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*Contemporary Migration Literature in German and English: A
Comparative Study* by Sandra Vlasta (review)

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Contemporary Migration Literature in German and English: A Comparative Study. By Sandra Vlasta. Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2016. x + 296 pp. \$128.

Reviewed by Katherine Anderson, Pennsylvania State University

Particularly since the 1980s, Europe has been coming to terms with its identity as a migration destination, a fact that has caused it to critically redefine the way it thinks about nationality. The stereotypical faces of nations have been joined by peripheral citizens, guest workers, asylum seekers, and other migrants from all corners of the earth in fluctuating number since the end of World War II. These newcomers have been instrumental in rebuilding Europe's infrastructure after the devastation of war; now their descendants and successors are helping to rebuild conceptions of nationality, not least with their creative output. Film, literature, art, music, cuisine, and even scholarship are keeping pace with these social fluctuations. Sandra Vlasta has delved into the heart of this cultural revolution with her *Contemporary Migration Literature in German and English: A Comparative Study*, examining novels with the theme of migration to better understand the immigrant experience.

Research on literary developments in the context of migration has focused predominantly on autobiographical details, such as the native language and country of origin of authors. This focus has sparked protest among scholars and authors alike, who feel that the literature produced is valued exclusively by the context that produced it, rather than the intrinsic value of the texts themselves. Further, research on German language texts has focused predominantly on authors residing in Germany. There is relatively little research focusing on the literature produced in the context of migration in Austria.

Vlasta addresses both research lacunae first by analyzing literature not by migration as a context, but migration as a thematic element within the text. Her work seeks to demonstrate that "a corpus of migration literature can be defined using the themes and motifs that occur within the texts" (43). Although reluctant to limit texts according to the biographical information of the authors, Vlasta limits the parameters of her investigation to two comparable national contexts, those of Great Britain and of Austria. By comparing texts from these two contexts, she builds upon the preexisting wealth of scholarship investigating migration literature in Great Britain to provide a sturdy foundation for her analysis of migration literature in Austria. In her analysis of the texts, Vlasta demonstrates first, that the motifs that fall under the theme of migration ultimately unify authors in their migrant

experience, and second, that these motifs simultaneously demonstrate the diversity of the migrant experience.

Vlasta is an adjunct professor at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany. She graduated from the University of Vienna with a doctorate in Comparative Literature in 2008. This monograph is closely related to her dissertation topic, which also compared works in German and English in the context of migration. Vlasta has published on the topics of travelogues, multilingualism and identity, postcolonial literature, and the growing popularity of literature in the context of migration in Austria and Europe. Her work, particularly an article due out this year, examining the power of literary prizes to bring peripheral literatures to the attention of the public eye, is immensely informative and timely.

In her present monograph, Vlasta investigates eighteen novels from eight primary authors, four writing in Austria and four writing in Great Britain. These authors include Dimitré Dinev, Anna Kim, Hamid Sadr, and Vladimir Vertlib from Austria and Monica Ali, Timothy Mo, Preethy Nair, and Caryl Phillips from Great Britain. Vlasta also references the works of authors writing outside these two national contexts to further illustrate her arguments. In an effort to resuscitate and reinvent the theoretical approach of thematology, Vlasta has chosen to analyze these novels not according to form, but according to their shared theme of migration. By using a thematological approach, Vlasta is not ignoring the formal aspects of literature, but rather focusing on those thematic elements of texts that reveal the sociocultural contexts that made these texts possible. This not only reveals the contexts, but also provides an understanding of the (im)migrant experience. Further, Vlasta professes to use this approach in conjunction with other theoretical approaches, such as traditional text analysis, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, history, and memory studies. She makes this connection most notably with reference to Arjuna Appadurai's research on ethnoscaples.

Under the all-encompassing theme of migration, which Vlasta identifies as the unitary topic of her analysis, she identifies further subthemes that serve to unify these texts. Each subsequent chapter, following the explanatory background of the introduction, serves to illustrate one of these subthemes. Vlasta describes the state of scholarship and migration in Austria and Great Britain since WWII in her introduction, focusing in particular on developments in scholarship on migration in the last 30 years and emphasizing the recent shift in politics in both Great Britain and Austria to limit migration. With Chapter 2, Vlasta begins her analysis of the texts, exploring language as a theme in texts written in the context

of migration. She identifies under this theme motifs such as translation, the linguistic ties between parents and their children, and the tongue. Chapter 3 investigates identity and the search for identity in literature of migration expressed by cooking, eating, and food. Chapter 4 explores depictions of the new homeland and Chapter 5 the Global ethnoscares in migration literature that form out of diachronic and cultural encounters. Chapter 6, the Resume, serves as her conclusion, followed by an Appendix containing bio-bibliographical notes on the sixteen authors whose works are included within her analysis.

In her concluding chapter, Vlasta reemphasizes her conviction that literature written in the context of migration can be analyzed, and that migration can be studied as a topic within literary works. While she certainly proves these arguments with her chapters, her work is a rough read, not only with regard to language but also with regard to her argumentation. Each of her content chapters makes compelling observations, but the framework that ties these chapters together is wanting.

Vlasta presents a solid argument for examining the merit of literature based on its thematic content, that of the experience of migration. Her research, which illustrates the vastly diverse migrant experience in the twenty-first century, is very timely in light of the conservative political shifts developing across Europe. In addition, the growing field of scholarship on literature of migration has been plagued since its beginning with finding an appropriate term for naming this literature. Vlasta makes a compelling contribution to this debate with the term *Literatur im Kontext von Migration* (or literature in the context of migration), which she argues places less importance on the background of the author and more on the texts and their thematic content.

I would consider this volume for the references, and for the concise summaries of previous scholarship to serve as an introduction to the field; however, particularly her introductory chapter should be supplemented by additional research. Vlasta points out interesting and compelling thematic elements that not only illustrate the migrant experience, but also call attention to innovations in the novel itself, namely in the form of existential crises arising out of linguistic, culinary, geographical, and spatial contexts. Vlasta has done the research and she has also compellingly turned the focus from authors' biographies to the texts themselves. However, her self-proclaimed conclusions, first, that literature written in the context of migration can be studied and second, that migration can serve as a unifying topic of literary works, left me disappointed that Vlasta had not made any bolder claims. Her discussions within each chapter suggest that the topic of migration serves as

an innovative element that motivates not only language and plot, but also structural elements within the texts.

KATHERINE ANDERSON is a doctoral candidate in German Literature at Pennsylvania State University. Her research interests include the German Romantic and literature written within the context of migration in Germany. Her dissertation investigates literature written in German by non-native speakers to understand the role of language in narrating traumas of the past.