REALISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY NOVEL: FICTIONALIZING
SOCIAL REALITIES IN JENNY ERPENBECK’S GEHEN, GING, GEGANGEN AND
CHRISTOPH HEIN’S WEISKERNS NACHLASS

by

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(Under the Direction of Martin Kagel)

ABSTRACT

As realistic political fiction, Jenny Erpenbeck’s Gehen, ging, gegangen (2015)
and Christoph Hein’s Weiskerms Nachlass (2011) respond to discourse on literary realism
that spans the past century. Erpenbeck and Hein’s novels use culturally-dictated frames
and scripts, such as recognizable character types and familiar plot setups, to communicate
messages about contemporary German society, positioning the texts within the genre of
realism. The texts respond to Bertolt Brecht’s theories on realism, established in his 1938
essays from Das Wort. I examine Erpenbeck and Hein’s use of realism to communicate
political commentary, as well as potential outcomes of this commentary. Hein’s
exploration of the academic precariat in Weiskerms Nachlass implies an insurmountable
historical continuity of the undervaluing of intellectuals. Conversely, Erpenbeck’s Gehen,
ging, gegangen’s depiction of the German refugee crisis offers suggestions for individual
involvement with this ongoing issue, though legal recommendations remain beyond the
author’s scope of analysis.
INDEX WORDS: Jenny Erpenbeck, Christoph Hein, Bertolt Brecht, literary realism, political fiction, refugee crisis, academic precariat, *Gehen, ging, gegangen, Weiskerns Nachlass*
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DEDICATION

To my parents, who let their fifteen-year-old pursue the dream of an early college career, and who have never ceased encouraging my academic pursuits.

To Leith, whose optimism and support made finishing this degree less daunting and more fathomable.
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INTRODUCTION

One cannot truly analyze the German novel of the twenty-first century without considering literary realism, the prevailing narrative mode of this genre. According to Heribert Tommek, a scholar of contemporary German literature, realism’s return and replacement of modernist writing as the dominant style in the 1990’s represented a “Wiederkehr des Erzählens” for the German novel (75). Moritz Bassler similarly affirms realism’s resurgence over modernism, declaring: “Von heute aus gesehen wird man nun allerdings rundweg anerkennen müssen: Der Realismus hat gewonnen! Die Avantgarden haben sich überlebt, das realistische Schreiben aber geht ungebrochen weiter” (28). While realism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is informed by poetic realism of the nineteenth century, it has also undergone changes in form, including stylistic innovation. Contemporary styles such as deconstructive realism, pop realism, and even anti-realism (Bassler 44-45) demonstrate both the relevance of the genre in this century and new implementations of this narrative form.

Hans-Ulrich Treichel, in evaluating the state of the contemporary novel, asserts: “Der Romanautor ist Realist, egal, welchen Stil er bevorzugt. Denn er weiß, dass die Zeit vergeht und mit der Zeit auch er. [...] Der Romanautor ist jemand, der immer zurückblickt. Egal, wohin er sich wendet” (Treichel). Treichel’s description of the contemporary novelist’s Zurückblicken seemingly alludes to the inherent process of cultural reflection in the authorship of novels. This cultural reflection results in the presence of frames and scripts in narration; Bassler explains frames and scripts as
culturally created narrative components that inform the writing and reading of every text. A text may uphold the conventions of these narrative components or call them into question through experimental and anti-metonymic techniques. This determines whether the poetic of the work is anti-realistic, postmodern, or imitates “realism proper” (Bassler 44).

Considering the textual role of frames and scripts is useful when discussing the realist aspects of Jenny Erpenbeck’s 2015 novel *Gehen, ging, gegangen* and Christoph Hein’s *Weiskerns Nachlass*, published in 2011. Both Christoph Hein (b. 1944) and Jenny Erpenbeck (b. 1967) select a university-level educator as their protagonist; the reader’s familiarity with this character type serves as a cultural frame through which to explore the social questions raised by the authors. While Erpenbeck and Hein’s protagonists belong to a recognizable, culturally-established character type, they also exhibit behaviors and attributes that challenge the associations made with this type. The separation of this frame from conventional metonymy—in which a concept is referenced through the use of associated ideas—works to question the nature and function of this character type. I therefore find that both novels are informed by postmodern realism.

According to Bassler, this postmodern or pop realism presents cultural frames and scripts and “destruiert Eigentlichkeitsvorstellungen aller Art” (45) by decoupling metonymic associations from the established frames and scripts. Additionally, this form of realism responds to past cultural discourse by synthesizing and re-conceptualizing cultural artifacts within a contemporary context. Bassler explains, “Postmoderne und Pop realisieren also, wenn man so will, eine synthetische Moderne unter den Bedingungen des Spätkapitalismus” (38).
Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Gehen, ging, gegangen* and Christoph Hein’s *Weiskerns Nachlass* are dominated by a realistic narrative structure, yet this mode is used by the authors to specific ends, and the narration at times deviates from this form. In Hein’s novel, for instance, there are dream-like sequences and bizarre moments, such as when protagonist Rüdiger Stolzenburg experiences a distressful hallucination on a budget flight from Leipzig to Basel. The narrator makes it clear to the reader that this vision is not experienced by any fellow passengers, thus contrasting Stolzenburg’s apparition with reality as experienced by the surrounding characters. In *Gehen, ging, gegangen*, Erpenbeck combines a plot informed by real-life events with fictitious elements to create a narrative that explores both concrete, factual issues and social abstractions surrounding them. While the novel is largely modeled after testimonies, interviews, and research conducted by the author, it also includes elements of the uncanny and the sublime. For instance, a drowning that occurred in a lake within view of protagonist Richard’s house serves as a recurring motif. The atmospheric unease created by this event lingers unresolved among residents of the community, as evidenced by Richard’s aversion to the site of the incident and discomfort in recalling it. This fictionalized motif contrasts with the nonfictional material that informs the greater part of the novel.

Both *Weiskerns Nachlass* and *Gehen, ging, gegangen* are works of the second decade of the twenty-first century, yet they still respond to twentieth century discourse on literary realism, framed in part by the realism debate between German playwright Bertolt Brecht and Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács. Lukács, possibly the most influential Marxist critic of the time (Kuhn et al. 207), led the discourse on twentieth century realism with the essay “Realism in the Balance” (*Es geht um den Realismus*), published in the
Moscow-based German exile publication *Das Wort* in 1938. In this piece, Lukács criticizes modernist and avant-garde narrative styles along with authors who attempt contemporary and novel techniques, saying that:

The modern literary schools [...] remain frozen in their own immediacy; they fail to pierce the surface to discover the underlying essence, i.e. the real factors that relate their experiences to the hidden social forces that produce them [...] the realist must seek out the lasting features in people in their relations with each other and in the situations in which they have to act; he must focus on those elements which endure over long periods and which constitute the objective human tendencies of society and indeed of mankind as a whole. (1040-1049)

Lukács’s stance denies any kind of social credibility to works influenced by modernist movements. He claims that surrealism and other modernist styles are inadequate in demonstrating *Totalität* (1037), the interconnectedness of societal relationships:

The literary practice of every true realist demonstrates the importance of overall objective social context and the ‘insistence on all-round knowledge’ required to do it justice [...] We do not regard the practice of left-wing Surrealists as an acceptable solution to the problem. [Great realism] does not portray an immediately obvious aspect of reality but one which is permanent and objectively more significant. (1037-1049)

These assertions by Lukács suggest that writers who use modernist narrative techniques fail to satisfy the goal of socially critical literature, which, according to the critic, is to denounce capitalism through comprehensively representing the relations of production within society (1036). Lukács finds that modernist-influenced literature fails to
satisfactorily portray this relationship, as he believes such styles may only portray the appearance (*Erscheinung*), but not the essence (*Wesen*) of society (1037). Lukács conversely praises authors whose works are informed by the tradition of poetic realism of the nineteenth century, such as Thomas Mann: “He is a true realist, [...] he knows how thoughts and feelings grow out of the life of society and how experiences and emotions are parts of the total complex of reality” (1039). Lukács believed that such authorship exemplified an author’s allegiance to their own literary and cultural heritage, further legitimizing their work:

Maxim Gorky is a son of the Russian people, Romain Rolland a son of the French and Thomas Mann a son of the German people. [...] It is possible for them to create art of the highest quality while at the same time striking a chord which can and does evoke a response in the broad masses of the people. (1054)

