

## INTRODUCTION

With Arno Schmidt's death in 1979 a life's work ended which must be unique in post-war German writing for its single-minded devotion to the idea of literature. Such an unwavering commitment to the writer's craft in many ways seems anachronistic. For Schmidt remains anomalous among modern writers, as much 'ein Verirrter aus dem 18ten Jahrhundert'<sup>1</sup> (*Triton* 257) as a radical experimenter with the novel form and with language. There are undoubtedly biographical reasons behind this, which will emerge if the circumstances of his life and self-education become better known. This cannot concern us here, but the vexed question of Schmidt's modernity offers a useful starting point for this – tentative and early – study of his work.

All the more so in the light of a recent polemic by the Viennese avant-gardist Oswald Wiener.<sup>2</sup> Hans Michael Bock is no doubt right when he perceives in Wiener's attack 'ein Titanenkampf um die Krone der literarischen Avantgarde',<sup>3</sup> for Wiener himself owns that it is the general celebration of Schmidt as the great radical in modern German writing which troubles him: 'denn mehr und mehr nimmt Schmidt den platz in der öffentlichen meinung ein, der einer echten experimentellen literatur gebührte oder der ihr wenigstens offenzuhalten wäre, da sie derzeit nicht stark genug ist ihn zu erobern'.<sup>4</sup>

This in itself conveys the problem which Schmidt's texts face: they raise expectations about their innovative nature which they do not always fulfil. Yet beyond such misunderstandings I think that there are matters of substance involved here which can help us to situate Schmidt's writing, however tentatively, in the context of modern experimental writing and its tendencies, of which Wiener may be said to be representative in several ways. Wiener objects, for instance, to the very devotion to literature as

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an idea and as a tradition which characterizes Schmidt's whole enterprise: 'er will irgendwie die schriftstellerei retten, sie soll so eine instanz sein wie zum beispiel wissenschaft aber er bleibt immer in den alten auffassungen drinnen er kommt nie zu einem radikalen zweifel, es is immer noch die dichtmaschine'.<sup>5</sup>

That Schmidt never arrives at a 'radical doubt' about the value of literature must probably be conceded, despite his views on experience and, to an extent, on language. This adherence to a traditional concept distinguishes him from the kind of position Wiener represents.<sup>6</sup> The mixture, paradoxical as it is, of the innovative and the traditional, of a fragmented experience but a literature which retains its integrity, is characteristic of Schmidt.

Wiener can help us further to define Schmidt's position. In his opinion, Schmidt remains within traditional habits of thought in a wider sense, which prevents him from contributing to the revision of basic attitudes to the self, society and language (on a fundamental level) which is currently being undertaken on many fronts. In the characteristic context of Schmidt's fascination with details, Wiener writes:

statt einer einzigen neuen beobachtung, statt einer neuen formulierung gibt uns SCHMIDT rauhe mengen von naturwundern aus dem bildungsschatz des lexikonlesers, statt eines einzigen details, welches revision des rahmens erforderte, in welchem es detail ist, häuft er uns den schutt ewig wiederholter und bestens bekannter einzelheiten aus den zyklen einer sozialen maschine.<sup>7</sup>

Leaving aside for the moment the central importance of details of all kinds for Schmidt (to which we shall have occasion to return frequently) one should point out that Wiener's criticism has weight in at least two ways. First, and this is clear from Wiener's argument as a whole, Schmidt does not question the frame of reference in which a detail is given – in other words he retains the notion of language as communication, and the concomitant one of fiction as

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-15523-6 - Arno Schmidt: A Critical Study of his Prose

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representation. Schmidt's dogged commitment to the idea of 'Abbildung' – by which he understands the representation of a knowable consciousness – is perhaps the major distinguishing feature between him and proponents of Modernism and post-modern experimental writing at least since *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. In insisting upon the idea of the representation of consciousness Schmidt fails to fulfil one of the broadest conditions of Modernism.

We need to expand upon this point before taking up the second issue raised by Wiener in the quotation above. Schmidt's ambition to improve the veracity of fictional representation of consciousness links him in this respect to the Naturalism of the stream of consciousness writers. The model here is, if not Joyce himself, then the image of him in the responses of his first generation of interpreters, as of someone who had developed ways of rendering the reality of subjective experience in a more profound way. But this identification of Schmidt with the writers of the stream of consciousness, the heirs of Naturalism and the forerunners of Modernism, is confusing, for he retains older concepts of the nature and status of literature, and of the role of the narrator, which they conspicuously abandoned.

