

*[Speech held in German language.]*

**Tribute by Ingo Schulze on the awarding of the  
International Stefan Heym Prize on 10th April 2013**

*As delivered.*

The speaker and his mentor – Chat for two voices at a lectern

For Christoph Hein on the awarding of the International Stefan Heym Prize on 10th April 2013 in Chemnitz

A: We've got to have a title, at least a working title! So that people will know what it's about.

B: I was thinking about: "What is water?"

A: What is water? What is that supposed to mean?

B: Or better still, the quote: "What on earth is water?"

A: You mean, if no one knows what it means, people will pay more attention, and it'll heighten the tension? And you'll give the answer at the end of the speech?

B: No - I wanted to tell the story right at the beginning.

A: What story?

B: I got it from a colleague: "Two young fish are swimming along, and by chance they meet an older fish coming towards them. He nods to them and says: 'Morning fellas, what's the water like?' The two little fish swim on for a while, and eventually one of them looks at the other and says, 'What on earth is water?'"

A: And what's the point of this story?

B: If, as a reader and writer, I want to explain what literature should be, stories are better than definitions.

A: And the definition?

B: It's about wonder. It's about the distance between us and what's self-evident, between us and ourselves, about seeing yourself from the outside.

A: You can only answer a story with a story. In one short story, Italo Svevo describes how a girl longs to travel by train. When her wish finally comes true and she's sitting looking out of the train window, she starts crying and can't stop. They ask the girl why she's crying, now of all times, when her dearest wish is coming true. The girl sobs, looks out with a strained expression, and whispers, I can't see the train at all.

B: And you mean...

A: Without literature, you are either the one looking at the train or the one looking out of the train. With literature you can see yourself in the train window. But is this the way to begin a tribute? What do you want to say?

B: I want to praise and thank Christoph Hein; I want to praise and thank Stefan Heym; I want to tell them what their books and they themselves mean to me; I want to tell them they both have a part in my life, so to speak.

A: Do you want to put it like that?

B: No, I'll try to say it better.

A: You should get round to talking about them sooner. Preferably straight away with a quotation.

B: "The crux remains whether democracy is more important than capital and capitalism. Even asking the question is undesirable."

A: Who said that?

B: Christoph Hein. You could do a whole speech just on that.

A: You shouldn't rush at politics like a bull at a gate. You need more context.

B: But that would be the context; that's what is self-evident, but most of us aren't even aware of it anymore. Capitalism is our water.

A: Before you get into a fight with capitalism, you should say something critical about actually existing socialism. Don't put the cart before the horse. When did you first hear the name Christoph Hein?

B: A fellow student who had read *The Distant Lover* was raving about it to me – that must have been 1983 or '84. I didn't know the name and asked, Heym? No, Hein! She told me some details about the book, some short scenes. I still remember that I didn't actually understand why she liked it.

A: At the time, did you sense the provocation in *The Distant Lover*?

B: Yes, but at first in the little details: for instance, the fact that the narrator, the doctor, only reads the small ads in the newspaper. The place is marked with pencil in my copy of the third edition. Back then, though, the doctor was no stranger to me and was even less so when I re-read the book. But I only grasped a few weeks ago how highly political her seemingly apolitical stance is. And how philanthropic. And also how slightly kitschy – probably because of the photos that she doesn't show anyone.

A: With characters like her, I always ask myself how they would have behaved in 1989.

B: She would have participated, cautiously, with respect for the former leaders, a provocative stance for some of the parvenus.

A: I find it downright sinister how meanings can change. For instance, her total absence of any thoughts on economics, either in relation to work or to her personal interests. The statement that was provocative at the time was this: I'm OK. What do we make of it today? To a certain extent,

every book that came out should have had one title for the East and another one for the West. Because the same book can be read completely differently. For the East, the doctor's stance was highly political. In the West, we read it differently.

B: I always found the doctor plausible. She is the one who doesn't get on anyone's nerves, who behaves thoughtfully, is ready to help, who devotes herself. To whom should she feel herself drawn, then, if the world is as she describes it?

A: Is the world as she describes it?

