

Wolfgang Hilbig's appropriation of romantic discourse

Alan Corkhill

Received: 7 October 2005 / Accepted: 12 January 2006 / Published online: 6 June 2007
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2007

Abstract The writings of East German author Wolfgang Hilbig reveal an indebtedness both to the poetics of Baudelaire and to literary modernism. At the same time, his creative oeuvre is shot through with intertextual references to German Romantic artists and tropes. Hilbig's attraction to the Romantic Movement is far from epigonal, sentimental or escapist. The article argues that just as the (re-)discovery of Romanticism during the 1970s and 1980s by other East German literary practitioners, including Hilbig's own mentor Franz Fühmann, resulted in a profound questioning of "actually existing socialism" and the cultural politics that shaped it, Hilbig similarly draws on Romantic *topoi*, intellectual discourses and aesthetic tenets to critique flaws in the State's socio-political mechanisms and in its treatment of the artist/writer. The article explores Hilbig's integration of philosophical, poetological and ecological aspects of this Romantic legacy into more than three decades of prose fiction and verse. It also interrogates Hilbig's reconceptualisation of Romantic imagery and diction.

The enthusiasm with which mainstream East German writers such as Christa Wolf, Günter de Bruyn, Stephan Hermlin and Volker Braun embraced and reactivated the cultural legacy of Romanticism from the 1970s onwards, partially under the influence of the New Subjectivity movement in the FRG, is well documented.¹ The favourable reassessment of the visionary world and aesthetics of German Romantic authors such as Novalis, Karoline von Günderode, Jean Paul, Tieck, Eichendorff, and especially Hölderlin, constituted a clear repudiation of Georg Lukács'

¹ See especially *Neue Ansichten*. Gaskill et al. (1990).

privileging of “healthy” Weimar Classicism over the bourgeois decadence and irrationalism of the Romantic Movement,² as well as providing a counterweight to the tenets of doctrinaire socialist realism affirmed at the Bitterfeld Literature Conference of 1959.

Wolfgang Hilbig, the *Arbeiterschriftsteller* from the mining town of Meuselwitz on the Thuringian border with Saxony, was already 18 when the Bitterfeld manifesto was drawn up. Years later Hilbig could still vividly recall disparaging public formulations such as, “In allen Ländern [ist] die Romantik fortschrittlich und revolutionär gewesen, bloß in der deutschen Literatur nicht”.³ Romantic authors had barely featured in the GDR’s school syllabus of the 1950s,⁴ and Hilbig’s initial encounter with them was to occur during his apprenticeship years as a drill mechanic. He observes retrospectively about their formative impact: “Von meinem ersten Lehrlingsentgelt, das waren 80 Mark, habe ich mir eine E.T.A.-Hoffmann-Gesamtausgabe gekauft. Romantiker, dafür habe ich mich interessiert. Von ihnen habe ich zunächst abgekupfert. Von Hoffmann oder von Tieck, Eichendorff, Novalis”.⁵ One facet of the special, and indeed enduring appeal of these writers, Hilbig goes on to claim, was a celebration of the uncanny (“die unheimliche Atmosphäre in ihren Arbeiten”).⁶ Elsewhere Hilbig writes in a similar vein: “Gereizt hat mich an der Romantik, glaube ich, der Versuch, das Unwirkliche darzustellen wie zum Beispiel bei E.T.A. Hoffmann [...]. Das Gespenstische, das hat mich gereizt”.⁷ *Das Unheimliche* is a feature of Hoffmann’s works acknowledged by Hilbig’s literary mentor Franz Fühmann in his commemorative radio tribute to the author/composer in 1976;⁸ and half a decade later it was Hilbig’s turn to lionise Hoffmann as a “Schlüsselfigur für heute” on the basis of his troping of “das Schauerliche”.⁹

The uncanny provides a strong undercurrent to Hilbig’s prose narratives.¹⁰ It manifests itself particularly in the surreal milieu of Hilbig’s industrial workplaces, but has been demystified and stripped of any vestiges of Tieckian or Hoffmannian supernaturalism. Hilbig’s reinterpretation of the *Nachtseite der Romantik* for his own times lies in his masterful nocturnal descriptions, whether they be of the

² See Reid’s comment: “Lukács’ proclivity for Weimar classicism was complemented by his rejection of the German Romantics and of those other traditions in German culture which contradicted Goethe’s harmonising outlook”. Reid (1990), p. 34.

³ Luise-Bott (2002); here p. 6.

⁴ The contradictory status of Eichendorff in the GDR school curriculum in the first three decades of the GDR’s existence (Lukács, for example, hailed him a realist and patriot) reflects changes in cultural policy. See Knittel (2003), p. 1 of 1.

⁵ Hilbig (2000a).

⁶ Hilbig (2000a).

⁷ Luise-Bott (2002), p.7.

⁸ Fühmann (1976).

⁹ Hilbig (1994a); here p. 34. Hoffmann’s horror tales “Der Magnetiseur” (1814) and “Der Sandmann” (1819) best exemplify “das Schauerliche” in his writings.

¹⁰ At school Hilbig filled the pages of his exercise books with experimental ghost stories.

Bonaventuran *Nachtwächter*¹¹ of industry such as the late-shift stokers in the infernal boiler rooms of power stations (“Der Heizer”, 1980), of the spectral iconography of refuse dumps (*Die Weiber*, 1987), of sinister knackers’ yards (*Alte Abdeckerei*, 1991), or of East Berlin’s labyrinthic cellars (“*Ich*”, 1993). If, as Fühmann contends, Hoffmann’s fantastic tales serve as the prototypes “eines gespenstisch werdenden Alltags”,¹² a similar claim can be made for Hilbig’s Kafkaesque prose narratives in which the protagonists’ battle to make sense of the arbitrariness and unpredictability of the state’s control mechanisms as well as their own ill-defined social function within it assumes nightmarish proportions. Hilbig’s fantastic realism, an apposite coinage for his oeuvre, also owes a great deal to a further literary ancestor, Edgar Allan Poe.¹³ In “Der Brief” (1971) the narrator, a skilled worker turned writer, tells how his reading of Poe’s “Schauerstücke”¹⁴ had taught him the importance of resisting a one-dimensional perception of reality, as a consequence of which he declares: “[I]ch [konnte] in einiger Hinsicht [der Realität] das Prädikat phantastisch nicht absprechen”.¹⁵

The lure of Romantic writers, Hilbig continues, was also deeply existential and psychological (“die gespaltenen Figuren haben mich beeindruckt”).¹⁶ They provided essential points of self-identification (“[ich] habe [...] mich in ihren Werken wiedergefunden”).¹⁷ To the extent that Hilbig’s indebtedness to the Romantic cultural inheritance has been both private *and* ideological, I now propose to show the extent to which both aspects find poignant expression in his writing.

