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Der Flug der Taube: Stephan Hermlin's Attempts to Adjust to the Cultural-Political Demands in the GDR in the Early Fifties

Wolfgang Ertl

I.

Stephan Hermlin was born in Chemnitz (Karl-Marx-Stadt) on March 13, 1915. Antifascist resistance is at the root of all his creative efforts. At the age of 16 he became a member of the Communist Youth Party (KJV). From 1933 until 1936 he went under cover in Berlin, joining the illegal fight against National-Socialism. In 1937 he participated in the Spanish Civil War, and in 1939 he made contact with the French Résistance. With the help of the *Maquis*, an underground group in southern France that became the nucleus of the Résistance, he escaped from the German occupation forces to Switzerland, where he stayed in internment camps until the end of the war. Hermlin returned to Germany in 1945, first to Frankfurt am Main, where he worked in radio broadcasting. His first volume of poetry, *Zwölf Balladen von den Großen Städten*, had appeared before the end of the war in Switzerland. Since that time he has become one of the most prolific writers of East Germany, which he made his home in 1947. His contributions to the literary scene after the war include poetry, translations, short stories, essays, as well as his work as editor. This study focuses on one aspect of his poetry. It tries to analyze the book *Der Flug der Taube* (1952) within its historical context and as a phase in Hermlin's development as a lyrical poet.

In 1947 Stephan Hermlin moved to East Germany. He became a member of the Socialist Unity Party, and continued his literary and political activities as vice president of the German Writers' Union, secretary of the Section for Literature of the Academy of Arts, member of the PEN-Club, member of the editorial board of the important periodical *Aufbau*, and as a delegate for many "Writers', Peace, and Peoples', Congresses." He was deeply involved in the cultural politics of the German Democratic Republic. In his essays during the early years of the GDR, Hermlin identified with the party.¹ In these he wrote about his first contact with the Communist Party in Berlin during his first high school years. He dissociated himself energetically from those who joined the workers' movement out of curiosity and who later became renegades. They—as Hermlin put it—robbed themselves of the only possibility of happiness.² Hermlin was well aware of the difficulties of a party-poet. In this context he cited Brecht's statement about the difficulty inherent in achieving a postulated simplicity. Hermlin also seemed to have accepted the party's right to criticize the poet, because the party represented nothing other than the public and conscious echo of the poet's own criticism of his work.³ He was convinced during this time that he had found his true home in the GDR, a home preserved and saved by the working-class from the dark years, tears, and ashes of Nazi rule.⁴ Hermlin had left West Germany because he was not at all in sympathy with the Anglo-Saxon version of democracy.⁵

Nazi rule.⁴ Hermlin had left West Germany because he was not at all in sympathy with the Anglo-Saxon version of democracy.⁵

Hermlin's identification with the party did not, however, extend to his acceptance of the party's authority in the realm of the arts, as his solemn declarations in the essay "Begegnung mit der Partei" appeared to suggest. In 1955, Hermlin was harshly criticized because he had portrayed a "negative heroine" in his story "Die Kommandeuse." He was accused of not having done justice to the positive historical forces. Hermlin in turn reproached the author of this criticism for not having understood that a valid political theory cannot be applied to literature without discrimination.⁶ In the question of the "collective responsibility for the new German literature," Hermlin had his own views, too. They differed substantially from those of the party functionaries. Hermlin insisted that the collective responsibility of writers had to be grounded in the individual responsibilities of each author to his personal work. Hermlin added that he alone was responsible for "Die Kommandeuse." The content of the story agrees curiously enough with the official condemnation of the workers' uprising in Berlin on June 17, 1953, which Hermlin depicted as a fascist putsch.

The "Manifesto of the Third German Writers' Union Congress," which was appended to Hermlin's published speech "Der Kampf um eine deutsche Nationalliteratur" (1952), also carries Hermlin's signature. Many formulations in this manifesto make it very likely that Hermlin contributed actively to its composition. It repeats, for example, Hermlin's indebtedness to the entire literary heritage of his people, which includes world literature, his call for communication between East and West German writers, and his conviction that talking to one another was still better than shooting at one another. In this manifesto, we also find, however, the following phraseology:

The Third German Writers' Congress accepts with pride the people's commissions. The poets, narrators and dramatists of the German Writers' Union are in agreement that from now on the people will be the content and the working man the hero of literature.

From the people we receive the power for the creation of our works. Giving the people power is the content and goal of our art. Therefore, we use the clear language of the people and demand that critics and literary scholars speak the language of the people as well.⁷

Apparently, Hermlin accepted the cultural-political demand of "popularity" and "simplicity" for the work of art. He seemed to have realized the necessity for a kind of formal standardization.

