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Berlin – still a divided city?
Ideological dualism in post-Wende fiction

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This article examines two post-Wende Berlin fictions, Peter Schneider's *Paarungen* and Uwe Timm's *Johannisnacht*, in order to explore what happens when two representative writers of the '68 generation are confronted with a radically changed world, one in which the ideological certainties of the pre-Wende period no longer offer interpretative frameworks for the city experience and one in which there has been a substantial, if perhaps belated shift in the perception of what literature can or should be or do. It has been claimed that it is only after 1989 that German literature finally abandoned the notion that the writer could speak with a degree of political or moral authority and hence that it is only since the Wende that it has been able to enter a truly postmodern phase. By exploring the novels' views of society and history and the relationship of literature to them, by considering whether the texts can be described as in any way self-consciously postmodern and by examining the image of Berlin they offer, this article attempts to problematize that assumption and to show that these works provide evidence of a reluctance to abandon the notion that the writer can say something authoritative about the world in which we live.

Introduction

In 'The Written Capital', an article published in 1999, Stephen Brockmann examines various Berlin fictions in an attempt to determine what it is that makes literature after the Wende different from that which had preceded it. He claims that prior to the Wende 'literature was able to maintain its status in Germany precisely because of national division', declaring that 'with the end of that division, literature loses its anachronistic status' (Brockmann 1999: 382). Stressing the similarities in the literary cultures of East and West, he alleges that what makes post-war German literature so old-fashioned is the respect accorded to it. It is only in the 'new "normalized" Germany' of the post-Wende period, he claims, that literature has finally shaken off 'the political and moral authority that had accrued to it during the years of German division' (Brockmann 1999: 381). Thus, he can conclude, it is only since 1989 that German literature has been able to enter a truly postmodern phase, a world dominated by the visual 'in which writing and words necessarily play a subordinate role' (Brockmann 1999: 380).

It might seem somewhat contentious to argue that German literature, in the West as well as in the East, came quite so late to a recognition of its position within a postmodern cultural and political context which has been variously debated, defined and disputed since the late 1960s. And yet, if we are willing to accept such statements as ‘central to the “postmodern condition” [...] is a recognition and account of the way in which the “grand narratives” of Western history and in particular, enlightened modernity, have broken down’, if we acknowledge that ‘postmodernism tends to claim an abandonment of all metanarratives which could be legitimate foundations for truth’, if we agree that ‘we have witnessed the terror produced through the instrumental modes of universal reason, the generalizing violence of the concept, and discovered that we no longer want “truth” and we do not even require “truth-effect”’ (Waugh 1992: 5), then our definition of the postmodern must indeed sit uneasily with an understanding of a literary culture in which writers and their works were deemed a source of moral authority and where literature was regarded as providing access to political, social or moral truths. For as Steven Connor has put it, it is characteristic of postmodernist fiction that it rejects ‘hierarchy, narrative closure, the desire to represent the world and the authority of the author’ (Connor 1989: 7).

It cannot, of course, be my intention here to provide any sort of conclusive answer to the question whether a truly postmodern literary culture has developed in Germany only since 1989. With this argument in mind, though, what I propose to do is to look at two post-Wende works by writers who also belong to, and indeed are primarily associated with, the pre-Wende context. That is, to examine two Berlin fictions, one by Peter Schneider, an author who has devoted some large part of his career to exploring the city and the repercussions of its division, the other by Uwe Timm whose works are more normally set in Hamburg or Munich and who thus views the city as an outsider.

Both Schneider’s and Timm’s literary careers began with the Student Movement and what remain probably their best known works grew out of that context. Both *Lenz* and *Heißer Sommer* reflect their authors’ commitment to Marxist politics and testify to their, at that stage, fairly unproblematic faith in literature as an instrument of political change. It would, of course, be unfair to assume that Schneider’s and Timm’s views on the relationship between politics and literature had remained static for twenty years and changes of perspective have indeed found expression in their writing in the intervening period.

