Agnès Cardinal

Ina Seidel
From Das Wunschkind to Lennacker:
Strategies of Dissimulation

This re-examination of Ina Seidel's novels Das Wunschkind and Lennacker begins with a brief discussion of the reciprocity of the past and the moment that perceives it. Seidel's historical novels have been subjected to a critique which is itself conditioned by the traumatic memory of the recent past. Under attack, invariably, is her ideological ambivalence, which in Das Wunschkind manifests itself in terms of an uneasy oscillation between liberal optimism and visions of a tragic German destiny. This essay argues that this tension can, more profitably, be understood as an integral part of the artistic project. Seidel's sovereign narratorial command, her play with slipping points of view, the fractured portrait she offers of the supposedly admirable heroine, the presence of peripheral information which contradicts the overt message of the novel—these are not necessarily the product of a deplorable ideological equivocation, but features of a deliberate artistic strategy. They anticipate the more assured treatment of narratorial double-vision in Lennacker, where the creation of a questionable image of the past, ambivalent argumentation, and the relativisation of the narratorial voice become pivotal and are most certainly not mere reflections of moral vacillation.

Apart from a few notable recent exceptions, not much has been said or written about Ina Seidel and her literary work since the war. Yet during the 1920s and 1930s Seidel counted amongst the best known and most widely read authors in Germany, and her historical fiction was particularly well received. Indeed, Das Wunschkind (1929), which is set at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, became a bestseller, and Lennacker (1938), which traces the development of German Protestantism through twelve generations of pastors from Luther to World War I, is still generally considered to be her masterpiece. To this day Seidel’s novels can be found on the shelves of the

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average German middle-class family and current publication figures suggest that her popularity is by no means on the decline.

Yet those who read and still enjoy Seidel’s books today tend to admit to it as if it were a guilty secret. Klaus Harpprecht, for example, is typical when he discusses Das Wunschkind with that reticence which invariably characterises the few mentions of Seidel’s work in the post-war period. Yet he also speaks of “eine Bewunderung” for her work: “die auf heimliche Weise und im Windschatten der Kritik bis auf heute anhält”.

The reasons for this necessity to admire Seidel “auf heimliche Weise” and the relegation of her work to “the Windschatten der Kritik”, indeed, her amazing invisibility in Germany’s cultural landscape after 1945, are not difficult to identify. They are, of course, the direct consequence of Seidel’s alignment, in the 1930s, with National Socialist cultural policies. After 1945, no one wanted to admit to having liked her books in the 1930s – or to reading them still. Hence, after World War II, as in countless periods before: “Literatur wurde ausschließlich aus dem Blickwinkel eines vollzogenen gesellschaftlichen Systemwechsels und dem damit einhergehenden Werte- und Wertungswandel beurteilt.” Indeed, it is a well-known phenomenon that at times of radical ideological reorientation, works of art in general, and literary works in particular, tend to be evaluated primarily in terms of inherent ideological errors and, by extension, in terms of the moral failings of their creators.

Seidel’s political record is undeniably tainted. The presence of her signature (amongst eighty-eight others) on the ‘Treuegelöbnis’ to Hitler of the Reichsverband Deutscher Schriftsteller in 1933, her acquiescence, as a member of the Preußische Akademie der Künste, in National Socialist cultural policies in the 1930s, and perhaps worst of all, an unfortunate poem she penned on the occasion of the Führer’s fiftieth birthday in 1939, speak for themselves. These incontrovertible facts have put Seidel’s political judgement, and especially her moral integrity, into question. Yet it is equally true that, like many of her contemporary Christian writers such as Werner Bergengruen, Edzard Schaper, Ernst Wiechert and Elisabeth Langgässer, Seidel wrote the kind of thoughtful fiction which appealed to the well-educated and supposedly morally discerning German bourgeoisie. She was, after all, the wife of a Protestant pastor. Her post-war novel Michaela (1959) deals with the guilt and retrospective disorientation of members of a large section of the Christian middle classes who, through the lack of a sound political edu-
