

**Michael Braun**  
**On the beauty of the quotidian**  
**and the music of coincidence**  
**Laudation**

Dear Mr Zeller, esteemed members, patrons and friends of the Hermann Hesse Foundation, dear Joachim, Ladies and Gentlemen, please do not be startled if I begin with an alarming medical discovery: publishing periodicals, the diagnosis reads, is a pathological condition, a nerve-racking activity practised by addicts. This insight comes from someone who ought to know: Walter Höllerer, no less, arguably the most literature-addicted magazine editor the literary world has ever produced. The spiritus rector at such illustrious titles as "Akzente" and "Sprache im technischen Zeitalter," he knows from his own painful experience that it is impossible for the editors of periodically published works of print to settle down into a cosy, "rocking-chair-like" form of addiction that is easy on the nerves and exercised in a full-time capacity. The conditions that have to be met by successful magazine producers include, as we learn from Höllerer, not only the obligatory bibliomania and passion for contemporary literature but also infinite patience and idealism and, last but not least, an unerring willingness to engage in self-exploitation, along with the ability to completely forgo any pecuniary speculation.

Yet magazine addiction begins with literary megalomania, the urgently felt wish to make a name for oneself as an avenger of the poetically suppressed in the fight against the establishment, and the desire to finally secure a place for oneself as a permanent guest in the literary Olympus.

This was the formulation employed precisely two hundred years ago by two young, rebelliously minded poets by the names of Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel when outlining their not entirely modest ambition of founding a romantic literary journal in order to not only shake up the poetic status quo of the day good and proper, but also to become "Germany's critical dictators within a period of 5 to 10 years." This hubris of the Schlegel brothers who, in their legendary "Athenäum" published in 1798, were seeking to set up a "critical dictatorship" in the literary world, may well have been positively nobilitized by literary historians. Viewed in sober terms, their high-flying visions swiftly failed due to the lack of staff and manuscripts available at the time. The arrogance endemic to their profession, the flights of megalomania, and also the shortlived nature of their project are, however, traits they have handed down to many of their literary successors, who, up until the present day, still believe in the need to engage in aesthetic opposition to their forebears through the medium of the literary magazine. Since the 1970s, vast amounts of literary protest energy have been expended in the wide world of literary periodicals, with the majority of these energies having been spent after a short time. Triumphant in most of these shortlived journals was something that the man who gave his name to this prize, Hermann Hesse, once termed, writing to literary magazine editor Thomas Mann, "momentary needs for discharge," a need for release, one might say, that is facilitated through the venting of one's emotions.

In the early years at magazine "Am Erker," there was also no lack of "momentary needs for discharge." Indeed, the beginnings comprised little more than an ardent resolve to sabotage literary consensus and to overthrow the existing poetic status quo. When, in the legendary German autumn of 1977, a group of German students and social workers to be – to wit, Joachim Feldmann, Michael Kofort, Rudolf Gier, and Friedhelm Wenning – when, one might say, these enlightened gents from Münster in Westphalia came together intent on getting their libertarian literary messages across to a student population largely uninterested in matters poetic, the most they had inherited from the Schlegels was the megalomania, albeit without the genius.

These were the years in which the “little magazines,” little alternative journals modelled on American publications, began to proliferate like mushrooms in damp soil – “little mags” characterized by plenty of good will to engage in subliterary counterculture yet a dearth of technical, financial and aesthetic resources. These were the years in which it was enough to duplicate sloppily produced typescripts - possibly even corrected by hand - on an offset machine, and to crank them for rapid consumption by an extremely narrow circle of readers. This democratization of literature, spurred on by the boom in the execrable “communication texts,” was also to be encountered in the first few issues of the magazine “Am Erker” – as evidenced by a sense of brotherhood that spoke to readers using the informal “Du” form regrettably so current at the time, and an easygoing dilettantism that mistakes any kind of seditious statement for poetic radicalism.

The magazine borrowed its name –demonstrating the full spontaneity of the avant-garde – from an anagrammatic rewriting of the title of Franz Kafka’s novel “Amerika.” For many years, literature in “Am Erker” was nothing but the continuation of the mood prevailing at the communal parties in shared student flats, employing what were, at best, semipoetic means. Grandiose tabula rasa gestures flourished, as did pieces pouring scorn and contempt on bourgeois aesthetics, and a proudly displayed shoddiness in terms of layout, yet one that merely served to fire the enthusiasm of the editors all the more. In a word, “Am Erker” was, in its early years, infected by every conceivable form of childhood ailment, the teething troubles typical of a so-called alternative literary journal. Particularly touching, when looking back from today’s perspective, is the way in which readers were persistently addressed in the familiar “Du” form, and the demonstrative adherence to a communitarian sense of companionship, both of which were right in tune with the magazine’s very own distribution system, which relied on a nocturnal “sales force” typical of the late 1970s. In the late evening hours, the “Am Erker Collective,” as it still called itself during the age of inviolable leftist brotherhood, bravely set off to tour the pubs and bars of Münster bent on - I quote from Erker 28 – “talking forbearing groups of imbibing students into buying the magazine.”

