

## **Refusing to be the Other: Interculturality as ‘Belgitude’ in German-Speaking Minority Literature in Belgium**

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### **Abstract**

In the postnational constellation of Europe, a vigorous resurgence of minority and regional culture can be observed. This is also the case for the German minorities in Belgium. Through a close reading of selected literary texts from German-speaking minority authors in East Belgium (Freddy Derwahl and Leo Wintgens), I will discuss the status of the literary representation of minority culture as a space (be it geographic, cultural, linguistic, political, social, ethnic, institutional, ideological, or aesthetic) in which global and local forces interact. The border region these German-language authors write from play an important role in their conception of Europe as a multicentered space of democratic values. In this paper, I will investigate how aesthetic forms and cultural expressions engage with and shape the ongoing redefinition of collective identity represented in German-Belgian minority literature. National imagemes of Germany and Belgium offer an insight into the self understanding and social consciousness of the German-speaking minority and the historicity of their literary texts. By focusing on the hyphen in ‘German-Belgian’, I challenge the discourse that locates minority literatures as marginal, or ‘Other’ in relation to their home countries, in relation to one another, or in relation to German literary culture. Created by a perceived center, and imposed upon a perceived margin, the term ‘Other’ is, I argue, a space that lacks the potential for conversation or for finding common ground. The interculturality and multilinguality in German-speaking minority literature are no sign of marginality, they are, on the contrary, the main characteristic of ‘belgitude’, of an uneasy Belgian identity. In this way, I want to reflect on the concept of transcultural dialogue/interaction in literary texts and address lacunae in the field of imagology, the study of the formation of images, national awareness and stereotypes.

**Keywords:** Belgium, Europe, German, literature, identity, memory, minority, multilingualism, borders

### **1. The Literary Representation of East Belgium**

This paper deals with the connection between memory, language and collective identity in the contemporary prose and lyrical poetry of the so-called ‘Eastern Cantons’ (*Ostkantone*) of Belgium. Before I begin my analysis I would like, by way of an introduction, to cast some light on the

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geographic and historical localization of this German-speaking area. When reference is made to the German-speaking community in Belgium there is often a surprised reaction, as the fact that German is an official national language in Belgium is still not widely known. Alongside the majority of the Dutch- and French-speaking population there are also around 75000 German-speaking Belgians who make up less than 1% of the overall Belgian population – which amounts at the moment to slightly less than 10.5 million inhabitants. Belgium is a federal state in which the German-speaking region officially and autonomously represents the German-speaking Belgians, enjoying independent responsibility in areas such as education, culture, employment and social affairs. The region consists of two geographically separate areas: the Eupen area in the North, bordering on Germany and the Netherlands, and the relatively sparsely populated Belgian Eifel, which shares its borders with Luxemburg and Germany. The region, which fell under Belgian sovereignty after the First World War (in 1920) in accordance with the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, was annexed in 1940 and thus reintegrated into the German Reich. After their liberation from the National Socialist regime the three cantons of Eupen, Malmedy and St. Vith were reincorporated into the Belgian State. In this period the Belgian authorities undertook extensive measures of cleansing and assimilation<sup>1</sup> accompanied by a wave of Frenchification in the educational and administrative systems. In public life the German language was thus forced to some extent into the background. It was only after the enactment of the new language laws in 1963 that the German language was again fully recognized as a language of education and administration.

As a result of its eventful history and borderline situation within the Belgian State the German-speaking language minority found the process of discovering its identity particularly difficult. Right up to the present day the traumatic reference to the National Socialist past and the feeling of not being fully accepted as Belgian citizens runs like a red thread through contemporary East Belgian literature. The special language situation in a country in which Dutch and French are dominant is reflected in the frequently discussed tense dynamics of regional minority and supra-regional national identity.

In what follows I would like to trace the relationship between regional memory, language awareness and collective identity in the German-language minority of Belgium, using selected texts from contemporary East Belgian literature. In the first part I deal with the problem of memory and identity in German-language Belgian literature. In the second part of this paper, I enquire into the significance of the concept of 'homeland' (*Heimat*) in contemporary East Belgian literature. Finally, I will conclude this paper with a number of general remarks on the relation between alterity and interculturality.

