

Original citation:

Shortt, Linda (2017) Review of : Friendship and social relationships in extraordinary times : an analysis of Heinz Helle's *Eigentlich müssten wir tanzen*. *Germanistik in Irland*. (In Press)

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Friendship and Social Relationships in Extraordinary Times: An Analysis of Heinz Helle's *Eigentlich müssten wir tanzen*

Linda Shortt

Heinz Helle's *Eigentlich müssten wir tanzen* (2015) tells the story of five friends and their struggle to survive when the world as they know it falls apart.¹ Set in the immediate future in southern Germany, the novel outlines an end of days scenario. An unknown disaster has taken place and civilisation has been destroyed. Fürst, Golde, Gruber, Drygalski and the unnamed narrator have survived as they spent the weekend together in an isolated hut in the mountains. This attempt to temporarily escape their lives by spending a weekend renewing their friendship overshoots the mark somewhat as, when they descend, they are faced with a panorama of utter destruction. Resources have been pillaged, waterways polluted; piles of putrefying and scorched corpses dot the landscape. Although the root cause of the disaster remains unclear, it becomes increasingly apparent that marauders are on the rampage. Buildings have been stuffed with people, locked and set alight; roads have been manipulated causing trucks to jack-knife so that looting is easier. Houses and villages have been set on fire. Moving through this hostile landscape in search of a safe place and simply trying to stay alive, the five friends encounter extremely brutal scenes. Cows, hooked up to milking machines, have been milked into emptied out cow costumes. People have been rounded up and electrocuted with live wires so that their bodies merge with cables to form an unidentifiable mass. Drivers, attempting to flee, have caused a huge multiple vehicle collision at a roundabout by forcing their way into still-standing backed-up traffic. The pile-up of cars creates a colourful tin memorial to the desperate but ultimately destructive will to live. These scenes are simultaneously shocking and hauntingly familiar as Helle mobilises a canon of man-made horror and genocide to create a nightmarish vision that negates all ideas of socio-cultural or political progress. Without extraordinary or utterly unrealistic features, this dystopia appears entirely feasible. Aspects of contemporary western capitalism have been accentuated and magnified to create an extreme situation of social Darwinism. Here, hyper-individuals compete for limited resources. Incapable of selfless solidarity, they lurch towards annihilation as their attempts to secure their own wellbeing are at the expense of the future of humanity and the planet.

This societal apocalypse is the background for a story which explores the mettle of friendship. In a world where the struggle to survive pitches individuals against each other, friendship could offer a hopeful alternative narrative of cooperative support. This is a typical strategy in Hollywood blockbusters where sleek fictions of friendly affection, loyalty and cooperation are burdened with investing life with meaning and facilitating the triumph of good over evil (recent examples include *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*; *Independence Day 2* and *The Hunger Games* film series).² But unlike these glossy fictions, Helle's book refuses to offer easy solutions. His five friends are not the adventurous rompers of Enid Blyton's

¹ Heinz Helle, *Eigentlich müssten wir tanzen* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015). Future references to this text will be included in parenthesis in the main body using the abbreviation E.

² Michael Kaplan has identified these types of friendship fictions as a 'compensatory prosthesis'. According to this argument, audiences use them to temporarily assuage their desire for community that real life can no longer still because of the divisive structures of capitalism. Michael Kaplan, *Friendship Fictions: The Rhetoric of Citizenship in the Liberal Imaginary* (Alabama: University Alabama Press, 2010), p. 199.

Famous Five, nor do they adhere to the heroic all for one and one for all motto of the Three Musketeers. As this analysis shows, this is a friendship that was already floundering in pre-apocalyptic times, but, thrown together and united by their desire to live, the five pragmatically recognise that their chances of survival are better in a group. Their quest is ultimately unsuccessful though as the dog-eat-dog world of capitalist competition is replaced by a friend-eat-friend logic of survival. One by one, the friends fall away until only the narrator is left standing. His survival is both an endurance test and a waiting game, but the prize for out-living the others is poor. As the last man standing, he appears to have no hope for procreation. With resources dwindling, survival is simply deferred death, but the struggle to survive has made living an end in itself. The pointlessness of this end is equalled only by the baseness required to secure it. Friends need to be abandoned, murdered and sacrificed. The characteristics required for survival (selfishness, lack of care for others, dangerous competition) appear as a darkening rather than a betrayal of pre-apocalyptic behavioural patterns. In fact, they are quite typical features of the neoliberal world. In his treatment of this private friendship then, Helle seems to be criticising a hyper-individualised society where people appear fundamentally unable to relate to each other in a cooperative and meaningful way. As an elective and affective bond which individuals can move in and out of, friendship is a relationship which offers companionship, support and diversion. The social ideal of friendship presents it as a moral virtue which depends on loyalty, trust and selflessness. In direct contrast to this ideal, Helle casts friendship in a utilitarian light, illuminating some of its baser and more ignoble motivations.