With regard, first of all, to the personal, self-identificatory dimension: most of the central protagonists of Hilbig’s highly autobiographical oeuvre from his first published story “Aufbrüche” (1968) down to his most recent novel *Das Provisorium* (2000) are would-be, fledgling or established writers—“gespaltene Figuren”, as it were, forever bewailing their *Doppel*existenz, in most cases the dilemma of forging their artistic credentials and credibility while serving the state predominantly on the fringes of its industrial workforce. Whereas practitioners of the official GDR literary scene crafted imaginative biographies of leading Romantic figures,¹⁸ Hilbig has re-appropriated two genres with their roots in Romanticism: fictional autobiography and the *Künstlerroman* and *Künstlernovelle*. However, Hilbig’s artist narratives do not celebrate genius or focus on the self-development

¹¹ An intertextual link with the early Romantic work *Die Nachtwachen des Bonaventura* (1804) suggests itself in the story “Über den Tonfall” (1977), where the first-person narrator deputises as “Nachtwächter” for a work colleague. Hilbig (1997).

¹² Fühmann (1979), p. 23.

¹³ Hilbig had read a biography of Poe as a teenager. See Hilbig (1994f); here p. 12.

¹⁴ Hilbig (1992a), p. 130.

¹⁵ Hilbig (1992a).

¹⁶ Hilbig (2000a) “Meine Lehrjahre (6)”.

¹⁷ Hilbig (2000a) “Meine Lehrjahre (6)”.

¹⁸ Biographies composed by East German writers include those on E.T.A. Hoffmann (Anna Seghers, 1972), Jean Paul Friedrich Richter (de Bruyn, 1975), Heinrich von Kleist (Kunert, 1976) and Karoline von Günderode (Christa Wolf, 1978).

and maturation of the artist-hero in the humanistic tradition of the archetypal *Bildungsroman*. Rather, their emphasis on the crisis of artistic articulation and the psychopathology of the socially dysfunctional, marginalised artist align them not with Romantic paradigms such as Tieck's *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen* (1798), but with the artist novels of Bernhard (*Frost*, 1963; *Der Untergeher*, 1983).¹⁹ Hilbig's self-absorbed narrators, stricken in the majority of instances with writer's block (cf. *Die Kunde von den Bäumen* and *Das Provisorium*),²⁰ and/or prone to bouts of drunkenness,²¹ work through their creative anxieties as they concoct their plots. Invariably, introspective self-preoccupation is countered by an almost instinctual awareness of the existential and socially therapeutic necessity of writing for the "other" in order to eschew the kind of literary autism Hilbig himself sees—rightly or wrongly—as a flaw of Romantic poeology: "Dieses Für-sich-Schreiben, das haut nicht hin. Das ist Romantik".²²

Hilbig's ideological interest in Romanticism forms part of an eclectic borrowing of intellectual discourses from earlier traditions, mobilised to critique the socio-political and cultural life of the GDR. On balance, the Romantic legacy is actually of lesser importance to Hilbig than his empathy with the exponents of literary modernism from Kafka to Beckett, as Hilbig scholars have consistently argued.²³ Of course, modernism, in turn, is undeniably an outcome of the continuum of Romantic thought. Paul Cooke rightly maintains in a blanket statement that Hilbig uses "literary tradition as a means of constructing a dissident voice within the context of the GDR".²⁴

One can only speculate on the sorts of Romanticists with whom Hilbig might easily identify temperamentally or ideologically, besides the aforementioned specific role models. Who, for instance, are "die schief angesehenen Romantiker" Hilbig claims in an interview with Harro Zimmermann to have greatly admired for their "subversives Potential",²⁵ but omits to name? Surprisingly, while the West German radical Left of the late 1960s and early 1970s made a virtue out of painting the Blue Flower red, Hilbig makes no explicit or implicit reference anywhere to exponents of German political Romanticism, neither to the patriotic Fichte as author of *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1807/1808), nor to intellectual freedom fighters such as Arndt and Görres in the vanguard of the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon. But then, late Romanticism wielded a double-edged sword, spurning the kind of Metternichian reactionism²⁶ that witnessed the prostitution of *Geist* to

¹⁹ This is particularly true of the Hilbig's narrator C. in *Das Provisorium*. See Corkhill (2004).

²⁰ Hilbig calls this writer's block "ein Leiden am Sich-nicht-artikulieren-Können". Hilbig (1994b), p. 9.

²¹ According to Bordaue the alcoholic stupour in which Hilbig's characters find themselves is no spur to creativity: Bordaue (2000), p. 235.

²² Hilbig (2002), p. 5.

²³ Cf. Bordaue (2000), pp. 241–256; or Cooke (2000), esp. pp. 55–91.

²⁴ Cooke (2000), p. 15.

²⁵ Hilbig (1994c), pp. 11–18; here p. 18.

²⁶ East German writer Peter Hacks polemicalises against the counterrevolutionary conservatism of political Romanticism in his book *Zur Romantik* (Hamburg, 2001).

