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The Politics of Peter Huchel's Early Verse

Joseph P. Dolan

In an interview with the author of this paper, Peter Huchel was at pains to emphasize that even as a young man he had had Marxist sympathies and that Ernst Bloch had been his "väterlicher Freund."¹ In the same spirit, he tried to distance himself from the literary journal, *Die Kolonne*, by referring to its editor, Martin Raschke, as a "snob," and by explaining away his first prize in the second lyric contest of *Die Kolonne* as the result of a joke played on him by his friend Hans Joachim. According to Huchel, Joachim had submitted a sheaf of poems to the journal's first contest without the poet's knowledge. Huchel received not so much as an honorable mention. After this, Huchel moved to Berlin and acquired for himself a certain reputation on the basis of his contributions to the *Literarische Welt*. Joachim now re-submitted the poems to the second contest, again without Huchel's knowledge, who this time won first prize. *Die Kolonne*, which appeared between December 1929 and mid-1932, cultivated an elitest conception of art and of the artist, fought vigorously against *Tendenzliteratur*, and published much apolitical nature poetry. It is clear that in this interview Huchel was trying to dissociate himself from the conservatives of the *Kolonne-Kreis* and at the same time to establish a certain continuity in his political attitudes which led him from the Weimar Republic through the Third Reich and into the GDR.

While still enjoying the favor of the Communist regime, Huchel was the subject of an appraisal by Eduard Zak, who likewise drew attention to the continuities between Huchel's early verse and his subsequent activity both as poet and as editor of *Sinn und Form* in East Berlin. Zak found that the young Huchel had a profound sympathy for the arch-representatives of the people, such as the migrant workers, the farm hands and milkmaids of rural Brandenburg, a sympathy feeding directly the demand for social justice and for the self-rule of the workers and peasants. This awareness of the social conditions in the country reveals, according to Zak, "den in die Zukunft weisenden Gehalt in Huchels Werk."²

It is pointless to try to refute these claims, particularly in light of such poems as "Der polnische Schnitter," which contains the lines:

Acker um Acker mähte ich,
Kein Halm war mein eigen.³

On the other hand, it is possible to misjudge the extent and the kind of Huchel's political sympathies. The proposal here is to examine some of his early poetry both in itself and in historical context for clues to Huchel's early political thought. As a result, the existence and the nature of continuities can be more accurately determined.

Taken by itself, the bulk of Huchel's early verse fits well into the category of

"nature poetry," and it looks quite at home in the pages of *Die Kolonne*. In many early poems, Huchel did, in fact, exclude political and social issues and avoided overt tendentiousness, that stigma which bourgeois critics were ever eager to assign to the works of leftist writers. It was part of the climate of the times, however, that even an apparently harmless, apolitical "nature" poem could convey a clear political message to contemporaries. As Johannes R. Becher wrote in *Die Linkskurve*: "Und wenn ihr schweigt, wir fragen, worüber ihr schweigt: in euch schweigt die Klasse, auch euer Schweigen ist Stellungnahme."⁴ Accordingly, in our effort to discover Huchel's political values, we must pay attention not only to what he says, but also to what he does not say.

In this enterprise, a superficial tallying of thematic categories is not enough. In order to understand what Huchel's response to his historical situation really was, we must go as deeply as we can into his poetic world. It is only by ferreting out the "deep structure" that the image of nature and of rural life acquires meaning. To provide this foundation, we have chosen the well-known poem "Knabenteich" for analysis, which John Flores has called Huchel's "finest achievement" in nature poetry.⁵

