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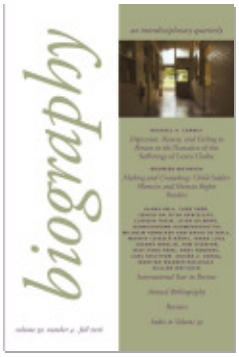

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GUNTRAM VESPER'S *FROHBURG*
BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICS
THE YEAR IN GERMANY

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In March 2016 the Leipzig Book Prize was awarded to Guntram Vesper's more than thousand-page-long epic autobiographical novel, *Frohburg*. The book came out at a time when Germany faces big challenges of migration and integration while the future of the European Community that for decades had been a reliable frame for the country's welfare seems more than ever uncertain. *Frohburg* draws the reader's attention to periods in German history of similar turbulances that might be considered as reflective of today's problems. The Book Prize committee praised the book as an "opus magnum" and a "mammoth work." The jury said that *Frohburg* reveals a wide landscape of history that includes—looking back from the present—the old Federal Republic, the GDR, and the Nazi period, and goes deep into German history to where only history books reach ("Guntram Vesper"). Critics praised *Frohburg* as a "German chronicle" (see Porombka).

Guntram Vesper was born in 1941 in the small town of Frohburg situated in Saxony, close to Leipzig. In 1957 his parents fled with him and his younger brother to West Germany. Today, Vesper lives in Göttingen. He has published poems, audio plays, radio features, essays, short stories, and novellas. Vesper earned several prizes, among them the Villa Massimo stipend in Rome in 1978, the Lowe Saxony Prize, the Peter Huchel-Prize in 1985, and the Prix Italia in 1987. In 1985 he published a small volume of poems and essays that was also called *Frohburg* and contained illustrations by the author himself. Since then he has been collecting material, consulting memories, and taking down notes for the magnum opus that he has been structuring and restructuring. *Frohburg* is Vesper's only major work of prose and is something like a summary of his literary work—and his life.

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The author himself said in the award ceremony for the book that in spite of the fact that his book is called a novel it is actually in "dialogue with the facts." He said that he wrote about the histories that had been told to him. The book's thousand pages caused critics to compare the narrator of *Frohburg* with Scheherazade from the collection of *One Thousand and One Nights*. The stories told to him, said Vesper, were all wrong yet they became "right," after he had taken them in his hands and turned and twisted them (Meyer). Indeed, *Frohburg* not only narrates history by telling stories but also makes the act of storytelling part of the narrative focus. The author's *Frohburg* years from 1941 to 1957 form the center of the book, which a myriad of byways and detours set off from and return to. The effect of this narrative structure is a labyrinth of stories. For example, we read the story that the father tells—which he recounts as it was told to him by another person. For readers it is not always easy to maintain an overview of the manifold stories and narrators. Often we have to look back to the beginning of a story to recall the identity of the narrator of the story we are currently reading. The general narrator seems to delegate the task of telling to numerous other narrators—however, this general narrator remains the "architect" of the construction, knotting the plenitude of threads together. Another aspect that highlights the character of *Frohburg* as a narrative-reflective text is the fact that the various narrators tell their stories in an oral mode. Many of them speak in the Saxon dialect, and their speech is set in italics.

> Und, fragte er. Man machte im Gegensatz zur Leipziger Tieflandsbucht, zur Sächsischen Schweiz und zum Vogtland im oberen Gebirge von Altenberg bis Rautenkranz nicht gerne allzu viele Worte. Wenn doch, wurde das leicht mißverstanden oder fehlgedeutet und als Unsicherheit, städtisches Getue oder Hochmut ausgelegt, der denkt, ich bin beschränkt, *gabbiere nischt, deshalb muß er endlos quaddschn. E rischdscher diefr Schloaf*, sagte der Mann, der vor Vaters Schreibtisch saß, das ist es, was mir fehlt, durch das Durcheinander meiner Dienstzeit, mal Nachtschicht, mal Früheinteilung, ich bin immer unterwegs auf den Straßen, in den endlosen Reihendörfern und in den Wäldern, und dazu noch die vielen Zuzügler, die vielen fremden Gesichter, wie die Goldgräber bei Jack London, aus jedem Winkel kommen sie hier an, jeden Tag mehr, die Russen bauen etwas auf in großem Stil, und ich als Polizist bekomme ihre Anrufe und Streifenzettel und muß springen, wenn ich dann endlich wieder für ein paar Stunden zuhause bin und mich hingelegt habe, kann ich prompt nicht einschlafen, ich brauche was, Herr Doktor, helfen Sie mir. (Vesper 288)[1]

High German-speaking readers do not immediately understand the Saxon passages in italics. They have to read sections aloud and—this is part of the underlying humor of *Frohburg*—suddenly hear themselves speaking Saxon!