Brecht’s realism, like that of Lukács, is informed by a Marxist worldview, but Brecht’s theory reveals stark disagreement with the Hungarian critic in abstraction. Like Lukács’s insistence on demonstrating the *Wesen* and *Totalität* of society, Brecht prioritized exposing the societal *Kausalkomplex* (332), the relationships between structures to constitute society. Brecht argued strongly against mere formalism; however, in describing the goals of literary realism, the playwright also advocated for room for inventiveness: “*[W]*ir werden dem Künstler erlauben, seine Phantasie, seine Originalität, seinen Humor, seine Erfindungskraft dabei einzusetzen” (332). Brecht similarly emphasized *Volkstümlichkeit*, or accessibility and relevance to the common reader. In contrast to Lukács, Brecht argued that it is necessary for narrative style to evolve with the times in order to effectively portray and criticize societal oppression:
Die Unterdrücker arbeiten nicht zu allen Zeiten auf die gleiche Art. Sie können nicht zu allen Zeiten in der gleichen Weise dingfest gemacht werden. Was gestern volkstümlich war, ist es nicht heute, denn wie das Volk gestern war, so ist es nicht heute. Jeder, der nicht in formalen Vorurteilen befangen ist, weiß, dass die Wahrheit auf viele Arten verschwiegen werden kann und auf viele Arten gesagt werden muss. (333)

Brecht’s arguments give express credibility to new and modern narrative methods, as he believed that political literature should constantly reform so as to combat the constantly changing ways of the oppressors (“die Unterdrücker”). Prioritizing a historical approach to the concept of realism over Lukács stagnant model of form, Brecht allows for contemporary abstraction, which critics such as Lukács had attempted to delegitimize. Brecht’s reconsiderations of realist literary merit therefore may be used as a metric by which to evaluate and consider the contemporary realist novel.

The narrative aspects debated by Lukács and Brecht in the first half of the twentieth century remain identifiable in realist novels of the present century. Though Erpenbeck and Hein use traditional narrative forms, the realism of their narration is decidedly more contemporary; their approach serves as a historically situated response toward social questions, allowing the reader to gain a “realistic” understanding of forces at work in society and potentially provide an impetus for change. My reading of *Gehen, ging, gegangen* and *Weiskerns Nachlass* is informed by Brecht’s approach, which affirms the ability of contemporary realists to meaningfully criticise capitalist society.

*Gehen, ging, gegangen* and *Weiskerns Nachlass* share significant similarities in both composition and content. The novels were published in close proximity (four years
apart), are similar in style, and were both written by authors from the former German Democratic Republic. The novels also feature protagonists with an East German background, both of them aging academics. The protagonist of *Weiskerns Nachlass* is an adjunct Cultural Studies lecturer of fifty-nine, informed on his birthday that his career aspiration of fifteen years—a full-time position at the University of Leipzig—will never be granted to him. Stolzenburg’s age, as well as ever-decreased funding for the Cultural Studies institute where he teaches, add personal and financial uncertainty to his already precarious day-to-day life. In addition to the challenges of living in legal poverty, Stolzenburg must cope with inexplicable events that shatter the stability of his modern urban lifestyle. The protagonist of *Gehen, ging, gegangen*, a professor emeritus of Classics, finds himself transitioning from involved academic to unoccupied widow following his compulsory retirement. To engage his intellect and occupy his time, Richard befriends a group of African refugees, whom he learns about through local news coverage of their demonstrations at Berlin’s Alexanderplatz. What he witnesses in these refugees’ encounters with German society exposes the shortcomings of European refugee politics under the *Dublin II* regulation—a European Union regulation dictating the eligibility of asylum applications in given member states (“EN - Dublin II Regulation”). Richard’s observations also challenge his own preconceived ideas about African people and culture, as well as Germans’ sympathy with refugees in general.

Both Hein and Erpenbeck’s protagonists are aging men who witness the waning of their physical virility and relevance in their academic fields. The transition they experience between vitality and physical decline, as well as their decreased role within academia, forces them to question their societal significance. These characters, however,
respond to this challenge in markedly different ways; while Stolzenburg is increasingly obliged to be complicit in corruption, his morale and integrity strained by the temptations of bribery and sexual immorality, Richard of *Gehen, ging, gegangen* is conversely ever more engaged in activism and outraged by systematic injustice.

Comparing Hein and Erpenbeck’s protagonists to historic instances of this “frame” or character type reveals both prevailing traits of this character type and innovations that challenge older scripts. A reference point for this character type is Professor Immanuel Rath of the 1930 film *Der blaue Engel*, directed by Josef von Sternberg. As an aging educator of the petit bourgeois class and representative of the nineteenth century intellectual, Rath’s way of life is threatened by the cultural innovations of the twentieth century, namely, the conditions that bore the New Woman of the Weimar Republic. Like Christoph Hein’s Rüdiger Stolzenburg and Jenny Erpenbeck’s Richard, Rath is disconnected from the surrounding contemporary society. Similar to Stolzenburg and Richard, Rath’s sexual desire for younger women—and subsequent failure in pursuit—highlights his disorientation in contemporary societal roles. This comparison demonstrates that Hein and Erpenbeck’s use of the frame of the socially detached professor situates the novels within the framework of both historical and contemporary realist fiction.

The frame of the professor type is just one of many frames and scripts apparent in Hein and Erpenbeck’s novels. In this introduction, I have offered an outline of the theory informing my analysis, including the works of Moritz Bassler and Bertolt Brecht. In the first chapter, I will comment on the critical receptions of *Gehen, ging, gegangen* and *Weiskerns Nachlass* and relate the critical reviews of these novels to Brecht’s realist
theory. The second chapter will include an analysis of the fictionalization of political facts and events in *Gehen, ging, gegangen*. Afterward, I will consider the subject of the “Precariat” class as topicalized in *Weiskerbs Nachlass*, followed by a comparison of the realist techniques evident in the works and a consideration of the societal impact of the two novels.
CHAPTER 1
PUBLIC RECEPTION OF GEHEN, GING, GEGANGEN AND WEISKERNS NACHLASS

The initial reception of Gehen, ging, gegangen and Weiskerns Nachlass, with reviews appearing in publications such as the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Der Spiegel, and even the Wall Street Journal, reflects the popular readership of these two novels. Newspaper and journal articles analyzing the works focused largely on aspects of popular interest, such as questions of social commentary or the enjoyability of reading the novels. Jenny Erpenbeck’s Gehen, ging, gegangen was noted for its depictions of cross-racial interaction and its use of German and African perspectives in the narration, which was both criticised and praised in various reviews. Christoph Hein was praised for his “beißende Gesellschaftskritik” in Weiskerns Nachlass (Metz), yet also criticized for a disjointed composition and mundane dialogues.

By largely giving attention to the entertainment value and social commentaries of Hein and Erpenbeck’s novels, critics appear to emphasize issues relevant to a wider readership over the aesthetic concerns of a smaller group of intellectual readers. This approach to reading these novels represents the state of contemporary fiction. In his article “Formen des Realismus im Gegenwartsroman,” Heribert Tommek observes a “Wiederkehr des Erzählens” in German literature that followed German reunification—a return to and expansion of realistic techniques of the 19th and 20th centuries (75). According to Tommek, the resurrection of realism as the dominant narrative form (over
modernism) was heralded by a discourse referred to as the “Lesbarkeitsdebatte.”

Tommek cites literary critic and author Uwe Wittstock, whose resolution of the debate stated, “ein literarisch ernst zu nehmendes Buch [sollte] neben großen ästhetischen Qualitäten auch Unterhaltungsqualitäten haben. Es geht darum, daß die künstlerischen Ansprüche verschmelzen mit dem Anspruch, dem Leser Vergnügen zu bereiten” (Tommek 75). The growing field of journalistic literary criticism also called for “Lebensunmittelbarkeit,” “Erzählbarkeit,” and a “Zugänglichkeit für alle” in contemporary realist fiction. All of these demands are reflected in the reviews of *Gehen*, *ging*, *gegangen* and *Weiskerns Nachlass*, which take on not only the contemporary relevant themes of the works and their lifelike depictions, but also the compositional clarity and entertaining qualities of the novels.