Der Knabenteich

Wenn heisser die Libellenblitze
im gelben Schilf des Mittags sprüh'n,
im Nixengrün der Entengrütze
die stillen Wasser seichter blüh'n,
hebt er den Hamen in die Hohe,
der Knabe, der auf Kalmus blies,
und fängt die Brut der Wasserflöhe,
die dunkel wölkt im Muschelkies.
Rot blüht um ihn die Hexenheide,
fischäugig blinkt der Teich im Kraut.
Der graue Geist der Uferweide
wird über Sumpf und Binsen laut,
wo dünn der Ruf der scheuen Unken
tönt wie ein Mund der Zauberei...
Der Knabe horcht, ins Ohr gesunken
sind Wind und Teich und Krähenschrei.
Verzaubert ist die Mittagshelle,
das glasig grüne Algenlicht.
Der Knabe kennt die Wasserstelle,
die anders spiegelt sein Gesicht.
Er teilt das Schilf, das splittrig gelbe:
froschköpfig plätschert hoch der Nick—
und summt und spritzt und ist derselbe
wie einst mit tierhaft wildem Blick.
Und auch der Teich ist noch derselbe
wie einst, da dein Mund Kalmus blies,

dein Fuss hing ins Sumpfdottergelbe
 und mit den Zehen griff den Kies,
 Wenn dich im Traum das teichgrüntiefe
 Gesicht voll Binsenhaar umfängt,
 ist es als ob der Knabe riefte,
 weil noch dein Netz am Wasser hängt.⁶

Like so many of Huchel's early poems, "Knabenteich" re-enacts a childhood experience in order to restore wholeness to the adult through contact with nature. "Die Magd," for example, captures the relationship between the child and the aged employee, who is "mehr als Mutter noch" and is ultimately identified with the Great Mother. Poems such as "Herkunft," "Bartok," or "Der Ziegelstreicher" conjure up figures from the poet's childhood who lived in harmony with nature and enveloped the child in the security of this contact. Most of the early poems, however, have as their subject the persona of the poet himself as child. Besides "Knabenteich" one might mention "Kindheit in Alt-Langerwisch," "Caputher Heuweg," "Am Beifusshang," and many others.

Childhood reminiscences of all kinds were very popular in the twenties, the reasons for which were according to Dietrich Bode "Rückkehr hinter den Krieg und die Revolution, Suche nach den verlorenen Zusammenhängen, einem Lebensganzen, Urbildern, nach Naivität,"⁷ and not the rousing of revolutionary consciousness. Writers such as Ernst Jünger, R. A. Schröder, J. Weinheber, and the editor of *Die Kolonne*, Martin Raschke, indulged in autobiography, all of whom were of conservative sympathies. Childhood memories were all the more attractive as an antidote to the gray sobriety of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, which, reacting against the pathos of Expressionism, laid value on quasi-scientific observation.

In the word "Kraut" in the second stanza of "Knabenteich" we can see a reflection of this new mood of objectivity. Instead of exotic fruits or tropical flowers which thrive only in protective greenhouses or in fantasy lands under the sea, we are presented with quite ordinary, homely weeds. The poet is clearly out to avoid cheap or sentimental effects. He wants rather to describe a real landscape, authentic in its flora and fauna, even at the risk of baffling the reader who may never have heard of *Kalmus*, *Sumpfdotter*, *Hexenheide*, or *Entengrütze*. Zak suggests that this specific, geographically localized terminology, which also includes the names for various farm implements, is an example of Huchel's closeness to the people, and he can quote Huchel himself in this connection:

Wenn sich der Dichter mit der Sprache der Arbeit, der Arbeitsvorgänge,
 das heisst mit der Sprache des Volkes beschäftigt, wenn er diese nicht
 poetisch verbrämt, wohl aber zu seiner eigenen Sprache werden lässt,
 so wird er im Gedicht ganz neue Wege gehen können.⁸

On the other hand, when one compares Huchel's poetry with the contemporary productions of Wilhelm Lehmann und Elisabeth Langgässer, who also cultivated a scientifically accurate vocabulary, focusing on the plant and animal

life and milieu of the countryside, one begins to see that it is quite one-sided to view Huchel as a rustic, Robert-Frost-like poet of the people; all three poets can be seen in the *poeta-doctus* tradition of the Baroque, for it is obvious that their poetry was not intended for the farm hands and milkmaids but rather for a sophisticated elite.

