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Dennis Tate: Franz Fühmann. Innovation and Authenticity: A Study of His Prose-Writing

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BOOK REVIEWS

wortspiels" (although now with a less exotic spelling). As a sociohistorical document, the volume offers yet another facet of East German writers' uneasiness toward the newly gained freedom within the market-economy. Surprisingly, Bert Papenfuß's impulse to respond to the political situation by creating a rampant and provocative anti-art is betrayed by remarkably refined poems as "anschauung & verstand," "zur westandacht" or "albanien an der elbe" which should be included in every anthology dedicated to the literature of the German "Wende." It is perhaps no coincidence that in one striking example, "dichter zerfallen," we can find a hidden reference to Hans Magnus Enzensberger who created the figure of knifegrinder to illustrate the craft of the poet. Papenfuß reutilizes this concept to destruct the heroic image of the prophet-poet:

dichter zerfallen
in orgeldreher & kritzelbuben
galeerenschleifer & scherenflicker
es gibt hervorragende hofbarden
& in der gosse auch idioten

One could indeed maintain that the best stanzas of *Tiské* find their equivalents in Enzensberger's *landessprache* (1960). Not surprisingly, the two poets denied the aesthetic value of their volumes: for them, the poem was merely an item of practical use, and as such the poems of *Tiské* should be read.

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Much of Franz Fühmann's work has suffered a distorted reception. The initial judgment of ideologically blinkered critics in East and West Germany, who tried to present Fühmann (1922-1984) as 'staatsdichter' on the one hand, and raised doubts about his creative integrity on the other, took a long time to recede. In the 1970s and 1980s Fühmann became better known and appreciated, largely due to his two autobiographical books *Zweiundzwanzig Tage oder die Hälfte des Lebens* (1973) and *Vor Feuerschlünden* (1982). Although both books have been translated into English, Dennis Tate is right to point out that Fühmann's international credentials have yet to be established. While two other GDR writers, Christa Wolf and Stefan Heym, have achieved international breakthroughs as a result of factors that make their work more than a paradigm of GDR literature—namely the significance of Wolf's writing in a wider feminist context and Heym's early reputation as a best-selling author in the USA—Fühmann has hitherto been

neglected in the English-speaking world. Dennis Tate attempts to change this with his book *Franz Fühmann. Innovation and Authenticity: A study of his prose-writing*.

Tate's monograph, the second after Hans Richter's *Franz Fühmann—ein deutsches Dichterleben* (1992), provides a full and coherent picture of Fühmann's development as a writer. Covering a huge body of different texts and genres (poetry, stories, essays, speeches), Tate's book is an invaluable source for scholars working on Fühmann. Moreover, readers interested in learning about the GDR and its writers will be rewarded with a subtle historical analysis of cultural policy in the GDR and with a cohesive yet complex biography that cuts across the periods of fascism, Stalinism, and post-Stalinism. Tate's unrelenting attempt to expose the difficulties, contradictions, and pains of a writer who gradually detached his creative process from a political doctrine effectively complicates the still prevalent reading of GDR literature, or more generally of social interactions and cultural productions in a dictatorship, in terms of affirmation or subversion. The contextualized biographical-political approach Tate chose for his study of Fühmann's prose-writing, however, might in the end inadvertently undermine his quite rightly announced aim, which is to show that Fühmann's work offers more than merely a paradigm of the general course of GDR literature.

Franz Fühmann. Innovation and Authenticity consists of five chronologically organized chapters. In the first chapter, "Educated for Auschwitz? Childhood, War and Soviet Captivity 1922-49," Tate reconstructs Fühmann's childhood in Bohemia, which had previously been a province of the Austro-Hungarian empire, was then integrated into the newly created part of Czechoslovakia and not long after annexed by Hitler. Mainly based on Fühmann's autobiographical cycle *Das Judenauto. 14 Tage aus zwei Jahrzehnten* (1962) and later interviews given by Fühmann, Tate draws out a somewhat paradoxical world of a child and young adult who, on the one hand, was absorbed in an alternative world of private fantasy, immersed in fairy tales, myths and a rich body of European literature (Joyce, Trakl, Rilke), but who, on the other hand, found an overwhelming sense of pleasure in becoming "a cog in the Nationalist Socialist machine" (13) and later in providing his self-effacing service to the new antifascist regime.

