

*The Quest for Identity in Michael Frayn's Democracy*

Michael Frayn's *Democracy* struggles with presenting the human drama of Günter Guillaume amidst the chaotic backdrop of post-WWII Germany; while attempting to dramatize the internal conflict of a man placed in a situation where he was required to spy on a man he deeply admired, it does not fully succeed in clarifying that focus. The play endeavors to illustrate the personal and political challenges Guillaume faces in his role as a spy: the conflict between his competing and opposite alliances, the challenge of living a double life, the confusion of being caught between two entirely different worlds and trying to reconcile his place in both of them. The personal and intensely human drama gets bogged down, however, in the setting, as Frayn is unable to fully explore (to a degree of satisfaction) several of the introduced themes and in the structure itself, as he distances the audience from the action at hand and never truly delves into the interior lives of the most critical characters.

*Democracy*, at its core, is the story of a spy. Guillaume is an agent planted in the lower rungs of West Germany's Social Democratic Party by the Stasi (the East German Ministry of State Security). William Brandt is elected as Chancellor of the German Federal Republic, and as he rises, so too does Guillaume; he is promoted to a new post in the chancellor's office, much to the delight (and surprise) of his Stasi contact, Arno Kretschmann. Using his position in the SDP to spy for East Germany,

however, seems counterproductive, as Brandt is the first leader of the Federal Republic to honestly attempt to forge a mutually beneficial, united relationship with East Germany; he is far more an ally to East Germany than an enemy worthy of being the target of such self-preserving espionage. The historically convoluted motives of the Stasi, however, mirror the conflict within Guillaume himself; as he becomes closer to Brandt, he is forced to weight his increasing responsibilities to his home country (since the more intimate his relationship with Brandt, the greater his access to sensitive documents and communiqués) against his growing admiration and respect for the man he is supposed to be spying on.

The play is structured around the parallel careers of Guillaume and Brandt; the first act follows Brandt's rise to chancellor and Guillaume's rise to Brandt's personal assistant while the second act charts the public revelation of Guillaume's role as a spy and Brandt's virtually simultaneous fall from power. The format of the play is comprised of various personal reflections, occasional dialogue, and periodic bursts of narrative; there is practically no direct conflict or confrontation between characters. The bulk of the story development inherent in this spy drama is revealed through speeches removed from the action rather than the actual playing-out of the events at hand. Many aspects of the unfurling drama within Brandt's political cadre and Guillaume's growing internal conflict are revealed during Guillaume's reports to Kretschmann or a reflective soliloquy from Guillaume or Brandt (although speeches from Brandt that actually offer meaningful insight into the inner workings of himself and his world are rarer). By letting the story play out indirectly, as filtered through

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other parties separated from the action, Frayn toys with the traditional format of dramatization; the meat of the play lies not in what is actually happening, but in the characters' responses to their environment and their own internal machinations. It makes it less clear what exactly is being dramatized, since so little action truly takes place onstage, but in focusing on reaction over action Frayn highlights the emotional and highly personal aspects of this otherwise complicated, convoluted historical spy thriller.

This lack of concentration on traditional dramatic action places responsibility for the plot and thematic development on the characters themselves. The protean, inconstant nature of politics is illustrated most noticeably through tracing the paths several of the secondary characters travel throughout the play; while they bear little direct influence on the action of the play, as their role in the drama is not played out in the text but rather referred to, they provide a clearer image of the world in which Guillaume is attempting to navigate. Herbert Wehner, the party leader, arranged in 1966 (with Helmut Schmidt) a coalition between the Christian Democratic and Christian Social Unions and the Social Democratic Party while Brandt was detained in transit only to have Brandt seize the opportunity to form a coalition with the Free Democratic Party in 1969 against Wehner and Schmidt's wishes and then run for chancellor without telling either of them. Throughout the course of the play Wehner is forced to act as though he supports Brandt while internally resenting him for his individual rise to power while Wehner stays in the same position. While Wehner and Brandt should be on the same side, Wehner consistently undermines him to other