B: It's a first-person narrative; it's her point of view. Of course, you don't go along with it. You can't even say that she is critical of the GDR – for her it seems not to exist anymore. She can't receive certain wavelengths. It was a scandal. The matter-of-factness with which the official was disregarded. And yet the doctor is an East German through and through. It's symbolic, too, that she doesn't have a name.

A: That's not true, she does have one: Claudia.

B: Strange, but she's always referred to as "the doctor".

A: You should definitely say something about how Hein gives each book its own style. I don't want to exaggerate, but it should be possible to distinguish his books from each other just on the basis of their tone and the length and rhythm of the sentences.

B: When I read *Horri's Fate* (*Horns Ende*), I found all the characters who are outside Claudia's field of vision, so to speak.

A: *Horri's Fate* was an awakening for me, in every sense, including a literary one.

B: It came out in 1985, the same year Gorbachev took over.

A: The same year as Volker Braun's *Hinze-Kunze Novel* (*Hinze-Kunze-Roman*) and Günther de Bruyn's *New Glory*. Back then, it felt like a literary phalanx was making space for us to breathe, to speak, to remember.

B: Those were steps that, once made, there could be no going back.

A: Yes, but in literary terms, too, it was *the* book for the times because it gave a diversity of voices a say, a diversity of views that would be, or would have been, excluded from everyday life.

B: The book was a template for what happened in 1989.

A: And for what was ended then or sidelined.

B: Justice prevails in *Horri's Fate*, as it does in all great literature. And that's why Kruschkatz, the party-appointed mayor, gets to have his say, as well as Horn, a man who is broken under the tutelage of the party's bureaucracy, a man I wouldn't like to live with.

A: Strange, too, how a post-'89 perspective actually makes the book stronger because it is freed from the immediate claims of its time, the repressive forces acting on literature. Today it exists as a model, its glow is darker, deeper.

B: I should also talk about the fact that neither Hein's nor Heym's

books were blown away as the winds of time swept away the period in which they were written.

A: I took my research to the extreme – instead of going back to *The Tango Player*, which I gratefully lined up in my 1989 arsenal, I looked at *Schlötel or What's the Point? (Schlötel oder Was soll's)*, Hein's first play from 1974, which begins with shooting practice in GST uniforms (of a GDR mass youth organisation).

B: Doesn't sound good.

A: Yes, it does! It sounds good because I found the insight into the ugliest corner of the GDR convincing.

B: But today? Even thinking about GST uniforms makes me shudder.

A: Today we elegantly outsource shooting to a professional army. We don't get our hands dirty; we pay others to do that. They're doing their job; we're doing ours.

B: But *Schlötel's* not about shooting, though, is it?

A: I'm fascinated by the demand that underlies it, the demand not to be alienated from your work. Even then it was incredible. They invented a term for it, "Vorgriff" literature, or anticipation literature. Who still speaks of being alienated from their work today? I would love to see *Schlötel* on the stage again.

B: Because then all the misery and suffering of day-to-day life in the GDR and how self-evident it seemed back then would be illuminated in comparison with today?

A: That could prompt many young fish to reflect that the water was strange back then.

B: But it's also strange today?

A: Yes, the water's strange today.

B: Christoph Hein is an author that I've been with as a reader almost from the beginning. If I didn't get the first edition, then it was the second or third, but I think I've probably read every one of his books. Most of them as soon as they came out, including his first prose collection, *Invitation to the Lever Bourgeois (Einladung zum Lever Bourgeois)*, whose title story describes the first hours in a day in the life of Racine, a biography and portrait of a society in twenty pages. This is where you find the sentence, "Perhaps the ability to keep a crime secret is the prerequisite for human coexistence in society." There was so much cunning and guile involved in getting such a sentence published in the GDR.

A: And are you connected on a personal level?

B: Reading is always personal. You can't get any more personal than reading.

A: And as a public figure?

B: It must have been a weekend, the middle or the end of October '89, in the afternoon, evening; a sort of hearing was being broadcast, about police attacks on demonstrators in the weeks before. And a man spoke with a voice that seemed made for radio. I trusted that voice. There was no leader as such that you could follow; there were no elected representatives. But I wished this man

was our representative. I no longer remember the details of what he said – he was demanding complete openness, absolute clarity in every case, but he did it as if his claim were utterly self-evident; he spoke so calmly and entirely without fervour or hate. Although we had never had a public debate of this kind, here was someone capable of speaking as if he had never done anything else. And then came the name, that very Hein whose *Tango Player* I had just read – I finished it two or three hours after buying it. As I sat in front of the radio, in a sense, a dream came true for me: the writer as a revolutionary. I saw Hein on television for the first time when he spoke on 4th November 1989. The profession obviously most strongly represented there in numerical terms was probably writers. Hein, Heym, Müller, Wolf, not a bad showing.