Published in 2015, Helle's novel is part of a growing wave of apocalyptic or catastrophic writing in contemporary German-language literature.³ While this has always been a theme in science fiction, it has now begun to creep into more mainstream writing particularly by younger German-language authors such as Dorothee Elmiger, Valerie Fritsch, Matthias Nawrat, Leif Randt, Nis-Momme Stockmann and Thomas von Steinaecker. Drawing on topics like man-made and natural catastrophes, aggressive climate change, an all-encompassing and out of control capitalism and developments in technology and surveillance, these authors depict, in various ways, a world that has dramatically spun off its axis, leaving their protagonists struggling to plot their way.⁴ This is not really a surprising development. Klaus Vondung and others have noted that the turn towards catastrophe narratives generally arises at moments when the meaning of history, and life more broadly, becomes questionable. As Axel Goodbody highlights, this occurred in heightened form after World War I and II when people were extremely disillusioned with reason, progress, civilisation and technology. There was also a resurgence of interest in ecological catastrophe narratives in the 1970s and 1980s when the failure of the anti-nuclear movement to initiate

³ These German developments seem to be part of a wider trend in literature and film. See: Florian Mussgnug, "Apocalyptic Narcissism and the Difficulty of Mourning", *Between*, 5.10 (2015), 1-17; Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003); Teresa Heffernan, *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Toronto, Toronto University Press, 2008); Eva Horn, *Zukunft als Katastrophe* (Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 2014).

⁴ See: Dorothee Elmiger, *Einladung an die Waghalsigen* (Cologne: DuMont, 2010); Matthias Nawrat, *Unternehmer* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2014); Valerie Fritsch, *Winters Garten* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015); Leif Randt, *Planet Magnon* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2015), Nis-Momme Stockmann, *Der Fuchs* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2016), Thomas von Steinaecker, *Die Verteidigung des Paradieses* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2016). All these authors were born between 1979 and 1989.

change, the discovery of acid rain and the transnational scale of the Chernobyl disaster generated an urgent sense of crisis.⁵ Writing in 2014, Eva Horn linked the current upsurge of catastrophe narratives to a crisis of the future which can no longer be conceived in utopian terms.⁶ The present, marked by the global terror threat, increased conflict, social and political fragmentation, and fears of environmental collapse, is configured as a tipping point when the ordinary everyday could easily slip into disaster simply by continuing the status quo. Now that we are ‘dwelling in crisis’,⁷ it seems to have become easier to imagine total annihilation rather than a social alternative. Despite this, these visions of future catastrophe can be read as an attempt to use narrative to create an awareness of current risks and to call for social and political reforms that could prevent such ruination. This is why, as Tom Moylan notes, the dystopian manoeuvre can be hopeful, as it can encourage a reassessment and re-evaluation of current practice to bring about change, thus influencing the future for the better.⁸

Divided into 69 short chapters which concentrate on episodes and impressions that are narrated in a cool and dispassionate style, the story of *Eigentlich müssten wir tanzen* is not told in chronological order. Instead the post-apocalyptic journey is interspersed with memories of the time immediately preceding the catastrophe. It also contains invented pasts as, when his friends die, the narrator imagines his way into their pre-apocalyptic everyday lives. By conjuring up a version of a day in their life, he lends their characters more contour and imaginatively tries to close the gap that they leave, treating the dead friends as individuals (in contrast to the many other storyless corpses that they encounter).⁹ Although it focuses on men, Helle’s novel does not fully fit in with the tendency for apocalyptic fictions, and particularly last-man-standing narratives, to focus on ideas of an essential masculinity which lurks beneath the surface but then reveals itself, after the cataclysm, through survival skills, a return to primitive virility and a belief in regenerative violence.¹⁰ Helle’s friends are not equipped for the new world order. In their thirties and trained in microbiology (Drygalsky), architecture (Fürst), aviation (the narrator), financial services (Golde) and import/export logistics (Gruber), these professionals do not have any useful survival skills. Alienated from nature, they are unable to efficiently mine their environment for sustenance and end up feeding on supermarket leftovers and “zufällig Verendetem” (E, 65) such as a half-burnt sheep, executed pigs and dead birds. Their change in feeding habits reflects their shift in status. No longer in a position where they have mastery over nature and alienated from their historical lineage as “Jäger, Züchter, Schlächter”, the narrator describes them simply as “zu groß geratene Bakterien” (E, 66). The apocalypse is not the making of these men, but their undoing.

