

History, Memory, and Self in Christoph Hein's *Drachenblut*

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Christoph Hein has emerged in the last few years, and particularly during the turbulent events since November 1989, as one of the significant figures of contemporary East-German literature.¹ Hein is known primarily as a dramatist, one whose plays *Vom hungrigen Hennecke* (1974), *Schlötel oder was solls* (1974), *Cromwell* (1978), *Lasalle fragt den Herrn Herbert nach Sonja* (1980), *Der neue Menoza* (1982), *Die wahre Geschichte des Ah Q* (1983), and most recently *Passage* (1987), frequently dealt with thorny issues of history and power. But Hein has also published prose pieces. In addition to a children's book, *Das Wildpferd unterm Kachelofen* (1984) and the novel *Horns Ende* (1985), the novella *Drachenblut* (Dragon's Blood) appeared in 1983 in the Federal Republic of Germany, having previously come out in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as *Der fremde Freund* (The Alien Friend).²

Of all Hein's prose works, *Drachenblut* has been among the most controversial. With the rapid political changes since November 1989, the discussion of the implications of GDR literature has become even more intense. Writers who were able to publish under the GDR system are now challenged to demonstrate where they stand with the new order and, more importantly, where they stood previously. It is being suggested that writers such as Christa Wolf and Christoph Hein were not sufficiently opposed to the previous regime. A closer examination of *Drachenblut* shows, however, the extent to which Hein was deeply critical of the East-German society as it really existed beneath a veneer of relative prosperity—at least compared to the hardships of the 1950s.

The plot of the novella is disarmingly simple. After the funeral of her lover Henry in the first chapter, the central character Claudia narrates, in the first person, the history of how she came to know him. Reviewers in the GDR could not or would not come to grips with the real problems raised by the book, namely, how a bright, well-to-do professional woman living under the conditions of "really existing socialism" has come to exist so coldly, in such emotional isolation:³ what has caused her to "bathe in a dragon's blood" so that nothing could touch her, no one could reach her any more? By depicting Claudia's alienation, Hein was indicting a society and a government which deprived people of access to their own history and thus to an authentic identity.

¹ Biographical information and a general introduction to Hein may be found in Antonia Grunenberg, "Geschichte und Entfremdung: Christoph Hein als Autor der DDR," *Michigan Germanic Studies* 8. 1-2 (1985): 229-51.

² Christoph Hein, *Der fremde Freund* (Berlin/Weimar: Aufbau, 1982). For copyright reasons, the work appeared in West Germany as *Drachenblut* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1983). References are to this edition and will appear in the text. All translations are mine.

³ Representative of official reaction in the GDR are Rüdiger Bernhardt, "Der fremde Freund von Christoph Hein," *Weimarer Beiträge* 29.9 (1983): 1635-55; Ursula Heukenkamp, "Die fremde Form," *Sinn und Form* 35 (1983): 625-32; and Hans Kaufmann, "Christoph Hein in der Debatte," in *DDR-Literatur '83 im Gespräch*, ed. Siegfried Rönisch (Berlin/Weimar: Aufbau, 1984) 41-51.

This interpretation may seem to be at odds with the surface of the text. Certainly the narrator of Christoph Hein's *Drachenblut* does not suffer from any difficulty in saying "I" (unlike so many of Christa Wolf's protagonists). The paragraph which opens the narrative proper after the prefatory emblematic dream-scene contains "I" no less than ten times. The opening sentence manages to say "I" twice: "Even on the morning of the funeral I was undecided whether I should go" (8). And in the concluding paragraph of just over 150 words, we hear "I" no less than twenty-four times. In addition, "to me" or "me" are heard another seven times in the same paragraph and "my" a further three times. "I" dominates this last paragraph, in sentences which sound like the strokes of a hammer beating out self-identity: "I am in balance. I am relatively popular. I have a friend again. I can pull myself together, it's not hard for me. I have plans. I like to work in the clinic. I'm sleeping well, I don't have nightmares" (174). The conclusion culminates in a declaration of completed self-sufficiency: "I wouldn't know of anything I lack. I've made it. I'm fine" (175). This emphatic closure of the narrative stands in stark contrast to earlier stories of this type in recent literature of the GDR.

As in the Soviet Union, stories which explored the development, or lack of development, of a central figure had larger ideological implications in the literature of the GDR, seeking to reveal both the conditions of personal development and the underlying historical process.⁴ The possibility, or impossibility, of personal development was seen, according to the specific theoretical position taken, as a function or reflection of the development of society. An orthodox approach, in line with the tenets of socialist realism, could be seen in Erik Neutsch's story, "Akte Nora S." The third-person narrator is in tight control of the narration, which is intended to explain why Nora S. failed to integrate herself properly into society. The narrator claims to have all the available evidence about the subject: "Somewhere in the jumble of questions and answers about her person, in the protocols, reports and notes they hope for a hint will aid them in judging the case."⁵ The ambiguities and instabilities presented by the documents do not lead Neutsch's narrator to doubt whether a case history was possible and thus posed no apparent difficulties.

