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‘Wer schreibt, kann nicht töten’:
Writing and Life in Reinhard Jirgl’s
Abtrünnig: Roman aus der nervösen Zeit

Reinhard Jirgl’s *Abtrünnig: Roman aus der nervösen Zeit* is an aesthetically complex text which explores the function of autobiographical self-reflection through fictional means. Its protagonist and narrator tells the story of his own frustration and failure, a story which appears inevitably to end in violence. However, the structure of the text, which incorporates various Internet-style ‘links’, ultimately offers the reader two possibilities: to circle endlessly within the novel in the hope that the narrator’s story might somehow be read in such a way as to produce a more positive outcome; or, like the narrator himself, to step outside of the story, liberating themselves from a world which ultimately cannot be redeemed.

Dennis Tate’s monographs on Franz Fühmann and on autobiographical writing in the GDR have convincingly demonstrated the importance that many critical socialist writers attached to the authentic reflection of their own lived experience in the face of the SED’s ideologically distorted version of social reality in East Germany. As Tate points out, GDR cultural politicians were from the outset suspicious of autobiographical writing and, by extension, the attempt to present the ‘subjective authenticity’ (Christa Wolf) of the writer’s own experience where this could not be made commensurate with the Party line.¹ The function which such ‘subjective authenticity’ was to take on for the writers Tate has analysed cannot simply be understood as a desire for self-expression, although it was that too. Rather, these writers believed that their reflection on their own experience could be a contribution to the socialist project: by revealing socialist society’s failings and contradictions through the authentic portrayal of their own experience, leading writers like Wolf, Fühmann or Christoph Hein believed,² the ideological carapace of the SED’s view of that society could be cracked open, offering the possibility of debate and change. This was, then ‘an autobiographical literature in which the political and the personal would be inextricably merged’.³

This chapter, however, examines the writing of Reinhard Jirgl, an author whose work, despite his East German socialisation, radically challenges all of the assumptions upon which such ‘subjectively
authentic’ and indeed political writing in the GDR was based. Jirgl’s literary project sets out a very different case for turning one’s life into literature, which can nevertheless be productively read against the backdrop of the model which Tate outlines. This is particularly the case for the text examined in detail here, Jirgl’s 2005 novel *Abtrünnig: Roman aus der nervösen Zeit*. This is not an autobiographical text in the traditional sense: the narrator is not coterminous with the author Jirgl, and their biographies, whilst broadly similar, are certainly not identical. Yet, as in most of Jirgl’s novels, we are presented with a figure who narrates their life in retrospect (as, for example in the novels *Abschied von den Feinden* of 1995, *Die Unvollendeten* of 2003 or, more recently, *Die Stille* of 2009), often from a point of defeat or near to death. A significant difference in *Abtrünnig* is that the unnamed narrator is himself a would-be literary author, who is, in fact, at work on the text that the reader of Jirgl’s novel holds in their hands. For example, in a scene in which the narrator is introduced to a group of ‘KULTURTRÄGER’ by his lover Sophia, he reads to them from the text ‘Auf Tag & Stunde’, an earlier chapter of *Abtrünnig*. The novel is constructed as a series of dated chapters, which appear in chronological order, detailing the arrival of the narrator in Berlin, his attempts to establish a literary career and pursue his love affair with Sophia, and his eventual failure and isolation. The main events of the novel are dated between the late summer of 2000 (15) and the summer of 2004 (518). Beyond this, the main body of the text is sandwiched between a short preface and postscript, which are both dated in the autumn of 2004 from the point of view of an author who has now completed the work we are about to read, or have just finished reading.

The fact that the novel proper begins with a section in the first person told from the point of view of a former border guard working in Frankfurt an der Oder is something of a red herring, in that we can ultimately see this as an act of ventriloquism on the part of the author figure, who is told this man’s life story when he meets him later in Berlin (319) and whose murder he later reports (505). Other life stories are also included in the text which the narrator is producing, including that of a writer who worked as a forester in the GDR whilst secretly writing a novel (217-69), a painter whose work, after his death, is destined for the rubbish tip (127-9), and the narrator’s uncle, a quiet, bookish man, persecuted by his neighbours (338-56). The