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ZEICHENSPRACHE UND PRIVATMYTHOLOGIE

IM WERK

PETER HUCHELS

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Axel Jürgen Artur Vieregg
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A.J.A. Vieregg,
Massey University,
Palmerston North.

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Peter Huchels

(Abstract)

Peter Huchel, born in 1903, editor of the leading East German literary periodical Sinn und Form until 1962 when he was forced to resign for political reasons, lived in isolation near Potsdam, East Germany, until May 1971 when he was allowed to move to the West.

Hitherto critics have been interested in his poetry mainly for its political and biographical import, although Huchel himself had warned against an exclusively biographical approach and indicated that his poems had more than one level of meaning. These other levels of meaning, however are not adequately described by the term "Naturlyrik" which has frequently been applied to his poetry. It has been recognized that, with either approach, a point is soon reached beyond which Huchel's poetry becomes "cryptic" (John Flores: Poetry in East Germany) and it has been suggested that this only seems to be the case because his system of private metaphors, which operate within a private mythology, has not yet been elucidated. The present thesis attempts such an elucidation.

As an introduction to Huchel's technique the first chapter analyses a number of poems in which the political implications are masked behind allusions to classical and biblical mythology. Thus the poem Elegie seemingly describes the voyage into death of the blind Homer, from Chios, where it is believed he was born, to Ios, where he died. Only one word, "Telegraphendrähte" (telegraph wires), evokes the present and makes it apparent that Homer's voyage into darkness and death is a parable of the approach of a political night. Both Homer and Huchel, the first through his blindness, the second through his isolation, are left with an inner vision. This already announces, at the beginning of the volume, the mask of the Old Testament prophet which Huchel puts on in his later poems, which deal with the fate of Germany. Thus the poem Ankunft, significantly published in a magazine on Berlin, mirrors the situation of Germany by means of Bible quotations, which refer to the partition and final destruction of the old Israelite Kingdom as a punishment for sin. With each of the poems analysed it became clear that there were other levels of meaning present which a political interpretation fails to explore. These are the disappearance of God and the deification, instead, of the Earth in terms of the Great Mother of early matriarchal mythology.

A detailed analysis of the poem Widmung (für Ernst Bloch) shows that through self-quotation, allusion to Germanic myth (the Wild Huntsman) and to Hölderlin (the private metaphor "goldner Rauch" - golden smoke) Huchel relates the political darkness to the void created by the absence of the divine element, an absence which is also lamented by the Hölderlin poem from which Huchel quotes. Unlike Hölderlin, however, Huchel does not long for its return but, in an act of Promethean rebellion, extinguishes the "oil" in the "lamps" which God had commanded to be lit to celebrate the covenant (Haus bei Olmitello).

The fishermen return empty-handed, because the fish, symbol of Christ, cannot be found, darkness and death have not been overcome (San Michele). 'Fish' and 'empty nets' are recurring images, so are 'smoke' and 'fog' as signs of metaphysical darkness and death.

For a time Huchel seems to find consolation in the deification of the Earth: "Dich will ich rühmen, Erde" (You, Earth will I praise), - and visualizes her as the Great Mother, embodied in "Magd" (maid), "Frau" (woman), and "Greisin" (old woman), with her attributes of moon, womb of night and death ("Tor"), cow, milk, bread etc. The very plants with which she comes in contact, the mugwort for instance ("Beifuß", Latin "Artemisia") denote her sphere. He celebrates the cyclic structure of the world, of the seasons, and the continuation of the species, in the male counterpart of the Mother Goddess, the phallic element of the tree of life, especially the poplar tree which grew on the banks of the Acheron as a symbol of rebirth. The cycle breaks down, however, when it comes to the death of the individual ("Der nicht zu Ende geschlagene Kreis" - the uncompleted circle - Abschied von den Hirten) and the life-giving aspect of the Great Mother is superseded by the female as the great swallower, the Terrible Mother ("die wendischen Weidenmütter, die warzigen Alten mit klaffender Brust" the Wendish willow mothers, the warty hags with gaping breasts - Ölbaum und Weide) approaches in the end and her friendly moon symbol has turned into the moon with the hatchet (Unter der Hacke des Mondes). All of Huchel's private metaphors and images are ultimately connected with this concept, which, it seems, assumes for Huchel the importance of a private religion not unlike Hölderlin's.

Am Nachmittag saßen wir dann, noch mit den gleichen Problemen, den Fragen des alternden Stalin beschäftigt - welche Konstanten gibt es in einer sich wandelnden Welt? - im Arbeitszimmer des witzig-klugen Hans Mayer und sprachen zu viert, der Hausherr, Peter Huchel, der an einem Hymnus auf Persephone schrieb, Ernst Bloch und ich, über Artemis und Apollon.

Draußen, in der Düsternis einer wilhelminischen Straße, gingen die Menschen vorbei, Karren rollten über das Pflaster, Minister Strauß sprach von Krieg, Ulbricht hielt eine drohende Rede, zwei Jungen jagten einem Reifen nach. Im Zimmer aber, unter den Bildern von Karl Valentin und Bertolt Brecht, beschwor man die griechischen Sagen, und noch einmal zeigte es sich, daß die Chiffre des Mythos, Apollon und Eros, Aletheia und Dike - Zeichen und Bild, Formelspruch und Schlüsselwort zugleich -, exakter als alle Beschreibung und plastischer als jede Begrifflichkeit ist.

Der griechische Mythos, dachte ich wie vor Jahren in einem Gespräch mit Albert Camus [...] das ist vielleicht die einzige, die letzte und unverlierbare Sprache, in der wir uns noch verständigen können.

Walter Jens

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