A: Do you want to go through any more of the books? It's getting a bit long, isn't it?

B: I don't know if this is the right place, but chronologically speaking I should probably offer an overdue apology at this point.

A: Don't get too personal.

B: No, perhaps it concerns Christoph Hein least of all. Because his *Napoleon Game (Das Napoleonspiel)* – which on first reading left me at a loss – is a radical representation of how we can lose sight of the alternative in our heads. The reason why I couldn't read it this way at the time is that I was one of the fish asking, "What on earth is water?"

A: You promised an apology; now I want to hear it.

B: That was already the beginning of it. I, too, who at the end of '89 was still dreaming of a reformed, humanitarian and therefore socialist GDR, who could now finally see the opportunity to achieve democratic socialism, was led by accession to the Federal Republic and the fight for economic survival to lose sight of any notion of a social alternative.

A: And what's that supposed to mean?

B: That any writer who kept alive my awareness of this loss no longer interested me. I rediscovered them only slowly, at the end of the nineties. And admire them all the more.

A: So you soon looked down on those who were still your heroes on 4th November, as nostalgics who were unable to cope with the loss of their status.

B: Not in a personal sense, but in a general one.

A: I thought: is there anything more personal than reading?

B: I didn't any social antennae anymore. Ultimately I was only interested in my own life and my own advancement – the only constraints were practical ones, and everyone was the architect of his own fortune. And no people in the whole wide world had it better than the East Germans.

A: You used GDR terminology creatively: up until 1989, we had antagonistic contradictions; after '89, we only had non-antagonistic contradictions.

B: Very good!

A: If there are difficulties in the present day for us, at their root are forty years of mismanagement and atheism.

B: Very good!

A: Prohibitions, oppression, censorship are all terms that are only good for describing the past. After '89 there was freedom, freedom, freedom.

B: Exactly! That's why I can put myself in the shoes of our headmaster of democracy, Mr Gauck, so easily. I was happy, conceited and thankful.

A: Was it really that bad?

B: Yes, I fear it was.

A: But in 1994, when almost the entire Bundestag boycotted its president by seniority, Stefan Heym, gave him no applause, no ovation – then you were speechless.

B: Yes. Then I knew as I sat in front of the television that I was witnessing a declaration of political and moral bankruptcy. When, a day before his speech, the Gauck Commission (which investigates Stasi cases) announced that they had incriminating evidence against Stefan Heym, but it transpired right from the outset, on the most cursory reading that the accusation was – as might have been expected – indefensible rubbish, and the accusation was withdrawn the day after his speech... without any apology! Words continue to fail me.

A: They resented the fact that he had won a direct mandate for the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism) in Prenzlauer Berg, in East Berlin!

B: As a citizen of this country, I was proud that Stefan Heym was opening this parliamentary session – a democrat who had fought for democracy, freedom and equality under four political systems, and who would not miss the opportunity, even in the fifth system he was consciously experiencing, to fight for freedom and equality. A writer, a German, a Jew, “the Nestor of our Movement”, as he was dubbed by the demonstration moderator on 4th November. This man was refused respect and derided by the elected representatives of the people. It was so awful – I couldn't bear it.

A: When you read the speech, you might think it had been given today: “The crisis into which this Bundestag has been elected is not merely cyclical, a crisis that comes and goes, but a structural, permanent and worldwide one.”

B: More please!

A: “Although the majority of peoples affected by the repressive burden of Stalinism and post-Stalinism have freed themselves, this has made the crisis I was speaking of, a crisis faced by the whole of industrialised society, all the more visible. How much longer will the planet, the only one we have, tolerate the way humanity produces and consumes its thousands of goods? And how much longer will humanity tolerate the way these goods are distributed?”

B: More please!