Right up until the early 1980s, this blithe revelry lived on as an enclave of the regional literature business, indulging in an uninhibited orgy of first-name terms with its readers, and driven by the desire for intimate literary self-understanding. Often, in fact, literature played only a supporting role, up until ... well, yes, up until issue 12 of “Erker” published in 1983, which, for the very first time, was produced with what was presumably a prehistoric version of a typesetting computer. A kind of aesthetic revelation must have occurred at this time, the stirring of a literary ambition that went beyond an aesthetic shaped by mere ideology. In issue 14, already boasting a professional layout and design, one comes across a fundamental pronouncement on the part of a left-leaning literary specialist, dismissing all demands for literature to be partisan, and criticizing the “urge for political clarity and a need [for texts] to have an immediate impact” as nothing but “a petty-bourgeois attitude towards reading.” And, gradually, it also dawned on the “Erker” editors that the politically correct can be appallingly meagre in aesthetic terms, and that the fantastic inventions of literature are definitely to be preferred over the certainties of ideology. When, a short time later, in issue 16, “Erker” editor Rudolf Gier talked to writer Ralf Thenior about his work, this can already be read as a blueprint for the poetics favoured by the magazine itself: perched on the divide between the crudely quotidian and grotesque fantasies, the texts of short story writer Thenior could be seen as an aesthetic model for the literary course pursued by the magazine. It is this extraordinary predilection for short, laconic, scurrilously accentuated prose putting everyday life under the microscope that has been cultivated by “Am Erker” for twenty years, and this is a direction from which Feldmann, Gier, Kofort and Co. are unlikely to depart in the future either. “Everyday things are beautiful and rich enough for poetic sparks to be struck from them”: this Robert Walser quote, smuggled into issue 30 of “Am Erker,” had a formative effect in

stylistic terms. As the magazine's literary puberty drew to an end, the penchant for scurrilous short stories and small-format everyday realism became a passion. Since the Ralf Thenior interview - the very first interview of all to appear in "Am Erker" - the magazine has presented a succession of authors and texts, or featured them in the form of discussions and interviews, that perfectly embody this much-loved scurrilous aesthetic: the magnificent Ror Wolf, for example, who, in his burlesque stories, always manages to give a fantastic twist to things - or also, in issue 25, writer Paul Auster, through whose starkly disturbing prose the "music of coincidence" vibrates, with one outrageous occurrence succeeding the next. Additionally, "Am Erker" has also managed to discover the odd young and unknown author: Burkhard Spinnen, say, the virtuoso chronicler of our white-collar world and the inventor of tragicomic everyday entanglements, published his first literary texts in "Erker," and in the shape of the young Marcus Jensen, I may predict *en passant*, a further Erker author will soon also prove to be a talking point.

Twenty years after its literary coming-out, at any rate, the poorly scrawled sheets of the radical young students have changed beyond recognition: "Am Erker," a reviewer writing in issue 28 summarized in an almost melancholy tones, has become bourgeois. "The title has indeed - since issue 20, to be precise - adopted the guise of a sophisticated literary magazine, clad in a sober black reminiscent of the early quarto productions of Klaus Wagenbach Verlag and also, in the now larger format, somewhat evocative of the 'Schreibheft' already eulogized in these pages. The fantasy-style short story has since become the dominant text form, yet the magazine's trademark feature is the comprehensive review section, in which our solemn arts pages culture is challenged and opposed in remarkably intelligent and witty manner. Donning the most diverse of caps to disguise their identity, the "Erker" editors write amusing columns designed to disrupt the cosy workings of the literary business. An especially diligent factotum among reviewers is a certain Fritz Müller-Zech, who, according to a biographical note, "is a televiewer, model-aeroplane flyer and social critic living in Oer-Erkenschwick" and, for all his feigned petty-bourgeois innocence, someone who displays a quite remarkable appetite for reading. Serving as his assistants - providing the prompts and feeding him anecdotes - are critical subjects with such culinary-sounding names as Peter Pfirsching ("Peter Peachcock") and Johannes Vielfrucht ("Johannes Manyfruit"), who have a penchant not only for vitamin-rich food but also for the ironic sabotage of literary dignity. A further identifying feature of the literary caprice of our magazine-makers is, after all, the fact that they are always busy helping to break the spell exercised by many a new attempt to evoke the tone of literary pathos. One of the most efficacious forms of medication to treat false pathos in literature is, without doubt, a good wholesome dose of "Erker."

All that therefore now remains for me to do, respected members of the jury, is to thank you for your courageous and original decision to award this prize to a few untreatable magazine addicts from Münster who, at their office in Dahlweg 64, continue to toil untiringly on the poetics of scurrility. Fritz Müller-Zech - that much I may reveal - has just celebrated his 40th birthday and will, he has promised me, continue to spend less time on his perfect model airplanes and more on the ineluctably flawed medium that is literature - a medium that, while not perfect, certainly does help to foster one's cognitive faculties.