Eberhard Panitz: Die Moral der Nixe. Eine Sommergeschichte

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Die Hintergrundperson oder Versuche zu
lieben. Von Christine Wolters. Berlin und
Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag. 1979. 7,20 M.

Versuche zu lieben. Christine Wolters
Erkenntnisroman könnte ebensogut "Versuche
tzu leben" als Untertitel haben. Das Leben
einer Dolmetscherin auf einer 10-tägigen
Reise wird in diesem Roman aufgedeckt --
nowohl durch unmittelbare Erlebnisse, als
auch durch Erinnerungen, die auf dieser
Reise wiederbelebt werden. Karla ist auf
dieser Reise die "Hintergrundperson:" die
unerwünschte, jedoch notwendige Begleiterin,
die den einzigen Vorteil hat, zwei Sprachen
zu beherrschen. Sie steht aber mit ihren
Erinnerungen und Überlegungen im Vorder­
gund des Romans. Die Mitglieder der
Gruppe, die Karla begleitet, spielen keine
große Rolle in den Überlegungen Karlas, noch
regen sie diese innere Reise an. Das
Wichtige an dem Roman hat sehr wenig mit
dessen äußeren Ereignissen zu tun.
Ich habe den Roman als Erkenntnisroman be­
zeichnet, gerade weil die Hauptfigur, die
allein und für sich steht, ihre Reise haupt­
sächlich in Gedanken macht. Sie verbindet
Vergangenheit mit Gegenwart und findet sich
dadurch mit beiden zurecht.
Die erste Etappe des Erkenntnisvorgangs
erfolgt auf die unerwartete Wiederbegegnung
mit einer ehemaligen Kollegin in Mailand,
und findet ihren Ausdruck in der Form eines
Traums. Der Traum deutet an, daß Erfolg
im Leben dem Menschen ein Sich-in-das-Leben-
Fügen, ein Mit-ihm-frei-Fliessen abverlangt.
Dies bedeute jedoch nicht unbedingt die
eigene Freiheit aufopfern zu müssen. Darin
glaubt Karla ihre Kollegin zu verstehen.
Der Anlaß zu der zweiten Etappe solcher
Überlegungen ist das gegen seitig verspro­
chene Wiedersehen mit Carlo -- einen ita­
lienischen Geliebten, den sie auf einer
früheren Geschäftsreise kennengelernt hatte.
Ihr Verhältnis zueinander ist offenbar ein
einmaliges, sehr verständnisvolles. Carlo
fungiert hier als Fragesteller, der Gedanken
in Karla veranlaßt: "Warum haben wir diesen
Drang, diese Schwäche, das Leben in der
Vergangenheit zu suchen oder, noch schlimmer,
in der Zukunft, statt zu leben?" (S. 141)
Diese Frage und Carlos letzte Bemerkung
führen zur dritten Etappe der Erkenntnis­
reise: "Ich mochte und mag an dir, daß du
nicht die Sichere bist...Ich mag, daß du
suchst, daß du zweifelst..." (S. 142)

Diese letzte Etappe der Reise findet bei
dem "Großen" statt -- bei dem Meister des
Films in Rom, mit dem Karlas Gruppe einen
Termin hat. Er fasst Karlas Überlegungen
zusammen:
"immer empfinde ich alles als provisorisch;
as erregend, chronisch, permanent provi­
sorisch, und so ist ja die Lage des Menschen.
Wenn die Menschen ihr Leben mit diesen
starken, dauernden Gefühl lebten, wären sie
aktiver, bestimmt schöpferischer, sicher
auch besser." (S. 164)
Es sind diese Worte, die im Ganzen den
Roman bestimmen. Sie geben den Kerngedanken
der Aussage dieser Autorin wieder. Dadurch
erhält der ganze Roman einen Wert, den er
sonst nicht hätte. Jene Einsicht in das
Leben, die hier Äußerung findet, macht
Christine Wolters Roman des Lesens wert.

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Die Moral der Nixe: Eine Sommergeschichte.
By Eberhard Panitz. Halle-Leipzig:
6,20 M.