But "Knabenteich" is not just thirty-two lines of nature description. A very simple story is inconspicuously embedded in the thicket of exact observations. In the first stanza, the boy raises his net into the air and proceeds to catch the brood of the water fleas, but these simple actions are practically submerged in the attendant details and appended relative clauses, which place a disproportionate amount of emphasis on the scenery. Furthermore, the first appearance of the boy is delayed until the fifth line. The gesture he makes, however, is important. By raising his net into the air, he asserts his independence from his surroundings; his essential otherness is intensified by his harmless game of catching fleas, which exhibits an underlying aggression toward nature. The boy's independence from nature is already being undermined, however, in two different ways in this first stanza: first, by the very predominance of the objects of nature, and second by the trance-inducing sound of the language, which is already lulling the boy's conscious mind into a state of passive receptivity. It is not a melodic language in the romantic sense, however. The romantic poet plays cavalier with meter in order to embody the surge and flow of his feelings, but in the process the individual object is devalued, as Heinrich Henel writes:

Durch ungleiche Füllung der Senkungen und durch Hebungen von sehr verschiedenem Gewicht, durch feinste Nuancierung der Längen und Kürzen wird ein Erlebnis vermittelt, das alles Einzelne Gesehene auflöst in ein geheimnisvolles, nur dem Ohre vernehmbares Dasein.⁹

Huchel's language is not of this kind. The meter is absolutely regular; the very few exceptions occur only where they can function as significant breaks in the pattern. A poem with this regular rhythm occupies a neutral space, in which each object has a specific place and can exist for itself. To quote Henel again:

Ein regelmässiges Metrum vermittelt wenig Empfindung, aber dafür sind die Dinge selbständig und können auch ausserhalb der dichterischen Sphäre bestehen.¹⁰

Let us take a closer look at this neutral space, reading again the last four lines of the first stanza:

hebt er den Hamen in die Höhe,
der Knabe, der auf Kalmus blies,
und fängt die Brut der Wasserflöhe,
die dunkel wölkt im Muschelkies.

Extensive use of alliteration and assonance guarantees that all the accented syllables have the same weight. Literally every accented syllable is included in a network of sound, as for example the syllable "Ha-" in "Hamen," which is linked by alliteration to "Höhe" and "hebt" and by assonance to "Knabe," "Kalmus," and "Wasser." "K" in turn links "Knabe" and "Kalmus" with "dunkel,"

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"wölkt," and "-kies"; "ö" occurs not only in "Höhe" and "wölkt" but also in "flöhe"; "u" joins "dunkel" with "Brut" and "Muschel" and so forth. The effect of all this is not of a free-floating melody separate from the objects, but rather of a sound which is anchored in and emanates from the objects.

That this is the intention of the poet is particularly clear from the second stanza, in which the action is reduced to the mere activity of listening: "Der Knabe horcht, ins Ohr gesunken / sind Wind und Teich und Krähenschrei." As in the first stanza, the boy appears only toward the end, nature again asserting its dominance. The sound of the poem is the sound of nature, which seduces the boy from his aggressive independence and compels him to become one with her. As if offended by his hostile behavior, nature resists and protects herself by bringing the boy under her spell. This is made perhaps overly clear in the lines:

Der graue Geist der Uferweide
wird über Sumpf und Binsen laut,
wo dann der Ruf der scheuen Unken
tönt wie ein Mund der Zauberei...

It would have been clear enough without the explicit reference to the "gray spirit" that the boy had been plunged into a magical realm.

The assimilation is completed in the third strophe. Again, we are presented first with description: "Verzaubert ist das Mittagshelle, / das glasig grüne Algenlicht." As soon as the boy has stopped catching fleas and has begun to listen to the sounds of his surroundings, it is a foregone conclusion that he will soon be as enchanted as the mid-day brightness, but first a memory stirs in him: "Der Knabe kennt die Wasserstelle, / die anders spiegelt sein Gesicht." From experience he knows what can happen here. How far back this memory reaches, or how often the experience has taken place, we do not know, but ultimately we would certainly reach the stage of the unborn child, enjoying the original union of self and world in the womb of the mother. However that may be, the memory and inner assent play the deciding role: immediately thereafter he parts the reeds and he is no longer himself but it must be said of him: "froschköpfig plätschert hoch der Nick---." ("Nick" stands here for the more usual "Nix.") The thoroughness of the transformation is emphasized by the metrical irregularity which places an accent on "frosch-." The boy is now completely one with nature, "derselbe / wie einst mit tierhaft wildem Blick."

