Peter Huchel 1903-1981
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Peter Huchel's literary career spanned the period from the late 1920s through the 1970s. He made his literary debut during the Weimar Republic, and he continued to write during the Third Reich until his conscription into the armed forces in 1941. After his release from a Soviet prisoner of war camp in 1945, Huchel worked for the Berliner Rundfunk (Berlin Radio), then edited the literary magazine Sinn und Form (Meaning and Form).

Huchel was one of the collaborators on the newspaper Die Kolonne: Zeitung der Jungen Gruppe Dresden (The Crew: Newspaper of the Young Group Dresden), which appeared from 1929 until 1932. It was here that he published his poems. He won the Kolonne prize in 1932 for his poem “Der Knabenteich” (1932; The Boy's Pond). Die Kolonne served as a mouthpiece for a new and decidedly unpolitical type of poetry, a conscious break with the critical and political overtones of Expressionism. At this time, Huchel developed friendships with Ernst Bloch and Alfred Kantorowicz. From 1935 to 1940 Huchel wrote radio plays, an activity that would influence his career after the war.

In 1945 Huchel was held at the Soviet prisoner of war camp at Rüdersdorf where he underwent his antifascist reeducation. While in the camp he displayed his artistic talents, leading to a position developing the radio play department. He then rose to become cultural director of the Soviet-licensed Berliner Radiofunk, a position he held until 1949. Despite his indoctrination into communism at the prisoner of war camp, Huchel was not an activist. At the time, ideological purity was not necessary for cultural work. Huchel's lack of commitment to Communist Party ideology would later prove to be his downfall.

In 1949 the literary magazine Sinn und Form was founded and published under the auspices of the Akademie der Künste (Academy of Arts). Johannes R. Becher, the Culture Minister, appointed Huchel chief editor. This was an interesting choice because Huchel was not a Marxist, a fact that contributed to the content that Sinn und Form would have in the ensuing years. Under Huchel's leadership, Sinn und Form gained preeminent status in German literary life. He courted Western literature and succeeded in publishing a great deal of it. Huchel also refused to print Party maxims and avoided reviewing contemporary works. This enabled him to be independent of the constantly changing Party-influenced campaigns.

Huchel was dismissed from his post at Sinn und Form in 1962, but he had actually fallen into disgrace much earlier. He was first dismissed in 1952, but was reinstated in 1953 through the intervention of Bertolt Brecht. In 1959, Huchel was condemned at the Bitterfeld conference. Huchel's final dismissal occurred because he did not support socialist realism and the Bitterfelder Weg movement initiated by the cultural functionaries of the German Democratic Republic. Instead, he chose to publish a number of West German writers in his literary magazine at a time when the GDR was trying to solidify and define its own contributions to the cultural sphere. Huchel tended to think more in a Gesamtdeutsch or even European context.

Following the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, the GDR was able to shut itself off culturally. This enabled the party functionaries to dismiss Huchel as a perpetrator of “Westernisms.” He retained his post long enough to publish the final double issue of 1962. He managed to publish Brecht's “Rede über die Widerstandschaft der Vernunft” (Speech About the Resistance Strength of Reason). Further, Huchel published six of his own poems. In 1963 the culture minister; Kurt Hager, denounced the literary magazine for not having taken a stance in favor of the GDR. The Akademie der Künste replied that although the journal was supportive of the GDR, the section responsible for language and literature always deferred to Huchel's wishes.

Huchel's ideological distance from GDR cultural policies also played a role in his own texts. His early poetry can be classified as nature poetry, influenced by the time he spent at his grandfather's country estate during his childhood and youth. As time went on, he changed the focus of his poetry to reflect nature as the showplace for history, using nature metaphors to represent human and social conditions. Huchel was unable to reconcile his poetic works to the political-cultural ideology of the GDR. His works from the 1950s on display a cultural pessimism directly opposed to the GDR's promotion of progress. Following his dismissal from Sinn und Form, Huchel was isolated artistically. His texts grew increasingly dark and he left the nature themes behind, turning his attention to mythological and historical motifs. This remaining poetry was published in the West only after his emigration. Huchel's works did have considerable influence on subsequent generations of poets in the GDR, including Heinz Czechowski, Wulf Kirsten, and Uwe Grünig.

Following his firing, Huchel's house in Wilhelmshorst was watched and he was not permitted to travel. Indeed, even visitors were unwelcome. In 1971, he was again permitted to travel; he went first to Rome and then emigrated to West Germany,
where he died in April 1981. In December 1981, there was again a changing of the guard at Sinn und Form, and Wilhelm Girnus stepped down as editor. In his departing message, he made no mention of Huchel. Girnus's successor, Paul Wiens, took up this gauntlet in the first issue of 1982 and published four of Huchel's poems. In the annotation, Wiens also indicated Huchel's tenure as chief editor of the magazine.

Biography

Born in Berlin, 3 April 1903. Studied literature in Berlin, Freiburg, and Vienna; contributor to the literary magazines Die literarische Welt, Die Kolonne, and Das innere Reich, 1930; served in World War II, 1940–45, and was captured by the Russians; worked for the Berlin Broadcasting Company in various editorial and supervisory functions, 1945–48; editor-in-chief for the prominent East German literary magazine Sinn und Form, 1949–62; during the 1960s, Huchel was prohibited from leaving the country and placed under restricted visitation rights; moved to Rome, 1971, and eventually settled in West Germany. Austrian State Prize for European Literature, 1971. Died 30 April 1981.

Collections


Poetry

- Huchel, Peter *Gedichte*, 1948.
- Huchel, Peter *Chausseen Chausseen*, 1963.
- Huchel, Peter *Gezählte Tage*, 1972.
- Huchel, Peter *Der Tod der Bühner*, 1976.
- Huchel, Peter *Unbewohnbar die Trauer*, 1978.

Edited Work


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