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Taste Matters

- Michael Wood, Literature and the Taste of Knowledge. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2005. 216 S. [Preis: £17.99]. ISBN: 978-0521606530.

In 2007, Tilmann Köppe sparked a controversy in the *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* by publishing an article in that journal on what he considered an extremely fashionable interest in recent academic literary criticism, namely, numerous attempts at launching a defence of poetry – and, by the same token, a defence of literary scholarship as well – by claiming a special knowledge for literary texts (Tilmann Köppe, Vom Wissen in Literatur, *Zeitschrift für Germanistik N.F.* 17 (2007), 398-410). Michael Wood's *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge* (2005) shares this interest in that it seeks an answer to the question of »why we should bother with a novel or a poem when there are other things to do« (175) by discussing what he calls »the double subject of this book: the act of representing knowledge, especially elusive knowledge, in words; and the nature of the knowledge that literary arrangements of words can offer us.« (2) The bone of contention in Köppe's article, however, was not so much his diagnosis of a development in recent criticism as his claims that so long as literature is fictional it is highly problematic to regard it as a source of knowledge in any strict sense of the term (Köppe 2007, 402 and 408) and that, therefore, it is pointless to defend literature by emphasising its relation to knowledge (Köppe 2007, 409). While Michael Wood's argument goes in the same direction as the first of these two claims, a full appreciation of Wood's book must, I think, lead one to the conclusion that Köppe is right with the second claim, as well.

Literature and the Taste of Knowledge combines literary theory with close readings of texts by Henry James, Franz Kafka, William Empson, Elizabeth Bishop and with comments on details of a great number of other literary works, most of them modernist or at least modern. Its six chapters are derived from the William Empson Lectures Wood gave in Cambridge in 2003, and the amiable conversational style in which the book is written seems to owe a great deal to that origin. On the whole, the close readings make for a stimulating and highly entertaining read, which in itself would be reason enough to recommend the book. However, it is as a whole that the book ought to be judged, and on that point, it must be said that the whole is not greater than the sum of its various parts, brilliant as most of them undoubtedly are. In short, the book scores as a series of findings about literature and certain literary texts but it fails to provide a convincing argument as a satisfactory answer to the interesting questions it puts up in its introduction, that is, questions about literature and the taste of knowledge. This has to do with Wood's somewhat willful use of the term »knowledge« (cf. 8-9, 15, 29, 51-52, 54-55, 109-115, 136, 147), of which, however, he is more than aware (cf. 8-9, 109-115). But more importantly, Wood focusses too much on what must be considered common-place knowledge in academic criticism and, in doing so, overlooks the potential of his subject that the title of his book so promisingly suggests.

1. A taste of form and fiction

Unlike Tilmann Köppe, Michael Wood is not interested in commenting on recent developments in literary criticism. For him, the »worry about the relation between literature and

knowledge is a very old one« (2) that is of interest when it comes to refuting the »many who deny the relevance or importance of literature, who believe that its knowledge, if it has any, is trivial or merely decorative.« (11) To explain what literature is and why it matters Wood, quite traditionally, opposes literature to science and to the everyday knowledge of its readers and comes to the conclusion »that literature characteristically offers something harder – in the sense of ›hard sciences‹ – than understanding and something softer than we often imagine knowledge to be.« (54) For this in-between that he finds so characteristic of literature, Wood employs a metaphor he derives from Salman Rushdie: »There is something unavoidably oblique about literature.« (9) Since literature exists »at a slight angle to reality«, as Wood quotes Rushdie (ibid.), it is not what we would consider a reliable source of straight knowledge, as Wood makes clear in a rhetorical question near the end of the book: »[…] why would we go to a novel for this kind of information, when there are so many other, better places to go? The answer […] is we don't – go to the novel for this kind of information.« (176)

While Wood concedes that, due to its obliquity, literature loses as an authority on »that kind of information« his main concern is what, by the same token, it gains elsewhere. There, three aspects come into play that he calls »fiction«, »the taste of knowledge« and »form«. Fiction is what Wood's book is mainly about and the fact that he explicitly admits this only on the last page must be taken as an instance of clarity sacrificed for a pseudo-theatrical effect. At the book's finale, he declares with a flourish: »And at this point I think I can bring together the two terms I have so carefully been keeping apart: literature and fiction.« (190) The way he brings them together is by means of a final definition: »[…] literature is fiction in the fullest, most powerful sense when it sets out to encounter real knowledge along imaginary roads.« (ibid.) He reveals his concept of fiction in the second chapter of the book taking his cues from Aristotle, Sidney, Wittgenstein, Austin and Roland Barthes:

> […] I do want us to think about whatever is evoked by poetry in the old sense and by literature in its modern sense. That is: representations or imitations of life as it might be and perhaps is; imaginary people doing real things; real people doing imaginary things; more rarely, imaginary people doing imaginary things; and more rarely still […] real people doing real things, but not the things they actually did. The term »fiction« has come to cover much of the same ground […]. (44)

In other words, »fiction« here means the licence to speak about real or imaginary people and things alike without being liable to being accused of lying (cf. 44-45). To avoid the ambivalence of the term »fiction«, it would have been more precise to speak of fictionality here since what is meant is that literature is fictional in that it can, but does not have to, speak of imaginary, that is, fictitious persons, things, places, events. Literature is oblique in that what it speaks of does not have to correspond to reality.

The »criss-crossing dilemma which is at the heart of this book« (45) is that, although fictional texts make no claims about the truth of their propositions, there must be some basis to take seriously what is said in them because otherwise poetry would not matter at all: »Propositions in poems may in the end be more speculative than they look but they may also represent unequivocal advice, urgently given and perhaps urgently needed. […] There is no safe place here: no literalist's haven where fact is always fact; and no paradise of metaphor, where fiction has no truck at all with the harsh and shifting world.« (61)

Wood spends too much time discussing »the worry about lying« in literature (51) since, on closer analysis, his ideas of why literature matters do not at all depend on the truth-value of propositions in literature. Literary texts can well »unsettl[e] direct knowledge« (7), »impl[y] and project[…] the possible other case« (67) or »know about a particular horror well before it happens« (70) without containing a single proposition that cannot be proved wrong. First of all, readers familiar with the concept of fictionality should be prepared to believe even the unbelievable when it comes to reading literature, as Wood is well aware: »We can scarcely tell

the poet from the magician. He wants us to believe and not believe, and the extraordinary thing is how good we are at performing this double act, virtually without thinking, and without the least strain.« (59) Secondly, Aristotle's definition of »poetry« as being »a more philosophical and higher thing than history« and his distinction between the »universal« and the »particular« contents of a text (cf. 48) allows an explanation of how fictional texts can provide knowledge of the world and the way it is governed by »probability and necessity« even if the persons, places and events they speak of are completely fictitious. It allows an explanation of how, in other words, fictional texts can make false propositions concerning the particulars and still be regarded as expressing universal truths. Although Wood does quote the very passage he completely misses its relevance for his problem by restricting his attention to the particular contents of fictional texts (cf. 48-49).

Thirdly and most importantly, literary texts can matter to readers who do not share the universal claims made in them, as Wood later in the book points out: »But unlike a human arguer, the poem doesn't need to be right, and what it knows is different from what it says. It knows there is a good chance that many people will think its affirmation is right, and that even those who disagree with it will think the argument matters.« (101-102)

The question would now be how literary texts do not depend on their being accepted as speaking the truth, in particular or universally, for their being relevant to their readers. What Wood's lengthy argument about aspects of fictionality amounts to is the thought that »what we believe a novel shows us is always going to be more than the facts as we may get them from another source« (177). That leaves the question what this »more« is, and at this point, the aspects of »form« and »the taste of knowledge« come in.

Wood rightly emphasises the contribution of formal aspects to what he calls »the literary«: »The literary is everywhere, but literature is a formalized concentration of the literary, and the degree of formalization is significant.« (111) When he devotes his fifth chapter to the question »what literary forms know of« (136, cf. 147) the limits of his concept of form undermine his argument. By »form« Wood means only the exterior aspects of form, that is strophic patterns, meter, rhyme and the playing with sounds in general. But what is supposed to be a »playing form against meaning«, in his brilliant analysis of two poems by William Empson and Elizabeth Bishop, respectively, is in fact a demonstration that any meaning not carried by explicit proposition is the result of form on the semantic level. A case in point is the »elegant false parallelism« Wood identifies in Bishop's poem (cf. 156). There is no reason, of course, why one could not define form in a way that excludes the semantic level as Wood does. Here, however, the definition of the term »form« is one of the reasons why Wood fails to satisfactorily describe the specifically literary way to deal with knowledge.

