

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Stefan Heym was a rebel long before he reached the German Democratic Republic, but he proved to be that country's first, one of its most popular, and certainly one of its most successful dissidents. He was, typically, centrally involved in the journalistic pressure on the GDR government prior to its resignation, and he was one of the first to take a symbolic step through the Berlin Wall. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Heym did not allow himself to be either muzzled by censorship or to be harassed into exile in West Germany. He maintained his sharply critical position despite all dangers, and he completed no fewer than thirty-six years of open, serious disagreement with the government and its official bodies. No study of East German literature, or even East German history, is complete without substantial reference to his achievements.

Given the wide range of activities in which Heym has been involved, there is no difficulty in finding a succession of adjectives to describe his personality. The most obvious, in an approximate order of celebrity are: courageous, shrewd, versatile, indefatigable, committed, outspoken, single-minded. As the list suggests, Heym does not choose easy options, and he has never relied on others for support. He has therefore had to struggle, simply in order to survive, at virtually every stage of his career.

Heym has proved remarkably uncomfortable a person to the regimes under which he has lived, and he has been a form of outsider in every society in which he has existed: the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, the USA, and the GDR. His early revolt against National Socialism resulted in teenage exile. Yet

Heym's enforced travels had positive consequences. His writing was to benefit considerably from his experience of widely differing political systems, life styles, reading habits, and tastes. In addition, exile brought linguistic advantages. The need to compose in a language other than his own ultimately led to Heym becoming one of the most distinguished self-translators of our age. He translated virtually all his own novels, which have consequently appeared in at least two languages. The majority have been translated into many other tongues, ranging from Russian, Polish, Czech and Hungarian, to Chinese, Greek and Tamil.

It would be a mistake, however, to concentrate exclusively on Heym's work as a novelist when attempting to assess his achievement. Although his greatest works have been in the form of fiction, his investigative journalism has made him accessible to readers on a much wider scale, and his journalistic activity has nourished and inspired much of his fictional composition. This study will consequently devote much space to the relationship between Heym's active political life and his writing. It has, of course, been his journalism which has often placed him so firmly and so regularly at the centre of political events, with his reformist zeal repeatedly contributing to the early development of the German Democratic Republic. Like most successful journalists, Heym had to show considerable courage in his preparedness to investigate and to publish, and in some respects it is remarkable that he was never imprisoned for his candour. He has stood against what he felt to be unacceptable in a succession of different societies (the militarism of the National Socialists, US imperialism, East German Stalinism and dogmatism), and in his fiction he has repeatedly used the figure of the struggling intellectual as a focus for broad inquiries into the nature of truth, and into the influence and corruption of power. He has repeatedly asked uncomfortable questions, using his own brand of practical, commonsense socialism as an ideal, and as a result he has enjoyed tremendous popular support. His personal bravery has been a key factor in encouraging other East German dissidents to resist the demands of the government and the censorship office, thus

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[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

paving the way for the 'new' GDR literature of the eighties. This study will pay much attention to the calculated risks which Heym regularly took, one of the most dangerous of which resulted in a nationally significant paragraph in the penal code, the so-called 'Lex Heym'.

Critics have found it difficult to classify Heym, partly as a result of his exceptional linguistic ability. For a period he was avoided by West German critics, for although he was attractive as a gifted and dissident East German, he nevertheless wrote in English, defended the concept of socialism, and did not conform to any clear patterns in eastern development. He was obviously shunned by East German critics, since for a number of years his writing was effectively banned in their country; and even when he was allowed publication, critics could never be sure when he might again fall from favour. Yet he was also avoided by English-language critics, because his work did not follow any English or American traditions, and most of it had to be related to the German scene. Consequently, despite the fact that his novels have always received widespread reviews, there have only been two books devoted to him. One of them a highly detailed study of his novel *Ahasver*, the other a fairly short, and rather inadequate survey of his life and work. The collapse of the GDR, and the unification of Germany, provide an ideal moment to assess Heym's political, as well as his literary, achievements.

Several of Heym's novels have been bestsellers, and it was also reckoned that his column in an East Berlin newspaper used to be a considerable bolster to sales of that paper. It would be wrong, however, to deduce from this that Heym in any way panders to the sensationalist or other needs of certain readers. His newspaper stories may regularly be concerned with controversial issues, and his novels with major events of our age, but Heym's approach is always reflective, dialectic, and historical. One of his main tasks – in whatever medium he has chosen – is to make his readers *think*. He is never satisfied with narrative alone. He sees his task as exploiting a story in order to force reflection on those aspects of his readers' lives which they may take for granted, on forces in history, on such key concepts

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Peter Hutchinson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

Stefan Heym

as 'freedom', 'democracy', and 'socialism'. He is also very much concerned with the limits of political and moral freedom, and the way in which history may be seen to repeat itself.

