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Christoph Hein: Das Napoleon-Spiel

Phil McKnight
University of Kentucky

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Hein, Christoph. *Das Napoleon-Spiel*. Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau, 1993.

Hein's most recent novel appeared as series in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in the spring of 1993 before the book was released. While writing the novel, Hein's attention was diverted by the events of 1989 and especially by his own participation on the committee established to investigate police brutality in the GDR during the demonstrations of 7 and 9 October 1989. The following year his work on *Das Napoleon-Spiel* was interrupted when he collapsed on stage during a cultural event as a result of hemorrhaging caused by a blood clot. Two life-threatening surgical operations and the ensuing long rehabilitation period followed, during which he was able to work only an hour or so each day.

The novel, in the broadest sense of the term, is an epistolary novel, consisting, however, of only two letters written by Friedel Wörle to his lawyer, Herr Fiarthes. The first letter, 194 of the 208 pages in the text, is written from his prison cell where he awaits his trial for the murder of one Bernhard Bagnall during a ride in the West Berlin subway through the East Berlin sector. The murder weapon is a billiard cue and the victim was carefully selected to represent the most inocuous, neutral individual Wörle was able to locate. The second letter was written after the trial and challenges Fiarthes to a new "game."

Wörle had been driven only by fear of boredom. Winning by itself, for the "player," can be fatal, it is the game itself which keeps him alive and the stakes and the difficulty of the lay and the stroke must constantly be increased. This boredom, the need to have a game without a foregone conclusion, drives him to kill a stranger whom he has determined to be an absolute neutrum and then to defend himself by arguing that it was not murder or homicide, but "compulsory homicide." Bernhard Begnall, a clerk in a department store, lost his life on June 21, 1989 as a result of Wörle, but it is difficult to describe the motive, he writes, and chooses his formulation carefully: "Es war kein Mord und kein Totschlag, allerdings auch kein unglücklicher Zufall, wie ich nun in den seriösen Blättern lesen kann. Es war eine Tötung, genauer: eine unerläßliche Tötung" (NS 13). "Tötung" is also used in the sense of "manslaughter" in German legal terms and the terminology itself, "compulsory homicide" is a play on the words "justifiable homicide" (rechtmässige Tötung) and "involuntary manslaughter" (fahrlässige Tötung). This compulsory homicide, or obligatory manslaughter, is justified by Wörle in his exhaustive letter to his attorney. Bagnall died because Wörle had to protect himself from the experience of loathing and complacency. Implied is his right to "protect" himself and to always defend his self-interest, a principle which Western society holds sacred. Wörle is very much aware of this unspoken principle and, consequently, this is really the most correct answer he can give. He claims that he simply allowed himself to follow through with what most people probably feel like doing at one time or another anyway.

Hein worked with the character from a greater distance than usual, albeit still employing first-person narrative. This is a somewhat perplexing book, much more difficult to decipher than his earlier prose, leaving the reader with the suspicion that he or she has read an allegorical novel, or a parable, or a book with undeciphered keys to real-life individuals. It is not unlikely that Hein had a specific individual in mind, but his experiences with the crassness, the cold, manipulative attitude, and the outright denial of moral reponsibility by the once-powerful men interviewed by the committee investigating police brutality undoubtedly influenced his portrayal of Friedel Wörle, the epitomy of a man without morals or compassion, the most cynical of all characters that Hein has ever created, and he is a master at portraying cynical characters. Most of his other fictional characters, however, like Claudia or Kruschkatz, are somehow trapped by their own cynicism, there seem to be social and political causes for its occurence and they are as much victims of the circumstances which led to their cynical behavior as they are perpetrators of inhumane deeds and actions against people around them and, even more so, against themselves.

