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Cannibalising Texts:
Libuše Moníková Digesting Arno Schmidt

Libuše Moníková’s novel *Pavane für eine verstorbene Infantin* and two of her plays in *Unter Menschenfressern* were influenced by the German experimental writer Arno Schmidt. In *Pavane*, the protagonist Francine Pallas tries to engage her students by focussing on the misogynist aspects of Schmidt’s work. *Pavane* also shares a pronounced intertextuality with Schmidt’s writings, the main common denominator being the role played by maps and typography. The relationship of Moníková’s play ‘Caliban über Sycorax’ to Schmidt’s ‘Caliban über Setebos’ is explored with particular emphasis on the themes of deviance and cannibalism, while ‘ArAl’ is shown to provide a remarkably accurate portrayal of Schmidt’s domestic circumstances and his chauvinism.

Libuše Moníková’s creative engagement with the work and, to a lesser extent, the person of Arno Schmidt spans virtually half of her writing career, from her second novel, *Pavane für eine verstorbene Infantin* (1983), to the quartet of plays published under the collective title *Unter Menschenfressern* (1990). Given Schmidt’s relatively peripheral role in the first of these two densely intertextual works, as well as the largely dismissive way in which he is treated there, most readers would at the time have thought it unlikely that Moníková would ever revisit contemporary West Germany’s *enfant terrible*, notorious as much for the provocative nature of his public declarations and *obiter dicta* as for the experimentalism of his fiction. And hardly anyone could have predicted the *Akribie*, ingenuity and sheer empathy with which she was to return to this particular subject.

In *Pavane für eine verstorbene Infantin*, both the narratorial intertextuality and the female protagonist’s own ‘längere Gedankenspiele’, as the Schmidt of ‘Berechnungen 2’ would have called them, are on the whole plausibly accounted for. Sometimes the motivation for the novel’s complex net of literary associations stems from the central figure’s Czech origins. Elsewhere it is a by-product of her academic interests. In the end, however, these two sources of images and quotations tend to merge due to the specific present circumstances of the novel’s protagonist. For Francine Pallas has, since her arrival in West Germany from Prague, held a post as
literary ‘Lehrbeauftragte mit sechs Wochenstunden’ (P 17) at a North German university.

Although Moníková’s protagonist at one stage refers in the same breath to such improbable bed-fellows as Kafka and Schmidt as ‘meine Widersacher, meine Stützen’ (P 147), when it comes to intertextuality, *Pavane für eine verstorbene Infantin* is, above all, a novel of intense Kafka-reception – albeit reception in a critical as well as adulatory sense (Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*, with its notion of the creative ‘swerve’, adds a helpful perspective here).¹ And, in the case of both Kafka and Schmidt, the reception results in a form of intertextuality embracing a response to the writer’s work as well as his biographical and public persona.² Despite Kafka’s dominant place at the literary table, Schmidt’s works nevertheless play a by no means inconsiderable role in Francine’s private and academic life. He is certainly allocated a greater role than that allotted to another twentieth-century Czech author, Jaroslav Hašek, whose most famous literary creation has but a small (literally) walk-on part in an encounter which may or may not have taken place on Prague’s Charles Bridge: a meeting between Prague’s two greatest literary Josefs, Josef Švejk and Josef K., a possibility just as likely to have resulted from Francine’s recent reading of Angelo Maria Ripellino’s *Magic Prague* as from any independent private fantasy.³

As far as can be gleaned from this at times elusive novel, Francine’s formal teaching does not cover Hašek’s work – after all, she is not a professional Slavist (even Moníková’s duties at the German universities where she was employed in the early 1970s were confined to *Germanistik*, Women’s Writing and Comparative Literature). In any case, it is the classic Prague setting, not the archetypal figure of Švejk or his equally legendary creator, that appears to capture her imagination. Quite rightly, one commentator has termed her nostalgic relationship to the Czech city ‘a fantasy of origins’.⁴ This may explain why Francine experiences no comparable emotional bond with the North German *Heidelandschaft* evoked in Schmidt’s novels, a setting just as much associated with his image as a writer as Prague is with Kafka’s. Witness the title of one classic early study of Schmidt’s work which Francine might well have put on her reading-list: *Der Solipsist in der Heide*⁵ or the evocative title of the legendary periodical devoted to his work: *Bargfelder Bote*. The nearest *Pavane für eine verstorbene Infantin* comes to a picture of Schmidt in his chosen habitat occurs right near the end, when Francine recalls that the