1.1 Critical Reception of *Gehen, ging, gegangen*

Beginning in October 2012, the Berlin Oranienplatz was publicly occupied by more than one hundred refugees of various national origins who protested the refugee politics of Germany and the European Union through demonstrations, hunger strikes, and marches in Berlin (Dassler and Zawatka-Gerlach). The encampment was evacuated in April 2014, fueled by pressures from the city police and senate. Further refugee demonstrations in Berlin, which have continued through 2017, have since been the subject of public scrutiny and debate. Immediately following the demolition of the Oranienplatz camp, European asylum politics dominated political discussion and journalism, especially as the increasing influx of refugees escalated pressures for long-term solutions. For thematizing the politics of the Oranienplatz refugees based on research conducted in 2013 and 2014,
Gehen, ging, gegangen was deemed the “Roman der Stunde” (Sternburg, “Jedermann und die Afrikaner”). The novel’s timely undertaking of contemporary subjects was underscored by its nomination for the 2015 German Book Prize. Wolfgang Tischer, editor of Literaturcafe.de, reaffirmed the contemporary relevance of Erpenbeck’s novel, claiming that “der Umgang mit den Flüchtlingsströmen ist das bestimmende Thema in Deutschland im Herbst 2015” (Tischer).

In a review for the Frankfurter Rundschau, Judith von Sternburg writes, “‘Gehen, ging, gegangen’ erzählt ungemütlich und schonungslos von Flüchtlingen und Einheimischen in Deutschland. Logischerweise steht [Erpenbeck] damit auf der Shortlist für den Deutschen Buchpreis 2015” (“Jedermann und die Afrikaner”). Sternburg’s review praises Gehen, ging, gegangen for its clear depictions of asylum law and the role protagonist Richard takes in exploring the state of refugee lives in Europe, highlighting the novel’s depiction of Germans who involve themselves in refugee aid. The critic sees Erpenbeck’s description of Richard’s aid efforts, such as providing piano lessons and hosting Christmas dinner for the refugees, as an apt display of merely provisional solutions to the complex difficulties of the refugee crisis: “Sind das Zustände? Durchaus nicht [...] ‘Gehen, ging, gegangen’ erzählt nicht von einer Utopie, sondern von einem Provisorium und [...] auch von der Erbärmlichkeit des Improvisierens. Mehr hat Richard nicht zu bieten, Deutschland insgesamt nicht einmal das” (Sternburg).

The effectiveness of Erpenbeck’s portrayal of Richard, the retired Classics professor, is, however, disputed by critics such as Dana Buchzik of Der Spiegel, who finds the focus on the German academic a significant hindrance to the aspirations of the novel, which attempts to shed light on the struggles facing refugees in Germany. Buchzik
denounces Richard as “das Hauptproblem dieses Romans” (Buchzik), as his colonial ways of thinking perpetuate exoticising the African refugees. Buchzik also finds that the use of Richard’s viewpoint throughout the novel overshadows the perspectives of the African characters. Instead of providing a call to action, says Buchzik, Erpenbeck’s novel merely serves to reaffirm Germans’ self-image of progressivism:

Statt die Geschichten der Geflüchteten in den Vordergrund zu stellen, wird “Gehen, ging, gegangen” von einem Wohlstandsburger dominiert, der sich weltoffen und aufgeklärt fühlt und die eigene, von Ressentiments durchsetzte Ignoranz nicht bemerkt. Erpenbecks Roman ist ein klassischer Pressetitel, [...] auf Leser zugeschrieben, die sich in Richard wiederfinden werden. (Buchzik)

In contrast to Buchzik, Sternburg sees Richard as a clever tool—an intentional narrative device to portray and question German attitudes in cross-racial contexts—by which Erpenbeck seeks to prompt self-reflection on the part of her fellow citizens:

Die Wahl des Mannes, um dessen Perspektive es hier geht, ist auf den ersten Blick verfehlt, auf den zweiten genial [...]. Er hat keine besonderen Vorurteile, aber er hat keine Ahnung. Dass ihn das zu einem der meisten von uns macht, ist dann zugleich der erzählische Vorteil. Zumal Erpenbeck ihn glücklicherweise weniger zur Belehrung nutzt, sondern für eine höfliche Bloßstellung. (Sternburg)

In other words, although the text is laden with Richard’s imperfect, often problematic observations, his perspective reveals assumptions and prejudices about refugees held by many Germans.

One aspect both critics praise is Erpenbeck’s use of refugee perspectives in the narrative. Noting the brief passages that feature refugees’ private thoughts or narrations
as the most powerful pieces of the work, Buchzik writes that, “immer dann, wenn Erpenbeck den Stimmen der Menschen Raum lässt, die alles verloren haben, wird ‘Gehen, ging, gegangen’ zur eindringlichen, zur relevanten Lektüre” (Buchzik).

Similarly, Sternburg describes such passages as “eindringliche Momente. Man hätte gerne mehr davon” (Sternburg).

1.2 Critical Reception of Weiskerns Nachlass

Christoph Hein’s 2011 novel Weiskerns Nachlass centers around Rüdiger Stolzenburg, a struggling academic who must face the ever-shrinking prestige of research in the humanities. The novel depicts the difficult living circumstances of the academic “precariat,” a term that Axel Hildebrandt defines as follows:

*Precariat* is a term taken from the fields of economics and sociology describing a social group consisting of people whose lives are difficult because they have little or no job security and few employment rights. The term combines *precarious* and *proletariat* and was first used in France in the 1980s to characterize the unstable economic situation of the working class. (146)

*Weiskerns Nachlass* demonstrates in detail the financial, social, and personal challenges members of the academic precariat face as a result of their employment situation. The novel also features a dynamic plot that sometimes suggests a complete change in genre (from a *Gesellschaftsroman* to a crime story to romance). Some critics responded to this compositional choice with disapproval, such as *Die Zeit’s* Andreas Isenschmid, who reportedly expressed disappointment with the novel, finding that the disjointed plot structure dilutes the critical function of the work. The online literary magazine...
Perlentaucher, in its summary of Isenschmid’s review, indicates the critic lamenting “die öde Dialoge, den uninteressanten Plot [und] die belanglosen Gespräche der Protagonisten” (qtd. in Perlentaucher)\(^1\), leaving no doubt about his view that Hein’s novel loses its social criticism through an overdrawn plot.

Other critics, however, such as Christian Metz of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, praise the dynamic structure of the text, arguing that Hein’s narrative style is vital to the message of the novel.


One may interpret what Metz describes as “erdbebengleiche Erschütterungen” as greatly disruptive plot events, but these are also often accompanied by a change in pace and style in the narration. The constantly changing focal point of Richard’s day-to-day life is highlighted by the shifts in narrative style, which emphasizes the overwhelming complexity and constant distraction inherent to Richard’s life as a working academic in legal poverty. The plot structure’s role in the novel’s commentary is easily recognizable at the end of the book as well, in a surprise repetition of the airplane scene that opens Weiskerns Nachlass. The repetition of the scene suggests that, despite the tiresome trials

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\(^1\) The above information is found on the website for Perlentaucher, on a webpage titled “Christoph Hein: Weiskerns Nachlass. Roman.”
Richard has endured throughout the story, little has changed; the cycle of struggle for the academic precariat will keep turning. In her review for the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Judith von Sternburg echoes Metz’s interpretation:


Hein’s portrayal of the academic precariat plight in twenty-first century Germany is straightforward, yet bleak. Sternburg points out that the protagonist of *Weiskerns Nachlass* clearly has no realistic outlook for improving his threadbare life, and that the text suggests that Stolzenburg’s entrapment in the “precariat” class is a reflection of the economic struggle of the eighteenth century intellectual. In her review for *Der Tagesspiegel*, Katrin Hillgruber praises Hein’s endeavors to illuminate the growing threat of the “precariat” in academia, calling the author an “unbestechlicher Zeitdiagnostiker” (Hillgruber). As these reviews reflect, many critics viewed protagonist Stolzenburg as an appropriate and prototypical member of the ever-growing academic precariat.

In addition to praising Hein’s depiction of his protagonist, critics also commended *Weiskerns Nachlass* for its cyclical plot structure and symbolism; Christian Metz’s review for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, for instance, praises the mirrored beginning and ending, saying, “wenn man bemerkt, dass die Erzählung einem ihr Ende als Anfang unterjubelt, ist klar, dass sie ein intrikates Spiel mit dem Leser treibt” (Metz). Nearly every review mentions the telling opening and closing scenes of the novel, in which Stolzenburg experiences and re-experiences a sort of optical illusion. The repeated and
re-imagined scene, in which Stolzenburg believes to witness a propeller engine failure on the airplane in which he is flying, gained attention from critics for its representation of existential questions introduced in the opening pages of the book. Hillgruber draws attention to the situational metaphors and symbolic objects in *Weiskerns Nachlass*, seeing Stolzenburg’s apprehension of a plane crash as a metaphor for the protagonist’s livelihood and reason to live. Hillgruber compliments the author for taking full advantage of the propeller motif: “Die Flugzeugpropeller, die Stolzenburg so in Angst versetzten, finden ihre Entsprechung in einem bunten Windrad [...] So feiert hier das Dingsymbol der klassischen Novelle seine Renaissance, formvollendet wie das gesamte Buch” (Hillgruber).