Nevertheless, what I am interested in here is the rather specific question of what happens when two representative writers of the '68 generation are confronted with a radically changed world, one in which there has been a substantial, if perhaps belated shift in the perception of what literature can or should be or do. And, in exploring their two post-Wende Berlin novels as attempts to come to terms with an entirely new historical situation, I hope to be able to shed just a little light on the question of postmodernism in relation to recent German fiction.

To do this, I propose to explore the works from three related angles, using aspects of various (admittedly sometimes problematic) definitions of postmodernism as and when they might prove illuminating. I will explore what view of society and history emerges and consider what function literature is perceived as having in relation to them. I will examine what image of the city the novels present and I will ask whether there might be anything which can be described as self-consciously postmodern about them.

Peter Schneider, *Paarungen*

Peter Schneider's *Paarungen* was published in 1992 but is set in the still-divided Berlin of the early 1980s. Perhaps surprisingly, given Schneider's reputation as a clear-sighted political commentator, the novel initially appears to have little to say about the historical reality of division, primarily concerned as it is with the trials and tribulations in the love lives of its three forty-something central male characters.

Iris Radisch nevertheless reads it as an essentially political novel, albeit a failed one, claiming that it is intended as an 'Abrechnung' with the ideology of '68, but insisting that it actually repeats the very mistakes that soured the ideals of a generation:

Paarungen soll ein zeitgeschichtliches Dokument sein, der gealterte Eduard leidet stellvertretend für uns alle. Darin ist der melancholische Abrechnungsroman mit den Dogmen der 68er Generation diesen Dogmen treu geblieben: Er glaubt an die Kraft der Verallgemeinerung, an das Stereotyp und an den exemplarischen Helden. Seine Veteranen gehören zusammen. Sie sind noch immer Mitglieder einer einzigen, wenn auch inzwischen etwas heruntergekommenen Familie, die geschlossen ins Morgenrot der siebziger Jahre aufgebrochen und geschlossen im Mief der achtziger Jahre gelandet ist. Noch immer heißt ein 68er sein: aufs Ganze zielen. Egal, auf was. (Radisch 1992).

Radisch's objection to the novel seems to be that it is anachronistic in a way similar to that in which Brockmann defined the whole of pre-Wende German literary culture as anachronistic. Her implication is that Schneider still buys into a view that the writer can speak authoritatively for the many and in so doing espouse general truths about a generational condition.

Leaving aside the question of the accuracy of that assumption for a moment, I would suggest that Radisch's dismissal of the novel as 'trivial' and 'kitsch' raises the possibility that she might be missing a significant dimension of the text. While Schneider certainly utilizes the more often than not kitsch form of the 'Beziehungsroman', he nevertheless employs literary allusion to introduce a dimension to the novel which goes beyond that of its surface concern with the 'trivial' topic of the tangled love lives of three middle-aged men.

It is above all allusions to E. T. A. Hoffmann and to Goethe which signal the novel's fundamental concern with questions of progress. As Colin Riordan has pointed out these bring into play contrasting views of the scientist: 'Goethe's clear-headed, scientifically knowledgeable Enlightenment figures' are opposed to Hoffmann's 'deliberately disturbing' image of the scientist (Riordan 1995: 96f.). That the novel's central character, a molecular biologist whose attempt to identify the genetic foundation of multiple sclerosis brings him into conflict with animal rights activists, is called Eduard Hoffmann goes some way towards illustrating the novel's questioning attitude towards notions of scientific progress. What is perhaps more significant, though, is the fact that Eduard's clash with the animal liberationists links scepticism about scientific advances with uncertainty about the continued efficacy of political protest.