The crumbling of narrative authority and the growing awareness of the centrality of the individual emerged gradually in GDR literature, as in Christa Wolf's novel *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968).⁶ Here the effort to write the history of Christa T. necessarily involved general questions of how to write history, of how to fill gaps left by the divergence of public and private history or those gaps caused by the loss of documentary evidence. How much fiction could an objective narrative about an individual's life incorporate? And how omniscient could an honest, authentic historian be? The attempt to tell the apparently relatively simple story of one life led to doubts about the possibility of

⁴ See Katerina Clark, "Political History and Literary Chronotype: Some Soviet Case Studies," *Literature and History: Theoretical Problems and Case Studies*, ed. Gary Saul Morson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986) 230-46; and Régine Robin, "The Figures of Socialist Realism: The Fictional Constraints of the 'Positive Hero,'" *Sociocriticism* 2.1 (1986): 69-130.

⁵ Erik Neutsch, *Heldenberichte: Erzählungen und kurze Prosa* (Berlin: Verlag Tribüne, 1976) 110. The translation is mine.

⁶ Christa Wolf, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968; Neuwied/Berlin: Luchterhand, 1969). References are to this edition and will appear in the text. The translations are mine.

any historical narration whatsoever: "The way one is able to tell it is not the way it happened. If one is able to tell it the way it was, the one wasn't present, or the story happened long ago, so that impartiality comes easily" (65). But still, the central character was occluded by third-person narration and a major theme was the very "impossibility of saying I."

Claudia, the protagonist of *Drachenblut*, is located near an intersection of Christa T. and Nora S. That is to say, the reader will learn a great deal about her from a very well-informed narrator. In the process the possibility of narration and of the narrator's authentic subjectivity will be called into doubt. Unlike the narrators who introduce Christa T. or Nora S., Claudia, speaking for herself, does not explain the reason why the story is being told. The story is narrated as a flashback after the opening funeral, recapitulating the history of the affair between Henry and Claudia. The narration of the affair is strictly chronological, proceeding from the first meeting, through various contacts and highlights, to the final crisis. Quite problematic is the detail with which this affair is recalled. For instance: "In a village pub we ate scrambled eggs and cheese. Noon was past and the pub owner had taken our order only reluctantly" (49). Incredibly precise details are recalled effortlessly, flawlessly. Does anyone have the kind of memory required to be able to recall such details months later? It seems highly unlikely, but the narrating voice carries on calmly and without apparent doubt or irony. This is the voice of confident realism, but it is not authentic.

Matters are complicated when Claudia returns, within the framework of the flashback, to her home town G., making "a trip into the past." Although nothing has changed outwardly, time has worked on, and the past is no longer accessible. Abruptly, the narrator reflects upon this experience: "The past is no longer to be found. Only imprecise relics and impressions remain in us. Distorted, touched up, false. Nothing can be checked any more. My memories have become irrefutable. It was, as I have retained it, as I retain it. My dreams can no longer be damaged, my fears cannot be extinguished. My G. is no more" (115). Suddenly, all the calm confidence of the narrating voice is subverted by a startling confession that the past, which exists only in memory, is "distorted, touched up, falsified." The evidence cannot alter the interpretation of the past; memories have become irrefutable, because they are inaccessible.

Were this the final destination of Hein's text, then one could certainly accuse him of propagating an extreme form of subjectivity, of depicting a solipsistic universe where all external history was outweighed by inner convictions. However, Hein does not stop there. Claudia recalls those incidents from growing up in what would become the established GDR, incidents beyond erasing from her memory. They are not pleasant and include the denunciation of a favorite history teacher for political reasons, the terrorization of students by a physical education instructor, the arrival of a Russian tank in the village square, the destruction of Claudia's relationship with her best friend Katharina, the discovery of her uncle's past misdeeds. She has been taught that her private life, her personal experiences, cannot be integrated into communal history. After a lifetime of learning to keep silent, she no longer makes an attempt to reflect seriously upon the nexus between private and public history. It dawns upon us why all pretense of a narrative that is to be published has been abandoned here. In the GDR as it really existed, there could never be a publication of an honest private history. Instead, Claudia narrates in total isolation, as she

has learned to do. Her attempts to recall are spiritual exercises through which she tries to come to terms with the origin of her anxieties, with her lack of emotion. Despite the presence of "I" on every page of this text, the narrator knows, and we learn, that this "I" signifies something less than a full personality. Unable to speak about the terrors of being completely isolated in an individual memory of the past which it is impossible to share with others in the community, Claudia blames no one for what has been done to her. At best, she acknowledges her state of shrewd alienation: "I am cunning, hard-boiled, I see through everything" (172). Claudia has learned her lessons all too well. It is not surprising that official literary critics in the GDR, who observed Claudia's alienation well and clearly, declined to read it as the successful product of the forty years of their history. Claudia's "I," deprived of any possibility for authentic self-expression, was not hers alone.