It would be possible for the poem to end now, since the process that had begun with the first stanza has been completed. The words "derselbe / wie einst," however, act as a transition to a final stanza, which is spoken from a new perspective, namely that of an adult, who is at the same time easing himself out of the realm of memory and keeping the way free for his return. As long as the pond remains the same as before, at least in memory, it is always possible for the adult to return to it and to be assimilated into nature. The lyric persona has proven this in the first three stanzas. The assimilation of the boy into nature is, however, only a part of the entire action of the poem, which consists in the larger process in which the adult persona identifies itself with the boy who goes to a

pond to fetch his forgotten net. In that the adult has become one with himself as child, he can again become one with nature. The man has therefore temporarily overcome time, reversed it in fact, and asserted the essential unity of all stages of his life. By reversing time, he has rejuvenated himself at the source of all life in nature. Water and especially small bodies of water are common womb symbols, and it is certainly suggested that the man returns to the maternal womb in order to be reborn.

A kind of cyclical time has therefore been established in the poem. In that the man, absorbed in his memories, goes to the pond to fetch his net, he has arrived at the initial situation in which the boy raises his net at the water's edge. The whole process could therefore begin again. The net is the link between the two worlds, the node, as it were, between successive cycles. It stands from the point of view of the man in the world of childhood, but, because it is the symbol of individual consciousness, it is accessible to the adult. When he seeks the net, he is projected back into the world of his childhood. For the boy, the net is a hindrance to his assimilation, but also the symbol of his own potential maturity. Just as the pond is contained in the boy and the boy in the pond, so also the man is present in the child and the child in the man. These two cyclical patterns, one within the other, determine the "deep structure" of the poem. The scientific nomenclature, fusing with the intoxicating sound patterns, produces a magic which absorbs the individual into a transhistorical and transpersonal realm.

This completes our analysis of the poem, but before we try to extract its political implications, there is a problem which must be acknowledged: how is it possible to derive political ideas from a poetic work which intentionally eschews politics? It would seem that we must restrict our discussion to showing affinities between Huchel's verse and various public attitudes by demonstrating the common use of materials which in the context of the times had conventional political associations. Guido Zernatto, the Austrian poet who won first prize in the first contest of *Die Kolonne*, provides us with a good example of how this method works. Zernatto wrote poems about the rural society of his home province of Carinthia; avoiding any overt mention of political or social issues, he focused instead on the universal themes of birth, death, marriage, natural calamities, and so forth. Yet as he wrote these poems, Zernatto was living in the capital city of Vienna and had become part of a political reform movement. After 1918, Vienna had experienced an influx of people from the Alpine regions, who brought about what Zernatto called "eine beginnende geistige Neubesiedlung der alten Metropole an der Donau."¹¹ These provincials wanted to build a new state in their own image and in explicit opposition to strong Marxist influences in Vienna. The provinces appeared to them to be the source of Christian virtue and the unspoiled life. Zernatto's cultivation of rural themes and nature imagery in his poetry assumed political significance, therefore, within the framework of this attempt to renew Austria both politically and culturally.

The opposition between rural virtue and urban vice had already been common for some time; Stefan George and Rilke adopted this view, not to mention Adalbert Stifter, who enjoyed a modest Renaissance precisely in the twenties.

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The elevation of life in the country to the status of inspiring model for national life was typical for the entire conservative reaction against modernity. This very choice of rural theme, therefore, necessarily places Huchel in the neighborhood of many of the same conservative authors with whom he had already been associated by virtue of a common preference for the theme of childhood. Even the motif of the authentic peasant as true representative of the *Volk* and thus the source of regenerative values for the oversophisticated, overly rational urban society is suggested in Huchel's poetry. Again, this association was traditional precisely in conservative circles; it found a place in Julius Langbehn's influential *Rembrandt als Erzieher* of 1890, in which the idealized peasantry was said to still exist in *Niederdeutschland*, an elastic term indicating the homeland of nobility and toughness and the habit of cheerful subservience. According to Langbehn, not only Rembrandt, but also Shakespeare and Bismarck were *Niederdeutsche*.¹²