When Schmidt talks of 'realism' (as he often does) or even of 'naturalism' (as he sometimes does), he seems to be using the words less as literary conventions and more in the everyday sense of 'facing up to reality', of 'being realistic' about something. The German people, he writes in *Kübe in Halbtrauer* (1964), have obstinately refused 'im Zokkeltrab [ihrer] 2000-jährigen Geschichte [ . . . ], je etwas mit Realität zu schaffen zu haben' (*KiH* 240); the protagonist in 'Caliban über Setebos' records 'die lächerliche Unrealistik sämtlicher bisherijen Literatur' (*KiH* 307). And 'facing up to reality' in Schmidt's terms is equivalent to displaying the dignity and human assertion possible in literature. Hence Schmidt can throw our received categories of literary history into disarray by talking of the gesture of

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978-0-521-15523-6 - Arno Schmidt: A Critical Study of his Prose

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‘verwegenster Realismus’ as the essential characteristic of the Romantics’ response to life (*RvG* 235).

In other words, while accepting without question the possibility of a form of representation, Schmidt is quite unconcerned by the whole argument about Realism as a genre, a convention or a criterion of literary value. His belief in the purpose and justification of literature is untroubled by his view of the inadequacy of human perception and of the adverse circumstances in which man finds himself in the world. Indeed, literature takes its very force and dignity from its role as the medium in which man ‘represents’ perceptual inadequacy and the adversity of circumstances, for in thus representing what cannot be controlled or changed, it stands as a gesture of self-assertion in the face of a hostile world.

What we have here, and what lies behind Wiener’s dissatisfaction on this point, is Schmidt’s simple and untroubled attitude to the premises from which literature proceeds. The block in Schmidt’s thinking which prevents his views of reality and experience from influencing his traditional view of the nature and value of literature can also be seen in his attitude to form and content. His experimental prose forms for the representation of consciousness are – for him – formal concerns which are not to be confused with the content which may be conveyed through them. This is apparent, for instance, in his celebration of Wieland, whose formally innovative *Aristipp*, according to Schmidt, made possible the ‘Bewältigung’ of a ‘“Fülle” menschlicher und geistiger Ereignisse’ (*ReP* 283–4). That is to say, they facilitated the transmission of certain kinds of content (‘Ereignisse’) which exist quite independently of the form in which they are expressed. Similarly, one supposes, Schmidt’s own innovations will simply provide the apparatus necessary to transmit other kinds of content from the cornucopia of human and spiritual events – we are back with the notion that all forms of human experience can be

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978-0-521-15523-6 - Arno Schmidt: A Critical Study of his Prose

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represented as long as the appropriate forms are devised. The question hanging over the reliability of our perceptions, which Schmidt takes very seriously, does not, for him, spill over into a questioning about the nature and status of fictionality and language. If *Finnegans Wake* can, in Beckett's words, not be about anything, but only be that thing itself, then *Zettel's Traum* must be owned to be about Edgar Allan Poe, at least to some significant extent, as well as about several other discernible issues, including its own constitution.

The quest for greater objectivity which is the starting point of Schmidt's work does not, then, interfere in Schmidt's case, as it might be said to have done in the case of the German Naturalists, with an implicit acceptance of a quality one might term literariness, with, that is, a feeling that writing is a justified human undertaking, far exceeding less fundamental arguments about Realism.

Schmidt, in fact, displays something of the productive self-consciousness of the period in the history of the novel before the issue of impersonality ever arose, of such as Sterne, Smollett, Fielding and Wieland, strongly modified by more characteristically twentieth-century views on the limitations of experience, of man's perceptual abilities. But we can distinguish him from another aspect of modern fiction in this context by reference to Robert Alter's exposition of the novel as a self-conscious genre. Schmidt, despite his affinities with the self-conscious tradition, does not, like other twentieth-century proponents of the self-conscious novel according to Alter, appear beset by 'brooding metaphysical or meta-historical doubts about the stuff of reality'.<sup>8</sup> Schmidt's basic view of the world is too stable to justify such eloquent glosses; for him experience may be fragmentary, but what there *is* can be relied upon, and progress of a sort is possible.

It would, I think, be wrong to suggest that Schmidt's affinities with the eighteenth-century self-conscious narrator

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represented at the same time a modern questioning of fictionality and its paradoxes – for in Schmidt the allusion to himself as the originator of his texts is not a way of entering an epistemological jungle or a hall of mirrors, but simply a frankness regarding his own position which reflects the feeling that, although there may be no audience for his writing (which view simply increases the clear outlines of Schmidt's self-definition), his activity is self-validating and unproblematic.