Macht. Such a regressive setback to the forces of liberalism under the Holy Alliance might easily be compared with the “stagnation”²⁷ and ossification of GDR life to which Hilbig constantly alludes in writings subsequent to his voluntary move to Rheinland-Pfalz in 1985.²⁸ A single line in an early poem “ankunft” (“denn das vaterland des dichters ist das exil”)²⁹ aptly sums up the predicament of Hilbig and other disaffected GDR literati and intellectuals at loggerheads with the political authorities, while simultaneously establishing an associative historical connection with the fate of Heinrich Heine.³⁰

Hilbig would have sympathised, in theory at least, with the free spirits within the Jena and Heidelberg circles of early and middle Romantics in their opposition to a prescriptive aesthetics or their hostility to the notion of the artist as an instrumentalised servant of the state. On the other hand, Hilbig's isolation from the official literary establishment during his writing years in the GDR, largely a self-inflicted outsiderdom, militated against the camaraderie that bound together some of his mainstream colleagues in ways reminiscent of the “sociability” cult fostered by those Romantic circles. But there were also other like-minded souls among the German Romantics with whom it would not have been difficult to experience a strong kinship, regardless of their aristocratic pedigrees. A case in point is Friedrich von Hardenberg to whom Hilbig pays tribute, albeit obliquely, in a sonnet entitled “novalis” (1970).³¹ Fühmann counted Novalis and Rimbauld among the young Hilbig's most inspirational of predecessors.³² As a litterateur and overseer of mines Novalis also led a *Doppelexistenz*. Novalis exhibited much respect for the Saxon mining fraternity, which pursued its “vocation” with pious devotion, as is shown to be the case in the unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1803), and similarly, for that matter, in Hoffmann's tale “Die Bergwerke zu Falun” (1816). Born into a mining family, Hilbig likewise relates to the workers at the coalface of his provincial homeland, accentuating the secular solidarity of this proletarian *Urgemeinschaft*,³³ and thematising, above all, their taciturnity as an act of defiance directed at a totalitarian regime that has perverted the language of humanistic interchange. Such silence furnishes an apposite example of Hilbig's arrogation and reappraisal of a Romantic trope, in this case the programmatic *Unsagbarkeitstopos*. Novalis unwittingly anticipated the mutual mistrust that existed between the proletariat and the SED authorities in announcing prophetically

²⁷ Hilbig (1994d), p. 27.

²⁸ Loescher draws a conspicuous parallel between the libertarian worldview of the German Romantics prior to the Vienna Congress and the “Eiszeit” that set in with the Biermann affair and its trigger for the demise of liberalising elements on the GDR cultural scene. Loescher (2004), p. 45.

²⁹ Hilbig (2004a), p. 8.

³⁰ Heine starts the third section of his famous poem “In der Fremde” with the famous words “Ich hatte einst ein schönes Vaterland”. Heinrich Heine, Werke. Sonderausgabe in zwei Bänden (Wiesbaden, ca. 1970), Vol. 2 (*Epen, Romanzero, Gedichte, Nachlese*), p. 352.

³¹ The poem is contained in Hilbig (1992b).

³² Zimmermann (1994), p. 37.

³³ By contrast, the brothers Grimm shared with like-minded Romantics a view of “Urgemeinsames” as a religious bond between humans. Hilbig (1994g) pp. 26–29; here p. 27f.

in 1798: “Wenn man mit wenigen in einer großen, gemischten Gesellschaft etwas Heimliches reden will, und man sitzt nicht nebeneinander, so muss man in einer besonderen Sprache reden. *Diese besondere Sprache [...] wird eine Tropen- und Rätselsprache sein*” (my emphasis).³⁴

Communicating in riddles has particular relevance to the clandestine operations of the Stasi’s hierarchy of *Mitarbeiter*, as Hilbig demonstrates so poignantly in his second novel “*Ich*”. This is a world of intrigue and (self-)deception far removed from the Romantics’ universalist preoccupation with deciphering the secret hieroglyphics of nature in their quest for higher wisdom and truth. In “*Ich*”, which Joachim Pfeiffer reads predominantly as a travesty of the Romantic *Künstlerroman* in both subject matter and form, but which also borrows, I would argue, from the 18th-century *Bundesroman*, the manipulated and ethically compromised writer-informant M.W. alias Cambert, a truly “gespaltene Figur”, has become Hilbig’s mouthpiece for the unattainability of the Romantic ideal of the autonomy of art and the related Schlegelian dictum “die Willkür des Dichters [leidet] kein Gesetz über sich”.³⁵ Hilbig notes in an interview how straightforward it was for the Stasi authorities, “Menschen eine neue fiktive Identität aufzudrücken”,³⁶ thereby usurping the traditional preserve of the creative writer.

A clear parallel is establishable between the fate of Hilbig’s *inoffizieller Mitarbeiter* and that of Christian in Tieck’s *Kunstmärchen* “Der Runenberg” (1803). A citation from the fairytale in the second of the novel’s prefatory epigrams furnishes the intertextual clue: “Wie habe ich mein Leben in einem Traume verloren. [...] Jahre sind verflossen, daß ich von hier herunterstieg”.³⁷ Both protagonists have entered a realm of timelessness and irreality and inevitably find themselves on the verge of madness and loneliness, having severed their ties with those dearest to them. Each has descended into the bowels of the earth, into a mine shaft and labyrinth of cellars respectively, emerging not with the spiritual riches vouchsafed by Novalis’ mystical “Weg nach innen”, but empty-handed—Christian in the aftermath of his subterranean search for precious stones and Cambert as the result of his failure to spy effectively on the underground literary scene. Again a compelling analogy is to be drawn between the unintelligible runic inscription in Tieck’s fairytale and the cryptic codes inscribed in the texts of the Prenzlauer Berg lyricists.

Here we discover, then, Hilbig’s consummate skill at weaving an early Romantic canonical pretext into his own literary artefact—not as an exercise in mimetic mannerism, but in order to recontextualise the psychopathology of the “demonised”, schizophrenic Romantic persona and to reposition the Kantian *Wesen-Schein*-dichotomy as part of an ongoing ontological and epistemological problematic culminating via Fichte’s radical subjectivism and Schopenhauer’s

³⁴ Cited in Herzinger (1999).

