

A Long Good-bye

Revisiting Christa Moog's Novel *Aus tausend grünen Spiegeln*
(1988)

Überhaupt ist das Lesen ein doppeltes Vergnügen, wenn man mit jemandem zusammenlebt, der sich für die gleichen Bücher interessiert.

Katherine Manfield*

By the time this novel appeared, was reviewed, celebrated (it won the ZDF »aspekte« prize), and reissued in paperback (Rowohlt, 1990), the so-called *Wende* was already well underway, which all but ensured that even now, over twenty-five years following its debut, *Aus tausend grünen Spiegeln* would remain a bit of a sleeper, an insider's tip. At that time it was the unfortunate *Literaturstreit*, focused on Christa Wolf and her slender book *Was bleibt* (1990), that dominated the discussion of literature and politics in Germany. For several years, that rhetorically overblown debate, which resurged after the 1992 revelation of Wolf's status as a Stasi IM (»informeller Mitarbeiter«) in the early 1960s, sucked the oxygen out of virtually any room in which German literature was being discussed. Perhaps we were caught on the horns of Schirrmacher and Greiner's false dichotomy – between aesthetically sophisticated and politically engaged literature – and therefore less able to perceive those marvelous specimens, such as this novel by Christa Moog, that deftly combine both elements. *Aus tausend grünen Spiegeln* is not, however, a book that wears its politics on its sleeve. Rather, it introduces itself as an absorbingly dense travel and coming-of-age narrative that gently, and then only gradually and partially, reveals the story of the narrator's difficult departure from the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Yet this narrative strand builds and thickens as the novel progresses, leaving us, in the end, with the impression that the entire novel constitutes a long and painful good-bye.

The young woman who pens the letters that comprise this voluptuous novel is no less enthusiastic and full of wonder than Werther during his manic

* | Quotation from Katherine Manfield's diary (1 May 1908), as cited in the novel on p. 311 (italics in orig.). All citations are from the Rowohlt Taschenbuch edition (Reinbek 1990).

phase. Against all odds – and with very little money – she manages to follow in the footsteps of the great British writer known (ultimately) as Katherine Mansfield, whose work she got to know in the GDR. This trek takes her all over the world – to France, Italy, Switzerland, the United States, England, and of course to New Zealand, where Mansfield grew up. Beyond this quest for Mansfield, conventional story or plot is not really the point here: We are meant to experience the confusion that necessarily results from eavesdropping on letters rife with referents and allusions we can only gradually piece together – like attempting to make sense of fragmented images refracted by a thousand murky mirrors. And we are meant also to enjoy the twists and turns of discovery that await her at each new destination. Rather than an Aristotelian narrative arc, *Aus tausend grünen Spiegeln* offers a meandering river with surprises around each bend. Our narrator is a modern day pícaro.

Of course Moog is simultaneously taking the reader on an incredible journey, though one not quite identical to her narrator's. The latter is obsessed with Katherine Mansfield, whereas we may not be – nor not yet. More worthy of attention, I would suggest, is the way in which Moog entices us, her readers, to share this fascination in some fundamental way – that is, the way in which she infects us, who may know little or nothing of Mansfield, with a curiosity that makes us spiritual allies, even conspirators with the narrator. So the book's success simply cannot rely on our *prior* commitment to Mansfield (as is the case with our plucky protagonist); for that would imply a rather small print run indeed, intended only for Mansfield devotees.

Katherine Mansfield, as she is gradually revealed to us in this novel, is an icon of self-reinvention, of unceasing self-reflection, and perpetual motion. She fled her home in New Zealand and took up with one partner after another (women and men), though she was married to her work as a writer no less devotedly than Kafka; neither, by the way, was she any more capable of sustaining a committed relationship than he. She changed homes, countries, and lovers in the space of a few short years more frequently than most people do in the course of a life time. Her often poignant love letters to her husband, John Murry, both hide and reveal a sham marriage. She is rarely fully satisfied with her prose; she is her own harshest critic; and deems herself the eternal outsider, foreigner. She dies at such a young age that no matter what little we may know about her and her work she must remain a profound mystery.

The book is haunted by her ghost, by what she might have been and done and written. The cover illustration for the Rowohlt paperback edition features an artistically enhanced headshot of Mansfield, who at first glance appears to be looking straight at us, meeting our gaze and presenting herself openly. But this turns out to be wrong: she is actually looking past or through us, above our eye-line. It is impossible to situate the book so that »our« eyes actually meet. What Moog has achieved in this winding odyssey is to get us to join with the narrator in the »hunt« for Mansfield.

