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# Uses and Misuses of Language

Uwe Johnson's *Ingrid Babendererde* as a GDR Novel

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Uwe Johnson is seldom discussed as a GDR author, for it was not until after his 1959 decision «to relocate,»<sup>1</sup> as he put it, to the West that Johnson became established as a literary force. Literary historians often mention Johnson along with Gunther Grass and Martin Walser when they discuss the important novelists that burst onto the literary scene in West Germany at the end of the 1950's. But Johnson's work—from *Mutmaßsunmgen über Jakob* to *Jahrestage*—is unthinkable without his education and experiences in the Soviet Occupation Zone and the GDR. With the posthumous publication of his first novel *Ingrid Babendererde. Reifeprüfung 1953* we have the opportunity to examine how the young Johnson strove to portray and to come to terms with the society he ultimately chose to leave.<sup>2</sup>

In one of the earliest reviews of the novel Gert Ueding in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* wonders why the novel was not published by Suhrkamp when it was submitted in late 1956, and he compares it favorably with other notable publications of the same year, novels by Nossack, Andersch, Frisch, and Walser.<sup>3</sup> I have no quarrel with this comparison, but it is curious that no mention is made of contemporary publications in the East. After all, *Ingrid Babendererde* portrays the situation in a small Mecklenburg city in 1953, was written by a student in Rostock, who revised it in Leipzig in 1956, and who did not leave the GDR for West Berlin until 1959. Before Johnson submitted the manuscript to Suhrkamp in the West, it had been the rounds of the best literary publishers in the GDR, from whom the young author received compliments on his promise as a writer and assurances that his manuscript was politically impossible.<sup>4</sup>

If one, then, reads *Ingrid Babendererde* as an example of GDR prose of the fifties, it becomes more than a good, if unaccountably unpublished, first novel. It represents a remarkable and virtually unique attempt to ponder the contradictions of language, ideology, and reality in the fledgling socialist state. Many GDR novels of the time did not examine the present, but instead looked back to the war and to the anti-fascist struggle. Those that did look to the present—*Produktions-* or *Aufbau* novels like Hans Marschwitza's *Roheisen* or Rudolf Fischer's *Martin Hoop IV*—tend to portray the efforts

of workers to come to terms with the new system, to accept and grasp the logic of socialism. Nowhere in these novels is there an effort to examine the relationship between the rhetoric of the new ideology and reality of the new system—one was ultimately either for the new system and accepted its terms, or one did not support it, and represented, consciously or not, a throwback to the old.

Uwe Johnson, by his own account in the *Frankfurter Vorlesungen*, took an interest in precisely this relationship between public language and the reality such language sought to describe, the relationship other novelists of the period had left unexamined. He explains that his study of literature provided him with «eine Vorliebe für das Konkrete ..., eine geradezu parteüsche Aufmerksamkeit für das, was man vorzeigen, nachweisen, erzählen kann» (BU, p. 23). He points out that, because his childhood and adolescence were dominated by the values of Hitler and Stalin, symbolized by the pictures that hung in virtually every public and private place, he had had ample opportunity to observe how language can be used and abused. Johnson details numerous examples of duplicitous language usage, first by the Nazis and then by the Stalinists, and concludes his first lecture by conceding that he might appear to have a psychological fixation on the two leaders. He believes, however, that their pervasive influence had provided him with an essential insight: «Allerdings meint er, vornehmlich sie hätten ihm vorgeführt, wie man Sprache falsch benutzen kann, sogar mit dem Vorsatz zu betrügen» (BU, p. 54).

One of Johnson's examples of languages abuse in the Soviet Occupation Zone and in the early GDR brings us to the language problem Johnson examines in *Ingrid Babendererde*—the impossibility of saying precisely what one means without running afoul of predetermined, ideologically acceptable, versions of reality. He speaks of the contradictions between what school children could observe and what their teachers told them.

