

Postwar Women in Herbjörg Wassmo's and Helga Schütz's Prose

The Norwegian writer Herbjörg Wassmo, born in 1942, worked many years in a Northern Norwegian primary school. As a child she was already writing poetry and she published two collections, *Vingeslag* in 1976, and *Flodtid* in 1977. However, she is better known for her prose, mainly for her trilogy about the girl Tora. The first volume, *Huset med den blinde glassveranda*, appeared in 1981 and won the Nordic Council's prize for literature; the second, *Det stumme rommet* in 1983; and the third, *Hudløs Himmel* in 1986. In these novels Wassmo describes the life of a teenage girl in a Northern Norwegian fishing village from about age 12 until age 20. Tora is a very intelligent girl and develops into quite a beauty, yet her life is difficult and destiny is less than kind to her. There is utter poverty. Her father was a German soldier, killed by the Norwegian resistance in Trondheim; her mother suffered the fate typical of most Norwegian women who fraternized with German soldiers: she had her hair sheared off and was scorned. To make matters worse Tora's stepfather, an alcoholic sailor wounded and handicapped in the war, commits incest with Tora over the course of several years. The only bright light in Tora's life, her aunt Rakel who really cares for her, who is her model and challenge, later succumbs to incurable cancer, and drown herself before the cancer kills her. Tora tries to survive, to cope. She fights continuously against the demons in her life, but the obstacles prove to be very large, perhaps too large. In the end Tora is physically healthy and functions in daily life, yet her psyche certainly does not come through unscathed. The last volume of the trilogy ends with Tora lapsing into one of her escapist dreams. In addition to the tremendous variety of themes, such as war, death, collective and individual guilt, love, incest, abortion, women's role in society, poverty, social conflicts—the list could be continued almost indefinitely—what is intriguing about these novels is the way Wassmo captures the Northern Norwegian landscape and the culture of the fifties and sixties. There are continuous references to political and cultural events of the times, to fashion, technology and religion. The material is carefully researched, and the style varies from almost lyrical descriptions of nature to earthy dialogue rendered in Northern Norwegian dialect. The ruling creative

gestus is irony, which at times slips into somewhat shrill sarcasm.

Tora lives on a Northern Norwegian island in the fifties where life is rough for everyone. The Northern climate parallels living conditions. The struggle to survive is permanent and all-encompassing. The island is a microcosm of Norwegian society and attitudes reduced to a level which the author can easily manage in her novels. At the same time the island represents a fringe society on the periphery of Norway where conditions are extreme and the rest of the world very distant. People on the island are staunch individualists, living according to their own convictions and opinions. Within this frame, however, certain stereotyping takes place: we meet the crusty independent old bachelor, the Jehovah's Witness, the scheming businessman, the women in the fish factory with their strange ideas about fashion and good times. In some ways each individual character could be considered an outcast of society. But in this community of outcasts, Tora is a double outcast. She does not have the flaws of character that her peers have. She is not ugly—on the contrary, she turns into quite a beauty—is intelligent, industrious, always trying to please and cooperate. In short, she excels above everyone, yet is not a full member of society, not generally accepted, and persecuted at times because she is the daughter of a German soldier. The children yell "tyskerunge" at her and make fun of her red hair: "Brann, brann i Tora sett hår, brann, brann, mora har logge med tyskermann." Her mother, also punished by society yet still a native part of it, tries to ignore the issue. Her otherwise understanding and supportive aunt Rakel tries to reassure her, but cannot avoid mentioning that Tora's birth virtually took the life of her maternal grandparents. Of course, Tora knows very little about her father and the German side of her family. Only after her confirmation does she receive an ancient photo from her mother that shows her father in uniform. Only much later yet does Rakel investigate via the Red Cross whether members of the German family survived, at which time she discovers that only an uncle in Berlin is still alive. The impact on Tora is twofold: first of all she suffers from a permanent and severe identity crisis.