To what extent Huchel shared any of the concrete political proposals of the conservative critics is impossible to determine from his poetry. But there is nevertheless a link to the general phenomenon of conservatism, insofar as Huchel's early verse presents a picture of nature and of country life as the source of wholeness, community, and humane traditions, all of which modernity has forfeited in the name of reason and profit. The idea of *lost values* is, as Martin Greiffenhagen points out, essential to conservatism.¹³ Only after we have lost the trailing clouds of glory, as Wordsworth put it, do we realize that we have come from God in the first place. Then we begin to oppose our present state in order to regain the lost harmony. Our analysis of "Knabenteich" has revealed this same backward-looking, essentially conservative impulse to regain a lost value. In other words, it is possible after all to go beyond the mere discovery of external similarities of theme, for the poem not only makes use of nature imagery, but it also exhibits the internal structure with respect to time that is central to conservatism. In both there lies a profound rejection of history, an unwillingness to accept historical events as such. Thus not only does Huchel's preference for the themes of nature and childhood conflict with the Marxist demand for overt political commitment, but also his cyclical attitude toward time conflicts directly with the Marxist insistence on the irreversibility of history. Within the historical context of the twenties, therefore, we find that Huchel has placed himself wittingly or unwittingly, and in contrast to the idea of continuity Huchel apparently wishes to foster—in the company of conservatives.

On the other hand, there are limits to the extent of Huchel's conservatism, and we can in no way associate him with that radical wing of conservative ideologists which was the direct precursor of National Socialist ideology. As George Mosse informs us, nature mysticism was an essential element in the rag-bag of irrational sources for National Socialist thought. This aberrant form of nature mysticism, however, was associated with sun worship, the sun being the symbol par excellence of the father-god, the patriarch, and the charismatic leader. Tarnhari's *Swastika Letter*, for example, a representative twenties document of the right, displayed on its title page "an astral figure with a sun-drenched swastika floating over a man kneeling in a landscape." As Mosse comments, "The

combination of sun worship, exaltation of nature, and Volkish faith could hardly have found a better representation."¹⁴ What sets Huchel apart from the radical sun and power worshippers is precisely his dedication to the *female* principle as an integrating force in the psychological life of the individual and in the collective life of society. His allegiance is not to the sun, but to the moon.

In his book, *Die Lyrik Peter Huchels. Zeichensprache und Privatmythologie*, Axel Viergg draws attention to the profound influence which the writings of Johann Jacob Bachofen had had on the young Huchel.¹⁵ Bachofen, a contemporary of Nietzsche, committed himself in his voluminous writings about ancient civilizations to the analysis and interpretation of the maternal principle in its formative effect on all aspects of life. According to J. Rosteutscher, Bachofen's sympathies were clearly with matriarchal society, which embodied real divine creativity, and not with authoritarian and hierarchal patriarchy.¹⁶ What must have caught Huchel's attention is that Bachofen situates matriarchy in "die Region des tiefsten Tellurismus, die Sumpfteugung mit all ihren Produkten, Tieren nicht weniger als Pflanzen."¹⁷ This kind of region is, of course, presented to us with unparalleled effectiveness in "Knabenteich" and occupies a central place in the private life of the poet. He grew up in just such a place on the farm of his grandfather in Alt-Langerwisch, Brandenburg.

