

The Novels of Hermann Lenz

The West-German novelist Hermann Lenz, born 1913 and presently living in Munich, does not belong to the well-known and much publicized contemporary group of German writers such as Günter Grass, Heinrich Böll, and Uwe Johnson. He was awarded the George Büchner Prize 1978 of the German Academy of Languages and Literature in Darmstadt, Germany. This event gave him the publicity which he deserved, and one of his books, *Neue Zeit* ("New Time"), became a modest success. The renowned publishing firm Suhrkamp is reprinting many of his earlier works which have been out of print for many years.

Hermann Lenz has always been regarded by scholars and literary critics as an outsider.¹ Being an outsider, however, seems to suit him well for one easily notices that withdrawal from reality into a world of dreams and reminiscence is a recurring theme in his novels. The Hapsburg monarchy, Vienna at the turn of the century, the Roman empire, the Romantic movement—especially the poetry of Edward Mörike—are some of his favored motifs. Even the titles of his works indicate a certain introversion and reflect his attitude toward life in general: *Verlassene Zimmer* ("Deserted Rooms"; 1966), *Andere Tage* ("Other Days"; 1968), *Im Inneren Bezirk* ("In the Inner Region"; 1970). The title of his latest book *Der Tintenfisch in der Garage* ("The Squid in the Garage"; 1977, which is a translation of a Spanish proverb meaning someone who lives in an unsuitable environment, a misfit) follows this trend.

Hermann Lenz's numerous narrative works—published between the years 1947 and 1977—have been influenced by German and Austrian writers such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Adalbert Stifter, Arthur Schnitzler, Thomas Mann, and Franz Kafka.² There are three main categories into which one can group his novels: the autobiographical (*Verlassene Zimmer*, 1966; *Andere Tage*, 1968; *Neue Zeit*, 1975; *Das Stille Haus*, 1947); the historical (*Die Augen eines Dieners*, 1964; *Der Kutscher und der Wappenmaler*, 1972; *Dame und Scharfrichter*, 1973); and the allegorical novels (*Das doppelte Gesicht*, 1949; *Spiegelhütte*, 1962). From each category a few representative works will be discussed in order to demonstrate how a mainstream of recurring themes and motifs dominate his work.

The autobiographical novels depict the writer's early childhood (*Verlassene Zimmer*; "Deserted Rooms"; 1966), describe his life as a student during the Third Reich (*Andere Tage*; "Other Days"; 1968), or deal with the time he spent in the army during the Second World War (*Neue Zeit*; "New Time"; 1975). Lenz does not begin the search for his self with the early years of his childhood, but rather with the life of his ancestors. The turn of the century means to Lenz more than a chronological and historical mark of time; it is a cultural outlook and an attitude towards life and history.

In *Verlassene Zimmer* the characters repeatedly refer to the "wonderful dual monarchy."³ Grandfather Julius Krumm resembles with his walking stick and

¹Manfred Durzak. "Versuch über Hermann Lenz." *Akzente: Zeitschrift für Literatur*, No. 5 (October 1975).

²See Manfred Durzak. *Gespräche über den Roman*. (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1976); also Thomas Mann. *Briefe 1948-1955 und Nachlese* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1965), pp. 191-293.

³Hermann Lenz. *Verlassene Zimmer* (Köln: Jakob Hegner, 1966) ". . . diese wunderbare kaiserliche und königliche Monarchie" (p. 77). This, and all following translations are mine.

wide brimmed hat the king of Württemberg. His profession as "retired gun manufacturer appointed by His Majesty the King and owner of the pub 'to the Golden Hare'"⁴ creates a vision of continuity and wholeness.

Contemporary problems are also illustrated; for example, Krumm and his two brothers had emigrated to America, and had tried to build a new existence in Philadelphia. But Krumm returns to Württemberg and restores the old order within his immediate family. When her previous fiancé breaks off the engagement, Krumm's daughter Irene marries Hermann Rapp, a lieutenant who becomes an art teacher. Hermann Rapp represents the author's father, and in Eugen Rapp, a son born in 1913, Lenz describes himself. He is a child who suffers under a sadistic, child-beating teacher and who withdraws into his imagination, because he could never live without his dreams.