2. Taste not tasted

If considering the aspect of fictionality merely reveals that it is not as a source of direct knowledge that literature matters and if Wood's definition of form fails as a tool to describing what the specifically literary is that literature can offer, the third of the three key concepts still looks promising. The more so since the title of Wood's book suggests that it has something to tell about how literature's domain is to provide not plain knowledge but knowledge with a taste – the taste being the main thing. Unfortunately, the book has not much to say about this, and for that Wood's discussion of Roland Barthes's *Leçon*, from where he takes the metaphor of the taste of knowledge, is mainly to blame.

Wood introduces Barthes and the metaphor in the introduction, quoting from the *Leçon*: »›[…] It is the taste of words which makes knowledge profound, fecund.‹ The knowledge

Barthes has in mind is distinctly the knowledge found in literature, and I shall return to his intricate thoughts on this topic.« (10) He returns to Barthes many times throughout the book but never in connection with the metaphor of taste and the notion that the taste of words can make knowledge profound, fecund. Instead, he takes up his discussion of the *Leçon* in the second chapter quoting Barthes on the distance between what Barthes calls »la science« and »la vie« and on his claim that »c'est pour corriger cette distance que la littérature nous importe« (cf. 38-40). Wood then takes up »[t]he idea of correction« as »our main focus here« coming to the question what literature is if it is »neither knowledge nor life« (40). That leads him to the question of suspended knowledge, i.e. of ostensible lies and truths in literary texts (40-44). Wood comes to the conclusion that literature is »[…] a space where [b]oth knowledge and life get a day off« (41) and, thus, arrives at the above-mentioned lengthy discussion of fictionality (44-46).

One wonders whether Wood's reading of the *Leçon* does not miss its Nietzscheanian point. When Barthes regards the relation between »la science« and »la vie« as the opposition of »grossièreté« and »subtilité«, what he means is that »la science« produces knowledge by naming and defining everything in the universe. Thus, Barthes considers »la science« as an instance of »le pouvoir qui est dans la langue« (Roland Barthes, *Leçon*, Paris 1978, 12). By labelling things, people, animals, events, however, »la science« must necessarily generalize and, in doing so, neglect certain differences between things, individual people, animals, events and reducing them to certain characteristics that make them items of certain categories: »le signe est suiviste, grégaire ; en chaque signe dort ce monstre : un stéréotype« (Barthes 1978, 15). »La science« is coarse, in that it suppresses individuality since the subtle differences that make real-»life« experience so »profound« and »fecund« elude it. Moreover, since »la langue est immédiatement assertive« (Barthes 1978, 14), the scientific production of knowledge through language fixes individuals as members of certain categories and thereby suppresses the sensitivity for both the variety and the ever-flowing change in life. It is easy to trace Barthes's views on language back to Nietzsche's influential vitalistic criticism of modern language as a ramshackle construction made of dead technical terms (cf. *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne*).

Given that, Barthes's notion of how literature can possibly correct the distance between science and life does not so much point towards the aspect of fictionality but rather towards something that can be referred to as the sensuousness of literary texts. Literature viewed within the context of Barthes's opposition of »la science« and »la vie« is a way of language not being coarse. Since there is no way around language when one wants to speak of anything the question arises if there aren't ways to speak about things without subjugating life to science, individuality to uniforming labels, the senses to the brain. Literature, Barthes suggests, offers such ways precisely because the knowledge it offers is not fixed and final and because it is the taste of the knowledge it offers that counts more than the knowledge itself. Literature is supposed to deal with knowledge »selon un discours qui n'est plus épistémologique, mais dramatique« (Barthes 1978, 19), it »met en scène le langage, au lieu, simplement, de l'utiliser« (ibid.);

> [E]lle reconnaît que le langage est un immense halo d'implications, d'effets, de retentissements, de tours, de retours, de redans; elle assume de faire entendre un sujet à la fois insistant et irréparable, inconnu et cependant reconnu selon une inquiétante familiarité : les mots ne sont plus conçus illusoirement comme de simples instruments, ils sont lancés comme des projections, des explosions, des vibrations, des machineries, des saveurs […]. (Barthes 1978, 20)

To run his message home on a performative level as well, Barthes chooses his words here to be rather more pregnant (shall we say: »fecund«?) than precise but it is unquestionable what he means by that »la littérature fait du savoir une fête« (Barthes 1978, 20; quoted in Wood 2005, 40): it breathes, as it were, life in the dead words that constitute language in that they

are made to convey not the fixed uniformity of scientific concepts but the ever-changing and ever-moving variety of life in all its forms and expressions, not just meanings as ideas but also emotions, moods and sensuous experiences. And in that sense, too, Barthes suggests that literature, or, as he also calls it: »l'écriture« (cf. Barthes 1978, 17), »se retrouve partout où les mots ont de la saveur« (Barthes 1978, 21). When Barthes claims that »la littérature fait du savoir une fête« he means that what otherwise would be dead knowledge tastes of life when it is presented in literature: »C'est ce goût des mots qui fait le savoir profond, fécond.« (ibid.)