Wörle does not suffer from his cynicism, on the contrary, he thrives in it, it is the essence of his life and he succeeds at everything he tries to accomplish. He is able to accomplish anything he wishes precisely because he has no moral qualms and because he defines his actions and his life as a game of billiards or pocket billiards, a hustle in which winning is vastly less important than the elements of the game itself, which include, above all, the cold, rational calculation of all the possible angles, variations and reactions effected by other men's normal attitudes when playing the game, including by those who may have almost as few scruples as Wörle himself. Napoleon would have been an equal, worthy opponent and is the game-master par excellence after which Wörle imagines himself to be molded.

The very text itself is the most inaccessible of Hein's prose because Wörle is himself a lawyer and the language he writes is an incredible mixture of a

cynical panarama and an egocentrical outlook on life, replete with legalese, bureaucratic formulations and intentionally misleading statements, including long passages in parentheses. The language is often comparable to the euphemistic formulations which emit from official, military and public life to circumscribe reality or to avoid the impact which more poignant or common descriptions of reality might have on ordinary people. Wörle uses language in the same way he practices billiards: the spin of each word, the sentence and phrase he uses is pre-calculated to impact his colleague Fiarthes in a certain, predictable manner. Likewise, the spin placed on the language by Hein has an impact on the reader as well, a calculated impact which causes his or her disbelief to grow with the increasing realization of the potential for human atrocities contained in the existence of this man Wörle. Wörle will run the table before anyone else will ever get a chance, and he will do it from an impossible lay.

The player, Wörle states, "will setzen und natürlich gewinnen, doch der Gewinn selbst ist für ihn nur von Interesse, um erneut setzen zu können" (NS 73). The task is to play, the stakes and the winnings are secondary. "Wir haben große Spiele, langjährige Partien, in denen wir Vermögen und Menschen einsetzen können. Wie Feldherren können wir Strategien planen und verwirklichen, sobald wir die Vollmacht für unseren Schlachtenentwurf erhalten haben" (NS 73). Napoleon, he surmises, must have viewed the money and armies of his nation with a certain objective distance. It wasn't his money or his army which were at his disposal, and hence he did not need to be considerate of them as he threw them onto the game board Europe. He could play unreservedly, majestically and successfully. "Ein Spieler ist der, der setzt. Vielleicht ist das die ganze Wahrheit" (NS 73). He bets his money, his reputation, his reason, his life, but always without worry or fear of loss, and this distinguishes him from common gamblers, carreerists, idealists, business executives and normal people who risk something in order to attain something else, something greater, more beautiful, wealth, power, influence. A player wants to wager in order to play. The winnings are already boring for him. But a game in which the player cannot intercede and act to influence the outcome would be nothing more than an order placed for an unspecified capital return.

Wörle is a bit sorry that this is the way he thinks, that he is not more noble and humane, but he questions whether to think otherwise would really be normal for human beings: "Es ist eben menschlich, nicht allzu selbstlos zu sein" (NS 134). The self-serving person is not the monstrosity but rather the do-good natural healer or the charitable nurse who get on our nerves with their good deeds. Even though we admire them they are strange and puzzling to us. "Wir werden es viel besser mit uns aushalten können, wenn wir akzeptieren, was wir sind" (NS 134), is Wörle's logical and frighteningly callous maxim.

Symbols of disconcerting abstractions appear throughout the text in fragmented form, presenting a temptation to risk badly misinterpreting the story. One such risk of interpretation might be to include consideration of Hein's intellectual activity during the writing of *Das Napoleon-Spiel* and his reaction to the neo-Nazi activity on both sides of the Elbe, his concerns that the outgrowth of the long-lasting "Historikerstreit" would overturn national guilt and awareness about the past.

Wörle, who always let the "bastard," as he refers to his half-brother, the one who remained in the GDR and became a high school history teacher, take the blame, might symbolize the spectre of Fascism (always linked with capitalism in socialist ideology) raising its head again in Germany during and after reunification, a ghost of the Nazi past who succeeds in duping the Germans (Fiarthes) into defending him, and who is found not guilty (on legal technicalities) by the judges (historians), setting the monster free once again.