Although she makes a great effort to be like her peers, deep down she knows she is not. She knows that part of her is of a different world, not of the island on which she lives. Her hungry mind cannot forget this other world. She secretly tries to get information about Germany, especially about Berlin. One day she broods over a map of Germany in her school atlas. Another time she reads in her history book that Berlin is a pile of ruins and rubble where people still are not allowed to be friends and pictures of burnt corpse appear before her mind's eye. Then it dawns on her that she really is part of the war and its horrors, and consequently carries a burden of guilt. Besides struggling with her identity crisis, then, she leads a life of permanent shame. She proves, however, to be surprisingly resilient. Just as she fights her identity crisis with escapist dreams, imagining a visit to Berlin and her German family, she fights her shame by regaling in it. Several times we are told she "crept into her shame," that it takes over so that nothing else matters. What remains is her Germanness, her shame and her fiery red hair.

The children of Tora's community are unforgiving and the adults freely comment on Tora's shameful background, her mother's sins and generally give free reign to their hate of Germans and everything German. Tora feels so haunted that one day she is relieved when in school her teacher discusses the cold war and the dangers of atomic warfare, because this, after all, would be much worse than the war the Germans had brought down upon Europe. German language class is no one's favorite: "the German grammatical rules and declensions permeated the sweaty air which was full of chalk dust and disgust. But Tora did not experience it this way." By coincidence she finds Anne Frank's diary and feels very much akin to Anne's fate, so much so that, irony of ironies, "she forgot to be ashamed that she was German." Another time an old Jew selling trinkets wanders around the island. Again Tora senses immediately that he is a spiritual relative, a fellow outcast. The epithets that apply to Tora and to the old Jew, *tyskerungen* / *gammel-jøden*, become strangely parallel, unifying rather than separating the two. The Germans have sunk just as low or even lower than Jews who, in the eyes of the Nazis, were the pariahs of world society. On the other hand, there are conciliatory attitudes as well; at one point people in the general store discuss the capture of a West German trawler in Norwegian waters. Many fishermen make hateful comments about German

trawlers and Germans in general; one old man stands up and exclaims that things cannot continue like this forever: the new generation of Germans should have a chance, a new lease on life.

Wassmo thus paints a rather realistic picture of Norway in the fifties and of attitudes toward Germans and Germany. But she also introduces a second level which highly dramatizes the story, making the issues palpable and tangible. Tora's brutish and violent stepfather Henrik who, wounded in the war has only the use of one arm, repeatedly rapes Tora over an extended period of time. Because of his war injury he hates Germans, and by inference, Tora. Whether he rapes Tora as an act of revenge is left open. The act of incest, besides causing a great deal of physical pain, causes grievous psychological damage to Tora and increases her shame to extremes. In her early teens Tora becomes pregnant. She barely survives a self-induced abortion, but manages to drag herself out into an unfriendly winter landscape to bury the fetus. This trauma is in some ways a turning point in her life: she finds herself suddenly liberated. She turns into a beautiful young woman, a superior student with a promising future. She even manages to torment Henrik, her tormentor, but her thoughts often wander back to the fetus which she refers to as "fugleungen," her little bird. With it she buried her shame, yet afterwards she seems to miss it, as if she had lost part of her destiny. Her identity crisis is still very much with her, and in the final chapter she is still dreaming about going to Germany, now confusing dream and reality. The ending, although seemingly very peaceful, in many ways recalls the ending of Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Tora's Berlin is Oswald's sun. What finally breaks Tora are not her extreme feelings of guilt and shame, nor her status as an outcast, which loses much of its importance once she grows up; it is the idea of being caught between two worlds, of being suspended in the void.