In the stimulating second chapter "Spokesman for the New Germany 1950-58," Tate traces Fühmann's development from a propagandist, cultural functionary, and *Staatsdichter* to a more innovative author who challenged the basic socialist realist notion that literature should be ideologically explicit. Tate not only challenges us to reevaluate our understanding of Fühmann in the 1950s as an unambiguous Stalinist but also to reconsider our assumption that the cultural landscape of the GDR in the 1950s was homogeneously affirmative. He presents Fühmann both as a propagandist who had no difficulty conforming to the

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narrow orthodoxy signaled by the SED, and as an aesthete with a remarkable sensitivity for the magic of language. Disclosing the pervasiveness of Georg Trakl in Fühmann's poems, of Freud in one of Fühmann's early speeches, and of the increasingly psychological and minimalist narrative style of Fühmann's prose texts, Tate problematizes the common understanding that at least in the 1950s the SED succeeded in shaping an organic body of unequivocal socialist realist literature. Rather, Tate implicitly suggests that the socialist writers of the early period (here one could add for example Seghers and Becher) suppressed their modernist impulses and that their affirmative texts bear traces of this self-censorship. Furthermore, Tate's careful account of this decade in Fühmann's life cautions us against employing the view of GDR officials to judge the subversive quality of respective authors and texts. For example, why was *Fahrt nach Stalingrad* (1953), a piece that according to Tate was strongly influenced by Fühmann's reading of Trakl, praised by officials as 'grosse Dichtung'? Why was Fühmann not reprimanded for his rather heretical theses proposed in a speech before the NDPD in 1957, advocating the principles of 'subjective Ehrlichkeit' and 'künstlerische Wahrheit,' principles usually associated with the aftermath of Honecker's Taboo speech and with Christa Wolf, but then dismissed from his position as the NDPD's cultural spokesman in 1958, after having been awarded the highest official accolade, the 'Nationalpreis,' in October 1957? Although at moments Tate's wish to solidify Fühmann's political integrity results in a slightly too defensive tone or rather tenuous documentation (Fühmann's diaries and correspondences are restricted from publication until 2004 and the edition of the selective correspondence by Hans-Jürgen Schmitt reached Tate too late for inclusion), most parts of the chapter, and of the book in general, reconstruct Fühmann's life narrative in a manner that leaves space for perhaps irresolvable contradictions that arose out of the continuous conflict between Fühmann's desire to support the GDR regime and to develop his creative integrity.

This very conflict which, according to Tate, provides the key to Fühmann's texts, is analyzed in more detail in the three subsequent chapters ("Freelance Author, GDR Loyalist: Destructive Contradictions 1958-68," "At the Forefront of Cultural Change: 1968-76," "The Voice in the Wilderness 1977-1884"). While Tate initially employed the literary texts in order to elucidate Fühmann's biography, he progressively sheds light on the complex interrelation between Fühmann's text, his life, and the cultural political reality of the GDR. In this process, Tate's focus on the stylistic and intertextual elements in Fühmann's text prevents him from scrutinizing the texts for coded language or from falling into the pitfall of simplistic allegorical interpretations. Tate structures his thorough and subtle readings of Fühmann's texts around the paradigm of "Authenticity and Innovation." By means of this paradigm Tate shows that

Fühmann increasingly strove for "the totally honest rendering of his most distinctive personal experiences using the most effective stylistic means at his disposal" (3). Foregrounding this dimension of Fühmann's writings, Tate wishes to bring Fühmann in proximity to the internationally better-known Christa Wolf, a desire that is also reflected in Tate's final emphasis on Fühmann's interest in problems of matriarchy and patriarchy. Yet it seems to me that the actual potential for establishing Fühmann's international credentials lies elsewhere in Tate's book.

Out of Tate's careful analysis emerges the portrayal of a writer who has to be understood more broadly in terms of the modern(ist) formation. By disclosing the rich intertextual references to Nietzsche, Rilke, Joyce, Kafka, and Trakl in Fühmann's writings, Tate demonstrates how these writings unfold in constant dialogue with the High Modernist tradition. In affirming the richness of the Central European cultural heritage, Fühmann faced up to the fact that he belonged—in terms of a genuine sense of identity—neither in the multilingual *Heimat* of his childhood nor in the 'kalte Norden' of the GDR: "On the threshold of the 1980s, he stood alone, motivated only by the extraordinary strength of his commitment to the integrity of his creative writing" (193). Paradoxically, it was Fühmann's movement towards *Wahrhaftigkeit*, a movement deeply grounded in the specific cultural and political reality of the GDR, that opened his texts to the treatment of universal themes such as war trauma, death and sexuality, patriarchy, guilt, and the mental anguish of being an outsider. If that is so, reading Fühmann's text as complicated meditations on modern experience will become in and of itself rewarding.

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