

# Lies and Ambiguities: Alois Hotschnig's Fiction

Identity is slippery at the best of times. We think we know who we are, but are often swayed unawares by internal and external forces. And even when aware, we easily convince ourselves that we chose to be influenced, that we are in control. The Austrian writer Alois Hotschnig has explored the treacherous ground between deception and self-deception in several novels and one play. His haunting collection of short stories, *Maybe This Time*, just published in English translation by Peirene Press, probes even more deeply the intricacies of delusion. He anatomizes the distortions and contortions of the psyche struggling to assert itself for good or ill. And when he turns his surgical gaze on the outer world, he reveals the mystery inherent in mundane situations, evident to those willing to look closely enough.

The intense psychological dramas in his stories are all the more chilling for the narrators' seeming normality and the calm, matter-of-fact tone in which they relate odd or disturbing situations. The placid surfaces of Hotschnig's stories are ruffled only by an occasional ripple and the currents that seethe beneath his crystalline prose are no less turbulent for only gradually becoming apparent.

What Hotschnig's characters see is less disturbing than the way they perceive and internalise what they observe. In one story a man watches his neighbours as they lie on deckchairs outside their lake house all day long, day after day. His puzzled interest, spurred by their refusal to acknowledge him, turns to morbid fascination. Soon, just watching his neighbours is not enough. He takes notes on their unvarying routine and photographs them during the day so he can study them at night. He surrenders every waking hour, and even his sense of self, to the motionless couple. He is horrified by his obsession, but his attempt to pull back is comically thwarted. In another story, a man on his way

to visit an old friend is waylaid by the friend's neighbour. This strange woman not only seems to know him well, but has a collection of dolls which depict him at various ages. She says little and leaves him alone with these tokens of his earlier selves. He becomes addicted to these encounters since they open to him levels of self-awareness that were previously inaccessible.

A sense of threat or hidden dread suffuses even the more outwardly normal stories. In 'Two Ways of Leaving' a former lover is summoned with some agitation by the woman he left years earlier for reasons he could explain neither to her nor to himself. When he arrives at her flat, it is prepared for an intimate dinner, but she is gone. As he wanders through her flat, his sense of estrangement from his former as well as his present self grows.

In *The New York Review of Books* and the *TLS*, the novelist, critic and translator Tim Parks has noted the rise in Europe of a featureless international fiction at the expense of distinctive national variants. It is becoming harder to find 'the kind of work that revels in the subtle nuances of its own language and literary culture, the sort of writing that can savage or celebrate the way this or that linguistic group really lives.' Instead, according to Parks, a growing number of European writers, in their desire for a larger audience, are consciously or unconsciously tailoring their narrative modes and styles to be easily translated into English. National traditions and cultural complexities, as well as particular linguistic qualities, are smoothed over in the pursuit of some bland global appeal. Hotschnig is one writer who stands well outside any such trend. From his first works he has been and remains a distinctively Austrian writer, intimately and actively engaged in his country's cultural and political complexities and luxuriating in its language.

In his play, *Absolution*, a son may or may not have committed suicide in protest against his father's abuse of schoolchildren when he was a teacher. The community looked the other way then and now the father is running for public office. There can be no absolution without recognition, but of course, this being a Hotschnig play, the absolution will be double-edged at best. In his second novel, *Ludwig's Room*, a village in Carinthia is bound by an unspoken agreement not to expose the guilt of several members in the community who had been involved in running a nearby forced labour camp. This knowledge and the complicity it provokes poison the community for generations, and their refusal to call their neighbours and relatives to account makes them share in the collective responsibility. In this novel, guilt is neither inherited nor collective, but responsibility is.

The stories in *Maybe This Time* can be read as a psychological counterpart to the denial or suppression of the past. Individual identities constructed within a community that has built its collective identity on an illusion – that of being Hitler's first victim, say – are bound to be more than usually fragile or prone to psychosis. Many of Hotschnig's characters suffer such deformation: the man living through his almost comatose neighbours, or the one who can only access his own past through the bizarre intervention of a witch-like figure, or the family that feeds on a myth of a benevolent but always absent uncle, or the chameleon-like protagonist in the collection's final story whose identity is entirely dependent on how his neighbours see him.

Yet these stories can also be read independently of any specific cultural or historical context. They are fascinating allegories of the self negotiating its way through the confusions of contemporary life. And, no less importantly, they are darkly, grimly amusing.



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*Maybe This Time* is the second of Alois Hotschnig's works to appear in English. It will offer readers familiar with his novel *Leonardo's Hands* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999) a greater sense of his range and versatility, and will introduce new readers to a unique, captivating voice in German-language literature.

Tess Lewis is a translator from German and French and an Advisory Editor of *The Hudson Review*. In 2009, she was awarded an NEA Translation Fellowship and a PEN Translation Fund Grant for her translation of Alois Hotschnig's story collection, *Maybe This Time* (Peirene Press). Her most recent translation is *Splithead* by Julia Rabinowich for Portobello Books. Tess Lewis also writes essays on European literature for numerous literary journals including *The New Criterion*, *The Hudson Review*, *World Literature Today*, *The American Scholar*, and *Bookforum*.



*Die Kinder beruhigte das nicht* by Alois Hotschnig