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Günther de Bruyn: Märkische Forschungen

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In summary, this first published collection by the thirty-six-year-old poet/potter (individual works have appeared in anthologies and periodicals since 1970) reveals a great deal about a private struggle for freedom and dignity.

Peter E. Carels
Miami University (Ohio)

Märkische Forschungen. By Günther de Bruyn. Halle-Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1978. 167 pages. 6,50 M.

In his latest work Günther de Bruyn presents the reader with an arresting tale of personal moral courage and professional integrity. The hero of the story is Ernst Pötsch, a somewhat naive country teacher, who becomes entangled in a web of artificiality and deceit woven by his urbane counterpart Winfried Menzel. While it is true that both men share a common interest--the obscure revolutionary poet Max von Schwedenow--all similarity between the two men ends here. Pötsch is the unpretentious local expert moved by a genuine urge to know the truth about his small domain. As for publishing his views, Pötsch has apparently long since reached the conclusion, "daß zu schreiben sich nur lohne, was außer ihm niemand wüßte (29)." His foray into the world of "serious" scholarship, prompted by a chance meeting with his longtime idol Menzel, pits him against a man motivated almost exclusively by a selfish desire for fame and intent upon securing a place in the history of Schwedenow scholarship, regardless of the cost to himself in terms of ethical integrity.

In the course of their association, Pötsch becomes obsessed with the need to correct what he considers an error in Menzel's monumental work on Schwedenow. In his uncompromising search for truth, Pötsch throws away his chance for a prestigious career as Menzel's colleague. Menzel, in contrast, prefers to suppress the truths which he finds objectionable, rather than

jeopardize his reputation as a scholar by casting doubt on the accuracy of his "definitive" monograph on Schwedenow. "Dir geht's um ein Phantom, das du, wie ich dich kenne, Wahrheit nennst," Menzel confesses. "Mir geht es um viel mehr: um Sein oder Nichtsein in Wissenschaft und Nachwelt (153)."

At the crux of the problem is the question of whether Schwedenow died an heroic death in 1813, as Menzel assumes, or whether he lived on as a government censor under the name of Maximilian von Massow in dutiful service to the system he had sought to overthrow, as Pötsch suggests. The title of Pötsch's study, "Suche nach einem Grab," thus assumes ironic and indeed tragic proportions, referring not only to Schwedenow's, i.e., Massow's grave, which Pötsch hopes to locate, but also to the truth Menzel wants forever buried. In the final analysis, then, it is the idea of truth and the validity of legitimate criticism which concerns the author and forms the heart of the drama unfolding between the two men--a drama skillfully underscored by the several theater images used by de Bruyn, from the "Vorspiel im Theater" with its intimations of Faust's unending pursuit of knowledge to the superficial poses assumed or the roles played by the various characters.

De Bruyn assembles a cast of supporting characters whose ideas and actions help put into perspective the central conflict between Pötsch and Menzel. And yet far from being mere types or shallow representations of abstract ideas, de Bruyn's characters are all living individuals with credible faults and virtues. Foremost among these is Menzel's assistant Brattke, a somewhat cynical, self-compromising man who has evidently learned to recognize the personal danger inherent in man's search for truth and who has acquiesced: "Moralischer Sieg und Selbstmord sind fast Synonyme (157)," he tells Pötsch, but it is an idea which Pötsch heroically refuses to acknowledge.

De Bruyn's point--given emphasis by several allusions to the present, which insure contemporary relevance for the work--seems to be that, in man's search for truth, the conscientious individual will inevitably have to confront those for whom truth is desirable and tolerable only to the point where it is in keeping with their own selfish objectives. The final touch of irony in a work pervaded by the above is that the scholar, Alfonso Lepetit, who the reader is led to believe will assist Pötsch in his efforts to publish his findings, suddenly withdraws support from the project when he, too, like Menzel, feels his lifework threatened by Pötsch's thesis.

The ultimate moral of the story may be contained in the narrator's understatement that, "Es ist bekanntlich schwer zu tadeln, wo man loben will (59)." And yet de Bruyn seems to be telling his readers that it is only through such objective criticism--even of the things we love and hold in awe--that truth will emerge. And through truth it is hoped man's lot will be improved, for as Pötsch humbly insists: "Man will doch helfen, besser machen (67)."

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