## 2. Memory, Language and Identity

Literary texts can be regarded as media transmitting the collective memory of a culture, nation or group. They fulfil certain cultural functions such as for example the constructive mediation of versions of the past or the construction of collective identity.<sup>2</sup> With regard to the question of the Belgian, German, or German-speaking identity of the language minority, East Belgian literature is characterized by the Belgian journalist Hubert Jenniges as an example of the ‘schizophrenic psychogram of the East Belgian soul’, which was always caught between two stools in the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

The situation of the German-speaking Belgians after the end of the Third Reich is of decisive importance for their complex identification with the Belgian State. The German-speaking population wanted to be assimilated as swiftly as possible and to be more Belgian than the Flemings and the Walloons. These strivings for assimilation by the local population were not seldom accompanied by the suppression of painful experiences in the past. In the first post-war edition of the German-language Belgian newspaper *Grenz-Echo* of 24 March 1945 the hope was expressed – not without pathos – that it would be possible after the end of the war to leave the National Socialist past behind and to work for the development of a common Belgian fatherland:

Under the radiant sun of our newly gained freedom may... all well-meaning people unite with us for the wellbeing of our homeland, which claims its place within our beloved fatherland.

Long live Belgium!  
Long live our beloved King Leopold!  
Long live our Prince Regent Karl!  
Long live our allies!<sup>4</sup>

The problem of the changing national and collective identity can be traced in Freddy Derwahl’s novel *Bosch in Belgien* (2005). The life of Robert Bosch, the protagonist of Derwahl’s story, and of those in his immediate environment presents in a paradigmatic fashion the course of the history of the German-speaking community. Bosch’s grandfathers fought for the Kaiser and the Belgian King Albert I during the First World War. His father did compulsory military service under the National Socialists, for which he was reviled by French-speaking men of his age as a traitor and a ‘boche’ – hence the ironic title of the book: ‘Bosch in Belgien’. He had an equally profound mistrust of both the Belgian State and his teachers. Robert Bosch’s feeling that he has no fatherland is particularly pronounced. Derwahl relates the chequered history of the German minority in Belgium. The title of his

picaresque novel *Bosch in Belgien* is evidently a play on Ernst von Salomon's ironic work *Boche in Frankreich* (1950).<sup>5</sup>

The collective East Belgian identity was traumatically affected by the wild persecutions following the Second World War, which hit the German-speaking minority harder than the Flemings and the Walloons. In the first chapter of Derwahl's novel – entitled 'The King' – the cool relationship of the Belgian king to his German-speaking subjects becomes evident when the king visits Eupen. He sees the Eastern Cantons as 'a little land full of non-citizens without a fatherland.'<sup>6</sup> It does not escape the attention of the little Albert Bosch against this background that the young King Baudouin 'could only raise a short sparse smile for the ovations accorded to him.'<sup>7</sup> The Mayor of Eupen, Kisteman, then addresses the head of state full of embarrassment: 'Sire, this is your people.'<sup>8</sup> The reserved manner of the monarch is all the more painful as the celebration in Eupen was specifically intended to draw attention to the indispensable East Belgian loyalty to the Belgian fatherland. 'Its message left no doubt about what was being celebrated: the final national solution, the ultimate decision to be Belgian after the failure of Hitler's "Back to the Reich" (*Heim ins Reich*) decree and centuries of humiliation spent moving back and fro between two nations.'<sup>9</sup> But the desire to merge once and for all and without distinction into the Belgian nation expressed in the loud ovations only met with the distrust of the Belgian head of state.