Heym's interest in traditional liberal values stretches through the majority of his novels and is regularly associated with a common liberal dilemma: the question of compromise in the attainment of one's ideals. This is an issue with which Heym saw the East German government repeatedly confronted, but it was one he had raised in his earliest fiction and his position was thus well established long before he was to castigate that government for its inconsistency. For Heym, compromise is a clear indication of moral inadequacy. Nor is passive resistance a sufficient response. Repressed societies need those who are prepared to stand firm or to fight. Progress tends to be achieved only by martyrdom. Perhaps not surprisingly for one who has remained consistent to his own ideals, Heym's choice of martyr figures is itself consistent. His preferred central character is the embattled intellectual, who is sometimes uneasy in the role of campaigner for human or civil rights. But in those cases where such a figure fails to engage in the battle, the result is not only detrimental to the cause: the individual himself is undone. Bravery, even of the most modest form, will achieve far more than the most subtle of compromises. The reason for this is simple: the forces of reaction can never be trusted. The evil and the powerful are ruthless in seeking their own selfish aims, and they surround themselves with brutal henchmen and fearful sycophants.

All these characters tend to be male. Heym's females are almost invariably background figures, self-sacrificing, often denying themselves for their more self-centred, ambitious, and sexually easily distracted partners. Intellectually often more limited, they nevertheless possess far stronger intuitive gifts and emotional resources which play a key protective and supportive role.

Those aspects of Heym's writing which one tends to praise first are his clarity, his logic, his creation of character. He also has a discriminating eye for detail, and he can develop his themes through use of dramatic confrontation and vigorous

Introduction

5

dialogue. It often tends to be overlooked, but Heym is also a witty writer. It is not coincidental he should have chosen to write his MA dissertation on Heinrich Heine, and like his great forerunner, he has been a Jewish exile with a love–hate relationship to his homeland. Heym, like Heine, began as a poet, but he adapted himself to those areas in which his main strength lay, and where the age in which he lived could best be influenced. ‘If Heine had lived today, then he would have been on television’ Heym once jested in conversation, and television was in fact one of the most successful ways in which he tried to reach his East German audience. Unable to feature on the programmes in his own country, he regularly made himself available as a guest on West German channels. These channels were naturally received in the East, and in this way the author managed to reach a public to which he was otherwise denied access. Like Heine, then, Heym outwitted the censors, and he also took a particular delight in outwitting the party bureaucrats. His desire to reach his public is equally evident in the large number of interviews which he has given over the years. He was a favourite of western television producers, who found his forceful personality ideal for discussion programmes, particularly about the Third Reich and the future of Germany, and he was also popular with newspapers and literary critical journals. Heym was – and remains – in demand as an interviewee for two reasons. As a newspaper man himself, he knows what journalists need: he does not dodge questions, and he can combine the telling and witty anecdote with an underlying serious argument which may well have universal interest. In addition, Heym is remarkably well informed on all aspects of world events. He is an avid reader of newspapers, he has an excellent memory, he can formulate his thoughts quickly, even under pressure, and produce the ideal mixture of provocative statement, philosophical reflection, casual aperçu, cautious prediction, and literary insight – all this without padding, without cliché, without jargon.

In this study I intend to trace the development of Heym up to his most recent publications, giving more attention than usual to his earliest and practically unknown pieces of poetry,

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Peter Hutchinson
Excerpt
[More information](#)

6

Stefan Heym

prose, and drama. I shall show how in the thinking and the methods of his youth we can detect the seeds of his mature approach, and how his presentation of ideas has been changed and sharpened in response to different political climates.

CHAPTER 2

The early years: revolt and exile

One is surprised by two features of Heym's earliest years as a professional writer: first, his youth, and second, his versatility. By the age of twenty-two he had published poetry, fiction, newspaper articles and reviews, and two of his dramas had been performed. He might well have wished a more gradual start to his career, but the choice was not his: as an exile from Nazi Germany, he was forced to write simply in order to survive. And to write, moreover, in anonymity. 'Stefan Heym' is one of several *noms de plume* under which his first pieces appeared.

Helmut Flieg was born in the industrial city of Chemnitz on 10 April 1913.¹ His father, Daniel, was married to the much younger Elsa, only daughter of a successful textile businessman, and a second child was born to the Fliegs in the spring of 1918. The whole family was Jewish, and Daniel worked for his father-in-law's company in an executive capacity. Throughout the boys' youth the Fliegs therefore enjoyed a sound financial existence, and for a period in the twenties, when the textile industry was flourishing, they moved to a large house in one of the more prestigious parts of the town. But depression affected them like others, and a return to the original flat proved necessary after a few years.