A: “Let’s not just talk about debt cancellation for the poorest among us. Let’s cancel their debts. And it’s not the refugees that are crowding towards us who are our enemies – it is those who drive them to seek refuge.”

B: It’s difficult not to keep on quoting from it.

A: His implication that East Germans had won their rights and freedoms themselves, and that those “who had the weapons to preserve the unloved system” were “self-restrained enough to refrain from using them” – people didn’t want to hear these kinds of distinctions.

B: And more than ever, they didn’t want to be admonished: “Please do not underestimate a human life in which, in spite of all the limitations imposed on it, money was not the be-all and end-all. Likewise a right to work for all men and women.”

In an article for *Der Spiegel* on 14th November 1994, Jürgen Leinemann writes, “But the Christian Democratic Union cannot forgive Stefan Heym for representing the PDS. CDU Minister Angela Merkel regards the fact that they exercised collective discipline and put up with him and did not walk out as a substantial concession. “The Union has been magnanimous,” says the woman who as a GDR citizen once read Stefan Heym’s books “enthusiastically”. “It doesn’t have any more to give.”

B: Did she ever apologise for that?

A: What are you thinking?!

B: –

A: What is it?

B: Nothing.

A: Tell me!

B: I’m thinking of that passage in his memoirs, *Obituary (Nachruf)*, when he’s talking about family members, and after each of them he puts in brackets: emigrated, gassed, gassed, emigrated.

A: You can’t do anything about Kohl’s or Merkel’s magnanimity; it’s just too incomprehensibly great.

B: You mean this magnanimity can’t be softened?

A: It can, but only at the right time in the right place, with the right people. But we’ve gone off track. This isn’t the material for a tribute. What else have you got up your sleeve?

B: I have to talk about how Heym and Hein belong to those who spoke up in different political systems, who never saw themselves as winners, even though they had enough merits they could point to.

A: And where are the civil rights campaigners who are speaking up today? Which of them doesn’t need to be described as “former”?

B: Those who still have a fundamental disagreement with the status quo are thin on the ground.

A: The fight for the present is at the same time a fight for the past. A brief digression on that, perhaps?

B: To the best of my knowledge, there has been no book in the German language in the last decade that describes this better than Stefan Heym's *The King David Report*.

A: It concerns the preparation of the *One and Only True and Authoritative, Historically Correct and Officially Approved Report on the Amazing Rise, God-fearing Life, Heroic Deeds and Wonderful Achievements of David the Son of Jesse, King of Judah for Seven Years and of Both Judah and Israel for Thirty-Three, Chosen of God and Father of King Solomon*.

B: It's about making a history out of stories, something Solomon, the reigning King, needs more than gold, weapons or food.

A: The report is supposed to establish *One Truth*, thus ending *All Contradiction and Controversy*, eliminating *All Disbelief* of the *Choice by Our Lord Yahveh of David ben Jesse*, and allaying *All Doubt* of the *Glorious Promises* made to him by our Lord Yahveh in regard to *his Seed and Progeny*<sup>1</sup>.

B: But the stories gathered by Ethan, son of Hoshai of the town of Ezrah present an obstacle.

A: As Ethan is about to be condemned to death for this, he draws one of King David's psalms from his robe and reads it aloud. The wise King Solomon spares his life, but sentences him to be silent until his death, saying: "[L]et no word of his reach the ear of the people", and to let "his name be forgotten as though he were never born."

B: "But that psalm he read us, *In Praise of the Lord, and in praise of David*, which is written in the spirit and the manner of all those that write like the lowest kind of servants, trite, and full of platitudes, and bare of imagination, this psalm shall carry his name and be preserved for all times<sup>2</sup>."

A: The perfidious revenge of the powerful.

B: But Solomon underestimates the solidarity of those who write.

A: Stefan Heym, a descendant of Ethan, rediscovered the stories within history. And there he picks up where Brecht left off with *The Business Affairs of Mr Julius Caesar*.

