

## Die Schillergruft

Jürgen Hultenreich

Berlin: Weidler, 2001, pp. 196, ISBN 3-89693-173-3, DM 29,90

Reviewed by Stan Jones

Two notably quotable sentences from English and Czech literature express the essence of Jürgen Hultenreich's latest, very German book, his novel *Die Schillergruft*. Its narrative retrospection is an echo of L. P. Hartley's famous opening to *The Go-Between*: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." And its overall purpose and meaning matches Kundera's dictum: "The struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

Hultenreich filters his autobiography through the medium of a fictional "ich", Georg Hull. He depicts himself as a laconic ne'er-do-well in the GDR. His mocking and ironic tone suits the image of an "involuntary dissident" growing up disrespectfully in 50's Erfurt to fall foul of the state in 1967 when he was caught trying to get to West Germany via Czechoslovakia. As one of his subsequent cellmates puts it, they are the state's products: "Dieses System macht aus uns, die wir die harmlosesten Leute der Welt sind, nur unsere Füße ein wenig bewegen wollten, Verbrecher. Einfach so..." (p.166). Citizen Hull did not actively oppose the regime, but he insisted on "doing his own thing" in a society where conformity celebrated its own historical necessity, at least officially. His individualism is a form of passive resistance involving much drinking, idling, devising ways of avoiding commitment to any sanctioned activity, playing chess and listening to western pop. But as: "... dieses System hatte die grösste Anpassungsfähigkeit als gesund erklärt." (p.91), passivity is actually the worst affront to the system because it does not affirm it by at least offering opposition. Hull lands before: "Richter Strube, fett und mürrisch, dahinter drei Schöffen" (p.7) and "Staatsanwältin Van Uehm". When they pressure him over his insistence that he only reads Schiller and then into ritually doing penance by affirming the state's shibboleths, he loses his temper: "Und wenn Hitler den Krieg gewonnen hätte, wären genau Sie nämlich auch hier in den gleichen Funktionen." (p.17). This propels him into the prison ward of the "Irrenanstalt Pfaffenrode", where the bulk of the narrative traces

the mistreatment of inmates, the punitive drug therapy and the indignity of constant surveillance. It culminates in a massive shock-therapy session which apparently leaves him for dead — and was meant to. The officially sanctioned sadism and casual cruelty is, however, balanced by two experiences. One is the bizarre solidarity of the inmates among themselves, regardless of the fact that some are truly insane as distinct from political "Plempeler", as Hultenreich's narrator dubs the community. The other is a remarkable coincidence: the rediscovery of a childhood sweetheart, the mysterious Marion, whose acute sensitivity to her surroundings and the people in them Hull describes as a sort of second sight, a gift too challenging for a conformist society so that it has landed her in the woman's section of Pfaffenrode asylum. After almost having his brains fried and being left for dead in the mortuary, Hull gets a little grotesque revenge by coming back to life with a "Guten Tag, ihr Dreckschweine" (p.155) as they prepare to write him off. Then it's back before the same court where he manages enough compliance to indicate some sort of remorse and some sort of recognition of the State's "official" writers. And unexpectedly, this gets him released from Erfurt jail. Waiting for him is a ray of light in the shape of "ein kurzhaariges, schlankes und verlegen lächelndes Geschöpf." (p.201).

*Die Schillergruft* expresses the process of recording, remembering, interpreting and evaluating the past which marks the — often fraught — public debate in Germany today, as in the recent series in *Der Spiegel*, "Die Gegenwart der Vergangenheit". Hultenreich's latest contribution is highly personal, very detailed, bound to a closely defined place and time and inevitably demanding on its readership. Its fictional overlay serves to modify memory and remembering while drawing attention to them as a process necessary for the present of the author and the reader: the exorcising of peculiarly German ghosts. In this respect the "Roman" resembles writing by Hultenreich's colleague Bernd Wagner, by Reiner Kunze or Monika Maron. It reflects a generation's reckoning with its past and insists on its voice, style and identity in the present. Its direct literary predecessors are from the period before the collapse of the Wall. These are the "Elternbiografien" of writers such as Peter Härtling, Christa Wolf and Christoph Meckel, where "Zeitgenossen" deal with an earlier generation of personal ghosts hailing from the Third Reich.

That "Ich-Erzähler" Hull carries Hultenreich's authentic voice is clear to anyone who knows this writer's previous work, his novel *Die-748-Schritte-Reise* (1995) or his