³⁵ Pfeiffer (1995), p. 6 of 8. For Pfeiffer the Stasi’s association of literature with the utility principle links “*Ich*” with Hoffmann’s satirical novel *Lebensansichten des Katers Murr* (p. 7).

³⁶ Saab (1994), pp. 222–228; here p. 222.

³⁷ Hilbig (1993), p. 5.

post-Romantic theory of representation (*Vorstellung*) in postmodernity's concept of simulation. For Cambert, who by his own significant admission, "[...] lebte in einer Welt von Vorstellung",³⁸ the aporia of simulation constitutes a nagging and seemingly unsolvable riddle: "[...] konnte aus der Simulation die Wirklichkeit werden, und wo war der Übergang?".³⁹ As Hilbig posits in his discursive writings and in other fictional narratives as well, the Baudrillardian concept of simulation encompasses the postmodern condition par excellence. Moreover, in the socio-political life of the GDR the virtual reality of "actually existing socialism" is shown to have supplanted Marxist utopianism in both theory and practice.⁴⁰

In the bureaucratic *realpolitik* of Stasi operations a further factor comes into play: *simulatio* merges with *dissimulatio*. All informants, so Cambert's superior Feuerbach insists, must pretend to believe what they proclaim and enact, even if the "truth" is compromised in the process.⁴¹ Cambert's surveillance function, his quasi-mythical "Dienst in der Unterwelt",⁴² effectively reduces his role to that of a Peeping Tom, a voyeur, which is a far cry from the status of Rimbaud's voyant, and even further removed from Romanticism's illustrious view of the artist as a prophet-seer. Even upon the completion of Cambert's covert assignment, Feuerbach, in reminding his dysfunctional informant of the unbreakability of the magical spell of Stasi collaboration ("[i]ch werde Sie schon wieder holen, wenn ich *Sehnsucht* nach Ihnen habe" [my emphasis]),⁴³ conjures up a vision of the Tieckian *Bergfrau* and her subsequent reincarnation as the ghastly *Waldweib*, whose clutches a demented Christian cannot evade. The word "Sehnsucht" in this postmodern context is in itself a parody of a key Romantic sentiment.

"*Ich*" is not the only Hilbigian narrative to be shot through with intertextual references to Romantic literati and tropes, an aspect of Hilbig's oeuvre that has received some scholarly attention.⁴⁴ Arguably, intertextuality extends as well to Hilbig's ubiquitous employment of a romanticised register and style, and includes his penchant for the Romantic sentence construction "es war/es schien, als ob ...". Indeed, the lyrical tone of many Hilbigian prose passages is highly suggestive of a good deal of Romantic writing. However, while Hilbig may set out to simulate Romantic diction, above all in his descriptions of natural landscapes, he does so not for sentimental or epigonal purposes, but rather to highlight and thus (eco-)critique the disparity between past and present. What is more, the temperamental or aesthetic attraction certain Romantic authors have held for Hilbig at various stages of his life does not presuppose a conscious desire on his part to mimic or faithfully replicate their worldview and poetics. Such reservations surface, for example, in

³⁸ Hilbig (1993), p. 44.

³⁹ Hilbig (1993), p. 45.

⁴⁰ Hilbig remarks in an interview in this context: "Die gesellschaftliche Realität des realen Sozialismus war fiktiv und ideologisch und hatte mit der Wirklichkeit nicht viel zu tun". In: Saab (1994), p. 227.

⁴¹ Hilbig (1993), p. 76f.

⁴² Hilbig (1993), p. 36.

⁴³ Hilbig (1993), p. 363.

⁴⁴ See especially Bordaue (2000), esp. pp. 214–240.

“Der Heizer”, a story in which the artistry of Edgar Allen Poe comes under critical scrutiny from an aspiring writer grappling with the all too familiar Hilbigian syndrome of “literarischer Impotenz”,⁴⁵ while trying to shape his own distinctive literary identity. Although the narrator may long, as Cooke puts it, to “articulate Poe’s vision”,⁴⁶ he is nevertheless thrown back on the relativistic proposition that the American storyteller, like any man of letters, was a product of his time (“den Bedingungen seiner Zeit unterworfen”);⁴⁷ in other words, a unique and unrepeatable cultural incarnation. The same could be said of Novalis, whose arcane mission to “romanticise the world” was predicated on an unquestioning trust in the magical power of poetic language to transform or “qualitatively potentialise” reality, and on the artist-seer’s ability to “rediscover the original meaning of the world”. For Hilbig, on the other hand, the GDR, a “völlig sinnentleertes Begriffssystem”,⁴⁸ possesses no teleological legitimacy. The postmodern condition, too, is synonymous with the loss of *Sprachmagie*, meaning and referentiality, and in the absence of any perceived coherent external reality, Hilbig’s artist figures fail to share the Romantics’ now outdated cardinal belief in the capacity of poetry to give order and meaning to reality.

But to return to “Der Heizer”: in distancing himself even further from his literary forbear, the narrator concludes that Poe was guilty of couching his prose descriptions in “hochstilisierte[n] und romantische[n] Idealismen”.⁴⁹ By contrast, Hilbig’s primary purpose in borrowing from the Romantic tradition is not to engage in aesthetic stylisations, but rather to appropriate and redefine Romantic *topoi* with a view to critiquing the SED dictatorship through dialectical contrasting. There is, however, little textual support for Gabriele Eckart’s contention that Hilbig resurrects the literary device of romantic irony, “um das Verhältnis von Denkendem und Gedachtem zu verwirren”,⁵⁰ or indeed, with a view to playfully deconstructing the rigidity of doctrinaire socialist praxis. Hilbig’s jibes at the deficiencies of the *Arbeiter- und Bauernstaat* lack, for the most part, the scurrilous humour of a Jean Paul.