Andere Lehrer wissen, daß der Schüler lügt beim Aufsagen von Lügen, die er von Niemandem weiß als von ihnen selber, und eine Eins schreiben sie ihm an, und der Schüler sieht ihnen zu dabei. (BU, p. 49)

The central problem of *Ingrid Babendererde* concerns just such a contradiction between observable reality and the prescribed truth of the party. The novel covers five days in late spring of 1953 in a small city, the five days prior to the beginning of the written *Abitur*. The protagonists—the title character Ingrid, her boyfriend Klaus Niebuhr (who in *Jahrestage* turns out to be Gesine Cresspahl's cousin), and their friend Jürgen Petersen, a leader of the *Freie Deutsche Jugend*—find themselves affected by the GDR-wide campaign to discredit the Christian youth organisation *Die junge Gemeinde*. *Die junge Ge-*

*meinde* has been accused of complicity with Western sabotage and espionage activities, and there is pressure to denounce the Christian organization and its members. At the local level, within the school Ingrid, Klaus, and Jürgen attend, the campaign is patently ridiculous, and the students know it. When Klaus discusses the local leader of the *junge Gemeinde* with Jürgen, he suggests,

Aber versucht mal erst mit ihm zu reden: sagte Klaus: Peter Beetz sei nicht die kapitalistische Klasse sondern jemand mit einem Irrtum. (IB, p. 107)

Jürgen, despite his deep commitment to the party, does not need to be told that. He understands the necessity for dialogue and believes his party organization and his Christian fellow students capable of it. As he listens to the local party leader, the school director Robert Siebmann, whom the students refer to as Pius, denounce the Christians, Jürgen finds himself in a dilemma. He would like to accept and respect what his party leader has to say, but his own experience refutes what he is hearing.

Jürgend wo hatte Pius recht: dachte Jürgen: Aber das war nicht in seinem Reden. Sicherlich hatten die von der jungen Gemeinde sich etwas gedacht bei der Schrift in ihrem Schaukasten Liebet eure Feinde unter Umständen hatten sie damit wirklich den Klassenkampf behindern wollen. Warum nahm Pius das ernst? Unter ihnen hatte wahrlich niemand Anlaß das kapitalistische Ausland zu lieben: nicht einmal Marianne. Die wäre dort nie bis in die Abiturklasse einer Oberschule gekommen. Man konnte doch mit ihr reden, man konnte auch mit Peter Beetz reden. Jürgen konnte das. Mochten die doch verhandeln an ihren Mittwochabenden über den Bund Christi mit der Welt; die Welt würde Peter Beetz das Studium bezahlen und am Ende mochte der ohnehin gemerkt haben worauf erstens zu achten war. Ach ja: Pius hatte irgend wo recht. Aber das war nicht in seinem Reden. (91)

Indeed, Jürgen's initial response to the problem of the *Junge Gemeinde* is conciliatory. Under Jürgen, the party youth organization is a group where policy is born of discussion and argument, where the dialectic process is at work: «Sie redeten durcheinander, rauchten, waren betriebsam, hatten Einfälle, kamen gut vorwärts» (IB, p. 55). When Ingrid's mother asks Klaus, «So wie Jürgen ist—ist das die Partei?», Klaus responds: «Wir wollen ihm das wünschen» (IB, p. 61).

The party, however, is not always like Jürgen. When a school assembly is called for the purpose of expelling the young Christians, it falls to Jürgen, in his role as leader of the *FDJ*, to advocate the party line. Johnson's laconic description of Jürgen's speech and the probable further proceedings of the meeting underscores the main language problem—

the relationship between what one sees and what one says—and identifies a number of corollary problems.

Er (Jürgen) sagte aber dieses: Peter Beetz sei ein Böses Kind; und jenes war: daß Peter Beetz nun mit vorgeschobener Unterlippe würde nach Stuttgart reisen müssen oder nach Hamburg. So sagte Pius dieses und die ihn anhörten fürchteten daß er jenes wollte. Sie konnten seit langem die Bedeutung der Worte nicht mehr übersehen, sie waren also bedacht wenig gesagt zu haben. Aber nächstens würden sie sagen müssen, als Gute Kinder: der neben mir sitzt ist ein Böses Kind, und er soll nicht neben mir sitzen; und das Böse Kind würde zu jenem gezwungen sein. Und sie würden die Hände heben zum Zeichen ihres einmütigen Willens, und indem sie dieses taten, würden sie hoffen jenes nicht gemeint zu haben. (IB, p. 145)

Not only must Jürgen say what he does not believe to be true, but he must also say things that have implications far beyond their surface meanings. By identifying Peter Beetz as «ein böses Kind,» the party casts him from the school, negates the possibility that he will ultimately be integrated into GDR society, and leaves him little choice but to go to the West.