Eduard initially objects when protestors disrupt his seminar, but the recollection of his own political past means that hostility is soon replaced by guilt. We can probably agree with Radisch that this reads fairly predictably as an illustration of the bad conscience of the old '68er', forced by the ideological zeal of a younger generation to confront the waning of his own one-time political fervour. But Eduard's reaction is a little more complex than that. He takes particular exception to a banner unfurled by the protestors which demands an end to

‘Mäuse-KZs’. The reference to the concentration camps in this context leads Eduard to speculate whether the animal rights activists’ protests are not really ‘eine unerklärte Form der Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ (Schneider 1994: 227) by means of which they attempt to reassure themselves of their own clear consciences by implicating others in the crimes of the past:

Um nicht in den Sog der Verbrechen der Nazigeneration zu geraten, retteten sich nicht wenige der Nachgeborenen in eine Art Unschuldswahn [...] am besten wurde das eigene, untadelige Bewußtsein demonstriert, indem man bei andren Spurenelemente von Nazigesinnung ausmachte. (Schneider 1994: 227f.).

The implication is that the still problematic relationship to Nazi crimes has such a hold over the German consciousness that rational debate about scientific progress has become nearly impossible and, if this holds true for those of an age to be taught by Eduard, then how much more so does it define the views of his own generation. Thus the same kind of contorted thinking informs the ‘Dauerstreit’ over the nature / nurture debate in which Eduard and his brother, Lothar, a social scientist, are locked. Eduard interprets his brother’s insistence that family environment determines everything as another rather perverse attempt at ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’:

Dieses Verantwortlichmachen, dieses Schuldigsprechen, dieses Entlarven! Du, ich, wir, die Söhne und Töchter der Nazigeneration, leiden unter einem Unschuldskomplex. Es stimmt ja: Nie zuvor war eine Generation durch die Geschichte derart verführt wie die unsere, die eigenen Eltern total schuldig und sich selbst total unschuldig zu sprechen. Was haben wir davon außer ewiger Unmündigkeit? (Schneider 1994: 120).

Thus the still troubling question of the nature of German guilt is seen to stifle rational debate about scientific progress and to offer an excuse for those who fail to take responsibility for their own lives. In another example, it is shown to smother political discussion when a lively argument over who should take responsibility for the Soviet shooting down of a Korean jumbo jet is brought to an abrupt end by a woman who claims that all those who express a point of view are ‘Massenmörder’ who have ‘den Faschismus in den Knochen’ (Schneider 1994: 100).

Eduard seems likely to abandon his research precisely because he cannot find an answer to the ethical dilemmas it throws up. What the novel seems to imply is that, given the

irrational underpinning of political discourse in Germany, such issues are likely to remain unresolved and this in turn suggests a degree of resignation about the possibility of scientific and political progress in Germany. For Eduard's recognition that the same short-circuit thinking which characterized the political responses of his own generation manifests itself in the actions of the animal rights activists implies that oppositional politics in post-war Germany continually repeat the same mistakes and have therefore essentially reached a point of stasis. It is this understanding which underpins the novel's fundamentally pessimistic perspectives on notions of political intervention and historical progress.

A similar sense of historical stasis and political impasse informs the way in which the divided Berlin is presented in the novel. Above all the division is thematized through the figure of Theo, an East Berliner with a so-called 'Doppelpass' (Schneider 1994: 50) which allows him to cross the border in either direction as often as he likes. That the novel's only East German can move freely between the two halves of the city acts to eradicate the differences between them and their inhabitants, not least because Theo's 'Mauerspringen' seems to serve no purpose other than to provide him with a handy alibi for the labyrinthine love life he has in common with his Western counterparts: 'Die Mauer war für Theo eine Tarnkappe, die ihm erlaubte, ohne jede Ankündigung aufzutauchen und spurlos zu verschwinden' (Schneider 1994: 52).

When Theo does become caught up in a specifically East German intrigue, it remains deliberately de-politicized. His girlfriend tests his loyalty by sending him letters from, and eventually setting up a meeting with, an imaginary American doctoral student who claims to be in love with him. Her trap is, however, hijacked by the Stasi when they send a female agent to the arranged meeting point. While this story might suggest some sort of equation between the problems of sexual fidelity which the novel explores and notions of loyalty to a state or a political idea, this is not an issue the novel examines further, rather this story seems to have the same status as any of the other tales of sexual intrigue which the central characters relay to one another.