Moog is asking nothing less than that we consider the nature of art and artistic inspiration. What does it mean to undertake such an aesthetic pilgrimage? Where do we draw the boundary between smitten reader and beloved author? Here we have the opportunity to watch a young woman »use« literature not only to understand but to change her life (we are reminded, with reference to Marx, that both are necessary). And in the process we observe the creation of literature itself: »So macht man Literatur!« – she exclaims, as she observes how Mansfield mounts an excerpt from one of her personal letters almost verbatim into her working journal (298).

Our letter-writing narrator recapitulates and embodies many of Mansfield's own attributes. The book is in equal measure about her sojourn, which as I've said begins in the GDR. No doubt the authorities sanctioned the publication of Mansfield's work in the GDR because of its evident critique of bourgeois society. What they didn't reckon with, I would wager, is the way in which Mansfield could prove subversive of the GDR regime as well. However, I do not wish to nail this novel to the procrustean bed of Cold War politics; it is by no means simply a coded kind of GDR critique. Indeed, in the narrator's regret of the mindless economic »development« of some of the places Mansfield lived – soulless new construction that has all but obliterated the author's traces – we catch a powerful, if muted, critique of western capitalism: »Die Spuren sind verwischt von Kränen und Betonmischnmaschinen ...« (307). Neither does Santa Monica (California), with its race and class tensions, come off very well (153). Yet in the way in which this novel above all enshrines a boundless love of travel, celebrates unceasing self-refashioning, and promotes unfettered self-discovery through the free and ruthless pursuit of art, how could it not *also* constitute a source of opposition to GDR strictures?

»Sie beobachtet genau,« the narrator says of Mansfield, »und hat ein Gespür dafür, welche Details wichtig sind, um etwas Bestimmtes deutlich zu machen. Sie schreibt auf, was sie erlebt. Mut, Humor, Ehrgeiz, Lust am Schreiben macht sie Geschichten daraus, die wahrheitsgetreue Situationsschilderungen des Lebens in diesem Kurbad sind« (72). The narrator's enthusiasm is palpable, but it is not for lack of a developed literary taste: she does not shy away from bold comparisons with major figures (such as Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, and James Joyce, to name but a few) – always in Mansfield's favor. In assessing Mansfield's strength, she could of course just as well be describing her own aesthetic strategy, which mirrors a world view she has come to cherish: the conviction that each moment has equal value, is in fact precious, and that the present is not to be subordinated to some future, grand resolution of conflict. This is not just a GDR theme, to be sure. After all, it comes from Mansfield herself and therefore dates from a time prior to the founding of that state. But we can be forgiven, I think, for also seeing in this a pointed rejection of the dreary »five-year-plan« mentality that required East Germans to put up with environmental pollution

(see, e. g., 220, 302) and extremely modest consumer amenities in the name of a grand plan that would culminate, one day, in a truly egalitarian society.

There can be no final conclusion to this journey because, as the fictional letters have been suggesting all along, the »story« has no particular telos, no clear trajectory that can possibly culminate in resolution. This attribute of the novel imitates what the narrator praises about Mansfield's prose: »Für mich ist es ihre schönste [Geschichte]. Der Schluss ist wunderbar offen« (195). It is no coincidence that the novel takes its title from a Mörike poem, »Besuch in Urach,« that undoes the firm sense of progressive, linear time. In this poem, past and present flow subversively together, with no clear sense of chronological boundary or border. The narrator quotes it, lovingly, from memory: »Aus tausend grünen Spiegeln scheint zu gehen/Vergangne Zeit, die lächelnd mich verwirrt ...« (133; see also 247, 277), and finds that it fits her situation perfectly: »Wie das passt« (133)! Indeed it does: This novel lives in its many parts, in its almost unending paratactic constructions, in the multitudinous travel vignettes suffused with a sense of unguarded wonder. Along with the narrator – and perhaps with Mansfield herself – we fall in love with the journey. Regarding the death of the Mansfield expert, Guy Norman Morris, she writes: »Er starb wie seine Heroin Katherine Mansfield. Immer noch suchend« (218). That could serve as this novel's epitaph.

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Christa Moog: Aus tausend grünen Spiegeln. Reinbeck: Rowohlt Verlag 1988;
315 pp.