As opposed to emigrants like Johannes R. Becher, who had returned from the Soviet Union, this subjection to a "socialist realism," which was soon narrowly interpreted by the cultural functionaries in its most shallow sense, meant something quite new for Hermlin. Adjusting to these new demands proved to be a very difficult undertaking.

It is necessary at this point to look back on Hermlin's poetic achievement in the forties. The analysis of an early poem may serve as an example of his art.

II.

The "Ballade von einer zu bebauenden Ebene" (1940) was published for the first time in *Wir verstummen nicht: Gedichte aus der Fremde* (Zürich, 1945), a collection of poems by the two German poets, Jo Mihaly and Hermlin, and Lajser Ajchenrand, whose contributions are in Yiddish. All three authors were exiles. A mere cursory reading reveals Hermlin's indebtedness to an existing tradition of modern poetic practice:

Auf einer Ebene mit einem Reif-Flußgeronnen
Unter der blutigen Sonne des Winters versteint
Zwischen den Ackerfurchen vom Rätsel besponnen
Die vergeblich der Schrei der Krähen beweint —
Dort erbauten wir heute im Traume die Städte
Wälder aus Steinen und Fackeln im gelblichen Licht
Ewigen Nebels wo in der Verrückten Gebete
Sich die Orgel oder Sirene mischt.⁸

The poem begins with the image of a plain "under the bloody sun of winter." The expressive metaphors are reminiscent of German expressionism: an atmosphere of forlornness and isolation dominates the poem. Something enigmatic haunts the scene. The second stanza introduces a series of dreamlike images. A vision of decadent city-life and corrupt civilization is conjured up, an insane world with "symphonies of murders and lust," faces of death and the frenzied sound of grammophones. Then follows an illusory flight from civilization:

LieBen wir nicht uns auch in die Wälder versetzen
Wo unter Schlingpflanzen und dem zaubrischen Flug
Gifffarbner Kolibris Wahnsinn und Entsetzen
Uns aus verdrehten Pupillen entgegenschlug?

Here, too, insanity and horror prevail. After that, a northern scene is imaged. The poet envisions the fight against the ocean ("Darum lieBen die nördlichen Meere wir strömen / Brüllte die Brandung auf dem erschrockenen Feld"). This image also ends in a nightmare: "Aber auch dort war ein Fischervolk von den Schemen / Seines Hungers vor die Netze des Todes gestellt."

The word "dream" and the contents of dreams occur quite often in Hermlin's poems. Stanzas which contain visions and imaginary landscapes emerge again and again. It is quite obvious, however, that these visions are merged with the thematic contexts which I have outlined and shall follow further. The description of the fatal fight against the force of nature evokes a social theme, expressed in what may appear to be inappropriate or unreal metaphors, as Hermlin draws on the rich sources of his own dreams, the process of his history and the surrealist tradition. The flight from civilization to the Pacific Islands, reminiscent of Gauguin, whose name the poem mentions ("Eine Madonna Gauguins am Boden sich wand"), ends with an attempt to escape disease. In the north, the poet finds a people of fishermen who fight for their lives. The "frightened field" shows the misery of oppressed farmers:

Und es antwortete indem es Bauern gezeit
Auf dem fremden Feld wie vor fremdem Pfluge sie lagen
Flankenztitternd — die Stirn bis zum Boden geneigt.
An analogy is drawn between man's fight against the forces of nature and his

fight against oppression by other men. The following seven stanzas deal with the consequences of this awakened social consciousness, the decision to act, to change things:

Da beschlossen wir endlich all dies zu ändern
Unseren Traum und unsere Wirklichkeit
Jener Stadt dem Feld und dem Meer fremden Ländern
Hielten wir die erwartende Ebene bereit.

The scene of the poem also changes suddenly. The setting of revolutionary change is the city where street fights take place, roofs are torn down, narrow alleys swept away, and hunger, death, insanity, pestilence, and treason are overcome:

An jeder Ecke erschossen wir Hunger und Sterben
Wahnsinn Pest und Verrat Wir reichten der zögernden Hand
Waffen und Bücher Und gegen das große Verderben
Schmiedeten wir wie beflügelt den Großen Verband.

Again, cities are built in the poet's dream, but this time the vision differs fundamentally from that of the first part of the poem. It is projected for the future, a vision of a happy world, "born in the East":

Und so bauten aufs neue im Traum wir Die Städte
Schritten wie Wälder aus Marmor und Licht um uns her
Lächelnd Gesänge verleugneten Angst und Gebete
Glückliche Flotten befuhren gewaltig das Meer

...

