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Book Review: The Ancestral Pyramid by Ilse Tielsch

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The Ancestral Pyramid. By Ilse Tielsch. Translated and with an Afterword by David Scrase. Riverside, California: Ariadne Press, 2001. 303pp. \$ 28.50, paper.

Like the overture of a symphony, the captivating opening pages of Ilse Tielsch's novel, The Ancestral Pyramid introduce the themes of her work: the child Anni's daydreams, fantasies, invented narratives and an imagined fairy tale existence in the magic world of her own creation. The mirror game shows her reality in reflection, allowing her to escape the limits of space and time, "floating there, opening invisible wings . . . an elfin child." Her experience of space expands with the mirror acting as threshold between reality and fantasy, as gateway to a timeless universe. But Anni is confronted with her humanity in view of her family tree, the ancestral pyramid. The novel, a first person narrative, is the story of Anni, who grew up on the border between Bohemia and Moravia, knowing two versions of the national anthem and counting in two languages. Once upon a time, her father told her, everyone in her family was Austrian. The sheets of white paper spread out on the table in the shape of a pyramid with names and dates in boxes resting on the box with Anni's name arouse fear in the child. The boxes seem like coffins confining the dead whose weight bears down on her. Through photos, chronicles, diaries and the double lense of her glasses and a magnifying glass, the adult narrator enters the unknown regions of the past where those ancestors lived, transcending the boundaries of space and time by entering the "virtual reality" of their environments, breathing life into them through her creative imagination and liberating them from death and obscurity.

The narrator's ruminations about the past may have been prompted by a questionnaire asking her to define her concept of HOMELAND. The resulting novel is evidence that this can not be accomplished in thirty lines or less. Die Ahnenpyramide, published in 1980, is part of a trilogy which includes Heimatsuchen (1982) and Die Früchte der Tränen (1988). The critics Theo Döllgast and Kurt Adel focus on the theme of "Heimat" in Tielsch's work, but equally important thematically is the process of reconstructing memory, entering other dimensions through observation, contemplation, and synesthetic fantasy, connecting past and present through language, through naming and word magic intertwining personal and public history. Singing forgotten songs, writing down fleeting memories and expanding chronicles through speculation, sketching unknown geographic areas, the adult narrator rhythmically, lyrically, visually conjures the past, making history, sociology, and fantasy real and tangible through the enchantment of words: naming sounds, colors, shapes, and spinning her tale in the tradition of the weavers among her ancestors, who told stories in their spinning rooms.

This kind of chronicle is less about certainties than about possibilities and probabilities. It is a poetic re-collection of memories against the backdrop of actual historic events covering more than 400 years from the first recorded progenitor, Adam, who emerges from an almost mythical past, to Anni's present life in Vienna, where she resides with her husband Bernhard and their children, completing the Reigen of her ancestors. The novel comes full circle with Anni's concluding reflections on the ancestral pyramid. The principle of inversion, which permitted her to exchange her real world with a magic fantasy realm through the mirror, now enables her to change her view of the ancestral pyramid. Turning it upside down, the adult Anni perceives herself supported by all those who lived before her, "being HELD ALOFT by something WHOLE AND COMPLETE," feeling reassurance instead of fear. ABOVE now is future rather than

past. It's a matter of perspective: above and below, then and now, she concludes are concepts invented to bring apparent order into our world, "probably age-old deceptions" needed for reassurance that the world really exists.

The novel is about processes and choices, about filling in the gaps between fixed coordinates in space and time, about prying moments loose from petrification and stepping beyond limits and boundaries. In "Ilse Tielsch's *Grenzüberschreitungen*," Carine Kleiber comments on processes of internalization and externalization in Tielsch's work, examining the author's attempts to reconcile inner and outer images in coming to terms with the idea of HOMELAND. She notes the importance of the imagination in the construction of memory and the role of fantasy in the fictionalizing and mythicizing process, which Tielsch in *Heimatsuchen* regards as "korrigierte und korrigierende Wirklichkeit." Tielsch's writing occurs as if in a trance, but only after painstaking research of the documentary evidence available to her: transcripts, carbon copies, certificates, letters. Like an archaeologist, the author searches for her own identity by collecting and arranging the fragments of the past, assembling her character, her talents, her aversions, finding similarities, overlaps, and parallels with those who lived before her and growing conscious of her place in the ancestral chain.

At the same time, objective reality is not obscured. From magic lanterns and stereoscopy to the fur trimmed fashions ladies wore ice-skating in Moravian-Trübau at the turn of the century, Ilse Tielsch evokes the mood and atmosphere of the Austrian Empire preceding World War I: games and entertainment, social and sports activities, customs and traditions, labor conditions and worker uprisings, social and political movements, technical innovations and scientific inventions. She examines flax cultivation and linen weaving, crystal cutting and glass bead production in the Iser Mountains, Riesengebirge and Bohemian Forest. The smells of meadows and forests, the clarity of streams like the *Silberwasser* in the Schönhengst, and the sparkle of stones from the river, a tree-lined road, grasses, flowers, fields connect with regional legends, sagas, and fairy tales to signify HOME for the narrator in the multi-ethnic, multi-national border area of Bohemia and Moravia from which she is displaced by the events of World War II. Adult narratives and newspaper accounts aid the mature Anni in reconstructing the historic events of that time, interweaving personal stories and fragmentary memory with reports researched in Vienna's *Nationalbibliothek*.

David Scrase's translation of *Die Ahnenpyramide* is eminently readable, his expert skills especially apparent in the rendering of lyrical inserts (frequently in dialect in the original). In a brief "Afterword," he presents a short history of Czechoslovakia, whose historical and political vicissitudes are encapsulated in a statement by Anni's father: "Without leaving your apartment, the house in which this apartment is, the town in which the house is situated, you can be a citizen of Austria, then Czechoslovakia, then of Germany, and then, finally, of any country whatsoever." (Here the German text suggests "of no country whatsoever: "...dann überhaupt kein Staatsbürger mehr sein," which implies being stateless.) Starting with Celtic and Germanic tribal migrations and the settlement of Central Europe by the Slavs, Scrase traces Bohemia's rise to power, rivalry with Hungary, and the influence of Christianity and German legal models in the area, all contributing factors to the region's westward orientation maintained by centuries of Habsburg rule. Even after the demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in the time before Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1938, he points out, Germans outnumbered

Slovaks in this multi-ethnic and multi-lingual region by 1% and vestiges of German influence remained in law, religion, education, and language—the language of Rilke, Kafka, and Werfel, which is also the language of Ilse Tielsch. He sketches an overview of her life and work and places her in the company of other post-war writers like Günter Grass, Siegfried Lenz, Martin Walser, and Christa Wolf, who also had to leave their homeland after World War II and in their writings, like Tielsch, seek to come to terms with their loss of HOMELAND and IDENTITY by interweaving personal and public history, subjective and collective memory in their narratives.

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