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Life Comes Unhinged

Review of

Inka Parei, *Die Schattenboxerin*. Roman. Frankfurt am Main, Schöffling & Co. Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1999. Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001. [The Shadow Boxer]
[Page numbers refer to the paperback edition.]

Berlin author Inka Parei was awarded the prestigious Ingeborg Bachmann Prize in 2003, at the age of thirty-six, for an excerpt from her novel *Was Dunkelheit war* [What Was Dark]. *Die Schattenboxerin* [The Shadow Boxer] was her first novel, published in hardback in 1999 and already into its third printing as a paperback by 2003. This debut novel is a detailed and carefully orchestrated text about the consequences of traumatization, from an author now reputed for her slow and painstaking approach to writing fiction.

The novel's location, its temporal structure, and the links between its main parts all build a unit. Something has happened to the first-person narrator, whose name is "Hell" (Light). While there is no explicit mention of rape, it soon becomes clear that she has been a victim of sexual violence. The text is set in the late 1980s and Hell has withdrawn from the outside world and lives in a derelict building on West-Berlin's Lehniner Straße. She survives on powdered soup and vitamin tablets and, in an attempt to regain her life's former stability, follows a strict daily schedule. Parei's text reflects the damage to an individual's sense of self and sense of the world that Fischer and Riedesser (cf., for example, p. 82) have described as typical for those who are traumatized. The traumatic situation has dismantled all protective boundaries and Hell's life bears the mark of de-personalization and de-realization. In the first phase after the attack, she retreats completely from the outside world (113):

Some days my life seems to stretch from the door to the balcony railing, on others, only as far as the edges of the mattress. From time to time, it ends at the place where my body reaches the end of its physical dimensions. I suspect that it might be possible to minimize oneself even more, towards the inside, but at this point fear closes in on me and I get up.

Hell is easily seized by panic; her life is defined by hyper-vigilance. Returning from grocery shopping, she suddenly feels someone is following her: "And then they come. Suddenly, on a day in November, they come. / I was ready. [...] I am surrounded by strange people and they all look at what I have bought" (121). She flees, looks back at the crowd that stands around the shopping bags she has dropped but is afraid to go back and collect her things. No one comes after her. She proceeds in the "direction of flight" and enters the subway: "I take three steps into the closest, almost empty coach, drop onto the green bench, cool the back of my head on the windowpane and, before I slide into the tunnel, close my eyes" (122 f.).

Surprisingly, the situation is neither commented on, nor related to a larger context, nor otherwise explained. The ambiguous phrase "before I slide into the tunnel" underlines the existential threat that Hell must have felt. Here, "tunnel" might be a subway tunnel, but might also simultaneously refer to a reaction to an overpowering (trigger) situation and to tunnel vision, as a form of de-realization.

Light and Dark

At first, the role played by a little pouch of tobacco and two pipes is unclear. Hell took the pipes and tobacco with her from the ruins of a small train company building, after the traumatic situation was over (63). Later, she describes how she happens to come across these things in her apartment; she attempts to smoke for the first time but fails “miserably” (120). In time, she gets used to the pipes and thus, by this circuitous route, approaches the crime and its perpetrator once again. She begins to feel that strict exercises help her to control at least part of the traumatic situation, so that these objects no longer trigger the same reactions.

Ultimately, the tobacco pouch and pipes lead to the story’s resolution. The shadow boxer breaks into the apartment of the last remaining resident in the building, who has apparently disappeared; in contrast to the narrator Hell, this woman’s name is “Dunkel” (Dark). While Hell is in Dunkel’s apartment, Markus März appears. März recognizes the pouch and pipes Hell has with her; they belong to März’ friend, who he plans to meet while in Berlin. This coincidence means that Hell can meet the man who raped her once more.

The overall impression of fragility and vulnerability, strict self-discipline and simultaneous self-neglect, is evoked not only by the novel’s narrative content but by other elements, as well. A strange feeling of timelessness is conveyed by the book’s floating, present-tense temporal structure as well as by its chapter endings; despite their abruptness, these endings form links to the following chapter beginnings and text elements. Although new threads in the plot may be taken up in the next chapter and place and time also shift, motifs and themes seem to be carried over into the next chapter. One example is the transition from chapter 9 to chapter 10. Markus März has large sums of cash with him in his backpack. Hell is surprised. “Do you rob banks because of that?”, she asks, but März just “shrugs his shoulders” (79). The next chapter begins with the sentence: “I take the bus to the police station.” Apparently, Hell is going to report März’ bank robbery. The fact that the text is still in the present tense leads one to believe that the narrative thread has been taken up again where it left off. But the scene has actually shifted to the more distant past, shortly after the rape was committed. Although it does not say so directly, the text conveys the impression that Hell, at the time, intended to report being raped to the police.

The transition from chapter 19 to 20 is particularly impressive. The former describes Hell (who began intensive training in the martial arts after her traumatic experience) at one of her kung fu sessions and ends with the description of an animal. During a particularly strenuous exercise, Hell fixes her gaze on a plateful of water: “The line of water breaks; the water flows onto the window sill and washes the fly away with it” (168). Chapter 20 begins with a description of an animal, this time a dog. März has met Hell’s rapist. Hell follows the two men into a forest and ends up face-to-face with the man’s new dog. In the earlier traumatic situation, Hell was chased and bitten by the man’s old dog. The structural parallel to the rape scene reveals clearly that Hell has sought out the same dangerous constellation—despite the fact that she failed in the earlier situation—so that she can resolve it by re-experiencing it. Rather than ending abruptly with the break in chapters, the account of Hell’s highly concentrated training session in chapter 19 is a precondition for her reaction in the next chapter. Because the main character has developed self-confidence thanks to her command of the marital arts and her new skills, she can ward off the dog.