Auf den dröhnenden Feldern der Sang der Traktoren. . .
Ebenen warteten riesig auf uns überall
Und der mächtige Tag im Osten geboren
Flog aus unserer Hand wie ein feuriger Ball.

Hermlin's aesthetic position places him in the mainstream of literary modernism. His rootedness in an aesthetic continuum stretching from Symbolism to Surrealism can be shown through an analysis of his poetic language. Hermlin's metaphors are often made of extremely disparate images, connecting phenomena of completely different character and creating a multifarious and ambiguous net of associations. The following lines illustrate this unusual juxtaposition of linguistically and thematically disparate elements:

Aus einem Loch im Nebel fiel von den Sternen
Auf uns die Süße des Irrsinns wie kosmisches Eis.

In "Ballade von einer sterbenden Stadt" we read:

Welkt denn wirklich dein Auge im Schutt der Tränen
Bröckelt der sehnsuchtslose gehärtete Mund?
Ich errete dich! Auf meinen Stunden lehnen
Unvergänglich Erinnerungen.⁹

With such verses Hermlin incurred charges of unintelligibility in the GDR. He was accused of relapsing into decadent bourgeois aesthetics, of impairing the clarity of his message through excessive use of irrational elements.¹⁰ The images are, however, as pointed out above, dream-images and visions. The reference to reality in the "Ballade von einer zu bebauenden Ebene" is apparent:

Ertl: Der Flug der Taube: Stephan Hermlin's Attempts to Adjust decadent big-city life in war time, death, insanity, flight into air-raid shelters, gramophone music, etc. In the example from "Ballade von einer sterbenden Stadt," the metaphoric web is immediately transparent because of the personification of the city in ruins and rubble. In this context, the thematic juxtaposition "rubble - tears," "mouth - crumble" is at once intelligible. In addition to this, the scene which is evoked in these lines is expressed in the form of a question. "Ich errette dich!" then means that the poet's answer is to preserve the true image of the city in memory, in poetry. Hermlin's use of dream, hallucination, and vision is comparable to the technique of the Surrealists, although it is quite obvious that these poetic means of "lyrical modernity" have a function which differs substantially from Surrealist practice. They are elements within a traditional order of stanza, meter, rhyme and the thematic context already mentioned.

Hermlin broke with his bourgeois origin early in his life, because he sensed the falseness of the humanistic education, the cozy liberality of the Weimar Republic. His decision to join the Communist Party, as well as his first literary attempts, stem from a critical anti-bourgeois attitude. Like the Surrealists, Hermlin does not believe in separating art and life, art and politics. He goes beyond the ideological position of the Surrealists in that he does not use their poetic means as mere shock elements. Hermlin places the autonomous metaphor into a thematic and formal context which gives his social criticism an ideological direction missing in Surrealist poetry. It has been pointed out that the Surrealists' criticism of bourgeois rationalism often turns into a magical irrationality and that their concept of liberation of art and man does not necessarily include a fight against material misery, or solidarity with social revolution. Hermlin's "Ballade von einer zu bebauenden Ebene" evokes a scenery reminiscent of Surrealist paintings; it uses expressionist language and Surrealist images without being eclectic. These well-known elements occur in a new thematic context, however, which gives the poem a different social-political dimension. The demonizing of the cities and the apocalyptic vegetation of primeval forests reminiscent of Georg Heym are used as kinds of literary quotations. These elements known to the reader of modern poetry are part of the literary and ideological heritage which Hermlin integrated into his poems. He did not merely copy these elements, but tackled them in order to go beyond their ideological implications.

III.

It is not the purpose of this paper to chime in with those critics who speak of Hermlin's "tragic case," who regret his "subordination" to the directives of the Central Committee of the East German Socialist Unity Party. The poet's need for community ("Gemeinschaft") and an audience which he was deprived of in exile seems to be a much more plausible reason for his decision to use a more "popular" language. The result was his volume of poetry *Der Flug der Taube* (1952). With the exception of the first two poems, which are taken from his "Erinnerungs-Zyklus," it contains poems written from 1949 to 1952.