In the year 1983 the Council of the German-speaking Community (*Rat der deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft*) was founded. The Council is a legislative organ whose decrees have the force of law in the German-language region. It has more or less the same range of competence as the regional parliaments of the Dutch and French language communities.<sup>10</sup> The foundation of the Council was not the product of East Belgian strivings for autonomy; its creation must rather be seen against the background of the Walloon-Flemish conflict. The process of federalization which grew out of the disputes over competencies and language unexpectedly bestowed an unforeseen autonomy on the German-speaking Belgians. The original name of the organ was 'Council of the German Cultural Community' (*Rat der deutschen Kulturgemeinschaft*) but it was renamed in order to abjure any kind of link with Germany or with the concept of the 'Germandom Abroad' (*Auslandsdeutschum*).<sup>11</sup> In this context we find the following passage in *Bosch in Belgien*:

The dominant subject of debate was the question whether this "cultural community" should be characterized as "German" or "German-speaking" [...] The orientation of a new generation was at issue, but old wounds and sensitive boundary issues also played their part. A detailed exchange

of opinions pro and contra took place, but not only this; there was also a litany of all the imaginable reproaches and suspicions which a difficult history had washed up and left behind in this narrow stretch of country. Finally the majority parties carried the day with their proposal in favour of “German-speaking”. It signified a fine but striking difference. It had something to do with yearning and facts.<sup>12</sup>

The yearning is the desire to obliterate the historical link with Germany and to ring down the curtain on the National Socialist past. Especially in present-day Europe it seems that the distinction between regional or sub-regional identity on the one hand and supra-national identity on the other has been abolished.

### 3. **Homeland**

The German-speaking literature of East Belgium reflects a state of permanent tension between regional and supra-regional tendencies. In recent years three authors have dealt with the East Belgian past in quasi-autobiographical development novels: Freddy Derwahl in *Bosch in Belgien* (2005), Leo Wintgens in *Wege aus Sumpf* (2001) and Hannes Anderer in *Unterwegs zu Melusine* (2007).<sup>13</sup> These works tell the story of the childhood and youth of the protagonists in the Eastern Cantons. At the same time the complex of themes related to the idea of ‘homeland’ play a prominent part in the narrative. In Leo Wintgens’ novel the main character –Pééke or Peter – experiences a distinctive feeling for his East Belgian homeland through the use of the Low German dialect of the Göhl valley, which runs like a red thread through the story. In Derwahl’s novel the personal history of Robert Bosch as a member of the German-speaking minority in Belgium is in the foreground of the account. Robert’s search for identity also reflects at a social level the finding of autonomy in the Eastern Cantons. There are frequent reflections on the contemporary history of the German-speaking community and detailed accounts of Belgian politics in the novel. Hannes Anderer’s story, on the other hand, deals with the oppressive atmosphere of a Catholic-conservative environment. The development of personality is impressively linked to the structural development of the Belgian state. Again and again the traumatic experience of the Second World War is given a central position, as in as in Emil Gennen’s poem on the debris of war ‘Rückkehr in die tote Stadt’, which dramatically presents the destruction wrought in the town of Sankt Vith in 1945:

Only hesitantly do they return  
With horse and wagon and chattels

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Bereft of hope, consolation and happiness  
In these dark days

And all they find is debris  
Misery, need, lament  
All is destroyed, wrecked, lost  
Spirited away at a single blow

They pluck up new courage  
And gradually the town grows  
Resting strongly within its walls  
And finding peace again<sup>14</sup>

The recollections of the Second World War, which was particularly bloody and destructive in East Belgium in its final phase on account of the Ardennes Offensive, continues to be a central complex topic in the contemporary literature of East Belgium. The traumatic experience derives from the devastation of many places in the Eastern Cantons and from the fact that around 8000 East Belgians served in the German Army after they had been reinstated as citizens of the Reich.

In his bilingual French-German volume of poetry *Atemlängen. Respirations*, Bruno Kartheuser, the editor of the leading East Belgian literary periodical *Krautgarten*, lends a powerful but vulnerable voice to the ambiguity and ambivalence of the concept of 'homeland':

Fatherland, homeland  
Rust encrusted  
Railing<sup>15</sup>

The ambiguity of the concept of a homeland finds a powerful voice here. Rust is on the one hand a sign of decay and transience, and a railing, of course, protects one from falling and, in a transferred sense, offers something to hold on to in uncertain times. Homeland has become a disreputable concept in the German-speaking region at the present moment. It seems antiquated, backward-looking and conservative. The question this poem puts is, therefore, the following: Should the rust simply be removed and painted over or should one take the decisive step of pulling down the railing in order to throw off the straitjacket of the idea of the homeland?

