

Obituary for Karl Eibl (1940–2014)

Karl Eibl passed away on 18 February 2014. He was among the leading literary scholars of his generation and left a lasting mark on literary theory, Goethe studies, and Enlightenment research, as well as on what are now known as the Digital Humanities. With his *Kritisch-rationale Literaturwissenschaft* (1976) he provided literary theory, at a very early date, with an outline of literary history as an explanatory tool, where literary studies are considered one of the theoretical and empirical disciplines. He thereby formulated a position which treats literary studies as a process open to *Erkenntnis*, or grounded knowledge, and many found an effective antidote against academic fads in the way that this stance distanced itself sceptically from words of master thinkers that had been turned into articles of faith. By looking at literature as a problem-solving activity, he found a fruitful perspective that he explored further in intensive research both within the discipline and, above all, in an unusually far-reaching interdisciplinary context. His model for contextualizing literature in terms of social history, which he put forward in *Die Entstehung der Poesie* (1995), avoids the reductionist elements that are generally encountered elsewhere, without losing its explanatory potential in the process. At the same time, he was already interested in the biological foundations of literature, a topic to which he then devoted himself above all in his magnum opus, *Animal Poeta* (2004). His thought and writing stand out in today's world because of the clarity that, more than anything else, defined them – a clarity that was never reached at the expense of complexity but instead served the pursuit of *Erkenntnis*. As one of his favourite maxims put it, going against the grain: »Man soll die Probleme nicht mästen wie die Gänse, sondern abmagern lassen, bis man ihr Skelett sieht« (»problems shouldn't be fattened up like geese but starved until their skeletons are visible«). Karl Eibl was not only a leading researcher but also a master of style. His texts stand out for their rare incisiveness, their shrewd wit, and their remarkable ability to find the right turn of phrase. In this, they are an expression of his distinctive personality, where the researcher's passionate ethos of *Erkenntnis*, a deep-seated discomfort with superficial fashions, and an ironically sceptical attitude toward the big questions come together in a dogged individuality. With the death of Karl Eibl, the contemporary humanities have lost one of their most exceptional, their most idiosyncratic, and their best thinkers.