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TWO NOVELS BY ARNO SCHMIDT

The fictions of Arno Schmidt (1914-1979) emit a unique and positively startling energy. Repulsively neurotic and grandly humane, elitist and self-consciously vulgar, formally conservative and a mold-smasher, Schmidt leaves his reader with the image of a governed mania, a kind of agonized self-control, that may finally be as flagrantly anachronistic as it is “modern.” As the century that announced the death of the subject, the author, the novel and the book draws to a close, Schmidt’s particular indifference to the philosophical and critical shifts signalled by those deaths takes on an air of paradox. First, because as an “intellectual,” in the best sense of that term, Schmidt was more than equipped to respond to such signalling and the world-historical contexts from which they issued; instead, autodidactic and hostile to the academy, he became a one-man literary-critical industry, composing impassioned and isolationist manifestoes in defense of his own works. Second, because on a first reading his texts display all the familiar hallmarks (disjunction, interiority, linguistic “play,” pastiche, parody, etc., etc.) of both modernist and postmodernist works of fiction; and because they do so with such inventive extremity as would be difficult to surpass on the printed page.

But Schmidt was a German who had served the *Wehrmacht*, and his vociferous postwar contempt for Nazism has not prevented Freudian-minded critics from locating a general strategy of denial at the root of Schmidt’s resistance to the currents of European thought at midcentury. The author was born in Hamburg, completed his schooling there, worked in a textile factory, married, and was conscripted and sent to Norway in 1939, ending the war in a British P. O. W. camp. *Leviathan*, a volume of three wartime stories, appeared in 1949, securing for Schmidt the role of *enfant terrible* among emerging German writers. Over the next thirty years, as his personal work schedule grew to a boasted 100 hours per week, Schmidt produced nine novels, six volumes of novellas and stories, four books of essays and radio dialogues, a psychoanalytic study of the adventure writer Karl May, a 700 page biography

The Dalkey Archive Edition of Arno Schmidt, Volume 4. Two Novels: *The Stony Heart* (1954); *Boondocks/Moondocks* (1960). Translated by John E. Woods. Dalkey Archive Press, 1997. 424 pp. \$49.95, cloth.

of Baron Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, uncounted articles and book reviews, and 11,000 pages of translations (Poe, Faulkner, James Fenimore Cooper, and others) from English into German. (The last four novels alone total 2,000 pages and were typewritten on 12" by 17" paper for reproduction *in facsimile*.) All of which is, one might say, more than enough to bury anyone.

Here are two novels, six years apart in composition; the first belonging to Schmidt's early period of formal realism, the second marking the beginning of a late and more experimental phase. According to the hierarchy of prose models mapped in Schmidt's literary-theoretical essays, the first novel demonstrates something entitled the "Porous Present" (*musivisches Dasein*); the second, no more self-evidently, is an instance of "Extended Mind Game" (*Längeres Gedankenspiel*). The first novel is subtitled "Historical Novel from Anno Domini 1954," the year in which the narrative is set; the second is introduced by the apocryphal caveat, "Persons attempting to smell out <plot> or <moral>, or indeed to perceive herein a <work of art> will be shot." And finally, the first novel is set in the provincial German town of Ahlden and in East Berlin, while the second takes place in rural Giffendorf and, well, on the surface of the *moon*.

A Schmidt persona is remarkable in his invariance from one novel to the next. He is myopic, hemorrhoidal and dyspeptic, in need of a shave. He is a rabid atheist and morbid pacifist. He has a landscape painter's eye for the moon, the clouds, the forest, the heath stretched out in front of him. He is a raconteur, a bibliophile, a pedant. The voices of Western literature babble in his head in their original tongues. And he is nearly always with a woman. For Schmidt, Eros is pedagogy, and a persona's sexual impulse is nearly coextensive with his desire to Enlighten. Accordingly he is paired with a spirited but ultimately deferring female companion, who marvels at the fund of anecdote—historical, literary and linguistic—on which he draws, occasionally even making notes. "Did you know that . . . ?" is how he holds up his end of a conversation, and in this tendency to focus, if not exclusively on himself, then on the things that interest him (which ought to interest everyone else) he recalls the volubly preoccupied bumblers of Saul Bellow, roughly Schmidt's contemporary. At times he notes the vaguest outlines of an Other superimposed upon his own, but stops only long enough to register a chill before returning to the pursuit of his own charms. And so the companion acquires a fond, if diminutive nickname (here, "the urbanette," or "Little Blasé"), and is led out for a long discursive ramble on the heath. And that's that.

“Character,” as we know it, is therefore secondary: everything is mediated by the consciousness of an immensely present “I,” whom Schmidt insistently identified as his author-self (in the critical essays, and within the fictions themselves—for example, by the assignment of Arno Schmidt’s name, biography and œuvre to the narrating persona). *C’est moi*, Schmidt announces proudly, smugly; the persona’s female companion quickly becomes a mere dimension or projection of that *moi*, who bloats beyond E. M. Forster’s conception of “roundness” even as he keeps her from it. Plot also is minimized, in fidelity to the quotidian nature of real life, and may consist for long stretches of little more than walking and conversation.