If romantic irony was thought to be a way of dealing with existential contradictions or the contradictory nature of reality, the theory is put to the test in “Die Territorien der Seelen”, a prose vignette of 1983, reprinted in a post-*Wende* collection of stories *Die Arbeit an den Öfen*. Here a first-person narrator, peering by chance into the mirror of a department store, finds himself transported into a landscape of sweeping vistas that stretch as far as the eye can see. The vision remains unsustainable, and returning unceremoniously to earth, as it were, from the “Peripherie des Unendlichen”⁵¹ the narrator, unable to resolve the tension between

⁴⁵ Hilbig (1992a), p. 130.

⁴⁶ Cooke (2000), p. 113.

⁴⁷ Hilbig (1992a), p. 129.

⁴⁸ Hilbig (1995), p. 39.

⁴⁹ Hilbig (1992a), p. 130.

⁵⁰ Eckart (1996), p. 21.

⁵¹ Hilbig (1994e), p. 33.

the finite and the infinite through irony or wit, is filled with disdain for the "käufliche[] Endlichkeit"⁵² of the consumerism-driven shoppers.

Hilbig treads warily when it comes to rehabilitating German Romantic metaphysics or transcendental philosophy, a legacy subverted and perverted by the exponents of National Socialist ideology. In any case, Hilbig's insecure characters are seldom seekers after a transcendental identity, but simply require the reassurance of an empirically verifiable selfhood. In this respect the inverted commas enclosing the tentative title of Hilbig's Stasi novel are self-evident. The political and cultural tabooisation of the very word "I" ("Die Diktatur kann das Wort 'Ich' nicht ertragen")⁵³ stands in marked historical contrast to a more tolerant intellectual climate that vested in the autonomous Fichtean ego an unbridled authority to assert its will. Particularly for the artists of Hilbig's fiction the problematic of identity is largely existential, epitomised by the dictum "wenn ich schreibe, dann bin ich" (*Eine Übertragung*).⁵⁴ The writer figure of *Das Provisorium*, C., is certainly not alone in his recognition of creative self-reinvention as the antidote to "Nicht-Identität".⁵⁵

Hilbig's special bond with Romantic philosophy and science consists undeniably in a reaffirmation of the organicist and holistic attitude of German Romantics to their physical environment (Schelling, Baader)—in contradistinction to the Marxist–Leninist debasement of nature as a commodity to be "controlled [and] socialised".⁵⁶ Throughout the 1980s Hilbig added his voice to the chorus of "green" literary activists such as the regional poets Wulf Kirsten and Heinz Czechowski in bewailing the loss of biodiversity in the GDR.⁵⁷ Man-made, "simulated" landscapes abound in Hilbig's verse and prose, frequently evoking the impression that "engineered" nature was indeed bizarrely capable of parodying its own *Urschönheit*. As Hilbig explains:

Man muß bedenken, daß ich in einer Gegend aufgewachsen bin als Kind, in der die Erde andauernd umgeschichtet wurde und Tagebaue entstanden und Abraumhalden. Und es war viel Wald in dieser Gegend. Also hatte man praktisch Bilder. Die Tagebaue sofften dann mit der Zeit ab und wurden von verschiedenen Grundwassern gespeist und waren teilweise sogar verschiedenfarbig. Und dazwischen lagen weißgelbe Abraumhalden von Sand. Also hatte man Wüste, Wasser und Wald vor Augen.⁵⁸

A key passage underscoring the radical historical shift in the significance ascribed to the hallowed German forest from the Romantics' literary perception of it as the *locus amoenus* of mysterious and terrifying spiritual forces, to its demythologisation

⁵² Hilbig (1994e), p. 34.

⁵³ Hilbig (2004b).

⁵⁴ Hilbig (1989), p. 220.

⁵⁵ Hilbig (2000b), p. 169.

⁵⁶ Reid (1990), p. 205.

⁵⁷ Corkhill (2001), pp. 173–188. See also more generally: Goodbody (1990) pp. 191–211.

⁵⁸ Luise-Bott (2002), p. 36.

as a fragile ecosystem under threat from encroaching industry, is to be found in Hilbig's detective novel *Eine Übertragung* (1989), which not only revolves around the attempt to solve a murder and to fictionalise the chronology of events leading to the crime, but equally explores on a deeper level the issue of cultural memory. The narrator observes contrastively:

Der Wald war das Gebiet vergangener Jahrhunderte, er hatte in der Wirtschaft des *jungen Staats* nichts zu suchen, er war eine Gegend aus der Literatur, wabernd vom schwarzgrünen Dunst des Aberglaubens [...]. [D]ie Wälder, in die ich mich verstrickte, waren die Wucherungen der reaktionären und weltfremden Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts. Den Wald kannte ich seit meiner Kindheit; am Abend erst kehrte ich täglich aus ihm zurück, wenn ich wußte, daß die nackten baumlosen Straßen ihr erdrückendes Aussehen verloren hatten. Dann illuminierte sich der Qualm der Industrie, hinter seinen Wolkenwänden flackerten Brände, die aufrecht stehenden Batterien der Produktionsfront feuerten aus allen Rohren [...].⁵⁹

A similar sense of “Verschwinden”, a Hilbigian leitmotif, permeates *Alte Abdeckerei* (1991), a story of painful initiation into adulthood in which an introspective first-person narrator moves from brooding private reminiscence to acerbic social commentary. The adolescent experience of nature as an animate entity and the objective correlative of projected moods, of “jugendlichen romantischen Anwandlungen”,⁶⁰ is encapsulated in a romanticised description of the sights and sounds of a secluded meadow with its canopy of age-old willows lining the banks of a murmuring brook:

Und wenn ich anhielt und lauschte, kam es vor, daß ich mich selbst im Innern dieser Überdachung aus Weidengezweig wählte, und manchmal glaubte ich mitzufließen, schaukelnd unter einem schwarzen Baldachin aus Weidenzweigen, in einer Barke von ätzender Trauer, unergründlich treibend in ziellosen Kreisen, um auf dem Sand ganz anderer Gegenden zu stranden.⁶¹

The fragrant purity of the natural landscape is gradually smothered by an overpowering odour that “in die Bachufer eindrang”.⁶² The pungent stench emanates from the man-made hell of the town's abattoir complex with the highly suggestive name “Germania II”, into which terrified animals are herded at dead of night.⁶³ An “aesthetics of ugliness” is integral to the dialectics of contemporary poetics, as Hilbig notes elsewhere: “Die Schönheit [ist] ohne ihr häßliches Gegenbild nicht vorhanden”.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Hilbig (1989), p. 203.