In view of personal experiences made during the war or the immediate post-war period an entire older generation of Belgian authors has adopted a negative – or at least extremely critical – stance towards the romantic, popular feeling of a homeland. In an article Kartheuser objects to an ecstatic use of the concept. Against this background he writes:

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The entire homeland is an illusion. It is always only a matter of the individual sum of fragmented elements. These are locations of all kinds, moments of happiness in the past stored in memory and enthusiastic creative activity, the experience of spiritual places and the more or less sovereign mastery of situations.<sup>16</sup>

More recent authors deal with the theme of homeland in a completely different way. For writers like Dietmar Souss or Ingo Jacobs who grew up in the 1970's or 1980's the subject of 'homeland' is not, or not primarily linked with painful memories of National Socialism. Instead they emphasize the transcultural openness and carnivalesque hybridity of the minority culture from a post-modern or post-national perspective. An important topos in contemporary East Belgian literature is in fact the representation of the German-speaking border region as a third space in which languages, countries and cultures touch and find one another. An illuminating example of this kind of presentation can be found in the work of Ingo Jacobs, born in 1969. In his prose piece 'Dreiländereck' (Three Country Point), originally written in 2008 for the Flemish daily newspaper *De Standaard*, he tellingly says:

Where three countries meet one another a fourth does not arise. This much I understand. [...] Where three countries meet a stone arises. On this stone people write in the name of the countries the names of the countries in their names. Everyone knows the names. They do it in their names. The names have been recorded. They are fixed, at least for a while. The stone is beautiful, although it is actually ugly. It is really not perfect, but beautiful nonetheless. It has no shape, but it is a symbol. The symbol radiates, it carries weight, in their names; I make a note of that. That is the Three Country Point, my mother says. Here Belgium, Luxemburg and Germany touch one another. Can countries touch one another? That is a fine place I thought, and laughed.<sup>17</sup>

The emphasis on the German-speaking border region as a transnational area of contact that – like a tender loving touch – opens up the neighbouring countries for one another, expresses the possibility of living peacefully together. Contemporary German-speaking Belgian literature is accordingly characterized virtually without exception by a critical distance from ethnic nationalism and narrow-minded regionalism, holding fast to the

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idea of ‘belgitude’ as an emancipatory principle of intercultural tolerance and cosmopolitan openness.<sup>18</sup>

In this way the East Belgian authors resist the Walloon-Flemish language conflict and it becomes evident that they see themselves as self-aware but often melancholic embodiments of a unitary Belgium, which increasingly seems to have become a chimera of times past. In spite of their attachment to their homeland and the local reference of their literary topics the texts of East Belgian authors can consequently be termed anything but provincial.<sup>19</sup> Instead they celebrate the cultural variety of Europe to which, for example, the author Bruno Kartheuser confesses his commitment:

The possibility that we have several languages and cultures here within a narrow space presents in all respects an opportunity, as long as it is seen as enrichment and not as a restriction or obstacle – this is particularly true of artistic, literary and intellectual work.<sup>20</sup>

In comparable fashion Leo Wintgens’ trilingual poem ‘land ohne grenzen’ [sic] emphasizes the openness and multilingual character of the German-speaking region of Belgium: ‘Pays/ sans frontières/ de barrières/ il n’y en a plus.’<sup>21</sup> The cultural hybridity of the Belgian Eastern Cantons on the periphery of the German-language area is also presented positively by Dietmar Sous (born 1952). Although it insists that it belongs to Belgium, the German-speaking community as a small language minority in a country without patriotism or a shared historical narrative cannot, according to Sous, express the collective self-understanding with chauvinist pathos or nationalistic excesses.<sup>22</sup> It is precisely the indefinability of Belgian identity which again and again gives rise among many authors to self-irony as a humorous compensatory strategy for the lack of national *grandeur*.<sup>23</sup> The surreal and anarchic, indefinable nature of Belgian identity is *ex negativo* one of the main characteristics of national self understanding: ‘Maybe Belgium is a *non-pays*, which is exactly what protects its citizens from the dangers and excesses of “real” nationalism and chauvinism.’<sup>24</sup>