What may be sniffed out here is this: *The Stony Heart* (*Das steinerne Herz*) is narrated by a scholar named Walter Eggers (the homophonic proximity to “alter ego” is no coincidence) who visits the granddaughter of a research subject, seduces her, and abets her husband’s extramarital affair. Between bouts of antic lovemaking (and diarrhea) he day-trips to East Berlin to steal a book, elaborates a history of the maltreated wife of an eighteenth century Hanover prince, and locates a fortune in gold stashed in his hosts’ attic. A parody of Goethe’s Romantic tragedy *Elective Affinities* (*Wahlverwandtschaften*, 1809), this schema also adapts the structure of the detective story (one of several popular genres Schmidt appropriates) and, it has been suggested, employs a complex psychoanalytic iconography by which the three principal characters embody the ego, the superego and the id respectively.

Structurally, the novel accretes in mosaic form, each tile or tessera performing the double function of isolating a moment of experience and displaying it in its figural relation to other tiles and batches of tiles. Each tile is further subdivided by parentheses, dashes, serial semicolons and colons and slashes spaced on either side to emphasize their breakage. This is, Schmidt argued, a formal imitation of the disjunctive and discontinuous reality of consciousness, and it is meant to decelerate, defamiliarize, “dehydrate” (Schmidt’s term) the act of reading—to force a reader out of his or her receptive passivity into participation in the “process” of the text. Familiar modernist and postmodernist precepts, all. What is interesting in Schmidt, however, is the attachment, indeed the restriction, of such consciousness—fragmented as it may be—to *one* overwhelmingly self-aggrandizing subject: the same controlling personality that Woolf and Eliot sought above all to extinguish. The individual elements of this subject’s thought may be chaotic and fleeting, but his able (and cheerfully narcissistic) person entirely contains them:

Back and forth : brushing teeth. (And knelt the while before the
morrow's crate. Surrounded by thought-gangs. Sympleglades of
addicted notions.)

Dewfall is augmented by moonlight : on the horizon a star began to blink :
shortshort : long : short / Long : shortshort! (So then, <F> and <D>,
if I haven't forgotten everything ?—But then I soon gave it up;
wasn't gettin' nothing; and the fat fellow went on busily tinseling.
Just for himself. Yom came the day, leila the night).

Consequently, she must be 40 ! – An oakleaf dangled in the moon's
disheveled face. Moi took himself sleepily in his arms : one of those
villas over there wouldn't be all that silly : not. silly. at. all.–

Mygodit'sonlyfour! : and try and try as I would, I could sleep no more!
Every dog yelped splotches in my dozings. Out of bungled flabby-
spongy gray. A motorcycle dragged balls of sound on past; in the
middle, great ones raged, shoving into each other.

To read Schmidt for the first time is either to find this immediately toxic—
philosophically, methodologically, syntactically—or else to be utterly seduced
by the delights of what might be called Schmidt's "hyperrealism"—the me-
ticulous moment-by-moment capture and transmission of experience. The
delights are real: Schmidt's *élan vital*, a compound of towering intelligence,
profound (if grudging) humanity, and exuberant wit, is quite simply off the
scale of anything you may have read before. Even a mature reader may recall
that instantaneous, uncritical intoxication that marks one's first discoveries of
the essential force of language. And yet to continue to read Schmidt after
being seduced is gradually to come to question the net worth of such instan-
taneous and, it must be said, unrepeatably pleasures. Like that of any egoist,
Schmidt's company is nearly sinister in its regard of audience as a mere recep-
tacle for the deposit of his experience. When you mark your five hundredth
page of such prose (which evolves only minimally throughout Schmidt's ma-
ture oeuvre), you begin to wonder if its creator ever considered a method
besides that of transcribing the impressions of eponymous personae. When you
mark your one thousandth page, you feel entitled to conclude that he did not.

Kaff auch Mare Crisium, rendered here as *Boondocks/Moondocks*, is comprised
of two sub-novels—a doubling made manifest in the formal patterning of the
text—its *Mosaikarbeit*—as well as in narrative content. On the page, concat-
enations of tiles aligned with the left margin follow the “real time” adven-

tures (again, largely walks and talks in the countryside) of one Karl Richter, factory inventory controller, and his companion, textile designer Hertha Theunert, on holiday in the rural town of Giffendorf. Periodically this text is interrupted by blocks of text indented from the margin, in which there unfolds the story of Charles Hampden, an American librarian living in a post-nuclear apocalypse moon colony. This secondary thread is a tale improvised by Karl to Hertha's audience, and it is designed to coax her into more frequent and less inhibited sex. Events in the Karl/Hertha narrative cross dialectically into the moon narrative and back again in a kind of chemistry of association:

*The hides tannd – wasn't hard to figger now – : soles from coarse
peasant=types. Uppers from intellecktuuls. Children yeelled the
finest book=bindings. Vir=gins . . .*
(“Oh no, Karlykins; please don't smut it up – it's already so . . . :
Tho there mite be somethin' to it.”; (the last in demi=voyce very
alterd, unvirginall
. *The skulls yielded drinking=cups – well=known & =loved
in Germanick=circles, too – for those of contrary 'pinions :
footed & edged in gold, they made vottka=ware very much in
demand*
(: “Rosamunnde>–” came the full=length whisper at my side,
thot=full & well=educated. : “And <Wayland the Smith> had
an x=cellent understanding of their man=ufackture as well,
sweetheart!”

Immediately one marks the delighted subversion of the didactic origins of the English novel; for the moon story, Schmidt also hijacks elements of science fiction and utopia, grafting them to the *Nibelungenlied*, and primary (direct quotation) and secondary (coded reference) allusions to Joyce, Karl May, Jules Verne, the Brontës, Lewis Carroll, and Poe (to name just a few) quite literally pepper the text. Then there is the *Kaff*—“chaff”—of the title: at once an agricultural term referencing the rural setting of the Karl/Hertha narrative and a heading for the wealth of “realia” inserted into the twin narratives in the form of astronomical, agricultural and botanical data, biblical and historical citations, mathematical tables, and contemporaneous news.

In *Boondocks/Moondocks*, individual tiles are subdivided even more extensively by slashes: “Yikes! : Someone staring pretty sheepishly at me. But not skwinting at least; so it’ll pass maybe. / Naturally Everyone lives alone behind his face=flesh. / And the voice from my self=self had a very snappy, ruthless sound.” Long passages of phonetically spelled Platt and Silesian dialect, rendered in English as a kind of composite outer-borough New Yorkese, further retard the progress of the reader’s eye. Punctuation marks are deployed independently and in series to stand for facial expressions and gestures:

-. -. -. -. / “?” : “- ; . . . !”. / -. -. -. -. / : :
 “So tell me : how is she related t’ you - xactly ?”

What is still more radical, words themselves begin to break down into individual morphemes, which Schmidt glosses inventively before reassembling them, often using the “=” connective, which he thought established a semantic and rhythmic balance missing from “Websterian” compound words. Out of an intensive study of Freud and Joyce, Schmidt elaborated a theory of “etym,” or linguistic elements of the subconscious which, like unintended slips or puns, “speak for” the sexual drives. Hence the un-orthography of “gynetick,” “indickated,” “speshallist,” “purrmission,” “fastiddyous,” “depicktion,” “visiball,” “inno=scent,” “pracktickle,” “mammorize,” “x=assperating,” “loocrative,” and “impenitrubble”—to offer just a page’s worth.

What is this but deconstruction? Here, too, Schmidt embodies a paradox. To the extent that the “etym” theory and its practice undermine the notion of conscious intentionality in language, they genuinely approach a poststructuralist conception of language speaking by, and from, and “out of” itself. But in so far as Schmidt disassembles language principally in order to encode it with elements pointing back *into* and *at* the psychoanalytically accessed origin of the authorial self, he has merely substituted one (possibly more) centralized and “logocentric” interpretive schema for another. How strange! One can see the creators of authorless texts shaking their heads in one camp, and the traditionalists screwing up their faces at Schmidt’s mosaic tiles and crazy spelling in the other. In order accurately to classify Schmidt, one would finally have to invent such an implosive category as the “neo-Romantic postmodernist.”

One need only think of Beckett, another contemporary, to see how *this* endgame differs so radically from that envisioned by modernism and its heirs,

from the *nouveau roman* to Language poetry to cyberpunk fiction to the anonymously collaborative, common-property hypertexts now evolving on electronic networks. Consider these lines from the final passage of *Molloy*:

I have been a man long enough, I shall not put up with it any more, I shall not try any more. I shall never light this lamp again. I am going to blow it out and go into the garden.

Arno Schmidt seems never to have conceived of such a garden. His authorial lamp was always lit, so he could see to write, and he died writing. His ferocious independence, which refused the principal Western philosophical revaluation of the twentieth century—that of the primacy of the self—is at once admirable and a little sad, like Pope’s conviction that newspapers would wipe out literature, or Arnold’s terror of the philistines, or the technophobia of those who are presently lamenting, once again, the decline of literary culture.

Ultimately, however, the value of such extreme conviction is that it invites one to test oneself against it and thereby to discover what one believes. In that sense, the service provided us by John E. Woods, Schmidt’s remarkable translator, and by Dalkey Archive Press is an invaluable one: it offers an Anglophone reader the opportunity to enter the culture wars in the company of one of its most persuasive and inimitable partisans.