⁶⁰ Hilbig (1991), p. 63.

⁶¹ Hilbig (1991), p. 8.

⁶² Hilbig (1991), p. 113.

⁶³ See my reading of “the pointed references to ramps, cattle trucks and soap manufactured from animal fat [that] conjure up associations of the Third Reich”. Corkhill (2002), pp. 67–80; here, p. 72.

⁶⁴ Hilbig (1994h), pp. 19–21; here p. 21.

If the collapse of “Germania II” at the end of the narrative turns the story into a double-edged political allegory of the demise of the Third Reich *and* the SED dictatorship, the National Socialist past also emerges as a key concern in the eerie prose piece “Die Angst vor Beethoven” (1981). Here the narrating *Arbeiterschriftsteller* purchases an exotic orchid from an elderly florist and finds himself a reluctant bystander to the ravings of this latter-day Ritter Gluck (Hoffmann), a dweller in two time zones who purports to have attended Beethoven’s last public concert. The meaning of the story’s title becomes clear in the florist’s reference to his loss of sanity as a result of his exposure to the maestro’s “Musik und Geist”.⁶⁵ Although the proletarian narrator is unable to empathise culturally with this Classical-Romantic composer (“unsereins kennt die Musik nur von Konserven”),⁶⁶ he nevertheless expresses his indignation at the ideological misappropriation by Nazi storm troopers of Beethoven, Brahms, Liszt and Schumann. The story assumes even more sinister proportions in the old man’s morbid conviction that the evil-smelling orchid, bearing the genus “Subterrania”, is an incarnation of his deceased half-Jewish daughter. The orchid evokes obvious associations with Baudelaire’s *fleurs du mal*, while furnishing a contrastive, and possibly parodistic counter-image to Novalis’ *blaue Blume*. Whereas Heinrich von Ofterdingen in his dream reverie spies his *subterrania* in a wondrous cavern and watches it metamorphosise into the visage of a beautiful maiden, Hilbig’s bard suspects that the hideous orchid, and indeed the whole bizarre conversation with the florist, are not the sequences of a beautiful dream, but a nightmarish hallucination, a figment of his imagination. If these are indeed the stirrings of the subconscious mind, it may be because the narrator is, on a meta-level, engaged in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, grappling with a collective guilt complex in the wake of the florist’s illogical charge that his young listener was, despite his age, complicit in the Holocaust.

A cornerstone of Hilbig’s contrastive critiquing is a reconceptualisation of stock icons and metaphors of Romantic belles-lettres, painting and music through a shift of connotation. In the process, the recurring substantive “Ruine” no longer links the present nostalgically with a picturesque medieval past, but denotes the monstrous eyesores of industrial wastelands. Within *Alte Abdeckerei*, to illustrate the point, a jarring juxtaposition of imagery is observable in the reference to the “Anzahl verlassener Industrieruinen, die wie sturmverlassene Felseninseln gegen Himmel zeigten”.⁶⁷ Christa Wolf employs the same technique with consummate skill in her novella *Störfall* (1988), where the word “Wolke” is divested of its innocent Wordsworthian associations and is, instead, refunctionalised as the cloud of lethal radioactivity emitted from the Chernobyl meltdown.

A further topographical hallmark of German Romanticism, immortalised in Wilhelm Müller’s/Franz Schubert’s *Die Schöne Müllerin*, but problematised by Hilbig is the image of the mill. In one of Hilbig’s pre-*Wende* stories, ironically titled “Idylle” (1970), the narrator, a solitary wanderer à la Stevenson, stumbles across an

⁶⁵ Hilbig (1997), p. 204.

⁶⁶ Hilbig (1997), p. 215.

⁶⁷ Hilbig (1991), p. 62.

old mill with a water-wheel that at first glance appears picturesque, but upon closer inspection turns out to be derelict. However hard he tries to imagine that he is beholding more than just an “unbewohnte Mühle”,⁶⁸ in a ramshackle state, he confesses to an inability to transcend or poeticise such “erscheckend banal[e]”⁶⁹ thoughts. Nevertheless, the make-believe miller’s daughter fancifully greeted by the narrator in the last paragraph provides a subtle intertextual linkage with Schubert’s song cycle. Hilbig’s remake is, however, no sentimental tale of unrequited love resulting in the suicide of the inconsolable miller’s apprentice.

Yet another interesting illustration of transferred epithets is the aforementioned sonnet “novalis”, a characteristically self-reflexive poem in which the titular figure serves Hilbig as a foil for defining himself existentially and poetologically. It lacks the unambiguously biographical coordinates of a portrait poem such as Johannes Becher’s eulogistic sonnet “Hölderlin” (1936).⁷⁰ Hilbig fails to endow the key Romantic concepts “night”, “darkness” and “dream” with the affirmative signification we encounter in the *Hymnen an die Nacht* (1800). The “I” addressed in the opening strophe (“ich ging von ihren tischen voller speisen”)⁷¹ is an autobiographical persona, an outsider bemoaning in an elegiac tone the creative plenitude enjoyed by writer colleagues. Driven out into “das Dunkel” of the street in an inebriated state (with overtones of the *Bateau Ivre*), the “ich” is denied the experience of night as a mystical or inspirational force (“ich sah die Nacht verwaisen”).⁷²

To sum up: Wolfgang Hilbig, whom compatriot author Ingo Schulze interestingly refers to as “der letzte Romantiker”,⁷³ has come under the spell of many different German Romantic literary practitioners for reasons ranging from geographical identification and temperamental affinity to similarities in outlook. It has been an ongoing dialogue with the Romantic tradition, one shared with Gert Neumann and with other like-minded representatives of what Hilbig’s close writer friend Adolf Endler has fancifully labelled “die Leipziger Schwarze Romantik”,⁷⁴ as though this unofficial “scene” might somehow be thought to constitute a belated Romantic school or circle.