At a fundamental level this traditionalism manifests itself in Schmidt's insistence upon the integrity of the subject – an attitude which further distinguishes him from the position of a Wiener.<sup>9</sup> From *Leviathan* (1949) to *Abend mit Goldrand* (1975) we retain an impression of the subject, of the full personality of the author as determining, grounding or justifying the fiction he produces. Linked to this is Schmidt's rejection of the aesthetic cult of impersonality and the allied notion of the work of art or literature as artifacts, as 'musical' in organization, to use the terminology of Walter Sokel's book on German literary expressionism (a movement with some claim to be a manifestation of Modernism), *The Writer in Extremis*.<sup>10</sup> Schmidt's attitude here is of a piece with his view of the writer's role (that the writer *has* a clear role is never in doubt) – the role of representation ('Abbildung') of reality (however patchy our perceptions of it), as a step towards human control ('Beherrschung') of it (*Re&P* 284). From this stable and anachronistic position the fiction is existentially validated and inalienably an emanation of the human mind; language a tool for naming and humanizing, literature a front upon which a hostile universe is bravely combated. In theory at least, Schmidt avoids the notion of literature as a self-justifying artifact, of a game, a pattern, a prolonged and ultimately desolate flirtation with its own meaninglessness – the glimpse of the void beyond confessed artificiality of which Alter speaks as characteristic of much modern fiction. And, however much,

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978-0-521-15523-6 - Arno Schmidt: A Critical Study of his Prose

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in practice, Schmidt extends the function of language beyond a transparent representational medium, his conception of language is always pronouncedly anthropocentric; man uses language, language does not use man. Schmidt's own reading of Freud, as we shall see, tends to reinstate man as a controller or overseer of his productions in language, beyond the undermining operated by the manifestation of the unconscious in words and mental processes.

All these unmodern elements in Schmidt's work must be conceded in the face of Wiener's attack, although it must surely remain a matter of preference whether we regard them as invalidating weaknesses. One is inclined to agree with Wolfgang Proß when he accuses Wiener's view of being unduly normative: 'Es ist jedoch nicht einzusehen, weshalb nur *ein* stilistisches oder methodisches Vorgehen legitimer Ausdruck eines Zeitstils sein soll'.<sup>11</sup> The only context in which Wiener's attack, as we have discussed it thus far, is valid, is as a discouragement to superficial responses to Schmidt's eccentricities, which tend to stand in the way of a differentiated grasp of his aims and achievements.

There is, however, an element of Wiener's attack, implied in the quotation above, which we have not yet discussed, and which brings us into an area in which I admit to a feeling of uneasiness with respect to Schmidt's work. I think it is as well to air this feeling at the outset of this study. When Wiener talks of the 'zyklen einer sozialen maschine' he is raising the pertinent question of the social relevance of Schmidt's writing. Manfred Mixner characterizes this aspect of Wiener's objection in the following rather tortuous way:

Wenn er Arno Schmidt vorwirft, das Konvolut "Zettels Traum" entbehre der Originalität, sei zuwenig innovativ [ . . . ], so steht dahinter die Erfahrung, daß in jeder Form der Diskursivität, soll in ihr dem Internalisierungsmechanismus von Macht/Herrschaft/Verfügbarkeit entgangen werden, die immer normierenden und der

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978-0-521-15523-6 - Arno Schmidt: A Critical Study of his Prose

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Kommunikation im Wege stehenden (sprachlichen) Vermittlungsformen durch deren Thematisierung zumindest irritiert werden müssen.<sup>12</sup>

Gerald Graff, in the article to which we have already referred, gives a clearer summary of the kind of position from which Wiener is criticizing Schmidt: 'Not only have the older social, moral and epistemological claims for art seemingly been discredited, but art has come to be seen as a form of complicity, another manifestation of lies and hypocrisy through which the bourgeoisie has maintained its power.'<sup>13</sup> It must be clear from what has gone before, that Schmidt retains elements of these older claims for art and does not share this sense of art as complicity, and although we may not choose to endorse Wiener's particular form of radicalism, I think the fact remains that Schmidt in his work on consciousness has failed to reflect upon those aspects of consciousness which bear upon our constitution as social beings. It might be argued that his thoroughgoing subjectivity becomes a culpable self-indulgence, and that, from this point of view, his unquestioning adherence to certain traditional notions of literature have led him into a kind of isolation from which radicalism like that of Wiener attempts to find an escape. It might be that Schmidt's insistence upon the integrity of the subject within his writing is bought at a very high cost. This, at all events, is the implication of the following passage by Jörg Drews:

Wo Objektives nicht mehr verbürgt ist, buchstabiert sich das Subjekt allein wieder die Welt zusammen. Im Effekt bedeutet dies zweierlei: Einmal liegt in dieser total subjektivierten Rekonstruktion der Welt der Reiz der Schmidtschen Romane beschlossen, in denen wenigstens nicht mehr vorgegeben wird, im Chaos and Irrsinn dieser Welt lasse sich objektiver Sinn ausmachen. Zum andern aber bleibt festzuhalten, daß nur in der poetisch-idiosynkratischen Welt der Romane Schmidts das Subjekt diese Bedeutung noch hat, die ihm in der hochtechnisierten, anonymisierenden Industriegesellschaft längst nicht mehr zukommt.<sup>14</sup>

The kind of strategy employed by Wiener and other



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German language post-modernists has been analysed by Victor Lange in his essay 'Language as the Topic of Modern Fiction'.<sup>15</sup> In this piece Lange refers to the work of Heißenbüttel, Wiener, and Jürgen Becker as demonstrating a self-consciously 'anti-subjective' use of language, for in the kind of socially imposed anonymity evoked by Drets in the passage just quoted, the novelist (and Lange is paraphrasing an argument of Heißenbüttel) 'must [ . . . ] represent in the future not so much the problematical nature of a subjective consciousness as the external evidence of social behaviour'<sup>16</sup> and the way to do this is to concentrate upon 'an exploration of the perspectives of the world of language that determine our experience'.<sup>17</sup> Although Lange seems to include Schmidt in his list of writers engaged in such attempts to escape solipsism, this must surely be wrong (the inclusion of Wiener in the same list speaks for itself).

This is to say that, whatever else Schmidt has achieved, he has not found or even attempted to find a way out of the social isolation consequent upon his concentration upon consciousness and subjectivity. While it seems excessively normative to censure a writer for choosing one particular area of concern to the exclusion of others, it may nevertheless be that this particular consequence of Schmidt's anachronistic position, instead of being productive (as I believe other aspects of it are), actually limits the interest and value Schmidt has for contemporary readers, beyond a small circle of admirers. One part of his work still suffers from the 'destructive preoccupation with the fathoming of consciousness' of which Lange speaks as characteristic of an earlier twentieth-century generation.<sup>18</sup>

It may also be relevant to mention that adherence to a traditional aesthetic need not exclude a concern for a social relevance in serious fiction as it does progressively in Schmidt's work. The thoroughgoing radicalism of Wiener and Heißenbüttel is not the only possible means of escape from a world of solipsism (how could it be?), and the work

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of Grass, to name an eminent example, attests from the early additions to *Die Blechtrommel* onwards a serious concern for the relationship between literature, conceived in terms no less traditional than those of Schmidt, and the reality and demands of social and political experience.

The subjective and isolated (and hence isolating) nature of Schmidt's writing becomes more apparent from book to book, although his initial project was the naive one of discovering workable conventions for the transmission and sharing of personal experience. This hope, which Schmidt soon came to see as impracticable, is a remnant of Schmidt's adherence to the traditional social or communicative claim for literature. The resulting bitterness, sometimes appearing as disdain for his readers, replaces any attempt to reflect upon ways of achieving and maintaining access to actual readers within the given social and historical circumstances. We must simply accept this negative consequence of Schmidt's position, for from this same position flow all the positive contributions he has made to the possibilities of writing since the Second World War.

One of the most common symptoms of the hasty identification of Schmidt with a vaguely defined Modernism is the label 'The German Joyce'.<sup>19</sup> Schmidt's attitude to Joyce could do with some clarification in this context, because it is a highly personal one. Schmidt never took his cues from the fashions around him, and although he did much for the reception of Joyce in Germany by initiating the debate about Goyert's translation of *Ulysses* in the 1950s,<sup>20</sup> and by writing and broadcasting on *Finnegans Wake*, his preoccupation with Joyce remained a kind of extension of his own vast plan of self-projection and definition, so that Fritz Senn could write of Schmidt's essays on Joyce and the *Wake* in *Der Triton mit dem Sonnenschirm* (1969): 'Das Ergebnis (Interpretation wie Lesbarmachung) ist nicht immer echter Joyce, aber zweifellos immer echter Arno Schmidt'.<sup>21</sup>