Even more significant for us than this childhood link to a specific kind of landscape, is the connection Bachofen draws between tellurism and the social organization of matriarchy. The matriarchal cult of Dionysos, says Bachofen, brought to antiquity a splendor which puts even the sophistication of modern art and life to shame. It loosened all bonds, dissolved all differences, and led life itself back to the laws of matter by giving first place to the beautification of corporeal existence. But this progress in the direction of making life primarily a matter of the senses is paralleled by the dissolution of political organization and the collapse of national life:

An der Stelle reicher Gliederung macht sich das Gesetz der Demokratie der ununterschiedenen Masse, und jene Freiheit und Gleichheit geltend, welche das natürliche Leben vor dem zivilgeordneten auszeichnet, und das der leiblich- stofflichen Seite der menschlichen Natur angehört. . . Die dionysische Religion ist zu gleicher Zeit die Apotheose des aphroditischen Genusses und die der allgemeinen Brüderlichkeit.¹⁸

Conspicuous in this description of society is the absence of a charismatic leader, that is to say, of an absolutist patriarch, one of the chief elements in the utopian vision of Germanic critics such as Lagarde, Langbehn, and Moeller van den Bruck, not to mention the sun worshippers. For Huchel, however, the dominant figure is the Great Mother in all her guises; instead of a sky or sun god, whose spiritual authority is imposed from on high, fostering the growth of a complex pyramid of authority, the Great Mother's influence wells up from the earth to flow, as it were, horizontally, affording each individual the direct contact with the sources of life and creativity. In fact, when speaking of the matriarchal principle we can no longer really speak of "authority" at all, that is, of power transmitted from the top down along rigid lines of subordination. The matriarchal pattern is rather more like an organic flow of vitality, into which anyone

can tap directly.

Huchel's early verse is so permeated by Great Mother imagery that one must take Bachofen's influence seriously. Two simple examples must suffice to illustrate the ingenuity and subtlety with which Huchel embodies his matriarchal sympathies. The plant "Beifuss" is mentioned in several poems, and it occurs as well in the title of the poem "Am Beifussshang," in which the lyric persona again recalls a childhood experience, namely that of walking up a hill covered with *Beifuss*, falling asleep in the sun and waking again after powerful dreams. The Latin name for the plant, *artemisia*, suggests the pre-Hellenic goddess Artemis, universally worshipped in ancient Greece, whose proper sphere was the forests, hills, and uncultivated areas; her function was to foster fertility and birth. That this plant grows on a hill, upon which the child falls asleep, and which must represent the breast of the Great Mother, only underscores the mystical relationship between the child and the earth.¹⁹

Even more directly connected with Bachofen is *Schilf*, already familiar to us from "Knabenteich." Reeds also grow in many other early poems and are for Bachofen "die Zeugen und Sinnbilder der regellosen Begattung von Wasser und Erde."²⁰ Matriarchal society is characterized by this unlimited fecundity, uninhibited by hierarchical structures imposed from the upper regions of light and air. Reeds, moreover, have the special function of revelation, which emphasizes the womb symbolism of the pond. The mystery of generation takes place invisibly to man "in den dunklen Gründen der feuchten Tiefe," but this secret process is betrayed to us by the reeds and the other plants which rise from the swamp: "In den Sumpfpflanzen, welche aus der Tiefe des Schlammes ans Licht emporwachsen, tritt die Frucht des in Selbstumarmung empfangenden Stoffes vor der Sterblichen Blick."²¹ When the boy in "Knabenteich" parts the reeds to spring into the water, we are of necessity forced to see in this the return to the very sources of generation in the womb of the Great Mother.

In the vision of the matriarchal culture with its attendant social features, concrete details as to the exact design of such society are of course lacking. In many respects, Huchel's use of Great Mother imagery serves to articulate a personal religion; that is, it is part of his attempt to come to terms with the problem of mortality, which is nothing other than the private expression of the dilemma of historicism. As Lothar Köhn has pointed out, the literature of the twenties can be seen as a unity only in terms of the attempt to overcome the terror of history which arises from the historicistic concept of time as unidirectional and irreversible.²² But Huchel's return to the archaic concept of reversible time, connected as it is with the Great Mother, does have definite political implications, and we can trace the affinities between them and the contemporary political alternatives.

