

Detlev's Imitations

Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"

Presented by: Shambhavi Prakash

Hubert Fichte's third novel *Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"*, set in his native Hamburg, oscillates between two time periods – during and after the Second World War (1943–1948), and around 1968–1970. Exploring these periods along with the narrator are two protagonists from Fichte's previous novels – the child theatre artist Detlev, and his thirty-year-old alter ego Jäcki, or "one of Detlev's imitations."

The novel questions the politically conservative time period of post-war West Germany marked by a tendency to look away from the continuities with the National Socialist past. At the same time, it also depicts the contradictions inherent within the extra-parliamentary opposition and anti-authoritarian political protest movements in Germany that were questioning its political imaginary and its continuities with the recent past.

Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan" is a novel about imitations, where the term imitation refers not only to the theatrical imitations of Detlev the child actor, but also to various layers of the self where the basis of identifications is interrogated. In examining the roles of language, history, memory, and sexuality and their relation to the processes of identifications, *Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"* blurs the boundaries between the autobiographical and the fictional, the realistic and the performative, between the self and the other, the individual and the collective, the present and the past, the private and political, the external and inner worlds.

It does so by drawing material from Fichte's own biography and narrating it through multiple viewpoints. These include, for instance, Detlev's childhood memories and experiences of growing up as a Jewish 'Mischling' ('mongrel') in Nazi Germany, his engagement with literary works and performances as a child theatre artist in Hamburg after the war, and his experiences discovering his queer identity in post-war Hamburg. Also included are Jäcki's searches into his childhood experiences through documentary material, including material related to the allied bombardment that Jäcki unearths in the archives, descriptions of documentary film reels, newspaper excerpts about the contemporary political landscape, in Germany of the 1960s, snippets of conversations with people that Jäcki encounters in bars such as 'Palette' and 'Grünspan' in the subcultural milieu of Hamburg's red light district St. Pauli, and from his research into the syncretism of Afro-American and Caribbean religious rituals. These are presented through a kaleidoscope of fragments, which indicate a relational understanding of the self and resistance to totalising narratives which is inherent in the novel's form as well. Contradictions are not pushed away but allowed to add to the variegated view that is presented. The novel thus presents an inventory of traces of the self that the narrator and the protagonists traverse.

Published in 1971, *Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"* is located at the cusp of a time period that is described in literary history as one involving politicisation of literature that saw trends such as

politically engaged documentary literature and political activism, which was followed by what is usually termed as a retreat into 'Innerlichkeit' (inwardness) and 'Neue Subjektivität' (New Subjectivity) as evident in the boom in autobiographies published around this time. In this it can be related to works by authors usually associated with these literary movements, even as it resists both these categorisations in its form and content. Fichte's critique of traditional European anthropology and his poetic ethnographies that led him to further experimentations with literary and ethnographic forms, his intercultural and decolonial approaches, interest in rituals, myths, everyday modes of behaviour and their relation to language that form the basis of our identifications make him all the more relevant today as is evident from the growing interest in recent decades, which also saw the posthumous publication of his multivolume *Geschichte der Empfindlichkeit* (The History of Sensitivity) in his works within the fields of queer studies, pop literature and cultural studies.

Shambhavi Prakash

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