Barthes's use of »fête«, thus clearly points to the sensuous side of literature to which he elsewhere refers as »le plaisir du texte«. This may involve what Wood understands by »form«, that is a playing with sounds and rhythms, as is often the case in poetry. But Barthes's claim that literature does not, as science does, offer knowledge as »énoncés« but as »énonciations« suggests that the pleasure of the literary text depends on something other than the merely exterior aspects of form. For Barthes, the difference between the two forms of utterance is that the »énoncé« seeks to convey pure, precise objective knowledge, whereas the »énonciation« both brings in the subjectivity of the speaker and stages language, to use Barthes's words, as a place for ambiguity and vivid variety (cf. Barthes 1978, 20). What exactly that means in terms of literary techniques, Barthes does not say, but one wonders whether Wood could not have filled the gap by focussing on certain techniques of representation that particularly appeal to the reader's imagination, thereby simulating real-life experience of human beings, places and events. Wood seems to do just that when he brings in Barthes's metaphor of the taste of words to illustrate that reading can be »an immediate event« and literature – in the words Wood quotes in his introduction from Dorothy Walsh – »a form of lived experience« (9). Unfortunately, after this, Wood ignores the pleasure aspect altogether by both dropping the taste metaphor and translating Barthes's use of »fête« as »holiday« in the sense of »a day off«, which, as we have seen, leads him to the question of fictionality when he could have gained so much more by discussing literature as a form of representation.

For someone exploring the taste of knowledge provided by literary texts, he shows remarkably little interest in how literature actually renders the imaginary world tasteable, how it can make readers see, hear, feel, smell and even taste people, things, places and events in their imagination. A case in point is Wood's discussion of Kate Croy in James's *Wings of the dove*. His argument hinges on the claim that although readers may most likely »regard her attitude as wrong« (29), to simply condemn her for this would be »to have missed ev-erything that matters about Kate, and to have misrepresented our own feelings about her and her actions.« (33). Wood argues that there are things to »admire« (32-33: »her clarity and her courage«, »her straightness«) and even to like about her (19: where he calls Kate and Densher »these likeable people«). This tension between an unequivocal moral judgment of a character's attitude and actions and the feelings the same character evokes in the reader would indeed be enough to justify Wood's claim that James's novel »rattles not our morals but our sense of their reasonableness, and that is why we are in such a fix when we try to talk about the book.« (34)

However, instead of pursuing this lead and considering his notion of a conflict of feelings and attitudes towards the character as an achievement of literary form on the semantic level, Wood seeks to solve the conflict by discussing whether, once one starts thinking about it, Kate's actions do not fail so utterly and, therefore, »Kate's scheme is unconventional and indirect, but can't be substantively wrong.« (33) He is right in pointing out that the novel keeps this question open (34) but he does not show how it does so, since he discusses this question solely on a rational level. And one may well wonder why a reader should take the trouble working himself through hundreds of pages of James's difficult poetic prose when he can have »the question of knowledge in *The Wings of the Dove*« (31), »the question of Kate's

wrongdoing« (ibid.) and the »exquisite moral dilemma« that »James has crafted […] for us as well as for his characters« (32) outlined and discussed on no more than 25 pages of Wood's extremely well written and lucidly argued analysis of the novel.

