Bert Papenfuß: Tiské

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Recommended Citation

as she dismantles her previous world, she is not without sympathy for the memories she conjures up of her grandmother or the Russian children who once lived in her midst.

Her demolition plans take on one final target: a large sofa soaked to the springs with the sweat of previous generations. It is associated with the narrator’s grandmother, an early twentieth-century socialist, a woman of strong character and constitution. Like an animal, the sofa is overtaken, conquered, but respectfully, almost mournfully, put to rest.

With deconstruction (not destruction!) of her past life complete, it is time for the Überfliegerin to take flight: “Meine Zukunft irrt durch die weite Welt.” She wings her way to the United States, to Minneapolis, Madison, and San Francisco. Like flight in a dream, the reader soars, then dives into each of the narrator’s impressions of lives and objects that had existed simultaneous with her own life: “Nur sechs Stunden versetzt, lief es seit zwanzig Jahren auf derselben Erdkugel ab, nur an einer anderen Stelle der Krümmung. Nun erfuhr ich das als zufällig.” The narrator’s experience of the United States is unequivocally freeing. It is permeated with nature as a living force: expansive landscape, cacti that intermingle with the structure of a house, a car decomposing in the mire of a gully. In San Francisco the landscape shifts to a pile of second-hand clothing that envelops her with numerous possible identities: “... in welcher Welt wollte ich wer sein, wenn man schon die Wahl hat?”

Flying further West, the narrator descends into Russia. It is not by accident that memories of home return on this particular voyage. Home is interminably intertwined with Russian history: the end of the GDR is heralded with “Die Russen sind fort!” The narrator experiences the withdrawal of the Russian people from her homeland with melancholy. Her visit to Russia now is at the invitation of a childhood friend with whom she had exchanged letters: “Es waren die achtziger Jahre. Es waren die Jahre des Briefverkehrs.” And, indeed, she finds some remnants of that earlier shared time and her attraction to the Russian people. In the 1990s, however, the Russian milieu is dominated by the market. The narrator’s childhood friend is married to an entrepreneur, who now is driven by a chauffeur in a limousine, but tomorrow will lose everything. The narrator’s unease with this new Russia is exacerbated further by her confrontation with another grandmother. This grandmother too has a sofa and early twentieth-century notions that the narrator instinctively fears. She takes to the air again, this time fleeing, in flight.
East German version of Dada or Konkrete Poesie. Instead, the main thrust is directed toward a rediscovery of Rabelais, Villon, Fischart or Multutuli in order to explode the doctrine of Becher, Kurella, and the “Kulturerbe.” Half-mockingly, half-sympathetically, the poet refers to classical poets; for instance, in “süßer Odin” the mythical image of a chaste national hero Hölderlin is dismantled. Most of the poems in this volume, however, explore the impact of German reunification on the existence of the individual. In reviewing the events of 1989, a certain disorientation is expressed in a tone that constantly oscillates between rage and sober contemplation. The poet’s alertness and irritability what he calls his “alarmbereiztheit” (60)—indicate uncertainty about the changes to come. Nevertheless—it is already clear to him that the new political landscape must be the result of a “verschaukelung,” referring to the alleged deception of the electorate. Things are no longer what they are, there is only “mennige uff jold” (31), minimum on gold, as a telling line in the Berlin dialect indicates. The reunification has left the once energetic poet in a rather melancholic mood, but it is rarely admitted; occasionally he is “wutbrütend,” thinking of murder (29) but mostly he feels insecure trying to hide from the signs of historical change: “ich schließe mich ein” (60). Yet, even his abode is not a home anymore: “hier will ich ja bleiben: / aber wo” (59). Confronted with another political status quo, the poet feels torn between staying and moving away from Berlin: “fortschreiten möchte man / & zwar möglichst fort” (61). In his most ironical comment, Papenfuß introduces himself in the mask of a French intellectual, thus claiming the role of a distant and unemotional observer: “zur westandacht / rauchte ich sechsundzwanzig / jean paul sartre gedächtniszigaretten / der zerschossene schwarze rollkragen / soll mir gestanden haben” (45). The quipping reference to Sartre makes one think of his famous play _Les mouches_ which addresses the possibility of radical change: “jeder ausrutscher ein der totale mumienschanz” (67), a fancy-dress party turned into a ball of mummies. 

Bert Papenfuß, however, does not completely reject role-playing. In _Tiské_, as in his previous volumes, he uses various personae to counter expectations concerning the poet as a symbolic figure and politically responsible intellectual. Instead he portrays himself as a freebooter and pirate sneaking through the system; or he plays a Celtic bard whose songs evoke a dim and distant past. Cutting across the real time-space coordinates, the subject imagines himself being one of the “sendboten enträtselter vorzeit” (42) who leaves us enigmatic notes about an East German “urnenfelderkultur” (9). In this bizarre perspective, life in the former GDR resembles a mythical period. Whereas the progression of history seems stalled in a time warp, the sense of place is equally distorted; like another Finnegan, the psyche is drifting between Prenzlauer Berg and sites in Ireland. In opposition to an emerging East German consumer society and a “counterculture” which has become equally commercialized as Berlin’s new hip scene, the poet demonstrates the art of punning, not shying away from the inanity of nursery rhymes: “laß dich beileibe nicht verbirren / & nicht auf verlangen verneiyougen” (64) is one of the most strident attacks on popular radicals such as Wolf Biermann or Neil Young. To the anarcho-poet, political opposition in the arts appears already subjugated to the entertainment industry; he sees reunification as a fairy tale in modern times: from one day to the other the “kultspiel der machthabenden,” the ritualistic propaganda of the GDR, was magically transformed into “ein medienspektakel für die ohnmächtigen,” a TV-spectacle for the masses (68). In a cynical poem about November 1989, the celebration in the streets was nothing more than a “volksfest ohne erbarmen,” another slip in German history which shows no regret and no awareness of the possibility of radical change: “jeder ausrutscher ein deutscher, sektgaben, freibier & gratis-sex / nichts bereuen”; thus it is “der totale mumienstand” (67), a fancy-dress party turned into a ball of mummies. 

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Dennis Tate is right to point out that Fühmann's Amsterdamer Rodopi, Tiské: A study of his prose-writing. Vor Feuerschlünden (1973) and Hälfte des Lebens became better known and appreciated, largely due to his two autobiographical books Zweiundzwanzig Tage oder die Tiské (1960). 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, undermined 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 internationally competitive, landessprache par excellence, the 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.

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