

COVER: POETRY AND NATURAL SCIENCES IN GOETHE'S LATE POEMS, 2016

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KARL RICHTER TURNS EIGHTY

Karl Richter, literary scholar and president of the *Competence Initiative*, turns eighty

Refugee Child, World Citizen

Both were refugee children. Both went through the experience of war and displacement. Coming from Bohemia, Karl and Barbara Richter had to start a new life in Bavaria (Oberallgäu District) after 1945.

Homeland

A rather difficult concept. The new homeland of Bavaria, however, offers new opportunities.

Both refugee children graduate from the high school in Obertsdorf. Barbara Richter recalls: *"You often recognized each other by your language and accent. In our relationship, the common former homeland did not really play a crucial role - at least not consciously. Making music together is what eventually brought us much closer to each other."*

Karl Richter studies German studies, history, and geography at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich and is a scholarship student of the Maximilianeum Foundation. At private gatherings with friends,

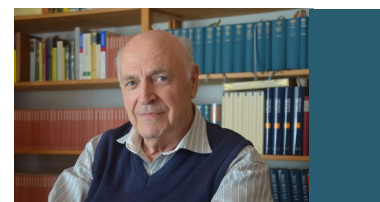
he may still occasionally share stories of his childhood, youth, and student days. To me as one of the "middle aged" scientists who got to know Karl Richter and members of his generation as teachers, these stories are of particular interest.

Would it be too much of an imposition if I asked to hear even more of his childhood and youth in a more public setting? Perhaps in autobiographical sketches?

Literature and science

But even without any autobiographical additions, his works stand out. Like his academic teacher Walter Müller-Seidel and his colleagues and students at Munich, the literary and cultural studies community also owes pioneering research to Karl Richter.

His contributions about Fontane's works, for example, read as if they have been written only yesterday. His pioneering study *Literatur und Naturwissenschaft* [Literature and Natural Sciences] regarding the poetry of Enlightenment (1970) opens



Karl Richter

He was born in Warnsdorf on 22 December 1936 and married Barbara Richter, who was born in Reichenberg in 1937. The home of their late childhood and youth are the Allgäu Alps where both still like to spend time today. Richter is a former scholarship student of the Maximilianeum Foundation; he completed his doctoral and postdoctoral theses at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. From 1973 to 2002, he was professor for New German Philology and Literary Studies at Saarland University. In 2001, he was awarded the Golden Medal of the Goethe Society. Since 2007, he has been cofounder and president of the *Competence Initiative for the Protection of Humanity, the Environment and Democracy* e.V. The Richter couple has lived in St. Ingbert / Saar since 1973, has two children, Stefan and Corinna, and now already two adult grandchildren, Lyn and Eva.

up interdisciplinary possibilities of analysis, research, and thought to conventional literary studies. This study has been, and still is, an inspiration to a new, and by now diverse, area of research. Thus it has become (almost) common practice today to read and understand literature not regardless of time and place, but also, and especially, against the background of scientific and technical developments. And finally in his position as the main editor - in cooperation with Herbert G. Göpfert, Norbert Miller, Gerhard Sauder, and Edith Zehm - the edition of the *Münchener Goethe-Ausgabe* (1985–1999) marked another milestone in research.

Werner Keller honors the new approach to historical origins and interdisciplinary linkages in this mega project in Goethe's sense. In his laudatory speech on the occasion of awarding the Golden Goethe Medal (2001), he states: "Since his doctoral thesis on Fontane (1966), Karl Richter's ability to look at traditional and conventional concepts with a completely fresh perspective again and again has been legendary."

Besides the *Frankfurter Goethe-Ausgabe* (which has been published at the same time), the *Münchener Goethe-Ausgabe* has become the reference tool for scientists. Researchers and enthusiasts of literary studies prefer to have both editions at hand in their library.

Of the more than one hundred specialist publications written by Richter, there are a few that deserve special mention here: *Fortschritt ohne Zukunft* [Progress without Future] (1979), *Emotionalisierung durch Sachlichkeit* [Emotionalization through Objectiveness] (1983), *Die Literatur und die Wissenschaften* [Literature and Science] (1997), or *Goethe - Ungewohnte Ansichten* [Goethe - Unusual Perspectives] (2001).

Frequently, the title of the publication already tells readers what to expect in Richter's work: intellectual joy of discovery, unexpected and surprising things, a large degree of sensibility toward literature and its own life, and most of all poetry. As for myself, one of the most beautiful lines of poetry ever written can be found in Richter's remarkable edition of *West-östlicher Divan* from the *Münchener Goethe-Ausgabe* (1998) where he observes in his commentary on the most famous and most mysterious Goethe poem *Selige Sehnsucht* [Holy Longing]: "The poem gives birth to a longing of grasping the subtle meanings just hovering there and infusing them with concrete meaning. Yet, at the same time, the poem also defies it."

Most likely it is not only his works, but also the personal encounter with him that must have fascinated literature students in Richter's third homeland where he has taught at Saarland University for three decades (1973–

2002). His lectures and seminars conveyed and explored approaches to literature that have inspired students with their sheer diversity as well as their many different layers of appearance and expression.

Richter dislikes idle flattery and excessive etiquette. In this regard, he seems to resemble his much studied subject Fontane, who also was suspicious of too much formality. In our frugal times now where faculties of humanity are heavily downsized in many places, it seems fitting to chat about such things.