For instance, it is possible to say that matriarchal society is compatible with the Marxist vision of society, insofar as both remove power from above and place it with the people. Bachofen's words "ununterschiedene Masse" and "Brüderlichkeit" express a kind of society opposed both to the power pyramid of authoritarian forms of government and to the atomistic society of capitalism. The absence of a male-oriented leadership cult is also essential to matriarchy

and is in principle compatible with the "dictatorship of the proletariat," while being opposed to the dream of the "conservative revolutionaries" of a new authoritarian state. The closest Huchel gets to a concrete proposal is his clear protest against unjust land distribution in "Der polnische Schnitter." Otherwise, Huchel's affinities to Marxism remain limited to a general sympathy with the working class and to the desire for a non-hierarchical self-rule of the people. As we know, however, Huchel was unwilling to submit to party discipline and never joined a Marxist party.²³ It seems clear from what has been said about the opposition between horizontal matriarchy and pyramidal patriarchy that for all his sympathies for Marxism, Huchel was only being consistent in rejecting the absolute authority of the party. The bureaucratic-authoritarian structure Communism had assumed by the late twenties was irreconcilable with the egalitarian spirit of matriarchy. As Werner Wilk has written:

Nein, es wäre auch wirklich allzuviel verlangt, sich diesen Lyriker als Kombattanten von Funktionären vorzustellen, deren Denken auf Parolen und Parteigehorsam reduziert wurde. Aber Marxist aus persönlicher Neigung mag er wohl immer gewesen sein.²⁴

Furthermore, it is obvious from the very sound of his verse that Huchel is not interested in teaching or in rousing his readers to action. As suggested earlier, the poet is primarily articulating a private response to the terror of history. In this sense, Huchel shows his allegiance to the old bourgeois tradition of *Innerlichkeit*, which places the inner world of imagination, profundity, truth, perfection of the personality, etc., in first place and looks with disdain on active involvement in outer or historical space. This emphasis on the inner life and on the cultivation of the *poeta doctus* tradition places Huchel once again in odd company: with the Germanic critics such as Lagarde and Langbehn, who railed against the mediocrity, vulgarity, and tastelessness of an increasingly industrialized Germany, and who feared that the process of social leveling would erase the cultural achievements of generations and forever prevent the hero and the genius from making their presences felt. The dazzlingly sensuous quality of Huchel's verse as well as his rejection of party authority are both clear statements of the rights of the individual to pursue his private vision of excellence.

To be fair, however, it must be admitted that Huchel had a much more sophisticated view of the dangers of social leveling than the Germanic critics, namely that on the one hand civil equality did not necessarily imply aesthetic mediocrity, and that on the other, elitism was not necessarily identical with heroics, or quality the same as power. In the pyramidal state the Germanic critics dreamed of, excellence in *Geist* naturally implied both power and heroism; indeed, the moral superiority of the Germans justified their grab for power. But Huchel's and Bachofen's matriarchy permitted, even encouraged the individual to excel, precisely by divorcing superiority from power. Each person in a matriarchal society, because he is in direct contact with the sources of divine creativity, has the opportunity to excel in his own way and has no need to displace others in the struggle to get nearer to these sources.

Judging from what has been said, the choice for Huchel after 1945 apparently

could have gone either way: parliamentary democracy in the West appeared to guarantee greater individual freedom; socialism in the East seemed to offer the better chance for *Brüderlichkeit*. Werner Wilk supposes that Huchel's job as editor of *Sinn und Form* may well have been the deciding factor in getting and keeping him in the East.²⁵ The other explanation for Huchel's decision for staying in the GDR, however, cannot be discounted, particularly since his sympathy with the peasants appears to have been genuine. When in 1945 and 1946 the land reform began in the Russian Occupation Zone, Huchel greeted the distribution of land among the peasants with an enthusiastic cycle of poems entitled "Das Gesetz." The reform must have seemed to him as at least the beginning of the kind of society which Bachofen had described so seductively. The problem was that no modern society can construct the preconditions of matriarchy without destroying itself in the process. Huchel's political thought was too much a part of his lyrical imagination to ever find embodiment in anything other than language.