At the end of his essay entitled ‘Belgien’ Sous emphasizes in a similar way that the lack of the cultural frame of reference of a classic national state – with its national heroes, its presentation of a glorious past and its great cultural figures – makes up the charm and even the character of ‘belgitude’. The modesty and limited visibility of Belgium are in this way ironically given a positive turn:

Belgians speak German badly; this is also true of the German-speaking Belgians in Eupen and St. Vith. The Flemings and the Walloons don’t understand each other

very well either [...] The Belgians have quite good cyclists and football players but no Beethoven, Beckenbauer or Goethe. Nobody knows any Belgian films, let alone Nobel Prize winners. I want to stay here forever.<sup>25</sup>

#### **4. The Intercultural Field of Tension Between the Own and the Alien**

Contemporary literature from the Eastern Cantons can be seen as a prime example of a hermeneutic dialectics precisely because the transformation of a difficult Belgian identity into a complex regional and private identity takes place in it and every individual matter is directly linked to the historical context. Literature as a public medium should thus help to ensure that one's own history and the origins of the collective identity – no matter how it is defined – are not forgotten:

Whenever the Eupener (and the German-speaking Belgians in general) would like to hide behind their curtains without knowing anything or having been anything, it is therefore necessary to raise one's voice, to take action and to face the dangers of the deadly creeping tendency to forget.<sup>26</sup>

On account of the closeness and the presence of other cultures but also of cultural delimitations East Belgian literature is a special area which, on the one hand, is clearly different from francophone and Flemish literature in Belgium, but, on the other hand, it is no less impossible to assign it to the German literature of the Federal Republic of Germany. The overlapping of the own and the alien creates a powerful and expressive literary material, which paradigmatically illustrates the intercultural field of tension of the border regions of multilingual Belgium.

#### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> The post-war period was characterized by the pursuance of actual and supposed collaborators, which took place in an atmosphere of profound mistrust. The special situation of the population resulting from the annexation by the Third Reich in 1940 was insufficiently taken into account and the effects of the persecutions have left their traces up to the present day (see U. Tiedau, 'Die Rechtslage der deutschsprachigen Bevölkerung in Belgien nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg' in M. Kittel et al. (eds.), *Deutschsprachige Minderheiten 1945. Ein europäischer Vergleich*. R. Oldenbourg Verlag,

München, 2007, p. 435). At that time a law was passed by the Belgian authorities which made it relatively easy to deprive the German-speaking inhabitants of the Eastern Cantons of their Belgian citizenship. The law referred specifically to the Eastern Cantons and created a special legal situation for its population. From a democratic perspective this was a legally dubious procedure. The German-speaking minority in Belgium was relatively harder hit by these cleansing measures than the Flemish and Walloon population. For more detailed information on the cleansing policy of the Belgian authorities, which aimed to investigate all kinds of collaboration with Germany and to punish it severely, see G. Kleu, *Die Neuordnung der Ostkantone Belgiens 1945-1956. Politik, Kultur und Wirtschaft in Eupen, Malmédy und St. Vith*. Klartext, Essen, 2007, pp. 37sq.

<sup>2</sup> See A. Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen. Eine Einführung*. J. B. Metzler, Stuttgart/Weimar, 2005, pp. 143sq.

