made to feel that they are the odd ones out when still making claims for dialogue, cooperation and efforts of thinking. In addition to that, digital teaching during the pandemic has demonstrated that it is very easy to hide away in such bizarre classroom situations. Your real presence – literally – is not even required. Accepting this 'culture' actually

means to cancel people and abolish an important part of true education, perhaps the nicest part of any academic training. So where should the mutual gain, the fun of learning and teaching come from then for both professor and student? The sense of attraction, novelty, curiosity, exploration, discovery, personal achievement, expansion and enrichment is gone. What could empower you under such conditions? The more so if, according to the new ideal of a work-life balance work is only seen as an undignified form of modern slavery and oppression, supposedly offering no fun at all. What then if you can't identify through work any more? A fatal concept! Because it robs people of their well-deserved rewards for efforts – and this is the basis of all sound education: to allow a learner to take pride in an achievement, in a good result after an educational effort. If you deny this to learners (from pre-school to academic degree) you cut the roots of education. And so it withers and perishes.

**One of the most important concerns of Western intellectuals such as Martha Nussbaum is about the 'not for profit' ivory tower in danger of falling into ruins. How do you feel about the influence of the university these days, what about the concept of the neoliberal university?**

Judging from the combined effects of various very unfortunate developments and the

omnipresent effects of *Zeitgeist* that cannot be stopped by the single individual any more, lots of important values, helpful rituals and meaningful practices are in danger of being deliberately abolished or simply vanishing because of ignorance and neglect. The concepts, roles and functions of education, universities, educational environments need to be discussed anew (and they are, but often to little avail) and constructive results put into good practice soon. However, especially in education changes often take a long time to produce their effects. Besides, they have long-term consequences that affect the whole next generation. Contrary to that, already during the Bologna process politicians were allowed to meddle with educational affairs whose term of office was much shorter (unless, of course, you vote for them time and again to give them the chance to still see the disastrous effects of their short-sighted decisions).

Neoliberal principles have long since been employed at most universities. Efficiency is an excellent idea – but what that means may be different in the natural and the technical sciences and the humanities (not to mention finances).

**What is your opinion about the recent demand for 'multiple agency' in a teacher, who has to perform diverse roles beyond the one as a true academic, an intellectual and a professional: as a so-called facilitator, a coach and a psychologist?**

Already in the past the university teacher was never 'only' an academic. In my own job it required the skills of educationist, coach, psychologist, lawyer, manager, business accountant and mother. Whether a professor should be a facilitator – well, I don't know. A helper, yes. In the sense of helping people to self-help. As with childhood: a good childhood is not always/necessarily an overall happy and easy one, but an important phase in your life when you learn to develop strategies of your own to cope with difficulties.

**In popular talks about today's various generations – boomers, the Generation X, millennials, buzzers, etc. – these social groups often become part of a simplistic analytical framework that serves to explain everything from empathy to attention span. Do you regard this as useful?**

Today's youngsters – and I have helped many of them in the past in their careers and their lives during my active professional time – will have to discover and pursue their own paths. Yet in order to facilitate this it would be helpful if society stopped bringing the young and the old constantly into conflict with each other. We need to join forces and assist each other instead of regarding one another as parasites and obstacles to a decent future. This is sheer stupidity, irresponsible!

***Apart from knowing you as an academic with a brilliant academic career I also know you as an incredibly creative person. In 2006 you published a travelogue and autobiography about your stay in Russia in 1975/76 („Reise nach Moskowien: Russlandbilder aus dem Kalten Krieg“) and you also organised the exhibition „Foursapes & Chronotopes“ (with photos of yours and some of your colleagues) at the University Library of Technische Universität Dortmund in 2018. If you had the opportunity to go back to the past and choose a different professional path, who would you become?***

Born in the GDR in 1955 I made my professional decisions in a totally different era and at a very early age – and never regretted them, though the working conditions altered dramatically over time. I shaped my career path in the East and the West (being the very first professor coming from the East of Germany who was appointed in the West of Germany in English Studies after German reunification), in the Cold-War era and after. The world I live in now is completely altered. So if I were young again and had to choose my professional path under the present conditions I would perhaps opt out for other directions.

**You have just prepared your new book for publication. Tell us about it.**

Since my retirement in 2022 I have worked on several more book projects. Addressed now to a broader and not exclusively academic audience, written in German and not in English, on topics across history and many cultures. The book that appeared in 2024 was on autumn: “Der Herbst: Sweet though in sadness“. Literarisch-visuelles Psychogramm einer Jahreszeit. The one to appear in 2026 is on graveyards and their ambivalent culture, once more accompanied by photos of my own.

**During our last meeting in Dortmund ten years ago, we strolled along the alleys of the Ostpark. You drew my attention to tombstones erected in honour of women who once earned themselves respect as educated representatives of their profession. In which way you deal with this topic?**

For me, cemeteries are little islands floating between life and death, past and present, mourning and joy, remembering and forgetting, noise and quiet. Females play a significant role on them – in various manifestations and functions: as dead people, buried there (e.g. on the Ostpark in Dortmund opposite my flat), as funeral decorations (statues, sculptures) and as the addressees of ambiguous inscriptions on tombstones. The graves have a lot to tell us about the lives of remarkable women – commendable wives of important husbands and public figures

or females who were important in their own right already. I have been exploring the Ostpark since 2013 and over time the females have almost become sisters to me during my frequent walks, foto safaris, encounters and talks with all kinds of people on that ground which is a fascinating mix of cemetery and English landscape garden, park and museum – one of the nicest graveyards in Germany. So I am also telling my own graveyard stories in this book. It deals with death, with sickness, old age, isolation and dying, yes, but at the same time with the daily joys and the beauty of the mundane, the fleeting happy moments in life, and – very importantly – the survival strategies of humans across history, countries and cultures in times of hardship and crisis. These are also my own strategies! And hopefully the young will likewise find their own ways of leading happy and successful lives in every respect!



Voronezh, autumn 1975

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