B: If the world of the Bible was a cypher for the Stalinist practice of rewriting history in 1972, today it is just one meaning amongst many. It even seems as if the relationship has reversed itself. What was once halfway "neutral" material has become incendiary because of the influence of ultra-orthodox Jews on the direction of Israeli politics, and this suppresses every other meaning. The literary and historical setting of a not remotely sacred Bible story has become a sacrilege – and at the same time, this setting remains a pattern that can be interrogated just as history can and one that can be narrated differently in stories.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation taken from: *The King David Report*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1972, p. 9

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247

A: Belief only ever has a single point of view. Literature, on the other hand, distances you from yourself; it sees you standing at the train window. The question is how it manages to do this. To put it another way: how can literature be both incendiary and commercially successful?

B: If you want people to read you, you have to be commercial. But at the same time your writing has to go beyond this. It has to ask as clearly as possible: What's the water like?

A: But does it make sense to seek out writing strategies?

Can you devise rules for it at all? As a reader, isn't it better to say, when I read a novel, I sit down next to the train window and enjoy both the landscape and the book, which in itself gives me a glimpse of the train? Or, in this novel, I felt the water in all its oiliness running over my gills?

B: Prescriptions are useless. But Heym and Hein, it seems to me, try out a different strategy in every book. Each book is wholly different from the next. With Christoph Hein, any similarities are more like distant relationships, as if there were pairs of books like *Horri's Fate* and *Settlement*, or *The Distant Lover* and *Mrs Paula Trousseau*, or *The Tango Player* and *In His Early Childhood, a Garden* (*In seiner frühen Kindheit ein Garten*), or *Willenbrock* and *Weiskerr's Legacy* (*Weiskerr's Nachlass*). It's in the books set in the immediate present that the effect of seeing your own train is most powerful for me.

A: It's a question of becoming aware of your own default setting. If we were looking for measures of literary quality, we would find one of them in the ability to create distance from default settings, distance from the self-evident. If you want to understand what I mean better, you should read *Mrs Paula Trousseau*.

B: And anyone who wants an up-to-date description of water quality should read *Weiskerr's Legacy*.

A: There misfortune always stops just short of catastrophe. It's always a question of how to handle the "just". But because it can "just" be averted, we understand how thin the ice is on which we tread every day. If the helping hand were suddenly removed, if luck deserted us, then woe betide us!

B: Each character takes us into a different world – you could make a whole TV series out of it.

A: Hopefully you won't be doing that! Do you at least have a conclusion?

B: Not a conclusion, but I definitely wanted to tell one more Christoph Hein story.

A: After the apology comes the thanks?

B: Yes, in a sort of way. For whatever reason, the former Chancellor Schröder invited five East German writers to dinner in December 2000. His selection was, in alphabetical order, Brussig, Hein, Hilbig, Maron and Schulze. A colleague whose life was at risk because his health insurer was refusing to provide life-saving treatment handed me a letter addressed to Schröder. And so I had a particular issue to raise. There was no seating plan, and since my colleague Hein headed straight for the far end of the table, and I followed him, whilst the Chancellor sat down in the

middle of the table, I didn't really get a chance to talk with Schröder. And there didn't ever seem to be a good moment to produce the letter. But as the Chancellor was getting ready to leave and – no sooner said than done – stood up, Hein rumbled at me, A: "Now, go!"

B: Normally that would have meant:

A: "Go on, young man, try your luck!"

B: But in this case I ran the whole length of one side of the table, and my colleague Hein ran the other. Together we pinioned the Chancellor at the door, in a kind of pincer movement. Surprised by this overpowering pursuit, and visibly shocked, he asked,

A: What's this, a writers' petition?

B: My colleague Hein answered for both of us and got me to put my case. The Chancellor calmed down and promised to help – and help actually did then arrive.

A: How good it is to hear that there are colleagues who are prepared to run the length of a table for each other without being asked.

B: Perhaps I should dedicate my conclusion to the centenarian? Do you think that would work?

A: If your conclusion's good, it will.

B: Sometimes you can get the impression that there's a writers' heaven, and that occasionally signs, advice, writing strategies appear from it.

A: Sounds a bit mystical.

B: No – but sometimes it's your own library, when you have to write a tribute, that is the greatest help.

A: So get on with it!