<sup>3</sup> See A. Fickers, 'Gedächtnisopfer. Erinnern und Vergessen in der Vergangenheitspolitik der deutschsprachigen Belgier im 20. Jahrhundert' *Zeitenblicke. Online-Journal für die Geschichtswissenschaften*, vol. 3, 2004, viewed on 15 April 2009, <http://www.historicum.net/zeitenblicke/2004/01/fickers/index.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from H. Warny, 'Neustart ohne den Chef (Grenz-Echo 1945-1965)', in *Zwei Jahrhunderte deutschsprachige Zeitung in Ostbelgien*. H. Warny et al., GEV, Eupen, 2007, p. 81. All translations in this article, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

<sup>5</sup> In Derwahl's thriller *Der Mord im Brüsseler Hof* (2002) an East Belgian politician called Jean M. Bosch already occurs, who embodies the uncomfortable special position of the East Belgians in regard to the discussion on the status of the German-speaking minority within the Belgian federal state structure. The Eastern Cantons are a plaything in the cynical power politics of the Flemings and Walloons. By way of an example it is possible to cite the antagonism between the French-speaking Minister of Culture and the Dutch-speaking Minister of Domestic Affairs in regard to East Belgian politics, as illustrated by the following text: 'Whenever Van Bruylaents, who comes from Charleroi, ardently attested that "the clever little German speakers" were an integral part of Wallonia, the Ghent politician Binnenmans called for a quasi extraterritorial statute "free of francophone patronizing". However, massive personal interests were at the back of all this. The Flemings and the Walloons each wanted to weaken the other. Neither of them was motivated by a special love for East Belgium.' (F. Derwahl, *Der Mord im Brüsseler Hof*. GEV, Eupen, 2002, p. 92)

<sup>6</sup> F. Derwahl, *Bosch in Belgien*. GEV, Eupen, 2005, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> See Tiedau, *op. cit.*, p. 481.

<sup>11</sup> In *Bosch in Belgien* the protagonist Robert Bosch stresses both his cultural attachment to his German mother tongue and his civic loyalty to the Belgian state: 'I was born in 1946, as a Belgian therefore, in the German-speaking community of Eupen. I was born into a family which was anti-Nazi in a small but non-heroic way and in the 1960's we raised our voices for the first time together with others to demand something like equal rights, above all in language and cultural matters. We insist, however, that we did so within a Belgian context.' (Derwahl, *Bosch in Belgien*, p. 92; in italics in the original)

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 36-37; cf. *ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>13</sup> For a further account of the significance of the thematic field 'homeland' in the work of Freddy Derwahl, Hannes Anderer and Leo Wintgens, see A. Strasser, 'Nachwort', in *Mit leichtem Gepäck. Eine Anthologie der ostbelgischen Gegenwartsliteratur*. A. Strasser (ed.), Edition Krautgarten, Eupen, 2007, p. 206.

<sup>14</sup> E. Gennen, 'Rückkehr in die tote Stadt', in *Grundlegung einer Geschichte der Literatur in Ostbelgien. Bild der sprachlichen Wechselwirkung im Zwischenland*. L. Wintgens (ed.), GEV, Eupen, 1986, p. 262. Gennen's poem 'In Frontnähe 1944-45' occupies an important place in the lyrical treatment of destruction and loss (see E. Gennen, 'In Frontnähe 1944/45', in *Mit leichtem Gepäck. Eine Anthologie der ostbelgischen Gegenwartsliteratur*. A. Strasser (ed.), Edition Krautgarten, Eupen, 2007, pp. 54-55).

<sup>15</sup> B. Kartheuser, *Atemlängen. Respirations*. Edition Krautgarten, St. Vith, 1999, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> B. Kartheuser, 'Omnia mea. "Heimat" – Prüfung eines verrufenen Begriffs', in *Völkerfrei. 25 Jahre KRAUTGARTEN. Ein Lesebuch*. K. Wieglerling (ed.), Edition Krautgarten, Eupen, 2007, p. 197. Freddy Derwahl also shares the critical attitude towards a romanticizing concept of 'homeland' when he expressly opposes the idea of an East Belgian nation: 'The Belgian concept of "nation" itself has already become questionable for reasons we regret and from which we in the meantime have to suffer. No, an East Belgian nation could only be an unbelievably falsifying synonym for a cultural ghetto. And I can imagine nothing worse than that this should happen to us.' (F. Derwahl in B. Kartheuser, *Ostbelgische Autoren im Portrait*, p. 18; italics in the original)