In monumental long verses, sometimes also in folksong strophes, Hermlin glorifies the October Revolution ("Aurora") and Soviet resistance ("Der Granit von Leningrad"). He describes the heroic fight of Greek partisans ("EPON")

and the self-sacrificing devotion of young French and German communists ("Ballade von Henri und Erika"). Long cyclical poems weave aureoles of light around Wilhelm Pieck (the first president of the GDR) and Stalin. The enthusiasm about the youth festivals finds exuberant expression in the cycle "Die Jugend":

Gib mir die Hand: Wir fliegen . . .
Es dämmern Fernen herauf.
Geschlossenen Auges zu schauen
Treiben wir über die Tiefen.
Die Nacht ist erfüllt von Stimmen,
Von Lichtern, Stille und Donner,
Gedichten, Beschwörungen, Blumen,
Von der Epoche des Kommunismus. (p. 69)¹¹

The image of the dove as a symbol of peace pervades most of the poems. In the title poem "Der Flug der Taube." Stalin descends from the mountains as a bearer of peace like Nietzsche's Zarathustra:

Dann schritt vom Gebirg herab
Der Rufer, der Lehrer.
Aus den Toren der Klüfte
Trat er hervor, der Mann von Gori.
Er raffte den Vorhang der Nebel.
Quer über der Stirn
Stand ihm des Wasserfalls Regenbogen.
So kam er herab,
Die Erreger der Flut zu bezwingen,
Schlug er sie zweimal
Vor seiner Stadt. (p. 74)

The solemn mood is intensified by the close association of the peace symbol with the biblical report of the end of the deluge:

Als sich die Fluten verzogen,
Sagten die Alten, kam
Weiß eine Taube geflogen.
Dort, wo die Arche schwamm . . . (p. 71)

There is little room for the death-motif in this volume, a theme which was so dominant in Hermlin's earlier poetry. As Marcel Reich-Ranicki put it, where optimism is obligatory, death can only play a minor role.¹² Reich-Ranicki points to the importance of the motif of the night which replaces the death-motif. Characteristic of Hermlin's poetic technique of the forties is the subtle ambiguity of his metaphors, the delicate web of his associations. In opposition to this practice, the image of the night in the poems of *Der Flug der Taube* remains ambiguous in a different sense. It serves changing purposes. Night can symbolize good or evil, progression or reaction, or merely have decorative function.¹³ What should be added to Reich-Ranicki's observation is that the image of night and darkness often contrasts with the image of day and light. In socialist literature, this light-dark symbolism is indebted to an old tradition which lives on in the GDR, not only in poems, but also in socialist songs and emblems on party badges.

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The poem "Der Reigen des achten März," written on the occasion of the International Woman's Day in 1949, begins with a nocturnal image:

Märznacht, in die sich die Länder gebettet haben,
Voll von Geräuschen (p. 14)

In the third stanza, the night appears torn by sheet-lightning. A storm crests on the political horizon and the morning steps out of the door of the night. In "Der Granit von Leningrad," Leningrad is referred to as "Stadt in korallener Nacht." The poem ends with the lines:

Unaufhaltsam entwirrt diese Nacht die Visionen,
In den elektrischen Hallen wächst die entfesselte Tat
Unter den Händen, die miteinander wohnen:
Frühling und Nacht im Granit von Leningrad. (p.21)

At night the visions of the future unfurl. Night does not simply stand for the past or fascism. In "Aurora" the night-image is in the center of the poem:

In dieser Nacht ist der Wind für immer umgeschlagen,
Nichts konnte mehr so sein wie es bisher gewesen war,
...

Um dieser einen Nacht willen ward alle Musik geschrieben,
Um dieser einen Nacht willen ward jeder neue Gedanke gedacht,
...

Was immer geschehen war, geschah für diese Nacht. (p. 25)

The poem ends triumphantly:

Aus der harten Faust des November
Wuchs lächelnd der neue Mai.
Denn am Steuer der Morgenröte
Stand die Partei. (p. 27)

Here, night is not really incompatible with aurora: each defines, makes possible the other. It is the scene where the revolution took place and the center of all meaningful human activity. The Stalin-hymn, too, begins with the evocation of the enigmatic possibilities of the night:

Sicherlich, damals konnte es keiner wissen,
Daß diese Nacht nicht mehr ganz so wie frühere war. (p. 28)

But as Stalin grew up, "the architecture of night" changed almost imperceptibly, and "Licht flatterte im Fenster." (p. 29) In the "Jugend"-cycle, night has a positive meaning, it "awakens the future." The poem continues, however, with a definite polarization. The reminiscence of the poet's homelessness of the past:

Denn ich hatte kein Land.
Es war mir damals entglitten
In den Finsternissen.

is followed by the rhetorically exaggerated praise of the Soviet Union:

Ich hatte UdSSR,
Wie die Sonne gehört sie jedem,
Doch lebt man nicht ohne sein Land.
Das Sonnen-Land gab mir das meine
Mit seinem Leid, seiner Würde,
Seiner Geschichte und Jugend,
Menschen, die Träumen glichen,

Aber doch Menschen waren. (p. 68)

The Soviet Union is glorified as the country which like the sun belongs to everyone, which gave the poet his home — the GDR.

