The East-German Breakthrough

When reviewing a collection of East-German short stories *(IFR*, 2 (1975), 90-91) we stated that "A close look at the stories and sketches included in *Erzähler aus der DDR* convinces the Western reader and critic that the East-German writer has reached the freedom he has aspired to, that he is now permitted to try new literary styles and modernistic artistic devices, and that he can now deal with unconventional themes and individualistic subject matter."

Some of the novels we have received lately from the German Democratic Republic strongly support this statement. The most interesting examples are *Der Tod des Studenten Lothar Dahl* (The Death of the Student Lothar Dahl) by Kurt Nowak (Rudolstadt: Greifenverlag, 1974) and *Frau am Fenster* (Woman at the Window) by Helfried Schreiter (Berlin: Neues Leben, 1973). If it were not for the occasional reference to the political and social structure of this socialist country, the reader would not find it easy to decide whether these two novels were written on the eastern or the western side of the iron curtain.

Der Tod des Studenten Lothar Dahl reminds the reader immediately of Uwe Johnson's *Mutmaßungen über Jakob,* 1959 *(Speculations about Jacob),* which, although written in East Germany, was published in West Germany where it was acclaimed as an excellent work of fiction. Both writers have not only dealt with similar situations—the investigation of the mysterious circumstances that surrounded the death of a person—but they resemble each other in their narrative techniques. A short summary of Kurt Nowak's novel may help to recognize a few of the thematic and formal features these two novels have in common.

On the first page of this novel the author gives a very objective report of a car accident that happened in Leipzig in 1938 and caused the death of the twenty-one year old student, Lothar Dahl. In the following five chapters the omniscient narrator describes everything that takes place in the home of the dead student during one day, the day on which he was buried (the family breakfast, the funeral, the festive lunch, the visit of the priest, and the long talks about life, death, and the political situation in Germany).

From time to time the author interrupts the narrator in order to give every member of the family a chance to speculate about, and to reflect upon, the accident. It also enables him to depict the dead protagonist's actions before and after this sad incident from several different viewpoints.

While the father, the two brothers, and the sister-in-law seem to believe—or wish to believe—that the accident was caused by Lothar's "inadequate driving experience" (p. 5), as stated in the police report, the mother is convinced that her son was driven to death by his disenchantment with the political situation in Nazi Germany and with the cowardice of the people around him. For fear of suspicion and persecution, the father and the brothers try to stop the mother from making a martyr of her son and thus create a political myth which could be disastrous to all of them.

These "speculations about Lothar," his motives and ideals reveal the true nature of these people, their feelings, hopes, and fears, and, at the same time, expose the impact upon the individual of the Nazi regime with all its crimes, lies, and injustices. While dealing with the personal conflicts and the private emotional problems of this one German family, the author succeeds in projecting a realistic picture of Nazi Germany as well as in examining the reasons for the "collective guilt" of the German people during the bleakest moments of their history.

Although the second East-German novel, *Frau am Fenster,* deals with a rather conventional subject, it is the ambitious and experimental extrinsic structure of this novel that makes it controversial and challenging. It consists of a long interior monologue written in the second person singular, reports submitted by uninvolved persons, a dialogue, and a passage in the first person singular.

The interior monologue is reminiscent of Michel Butor's novel *La Modification* (1957) in which the second person narrative is also used. But the use of the informal *du* differs considerably in nature and function from the *vous*-form used by Butor. In the German novel this *du* is more subjective than in *La Modification* and more critical in its evaluation of itself.

The protagonist in Schreiter's novel is Frau Dr. Giza Tonius, a wife and a mother in her late thirties. She has been offered a leading position in the scientific institute where she has been working for the last few years. Instead of accepting this attractive position at once—as people expect her to—she requests a week's time to consider the offer before submitting her answer.

In order to be able to examine all aspects of this offer without any outside interference, she decides to spend the weekend alone in her apartment. While looking for an unequivocal answer to this question, she reviews her life, analyzes her emotions, and explores her future prospects. When the discrepancy between the picture the others have projected of her and the way she really is becomes apparent, the question of accepting or rejecting the offer develops into a question of accepting or rejecting her own self.

In her attempt to draw an authentic picture of herself, the *du* of the protagonist confronts the *ich,* unravels its desires, and analyzes its motivations. And as soon as the protagonist succeeds in projecting a few recognizable features, the author interrupts the dialogue and lets, among others, her friends, colleagues, neighbors, and teachers comment on Mrs. Tonius, so that the reader can compare the picture of an *I* as drawn by a *you* with the picture projected by a detached *he* or an unbiased *she.*

After these two pictures have been presented and before the protagonist reaches a decision in the light of what she now regards as her very own *ich,* the author himself appears as a character and starts his own interrogation of Mrs. Tonius—here he uses the formal *Sie*-form—with the hope of convincing her to accept an ending to her story that is appealing to his readers rather than the one to which she was leading him.

But because she has discovered the advantages of being herself, the protagonist refuses any resolution that does not agree with the *ich* which she has just discovered. Alone with herself again, the protagonist decides to distinguish between possibilities and necessities and to accept nothing unless it proves to be necessary for her inner *ich*.

These two novels show quite clearly that the East-German writer has freed himself from the stringent literary and political "guidelines" which seemed imposed on him by the tradition of socialist realism of the last few decades, and that he realizes that other styles and approaches for depicting reality do exist, that there are other—perhaps inner—worlds besides that of the working class. It is obvious that the East Germans are now convinced that exchanging ideas with—perhaps even taking a lesson from—authors of the capitalist world can be advantageous.

These and similar literary experiments prove that the East-German writers have finally broken out of their isolation and have joined experimenting contemporaries in the West. It will be interesting to see how long it will take writers in other socialist countries to decide—or to be permitted—to participate in the search for new themes and unconventional forms which has been going on in the Western world for some time now.

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Nightwood and the Freudian Unconscious

When Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* first appeared in 1937 accompanied by a preface in which T. S. Eliot enthusiastically endorsed the work, only a few avant-garde critics seemed to feel that a major literary event had taken place. Since that time the novel has attracted a small circle of admirers who have been awed by Barnes's extraordinary ability to infuse macabre or grotesque subject matter with haunting beauty, but the general concensus seems to be, with a few notable exceptions, that an excessive lack of verisimilitude makes it something less than a masterpiece.[1] *Nightwood* has not yet been recognized as a truly great piece of American fiction simply because we have failed to fully appreciate the fact that it does not depict human interaction on the level of conscious, waking existence. It is rather a dream world in which the embattled forces of the human personality take the form of characters representing aspects of that personality at different levels of its functioning.

The understanding of the structure of man's interior life revealed in the narrative is remarkably close to that advanced by Sigmund Freud only a few years before Barnes began work on the novel. In 1923 Freud chose to describe the distribution and interaction of the two instinctual forces which he had defined previously—Eros and Thanatos—in terms of three mental provinces. The provinces delineated in this model—ego, superego, and id—are not, Freud makes clear, autonomous entities which are completely disparate and distinct from one another, but rather modes of mental activity which overlap and intermesh. Barnes's treatment of character seems quite consistent with Freud's conception of the nature of the three divisions in our mental life. She does not present us with allegorical