As far as overt and covert allusions to Romantics, their work and their thinking are concerned, it was never Hilbig’s intention to engage in an aesthetic or formalistic game via his network of intertextual referencing. Rather, intertextuality is used, as Sylvie Bordaux perceptively comments, to keep the process of cultural remembrance alive. “[Ich] schreibe gegen das Vergessen”,⁷⁵ Hilbig asserted

⁶⁸ Hilbig (1992a), p. 16.

⁶⁹ Hilbig (1992a), p. 16.

⁷⁰ For a reading of the Hölderlin poem see Leeder (1990), pp. 212–231; here p. 217f.

⁷¹ Hilbig (1979), p. 43.

⁷² I read “novalis” as a poetological poem about the predicament of writer’s block, whereas Jaak de Vos emphasises the political dimension, namely the poet’s “Abschied” as a repudiation “von historischem Materialismus” and socialist collectivism. Jaak de Vos (1990), p. 96.

⁷³ Schulze (2002), p. 13.

⁷⁴ Luise-Bott (2002), p. 17.

⁷⁵ Saab (1994), p. 228.

unashamedly in 1993. Furthermore, intertextuality serves to locate that part of the GDR's literary practice and production, albeit a very modest share, to which the regional *Arbeiterschriftsteller* Hilbig could lay claim within the continuum of a broader international or universal community of letters.⁷⁶ At the same time, Hilbig invokes the discourses of Romantic intellectual tradition, not as a means of gaining a better understanding of the present, but rather as a critical and dialectical measure of the shortcomings of the centralised East German state, especially in the realm of ecology, poetics and cultural politics since the seventies. Undoubtedly, cultural philistinism, reviled and lampooned by Hilbig's literary precursor E.T.A. Hoffmann, is found to have reinvented itself in what the narrator of *Eine Übertragung* scathingly defines as a "eine von den Bürokraten verwaltete Utopie".⁷⁷ As he stands accused of sabotage, the novel's insecure part-time writer is dealt the ultimate affront to his metier from such an interrogating functionary: "Wir haben hier keine Lust zu phantasieren".⁷⁸ Of course, those who are quick to draw an analogy between a riotous artistic imagination and social anarchy are just as likely to regard the "Verwilderung der Formen", characteristic of Romantic letters from Tieck to Jean Paul, as coextensive with uncontrollable, or at worst, subversive "Inhalte". Such is the conclusion Hilbig reaches in his seminal essay "Der Mythos ist irdisch" of 1983.⁷⁹ Even by the 1980s little had been done to allay the suspicion that the revival of interest in the Romantic past was, as a government gazette on heritage preservation in the GDR cautioned, simply a "Bezugsfeld für eine individualistische Privatisierung".⁸⁰ If Hilbig is culpable on this score, then it is because his closeness to Romantic aesthetic ideals calibrates with his own poetic vision and praxis. It cannot be said, however, that his *weltanschauung*, socially conditioned by dialectical materialism, extends to a re-appropriated Romantic historiography, whether it be Herder's ideologically discredited *Volksggeist* principle or Schelling's metaphysical teleology of history.

References

- Bordaux, S. (2000). [E]s gibt quasi keine Spur mehr von der romantischen geistigen Trunkenheit, die die Phantasie beflügelt. In: S. Bordaux, *Literatur als Subversion. Eine Untersuchung des Prosawerkes von Wolfgang Hilbig*. Göttingen.
- Cooke, P. (2000). *Speaking the Taboo. A study of the work of Wolfgang Hilbig*. Amsterdam.
- Corkhill, A. (2001). Scarred landscapes. Wolfgang Hilbig's ecocritique. In: *Aumla*, Vol. 96.
- Corkhill, A. (2002). In: M. Kane (Ed.) *Legacies and Identity. East and West German Literary Responses to Unification*. Oxford.

⁷⁶ Bordaux (2000), p. 197f.

⁷⁷ Hilbig (1989), p. 282.

⁷⁸ Hilbig (1989), p. 282.

⁷⁹ Hilbig writes: "Was man der Romantik vorgeworfen hat und vorwirft, ist unter anderem die Verwilderung der Formen. [...] Und wenn man meint, daß mit einer verwilderten Form einem Inhalt nicht beizukommen ist, meint man womöglich auch, daß Inhalte in solcher Form schwerer zu kontrollieren seien". Hilbig (1994a), p. 33.

⁸⁰ Horst Haase et al. (1986). Cited in: Gärtner (2001), p. 210.