Heym's memoirs, *Nachruf*, gives us an idea of Helmut Flieg's youth and of those influences which shaped his adolescence. The impression is of a boy with a rich imagination, precocious and questioning; isolated from others through his intelligence, his family's comparative affluence, and his Jewish faith, a faith he found difficulty in accepting fully. Particular literary

influences would appear to have been Schiller, and, among modern writers, Erich Kästner, Kurt Tucholsky, and Walter Mehring. Kästner himself was actually invited to read from his work in Chemnitz at the instigation (and organisation) of the young Flieg. The theatre flourished in the town at that point, and Flieg was fortunate enough to have several contacts among the actors. Indeed, he wrote a play himself during his school years, and this was actually staged in an amateur production by his Jewish contemporaries. Nothing has remained of any early experiments, however, and for literary purposes his career begins abruptly, and frighteningly, on 7 September 1931. On that day the local social-democratic newspaper, the *Chemnitzer Volksstimme*, published a poem simply entitled 'Exportgeschäft'. It is polemical and satirical, and furthermore, it attacks an aspect of German army policy which had been reported on the previous day – the decision by General von Seeckt to send instructors to Chiang Kai Shek's army in China. It was a bold move to publish such a poem at this point (the newspaper was actually banned in 1933), and even bolder for its author to couch his criticism in such openly scornful tones. The poem, in fact, derives its effects from a macabre imagery, which is used in a combination of arrogance and enthusiasm by a speaker who identifies himself with von Seeckt's cause.

Exportgeschäft

Wir exportieren!
 Wir exportieren!
 Wir machen Export in Offizieren!
 Wir machen Export!
 Wir machen Export!
 Das Kriegsspiel ist ein gesunder Sport!
 Die Herren exportieren deutsches Wesen
 zu den Chinesen!
 zu den Chinesen!

Gasinstrukture,
 Flammengranaten,
 auf arme, kleine gelbe Soldaten –

The early years: revolt and exile

9

denn davon wird die Welt genesen.
 Hoffentlich
 lohnt es sich!

China, ein schöner Machtbereich.
 Da können sie schnorren und schreien.
 Ein neuer Krieg –
 sie kommen sogleich,
 mit Taktik und Reglement und Plänen
 Generale, Majore!
 Als ob sie Hyänen der Leichenfelder seien.

Sie haben uns einen Krieg verloren.
 Satt haben sie ihn noch nicht –
 wie sie am Frieden der Völker bohren!
 Aus Deutschland kommt das Licht!
 Patrioten!
 Zollfrei Fabrikanten von Toten!

Wir lehren Mord! Wir speien Mord!
 Wir haben in Morden großen Export!
 Ja!
 Es freut sich das Kind, es freut sich die Frau.
 Von Gas werden die Gesichter blau
 Die Instruktionsoffiziere sind da.

Was tun wir denn Böses?
 Wir vertreten doch nur die deutsche Kultur.²

Export business

We're exporting!
 We're exporting!
 And it's military officers we're transporting!
 We're into export!
 We're into export!
 Playing war is a healthy sport!

The bosses are sending things Germanic, if you please,
 To the Chinese!
 To the Chinese!

Gas instructors,
 Flame throwers,

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[More information](#)

10

Stefan Heym

At poor, small yellow soldiers –
 The world will then get rid of disease.
 Let's hope
 It's got scope!

China, a splendid power sphere.
 There they can scrounge and shout.
 A new war –
 They'll soon be here
 With tactics and regulations and plans,
 Generals, majors!
 Like hyenas on corpse-fields, roaming about.

One war for us they went and lost,
 But they're still hungry to fight –
 They gnaw at peace at others' cost!
 From Germany comes the light!
 Patriots, you see!
 Manufacturers of death – tax free!

It's murder we teach! Murder we spew!
 Murder's our export, we do quite a few!
 Clear?
 The child is pleased, his mother too.
 The gas is turning faces blue.
 The officer instructors are here.

Anything wrong with what we do?
 Just German culture is what we feature.

This represents an amazingly sarcastic challenge to authority, and a revolt against the author's comfortable bourgeois existence and its preference for conservative values. The ecstatic opening announcement takes us straight into the mind of the speaker and conveys the delight of this 'patriot' at the resurgence of Germany's military power. War, to him, is a healthy game. The exclamatory tone attempts to diminish the horrors which are referred to, as do several lines which are presented in jocular form. 'Aus Deutschland kommt das Licht', for example, with its inversion of traditional symbolism, or 'Zollfrei Fabrikanten von Toten', which takes delight in the