These examples illustrate that Hermlin occasionally succeeded in preserving the image of the night as an evocative metaphor which exceeds plain allegorical meaning. With the antithesis of the "Finsternisse" and the "Sonnenland," however, the poet adopted a customary cliché.

In many poems of *Der Flug der Taube*, Hermlin uses metaphors which remind us of the skillfully blended images of the ballads he wrote during the war. These images conjure up the suffering of the past, erect a memorial to the dead:

Auf dem Wege der Gezeiten, an dem sich die Toten begegnen,
Wenn die Lampe der Schlaflosigkeit das Papier beruht,
Tritt an die Fenster Tanja, auf die Flußnebel regnen,
Weiß die Rose des Hungers an eisiger Brust. (p. 21)

In the annotations, Hermlin informs us about the biographical background of these lines from "Der Granit von Leningrad" (1949). Tanja Sawitscha, the heroine of this poem, was ten years of age during the occupation of Leningrad. The poet saw her diary in a show-case of the Leningrad Defense Museum. In this diary, Tanja gives us a day by day account of how the members of her family died. Her last notes say: "I am all alone." She was the last to die from starvation.

The poem "EPON" (1950/'51) stands out in this volume for its expressive, evocative imagery and its montage of particles of historical reality. Three subordinate clauses, effectively building up tension, begin the poem:

Als lägen all diese Jahre nicht hinter ihnen
Mit Namen: Zorn, Schweigen, Mord, Rache und Raub;
Als sei dieser Morgen nur Sommer und Wind und Bienen,
Als webten Phantome nicht schon für sie Schleier aus
/Tränen und Staub,

It is then in the first line of the second stanza that the main clause reads: "So gehen sie hin, im Rücken ein Knistern von Gesprächen." Subtle, but unmistakable allusions reveal the theme of the poem: an execution of Greek partisans:

Sie sehn im thessalischen Mittag die Trauben am Wege
Von Panzerketten zermahlen. Es kreischt der Milan
Auf die verlassenen Dörfer, wie Hobel und Säge
Hintern Gefängnis schreiben, wenn die Erschießungen nahen.

The last stanza gives a powerful picture of the heroic mentality of the resistance fighters:

Wie einen Mantel haben den Tod sie sich um die Schultern
/geschlagen.
Sie trinken die Zukunft durstig, als sei sie schon da.
Schon überrollt sie der Strom von Schreien und Schüssen
/und Tagen,

Und ihr Schweigen erzählt die Legende Attika. (p. 12, 13)

Complicated psychological and social processes are captured in delicately interlaced symbols. The poet evokes the general significance of the partisans' fate in the lines: "Und aus den Wäldern brechen / Die großen Stürme, gehn neben ihnen her." Many a detail, however, would remain obscure, if Hermlin

Ertl: Der Flug der Taube: Stephan Hermlin's Attempts to Adjust had not explained some words and names in the annotations: Here we learn that "EPON" was the name of the Youth Association of revolutionary Greece. The sixth stanza tells about "Monedas, den man Menelaos gennant":

Der dir die Geliebte entriB, steht schwarz über Hain und
/Lagune,

Und sein fremdes Geschütz durchpflügt den Danaerstrand.

Menelaos Monedas was a young mechanic, a hero of the Greek resistance movement, who as leader of a group of partisans was sentenced to death by German fascists. The seventh stanza, too, has a biographical-historical background which Hermlin explains: Marta Stefanidu, the eighteen-year-old partisan, was fried in oil. The stanza brings her gruesome fate to mind:

Das Öl der Athleten siedet furchtbar in Kesseln,
Es kleidet die Mädchen in Flammen. Die Tore des Lebens
/falln zu.

Geopferte, die keine Ängste und keine Verführung mehr
/fesseln,

Ich weiB deinen Namen noch, Marta Stefanidu.