⁵ Axel Goodbody, *Nature, Technology and Cultural Change in Twentieth-Century German Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 90-91. Examples of literary texts include: Günter Grass, *Die Rättin* (Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand, 1986); Christa Wolf, *Störfall* (Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand, 1987); Gabriele Wohmann, *Der Flötenton* (Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand, 1987).

⁶ Horn, *Zukunft als Katastrophe*, Kindle E-book, location 215.

⁷ Frederick Buell has used this to describe how contemporary attitudes to the environmental crisis have changed. See: Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁸ Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Colorado, Oxford: Westview, 2000).

⁹ According to Florian Mussgnug, many apocalyptic narratives are devoid of genuine compassion when faced with death and Helle’s text is ultimately no exception here. See: Mussgnug, “Apocalyptic Narcissism and the Difficulty of Mourning”, 2.

¹⁰ Florian Mussgnug, “Naturalising Apocalypse: Last Men and Other Animals”, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 9.3 (2012), 333-47 (p. 334).

Examining the apocalypse as an end and a beginning, this article explores how Helle's friends attempt to inhabit the extraordinary by adjusting to post-apocalyptic life. Although this obliterates established value systems (money, for example, is now only useful for its flammable properties; without electricity or internet, mobile phones are pocket weights and memory icons of their lost lives) and is marked by rupture, the novel draws our attention to continuities (i.e. ideas of ownership) between pre- and post-apocalyptic periods. The new world is in fact very ordinary and the friends remain unheroic characters. The story of their friendship emphasises that the private is political; the reflections on private relationships provide a metacommentary on contemporary social structures, political co-operations and man's relationship to nature, as well as the desperate need for change. Examining what remains for humanity when civilisation fails, Helle's novel is a sobering account of human shortcomings.

The Apocalypse as an Awakening

Reflecting on disruptive events, Alain Badiou attributes them a revolutionary power. They can unleash terror, but they can also create opportunities for making a new world. This potential for terror means that people often try to avoid risk. Instead, they play it safe and prioritise security, togetherness and pleasure. According to Badiou, this is essentially dehumanising. The event which risks but which does not have to realise terror is by contrast humanising as it invigorates people and gives them an opportunity to be seized by truths.¹¹ As it is both an end and a beginning, destruction and an opportunity, the apocalypse which dismantles the world order and destroys human life is surprising, but perversely welcome because it interrupts the boring everyday and temporarily suspends it. It is the radically new which unleashes a situation of violence, but it also has the power to galvanise life. Until this point, Fürst, Gruber, Golde, Drygalski and the narrator have lived ordinary and uneventful lives that centred on eking out their professional positions. Narrated through flashbacks and imagined pasts, these pre-apocalyptic stories are marked by surplus and consumerist excess. Time poor and task heavy, the five friends are portrayed as disaffected and anaesthetised. As children, they had sought relief from their boring everyday lives through small criminal acts such as stealing fire extinguishers (E, 33-5) and shooting at eggs with an airgun (E, 147-9).¹² However, even these brief acts of deviance were unable to sustain their interest longer term, as they soon too became boring. Presented as a social malaise, this chronic disinterest seems to stem from a pervading sense of meaninglessness. Overwhelmed by opportunities, the friends want for nothing, but equally seem to desire nothing.¹³ Their professional lives are also unable to repair this. Reflecting on his work as a pilot, the narrator describes how he is

¹¹ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, translated by Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

¹² When they run out of eggs, they move outside in search of new targets. Taking the inflated elephant that advertises the local garden show into their sights, they try to deflate it but when their shots fail, only two muster up the energy to return to the scene of the crime with penknives to perform a more precise kill. The others, already bored, stay home to watch a horror film (E, 148). Later when they are roaming through the destroyed landscape, they oftentimes engage in wanton acts of destruction, expending their energies to further destroy something that has already been ruined, simply to have something to do (E, 50).