Progress with future

Richter's new book with the title *Poesie und Naturwissenschaft in Goethes Altersgedichten* [Poetry and Natural Sciences in the Poems of the Late Goethe] - sponsored by *Alfried Krupp von Bohlen and the Halbach-Stiftung* and published by *Wallstein* - will soon be released, just in time for his 80th birthday. He would have liked to see it published earlier, but his workload has not exactly slowed down after his retirement. For a long time, Richter's commitment to one of the most urgent - and at the same time most suppressed - issues of our time has been crucial in raising awareness so that this issue is approached from interdisciplinary perspectives.

A cell tower not far from Richter's residence was the catalyst for him to dive into the research of the ever-increasing levels of wireless radiation. Richter sides with those who are affected, zeros in on the glaring contradictions of current wireless communication policies, which enshrine the prevailing exposure guidelines promoted by industry despite the currently available scientific knowledge to the contrary. This issue raises questions regarding human and citizen rights, relevant health prevention and environmental protection, limits and possibilities of independent research, and many more socially highly charged challenges.

Therefore, he had been a spokesperson of the citizen group *Bündnis saarländischer Bürgerinitiativen Mobilfunk* for a long time. To strengthen the participation of active citizens, he has become cofounder and president of the *Competence Initiative for the Protection of Humanity, the Environment and Democracy e.V.* This interdisciplinary initiative of scientists, health care professionals, lawyers, and technical experts stands for a new awareness of the health and environmental risks associated with increasing exposure levels of wireless radiation.

In current publications, Richter calls on politicians and representatives of the industry: "In the long run, only the union of natural sciences and technology, social sciences, humanities, and aesthetics, as well as democracy will ensure sustainable progress ... For example, anybody who ignores the risk of wireless radiation to be surprised about explosive health care costs has lost sight of the most important question of democracy, that is, what makes us human and what makes possible a future worthy of humans."

He knows that this is an inconvenient truth. German scientists close to the industry and lobbyists do not want to be friends with him. The business with current wireless communication technologies is a gigantic multi-billion dollar market.

However, he knows himself connected with a growing number of international as well as national colleagues of diverse research areas who share with him the urgency that action is needed for independent risk research and precautionary guidelines. This is not about doing away with wireless communication technologies, but about their compatibility with human health and the environment. Richter worries, in particular, about our future and the younger generations who grow up constantly surrounded by wireless radiation from, for example, cell phones, smartphones, tablets, and Wi-Fi & Co.

His work and the Allgäu Alps

Where to go when there is too much to do? Over the course of a year, both Karl and Barbara Richter like to withdraw regularly to Fischen in the Allgäu Alps.

"Our issues with 'feeling at home' are also part of this," Barbara Richter says. "Bavaria has become our second home we have grown accustomed to."

Peter Ludwig (*1962), literary scholar who lives and works in Dudweiler Saar. Translated by Katharina Gustavs, Sooke, British Columbia, Canada.

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDED READING

Resignation. Eine Studie zum Werk Theodor Fontanes.
Stuttgart, Berlin, Cologne, Mainz 1966.

Literatur und Naturwissenschaft.
Eine Studie zur Lyrik der Aufklärung.
Munich 1972.

Fortschritt ohne Zukunft.
Literarische Prognosen in »Physikerdramen« der Moderne.
In: Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte 2 (1979), p. 125–134.

Emotionalisierung durch Sachlichkeit.
Ein wirkungsästhetisches Paradigma der Moderne.
In: Klassik und Moderne. Die Weimarer Klassik als historisches Ereignis und Herausforderung im kulturgeschichtlichen Prozeß.
Edited with Jörg Schönert. Stuttgart 1983, p. 433–453.

Die Literatur und die Wissenschaften 1770–1930.
Walter Müller-Seidel zum 75. Geburtstag.
Edited with Jörg Schönert and Michael Titzmann. Stuttgart 1997.

Theodor Fontane. Gedichte.
Stuttgart 1998.

Goethe. Ungewohnte Ansichten.
Edited with Gerhard Sauder. St. Ingbert 2001.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe: Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens. Münchner Ausgabe.
21 in 33 volumes. Edited in cooperation with Herbert G. Göpfert, Norbert Miller, Gerhard Sauder and Edith Zehm. Munich 1985–1998. – Vol. 11.1.1 *Divan-Jahre 1814–1819*. Part 1. Edited with Christoph Michel. Munich 1998; Vol. 11.1.2 *West-östlicher Divan*. Edited in cooperation with Katharina Mommsen and Peter Ludwig. Munich 1998. – *Namen - Werke - Orte*. Gesamtregister zur Münchner Ausgabe. Edited with Sebastian Mangold and Edith Zehm. Munich 2014.

Kommerz, Gesundheit und demokratische Kultur.
Gewinner und Verlierer in einer Modellregion des Mobilfunks.
Edited with Hermann Wittebrock. St. Ingbert 2005.

Copublisher and coeditor of two interdisciplinary brochure series established in 2007:

Wirkungen des Mobil- und Kommunikationsfunks [Effects of Wireless Communication Technologies] and Forschungsberichte zur Wirkung elektromagnetischer Felder [Research Reports on the Effects of Electromagnetic Fields].

Publications by the Competence Initiative for the Protection of Humanity, the Environment and Democracy e.V.

Poesie und Naturwissenschaft in Goethes Altersgedichten [Poetry and Natural Sciences in Goethe's Late Poems].
Will be released in November 2016.

MORE INFORMATION ONLINE

<http://www.uni-saarland.de/fak4/fr41/richter/>
<http://kompetenzinitiative.net/>