This dangerous connection between what is said and its implications discourages meaningful speech altogether. The students «konnten seit langem die Bedeutung der Wörter nicht übersehen,» and, as a consequence, they prefer to say as little as possible. Dialogue, the discussion Jürgen had hoped would occur with the *Junge Gemeinde*, simply isn't possible under these circumstances.

Jürgen's behavior illustrates one response to these problems. Convinced as he is of the ultimate legitimacy of the party's aspirations and ideology, he accepts the decisions of his superiors in the party. (Although, as we shall see, there are limits to how far he will go.) Jürgen's two closest friends—Klaus Niebuhr and Ingrid Bebendererde—offer two other possible responses. If we return to Jürgen's speech, we can observe first Klaus's reaction and then Ingrid's.

Also beobachtete Klaus den redenden Jürgen wie etwas Belustigendes und Seltsames, er lag zurückgelehnt und lächelte dann und wann besonders. (IB, p. 145)

Klaus is the first in the line of intelligent, capable, and laconic North German men that populate Johnson's novels—most notably Klaus's uncles Heinrich Cresspahl and Martin Niebuhr and his cousin Gesine Cresspahl's friend and lover Jakob Abs. Klaus, in addition to his natural Mecklenburg taciturnity, has good reason for being skeptical of how language is used. His parents were executed by the Nazis because of their resistance activities, and their dead were explained as having been caused by heart attack. When Klaus is confronted with situations where the authorities say one thing and mean another, he either withdraws and observes with detached and rather bitter amusement—

as he does during Jürgen's speech—, or he adds his own measure of unreliability to the conversation:

Die Erzieherpersönlichkeit sagte: so sei es, und sei da keine andere Weise die Dinge zu betrachten. Dabei jedoch liefi sie außer Acht daß frühere Erzieherpersönlichkeiten von Herzschlag gesprochen hatte; es war dann aber etwas anderes gewesen. Als der Schüler Niebuhr nun abermals eine Schule besuchte, so also achtete er darauf daß die Erzieherpersönlichkeit nicht abermals dieses für ein anderes sagte; andernfalls würde der Schüler Niebuhr sich erlauben dieses zu sagen und ein anderes zu meinen auch. So waren Klauses Worte unzuverlässig geworden wie die von Pius, er hatte gelernt daß es etwas auf sich hatte mit den Namen für die Dinge, er hatte gelernt daß dies alles seine Notwendigkeit besaß, und gewisser Maßen machte es ihm nicht viel Freude. (IB, p. 170)

In the days before, upon the arrival of Pius, the school took on a pervasive party influence, Klaus had been a leader in the school chapter of the *Freie Deutsche Jugend*. However, even during his *FDJ* days his disinclination to use ideological language had been problematic for him:

Unangenehm war ihm die Notwendigkeit vielen Redens; vieles and der Sparsamkeit seines Ausdrucks war Verteidigung gegen den Nebensinn, der in allzu kennzeichnenden Worten wie «bürgerlicher Klassenfeind» und «Führer der Volker» enthalten war. (IB, p. 156)

Klaus refuses to attend the second session of the meeting called to denounce the *Junge Gemeinde*. He knows that open disagreement with the party's decision to expell the church group will result in one's own expulsion, and although he is disgusted with the performances and speeches he has witnessed, he will stay away and go sailing. He urges Ingrid to go with him

Hörst du ... hast du nicht die Lehrerbank gesehen? Diese Leute, die nichts weiter haben als was Lehrbefähigung genannt wird und großkarierte Psychologie, Alleswissende, Vertrauenspersonen—; denen nichts einfällt als daß sie ihr Brot nicht verlieren wollen; sollte mich angehen, geht mich aber gar nicht, finde ich ekelhaft verstehst du! ... Und dieser alberne Betrieb von Parlament und Verfassungsbruch. Liebe Ingrid komm mit segeln. Da ist doch Wind, das riechst du doch, riechst du das nicht? (IB, p. 149)

Ingrid cannot share Klaus's bitter amusement or his withdrawal. Her observation of Jürgen's speech is very different from Klaus's.

