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## Monika Maron: Animal triste

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**Maron, Monika. *Animal triste*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1996. 239 pp.**

The challenge of telling a good love story lies in finding a means of transforming universal feelings into an account that strikes the reader as both familiar and unique. In her most recent novel, *Animal triste*, Monika Maron accomplishes this feat through her deft use of language and by situating her lovers between the private realm of their passion and larger social and cultural forces. The events of the novel evolve out of two major turning points in the life of the middle-aged, East German narrator: her encounter with the West German who will become her "späte Jugendliebe," and German unification. Maron's love story derives its strength from this specific juxtaposition of private and public.

The narrator, a paleontologist, meets "Franz" (she claims to have forgotten his real name) under her "first love," a brachiosaurus skeleton in the Berlin Natural History Museum where she works. Franz's expression of appreciation for the "schönes Tier" draws her immediately to him. They begin an affair, during the course of which she abandons her husband and grows distant from her adult daughter, while Franz continues to return – every morning punctually at one a.m. – to his wife.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator informs her readers that she has lost Franz and is struggling to remember how and why. She relates her story in a series of disjointed flashbacks and reflections from within the confines of her apartment. She has ruined her eyesight by wearing Franz's eye-glasses (in order to see the world as he would have seen it), and claims not to know how much time has passed since their last meeting. She says she may be ninety or a hundred years old, and that they were last together maybe forty or fifty or sixty years ago. Her lack of precision engenders distrust, however, and the reader often wonders whether their final break perhaps occurred last year, last week, or even yesterday.

Here, as in Maron's 1986 work *Die Überläuferin*, a private space becomes a theater in which the past comes alive. The narrator's memories of her affair open the door to stories of her life in postwar Germany and in the GDR, and to ruminations on aging, gender relations, and relations between East and West Germans. She recalls as one of her happiest times the period just after the war and before she entered school, a time when her mother and the mothers of her friends were self-sufficient and the children were left to play. This period came to an abrupt end when the fathers returned home from the battlefield. With "Sehnsucht nach den früheren Idealen" (154) she remembers her youth in the GDR (and, by association, the ideals that defined the early years of that country), and recalls with scorn conditions under the dictatorship of an "als internationale Freiheitbewegung getarnten Gangsterbande" (30). She also

reminisces about her attachment to the brachiosaurus and her dream to travel to Pliny Moody's garden in South Hadley, Massachusetts: "Dabei hatte ich mich in den letzten Jahren der seltsamen Zeit nach keinem Ort der Welt so gesehnt wie nach Pliny Moodys Garten, was wohl an dem namen Pliny Moody lag und daran, daß der Ort ein Garten war, Pliny Moodys Garten eben, durch den ich in allen Jahreszeiten spazierte und die vogelartigen Fußspuren mal aus dem Schnee grub und mal von schweren Efeu-ranken befreite" (86). Transformed by its inaccessibility into a utopia, the garden loses its appeal with the fall of the wall: "Der Ort, den ich Pliny Moodys Garten nannte, gehörte mir plötzlich nicht mehr. Er war ein jedermann erreichbares Ziel geworden" (86). Here, as throughout the novel, anecdotes of everyday life serve as a window to broader emotions, values, and historical events.

Struggling to make sense of her life, the narrator describes it as more or less uneventful until one day – and here Maron employs her by now familiar technique of fantastic realism – some inexplicable force shuts off "den Strom im Gehirn" (21). This transformation leaves the narrator with the recognition, "man kann im Leben nichts versäumen als die Liebe" (23). One year later she begins her affair with Franz, a relationship defined by physical, atavistic desire: "Das eigentliche Wunder waren unsere Körper, die, seit Franz zum ersten Mal mit seinen Fingerrücken meine Wange berührt hatte, mehr zu wissen schienen als wir ... Sie sehnten sich nacheinander, als hätte man sie ihr Leben lang gewaltsam voneinander ferngehalten" (109). Long separated by concrete and political barriers, Franz and the narrator find a common language in physical intimacy.

Yet despite their intense desire, the two lovers remain separated by the traces of gender and cultural formation left on them by their respective pasts. Though the most immediate barriers between the narrator and Franz seem to be the Franz's wife and the narrator's insecurity about her aging body, their very different histories significantly widen the gulf between them. While they shared similar experiences just after the war, their developmental paths parted by the time they entered school. As the narrator soberly puts it: "Franz hat in einer anderen Zeit gelebt als ich: er kommt aus Ulm" (40). Whereas he can sing the church hymns of his childhood, the narrator knows only Stalin hymns. While he is well acquainted with the variety of consumer goods available to Westerners, the narrator has difficulty learning the names of the cheese varieties now available to her and resorts to pointing at the same four kinds whenever she goes shopping.