Theo's anarchistic political position has a similarly levelling effect:

Er stand in dem Ruf, die kleinste terroristische Vereinigung der Welt zu sein: ein anarchistischer Dichter, der mit allen im Streit lag, mit dem 'Dachdecker-Sozialismus' im

Osten, mit der 'Peep-Show-Gesellschaft' im Westen und erst recht mit sich selbst. (Schneider 1994: 50).

Only once does Theo become directly involved in a political argument about the Soviet shooting down of a Korean airliner and the narrator's response in this context is telling:

Eduard war sich bei Theo nie sicher, ob er wirklich der Meinung war, die er gerade verfocht. Ihm war aufgefallen, daß Theo aus Prinzip den größtmöglichen Abstand zu seinem Gesprächspartner suchte, als wolle er die Sicherheiten des Gegners und seine eigenen auf die Probe stellen, indem er den jeweils extremsten Gegenstandpunkt bezog. Eine Stadt, in der es zu jedem Weltereignis zwei unvereinbare Nachrichtenversionen gab, war für Theos Gesprächsstrategie ein nahezu idealer Standort. Oft genügte es, daß Theo im Westen die östliche und im Osten die westliche verfocht, um sein Ziel zu erreichen. (Schneider 1994: 99).

Theo becomes a representative character in a city in which political differences are shown to be largely a matter of journalistic invention rather than of personal ideological conviction. Ideology is presented as a matter of perspective, where the position one defends will be determined by the role one has decided to play. Thus the novel is not only deeply pessimistic about notions of historical progress and the possibility of political intervention, it presents a world in which ideological differences have been levelled. More than this, ideology is presented as game playing in which all truth content is lost.

Thus, if the novel does attempt to speak with authority for a whole generation as Radisch suggests, then it does not do so in the spirit of '68. The central characters do degenerate into stereotypical figures whose lives are all unbearably trivial and all unbearably the same but they do so not least because they live in a world in which political intervention no longer seems viable, a world in which the ideological distinctions which made political certainties possible have disappeared and in which their personal lives have therefore become their overriding concern.

Steven Connor has noted that:

The key that connects the leading features of postmodern society [...] is the fading of a sense of history. Our contemporary social system has lost its capacity to know its own past, has begun to live in 'a perpetual present' without depth, definition, or secure identity. (Connor 1989: 44f.).

The only relationship to the past the novel's characters are shown to have is a contorted and unproductive one to the Nazi period, otherwise this definition would seem to hold true for the Berlin presented in *Paarungen* and its inhabitants. Thus Schneider would seem to be suggesting that the city had joined the postmodern world long before the fall of its wall.

Uwe Timm, *Johannisnacht*

In the first instance, it is actually far easier to identify Uwe Timm's *Johannisnacht* as a self-consciously postmodernist fiction, than it is Schneider's *Paarungen*. Peter Brooker has referred to a postmodern scepticism with regard to 'the notion of a generic urban mind or culture' (Brooker 1996: 12). Schneider, for all his arguably postmodern doubt about historical progress, still seeks to capture the pervasive mood of a whole city. Timm, on the other hand, is far more attuned to Berlin's post-Wende diversity and the city's ultimate fragmentation.

Published in 1996, the novel is set in the year in which Christo wrapped the Reichstag. Indeed, the narrator, a resident of Munich, travels to Berlin to pursue research for an article on the potato at midsummer 1995, the very point when the wrapping was in progress. Not only does the novel's action culminate on the night of 23rd June, a day when 'Verwechslungen, Verkleidungen, Vertauschungen sozusagen zur Tagesordnung gehören' and a night described as 'die ästhetischste [...] des Jahres' (Timm 1999: 193), it is also prefaced by a quotation from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the final line of which, 'So quick bright things come to confusion', gives some intimation of the chaos the narrator will encounter.