Andere Tage is the continuation of the first work. The political situation in Germany after 1918 forces the student Eugen Rapp to retire into the world of poetry. He studies theology and carries the poems of Eduard Mörike with him like a prayer book. His father Hermann joins the Nazi Party and Eugen shows his resistance by wanting to build a wall (p. 147), by reading the poems of Mörike, Hofmannsthal, and George. To stress his opposition to the military drill of Nazi-student groups he dresses like a dandy, lives in an imaginary Vienna at the turn of the century, and after changing his studies from theology to art history, hopes for a position as a museum director.

Lenz shows a way of life that was adopted by a certain group of people in Nazi Germany, who, for opportunistic reasons, neither joined the party, nor actively resisted the new order; they accepted the political reality for purely egotistical reasons. As Eugen confesses to his sister: "It is only important that I think what I please."⁵ The Vienna of his dreams turns in 1938 into a city that welcomes the Nazis enthusiastically. The death of Eugen's grandmother at the end of the book accentuates the parting from an epoch that has gone forever and exists only as an abstract hope in the mind of a contemporary human being.

In *Neue Zeit* this hope is destroyed by the war. Eugen Rapp, the soldier, survives the invasion of France and is sent to the Russian front. Like a sleepwalker he stumbles through bomb craters and over corpses. Only his thoughts about old Vienna make life bearable for him. During nightwatches he writes poetry, and in his last attempt to assert some individualism and to avoid sending innocent soldiers to their death, he refuses to become an officer. The acceleration of the war and its tragic end, the time he spends as a prisoner of war in America, and his return to a ravaged Europe, all combine to destroy his faith in history which has lost its magic and become a meaningless battlefield covered with corpses.

If Hermann Lenz had only written these autobiographical novels, he might have been dismissed as an old-fashioned and irrelevant author. But his importance is based on novels which deal with history as a state of transition toward the present. It is not an image in the mind of a person, nor a utopian configuration, but rather a process which involves positive and negative aspects. Even the Austrian monarchy is not excluded from his critical analysis. Three historical novels demonstrate his attitude towards history and the passing of

⁴"königlicher Büchsenmacher außer Dienst und Wirt zum Goldenen Hasen" (p. 10).

⁵Hermann Lenz. *Andere Tage* (Köln: Jakob Hegner, 1968). "Wichtig ist bloß, daß ich denken kann, was zu mir paßt" (p. 111).

time: *Die Augen eines Dieners* ("The Eyes of a Servant"; 1964), *Der Kutscher und der Wappenmaler* ("The Driver and the Painter of Emblems"; 1972), and *Dame und Scharfrichter* ("Lady and Executioner"; 1973).

The story *Dame und Scharfrichter* leads us furthest back into the past. It takes place during the last years of the Austrian monarchy shortly before the beginning of the First World War, and shows the moral decadence which preceded the political destruction. Lady von Seilern feels an inexplicable attraction towards the executioner who promises her both sexual ecstasy and death in the moment of strangulation. He fulfills his promise and the act becomes a parable for a world in which order has lost its balancing influence. The old emperor represents only a convention and the executioner sees his profession merely as a ritual. Reality has become questionable even for the emperor Franz Josef who seeks consolation by reading Marcus Aurelius. Vienna becomes interchangeable with the ancient Roman ruins of Carnuntum, whilst the Emperor turns into a museum director and the real world is like a gallery of old pictures and artifacts.

In this work Lenz criticizes the abstract Hapsburg myth, which Eugen Rapp and many other protagonists of his novels use as an escape into Utopia. This criticism also appears in two other novels: *Der Kutscher und der Wappenmaler* and *Die Augen eines Dieners*. Both novels are set between the World Wars and each uses National Socialism as a yardstick with which to measure the moral integrity of men. Those who pass the test are not the aristocrats representing the old order of society, but the lowest members of this hierarchy, a driver and a servant.