<sup>17</sup> I. Jacobs, 'Dreiländereck'. *Krautgarten*, vol. 53, 2008, p. 58. In a talk with Bruno Kartheuser in connection with the anthology *Ostbelgische Autoren im Portrait* Freddy Derwahl emphasized in a similar fashion the advantages for his activities as a writer of the border situation of the town of Eupen, as it

enabled transcultural and transnational exchange processes: ‘As a town Eupen has strongly experienced its border situation in the course of history, and isolation is not a good tradition here [...] I believe that the geospectrum could scarcely be more favourable and for this reason Eupen is not a bad place to work in as a writer.’ (Derwahl in Kartheuser, *Ostbelgische Autoren im Portrait*, p. 19; in italics in the original)

<sup>18</sup> Against this background it is highly illuminating that in *Bosch in Belgien* the East Belgian politician Weykmans is presented to foreign dignitaries by his Flemish and Wallonian colleagues as ‘a Belgian speciality.’ (Derwahl, *Bosch in Belgien*, p. 286) In a similar fashion the region of the German-speaking community stands outside the incessant tensions between the two main language groups and achieves the status of a symbolic epitome of a utopian Belgian nature: ‘More than ever Weykmans believed in his “little kingdom” which he depicted as an idyllic sunny corner in the chaos of the Belgian language dispute.’ (ibid., p. 287)

<sup>19</sup> The authors to whom attention has been drawn resist without exception the idea of a homogeneous German-language nation in East Belgium. Consequently they adopt a highly (self-) critical stance towards the political and cultural autonomy of the region. Gerhard F. Heuschen, for example, ironically calls the German-language community with its parliament for 70000 inhabitants an ‘operetta state.’ (G. F. Heuschen in B. Kartheuser, *Ostbelgische Autoren im Portrait*, p. 40; in italics in the original) Freddy Derwahl for his part underlines the nonsense of national or nationalistic strivings in East Belgium: ‘An East Belgian nation could only be an unbelievably falsifying synonym for a cultural ghetto.’ (F. Derwahl in ibid., p. 18; in italics in the original)

<sup>20</sup> B. Kartheuser in ibid., p. 59; in italics in the original.

<sup>21</sup> L. Wintgens, *Grundlegung einer Geschichte der Literatur in Ostbelgien. Bild der sprachlichen Wechselwirkung im Zwischenland*. GEV, Eupen, 1986, p. 279.

<sup>22</sup> The transculturality, which is based on reciprocal exchange and cultural *métissage*, is made possible precisely on account of the self-perception of Belgium as a laboratory of European multiculturalism and multilingualism, as a small hybrid Latin-Germanic country in the middle of Europe with Brussels as its political centre, surrounded by self-conscious nation-states such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands. With reference to the situation in East Belgium Jeroen Dewulf suggests: ‘This lack of national patriotism in Belgium made it easier to engage in cross-border activities.’ (J. Dewulf, ‘O liebes Land, o Belgiens Erde: The Development of the German-Speaking Community in Belgium Reflected in the Light of the Flemish Struggle for Autonomy’. *German Studies Review*, vol. 32, 2009, p. 75).

<sup>23</sup> For a critical treatment of the historical roots of the difficult and uneasy Belgian identity see J. Leerssen, 'Image and Reality – And Belgium', in *Europa Provincia Mundi. Essays in Comparative Literature and European Studies Offered to Hugo Dyserinck on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*. J. Leerssen and K. U. Syndram (eds.), Rodopi, Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA, 1992, pp. 281-291.

<sup>24</sup> T. Verschaffel, 'Belgium', in *Imagology. The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey*. M. Beller and J. Leerssen (eds.), Rodopi, Amsterdam/New York, 2007, p. 112; italics in the original.

<sup>25</sup> D. Sous, 'Belgien', in *Mit leichtem Gepäck. Eine Anthologie der ostbelgischen Gegenwartsliteratur*. A. Strasser (ed.), Edition Krautgarten, Eupen, 2007, p. 140.

<sup>26</sup> Derwahl, *Bosch in Belgien*, p. 103; italics in the original.

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