Neues Deutschland, the official organ of the Socialist Unity Party, criticized such poems as being unintelligible. And in the Federal Republic the poems met similar rejection. West German critics spoke of a poetic failure. Fritz J. Raddatz, for example, reproached Hermlin in 1972 for being too esoteric and elitist. He claimed that the failure of the poem "EPON" rested in the fact "that a central term, the logical as well as artistic axis" remained obscure or incomprehensible."¹⁴ It is difficult to understand how a reader of modern poetry could miss the fact that the poem deals with the fate of Greek resistance fighters whose personal sacrifice is saved from falling into anonymity and oblivion. The terms and names which need explanation are concrete: historical and biographical details which make it possible to determine the historical theme and context of the poem. They also reveal the immediate occasion. Hermlin has always considered it a duty of the poet to preserve the names of those who lost their lives in the fight against barbarity: His poem "EPON" tells about the heroic work of Greek partisans in the 1940's, about the destructive forces of the fascist war, not only in accounts of personal tragedy but also on the background of the destruction of nature ("Sie sehn im thessalischen Mittag die Trauben am Wege / Von Panzerketten zermahlen.") and within the context of Greek culture and heritage. The partisans have the names of gods or heroes: "Sie heiBen wie Götter oder auch Helden mit Stab und Harpune." The oil used by the athletes during their olympiads is now boiling in kettles serving as torture vessels. Memento and warning are at the "axis" of this impressive, powerful poem whose quality is not impaired by the fact that the reader may have to turn to the end of the book to read the poet's own clarifying comments or that he may have to consult an encyclopedia to gain a definition of the words "EPON", "Grammos", "Monedas", "Marta Stefanidu". These names, even without the specific details attached to them, gain contour in the fabric of the whole poem: grapes ground under by tanks, a girl in oil — these should not be too hard to recognize for what they are, unless one has been insulated from one's own history.

In most of the other poems in the volume, one is always aware that Hermlin is

borrowing verses from his earlier poems for these new poems: a self-quotation and kind of involuntary self-parody. In "Die Zeit der Wunder" (1947) we read: "Hörst du es noch: Wenn wir die Zeit der Kirschen singen . . . / Ich weiß noch heut der blauen Nebel bittren Ruch." In "Der Reigen des achten März" the image occurs again, slightly varied as "Das Dunkel mit dem Ruch von Nüssen / Wie von Vergangenheit" (p. 15) and paired with less original lines:

Und all dies Rauschen ...
Das Gurren der Hoffnung im Wind ...
Die Frauen, die überall tauschen
Blicke und GrüBe, sind
Ein einziges groBes Lauschen. (p. 17)

The "Ballade von Henri und Erika" also takes up the reminiscence of the 19th century French folk song "*Quand nous chanterons le temps des cerises*," a song popular among the resistance fighters, which had been so effectively used in "Die Zeit der Wunder": "Von der Kirschenzeit singen die einen, / Die andern vom Lindenbaum." (p. 50) The poem deals with the seventeen-year-old French youth Henri martin who was called to court because he had appealed to his comrades in Vietnam to support the fight against French imperialism. His story has an historical parallel in the arrest of Erika Thürmer, a member of the Free German Youth (FDJ) in West-Berlin. The verse from the French folk song has lost its evocative atmosphere. The analogy to the romantic song of the linden tree on the lips of the Free German Youth strikes us as being somewhat peculiar. The attempt to employ simple folk song diction leads to clumsy verses and occasionally to common-place phraseology:

Überall sind die Herren die gleichen,
Die Tränen sind überall gleich,
Der schmutzige Krieg muß weichen,
Das Dollarzeichen
Schändet Vietnam und Frankreich. (p. 48)

Or:

Und man befreite die eine,
Den andern muß man befreien!
Deine Lieb ist die meine,
Stärker ist keine
Macht. Sie wird Sieger sein! (p. 50)

In the Stalin-hymn, the haunting image from the "Terzinen" ("Der Schwalbensturz allein vergißt sie nie, // Die langsam treiben unter den Moränen.") occurs again as a less "poetic", but by no means less effective direct statement: "Unter dem Eis treiben die toten Matrosen / Von Odessa" (p. 32). Hermlin's Stalin-hymn and his "Aurora" are more than obedient idolatry and abstract glorification. With the exception of "EPON," most poems in this collection manifest the inner struggle of a poet, who, while unwilling to abandon his very own poetic technique, made great efforts to sacrifice it. The result is lyric hybrids. Evocative metaphors are often replaced by the placardized formulas "Friedenstaube," "Morgenröte," "Mai," "Fahne," "Roter Oktober." Merely decorative similes prevail. The following verses from the Stalin-hymn illustrate how the poetic "chiffre" is perverted into a propaganda slogan:

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Späher des fernen, des nahenden Roten Oktober,
Seid ihr im Brüllen des Gusses, unter dem Ruß
Der Hochöfen, und zwischen Isba und Schober
Chiffre, die heit

PARTEI
EINES
NEUEN

TYPUS. (p. 33)

The poster is stilized as "chiffre." It is not the integration of "unpoetic" elements which is injurious to the poem, but rather the stilization of political clichés.

