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Christoph Hein: Exekution eines Kalbes und andere Erzählungen

Phil McKnight
University of Kentucky

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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

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The stories in Christoph Hein's first collection of *Erzählungen* since *Einladung zum Lever Bourgeoise* in 1980 adhere 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 Rheinländischen 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 road signs 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

did send them to a radio station in North Germany, which liked them and broadcast them. Schulze and Kapell never saw each other again. Some 20 years had gone by and little had changed.

The *Exekution eines Kalbes* relates the frustrations of a collective farmer with officials who do nothing to relieve the overcrowding of livestock into inadequate and run-down facilities, a catch-22 situation, inasmuch as there is not enough feed to fatten the cows sufficiently for them to reach acceptable weight for the slaughterhouses, which refuse to take them. For the ceremonial execution of the calf, the farmer, Sawetzki, is deported to the West, accused of wasting valuable resources and demonstrating his inability to adjust his life to the conditions and circumstances which prevailed, a country version, almost, of Hein's earlier story, *Der neuere (glücklichere) Kohlhaas*.

The collection also includes *Die Vergewaltigung*, which appeared in *Neues Deutschland* in 1990 and chillingly describes the rape of an old woman--who thus successfully protects her 17-year old granddaughter--by advancing Russian soldiers, a taboo subject in the GDR and, oddly, not often approached in West Germany. The family, especially the granddaughter, suppresses its feelings for many years, until the husband of the young woman criticizes her for her loyal support of the eternal friendship between the GDR and the Soviet Union and her glowing public speech commemorating their liberation by the Soviets.

Hein's narratives fluctuate between humor and bitterness, first person subjectiveness and distant irony, including stories written as parables or allegories, such as *Moses Tod* and *Ein älterer Herr, federleicht*, the main character of which claims to be Noah, now living in a condemned house in East Berlin in press row, across from the ruins of the Jewish Synagogue, either just before or just after the fall of the wall. For Noah, after 949 years of strife and conflict with God, the latter is nothing but a fool. Moreover, "der alte Narr ist gescheitert" and Noah maintains that he was right to have argued against the flood, "da die Menschen sowieso und auf keine Art und Weise zu bessern waren und weder drakonische Erziehungsmaßnahmen noch tödliche Strafen, weder Krieg noch eine alles vernichtende Überschwemmung irgend etwas zum Guten ändern könnten." Noah seems to be cursed. He can't seem to die. Moreover, nobody believes him, he's just a crazy old man who has lost his "Reisepaß und Versicherungskarte." The flood, as everyone knows, was "eine völlig natürliche Folge einer Klima-

verschiebung," and it was just a couple of villages which were inundated, not the whole earth.

Phil McKnight
University of Kentucky