Hermann Lenz's most important contribution to German literature is the novel *Spiegelhütte* ("Mirror Hut"; 1962). Words like "surrealistic" or "allegorical" describe this work only incompletely. In an interview the writer admits that without reading Kafka this book would not have been possible.⁶ Lenz carries the tendencies of his protagonists to the extreme by describing past and present as one reality instead of viewing the present from a historical point of view. The laws of time and causality do not exist; the conscience of the characters is turned inside out. The same technique was used in *Das doppelte Gesicht*, but in *Spiegelhütte* all motifs and themes come together. The novel consists of three parts: *Einhorn geh nach Drommersheim* ("Unicorn go to Drommersheim"), *Calvaria oder eine Audienz in S.* ("Calvary or an Audience in S."), *Geheime Ziffernkanzlei* ("Secret Numbers Office").

In the first part a young man Franz Gravenreuther, just released from the penitentiary Drommersheim, meets a former girl friend Senta Sonnensperger in the pub "Spiegelhütte." This girl becomes his guide in a strange dreamland that is ruled by a Roman governor. All people are pagan and there is no moral code in the town of Drommersheim. Belief in human reason and history has been discarded: "History makes no sense and it is ruled by chance . . . The improbable and the absurd are our gods."⁷ Eventually the young man realizes that he is being confronted with his own life, failure, and guilt. When his human memory returns he recognizes in Senta the fiancée he deserted and who was killed by her later husband in a planned automobile accident. After a visit to the

⁶Manfred Dürzak. *Gespräche über den Roman*, p. 228.

⁷Hermann Lenz. *Spiegelhütte* (Köln: Jakob Hegner Verlag, 1962), p. 280. "Die Geschichte ist sinnlos und wird vom Zufall bestimmt . . . Das Unwahrscheinliche und das Absurde sind unsere Gottheiten" (p. 28).

Babylonian cabaret "Spiegelhütte," which reviews the past, he admits his guilt and resists the Babylonians who despise the old order and believe in the absurdity of life.

The second part proves to be another parable in which Lenz shows his view of reality. The eighteen-year-old student Carl Umgelter who is described as a naive young man resembles in many ways Eugen Rapp in *Andere Tage*. Eugene's world was divided into Nazi reality and dreams of the past, but Carl's reality is Drommersheim, where the Roman Empire and the Hapsburg Empire exist simultaneously. Carl's greatest wish is to obtain an audience with Emperor Marcus Aurelius, because Drommersheim in the province of Noricum is an important bastion of the Roman empire. Umgelter wants to accompany the emperor on his inspection trip to Vindobona and Carnuntum. This part of the novel ends with Umgelter's confession: "When you have everything and long for nothing, you are dead."⁸

The protagonist of the third part is another young man, Franz Laub. He is employed by Metternich and the governor of Drommersheim to watch the people and report their actions and feelings. Drommersheim is in a state of unrest. The Babylonian ideology undermines the fourth dimension of dreams, hope, and longing. The Babylonians want revolution and promise free sexuality. But Franz Laub warns the governor and prevents the revolt. He discovers that the motive behind all this unrest is a fear of dying. By denying the past, and therefore death, hectic sexual activity destroys everything that makes life in Drommersheim bearable. "The governor had made us familiar with death by renewing the past. In this old city of Drommersheim the old is more respected than the new, simply because the new is so shortlived. But the old remains; it is unchangeable, because it is dead and yet it is still alive."⁹ Finally the governor explains during a conversation with Laub that Drommersheim does not exist as a tangible reality, and that everything we experience is a dream. The battles happen inside us; what we see is the mirror image of our problems (p. 199).

This novel is surprisingly modern and visionary. Although it was written in the early 1960's, Lenz anticipated many tendencies and events of the seventies. Being an outsider provided him with an overall view of the political and social scene and the necessary distance to record it. Two perspectives, microscopic exactness and imaginative surrealism, can be found in Hermann Lenz's novels. His introversion is a modest, unhurried analysis of his self. He has no easy and ready-made answers for the problems of past and present, but makes his own life the theme of his epic search for the truth.

Sibylla Dickson
University of New Brunswick

⁸"Wenn du alles besitzt und keine Sehnsucht hast, bist du tot" (p. 176).

⁹"Der Statthalter jedoch hat uns mit dem Tod befreundet, indem er das Vergangene neu machte. In der Altstadt Drommersheim wird das Alte mehr geachtet als das Neue, allein schon deshalb, weil das Neue nur kurz lebt. Das Alte aber bleibt bestehen, es ist unveränderbar, weil es tot ist und trotzdem lebt" (p. 198-99).