¹³ Greice Schneider draws our attention to this paradox of boredom; it can arise when individuals are over- and under-stimulated. See Greice Schneider, *What Happens When Nothing Happens* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2016). Mary Cosgrove has recently drawn our attention to boredom as a social malaise, see: Mary Cosgrove, "The Time of Sloth: Terézia Mora's *Der einzige Mann auf dem Kontinent*", *Oxford German Studies*, 46.4 (2017), forthcoming.

consumed by micro-tasks. Remembering a pre-apocalyptic journey from Mauritius to Frankfurt am Main, he outlines how he undertakes “den siebenundfünfzigsten Schritt eines achtundfünfzig Schritte umfassenden, klar definierten Arbeitsablaufs zum insgesamt achthundertsechsunneunzigsten Mal” (E, 22). In an attempt to minimise risk, his job has been reduced to boring procedure, but operating at this procedural level evacuates all sense of satisfaction and pleasure, even though this seems to have been his dream job. Unfree and bored, he represents an extreme case, but the professional lives of Drygalski, Golde, Gruber and Fürst seem to be similarly marked by procedure, routine and repetition and this lack of freedom generates apathy.

As they operate within a utilitarian framework, interpersonal relations have been reduced to their exchange value so that even love is emptied of emotional complexity and its power to enliven life or bring about change. In fact, Gruber manages to confuse love with scenes of domination in hard-core pornography. He says: “Liebe ist schon was Merkwürdiges. (...) Nacho ist mir zu brutal, sagt Gruber. Mit seiner plumpen Gewalt will er nur die fehlenden Zentimeter gegenüber Rocco kompensieren” (E, 61). Reflecting on the sexual techniques of Rocco and Nacho, two male porn-stars he has watched, he analyses their prowess at subjugating women who are reduced to a means of male sexual fulfilment. Coolly assessing their technique, he does not appear to be aroused by what he has seen, instead he seems more interested in observing the male actors to potentially optimise his own success rates. Love is reduced to sex and sex, in turn reduced to competitive simulation, is about vying with other men for penetrable orifices. This is brought home at the beginning of the book when the only female survivor that they encounter is raped by four members of the group, including the narrator (E, 10-11).¹⁴ Motivated by selfish need rather than the urge to propagate, the rape spoils the chances of the survival of humanity; the unknown woman silently turns down Fürst’s decidedly unattractive offer when he asks her afterwards if she would like to accompany them. Paying for her services with bread, they abandon her to her fate. Later, when the reality of life without women becomes clear, Gruber reflects on homosexual activities as an act of friendship: “Man muss sich doch helfen, sagt er, das ist menschlich, wer wären wir, wenn wir das nicht mehr täten” (E, 132). Rather than a way of connecting with other people or sharing pleasure, sex is about satisfying one’s own needs and is thus a masturbatory act. Being human is not about the needs of others, but tending to one’s own.

Surrounded by death, the friends try to live in the post-apocalyptic world and, in trying to live, they experience brief moments where they seem to realise what it means to be alive. These occur when they achieve short-term goals like when they find temporary shelter or food. But these spurts of life are quickly undercut, as even the dramatic struggle to survive becomes mundanely dull. After a few days, the initial frisson of mortal danger gives way to a routine of walking and scouring the landscape for useful objects and food. As the ground is covered in snow, it provides no visual relief and their activities become a monotonous confusion: “Gehen im Schnee am Hang. Atmen. Gehen am Hang im Schnee. Atmen. Gehen am Hang, atmen, gehen im Schnee, atmen” (E, 116). Survival is a repeated act that is

¹⁴ By the time it is Drygalski’s turn, the woman is no longer responding and he stops. This is a particularly brutal scene which is narrated from a perspective situated outside the victim. It is told through a quickening of her breath, the movement of her hands and the sounds she makes which the narrator deliberately misinterprets in an attempt to decriminalise the act and feed his own fantasy: “und dann hören wir ihre Stimme, ein einziger Ton nur, wieder und wieder und wieder, und all das macht es uns unmöglich, nicht zu denken: Du willst es doch auch” (E, 10).

executed daily without will or passion. It is also not something that they can control. Propelled by a mixture of “das Weiterleben-Müssen, Weiterleben-Wollen, Weiterleben-Wollen-Müssen, die Angst vor dem eines Tages nicht mehr Weiterleben-Können” (E, 125), they go through the motions of the “wiederholte Wieder-einmal, das ur-alte Auf-ein-Neues, das Öffnen der Augen, das Einsaugen der Luft” (E, 125). Rather than consciously and actively trying to live, they fall into familiar patterns of behaviour and execute survival as another meaningless task. The directionlessness of their journey echoes the directionlessness of their lives. This undermines the idea of the apocalypse as a new beginning, a point which is further brought home when, at the end of the story, Drygalski and the narrator end up back at the mountain hut they had originally departed from. This has not been a developmental journey which has granted them insights that will allow them to settle into what Brian Aldiss terms ‘cosy catastrophe’.¹⁵ Instead, spectators of rather than participants in their own fate, they sit in the hut and wait on the end (E, 164), a behavioural pattern which echoes their apathy in pre-apocalyptic times.