Vor ihm (Klaus) saß sehr aufgerichtet Ingrid und sah von jedem Worte Jürgens wie er es aussprach. ... sie beobachte mit ihrer unheimlichen Aufmerksamkeit wie Jürgen nach seiner Rede sich auf den leeren Stuhl in der Mine des Präsidiums setzte ... (IB, p. 145)

Ingrid feels ashamed to be part of a group that will accept the abuses of language she has just witnessed. She reminds Klaus of the behavior of their teachers and fellow classmates after the first session of the meeting—going about their business, as though what had just happened had been normal—, and she refuses to be like that.

Ich will das nicht mehr, ich will nicht auf dem Oberen See liegen als wenn ich da nie gegessen hätte! (148)

The idea of going back into school to prepare for the *Abitur*, to recite high-sounding ideals, to memorize more formulas has become repulsive to Ingrid in the face of the absurd charade she feels she has observed. She feels she must witness the completion of what has begun, and she will not go with Klaus.

... es sei nicht gut so und sie könne dies nicht leiden, es sei einfach nicht gut so, sie rieche unter solchen Umständen überhaupt nichts von Wind! (IB, p. 150)

Ingrid returns to the afternoon session of the assembly. She had been asked to make a statement about «*Die Junge Gemeinde* and the rights of the church,» in support of the party's denunciation of the group. She refused, but when criticized by the school director for a lack of social responsibility, she takes the floor and makes a very curious speech. After rejecting the topic she I been asked to speak about because she lacks the competence to do so intelligently, Ingrid begins to talk about her classmate Eva Mau's slacks. These had created quite a stir when Eva had worn them to school, because was clear that they had been purchased in the West. The school director ad forbidden her to wear them. Ingrid uses this episode to denounce the intolerance and the hypocrisy of Pius, the school director, in particular, and of the party in general.

... In dieser Zeit führen alle Wege zum Kommunismus: sagte Herr Direktor Siebmann, und wir haben das wohl begriffen. Herr Direktor Siebmann soll aber bedenken woher wir kommen. Warum will er wohl daß wir einen Umweg über Stuttgart oder Hamburg machen, nur weil wir uns noch nicht gewöhnt haben, nur weil wir nach sieben Jahren noch in anderen Büchern lesen? Wir sagen dabei nichts gegen Pius' Bücher, Peter Beetz hat nie etwas gegen Pius' Bücher gesagt. Wir tragen nur noch nicht den Anzug von Herrn Direktor Siebmann. Und was geht es Dieter Seevken (a FDJ functionary) an daß Eva Mau neulich in der Großen Straße ging mit verbotenen Hosen? (IB, pp. 174–5)

As a result of her speech, Ingrid is also expelled from the school.

Klaus returns the next day and withdraws from school. He cites the violation of several articles of the GDR constitution as his reason for doing so. Jürgen, who voted as one of only 17 students out of 306 against Ingrid's expulsion, is disciplined by the party

and explains his behavior to the furious party leader, in terms almost identical to what Klaus had said in his withdrawal letter:

Jürgens persönliche Gründe seien diese: er sehe zwischen den Artikeln der Verfassung 41 42 43 und dem Vorgehen der Partei einen Unterschied, dessentwegen und in Erachtung der Artikel 9 12 habe er gegen den Ausschluß von Fräulein Babendererde gestimmt. Ich bin nämlich der Meinung sie hat recht, verstehen Sie? fragte er Pius' hilflos empörtes Gesicht. Er meine daß die benutzten Argumente Vorwände seien, die das Verbot einer anderen Meinung rechtfertigen sollten. Anstatt darüber zu diskutieren. Das halte er sowohl für der Partei schädlich als er das auch überhaupt nicht leiden möge. (IB, p. 226)