1.3 Brecht’s Literary Realism and Twenty-First Century Literary Criticism

As outlined in my introduction, Bertolt Brecht states that realist writing should expose the role of capitalist oppression and the workings of human and systemic relationships in society—“den gesellschaftlichen Kausalkomplex” (306). According to Brecht, writing in this manner enables the proletariat in the struggle against capitalist exploitation. He emphasizes that this may be achieved through a diversity of styles, so long as they communicate societal critique to their readership truthfully and in easily comprehensible ways. In describing the significance of the quality of *Volkstümlichkeit*, Brecht claims: “Ein Realist schreibt so, dass er verstanden werden kann, denn er will auf wirkliche Menschen wirklich einwirken” (307).

In “Volkstümlichkeit und Realismus,” which appeared in 1938 in *Das Wort* as part of a longer collection of essays on literary realism, Brecht expressly opposes the equating of realism with sensualism; he argues:
Wir werden feststellen, dass die sogenannte sensualistische Schreibweise (bei der man alles riechen, schmecken, fühlen kann) nicht ohne weiteres mit der realistischen Schreibweise zu identifizieren ist, sondern wir werden anerkennen, dass es sensualistisch geschriebene Werke gibt, die nicht realistisch, und realistische Werke, die nicht sensualistisch geschrieben sind. (332)

He uses this opposition to posit that to write in the form of realism it is not sufficient to merely describe appearances: “Der Mensch muss in seinen Reaktionen und in seinen Aktionen beschrieben werden” (328). To determine whether a work fulfills the criteria of realism, Brecht argues, “Man muss in jedem einzelnen Fall die Schilderung des Lebens (statt nur mit einer anderen Schilderung) mit dem geschilderten Leben selber vergleichen” (336).

Contemporary reviews of Gehen, ging, gegangen and Weiskerns Nachlass evaluate both political aspects of the novels—informed somewhat by twentieth century realist theory, and “readable” literary qualities, indicating the interests of the twenty-first century readership. Alongside discussing the achievements of the authors’ social critiques in their novels, critics also discuss the qualities of likelihood, scenic description, and believability in evaluating the texts. Judith von Sternburg concludes her review of Gehen, ging, gegangen by praising the blunt, realistic style of the work, stating: “Erpenbeck hat sich gegen Zauberei und für einen auf seine Weise schonungslosen Realismus entschieden” (“Jedermann und die Afrikaner”). Here, Sternburg seems to describe the absence of excessive optimism in Erpenbeck’s work as the “realistic” qualifier. Conversely, Hannah Lühmann of Die Welt remains skeptical of just how realistic Erpenbeck’s characters may be (Lühmann), while Claudia Reichert of the
Schwäbisches Tagblatt criticizes Erpenbeck’s protagonist in particular for his supposed lack of believability (Reicherter).

Reviewing Weiskerns Nachlass, critic Christian Metz stated: “Christoph Hein hat einen filigran gearbeiteten, fein austarierten und listigen Roman vorgelegt, der die Formen realistischen Erzählens neu auslotet” (Metz). Praising Hein’s use of symbolism, dramatic elements and narrative structure to communicate a critical indictment of a late capitalist society, Metz’s review focuses on Hein’s techniques for social criticism. The critic appears to use realistisch in the political-theoretical sense as used by Brecht and other twentieth-century literary Marxists, and implies that Hein’s narration offers new potential for the realist form. This praise of the novel contrasts with reviews that criticise the disjointed plot structure, such as the previously named Andreas Isenschmid of Die Zeit and critic Lothar Müller of the Süddeutsche Zeitung, who state that this narrative aspect takes away from the enjoyment of reading the novel (Müller).

These reviews, informed by the contemporary revitalization of literary realism, combine popular literary qualities with politically realist ones in their considerations of Gehen, ging, gegangen and Weiskerns Nachlass. Reflecting the developments in the literary publication industry of the 1990’s and 2000’s, the reviews cited here reflect the concerns of modern readers, which consist of both literary form and qualities such as entertainment and familiarity in depictions of society. This combination of interests and criteria in evaluating these novels demonstrates the expectations placed on the authors in shaping these texts, which is reflected in the layers of social and political narrative in Gehen, ging, gegangen and Weiskerns Nachlass.
CHAPTER 2

FACT AND FICTION IN JENNY ERPENBECK’S GEHEN, GING, GEGANGEN

By creating parallels between true events and created characters and dialogues, Jenny Erpenbeck’s Gehen, ging, gegangen utilizes the possibilities of both nonfiction and fictional narration. Her novel depicts the African refugee experience in Germany based on actual events alongside the German perspective of a fictional protagonist, thereby achieving a contemplative and personal comparison of two different viewpoints. In choosing to depict the German refugee crisis through fiction, the author is able to depict intimate details of this subject, exploring aspects of the exchange between Germans and refugees that might lose salience or even be impossible to depict in a work of nonfiction. For instance, Erpenbeck uses Richard’s memories, daydreams, and train of thought to show how an actual German might perceive refugee issues; with this, Erpenbeck is able to reveal implicit prejudices and confidential thoughts that a real person would unlikely admit to having. In addition, the narration occasionally reverses its viewpoint to reveal its African characters’ private thoughts and observations to encourage sympathy and diversify the perspective in scenes depicting the exchange. This storytelling technique, enabled by the fictional narrative, illuminates moments of interaction between Germans and refugees, re-contextualizing real-life exchange between these two groups. Critic Judith von Sternburg describes this as follows:

Manchmal, für ein paar Augenblicke, ein paar Sätze wechselt die Autorin die Perspektive und schlüpft in die Köpfe von Richards Umgebung. Wenn die
Flüchtlinge dabei selbst zu Wort kommen, ist auf einmal Richard der seltsame, befreundliche Fremde. Der Abgrund tut sich von der anderen Seite auf.

Eindringliche Momente. Man hätte gerne mehr davon. (Sternburg)

Another strength of supplementing historical accounts with a fictional narration is the potential for analogy and comparison. Richard’s intersectional identity (his middle-class economic standing, his progressive political values, his whiteness, his multilingualism, and his memories of the GDR) generates high potential for German readers to identify with the protagonist in some way. Additionally, Richard’s story serves as an analogy for Germany’s handling of refugees and the country’s history of African colonization; even as a quasi-philanthropist, Richard’s behavior and thoughts resemble that of a benevolent colonizer, Stefan Hermes (182) argues. The protagonist’s anticipation that the refugees will gladly share their stories and thank him for his benevolent deeds implies his assumption of a sort of white man’s burden (183). By substituting the African characters’ names with ones from the canon of European literary classics, such as “Tristan,” “Apollo,” and “Hermes,” Richard’s point of view suggests a potential Prinat des Eigenen (182). Though an attempt to create cultural familiarity, Richard’s nicknames consequentially erase a part of these men’s cultural identity. This practice also suggests Richard’s inability or, perhaps, unwillingness to remember the men’s foreign-sounding names. Similarly, Richard attempts to culturally translate the experiences of the Africans by comparing them to European narratives. Hermes explains this as such:

Die vielfach verstörenden Informationen, die Erpenbecks Protagonist [...] erhält, sucht er zu verarbeiten, indem er sie vorbehaltlos dem Prinat des Eigenen unterstellt. Das heißt in seinem Fall, dass er sie vergleichend auf Werke des
europäische Bildungskanons bezieht — darunter solche von Homer [...] Shakespeare, Bach, Goethe, Mozart, den Brüdern Grimm oder Brecht. Dass dieses Verfahren denkbar unangemessen, ja zum Teil beinahe lächerlich wirkt [...] versteht sich wohl. (182)

For Hermes, Richard’s implicitly colonialist mentality is an obvious, existing problem: “Ins Auge springt indes, dass Richards Verhalten gegenüber den jungen Afrikanern [...] alles andere als unproblematisch ist” (182). I interpret Erpenbeck’s use of Richard as deliberate, identifiable through an explicit depiction of Richard’s racist thoughts about other characters. *Gehen, ging, gegangen* thus presents a protagonist whose behavior is at once conceivable for actual, well-meaning Germans, and easily apparent as problematic.