The GDR writer Helga Schütz, born in 1937, received training as a gardener and plant biologist, and later studied at the Hochschule für Filmkunst in Potsdam. Schütz has written many movie scripts, but is better known for her prose: four volumes of stories which follow the people of a small Silesian village Probststein from the thirties into the sixties. The first volume, *Vorgeschichten oder Schöne Gegend Probststein* (1971), deals with daily village life during the era of fascism; the second and third

volumes, *Das Erdbeben bei Sangershausen* (1972) and *Festbeleuchtung* (1974), show how the people of Probststein are settling in and living in another village on the southern slopes of the Harz mountains in West Germany. Finally, a fourth book, *Jette in Dresden* (1977), focuses on those inhabitants of Probststein who remained in the GDR, in Dresden. The four volumes are only loosely connected and were not written in chronological order. For instance *Festbeleuchtung*, which depicts life in West Germany in the fifties, was written six years before *Jette in Dresden*, which tells us about the forties in the Soviet Occupied Zone. Although the books do not vary much in style and structure, *Jette in Dresden* was published as a novel; the other volumes as *Erzählungen*. What connects the texts, however, is the main character Jette, whom we meet at age five, at age ten and at age 20. Given the limited scope and length of this paper, I will consider two books only: *Jette in Dresden*, which describes Jette's life in the ruins of Dresden during the famine-stricken black market time in the late forties, and *Festbeleuchtung*, which presents Jette as a wedding guest in the Harz village of Spitzbergen in the West German *Wirtschaftswunderland* of the fifties. Jette's life is tragic. Yet whereas Tora's tragedy is unique, Jette's tragedy is shared by millions of other refugees, millions of fellow sufferers. Jette, too, is a fighter, a survivor, but at the same time someone who goes with the spirit of the times. Thus, in the fifties, she is a dedicated communist. Like Wassmo, Schütz works with irony and sarcasm and makes clever use of dialect and setting.

Compared to Tora's life, Jette's is not tragic in nature. Rather, it builds on tragedy, namely on the tragedy of hunger, cold, deprivation and the ruins of postwar Germany. She could be one of the German relatives Tora continuously wonders about. Jette is not an individual outcast like Tora. Rather, as a refugee from Silesia, she belongs to an entire social class of outcasts. She is thus always taunted and looked down upon, first by the locals in Dresden, an urbane setting after all, then much more so by the natives of the small village in the Harz mountains. Although street-wise, cunning, clever, and capable of surviving, deep-down she is very sensitive and vulnerable. Frequently when she transgresses the laws of the adults or acceptable behavior in school she feels intense shame which always returns, yet is no means tantamount to Tora's shame. Her signal color, then, is not a fiery red, but rather the sedate

pink of the jasmine bush outside her house, her "pink summer residence." Two old ladies who live in the attic gain a livelihood from making rag dolls: "Recently they have started to make the faces of the king and the princess white, all exploiters white and ugly and evil and the subjects good and pink." Jette is by and large a good subject, but often her pink face expresses shame and embarrassment.

Unlike Tora, Jette is not exposed to sexual abuse. But at least two incidents in which her human dignity is violated have significant impact on her. Once as a seven or eight year old, some of her playmates rob the bubble gum cards she has collected, and as one of them pulls down her pants she is ridiculed by all. On a second occasion strangers accost her in the street and forcefully take her new wooden shoes from her feet, so that she has to run home through the snow barefoot. The incidents increase her sense of shame and leave her devastated. Yet her suffering never reaches such a sustained intensity as Tora's and remains different in nature. For instance, in school she is immediately marked as a refugee girl "destined for the back row, belying to the group of the disturbed, unmusical and undernourished ones . . . In lieu of praise, life for her meant scorn and shame." She is eager to make friends with her peers and the teacher, but meets mostly with rejection. At home she lives with her grandmother, who cleverly manages to survive by making cigarettes and selling them on the black market. The grandmother is protective of Jette and very liberal. Reminiscent of Tora's aunt Rakel, she provides a safe haven for Jette. Jette's parents have already moved across the green border to West Germany where they are trying to build a new life for themselves. Jette joins them for a while, but things do not work out and she has to return to Dresden.