The Extraordinary Value of Friendship

Friendship carries an extraordinary burden in this novel as it is mobilised to combat total social annihilation. It alone seems to have the potential to redeem society. The disaster provides an opportunity to begin again and live better together, but, as this section shows, Helle weakens this revolutionary potential by emphasising continuities in pre- and post-apocalyptic relations that centre on man’s inability to put the needs of others first. Bringing together different kinds of private, professional and political friendships, the novel tests these bonds and their use value. By showing the often contradictory and complex emotions that motivate friendship, Helle challenges attempts to easily categorise it. Despite this, he still seems to move in Aristotle’s categories of friends of utility, pleasure and virtue. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle reflected that, of these three, friends of virtue establish the most fulfilling bond because, unlike the other two, this friendship is based on care and regard for others. Friendships of utility and pleasure are convenient and they provide a limited form of comradeship. Utility friendships also facilitate access to certain services and pleasure friendships can create enjoyable diversions. Unlike friendships of virtue, however, these utilitarian and pleasurable friendships are more focussed on the individual’s selfish needs than on the needs of his or her friends. It is only if friendship succeeds in putting the needs of others first that it can create a better way of living together. Helle’s novel is ultimately unclear about whether this is possible -- it depends on how we read Drygalski’s death.

Childhood Friendships, Performances and the Communitas of Disaster

The depiction of childhood friendship in *Eigentlich müssten wir tanzen* effectively dissects this bond. Friendship is not presented here as a strong, flawless moral good where friends are bound to each other out of a sense of loyalty, solidarity or love. Instead, Fürst, Golde, Gruber, Drygalski and the narrator are connected by a nostalgia for their lost youth. As they grew up in the same area, they had a similar horizon of experience and expectation. This common past is the temporal locus of their relationship and, while walking through the ruined landscape, they often draw on this resource, using anecdotes and memories to remind each other of this

¹⁵ Brian Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1973).

connection. These stories seem to serve three different aims. Firstly, they try to overwrite the differences that have crept in between the group members now that they are older. Secondly, they remind the group members of their pre-apocalyptic lives, offering a biographical anchor in uncertain times. Thirdly, recalling moments of togetherness, these stories are used to secure their safety as they create a protective patina around the group. Friends should look out for (and not kill) friends. In essence, however, this friendship appears to be built on a lack. What seems to have united the five before the catastrophe was their willingness to remain silent on this lack and the silence kept the simulation of friendship in place. Co-conspirators in upholding their friendship ruse, the friends spent the weekend together to create new memories of togetherness, but these memories are ultimately undermined by their secret relief at the end of this duty weekend that they will soon be able to leave and return to their separate everyday lives (E, 72-3).

The description of their friendship essentially flags up the thinness of this bond now that they have grown older, but the strength of the bond in childhood is also made questionable. Rather than a meaningful investment in the other, their friendship is described as a relationship of convenient contemporaneity, an empty distraction, reinforced not only through a simultaneity of experience, but also through the communal acts of playful deviance that distract from the boring everyday. It is the disaster which gives this friendship a new lease of life. Faced with the prospect of annihilation, the friends turn to each other, giving their relationship a utilitarian twist. Uniting against the common danger, they cooperate to share risk, showing the important role that friendship can play in the high-stakes game of survival. In his book on friendship, Daniel J. Hruschka has emphasised its adaptive role which is often overlooked in calculations of how the fit survive. According to Hruschka, friends can be particularly useful in changeable environments as they can share food, labour and other resources when these are scarce.¹⁶ This cooperative sharing marks the interactions between the five friends, but there is a further dimension.

The experience of the disaster and the fight for survival level out differences in personality and character, reducing the group members to physical bodies that want to live. They become an “über mehrere Körper verteilter Wille” (E, 117). Evoking ideas of *communitas*, survival creates a sense of camaraderie and common purpose where individual roles can be transcended. Edith Turner, building on Victor Turner’s ideas of *communitas*, refers to this as a ‘*communitas of disaster*’.¹⁷ This form of *communitas* is a way of repairing ruptured social cohesion through a spontaneous form of togetherness that can offer hope for the future. *Eigentlich müssten wir tanzen* undercuts this potential and shows its limits by confining the sense of solidarity to the group rather than extending it to the wider community (as should happen with *communitas*). But even this sense of group solidarity is fleeting as the fight for survival in a world of limited resources pitches body against body. This is evident on their first night in the abandoned ski hut, dancing their way into the new era, the friends symbolically leave their old life behind. Motivated by a desire to live and a fear of death, this

¹⁶ Daniel J. Hruschka, *Friendship: Development, Ecology, and Evolution of a Relationship* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2010).