A reduction of metaphoric language is quite obvious. The critics in the GDR, however, still stated that Hermlin failed to go far enough in reducing his literariness. A review in *Neues Deutschland* criticized the poems in *Der Flug der Taube* as too subjective and incomprehensible. The author of the article disliked the fact that the reader had to guess, speculate, and search for meaning, because reality was obscured by musical language, rhythm, and alliterations.¹⁵ A book intended for use in East German secondary schools, which presented Hermlin together with Erich Weinert and Kuba as "socialist realists," pointed out that Hermlin still had not overcome his proneness to symbolism ("Hang zur Symbolik") in the Stalin-poem. Hermlin is praised, however, for a turn to a clearer, simpler and more comprehensive language.¹⁶ Compared to these comments in the fifties, the criticism of the sixties and early seventies in the GDR was more refined. Although Gerhard Wolf, for example, spoke of *Der Flug der Taube* favorably, he criticized the forced simplicity in Hermlin's new poems.¹⁷ Reinhard Weisbach, who used harsher words, found that the symbols and metaphors reminded him of general-humanistic doctrines of salvation and paradisiac imagination.¹⁸ West German reviews referred to the "tragic case" of Stephan Hermlin. Their criticism often descended to the level of political polemics. An article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, for example, formulated its criticism in the title of its review: "Absturz der Taube."¹⁹

IV.

The assertion that Hermlin was robbed of his individual abilities by the demands of the cultural functionaries cannot be maintained. He should not be called a "Dichter im Dienst." The officials of the GDR were in fact never happy with him. Along with their praise, there was always a tone of regret that Hermlin had preserved questionable "bourgeois" elements in his style. Hermlin went the way of adaptation because he was convinced that it was the right thing to do in the historical situation of the transition to a socialist cultural revolution. Compared to other lyrical products of these years, for example, those of Kuba (pseudonum for Kurt Barthel), a contemporary of Hermlin, *Der Flug der Taube* remains a remarkable achievement. Although both poets exploit the same clichés in their treatments of the October Revolution, Hermlin's work is superior. An example is the way each handles the "Aurora" symbol, the name of the Russian cruiser which signaled the revolution with her attack on the winter palace. In "Des Lächeln Lenins" from Kuba's first volume of poetry *Gedicht*

vom Menschen we read:

Der Kreuzer "Aurora"
hat seine Salve gebrüllt.
Dem Winterpalais
sind die weiBen Zähne zerbrochen.
Mit Schleiern von Nebel und Rauch
Ist Mütterchens Antlitz verhüllt.
Lenin —
hat gesprochen.²⁰

Hermlin's version:

Das Alphabet der Barrikaden war nicht mehr zu vergessen.
Dampf morsten die Geschütze der Aurora das neue Gesetz.
Von dieser Nacht an ward die Welt mit Lenins MaB gemessen,
Und die Zukunft schrieb an die Türen: Alle Macht den
/Sowjets! (p. 26)

Kuba's irregular short-line stanza which claims to be somewhat "modern" is merely superficial. The strophe feigns a form which is not there.²¹ If we rearrange the lines in the following manner, the actual form becomes apparent and the difference between these lines and Hermlin's poem becomes obvious:

Der Kreuzer "Aurora" hat seine Salve gebrüllt.
Dem Winterpalais sind die weiBen Zähne zerbrochen
Mit Schleiern von Nebel und Rauch ist Mütterchens
/Antlitz verhüllt.

Lenin — hat gesprochen.

Hermlin's monumental long lines and stirring rhythm are far more appropriate to the importance of this event than Kuba's monotonous versification. The second line in Hermlin's stanza places the emphasis on the content by juxtaposing two stressed syllables which are followed by three unstressed ones: "Dampf morsten die Geschütze." Dactyls prevail in Kuba's poem. The only special feature is the long pause after "Lenin —."

In his Stalin-poem Hermlin also commands a weightier poetic arsenal than Kuba. Hermlin's poem begins with the powerful evocation of the change in the atmosphere of the night from which Stalin emerged:

Sicherlich, damals konnte es keiner wissen,
Daß diese Nacht nicht mehr ganz so wie frühere war,
Eine Nacht wie alle, vom Bellen der Hunde gesplissen,
Und die Wälder wie immer mit Wind in ihrem Haar. (p. 28)

Kuba's lines lacking this poetic tension are examples of monotonous "socialist realism" at its worst:

Er kam auf die Erde, ein dürftiger Gast,
verwüstet die Welt war vom Hasse. —
Das Leben war Schuhpech und Leisten und Last,
ein Stiefel der Rauber im Fürstenpalast.
Das Arbeitskind war vom Strom erfaßt,
dem Malstrom der arbeitervolk!²²