The following day Ingrid finds herself under surveillance by state security agents. She and Klaus conclude that their situation is untenable, and, with Jürgen's help, they obtain documents that allow them to reach West Berlin. Their decision is by no means a symbolic embracing of Western ideology of anti-Communism. It is a criticism of the misuse of Socialist ideology and of the type of language such abuse spawns, not of the ideology itself. In five passages that begin each section of the book we observe Klaus and Ingrid briefly in West Berlin, where, as Johnson later put it in his *Frankfurter Vorlesungen*, «sie umsteigen in jene Lebensweise, die sie ansehen für das falsche ...» (BU, p. 87). Ingrid's and Klaus's decision is like Uwe Johnson's six years later, a decision he always characterized as a prudent decision to relocate.

The difficulty of this decision becomes clear through a further use of language in the novel. Johnson, as he was later to do with far greater facility in *Jahrestage*, contrasts the direct and economical use of *Plattdeutsch* by his protagonists and their families, with the inflated and frequently duplicitous standard speech of public discourse. In a particularly telling passage, Ingrid and Klaus walk together beyond the city wall, pursued by the state-security agent following Ingrid. They walk around the city, within sight of the lakes that are such an integral part of the Mecklenburg landscape they love. In dialect they share the anecdote, «Pete hett eis Melk to s-tadt füet...» alternating speeches, jumping in at a pause, in perfect harmony with each other. They have, for a moment, excluded the power that they cannot accept and asserted their place in their surroundings.

—Secht hei! sagte Ingrid lachend. Ihre Schultern legte sie erschüttert zurück und sie lachte, es ging nicht so einfach und von vornherein, es war nun allerhand mit ihrem Lachen; aber sie blieb dabei und lachte sehr, sie konnte gar nicht davon abkommen zu lachen in ihrem Hals und Klaus sah es alles an mit Petes Gesicht und sie lachte noch mehr. Es war ungewöhnlich erfreulich sie lachen zu sehen und zu hören in dieser unmäßigen Weise von Heiterkeit.



An den Koppeldrähten vor dem Kleinen Eichholz piff der Wind andächtig durch den Vormittag, der untere See lief klatschend auf am Ufer; die Pferde kamen ihnen von weitem entgegen.

Öwe Pete un de Jung, mit eern Waogn, de füen wire. Und sie sahen sich nicht um nach ihrer rückwärtigen Begleitung. (IB, p. 231)

By leaving Mecklenburg, Klaus and Ingrid will lose the context for this alternative means of communication, this link to their *Heimat*. This loss of language, and the loss of *Heimat* it represents, plays an extraordinarily important role in Johnson's subsequent work.

There are a number of areas for further investigation suggested by this study. It would be, I believe, instructive to compare the skeptical attitude toward language in this novel to that of other, later evocations of this period in GDR history; Kant's *Die Aula* and Christa Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.* come to mind immediately. It should also be productive to look at this novel in comparison with other, later GDR works that examine disaffected youth, like Volker Braun's *Unvollendete Geschichte* or Plenzdorff's *Neue Leiden des jungen W.* Such investigations, unfortunately, would take us far beyond the scope of the present study.

It is ironic and rather sad that Johnson was unable to add his enormously talented voice to the literature of the GDR, a literature which, a decade or so later, in works like those just mentioned, began to confront some of the questions he had raised in this, his first literary effort.

#### Notes

- 1 Uwe Johnson, «Vita,» in *über Uwe Johnson*, ed. Reinhard Baumgart (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 175.
- 2 Uwe Johnson, *Ingrid Babendererde: Reifeprüfung 1953* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1985). Subsequently referred to as IB.
- 3 Gert Ueding, «Uwe Johnsons Reifeprüfung. 'Ingrid Babendererde'—sein früher Roman in einer späten Edition,» review of *Ingrid Babendererde: Reifeprüfung*, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18 May, 1985.
- 4 Uwe Johnson, *Begleitumstände: Frankfurter Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), pp. 88–96. Subsequently referred to as BU.

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