¹⁷ In her reflections on *communitas of disaster*, Edith Turner examines responses to the Great Floods of Dakota (1997) and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Both disasters pitch man against nature. The nature of the crisis in *Eigentlich müssten wir tanzen* which pitches man against man seems to highlight the limits of this idea of *communitas*. Edith Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (Basingstoke, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 73-84.

common activity briefly connects the dancers who, united in tiredness, rub their bodies against each other to generate heat (E, 114). This brief moment of commonality where they help to keep each other alive is cut short by the realisation that each individual is ultimately responsible for their own survival as “wer jetzt fällt, der bleibt liegen” (E, 114). Equal in their solitary struggle, the dancers are simultaneously part of and not part of a group. The familiar presence of the other group members is a consolation, but it is not a support network that can be relied upon.

This impacts upon the level of support that group members extend to each other. Although they do engage in helpful behaviour – they hold back branches to ease the path for the person following; they also lie together at night so they can keep warm and they help each other to negotiate their way out of the shipping container that they sleep in –, this helpfulness occurs alongside subversive acts of sabotage. While walking, members of the group deliberately slow their pace so that someone else will have to take the lead (E, 100). This tactic means that Gruber dies when he steps on a mine, but Drygalski and the narrator who were lagging slightly behind survive (E, 145). The group also sacrifices members when they become a burden: when Fürst injures his foot, he is simply abandoned to die alone as he is no longer able to make the journey independently – this is not a friendship of heroic action or rescue. Their failure to either help him or to precipitate his death becomes more questionable when they later kill Golde who has injured himself while crawling into a supermarket through a broken window. As he is in pain and bleeding, they put an end to his suffering by smashing his head in with a hammer. In the immediate run up to his death, Golde had begun to display aggressive behaviour and, claiming ownership of objects that they had gathered, he attempted to assert his superiority over certain group members (E, 75). This challenging behaviour which jeopardised their safety makes his elimination and their act of ‘kindness’ suspicious – they did not kill Fürst. The narrator’s comment that Golde’s hair and blood which fly onto his lips when they beat his skull “schmeckt salzig” (E, 78) is a foretaste of the bigger transgression he will later commit when he eats Drygalski after they run out of food.

Locked in an unspoken competition for survival which blurs the boundaries between friend and foe, the story of their journey unfolds a darker side of friendship that is often overlooked. This pessimistic prognosis for personal relationships dampens the revolutionary potential of Drygalski’s thoughts on how politics could prevent such a catastrophe from recurring. Throughout the novel, Drygalski has been preoccupied with broader social questions that focus on human values and ideas of collectivity. His reflections give the reader food for thought even if his immediate audience misses the point. After two days without food in the forest with the narrator and Gruber, Drygalski, hallucinating with hunger, envisages a normalised future where political practice could prevent the outbreak of another disaster. The model that he envisages for doing politics is based on transaction. Nations should work together to improve their economic interests as “keine Moral ist so mächtig wie der Kontostand und der Bauch” (E, 133). This strategic and mutually beneficial cooperation would connect states and create a political community strong enough to transcend national boundaries where the members could work together for the practical purpose of preserving peace. This vision seems to echo the ideas of political and economic unity that generated the European Coal and Steel Community to stabilise Europe after World War II.¹⁸ The problem

¹⁸ “The history of the EU”, *Europa.eu*, https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history_en (accessed 22 May 2017).

with this transactional approach is that corrosive greed and the desire to maximise profits undermine cooperation, preventing the nations from genuinely breaking down barriers. Reflecting on the continued presence of border stations between Germany and Austria even though Schengen has been in place for over twenty years (E, 144), the novel appears to suggest that European cooperation has been limited by a reluctance to encounter the other openly and fully. Friendship, understood as a selfless way of striving for the common good together, could offer an alternative model of cooperation to this transactional approach. At a point when Brexit and the rise of populism in Europe are combining to undermine the European project, a call for more rather than less cooperation seems particularly timely. However, highlighting the challenges to selfless benefaction in personal relations, the novel appears to both suggest and undercut the unifying potential of a politics based on friendship. The slight glimmer of hope is that, rooted in human affection and despite its flaws, friendship or rather striving for friendship may offer the only way of bridging selfish concerns and regard for others. The poison may be in the dosage.