This kind of neoclassicist smoothness satisfied the demands of the functionaries. Hermlin may have written mediocre verse in his *Flug der Taube*, but he

Ertl: Der Flug der Taube: Stephan Hermlin's Attempts to Adjust seldom abandoned his poetic craftsmanship nourished by an intensive familiarity with the heritage of German and French literature. The fact that *Der Flug der Taube* as a whole does not possess the aesthetic quality of his earlier poems is not due to the tendentious themes, but rather to a voluntary formal "innovation", which robbed Hermlin of his best poetic means. The failure has nothing to do with the incompatibility of poetry and communism. The city ballads from the forties prove the opposite. That narrow-minded cultural politics is detrimental to poetic creativity cannot be denied in Hermlin's case. The direction of his hope was a more humane society: what he once called "eine poetische Gesellschaft."²³ It is difficult for us to understand that Hermlin recognized in East Germany — in a country which restricts and confines its poets — a new society which was "on the side of progress." "The period 1949-1953, from the founding of the DDR until Stalin's death, was the 'winter' in East German cultural life."²⁴ The stifling atmosphere of rigid centralization of aesthetic activity, of narrow-minded demands of a socialist realism which was supposed to be partisan as well as popular, left its marks in *Der Flug der Taube*, a document of the difficulties, contradictions, and hopes inherent in the early phase of the GDR.

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NOTES

¹See especially the essays and reports collected in *Die Sache des Friedens* (Berlin: Volk und Welt, 1953).

²Ibid., p. 48.

³Ibid., p. 49.

⁴Ibid., p. 98.

⁵Ibid., p. 326.

⁶"Methoden des Autors — Methoden der Kritik," *Neue Deutsche Literatur*, 3, No. 2 (1955), p. 130.

⁷Stephan Hermlin, *Der Kampf um eine deutsche Nationalliteratur* (Berlin: Deutscher Schriftstellerverband, no date), p. 29.

⁸Stephan Hermlin, Jo Mihaly, and Lajser Ajchenrand, *Wir verstummen nicht: Gedichte in der Fremde* (Zürich: Carl Posen, 1945), p. 56-58.

⁹Stephan Hermlin, *Zwölf Balladen von den Großen Städten* (Zürich: Morgarten, 1945), p. 13.

¹⁰Erich Weinert, *Stephan Hermlin, Kuba: Hilfsmaterial für den Literaturunterricht an den Ober- und Fachschulen* (Berlin: Volk und Wissen, 1953), p. 54, 55.

¹¹The page numbers in parentheses refer to *Der Flug der Taube* (Berlin: Volk und Welt, 1952)

¹²Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Deutsche Literatur in West und Ost* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1970), p. 252.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Fritz J. Raddatz, *Traditionen und Tendenzen: Materialien zur Literatur der DDR* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 148.

- ¹⁵*Neues Deutschland*, September 3, 1952, quoted from Lothar von Balluseck, *Dichter im Dienst: Der Sozialistische Realismus in der deutschen Literatur* (Wiesbaden: Limes, 1963), p. 31.
- ¹⁶Erich Weinert, *Stephan Hermlin*, Kuba, p. 56.
- ¹⁷Hans Jürgen Geerds (ed.) *Literatur der DDR in Einzeldarstellungen* (Stuttgart: Kröner 1972), pp. 184, 185.
- ¹⁸Reinhard Weisbach, *Menschenbild, Dichter und Gedicht: Aufsätze zur deutschen sozialistischen Lyrik* (Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1972), p. 197.
- ¹⁹See for example Balluseck, op. cit., p. 31, Reich-Ranicki, op. cit., p. 253, Gregor Laschen, *Lyrik in der DDR: Anmerkungen zur Sprachverfassung des modernen Gedichts* (Frankfurt/Main: Athenäum, 1971), p. 72, and Sabine Brandt, "Der absturz der Taube," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 14, 1963. The American John Flores, whose chapter on Stephan Hermlin in his book *Poetry in East Germany: Adjustments, Visions, and Provocations* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1971) is the most scrutinizing study of Hermlin's poetry in English, also refers to the "tragic case of Stephan Hermlin." (p. 64)
- ²⁰Kuba, *Gedicht vom Menschen* (Berlin: Volk und Welt, 1950), p. 127.
- ²¹Cf. Raddatz, pp. 158, 159.
- ²²Lothar von Balluseck (ed.), *Gedichte von drüben: Lyrik und Propagandaverse aus Mitteldeutschland* (Bad Godesberg: Hohwacht, 1963), p. 33.
- ²³Stephan Hermlin, *Lektüre 1960-1971* (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1973), p. 249.
- ²⁴Flores, p. 8.