The orality of Vesper's book recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's thesis of the novel as being characterized by a sociolinguistic plurality, which undermines a monolithic reading of the text (356). So, is *Frohburg* a novel or an autobiography? Its epigraph reads, "Für etwaige Zweifler also sei es Roman!"[2] This fairly famous statement on German autobiography originates from the prologue of Theodor Fontane's autobiography *Meine Kinderjahre*, which was published in 1893 (see Fontane 3). The quote indicates that the text—Fontane's text as well as Vesper's—oscillates somewhere between "autobiography" and "novel." It further indicates that the author does not care about genre classification. Moreover, Fontane and Vesper share the same mode of orality and the frequent use of anecdotes, which Fontane merely recounts, whereas Vesper makes them the starting point of a bundle of stories.

Although we learn a lot about Versper's childhood and youth, about his family and friends, *Frohburg* can be called a "collective autobiography." The text features a plethora of persons whom we get to know and whose paths cross and mingle with each other, thus producing a tight and nearly inextricable network. The book's narrative threads are densely woven together. The book does not have chapters. The stream of storytelling is only interrupted by the spaces between the paragraphs before the next story sets off or a previously told story is continued. This, paradoxically, causes the book to appear like a monumental block of writing—despite the way it draws from the oral form. *Frohburg* recalls the life of ordinary Germans during the Nazi regime, the invasion by the Red Army, and everyday life in the GDR. The people whom Vesper portrays—often by letting them tell their stories—are on the one hand part of the respective regimes and on the other hand try to elude the regimes' claims. Vesper seems to be fascinated by borders and thresholds, by border crossers and shady persons who belong to both sides and neither. It becomes clear that different ideological systems apply the same mechanisms of rule and try to make use of human failings. Winners and losers of political systems' changes are portrayed as well as the ongoing lives of the so-called "small people" who try to struggle on despite the experience of violence and loss.

Frohburg is not told chronologically but rather follows an associative structure. The reference point for all of the storytelling in *Frohburg* is, not surprisingly, the town of *Frohburg* as place and space. Vesper's autobiographical novel therefore should be read within the paradigm of the "spatial turn" that, in past years, has led to new approaches in autobiography studies (see Watson). Whereas autobiography traditionally focuses on time—the past, the time of writing, and their interrelation—foregrounding places and spaces in autobiography brings to the fore the reflection of self and life as a sort of imaginative stage on which the autobiographical play is being performed.

Frohburg is full of descriptions of buildings, streets, landscapes; some passages can be read almost like a map. The author's maps, sketches of locations, and drawings can, consequently, be seen on the flyleaves of the book. And in fact the narrator reports that he always has been deeply fascinated by maps.

> Der Atlas gab zusammen mit dem aus der Hitlerschen Aufrüstungszeit stammenden Meßtischblatt der Frohburger Gegend, das ich auf dem Oberboden in der Greifenhainer Straße fand, den Anstoß für meine kartographische Neugier, von oben sehen, was einen hier unten eng umgibt oder aus der Ferne herübergeistert, Hölzchen, Harzberg, Streitwald, Deutsches Holz, die Wyhraschleife, das Bachsystem von Maus, Ratte, Katze und dazu, weiter, scheinbar sehr viel weiter weg Theresienstadt, Schneekoppe, Marxwalde, Spiegelwald, Wasserbiblos. Draufsicht, Einsicht, Übersicht, nicht triumphierend, nicht in der Art von: Rio am Zuckerhut, kenn ich wie meine Westentasche. . . . Sondern sich hineinarbeiten, hineinsehen, hineindenken, die Zeichen, die Linien wahrnehmen, verarbeiten, entschlüsseln, so also könnte es sein, so müßte es in etwa sein, so ist es, vielleicht. Gerade eben, nachdem ich das geschrieben und mich über die Kartographie und meine Vorliebe für Karten und Pläne aller Art ausgelassen habe, erlebe ich die alte Faszination wieder. (Vesper 472)[3]