The Here and Now

The book's present-tense accounts link very diverse locations and plot threads to form a unit across the boundaries drawn by chapters; the author does not attempt to reproduce a correct chronological narrative that follows biographical facts. The links are freely associated and emerge under the influence of the traumatizing experience, which is, however, never referred to directly, much less recounted in detail. The horizon opened up by this present-tense narrative is atemporal, closed, and without causal structure. It seems that there is no way out.

But indeed, it only appears if there is no exit. The final sentences of the book jut out of the text, which is otherwise characterized by interlinking chapters bound together in an unstructured, horizontal, present-tense temporal scheme with no variation in depth. In these last lines, the monotonous temporal structure of the account is abandoned quite unexpectedly. Hell demonstrates her free will for the first time; she anticipates future occurrences, tries to live not only for the moment, to make plans, at least for the immediate future. In doing so, Hell, as the first-person narrator, does not leave the old temporal plane—strictly speaking, the account is still in the present tense—but because all the sentences in this part of the text use the verb “wollen” [to want, wish, intend to] with an infinitive, the effect is as if the text was written in the future tense, that is, with the verb “werden” [will] and an infinitive (182-183):

I put the glass to my lips.

I want to empty it with one swallow. When it's empty, I want to set it down on the tabletop in front of me. Then I want to draw a breath, stretch my nose and chin to meet the dark and ask her if she needs a roommate.

It seems, towards the end of the novel, that the process of overcoming hopelessness has begun. It has again become possible to plan the future, even if only for a brief period of time that immediately follows the present moment. Perhaps the paralysis induced by traumatic experience has been overcome. The dual meaning of the title has been defused. The expression “shadow boxer” refers to Hell's martial arts but can also be read as a reference to the shadows of memory and of the past, with which she battles so desperately. Perhaps, in the future, she will be less preoccupied with fighting her shadows.

How the Patterns of Trauma Can Leave Their Mark on a Life

One can read Inka Parei's book as a gray and monotonous, perhaps rather unsuccessful attempt to envision a traumatic occurrence from the perspective of the traumatized individual. Even at the end of the narrative, Hell is incapable of finding words for what has happened. But if one interprets the novel as an explicit account of the difficulties encountered in verbalizing traumatic experience, then this gray monotony becomes the backdrop for phenomenal upheavals and changes in Hell's world. In this reading, the cautious conclusion appears almost utopian.

A comparison of this text to another remarkable account of the life of a traumatized rape victim offers interesting insights. John Irving's outstanding novel “The Hotel New Hampshire” is also a first-person narrative, but this is a report on the life of a traumatized individual from the perspective of another main character. Frank's closed and ever-plausible narrative integrates the tale of his sister Franny's fate into his own autobiographical account. Franny has not seen the man who raped her for several decades but has remained in contact by writing him letters, hoping to thus keep him under control. Frank meets him by chance on the street in New York. When Franny, now a famous actress, learns of their encounter, she breaks

down. Her family stages a bizarre revenge-and-rape scenario, with the intention of helping Franny overcome her trauma.

In Irving's novel, the effects of sexual violence are portrayed indirectly in a third-person account. As a result of this perspective, the text's composition as well as its formal elements and use of language exhibit little or no signs of the traumatic experience.

Parei is to be credited with having refrained from writing an all-too explicit and potentially intrusive text that directly addressed the problem of sexual violence. Her use of two literary devices—the overextension of present-tense narrative and the linkage of key motifs—conveys at least a tentative sense of how the patterns of trauma can leave their mark on a person's life. Thanks to her sensitivity and skill as a writer, the author avoids two potential pitfalls: writing an account that functionalizes trauma as a mere literary exercise or lapsing into a weak, ingratiating rhetoric of concern.

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Short biographical note

Hannes Fricke, Dr. phil., is an editor for the publishing company Philipp Reclam jun. in Stuttgart. Fricke studied sociology in Bielefeld and German and philosophy in Göttingen. A visiting lecturer at the University of Stuttgart in the summer of 2004, he conducted a seminar entitled Introduction to the Psychology of Literature.

Recent publications: Fricke, Hannes, *Das hört nicht auf. Trauma, Literatur und Empathie*. Göttingen, Wallstein, 2004. Fricke, Hannes, *"Niemand wird lesen, was ich hier schreibe". Über den Niemand in der Literatur*. Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag, 1998. Fricke, Hannes, "Günter Grass, *Im Krebsgang*. Der Zwang, Zeugnis abzulegen, und die virtuelle Realität." In: *Romane des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Band 3. Interpretationen. Stuttgart, Philipp Reclam jun., 2003, pp. 351-368; Fricke, Hannes, "Bernhard Schlink, *Der Vorleser*. Opfer und Täter." In: ebd., pp. 274-294. Fricke, Hannes, "Stigma und Trauma bei Abaelard: Bewältigungsstrategien eines körperlich und seelisch Verletzten. Ein literaturpsychologischer Versuch." In: Hasse, Dag Nikolaus (ed.), *Abaelards "Historia calamitatum". Text – Übersetzung – literaturwissenschaftliche Modellanalysen*. Berlin, New York, Walter de Gruyter, 2002, pp. 237-259.

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