B: At the end of February my publisher asked me to write, by the following day, a piece for the business pages of a newspaper, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung. For the pros & cons section, as it happens. The editor explained,

A: "Hasso Plattner, a co-founder of SAP, wants to give half of his 5.4-billion-euro fortune to charity (it's not quite clear exactly why he wants to do this, but it's clear he wants to be charitable, which is quite something). Now we'd like to analyse the pros & cons, decide whether it's a good thing or not. We would assume that Mr Schulze is likely to be on the side of the cons and to argue that it should be the state's job to fund charitable work, and that in the event of any doubt, Mr Plattner should pay higher taxes. We would be delighted if he would agree to write the cons section for us."

B: I declined. I didn't want to play the naysayer. The editor persisted.

A: But he'd got all the arguments in his head: the piece wouldn't be long, and he'd get his photo in the paper.

B: I held firm, and the publisher declined again. Instead of writing pointless counter-arguments, I preferred to focus my reading on preparation for this tribute: a stack of Christoph Hein here, a

stack of Stefan Heym there. On top of the Heym pile was *The Queen Against Defoe*, a Buchverlag der Morgen first edition from 1978, a wonderful design by Horst Hüssel. It's somewhat battered because it was hidden so often, but I kept on taking it out again. It's just too lovely. I leafed through it, read a bit more and called my publisher: could I write the cons side after all? The answer came back shortly afterwards: Yes, write it!

A: And he wrote 4,505 characters arguing against the proposed donor: What kind of madness was this? What was this man doing? Couldn't he see the consequences? Nothing worse could have befallen us, he ranted. Plattner's money wasn't just lying around; it was invested, and "Is there any better way to serve the community than by investing?" he asked. B: Speculation also means investment! I trashed Plattner's defenders, who were saying that, until the law was made more equitable, he had no other choice than to donate to charity. And I poured scorn and derision on those who said it was good that he was donating to charity before anyone had the idea of changing the law.

A: And then he wrote about how, as a high achiever, this kind of donation demotivates him.

B: If I feel just as good about myself with one billion as I do with three billion or six billion, what is the point of all the slogging? In that case, I might as well give every average Joe at my company a share of the profits and raise the cleaners' hourly pay by three euros and give them permanent jobs and throw in a company pension to boot – I thought we'd put all that behind us!

A: How can I demand maximum efficiency and the highest levels of commitment whilst reducing staff costs in all areas, so that – "Yes, why then?" So that I can give away billions? Anyone who doesn't hold personal gain in the highest esteem is opening the socialist floodgates!

B: And then I gave Hasso Plattner a personal warning: people would suspect him of self-doubt – and worse, a bad conscience. They'd work it out: how many people this money could save from dying of hunger, thirst, malaria, Aids, or whatever else.

A: And then they'd ask, why only now, and why only half of your fortune? In conclusion, he advised him that if he absolutely wanted to donate, he shouldn't breathe a word to anyone!

B: "Take on the extra costs of the Stuttgart 21 urban development project, or some of them, on the quiet. That way the money would go silently out of the world and back into the economy and wouldn't cause any more trouble. Please, just think about it one more time!"

A: As agreed, he submitted the piece the next day. At 4 pm the editor called.

B: Could I rewrite my article because many readers would find it confusing. I said I couldn't rewrite it. We agreed to speak again later.

A: They exchanged emails and postponed their discussion to Saturday. On Saturday the rejection came.

B: The editor wrote that my piece was simply far too complicated for her readers, that I wouldn't be able to meet them on their own ground.

A: I'm convinced you could have said everything you wanted to in that article. Not a privilege to be underestimated!

B: That's what the format is for.

A: But you have to play by the rules, respect the format.

B: Within the format (almost) anything is possible.

A: You can lambaste things in a cabaret or be playful in a colour supplement, but when you're writing a counter-argument for the business pages, you have to fit within the predefined margins. But what's that got to do with Heym?

B: Stefan Heym has Daniel Defoe write a lampoon that differs neither in spirit, nor in expression, nor in tone from the inflammatory speeches given by supporters of the Queen against dissenters from the true Anglican faith. Defoe didn't even exaggerate; he simply followed their logic through to its conclusion.

A: And the man charged with finding Defoe is at first uncertain whether Defoe should be praised or punished. He is to be punished, and people want to pillory him and throw bricks at him.

B: Which is how you can tell that the times have changed significantly for the better.

A: You should finish with that.

B: Isn't that too unliterary?

A: Then make something of it!