Quite obviously, cartography serves as a model for autobiography with maps that visualize the work of scrutinizing distant regions and times. Whereas *Frohburg* is the "magic" (as Helmut Böttinger put it in his excellent review) center, there is another region that also plays a major role in Vesper's text: the nearby Ore Mountains, the permeable border between Germany and Czechoslovakia where people and goods, spies, communists, and ideologies cross from one side to the other and where everything becomes as ambiguous as it is dangerous. Böttinger even locates the threshold between truth and fiction here in this rough terrain. The Ore Mountains are not only a topo-graphy of political and narratological ambiguousness, they are also depicted as a region where religious sectarianism is practiced until far into the 20th century. Vesper—who tells of his fascination with biblical stories when he was a child and parenthetically reports that he had been a member of the Junge Gemeinde, an organization of young Christians in the GDR who opposed the Communist government—traces a world of superstition, odd figures, and strange religious practices in the woods and dark valleys of the Ore Mountains. The basket maker Schlingeschön from Johanngeorgenstadt, for instance, whom the narrator calls a "sorcerer" (Vesper 693), reports to the narrator's father in night-long sessions about the wanderings of Wehefritz. This cranky figure, who has a crucifix mandrake with him, is worshipped as a healer and redeemer and becomes the founder of the sect of the "Fritzianer." Yet there are other religious groups around who offer their worldviews: the Adventists, the Pietists,

Jehovah's Witnesses, and so on. Vesper clearly has an eye for the strange and dark sides of human nature, which also becomes evident in his drastic description of crimes and of mutilated and distorted human bodies. Politics and religion are both depicted as forces that strongly determine people's lives—and, strikingly, both appear as similarly bizarre in *Frohburg*.

Yet, there is a third force that is of similar might and influence: literature—in the mode of storytelling. It not only links, as *Frohburg* exuberantly demonstrates, the political and the religious on the level of its diegesis. Literature itself is also shown as both political and quasireligious. Therefore many writers appear in Vesper's text: including Christa Wolf, Erich Loest, and Walter Kempowski. However, first and foremost, there is Karl May, whose books, also in their materiality, are reported to have been the objects of the narrator's fetishlike worship and whose fantastic stories offer a refractor for *Frohburg*'s depiction of politics and religion. Thus literature is presented as a medium that helps people to cope with the hardships and odd conditions of their individual and collective histories.

NOTES

1. "And, he asked [the narrator's father, who was a doctor]. Contrary to in the Leipzig lowlands, in Saxon Switzerland [the region East of Dresden] and the Vogtland, from the upper hills of Altenberg to Rautenkranz, one did not use many words. If you did talk too much, you were easily misunderstood as being insecure and prone to arrogance and strange habits prone to people who live in big cities. *He thinks I am not all there, don't understand, and therefore he has to blab endlessly. A good deep sleep* [italics in the Saxon dialect], said the man who was sitting at father's desk, that's what I need, because of the mess of my working hours, sometimes night shifts, sometimes morning shifts. I am on the road all the time, in the endless, long villages and in the woods, and on top of that the many newcomers, the many foreign faces, like the gold miners in Jack London, from every corner they are arriving here, every day more. The Russians are building up something on a grand scale [this hints at the Soviet occupation in the first years of the GDR], and I as a policeman have to answer their calls and notices and run, and when I am finally at home for a couple of hours and lie down, I can't get to sleep quickly. I need something. Doctor, help me." Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.
2. "For any doubters, let it be a novel!"
3. "The atlas, together with the ordnance survey map of Frohburg from the period of Hitlerian rearmament, which I had found in the loft at Greifenhainer Street [where the narrator's grandparents lived and he was born], was the impulse for my cartographic curiosity, to see from above what surrounds us below or what comes ghostlike from far away, Hölzchen, Harzberg, Streitwald [part of Frohburg], Deutsches Holz, the bend of the Wyhra [obviously all regional places], the brook system of mouse, rat, cat, and further, seemingly much further away, Theresienstadt, Schneekoppe, Marxwalde, Spiegelwald, Wasserbiblos. Top view, internal view, overview, not triumphantly like Rio at the Sugar Loaf Mountain, I know it like the back of my hand. . . . Instead: working into,

looking into, trying to understand, discerning the signs, the lines, processing, deciphering, it could be like that, it must be roughly like that, so it is, perhaps. Right now, after having written this and having perorated about cartography and my fondness for maps and diagrams of all sorts, I feel the old fascination again."

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