If this history is rewritten, as the writer to whom Wörle arrogantly plans to give the manuscript of his letter will do, to eliminate incriminating references, as Hein believes the "Historikerstreit" to promote, the stage will be set. In his essay on "Die Zeit, die nicht vergehen kann," he expressed his concern: "Gewiß sind bei Betrachtung und Bewertung der Vergangenheit die Interessen von Beschuldigten und Anklägern im Spiel, weist auf die eine Seite so vehement auf Irrtümer und Verbrechen wie die andere bestrebt ist, die unstrittigen Leistungen in den Vordergrund zu rücken, das Unentschuldbare zu banalisieren und das Unerklärbare in einen erklärenden Kontext zu bringen." The consequences of a successful manipulation of history and people's knowledge and attitudes towards history are embodied in the disturbing figure of Wörle and his justification of murder as pardonable killing.

This book certainly inspires fear that people like Wörle may walk among us and it makes us hope that our society is not degenerating into nothing but a vicious game with high or low stakes, depending on one's point of view and capabilities. At the same time, it does not fulfill the expectations of the German critics who, after bashing Christa Wolf and

others, called for the "elevation" of literature to a purely aesthetic art form without any moral message or socially critical function. If the broader interpretation of Wörle is considered, Hein has done his part to not relativize the difficult pieces of the German past in such a way as to omit incriminating evidence. At the same time he touches a nerve about how threatening unscrupulous power which exists beyond good and evil can be to us. Wörle is the principle of barbarianism before which the principle of hope gives ground. After his exoneration, he boldly requests that we bear him no malice. But he will continue even if we do.

Phil McKnight
University of Kentucky

Hein, Christoph. *Exekution eines Kalbes und andere Erzählungen*. Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau, 1994.

The stories in Christoph Hein's first collection of Erzählungen since *Einladung zum Lever Bourgeoise* in 1980 abhere to the principles of the chronicler which Hein has stated his role to be. The language never imposes the author on the reader, it just meticulously reveals history through the experience of "little people," normal people, people against whom others commonly discriminate. The corresponding insight gained into historical reality with this method, gleaned by Hein from Walter Benjamin, whose ideas have guided him in the past in constructing his prose, exposes the simple truth, almost always obscured by the "history" of world affairs.

Hein's other master, as he has often stated, is Johann Peter Hebel, the style of whose short succinct chronicles, or "Erzählungen des Rheinländichen Hausfreundes" are reflected in the 14 short pieces mixed in with Hein's title story and the other longer story, *Auf den Brücken friert es zuerst* (a title picked up by Hein during his visit to the US from roadsigns along state highways and interstates). Nowhere is Hebel's stylistic influence more apparent than in *Unverhofftes Wiedersehen*. Hebel's 1811 story of the same title relates a miner who is lost in the mine on his wedding day, and whose body, fully preserved is found 50 years later, after world history has run a gauntlet of events. The bride was still in mourning. He had not changed in appearance except that he was dead; she had not changed, except that she had grown old. The great historical events, the Seven Years War, the earthquake in Lisbon, the American and French revolutions, Sweden's conquest of Finland, etc., were rendered trivial by Hebel with the tears of the old woman as she beheld her lover and felt her own youthful love rekindled, in vain. In Hein's tale, two students choose to flee to the West rather than submit to the pressure to join the army, pressure exerted on them by their Dozent, Dr. Edwin Schulze. One of them enjoys a successful career as a Gynasiallehrer close by Cologne. He also writes scripts on English history for the radio in Cologne. In 1979 the chief editor of the radio station retired and Michael Kapell, the teacher and popular scriptwriter, was one of five finalists for the job. At the interview he encountered Schulze, a member of the search committee. Schulze, the famous political scientist, had fled the GDR two years previously and came into his position of prominence on the strength of his "courageous"--as it was publicly described--critique of the GDR regime. Kapell did not get the job and all his future manuscripts were rejected--he