Violence, Sacrifice, Redemption and Endless Loops

While aggression and violence create divisions in the group, they also act as a unifying force. Drygalski and the narrator are later brought together by a communal act of brutality when they murder a stranger. After Golde's death at the border, the last two remaining friends decide to abandon their journey and return to the hut where they had spent the weekend, but, when they arrive, they find a man their age asleep in one of the beds. Rather than extending the hand of friendship to him and trying to survive together, they chase him out of the house and murder him with a spade and an axe, even though he is not really a threat. Although the group has always been suspicious of non-group members, even before the crisis (E, 44), until this point, they had generally ignored other survivors, operating a policy of non-intervention that essentially leaves them to die. This represents an escalation of fear, but it is also an expression of their frustration and boredom. Hunting and killing the stranger is a "Jagd nach nichts Bestimmtem, außer natürlich nach Glück, nach Veränderung, nach einem Leben, das irgendwie anders als das hier ist" (E, 158). Literally beating his brains out together, they enjoy a moment of complete symbiosis; the very act of killing reminds them what it means to be alive. Once it is over, it is followed by a ritualistic recivilising process when Drygalski begins to dig a grave for the body and the narrator realises "dass er das einzig Richtige tut, das Richtige, was wir getan haben, seit wir das brennende Dorf gesehen haben, vielleicht sogar in unserem ganzen Leben" (E, 159). While this violence seems to express the desire for diversion similar to other earlier acts of boredom, the competition for survival appears to also have legitimised a ruthlessness that unifies and divides the last two remaining friends. Having buried him together, they then stand "jeder für sich" (E, 160), silenced by their realisation of the by now inevitable outcome of their attempts to survive together.

Living together in the hut, having used up the food resources, Drygalski and the narrator essentially wait on death. When Drygalski commits suicide, it is presented as the ultimate selfless act; taking his own life to prolong the life of his friend, he behaves in a way that corresponds with the utopian ideas of solidarity that have marked his thinking throughout the novel. The narrator reads how he has positioned his body as an invitation and a sign that Drygalski wanted his body to be eaten. We know, however, that this narrator is not to be trusted – during the group rape at the beginning of the book, he has only been able to continue to orgasm by deluding himself that his victim desires it (E, 11). This fantastic

redescription of reality echoes through his assertion of friendly reciprocity when faced with Drygalski's dead body: "Jeder von uns hätte das Gleiche für jeden von uns getan" (E, 170). Given the reality of their behaviour to date – they have abandoned injured group members and eliminated others – and the narrator's failure to strategically intervene even though he had observed Drygalski leaving the hut with a knife, this heroic declaration of selflessness seems remarkably vacuous. Friendship is not to be counted on, but it can deliver the greatest gifts.

Undoing the charming bond of a caring friendship to uncover a relationship that is much more ambivalent, Helle queries whether there can ever really be a purely selfless benefaction while simultaneously presenting Drygalski's death in precisely these terms. There is another way to read it: Drygalski's suicide could simply be an attempt to actively claw back control over his own destiny, a becoming active to at least determine how he dies. The narrator ignores this possibility, perhaps so that he is not solely responsible for the decision to eat his friend. Dying so that his friend can live, Drygalski's extraordinary sacrifice fits the Christian model of selfless love. The narrator meanwhile incriminates himself by not intervening to stop him and although Drygalski's sacrifice enables life, the narrator pays for his passivity with his humanity.

In the final scene, the narrator imagines an alternate world order where his everyday situation has normalised. He fantasises about banalities like waking up, showering and getting dressed, but in this fantasy, he has become creaturely. He no longer walks, but crawls across the floor on his belly and slithers into his clothes. The trauma of surviving, his loneliness and his guilt at having eaten his friend seem to conspire to strip away his humanity. Meanwhile, the world keeps turning. Imagining a ritual of watching the sun rise and pronouncing the word sun in a way which aligns his speech with the appearance of the object, he reflects that, after a time, an external observer may be unable to tell whether the word creates the object, or the object the word (E, 173). Playing with the intersection of language, thought and reality and the constancy of the natural world, Helle seems to be commenting on ideas of world-building. While language can be performative – when he slithers into his clothes, the narrator declares them his favourite and thus makes them so –, his words do not make the sun, but, imagining an audience, he appears to think his way into a future where an alternative order can again be conceived. His experiences in the post-apocalyptic world have made him aware that the world exists independent of man, insofar as man does not destroy it through his actions (E, 65), but this imagined confusion of sign and object suggests that there will again come a time where it will be possible to believe that man and objects have world-making powers. In this way, the new world order seems to have in its birth the seeds of its own destruction: hubris and ideas of mastery and control.