collections of short stories, *Die Entfernung der Nähe* (1997), and *Zerbrochene Krüge* (1998). This account displays the inextricable intermingling of light and dark, levity and outrage, the fascination with the close observation to produce the telling detail, the delight in the self-conscious virtuosity of the well-timed anecdote, the eye for the grotesque and Hultenreich's customary ironic relativising of his narrative, his narrator and his narration. Yet this irony is not "grossbürgerlich" like that of Thomas Mann. It focuses much more on the credibility of his fiction *qua* fiction and sets the book's tone already in its "Vorwort". Here is the story of the "Bierkutscher" the boy knew in 50's Erfurt who had a horse so smart that it delivered the barrels by itself. There is his stepfather, Onkel Hugo, "ein Zwerg mit Buckel", (p.7) who delivered the little Georg to the kindergarten in the early mornings where the boy would slip into a nun's bed while the sister was away at prayer. And, typical for all of Hultenreich's writing, there is his indirect reference to the huge perspective of German history. This time it is in the family flat in Erfurt, where no-one realised at the time "...dass genau in diesen Räumen vor über 450 Jahren der dicke Luther an allem zweifelte." (p.6) For the retrospect from today, the gesture to the past coupled with the recurring motif of Schiller suggests a second, multivalent framework into which to fit the details, anecdotes and dialogue the author has his narrator transmit. Readers, therefore, face the invitation and challenge "to play the game" in deciding just how far they want to cooperate in believing in these memories. Where they recount an apparent exchange of letters with Marion in the asylum, the narrative tests its readers most acutely, not just with the fact that it was possible, but also to understand the way the two so closely correspond in using a "code" of highly whimsical allegory. *Die Schillergruft* requires a multi-levelled creative imagination if its readers are to join the hero in the ironic pleasures of narration.

Such pleasures reach their ironic and grotesque extreme where Hull relates how he encountered one of the defining phenomena of GDR history, the IM. His knowledge of Schiller, above all of the poetry, intrigues "Dipl-Psycho Ganz", as the specialist interviews him for assessment. Hull's doctor appears an ambiguous personality, almost as much a victim of the system as the people he "treats". He uses massive amounts of nicotine and alcohol to fend off the pointless squalor of his function, and the fact that his wife, who is also his colleague, has affairs with the inmates literally under his nose. One of the novel's deepest ironies derives from the way the "Dipl-Psycho", while ostensibly assessing the grounds for Hull's attempted flight, actually

sympathises with his patient's wish for freedom and seeks his company, his knowledge of literature and finally his goodwill by offering him a chance to join the GDR "establishment". Ganz shows him the sort of shambling vegetable that prolonged exposure to the asylum's regime can make of a "Pleplemer", reveals two separate reports very different in their implications for Hull's freedom and then introduces an "Oberleutnant Müller", Stasi officer and passionate Germanist. Under the influence of much real French cognac, the "Dipl- Psycho" and the Oberleutnant try to "turn" the absconder into an IM, all the while betting real Westmarks on Hull's expertise in Schiller-quotations. The heavy irony of the book's title comes to the fore as the drunken game takes over until Hull puts an end to it: "Als der dritte Müller ins Zimmer schlich und auf der Wettseite Platz nahm, riss ich mich noch mal zusammen. Unterm Tisch liegend, Die Verpflichtungserklärung, an der ich mich hatte festhalten wollen, zerknüllt in den Händen, brachte ich die Strophe schliesslich zu Ende...'Ond Töisende beschörmt, die grosse Mauer ischt's/ Dö unsch-re DDscheR vöm Feinde hsch-hsch-schöidet.'"(p108) Behind the grotesque slapstick of the scene is a real threat, and it materialises on the "Schockbett".

The reason why such memories are presented in such a style appears through the contrast with the book's programmatic statement. Hull drops his ironic stance to define the legacy left him by his experience and by that to indicate the reason for his account: "Keiner kann, als sei nichts geschehen, dort einfach von vorn anfangen, wo sich Abgründe auftaten." (p.90) Here is this book's version of Kundera's existential conjunction of memory and freedom. Beyond the individual perspective that dominates *Der Schillergruft*, Hull identifies his fellow-spirits in the GDR: "*Wir* waren eine verschworene Gemeinschaft. *Wir* erkannten uns auf den Strassen... . *Wir* waren es, die westdeutschen Reisebussen den Weg durch die verfallende Altstadt wiesen, voraneilend... . *Wir* schwammen mitten in der Woche in den Freibädern um unser Leben...*Wir* hätten eine Partei gründen sollen. *Wir* waren das Volk." (p.172) With a retrospective glance to the heady slogans of 1989, *Die Schillergruft* celebrates the memory of the idlers-on-principle, the nonconformists and "involuntary dissidents" of earlier, more routinely representative days in the life of the GDR.

Hull's creator had to leave this "other country" nearly twenty years later, in 1985. His novel in the new millenium looks to recapture a bitter and, for him, almost terminal part of it from his perspective in post-Wall Germany. To raise the ghosts now and

enable a reader to see them in the right light, Hultenreich interposes his fictive intermediary and so seeks the authentic voice of the remembering autobiographer in the ironising first-person. Telling the story in the third-person might simply not have been possible because it would have, ironically, meant a narrative perspective too close to the events, too fraught and bitter to be credible. How and what to think about its recent past are questions still needing resolution in Germany. Jürgen Hultenreich's novel is not only his best writing yet, it is an authentic contribution to that process. "Fortsetzung folgt" (with or without the "lächelndes Geschöpf")? That is to be hoped.

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