

The autumn 2019 Geisteswissenschaften International Prize for an outstanding work in the humanities goes to ...

Nicola Gess, *Primitives Denken. Wilde, Kinder und Wahnsinnige in der literarischen Moderne (Müller, Musil, Benn, Benjamin)* (tr: Primitive thinking. Wild ones, children and lunatics in literary modernism (Müller, Musil, Benn, Benjamin)), Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2013

Nicola Gess' brilliant study examines the emergent preoccupation with "the primitive" in early 20th century literature, aesthetics, psychology and ethnology. She reconstructs three manifestations of the primitive, namely the wild person, the insane person and the child, and then proceeds to decipher one of the modern age's key phantasms of alterity in precisely these three forms. Gess is entirely successful at establishing this phantasm as an object of literary study across multiple disciplines.

In the era around 1900, the ability to conceive of "the primitive" granted the fields of ethnology, developmental psychology and psychopathology two-fold access to Western modernity: on the one hand, the heterogeneous forms of alterity gave the humanities several options for undertaking demarcation and delineation, but on the other hand, as Gess shows, the humanities also saw members of primitive tribes, children and the mentally ill as being possible gateways to the origins of their own culture. Such manifestations of the primitive were also very attractive to the areas of linguistic theory and the theory of metaphors at the turn of the century, the reason being that pre-linguistic states of play, dreams and insanity represent a receptacle of knowledge that constitutes humanity prior to and beyond civilisation. The author places the familiar and the foreign, development and regression, norm and deviation in a tense relationship where the poles are organised around one single concept of primitiveness.

Gess pinpoints four convincing literary studies that portray this tense relationship. First, she reads Robert Müller's novel *Tropen* as an experimental arrangement in which modern European man is confronted simultaneously with his "primitive" cultural counterpart and the primitive component of his own existence. She interprets the figure of Clarisse in Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities* as an attempt by Musil to give literary form to what he called the "non-ratioid" between insanity and man's natural state. Gess situates the work of Gottfried Benn in the literature of the primitive in a two-fold sense, that is, with regard to his interest in mankind's phylogenetic past and to his coupling of ego-dissociation and artistic creativity. Gess ends her lucid and precise reading with a reconstruction of Walter Benjamin's figure of the child: in contrast to the romantic tradition that sees the child as a complete human being in a natural state, Benjamin focuses on the barbaric and destructive aspects of children and childlikeness.

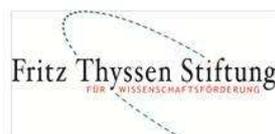


Gess succeeds at creating a grand-scale panorama of primitive thought in the early 20th century. The key strengths of her work lie in the accuracy of her readings, the originality of her conclusions and the precision of her formulations. She elegantly and methodically juxtaposes literature and knowledge, all the while understanding “the primitive” in the Bachelardian sense as a “poem”, that is, as an entity that produces scientific objectivity without itself claiming any such impartiality. The results of Gess’ undertaking are relevant far beyond the field of literary studies. Indeed, the primitive is used in modernity as the origin of our own culture, as the other, as that which is unfinished or at the edges and yet still our own. In other words, primitiveness helped to stabilise modern identity – as an idealised dream of a binding origin and as a fantasy of radical alterity.

The Jury,
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VG WORT



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