- Corkhill, A. (2004). Self-imposed difference? The writer as outsider in Wolfgang Hilbig's novel *Das Provisorium*. In: *Seminar*, Vol. 40(3), pp. 236–248.
- Eckart, G. (1996). *Sprachtraumata in den Texten Wolfgang Hilbigs*. Washington DC.
- Fühmann, F. (1976). Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Amadeus Hoffmann. Ein Rundfunkvortrag. Radio DDRII.
- Fühmann, F. (1979). *Fräulein Veronika Paulmann aus der Pirnaer Vorstadt oder Etwas über das Schauerliche bei E.T.A. Hoffmann*. Rostock, p. 23.
- Gärtner, M. (2001). Bibliothek deutscher Klassiker. In: *Weimarer Klassik in der Ära Honecker*. Wien.
- Gaskill, H., McPherson, K., & Barker, A. (Eds.) (1990). *Neue Ansichten. The Reception of Romanticism in the Literature of the GDR*. Amsterdam.
- Goodbody, A. (1990). The Romantic Landscape in Recent GDR Poetry: Wulf Kirsten and Volker Braun. In: *Neue Ansichten*.
- Haase, H. et al. (1986). *Die SED und das kulturelle Erbe. Orientierungen, Errungenschaften, Probleme*. Berlin.
- Herzinger, R. (1999). Rauberzug im Bürgertum. In: *Die Zeit*, no. 30, 1999. http://www.zeus.zeit.de/text/archiv/1999/30/199930.moderne_xml.
- Hilbig, W. (1979). *abwesenheit. Gedichte*. Frankfurt/M.
- Hilbig, W. (1989). *Eine Übertragung*. Frankfurt/M.
- Hilbig, W. (1991). *Alte Abdeckerei*. Frankfurt/M.
- Hilbig, W. (1992a). *Aufbrüche. Erzählungen*. Frankfurt/M.
- Hilbig, W. (1992b). *Zwischen den Paradiesen. Prosa, Lyrik. Mit einem Essay von Adolf Endler*. Leipzig.
- Hilbig, W. (1993). 'Ich'. *Roman*. Frankfurt/M.
- Hilbig, W. (1994a). Der Mythos ist irdisch. Für Franz Fühmann zum 60. Geburtstag (1982). In U. Wittstock (Ed.) *Wolfgang Hilbig. Materialien zu Leben und Werk*. Frankfurt/M, pp. 30–37.
- Hilbig, W. (1994b). Die Abwesenheit als Orte der Poesie. Gespräch mit Wolfgang Hilbig. In: *ndl*, Vol. 42(5), p. 9.
- Hilbig, W. (1994c). Zeit ohne Wirklichkeit'. Ein Gespräch mit Harro Zimmermann. In: *Text + Kritik*, Heft 123 ('Wolfgang Hilbig'), July 1994.
- Hilbig, W. (1994d). *Die Kunde von den Bäumen*. Frankfurt/M.
- Hilbig, W. (1994e). Die Territorien der Seele. In: *Die Arbeit an den Öfen. Erzählungen*. Berlin.
- Hilbig, W. (1994f). Selbstvorstellung anlässlich der Aufnahme in die Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung. In: *Wolfgang Hilbig. Materialien zu Leben und Werk*, pp. 11–13.
- Hilbig, W. (1994g). Unfähigkeit zur Anonymität. Rede zum Brüder-Grimm-Preis 1983. In: *Wolfgang Hilbig. Materialien zu Leben und Werk*.
- Hilbig, W. (1994h). Der Blick von unten. In: *Wolfgang Hilbig. Materialien zu Leben und Werk*.
- Hilbig, W. (1995). *Abriss der Kritik*. Frankfurt/M.
- Hilbig, W. (1997). *Erzählungen*. Frankfurt/M, p. 40.
- Hilbig, W. (2000a). Meine Lehrjahre (6). Wolfgang Hilbig, Schriftsteller. In: *Die Zeit – Chancen*. http://www.zeit.de/archiv/2000/24/200024.c-seriehilbig_xml.
- Hilbig, W. (2000b) *Das Provisorium*. Frankfurt/M.
- Hilbig, W. (2002). Ich komme aus dem Wald. Wolfgang Hilbig über seine Schreibanfänge in der DDR, Erfahrungen nach der Übersiedlung in den Westen und die Abneigung, ein Arbeiterschriftsteller genannt zu werden – ein Gespräch mit dem diesjährigen Büchner-Preisträger. In: *Berliner Zeitung*, no. 250, 26 October 2002, p. 5.
- Hilbig, W. (2004a). *Prosa meiner Heimatstraße*. Warmbronn.
- Hilbig W. (2004b). Die Abwesenheit als Orte der Poesie. Gespräch mit Wolfgang Hilbig. In: *ndl*, Vol. 42/5, p. 13.
- Hilbig, W. (1997). Die Angst vor Beethoven. In: *Wolfgang Hilbig, Erzählungen*.
- Jaak de Vos (1990). Du knüpfest zwischen Nationen/Aus noch getrennten, fernen Zonen/Ein heiliges, geweihtes Band. Novalis und Hölderlin in der Lyrik der ehemaligen DDR. In: E. Tunner (Ed.) *Romantik- eine Lebenskräftige Krankheit: Ihre literarischen Nachwirkungen in der Moderne*. Amsterdam, p. 96.
- Knittel, A. P. (2003). Zwischen Faust-Puppenspielen und Eichendorff-Rezeption in der DDR In: *Aurora*. <http://www.iasl.uni-muenchen.de/rezensio/liste/knittel.html>.
- Leeder, K. (1990). Towards a Profane Hölderlin: Representations and revisions of Hölderlin in some GDR Poetry. In: *Neue Ansichten*.
- Loescher, J. (2004). Mythos, Macht und Kellersprache. Wolfgang Hilbigs Prosa im Spiegel der Nachwende. Amsterdam.

- Luise-Bott, M. (2002). Urwörter der Moderne. Eine Annäherung an das Werk von Wolfgang Hilbig. In: *Literarisches Feature (60 Min.)*, WDR, 22 October 2002 (pp. 1–40). Redaktion: Imke Wallefeld.
- Pfeiffer, J. (1995). Wolfgang Hilbig's Roman 'Ich' und die Tradition des romantischen Künstlerromans. <http://www.home.ph-freiburg.de/pfeiffer/hilbig.htm>.
- Reid, J. H. (1990). *Writing taboos. The new East German literature*. Oxford.
- Saab, K. (1994). Die DDR-Literatur hatte völlig resigniert. Über Schreckfälscher und Flaschensammler. Ein Gespräch mit Wolfgang Hilbig. In: *Wolfgang Hilbig. Materialien zu Leben und Werk*, pp. 222–228.
- Schulze, I. (2002). Was Herr Voland in Meuselwitz machte. Für Wolfgang Hilbig, eine ernste Zuschrift aus Anlass des Büchner-Preises. In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, no. 103, 4/5 May 2002.
- Zimmermann, H. (1994). Wolfgang Hilbig. In: H. L. Arnold (Ed.) *Kritisches Lexikon zur deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*. München.