The novel is indeed a comedy of confusions in which a man, if not from the countryside, then at least from a city substantially more provincial than the new Berlin, finds himself incapable of grasping a transformation in the rules of engagement for interaction in the city. It is, in fact, his inability to comprehend a new and ambiguous relationship between appearance and reality, the new Berlin's foremost characteristic, that leads him to be defrauded of a substantial sum of money and a degree of his self-respect, even while he manages to hold on to his sense of humour.

In some senses, the wrapped Reichstag becomes the ultimate sign of an unsettling of Berlin's reality. Brockmann maintains that the fact that this 'most potent surviving symbol of nationhood, was for ten days during the summer of 1995, completely covered over by Christo's wrapping and made to disappear' provides evidence of a postmodern 'problematization of the visual sphere' in Germany (Brockmann 1999: 380f.). Certainly in the novel the Reichstag itself, and the multicultural trade carried on its shadow where 'Karl-Marx-Orden' are sold alongside 'lebende Bilder, Mumien, Caesaren, vergoldete Putti, Engel' (Timm 1999: 182), becomes a symbol of the disordering of historical, cultural and ideological fixed points, a distinguishing feature of the new Berlin, which hampers the narrator's attempts to orient himself.

In part, the narrator's dilemma stems from the fact that he is incapable of successfully negotiating a city which might provide him with physical evidence of the ideological dualism of the twentieth century, such as Second World War bullet holes in a house wall, but in which the binary thinking which underpinned that ideological split no longer proves adequate when it comes to assessing the individuals he encounters. He might meet a taxi driver who still views the city's Eastern environs as a 'fremde Stadt' (Timm 1999: 81) and he might, simply because he is a Westerner, fall victim to an absurd haircut from a man who practised a similar sort of 'Alltagssabotage' (Timm 1999: 69) on members of the 'Politbüro'. But such figures seem as out of place in the city as the narrator himself. More representative of the new Berlin are the likes of Rosenow, 'ein abgewickelter Akademiarbeiter' (Timm 1999: 15), who has adapted effortlessly to his new life as an estate agent in West Berlin without abandoning his contacts in the East.

Moreover, it is not merely the no longer clearly definable nature of East / West divisions which makes interaction in the city a tricky business. The Berlin of the novel is peopled by a bizarre array of characters who represent the cultural melting pot which is the postmodern metropolis: an Italian business man who sells the narrator a cardboard coat by passing it off as leather; a Portuguese taxi driver who is a connoisseur of Pessoa; even a Tuareg prince who manages to place the narrator in his debt. The postmodern condition has been defined as 'the multiplication of centres of power and activity and the dissolution of every kind of totalizing narrative which claims to govern the whole complex field of social activity and representation' (Waugh 1992: 8f.). The narrator's often disastrous encounters with this cast

of characters provide an example of just this. Social interaction in the city is conditioned by manifold, often competing and therefore divisive codes which, as they clash with one another, are constantly forced into flux and it is this which leaves him floundering as he attempts to find an appropriate response to a variety of bewildering situations.

But this is not his only problem. The wrapped Reichstag also serves in the novel as the emblem of an aestheticization of reality. The ugly symbol of German nationhood, which the narrator has always associated with the ‘Burgfrieden’ of 1914, and thus with notions of military aggression and left-wing betrayal of the working class, has, via the process of wrapping, lost any connection to a concrete historical reality and become simply ‘schön’. This aestheticization unsettles the narrator’s efforts to interpret the world he encounters, not least because he continues to work with the assumption that appearances must bear a relation to something tangible beyond themselves, whereas they are constantly revealed to have a life of their own, relating essentially only to other appearances. This is a state of affairs well and truly grasped by Spranger, another former East German academic who fakes Russian constructivist paintings. He uses newspaper cuttings from the 1980s, which prove to be essentially indistinguishable from the 1920s originals, and thus his work unsettles assumptions about the relationship between art and political context. Moreover, he understands it as an act of revenge on the old Soviet order and as a response to the new post-reunification world:

Ich habe die Collageteile so geschnitten, daß kein Name auftaucht, also nicht Schewardnadse, Bush oder Baker. Das ist die späte Rache des Konstruktivismus an Stalins Funktionären, die ihn bekämpft haben [...]. Es ist meine Antwort auf die Wende [...] Fälschung als Spiel. Die konsequente Verdoppelung. (Timm 1999: 60f.).

