

Artes Liberales

THE FREEDOM OF THE ARTS

Legend surrounds the German city of Heidelberg. The town, which is situated on the banks of the Neckar river, is simultaneously celebrated as the epitome of German Romanticism and as a science hub, home to several internationally renowned research facilities.

As Germany's oldest and most famous university town, it is famed for its Baroque old town, spirited student atmosphere, beautiful riverside setting and its evocative half-ruined hilltop castle, which attracts more than 10 million visitors a year. They follow in the footsteps of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century romantics, most notably the poet Goethe, and try to catch the famous 'myth of Heidelberg' somewhere between the castle and the valley of the Neckar.

Britain's William Turner also loved Heidelberg, which inspired some of his greatest landscape paintings. In 1878, Mark Twain began his European travels with a three-month stay in Heidelberg, recounting his observations in *A Tramp Abroad* (1880). Heidelberg's rich literary history, along with its thriving contemporary scene, which encompasses authors, translators, publishing houses, bookshops, libraries, festivals and events, saw it named a UNESCO City of Literature in 2014.

The *Hauptstrasse*, the long pedestrian zone, is crowded with tourists from all over the world. They make their way to the castle, stop in one of the old Heidelberg pubs or simply go shopping in one of the many souvenir shops around. At the end of the *Hauptstrasse* is the *Kornmarkt*, where I find my favourite gem – the bookshop *artes liberales*.

The *artes liberales* is the smallest bookshop I have ever come across, but probably the most well-curated one. Its founder and owner is the philosopher Clemens Bellut who opened this little treasure trove in 2013. Two years later it was awarded the respected honour of 'Germany's Best Bookshop'. Deservedly so. Clemens carefully chooses his selection of books. Around 2 000 works of philosophy, poetry, the arts and science can be found in the 20-square-metre shop in one of the wooden shelves that rise up to the ceiling. It feels like embarking on an intellectual expedition where you can find the classics next to unknown territory, and the dedicated owner is the right expert to accompany this transcendent journey.



Clemens is erudite and always happy to converse with his customers; to enlighten them with his immense knowledge and that of his books. This incredible man with his trademark hat offers the visitor not only a space for reading and thinking, but also a space to meet, to exchange ideas and to relax. Besides his bookshop, this restless intellectual founded another space called *artes liberales – universitas*, where he has initiated a diverse programme that includes readings, talks, scientific colloquia, performances, art shows and concerts. The *universitas* is an open space in the best and freest sense and enables a dialogue between the arts and science, between an incredibly informed audience and curators.

It is a sunny day and the front window of the *artes liberales* is already open, displaying its books to passersby. On one of the two outside chairs, I meet one of Heidelberg's most renowned poets. Rainer René Müller is a local icon and his poetry is a means of coming to terms with the legacy of Nazi-times and the repression of its implications. He was born



in 1949, when post-war Germany was just four years old, when the rubble of war and the smell of corpses were still part of everyday reality. Because of his roots and his Jewish family, German history goes right through his body and soul. His poetry is immersed in a language of injury. An injury many want to simply forget. But there is no comfort in forgetting and the silence of the post-war is a *horror vacui* (fear of empty space) instead. Rainer René Müller traces the injuries of the past, traces his own injured self and its whereabouts in a society of silence and repression. In his poetry he has created an injured language that stretches the German language to its limits and, while doing so, it becomes obvious that he has done it not only out of the sheer passion for the experiment but also bowed to the need to find a new language for the unspeakable, for the *Überlebensschuld* (guilt of the survivors).

Encounters like ours might come as a surprise but feel as if destiny played a role as well, and the interest this fragile man shows in an edition of African contemporary fiction is a connection point in a world that today would rather recognise what separates us. We talk about guilt and survival, about the strength of empathy and perseverance and the enormous power that our underlying injuries offer each of us.

We exchange books. I present our German translation of Niq Mhlongo's novel *Way Back Home*, which I found on one of the shelves, and in return receive a copy of Rainer's small compilation of his poetry. Poetry that blows me away and for the first time I wish I were a poet myself and not just a writer, so that I could translate his verses kindredly into English. His poetical journey is a tour de force through his own and Germany's post-war history and his command of language so acutely senses the pain and impossibility of properly confronting the deadly past.

While we talk, it feels like all these books take part in our conversation, and of course, they do, as so much of what we know we have learnt through reading and reflecting. I realise

that the biggest gift Clemens Bellut offers is that of a safe haven in the midst of this troubled world in which we can freely advance into the deep (un)known interior of ourselves to share and grow together. To connect people through books, to connect writers and book lovers has become the antithesis to our loud and exhausted world and therewith the *artes liberales* has become an irreplaceable space of intellectual life and its spirit will stimulate me until I next return to Heidelberg.

Paths, paths

A din,
this gospel of survivors' guilt

something undercuts us, necessitates this choir,
this murmur of shards, Lessing's splendour,
prologue blue

we have witnessed everything
the squealed on truth, the hanged man
billowing in the wind

who went the Way of the Cross
for one superfluous amen
a truncheoning by the Tarot

we have drunk everything
the bleached out leaden white,
the discharge
issuing from the Thomas side

in the guarded sleep overcome by us
there is a fateful sleep ticket

the left was the side of death
the right was the side of work

Rabbinical,
my dream of the tailor in New York
who might heal
this

– Rainer René Müller, translation by Charl Pierre Naudé



Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by
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