There is another dimension here. Throughout the novel, the narrator has drawn our attention to language and silence. In an inversion of the opening of the Gospel of John, the beginning of this imagined new world is not the word, but silence:

Ich stelle mir vor, wenn nach uns jemand die Welt wieder aufbaut, wird es eine schweigsame Welt sein. Die Menschen werden sich nur mit Blicken austauschen, mit vorsichtigen Gesten und sanften Berührungen, und sie werden die Stimmbänder nur nutzen, um zu lachen oder zu seufzen. (...) Und

so wird es beschwiegen, Tag für Tag, Jahr für Jahr, bis auch der letzte Erinnerung daran verblasst ist, an den uralten Brauch (...). (E, 143-4).

Imagining a space where people fall back on alternate forms of communication, this is a space where linguistic forms of world-making are undermined and people are pushed back into a sensory perception that revitalises the relationship between man and the environment. Without language to transmit the burden of history and culture, people exist as “gleichberechtigte Molekülberge neben anderen Molekülbergen, Dinge unter Dingen, sie werden schnelle Bäume mit Augen sein, oder langsame, weiche Steine mit Haaren” (E, 145). This equality between living things suggests a radical transhuman egalitarianism that depends on man’s ability – through a conscious unlearning – to see beings as equal. In *Eigentlich müssten wir tanzen*, forgetting language, in the narrator’s view, will counter the centuries of forgetting our relationship to the environment. The temporariness of this insight becomes clear in his final remark then, as he imagines this being again overwritten by hierarchical relationships of power. Furthermore, his reflections on nature ignore the effects of the pollution which man has caused, and which he as a pilot has actively contributed to, and the systemic instability that this will cause. Imagining his way into a future, he is still unable to think beyond his own perspective and ignores that nature is also in a state of flux. While the crisis represents an opportunity for a new beginning, the pessimistic outcome seems to be that this forced re-setting of the world order will again generate its own destruction.

To bring this to a close: Helle’s dystopian thought experiment presents a largely negative story of re-creation. Humanity as he depicts it is a sorry sight and the unreliability that marks the narrative style is echoed in the interpersonal relations depicted. Togetherness and connection are always used to achieve certain ends. The radical rupture that the apocalypse brings does not fundamentally change the friendship of the five friends, instead it brings hidden dynamics and acts of selfish sabotage to the fore. While friendship is often invoked as a paradigm for the sort of bond of solidarity that neoliberalism undermines, in *Eigentlich müssten wir tanzen* it largely fails to provide a moral bolster against inhumanity and instead provides a foil for a deadly competition. This is because individuals are unable to put the needs of others before their own: even though his death is ambivalent, Drygalski seems to offer the only exception here. The cost of being for another is high and in this particular case Drygalski’s death means that it is impossible for this generosity to generate a situation of reciprocity where both parties can benefit. While the prospects seem bleak, a positive reading would argue that Helle may be nonetheless suggesting that continuing to try to improve how we encounter the other, both personally and politically, may be our only hope to circumvent total annihilation. Outlining lives marked by a diminution of agency, he could also be making a case for an awakening to a more active form of living where people are not just spectators, executors of procedure and consumers. In *Eigentlich müssten wir tanzen*, the catastrophe fails to jolt the friends into life. Roaming directionless through the landscape with arms outstretched like zombies (E, 118), they are unable to muster up the energy to either resist or live differently. Reflecting on social behaviour in general, Drygalski diagnoses a form of chronic exhaustion where “[a]llen ist alles zu viel, zu kompliziert, zu egal” (E, 56). This definitely seems to apply to these friends, but the problem is that this is presented as both the wrong way and the only way to organise society, as Golde notes: “Wer fernsieht, begeht keine Verbrechen” (E, 56) – although, given the acts of deviance that they committed as youths and adults, this seems a bit misguided. Helle does not offer a solution here. Drygalski’s reflections on social fatigue fall back on a psychoanalytical discourse of collective depression that follows after mania which suggests that apathy is an

effect of surplus, as “[u]nser Gemüt stellt sich gegen die Welt da draußen. (...) Das ist das normalste fundamentalste Prinzip des Seins” (E, 57). We are “alle Elektronen, jeder will das, was er nicht hat, wird, was er nicht ist, plus, minus, Schwarz, weiß” (E, 57). This biological explanation for continual striving and voracious desire which characterise the pre- and post-apocalyptic present suggests an endless loop that even the apocalypse cannot reset. If this is a plea to reach out to the other, politically, but also in interpersonal relationships to try to bring about a more harmonious form of living together, the novel does not offer much hope of this actually happening.

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