This example implies that just as cultural codes have multiplied, so the reading of reality has become an act of game-playing, precisely because the ideological certainties of the pre-Wende period, which allowed the interpretation of the relationship between appearance and reality to be grounded in the concrete, can no longer be relied upon. That this loss is felt particularly acutely by an old ‘68er’ like the narrator becomes clear when he encounters a young woman wearing a T-shirt with a red star on it ‘der Sowjetstern mit einem T darin’ (Timm 1999: 95): ‘Tupamaros, fragte ich, die Stadtguerilla? Da lachte sie und sagte: Sie

kommen noch aus der guten alten Zeit. Nee, das heißt: Texaco. Ihre Generation sieht überall politische Signale, selbst wenn nur ein Zapfhahn gemeint ist' (Timm 1999: 96f.).

It is above all the narrator's encounter with this particular young woman which reveals the novel's concern with the problematic nature of the relationship between language and reality, particularly language as narrative. For she sells telephone sex, not of the rather inarticulate kind one might normally assume provides the staple fare for this sort of encounter, rather she tells her clients long, convoluted, and therefore very expensive tales, of sexual intrigue and perversion. In this particular kind of encounter, the gratification engendered in the realm of fantasy by the spoken word is rated more highly than that produced by concrete physical contact:

Erzählen ist total erotisch. Bekommen die heimlichen Wünsche etwas Luft unter die Flügel. Im Gegensatz zu den Frauen sind die meisten Männer ja Voyeure. Das Auge ist doch das Organ der Distanz. Beim Ohr geht es direkt in den Kopf, und da drinnen werden dann die Bilder dazu geliefert. Gehört einfach mehr Phantasie dazu. (Timm 1999: 102).

The fact that the eye is described as 'das Organ der Distanz', and associated primarily with men, might suggest that what we have here is a typically postmodern case being made for the 'substitution of desire for reason' (Waugh 1992: 9). If so, it is an idea the narrator rejects. He might spend 1000DM to hear one of the young woman's stories but he does so in the hope that it will be followed by a genuine physical encounter. When that fails to materialize he dismisses the whole affair as nothing more than a cheap, or rather not so cheap, trick. The spoken word that bears no relation to the concrete world of real human interaction cannot act, at least in the narrator's view, as an alternative to it.

The relationship between language and reality is also explored via the narrator's research for his article on the potato which provided the impetus for his trip to Berlin. Two things moved him to accept this commission: the writer's block from which he was suffering in Munich and the opportunity it presented to uncover the meaning of his favourite uncle's last words, 'roter Baum'. As this uncle was renowned for his skill in distinguishing between different sorts of potato, he had always assumed this to be the name of one such variety. The 'roter Baum' theme acts as a kind of detective motif in the story and for some large part of the text it looks as if it will follow the pattern of the anti-detective novel described as 'the paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination [...], the

formal purpose of which is to evoke the impulse to “detect” [...] in order to violently frustrate it’ (Spanos 1972, reprinted in Waugh 1992: 80). The narrator’s attempts to discover the meaning of the words are indeed frustrated, not least because towards the beginning of his stay in Berlin he loses a dead colleague’s ‘Kartoffelarchiv’. This ‘Geschmackskatalog für die Kartoffel’ (Timm 1999: 39) represents an idealistic and ideologically driven attempt on the part of a GDR academic to make language and reality correspond. In it its author has recorded the results of the painstaking process of preparing and tasting as many varieties of potato as possible, creating in the process the new words he requires, if he is to capture with absolute accuracy in language the distinctive taste of each. That such an undertaking has no place in a postmodern world which recognizes the ambiguous nature of the multiple potential correspondences and disjunctions between language and experiential reality is not only signalled by the fact that the narrator loses the catalogue. When he attempts to recover it by placing an advert in the local paper he falls into the clutches of an arms’ dealer because in the arms’ trade ‘Kartoffel’ apparently means land mine.