In addition to creating a true-to-life protagonist to examine cultural hegemony, Erpenbeck, in her narrative, also creates parallels between actual refugee experiences and those of the German people. The great losses, societal confinement, and displacement faced by refugees are narratively coupled with Richard’s experience of aging and mortality, his obligatory retirement, and the dissolution of his home country, the GDR. The juxtaposition of these struggles suggests commonality between refugees and Germans who may share similarities with Richard. Unlike Richard’s attempts to explain refugee testimonies by comparing them to works of European literary prose and fiction, the narrative coupling of refugee experiences and German lives does not trivialize refugee perspectives or imply European cultural supremacy. In one instance, after hearing the story of a Ghanaian man, Richard remarks, “es ist noch gar nicht so lange her [...] da war die Geschichte der Auswanderung und der Suche nach Glück eine deutsche Geschichte” (Erpenbeck 222). This remark shows legitimate empathy and recognition on
Richard’s part, referring to the historical expulsion and forcible deportation of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe, which he experienced personally as a small child.

At the beginning of the novel, Richard is confronted by the daunting lack of ways to occupy his time following retirement. Although he had to relinquish his position as chair of the Classics faculty at his university, Richard remains a keen intellectual whose perspective is heavily informed by his academic studies. The lack of professional or academic obligations presents a challenge for Richard, who seems to be in want of intellectual stimulation:


Without lectures to present or seminars to teach, Richard faces the prospect of becoming obsolete within society. Richard’s mandatory retirement, surrendering his vocation, resembles the refugees’ marginalization, as they are barred from legal employment in Germany without asylum. In addition to being deprived of mental or physical stimulation through work, the employment ban denies the displaced men a sense of purpose as well as the possibility to financially invest in their futures. Eighteen-year-old Nigerian Osarobo elaborates on the purposelessness felt by many of the refugees. Richard asks, “denkst du manchmal an deine Zukunft,” to which Osarobo merely replies, “Zukunft?” (Erpenbeck 126). Their pending status forces the young and able-bodied men into
temporary retirement, just as the still mentally capable retired professor Richard lives in apprehension of his approaching Lebensabend (92).

Another experience shared by the African refugees and Richard is the constant reminder of death in their own communities; in the course of the novel, several refugees give accounts of crossing the Mediterranean Sea, in which their family or fellow refugees drowned or died of starvation and thirst. Other testimonies also tell of pogroms in the hometowns of those who fled, where they witnessed the murders of neighbors and loved ones. The experiences are recounted with sobriety, the emotional trauma still very apparent. The lake drowning in Richard’s neighborhood also serves as a constant reminder of death. In the opening pages of the book, the protagonist considers the gruesome details of the man’s drowning, the failed cries for help, and what may have become of the body. Others from the neighborhood similarly contemplate the drowning, somberly discussing minutiae of the incident amongst themselves. The ubiquitous lake, which conceals the body in its depths, serves as an inescapable reminder of the unresolved tragedy and perhaps the residents’ own fear of drowning.

Vielleicht wird es ihm besser gehen, wenn der Tote endlich gefunden ist. Eine Taucherbrille soll der Unglückselige getragen haben. Das könnte lächerlich sein, aber keinen von denen, die das wissen, hat er in diesem Sommer je darüber lachen sehen [...] Er kann von seinem Schreibtisch aus auf den See sehen. Schön ist der See, so wie in den anderen Sommern, aber damit ist es in diesem Sommer nicht getan. Der See gehört, solange der Tote nicht gefunden und weggebracht ist, diesem Toten. (Erpenbeck 17-18).
Inspiration for the African characters in *Gehen, ging, gegangen* was heavily informed by testimonies and interviews conducted by Erpenbeck. An acknowledgements section in the back of the book signifies the real-life connections within the novel; in this section, Erpenbeck thanks thirteen men for speaking with her about their experiences in fleeing their home countries. Stefan Hermes sees the inclusion of this thanks as a means of connecting the novel to nonfictional means of composition and the external reality:

“[D]ie Grenze zur außerliterarischen Realität wird somit [...] überschritten: [Erpenbeck verweist] auf ihre zurückliegenden Kontakte zu Informanten, wodurch sie ihren Roman mit einer Aura des Dokumentarisch-Authentischen ausstattet” (181). Erpenbeck’s inclusion of the acknowledgements section therefore proves her efforts to create connections to the outside reality not only through the narration itself, but by using the front and backmatter of the book to this end, as well.

As outlined in this chapter, *Gehen, ging, gegangen*’s descriptions of refugee experiences, European legislature, and public demonstrations are largely based upon fact, while the character of Richard is an invention of Erpenbeck’s. Some of the protagonist’s characteristics enable dialogue with and create empathy for the refugees—such as his multilingualism and personal history—while many of the character’s thoughts are communicated as well-meaning, but ultimately regressive. Erpenbeck’s crafting of Richard, with his manifold functions on several layers of textual understanding, strengthens her thematizing of a current societal debate. By being culturally relatable to German readers, the protagonist serves as a vehicle through which one may observe a complex political issue within one’s home country and learn to identify and challenge racist thoughts, language and actions. Richard’s perspective and behavior augments
Erpenbeck’s descriptions of a largely nonfictional subject. Through combining these narrative elements, *Gehen, ging, gegangen* is a work that not only informs about the facts of the German refugee crisis, but also raises questions about the society in which this crisis is occurring.
CHAPTER 3
THE ACADEMIC PRECARIAT IN CHRISTOPH HEIN’S WEISKERNS NACHLASS

As in Chapter 2, this chapter will also examine a novelist’s representation of an existing societal problem in literary fiction. Christoph Hein’s Weiskerns Nachlass addresses the growing problem of untenured and underpaid academics within the German university system, portraying the workings and consequences of this crisis by illustrating its effects for one individual. Prior to examining how Hein’s novel portrays the struggles of the academic precariat and its impact on a single person, I would like to first consider what defines this class of laborers and the distinct nature of the precariat in academia.

3.1 Definition of the Precariat Class and its Depiction in Weiskerns Nachlass

Guy Standing, a professor of development studies and pioneering researcher on the subject of the precariat, states that this emerging class “consists of people who lack the seven forms of labour-related security” (10). The most important of these forms for the purposes of this thesis are adequate income-earning opportunities; protection against arbitrary dismissal; assurance of an adequate stable income; and representation in the labour market, such as through an independent trade union. Standing also writes that “the precariat is far from being homogeneous [...] But they all share a sense that their labour is instrumental (to live), opportunistic (taking what comes), and precarious (insecure)” (13-14). The precariousness of these workers’ state, as explained by Standing, is a consequence of globalisation, which resulted in the deregulation of worldwide labour markets and commodification in nearly virtually every sector of life (26-27). In relating
this to the academic precariat, one must understand the process by which educational institutions gave way to the existence of such a class of laborers. Standing argues that the commercialization of schools and universities symbolizes a “loss of Enlightenment values” (68):

The education system is being globalised. It is [depicted] as an industry, as a source of profits and export earnings, a zone of competitiveness, with countries, universities and schools ranked by performance indicators. [...] Administrators have taken over schools and universities, imposing a ‘business model’ geared to the market. [...] Any course is acceptable if there is a demand for it, if it can be sold to consumers willing to pay the price. (68-70)

Standing’s grim depiction of the state of higher education reveals a commodification of education, in which profitability is prioritized over the traditional values of classical educational institutions past. Globally, this has resulted in exponentially growing enrollment numbers at colleges and universities; in an interview with Der Standard, Christoph Hein describes the effect of this expansion on higher education in Germany, saying “die Alma Mater ist auf dem Markt gelandet. [...] Allein im letzten Jahrhundert wurde aus der ehemaligen Eliteanstalt eine Massenbildungsanstalt” (Reif).