The book describes a man's mid-life crisis
and first steps toward becoming human. Not
remarkably, his teachers are women (his wife
and his lover). A 40-year-old ethics pro­
cessor who possesses all of the middle-class
values which make for "successful" family
and professional life runs off and has a
fling with one of his students. The entire
encounter with her -- first at the verbal
level in class, where she challenged his
moral precepts, then his physical inter­
course with her (which could be read as a
metaphor for his intense involvement with
all that she represents) -- leaves him
questioning all that he had always held to
be the indisputably Good. When it is all
over he returns to his life and teaching,
pregnant with contradictions (just as she
is pregnant with their child) and unable to
find words to address his class. The fruits
of their encounter are not yet born, the
contradictions not yet resolved within him.
The story, which focuses on their weeks
together, describes the meeting of their
two life-styles and value systems. His
utilitarianism is confronted with the
hedonism of the water nymph which he stylizes
her to be; his ordered precepts with her
spontaneity; his possessive monogamy with
her free love without jealousy or strings
attached; his theory ("papierne Moral")
with her practice. In this moment of truth the past appears as hypocrisy, a lie, the bonds of marriage and forced fidelity as crippling and senseless self-castigation ("Verzicht und Selbstkasteiung"). Knowing the student/mermaid has broken down his wall of security and self-assuredness, black and white categories yield to doubt and reevaluation ("...ich habe meine Sicherheit eingetauscht" (60), "Ich erfahre hier aber nur immer neue Ungewißheiten" (89)). The imperturbable male has become the vulnerable human.

Panitz seems to have had trouble (either from within or without) accepting the ethics of so much hedonistic individualism and abandoning responsibility for sexual pleasure. He has built up an elaborate network of moral justifications to vindicate his hero. We learn, for instance, that his wife before him had once taken off for Cape Pizunda and couldn't be reached even when her mother died; furthermore, the professor is clearly not the initiator of the affair, but is seduced while inebriated by his student, whom he imagines to be a mermaid he hooked while innocently fishing one evening; as theoretical support for all that abandon, Panitz even arms his hero with a moral affirmation of the pleasure principle in the words of Spinoza, whose Mathematik der Moral the student/mermaid happens to find under her professor's bed.

The book does not offer a utopian glimpse at what a relationship between the sexes might look like, as the first chapter almost leads one to hope. Nor does it depict woman as anything more than a nymph, a fantastic vehicle to man's self-knowledge and personal growth. Nor is the imagery terribly subtle (most obviously the water metaphors: risk-taking as diving into cool water, or presaging away from the familiar solid world as plunging into the water world: "Sprung ins Ungewisse" (120). To the feminist reader, to the intellectual reader, the book cannot help but be somewhat disappointing. However, the problem of repressive marital relationships based on fear, possessiveness, jealousy, self-denial ("eingesargte Wünsche" (100) is one which continues to have relevance — perhaps particularly in the socialist countries.

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Published first in English under the title The Queen Against Defoe (1970), Stefan Heym's short prose work did not appear in the GDR until 1978. Still, given the restrictive cultural-political climate that prevailed after the "expatriation" of dissident author Wolf Biermann in November 1976, it is remarkable that Heym's story was ever approved for publication in his own country.

Die Schmähschrift recounts Daniel Defoe's clash with nobility and clergy during the reign of Queen Anne following the anonymous publication of his pamphlet, The Shortest Way with the Dissenters (1702). Appearing to support the English Establishment in the most exaggerated terms, Defoe satirized the extremist position of many high churchmen and Tories on the question of how to deal with religious dissent. Unfortunately, the trenchant humor in his treatment of this ecclesiastical/political problem was lost on most readers, and the anonymous author was denounced as an enemy of Church and State. When Defoe's identity was discovered, a reward was offered for information leading to his capture, and after several months he was apprehended. At the Old Bailey trial Defoe's defense was poorly managed, and he was persuaded to plead guilty. Consequently, he was fined 200 marks, condemned to be pilloried three times, and sentenced to indefinite imprisonment. His exposure in the pillory, however, was more a triumph than a physical punishment or public humiliation, for the people (aroused in Heym's account by Defoe's recitation of passages from his Hymn to the Pillory) took his side and protected him from bodily harm. Heym's historical novella is concerned chiefly with the role of literature and the problems facing writers in states which attempt to restrict artistic freedom. Not only is Defoe portrayed as a pillar of strength in the battle against his oppressors, but he is also shown to achieve that elusive socialist goal -- the solidarity of proletariat and intellectuals -- through his courageous defiance of the Establishment. Told in a manner reminiscent of the early 18th century, and based on the notes of the fictitious police agent Josiah Creech, Heym's tale has the ring of authenticity.

In fact, it sounds so convincing that a professor of English at a well-known American university once asked Heym to help him locate...