When we meet Jette again as a teenager, she has, similar to Tora, outgrown her ugliness and has turned into a good looking young woman. Although she does not excel in school like Tora, she has adapted and seems to have a reasonable future in East Germany. This issue of adaptation, incidentally, is crucial. Large segments of Helga Schütz's texts describe adaptation processes in East and West. In *Festbeleuchtung* we learn in detail how the Silesian refugees take root in a West German village: they first try to recreate life as it was in Silesia, but then slowly realize that they are facing a new reality and therefore must learn to

accept their new environment and all of its conditions, including its politics and Adenauer's brand of democracy. Jette adapts to the new state in the East and accepts political reality there. When she visits her Silesian relatives in the West, the predictable happens: in the microcosm of a West German border village in the Harz mountains the two worlds collide. Jette tries to convert the westernized Silesians to socialism. She quotes Marx and Lenin and tries naïvely, yet very seriously, to convince people that they live in an inhumane society and are being exploited. She starts out missionizing her old grandfather, who she thinks might be the easiest target. But he is too senile to make any sense of it, and the others are not listening.

It is Schütz's merit to be the first East German writer to examine the East-West issue. Her story unabashedly criticizes the system. She points a finger at Jette's naïveté and the black-and-white thinking of the Eastern world. By the same token she sees there the strength of youth and a certain amount of healthy optimism which stand in contrast to the somewhat jaded politicking and rampant materialism in the West. Ten years prior to Schütz, Christa Wolf discussed the division between East and West in her novel *Der geteilte Himmel*. Wolf, however, only stated the division without attempting to contrast the social and political situations in East and West.

Although the reader leaves Jette in her late teens without a sense of tragedy, he understands that her life is formed by the contrasts of the two systems. She, too, suffers from an identity crisis. Where does she belong? She cannot go back to Silesia; most of her family's relatives and friends are in the West, where, at least materially, life seems to be better. But she happens to live in the East, in a society of which she feels a part. She, too, is suspended in the void between two worlds.

Both Tora and Jette are children of war. They exist because of the war and the war casts a lasting shadow over their entire lives. Their struggle is the struggle to liberate themselves from the tragic influences of the war and to find a place where they belong. Both Wassmo and Schütz indicate, however, that in all likelihood this will not be possible: once homeless, always homeless and always suffering.

Victimized by a war or postwar milieu, both women overcome their terrible experiences by virtue of their character. They both are able to find a liberating stimulus inside themselves. Their mere youth and personal strength save them. The true

victims in Wassmo's book are Tora's mother, whose suffering persists, and Henrik, whose life is also ruined. In Schütz's book it is members of the older generation who cannot adapt and literally fall dead by the wayside. Youth has the strength to begin anew—in this respect both books express a certain degree of optimism. But, on the other hand, both protagonists are formed and in some aspects limited by their war and postwar experiences. In this context the issue of political victors and vanquished is unimportant. What counts is the chaotic and deprived environment. Symbols of the broken world include the fiery hellish color red in Wassmo's story and the artificial and chilly pink in Schütz's story. When the world again becomes hale and orderly, the reader's eye can rest on green fields and golden harvests. Both characters emerge as typical parts of a new reality—the new Norwegian state of the fifties on the one hand and the polar ideological and geographic division of Germany in the years of the Cold War on the other. Both books belong to the literary tradition of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a well-known tradition in West Germany and in Norway, a novelty—at least at the time the novel was written—in the GDR. Earlier novels in the GDR, for instance those of Anna Seghers, also deal with war and postwar times, but are ideologically black and white and celebrate the official GDR myth of "the year zero." Schütz is one of the first writers who recognizes the complex political reality of the years 1945-1960 and does not simply reflect official GDR policy. Wassmo in Northern Norway had no such restraints, but she equaled Schütz's courage in taking up an issue that was almost taboo—the offspring of Norwegian-German couples during World War II were about as popular in Norway as American-Asian children in Vietnam after 1975. Wassmo is one of the first Norwegian writers to take up their fate and renew public interest in and discussion of the topic.

Bibliography

- Helga Schütz, *Festbeleuchtung*, Zürich, Köln: Luchterhand, 1982.
 ———, *Jette in Dresden*, Berlin-Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1983.
 Herbjørg Wassmo, *Hudløs Himmel*, Oslo: Gyldendal, 1986.
 ———, *Huset med den blinde glassveranda*, Oslo: Gyldendal, 1981.
 ———, *Det stumme rummet*, Oslo: Solum, 1983.