Thus, one could argue, that Timm attempts to present Berlin as the ultimate postmodern city. Ideological divisions and the interpretive certainties that accompanied them have evaporated, just as their most concrete symbol, the Berlin Wall, has disappeared, to be replaced by a diversity and fragmentation which make impossible the depiction of a generic urban consciousness. Further, the loss of political fixed points has given rise to an aestheticization of reality, which in turn leads to a loss of any real concrete dimension to the city experience. What is more, the novel would seem to respond to the postmodern city in what has been regarded as typically postmodern fashion by problematizing its own existence. Language is also shown to have largely parted company with reality and to have taken on a life of its own, becoming a primary cause of the ‘Verwechselungen, Verkleidungen, Vertauschungen’ which make of Berlin a never ending ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream’ experience.

However, the story does not end in Berlin. The city is not the narrator’s home and thus he can, much to his relief, flee it and its confusions. And the fact that he can escape it also implies there might be an alternative to the postmodern condition, a conclusion reinforced by his experiences on the train home. With his memory jogged by the song of the former

Russian opera singer who accompanies him, the narrator is at last able to get to the bottom of the significance of the words 'roter Baum'. The song is 'Die Gedanken sind frei' and 'roter Baum' refers to nothing so mundane as a variety of potato. Rather it is the pub where the narrator's grandfather listened to a political speaker against the explicit instructions of his employer, after which he lost his job. Indeed, the favourite uncle's gift for distinguishing between varieties of potato stems not from an excess of epicurianism, but is the result of hard necessity, as the straits to which the family were reduced by the father's dismissal led to them living largely from stolen potatoes. Through the recovery of this memory, the previously free-floating words 'roter Baum' find their concrete referent in a story of political commitment. Moreover, the narrator would appear to find in this recollection the solution to the writers' block which had led him to Berlin in the first place, with the implication that it is through the political that he can regain control of language and of narrative.

Conclusion

Thus, somewhat ironically, Timm's self-consciously postmodernist fiction rejects the idea that the postmodern condition is all-pervasive and makes a case for the writer's continued role as a mediator of political truths. That is, he would still appear to regard narrative as providing an oppositional space from which to combat the aestheticized, and consequently essentially de-politicized, reality of the postmodern city. Equally, despite the fact that it would seem to register the 'pervasive loss of faith in the progressivist and speculative discourses of modernity' (Waugh 1992: 3) held to be characteristic of postmodernism, Schneider's novel is constructed in a way that implies his continued confidence in the existence of the kind of generic generational consciousness that makes it possible for the author to speak for the many. In my introduction, I quoted Stephen Brockmann's contention that 'the reunified Germany is now part of the normal postmodern visual world, a world in which writing and words necessarily play a subordinate role'. If this is indeed the case, then for all the obvious differences in their positions, it is probably safe to say that

neither Schneider nor Timm is willing to abandon the idea that the writer can say something authoritative about the world in which we live.

As a final point, I would like to raise one further issue. Many attempts have been made to distinguish between modernism and postmodernism, particularly in light of the fact that both ‘give great prominence to fragmentation as a feature of twentieth century art and culture’, but, it has been argued in this context, ‘they do so in very different moods. The modern features it in such a way as to register a deep nostalgia for an earlier age when faith was full and authority intact’ (Barry 1995: 83). The postmodernist, however, sees the world rather differently: ‘fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief. In a word, the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it’ (Barry 1995: 84). While Timm certainly revels in his playful depiction of the confusions such fragmentation throws up, he ultimately rejects the possibility that it is the common denominator of contemporary experience. Schneider seems more willing to embrace this notion but does so in a distinctly melancholic tone. Thus, at least on the evidence of the work of two old ‘68er’, it might be fair to conclude that even after the Wende German literary culture has not embraced the postmodern condition quite as wholeheartedly as might have been expected.

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Biodata

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