Among other things, the transition of universities to a Massenbildungsanstalt has transformed course offerings and threatened the vitality of less popular or profitable courses of study. Standing’s assertion that “any course is acceptable” given consumer demand (such as non-academic classes in outdoor adventure or aromatherapy) also implies that subjects that do not create demand are considered irrelevant to twenty-first century curricula. This appears to be the case for Stolzenburg, an adjunct lecturer of
Cultural Studies, whose institute is deemed an *Orchideenfach*, an exotic and inessential academic discipline. This categorization is reflected by the meagre financial means of the institute, barring Stolzenburg from full-time employment at the university. Hein was a witness to similar instances in his personal life, which he described as follows:


Hein’s observation that modern-day academic sponsors do not act like arts patrons of centuries past highlights a grim fact of twenty-first century academia: subjects are rarely, if at all, valued for their intrinsic worth. On the contrary, the disciplines that receive the greatest financial support are those that, in turn, reap the largest capital profit. In *Weiskerns Nachlass*, the department head of the Cultural Studies institute, Frieder Schlösser, reiterates this, explaining, “die Kulturwissenschaft bringt kein Geld, wie haben keine Sponsoren. [...] wir gelten als Belastung. [...] Und was in einem Jahr sein wird, darüber wage ich nicht nachzudenken” (Hein 20). The Cultural Studies institute’s lack of sponsorship indicates its lack of profitability to the university or outside investors; the resulting threat to the very existence of the institute points to the unavoidable and sometimes dire role that commodification plays in educational institutions in the twenty-first century.
Hein explains the unique nature of Stolzenburg’s precarious existence, saying, “zu meinem Helden gehört, dass er bestens ausgebildet ist und schlecht bezahlt wird” (Reif). Stolzenburg represents a unique fraction of precariat workers who cannot find secure employment despite achieving the highest level of education. Many outside of the precariat perceive this peculiar situation as inexplicable. Hein also depicts this reaction in Weiskerns Nachlass, in Stolzenburg’s interactions with more well-off characters. The protagonist is suspected of tax evasion by the German finance authority, as even they cannot believe that a man of Stolzenburg’s education could earn such a pittance. Klemens Gaede, a tax advisor who examines Stolzenburg’s finances, reacts to his meagre salary with disbelief:

Wenn das, was Sie hier dem Finanzamt als Einnahmen angeben, alles ist, was Sie in diesen zehn Jahren verdient haben, ist mir unerklärlich, wovon Sie leben. Sie haben studiert, sind […] so etwas wie ein Professor, und Sie haben ein Gehalt, das kein Automechaniker akzeptieren würde. (Hein 93)

Gaede’s comment makes clear that Stolzenburg’s wage is far from a sustainable one. In addition, his reference to the wages of higher-earning blue collar workers indicates that the emergence of the academic precariat defies societal expectations for the highly educated; since an advanced education has historically been a marker of middle and upper-class status, the twenty-first century impoverishment of academics like Stolzenburg is unfathomable and unjustifiable.
3.2 Personal Consequences of Precariat Life

Rüdiger Stolzenburg’s biography suggests that, had certain events in his younger life occurred differently, he would not have had to muddle along as a member of the precariat. In the early 1980s, Stolzenburg’s father was fired from his job and expelled from the East German CDU party for expressing political views incompatible with the actions of the state. Stolzenburg’s parents quickly emigrated to the West following the incident, which resulted in serious consequences for the protagonist’s career. Having just defended his dissertation and working at the Humboldt University in East Berlin with a Dozentur contract in sight, Stolzenburg is informed that he has been deemed an unsuitable candidate for the position, and that his teaching assistantship will not be renewed (140). Stolzenburg is able to find suitable work instead with a publisher in Leipzig, but it is clear that the GDR state’s political persecution of Stolzenburg’s parents has significantly hindered his pursuit of a full-time academic appointment.

The effect of his parents’ actions on his professional life is just one indicator of the many factors that rob Stolzenburg of any agency in his career. Ultimately, the protagonist is virtually powerless in his precarious situation. Despite his fourteen-year commitment to the institute, Stolzenburg will never receive a full-time position—if not for lack of financial means, than because of his age—and, if he does not lose his part-time position in the next institutional evaluation, he will soon be forced into retirement. This reflects that even Stolzenburg’s body escapes his control, as he is constantly reminded of his increasing age, physical decline, and inevitable mortality:

Die Zeit läuft ab, seine Zeit. Dieser Gedanke war ihm im vorigen Jahr zum ersten Mal gekommen, als er von einem Kommilitonen hörte, der in Pension ging. [...]
Ein Mann seines Jahrgangs war Rentner geworden. Er war erstaunt, als er davon hörte, irritiert, glaubte an einen Scherz, [...] aber im nächsten Moment war er tief erschrocken. Die Einschläge kommen näher, mit diesen Worten hatte ein Mann in einer Kneipe grinsend den Tod eines Nachbarn kommentiert. Eine Pensionierung ist auch so ein Einschlag. Eine Voranmeldung, ein erster Tod. (Hein 40)

For Stolzenburg, a man with no savings or pension to speak of, the spectre of retirement acts as both a financial death sentence and an indicator of the approaching end of his life. This serves as just one of many indicators that Stolzenburg is caught in a system in which he has little control.

Stolzenburg’s poverty and precarious employment foster a considerable emotional reaction. Because of his incapability to improve his circumstances and his apparent failure to achieve his long-term aspirations, Stolzenburg experiences incessant demoralization and humiliation, which manifest in anger, frustration, and emotional distance. He holds coworkers and students alike in great contempt, although this also stems in part from the changing culture of the twenty-first century university discussed briefly at the beginning of this chapter. As a seemingly honest educator, Stolzenburg strongly resents a colleague who abuses his full-time position to solicit sex from female students. Thinking on the corrupt behavior of his colleague Manfred Krupfer, the protagonist contemplates: “Nein, zu einem Manfred Krupfer wird er nicht werden, so tief will er nicht in der Banalität versinken” (159). The conscious “nein” of Stolzenburg’s train of thought echoes the sexual temptation the part-time lecturer experiences toward his female students, and the moral dilemma this presents for him.
In addition to a significant emotional impact at the workplace, Stolzenburg’s marginalization also has great consequences for his personal life. Christine Cosentino describes Stolzenburg’s behavior in intimate relationships: “Was ihm im akademischen Bereich nicht vergönnt ist, kompensiert er im Privatleben [...] mit der Eroberung von Frauen. Doch Liebe empfindet er nicht, seine Freundinnen sind Sexobjekte, verlässliche Partnerinnen für die Bewältigung von immer wieder neuem Frust in seiner prekären Lage” (Cosentino). By dictating the emotional parameters of his relationships and refusing long-term commitment to the women he entertains, Stolzenburg is able to grant himself a sense of control and authority within his otherwise powerless life.

3.3 Interactions between Social Classes in Weiskerns Nachlass

Characters who enjoy secure employment and a living wage often react to Stolzenburg and other precariat characters with confusion about their situation. Klemens Gaede, for instance, expresses his disbelief that an educated person, such as his cousin Marion, would continuously hold a precariat job: “Ich verstehe nicht, warum eine so kluge Person wie Marion als schlecht bezahlte Bibliothekarin arbeitet. Und sie ist dabei auch noch zufrieden, das ist mir ein Rätsel” (Hein 94). Gaede’s remark about his cousin’s situation—mentioning Zufriedenheit—suggests that he sees her employment as assent to a less-than-substantial lifestyle, without being aware of the circumstances that drive Marion to meagre part-time employment.

Stolzenburg’s work is necessary to his survival, and to get by, he has no choice but to supplement his university income through publications, extracurricular lectures, and other additional labor. However, his response to Gaede’s comment above indicates
that he may also perceive his precarious employment situation as a chosen one: When the
tax advisor Gaede comments that his mail carrier must earn more than Stolzenburg, the
protagonist replies: “die Gesellschaft braucht Postboten. Germanisten und
Theaterwissenschaftler werden nicht benötigt, also bezahlt man sie schlecht [...] Wenn
ich als Wissenschaftler arbeiten will, muss ich halt das Minigehalt akzeptieren”
(94). The speaker’s tone appears embittered and somewhat defiant, as though this belief
is one Stolzenburg has long resisted. Ultimately, however, it seems that Stolzenburg
cannot find any other justification for his circumstance. He appears to reiterate this
platitude as the only conceivable explanation. This impression of a freely chosen fate
places Stolzenburg in a humbling position, attributing his poverty to a voluntary lifestyle,
rather than to the commodification of education that is a real contributor to his
predicament.