The differences between them extend beyond the details of daily life, however, for Franz arrives at the museum not as a tourist but to oversee the restructuring of its operations, a project that leads to the removal of the narrator from her post as dinosaur caretaker and her

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relocation to an archive. The narrator's sense that, physical desire aside, Franz most probably believed "daß es mir an mehr mangelte als an der Erinnerung von Kirchenliedern" (185) increases after Franz travels to Scotland with his wife and describes Hadrian's wall, the one-time border between the Romans and the barbarians, as a metaphor for the events of recent German history. The narrator, by analogy, belongs on the side of the barbarians.

Jealous, insecure, passionately in love, the narrator takes as her motto the words of Kleist's Penthesilea, "Dich zu gewinnen oder umzukommen" (133). She admits that, in contrast to Franz, an etymologist who researches the orderly world of ants, the "Unzählbarkeit" of her feelings is as primitive as the dinosaur. As in *Stille Zeile sechs* (1991), Maron blurs the line between victim and perpetrator: in the novel's disturbing conclusion the reader discovers the extent to which the narrator's destructive thoughts, words and actions put an end to the relationship. The novel answers the question of how the relationship fell apart, but leaves the reader wondering exactly what drove the narrator to destroy that which was so precious to her. It may have been jealousy. But perhaps the narrator also feared losing her identity, just as had happened to her mother when her father returned from the war, and to East Germany following its "unification" with the West?

The strength of *Animal triste* lies in Maron's wit and irony, her ability to weave together the narrator's sober, unsentimental observations of herself and others with moving scenes from everyday life. It also lies in the novel's resistance to easy interpretation: it is more than a love story, more than a metaphor for German unification, more than a simple story of oppressor and oppressed. Since her well-received first work *Flugasche* (1981), Maron's writing has become more complex, her characters more resistant to identification and classification. This, in the end, is what makes *Animal triste* so much more than an intriguing love story.

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**Oehme, Ralph und Karl-Heinz Schmidt-Lauzamis. *Ich war kein Held. Leben in der DDR. Protokolle.* Berlin: Morgenbuch Verlag, 1993.**

Der Untergang der DDR hat in den vergangenen sechs Jahren einen Schwall von autobiographischer und Dokumentarliteratur hervorgebracht, in deren Mittelpunkt ein Thema steht: Was waren das für Menschen, die über vierzig Jahre in dieser *terra incognita*, DDR, lebten, sich lange mit dem Bau des realen Sozialismus beschäftigten und ihn schließlich demontierten. Die Herausgeber der 1993 veröffentlichten Protokolle *Ich war kein Held* versuchen Befindlichkeiten, Lebensumstände, Verwirrungen, Hoffnungen und Ängste der Leipziger um die Jahreswende 1989/90 zu dokumentieren. Die Auswahl der Gesprächspartner, so die Herausgeber, "ergab sich aus Prinzip und Zufall. Sie sollten durch Alter, Geschlecht, soziale Stellung und Gesinnung die vielen unterschiedlichen Schichten einer Stadt sichtbar machen"(7).

Ob die so entstandenen Selbstdarstellungen von elf Leipziguern einen allgemeinen Aussagewert haben? Man wird zumindest nachfragen müssen. Der vielfach auch in transliterierter Form beibehaltene sächsische Dialekt scheint zwar Authentizität zu verbürgen, aber repräsentativ für diejenigen, die die Parteiherrschaft in der DDR beendeten, waren der junge Stasiangestellte, der Parteisekretär, die Lehrer, Arbeiter, Studenten, die hier zu Worte kommen, vielleicht doch nicht. Zum Beispiel hätte ich mir gewünscht, daß mehr Vertreter der verschiedenen Menschenrechts-, Umwelt-, Frauen- und Friedensgruppen oder der Ausreiser und Flüchtlinge, die oft unter Lebensgefahr die Mauern und Minensperren durchbrachen, zu Worte gekommen wären.

Und doch, gerade in einer Zeit wachsender DDR-Nostalgie (laut einer Infratest-Repräsentativumfrage im Auftrag der *Süddeutschen Zeitung* im Herbst 1995 akzeptieren nur noch 33 Prozent der ostdeutschen Bürger das für sie neue System, 1990 lag die Akzeptanz noch bei 51 Prozent, während jeder fünfte in der früheren DDR sogar ein Systemvorbild sieht) ist es ganz erhellend, wenn man in diesen erst – wie lange scheint das schon her zu sein! – sechs Jahre alten Protokolle noch einmal nachliest, was zumindest diese Leipziger bewegt hat, sich als Schwert und Schild der Partei schützend vor den realen Sozialismus zu stellen, sich im System einzurichten oder Widerstand zu leisten. Hinter ihren unbeholfenen, nachdenklichen, lakonischen und mit Emphase vorgetragenen Geschichten, Erklärungen und Selbstentschuldigungen werden Menschen sichtbar, die sich durch die nach 1989 radikal geänderten Lebensumstände gezwungen sahen, Rechenschaft über ihr Leben abzulegen, zu Selbsterkenntnissen zu kommen und sich neue Rechtfertigungen zurechtzulegen. Man fühlt die Unsicherheit und zu hastige Einsichtigkeit eines ehemaligen hauptamt-