There is more to James's novel, of course, than merely recognising the questions and moral dilemmas. This can equally well be done by reading Wood's analysis – or even better so, since he takes much less space and a far simpler language and is also much clearer. The difficulties and the length of James's novel provide what an analysis of a novel cannot offer, that is, an opportunity for the reader to feel the impact of the questions and the moral dilemmas by reliving and re-experiencing what the novel presents as the lives and the experiences of its characters. To that crucial aspect, however, Wood pays almost no attention whatsoever. He thereby misses the opportunity to show how James's text undermines or, as Wood calls it, »rattles« our moral judgment by letting us share the fascination the other characters in the novel feel for Kate. To do that, one would have to consider the way Kate is represented by means of description and imagery, how her looks, her humour, her plight, her courage, her intelligence are presented to the imagination of the reader so that readers do not just get an idea of her but a taste as well. It is significant that Wood reduces the relationship between Milly and Kate to a rational aspect: »it is because they both try to name things and to know things that they hit it off so well.« (32) This, however, ignores the fact that James's text goes to great lengths to convey both the shear physical attraction Kate has for Milly and Milly's fascination for everything in Kate that she herself thinks she is not or has not, but would desperately like to be and like to have. This also accounts for Milly's not liking Kate any less for her being »the least bit brutal« (ibid.). What Wood misses in paying almost no attention to the sensuous aspect of the novel is that it may not only be »the reasonableness« of »our moral sense« that the novel »rattles« but its emotional basis too.

3. A taste of more

What is sorely missing from Wood's book is anything equivalent to Gottfried Willems's concept of literature as an »evaluative communication on values« (Gottfried Willems, Literatur, in: Ulfert Ricklefs (Ed.), *Fischer Lexikon Literatur*, Frankfurt a.M. 1996, 1012: »wertende Verständigung über Werte«). By that, Willems means that literature does not just speak of human beings, human actions, places and events but that it presents them in the light of human values – the values of literary characters as well as narrators, implied authors, etc. Thus, the knowledge that can be drawn from literary texts is both a knowledge about the values of certain people and/or literary characters and a knowledge about the relation of knowledge to values. According to this concept, the recipients of literary texts – the reader or the audience in the theatre – are engaged in this kind of evaluative communication in a way that provokes an evaluative reaction from them. Of course, this comprises an evaluation of literary quality of a text but what is meant by an »evaluative communication on values« goes beyond that. Recipients of poems, novels and plays are not just to learn about values expressed openly or covertly in a fictional context but they are to feel the urge to wonder whether they themselves share those values or some of them or none of them at all.

This then involves the recipients' emotional side, their sympathising with the characters, their endorsing or abhorring their actions. Recipients are to find people, places, things and events likeable or disgusting, fascinating or boring, portentous or negligible. This appeal to the emotionally evaluative side, Willems argues, results from the main feature of literary texts, i.e. their sensuousness (Willems 1996, 1017: »*Anschaulichkeit*«; cf. Gottfried Willems, *Anschaulichkeit*, Tübingen 1989.), achieved by description and imagery. Literary texts, thus, do not just appeal to the intellect but above all to the imagination so that readers of a novel or a poem

are made to believe they can actually see, hear, feel, smell and taste the things of which the literary text speaks. And so readers can, as if from experience, find their own views and values supported or questioned. They may even find, as it were, intuitive access to views and values they would never dream of sharing. Unlike the knowledge literature may or may not have to offer, the views and values it expresses can be of personal relevance, not just historical interest, even to those who do not share them. And it is this feature which accounts for Wood's observations that »we – don't go to a novel for this kind of information« (176), that »what we believe a novel shows us is always going to be more than the facts as we may get them from another source« (177) and that »unlike a human arguer, the poem doesn't need to be right« (101).

It is by no means that Wood fails to see the significance of the evaluative and the sensuous aspects of literature, as becomes clear from his remark on a sonnet by Rilke: »It speaks not of life and change in general but of the specific lived life and probably failed change of each of us.« (102) The same kind of insight is apparent in what Wood says about literature's »always work[ing] as a parable« (127): »We can't make sense of [parables] if we don't find this scene, if we don't apply them somewhere, if we don't find a connection for them in the world we inhabit.« (126-127) Finally, the subjective aspect reappears in Wood's concluding sentence of the last chapter: »Somewhere between what Nietzsche calls the horizon of our knowledge [i.e.: ›I do suffer.‹, cf. 185] and what he calls truths is the whole realm of what writers and readers and texts make of the fictionable world.« (187) What Wood's book lacks, however – in order to explain these observations and satisfactorily describe what makes literature matter – is terminological consistence and a systematic approach to its questions.

At one point, Wood asks what knowledge is to be had from criticism and interpretation in the humanities (53-54). The title of his book promises an answer to this nagging question: academic literary criticism offers knowledge about how differently knowledge can taste when it is communicated in literature. Even more precisely, it could be said using Willems's terms: academic literary criticism offers knowledge of the huge varieties of world views and values that are expressed in literature and about the various possibilities to express world views and values in language. Of that knowledge, on which one could and perhaps should base any defence of an endangered academic discipline, Michael Wood's book offers but a taste.

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