One may also identify this hegemonic ideology, which works to demean precariat
laborers, in Stolzenburg’s relationship with his employer, Frieder Schlösser. Having
assured Stolzenburg for fourteen years that he would eventually have full-time
employment in the institute, Schlösser finally delivers the brutal message that there is no
such position open for Stolzenburg. Humbling the 59-year-old lecturer even further,
Schlösser expresses his exasperation with Stolzenburg’s persistent expectation of secure
employment—despite this being due to his own promise of such a job:

Ich habe keine volle Stelle für dich, und das ist dir bekannt. Ich habe mich immer
darum bemüht. Du weißt selbst, was ich alles unternommen habe. Und heute, das
ist leider die Wahrheit. [...] heute muss ich froh sein, dass für dich und Veronika
wenigstens die festen halben Stellen bleiben [...] Und was in einem Jahr wird,
Schlösser contorts the discussion of Stolzenburg’s employment into an opportunity to express his own generosity towards his precariat employee, suggesting that the protagonist is ungrateful to his employer, and portraying himself as a victim of the competitive university system. This reveals the emotionally manipulative nature of relationships between employers and precariat employees. The example given demonstrates the employer’s moral elevation, humiliation of the employee, and threats; Schlösser emphasizes the inessential nature of Stolzenburg’s position, saying, “[Es kann] leicht passieren, dass wir alle nichts mehr haben und du nicht einmal mehr die halbe Stelle” (19). This foreboding threat by Schlösser not only trivializes Stolzenburg’s labor, but also acts as a warning against further objections to his circumstance.

3.4 Textual commentary through plot structure and symbolism
Hein embeds a great deal of symbolism into his novel through the use of situational metaphor, leitmotifs, and compositional commentary. I discussed the significance of the circular plot structure in Chapter 1; the disjointed sections of the plot combined with a repeated beginning and ending scene communicate the insurmountable and unending nature of the precariat struggle, which Cosentino describes as a “Wiederholung des Immergleichen” (Cosentino). Hein also incorporates the imagery of the circle through the use of Dingssymbole in the text: a child’s pinwheel, and the rotating propellers of an airplane. These circling symbols, as part of a commentary on the state of the precariat
class, act to reference “die eintönige Wiederkehr derselben Situation [...] die Einkreisung des Menschen durch das gesellschaftliche Milieu” (Cosentino). By imbedding allegory into the novel’s form in addition to the use of physical motifs, Hein’s symbolism reveals commentary that transcends multiple layers of the novel.

The opening and closing chapters of *Weiskerns Nachlass* are named by many critics the “Flugzeugsepisode,” with the term *Episode* pointing to the distinct and separate nature of the chapters of the novel. Written by an experienced playwright, Christoph Hein’s novel reflects influences of theatrical writing, identifiable in a through-composed plot structure and archetypal roles of various characters. In fact, the novel “makes more sense” if read as a stage play, divided into distinctive acts, as opposed to in the continuous, strophic format of a traditional novel. Indeed, the differing tempo of the distinct sections of the novel do distinguish themselves notably from one another. Beginning with a morose documentation of Stolzenburg’s position at the university, and travelling through episodes including an outburst of street violence, a criminal hunt, and an elusive love story, each “act” of the novel bears its own significance within the larger framework of the novel.

In addition to mimicking the “act” structure of a theatrical script, *Weiskerns Nachlass* also emulates the theatre through the use of character types and thinly-veiled symbolic names, which are especially typical of comedies. Friedrich Wilhelm Weiskern, the eponym of the novel, bears obvious significance in his name: *Weiser Kern*, which speaks the inspiration and foundation that Stolzenburg’s research gives to his life. *Stolz*, from the protagonist’s own name, may refer to the pride that the character feels, despite his humbling life circumstances. This could also be a potential reference to the eighteenth
and nineteenth-century character type *Hagestolz*, as Axel Hildebrandt suggests, describing the protagonist’s status as “an older bachelor by conviction” (159). Even the employer Schlösser’s name bears significance, as the word *Schloss* reminds of both restriction (a lock or a gatekeeper), and the social elite (a castle). The use of symbolic names thus resembles theatrical works in which characters’ roles are revealed by their own names. The theatrical influence on Hein’s novel creates a connection with the history of Friedrich Weiskern himself, who worked extensively in the theatre as an actor, librettist, and in other roles. This stylistic parallel further reinforces the novel’s suggestions that perhaps little has changed in the working conditions of undervalued artists and academics between the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries, as not only Stolzenburg’s experiences in the plot, but the narrative components of the plot itself remind of Weiskern’s life in the Vienna theatre.

Metz observes the dramatic techniques identifiable in *Weiskerns Nachlass* by explaining, “*Weiskerns Nachlass* wirkt, als habe der Dramatiker und Prosaist Christoph Hein seine beiden bislang getrennten literarischen Arbeitsweisen kunstvoll vereint” (“Das Leben ist ein Billigflug”). The critic observes that the “Inszenierungstechniken, die man vom Drama kennt,” that Hein incorporates into his novel, communicate “eindrückliche Bilder und Unmittelbarkeit,” through a present-tense narration and a notable absence of narrator commentary. The *Unmittelbarkeit* of Hein’s imagery results in a text that speaks to the currency of the author’s representation of society. In addition, the lack of explicit narrator commentary works to portray the crisis of the academic precariat as objectively as possible in a fictionalized setting, while at the same time leaving abstraction open to
interpretation. Hein himself addresses this stylistic choice in his interview with Der Standard, explaining that the end of the story leaves potential in interpretation:

Ich bin Humanist und ein bodenloser Optimist. Die Katastrophe, die auf Menschen in prekären Arbeitsverhältnissen lauert, wenn sie in die Rente kommen, spare ich aus. Das Leben für Stolzenburg wird noch viel härter werden. Aber da sehen Sie meinen optimistischen Blick auf die Welt, dass ich rechtzeitig den Vorhang schließe. (Reif)

Hein’s comment suggests that, under present circumstances without intervention, precariat laborers like Stolzenburg will continue to suffer, especially if no changes are made to protect workers with no retirement savings. However, the author’s narrative timing and decisive closing point of the novel speaks to the potential of the outside world to take action; Stolzenburg’s fate, and that of the existing precariat class, is dependent upon systematic transformation, a prospect that Hein does not deny, however unlikely it may be.
CHAPTER 4

“EMPÖRT EUCH!” SOCIETAL IMPACT THROUGH REALISTIC FICTION

As discussed in the introduction, Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukács had distinctly different understandings of the goals of realistic fiction, but the end goal of each is the same: to give readers a “realistic” understanding of the social and economic mechanisms at work in capitalist society and to enable social progress. This reflects the teleological view of history held by these writers, literature acting as a tool to achieve the eventual goal of a Marxist society. In the article “Marxism and Art in the Era of Stalin and Hitler,” Eugene Lunn explains that, through exposing the role of capitalist oppressors in contemporary society and demonstrating historical patterns, “Brecht hoped to galvanize his audience into action outside the theater. Art needed to be ‘open-ended,’ to be completed by the audience, and not ‘closed’ by the author's reconciliation of contradictions” (15). For Brecht’s realist theory, subsequent action and engagement with outside society is fundamental to literature’s purpose.

In chapters two and three, I discussed the means by which Jenny Erpenbeck and Christoph Hein’s novels attempt to expose and unmask oppressive forces and viewpoints within German society, following Brecht’s stipulations that “Realistisch heißt: den gesellschaftlichen Kausalkomplex aufdeckend; die herrschenden Gesichtspunkte als die Gesichtspunkte der Herrschenden entlarvend” (“Volks tümlichkeit und Realismus” 332). Gehen, ging, gegangen illustrates how legislative and institutional powers participate in the European refugee crisis, exposing a system designed to withhold asylum and prevent
refugees from working, acquiring sustainable housing, or having freedom of movement. *Weiskerns Nachlass* points out the changes that lead to the commodification of education and created the academic precariat, also revealing an ideology that keeps profiting university administrators in power and disempowers precariat workers.

In his description of the realist approach in “Volkstümlichkeit und Realismus,” Brecht names two additional benchmarks for realist literature: “das Moment der Entwicklung betonend; konkret und das Abstrahieren ermöglicht” (332). Emphasizing *Entwicklung* and *Abstrahieren*, Brecht believed that literature should encourage further consideration by the audience, enabling the audience to draw meaning from a work that is relevant to their own time and place. *Abstrahieren* suggests that an effective text should allow readers to come to their own conclusions about society with the guidance of the realist perspective. Brecht’s notion of *Entwicklung* advocates for taking action in the outside world as a response to critical art, creating change in the surrounding society. Considering these two Brechtian realist principles, it is relevant to examine whether and how Erpenbeck and Hein encourage action by the reader or influence societal change through their novels.