Subsequent events such as the ceremonious tearing up of the deeds supposedly given to the peasants "forever," the amalgamation of the private plots into collectives, and Huchel's growing estrangement from the GDR because of his independent editorship of *Sinn und Form* lie outside the scope of this paper. At least for a few years, however, Huchel appears to have felt that his starting-point in mysticism was on its way to being fulfilled in politics. After this hope was destroyed, the old problem had to be faced again: mortality. His experiences in the war and his disappointments with socialism destroyed his youthful faith in the Great Mother, too. She was, after all, only a private dream. In the collection *Gezählte Tage*, which appeared in 1972, Huchel says farewell to his myth-permeated childhood world and at the same time permits his central concern to surface again, unsolved:

UNTER DER BLANKEN HACKE DES MONDS

werde ich sterben,
ohne das Alphabet der Blitze
gelernt zu haben.

Im Wasserzeichen der Nacht
die Kindheit der Mythen,
nicht zu entziffern.

Unwissend
stürz ich hinab,
zu den Knochen der Füchse geworfen.²⁶

NOTES

- 1 In the spring of 1975, Peter Huchel kindly granted me an interview at his home in Stauffen, near Freiburg im Breisgau. I am relying on my record of our conversation written down immediately thereafter.
- 2 Eduard Zak, "Der Dichter Peter Huchel," *Neue deutsche Literatur*, 1 (1953), 171.
- 3 Peter Huchel, *Die Sternenreue. Gedichte 1925-1947* (Munich: Piper, 1967), p. 14.

- 4 Johannes R. Becher, "Unsere Front," *Die Linkskurve*, 1 (1929), 1.
- 5 John Flores, *Poetry in East Germany* (New York/London: Yale U. Press, 1971), p. 128.
- 6 The version given here is from *Die Sternenreue*. It appeared for the first time, with slight deviations, in 1932 in *Die Kolonne*, 3 (1932), 27, and in *Neue lyrische Anthologie*, ed. Martin Raschke (Dresden: Jess, 1932). In the *Kolonne*-version, the fourth line of the first stanza reads: "die Rosen auf dem Wasser blühen"; in the second line of the second stanza, "liegt" stands for "blinkt"; and in the fifth line of the last stanza, "teichgrüntiefe" is written "teichgrün tiefe."
- 7 Dietrich Bode, *Georg Britting: Geschichte seines Werkes*, Diss. Marburg, 1960, p. 21.
- 8 Quoted by Zak, p. 167.
- 9 Heinrich Henel, "Erlebnisdichtung und Symbolismus," *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 32 (1958), 76.
- 10 *ibid.*, 77.
- 11 Quoted by Hans Brunnmayr, ed., Guido Zernatto, *Die Sonnenuhr* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1961), p. 137.
- 12 See Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 189-190.
- 13 Martin Greiffenhagen, *Das Dilemma des Konservatismus in Deutschland* (Munich: Piper, 1971), p. 66.
- 14 George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), p. 77.
- 15 Axel Vieregg, *Die Lyrik Peter Huchels. Zeichensprache und Privatmythologie* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1976). See esp. p. 20.
- 16 Joachim Rosteutscher. *Die Wiederkunft des Dionysos: Der Naturmystische Irrationalismus in Deutschland* (Bern: Francke, 1947), p. 51.
- 17 Johann Jacob Bachofen, *Mutterrecht und Urreligion*, ed. Rudolf Marx (Leipzig: Kröner, 1927), p. 132.
- 18 *ibid.*
- 19 As Vieregg comments, "er liegt im Mutterkraut 'Am Belfusshang', also ganz buchstäblich 'am Busen' der als Göttin Artemis erlebten Erde" (p. 104).
- 20 Bachofen, p. 55.
- 21 Bachofen, p. 76.
- 22 Lothar Köhn, "Die Überwindung des Historismus," *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 48 (1874), 704-766, and 49 (1975), 95-165.
- 23 See Huchel's autobiographical sketch (reworked and expanded by Hans A. Joachim), "Europa neunzehnhunderttraurig," *Die literarische Welt*, 7 (2 January 1931); rpt. in *Zeitgemässes aus der literarischen Welt*, ed. Willy Haas (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1963), p. 326.
- 24 Werner Wilk, "Peter Huchel," *Neue Deutsche Hefte*, 9 (1962), 87.
- 25 *ibid.*
- 26 Peter Huchel, *Gezählte Tage* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1972), p. 71.