4.1 Effectiveness of Social Commentary of *Gehen, ging, gegangen*

*Gehen, ging, gegangen*, does not intend to act as an instruction manual on resolving the entirety of the European refugee crisis, but it does make recognizable attempts to suggest solutions or action at the local level. The novel also comments on the then-present state of action surrounding refugee aid to demonstrate what aspects are effective and which actions should be discouraged. For instance, while reportage surrounding the refugees of
Berlin is shown to have some negative consequences when not conducted impartially, news coverage of this crisis overall acts as a positive tool, as Richard learns of the Berlin refugees and their location through watching local network coverage of a demonstration:

Er setzt sich zu Tisch und schaltet das Fernseher ein, in der Abendschau bringen sie Nachrichten aus Stadt und Region: [...] auf dem Alexanderplatz haben sich zehn Männer versammelt, Flüchtlinge offensichtlich, und sind in einen Hungerstreik getreten [...] auf dem Alexanderplatz? [...] Dort, wo Richard heute gewesen ist? [...] Warum hat er die Demonstration dann nicht gesehen?

(Erpenbeck 27)

With this excerpt, Erpenbeck exhibits how the divided human attention presents an obstacle for involvement and awareness in one’s community. In busy public spaces, as Erpenbeck shows, protesting may not always be successfully noticed; thus, through the portrayal of the television journalism, Erpenbeck points to a valuable tool in creating awareness about the refugee crisis.

Additionally, Erpenbeck describes the stipulations one must navigate in order to appropriately register a demonstration, as well as the challenges these requirements present for refugees without asylum:


The absent point-of-view in this section of the narration appears as though the statement was addressed directly to the reader, informing the readership about the necessities of
organizing a demonstration. The inclusion of this straightforward list may educate inexperienced readers about how one conducts a demonstration, potentially creating interest in this activity.

Erpenbeck’s novel does not explicitly propose amendments to European asylum law, but it does use legal vocabulary and name pieces of current legislation that impact refugees in Germany. A concrete element in the novel is the frequent mention of *Dublin II*, a 2003 European Union regulation which necessitates that asylum seekers must apply in the first EU country in which they arrive (“EN - Dublin II Regulation”). This law is portrayed as one of the largest legal obstacles for refugees in Germany, preventing them from finding long-term housing or employment. By depicting real-life consequences of *Dublin II*, Erpenbeck suggests reform to this European Union law, although her fiction medium does not serve as a place to offer specific alternatives.

At the individual level, *Gehen, ging, gegangen* does exemplify some other ways in which regular citizens may get involved with refugee aid. The most concrete example Erpenbeck provides is listed in the back pages of the book: the routing number for a church bank account in Berlin specifically for refugee accommodation. The novel itself also depicts that donations, such books, instruments, bicycles, and other items can assist refugees who are unable to work or otherwise need to occupy their time. Volunteering to teach German, acting as an escort to legal or doctor’s appointments, offering handiwork or other provisional jobs, or boarding persons who lack sustainable housing are other forms of activism that Erpenbeck includes.

Erpenbeck’s depictions of refugee aid show ultimately provisional solutions; it is obvious that serious legal overhaul must be achieved to fundamentally address the
destitute situation many refugees face. Despite this, *Gehen, ging, gegangen* acts as an attempt to educate Germans about many facets of this crisis, create sympathy for refugees, demand long-term solutions from legislators, and encourage involvement to improve the everyday lives of these people.

4.2 *Zeitdiagnostik* and Social Abstraction in *Weiskerns Nachlass*

Unlike Erpenbeck’s, Hein’s novel presents a social crisis that is less overtly legal, and more explicitly connected with the widespread dilemma of educational institutions to operate as a business. Whereas Erpenbeck’s protagonist is a character who has the agency and means to engage with the social crisis he encounters, Hein’s Stolzenburg is portrayed as utterly powerless and overcome by the plight of the precariat, of which he is a part. The origin of the precariat is clearly the commodification of education, and though it becomes obvious that some sort of drastic reform in the protections of university employees are needed, Hein avoids promoting any particular solution. As the Adelbert Reif of *Der Standard* points out, “Es verschließt sich jeder Lösung” (Reif).

*Weiskerns Nachlass* is a novel centered around a member of the precariat, who partially blames himself for his precarious financial and professional circumstances. Reif notes this, saying “Auffallend ist, dass viele Personen [im] Roman, ungeachtet der misslichen beruflichen Situation, in der sie aufgrund der wirtschaftlichen Lage stecken, keinen kritischen Diskurs führen. Ihre Reaktionen sind apolitisch. Keine Spur von ‘Empört euch!’” (“Halbe Stelle, halbes Leben”) The novel shows the lack of agency among members of the precariat, and the narration does not attempt to act as a call to arms. While Hein succeeds in revealing the grim circumstances of the present as a
Zeitdiagnostiker (Hillgruber), as his message appears to be a bleak one: “Heute herrscht eine fatalistische Haltung: Die Arbeitssituation ist, wie sie ist. Es gibt keine Alternative” (Reif). This evaluation of the current precariat crisis exemplifies how persons without secure employment are often viewed without sympathy, as apathy plagues the culture.

The somewhat inconclusive ending of the novel leaves much to be answered, as Christine Cosentino describes, “dem Leser ist es überlassen, sich auf das offene Ende des Romans seinen Reim zu machen” (Cosentino). However, while there is potential for a positive turn in the protagonist’s life—perhaps with a fulfilling romantic relationship or a contract to publish his research—the prospects appear decidedly less optimistic, as even Hein states that “das Leben für Stolzenburg wird noch viel härter werden” (Reif).

Weiskerns Nachlass, therefore, appears as a diagnosis of the employment crisis of the present time, revealing the circumstances endangering members of the precariat, revealing that the lack of solutions intensifies this struggle.

Gehen, ging, gegangen and Weiskerns Nachlass both take a realistic approach, but with different intentions, as these novels respond to distinct and unique social crises. Both novels attempt to demonstrate the causes and consequences of the given crisis beyond what is plainly apparent, encouraging Abstrahieren, yet the reader response the authors prescribe differ. Erpenbeck and Hein’s implementations of realist writing thus demonstrate differing responses to the approach Brecht prescribes, as Gehen, ging, gegangen encourages individual action, while Weiskerns Nachlass depicts a crisis in which the individual is largely powerless.
CONCLUSION

Bertolt Brecht’s concept of realism emphasizes the importance of literature for revealing the methods and mechanisms of societal oppression, while also remaining relevant to the time and audience in which a work is written. Erpenbeck and Hein’s responses to Brechtian realism are historically informed, criticizing present-day Germany in a manner accessible to common readers. In addition, the novels’ titles both make reference to the connection of past and present, hinting at the historical continuity of the causal complex of society described by Brecht (332). The title “Gehen, ging, gegangen” references the journey of refugees from Africa to Germany, and the refugees’ separation from their homeland is shown to share some resemblance with the history of displaced Germans. “Weiskerns Nachlass” points to the shared impoverished situation of both the historical figure and the protagonist, reminding that the devaluing of artists and intellectuals is a long-existing struggle.

_Gehen, ging, gegangen_ and _Weiskerns Nachlass_ both use the narratives of individuals and culturally recognizable frames, such as the familiar professor type, and scripts to expose existing social crises. These novels are informed by historical and social facts and events, but the authors also use fictional and dramatic elements to strengthen the narrative’s perspective and encourage the reader to explore abstract ideas surrounding the depicted social problem. In _Gehen, ging, gegangen_, Erpenbeck uses Richard’s often tongue-in-cheek thoughts and symbolic components like the body in the lake to add narrative depth to the life-like account of refugee experiences in Berlin. _Weiskerns_
Nachlass, through the incorporation of Dingssymbole such as the circle and the airplane propeller, reveals the existential hardships experienced by members of the academic precariat.

These techniques also contribute to the Lesbarkeit of the novels, creating texts that both critically portray the workings of German society and are comprehensible and entertaining to the reader. Suspenseful and intensely dramatic scenes also create appeal for the reader, making the texts inviting. Gehen, ging, gegangen and Weiskerns Nachlass are examples of books following the realist literary tradition that reach for appeal and resonance with a wide contemporary audience, communicating messages that unmask the causality of present-day problems and stress the critical nature of real-life solutions to these crises.
WORKS CITED