people and disrupts the natural chain of command by hijacking Gunther Nollau (the head of West German Security) who now reports secretly to him rather than his official superior. When Brandt sends Wehner and Schmidt a letter about party reorganizations, Wehner ignores its contents and executes his own reorganization (namely, demoting his rival to Brandt's affection and party power, Horst Ehmke to a trivial station in the post office); soon after Wehner is heard griping about how well things used to be run when Ehmke was still in charge. Wehner, throughout virtually the entire play, toys with his inside knowledge of the potential sleeper in their department; he chooses not to make Brandt aware of it until exceptionally late in the game because he doesn't want to risk being wrong and looking incredibly foolish, but if he doesn't tell and it ends up being true, he would appear to be almost as treacherous and complicit as the spy himself. Wehner consistently plays the role of whichever character might benefit him the most in any given situation; even within their own party, alliances are shifting and no one is fully as they seem. Guillaume not only has to rationalize his roles in the disparate realms of East and West Germany but even within the party itself. There is no constancy, no clear reality, as everyone is hidden from one another by layers and layers of subterfuge and superficiality; since everyone is manipulating the system, it is incredibly difficult for any character to truly know where he stands in the world, and clearly even more of a challenge for Guillaume, who is forced to play innumerable roles in a world where he can never be certain if his cover is about to be blown; the instability inherent in his role as a spy is

magnified tenfold by the instability within the framework he is infiltrating, further complicating his already complex situation.

The most critical complication for Guillaume, however, is not the shifting nature of the political machine but his own variable and conflicting loyalties. In Wehner's ideal party, there are "no roots and no loyalties. A party has members and funds, offices and officers, patronage and punishment."<sup>1</sup> But this is not the case for Guillaume; he is increasingly torn between his loyalty to his country and his love for Brandt. He is put in a position where he must constantly reassess his motivation; is the East German cause worth jeopardizing the career of a man he respects and admires? How can he serve both masters without compromising his devotion to either cause? One of the failings of the play is the lack of exploration of either the reason for Guillaume's incredible dedication to Brandt or his motives for becoming an East German spy in the first place. There is very little attention given to Brandt's character, and while other characters speak of his extraordinary charisma (especially when relating the tales of his winning over entire crowds with a single wordless gesture), little direct evidence of it is provided in the play, which makes it difficult to understand Guillaume's attachment. There is also practically no discussion of what led Guillaume to become a spy, so his incentive for embarking on this mission is never explored beyond a basic assumed allegiance to his native country. Truly understanding the emotional rationale for Guillaume putting himself in this

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<sup>1</sup> *Democracy*. Michael Frayn. New York, 2003: p. 22. All subsequent citations are to this edition.

incredibly tenuous, challenging position is made far more difficult as his motivation is not fully explored in the actual text of the play and must instead be inferred.

The inherent challenge of reconciling warring parts of one's self epitomized in Guillaume's struggle with his allegiances is also relevant to the play's discussion of power, leadership, and democracy as a whole. The difficulty in ruling a nation lies in reconciling the conflicting desires of each individual party, each individual person; is it even possible to act in the interests of the country as a whole, when indubitably some segments are not being served by a particular decision? For a nation is as divided and contradictory as is any character in the play, and consequently the leadership of a nation is intrinsically only going to placate a fraction of the populace while the remainder attempts to curry favor back in their direction. The changeability and manipulation so present within Brandt's own party is equally present in the workings of the nation at large. Kretschmann describes the Federal Republic as:

Not just one so-called democracy – eleven separate democracies tied up in a federation like ferrets in a bag! Eleven separate talking-shops all talking at the same time, with the Federal talking-shop in Bonn trying to make itself heard above the rest of them! Three political parties, in and out of bed with each other like drunken intellectuals, fifteen warring Cabinet Ministers in Bonn alone, and sixty million separate egos. All making deals with each other and breaking them. All looking round at every moment to see the expression on everyone else's face. All trying to guess which way everyone else will jump. All out for themselves, and all totally dependent on everyone else. Not one Germany. Sixty million separate Germanies.

p. 30-31

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democracy struggling to reconcile the respective needs and shifting allegiances of its sixty million distinct citizens.

At the core of *Democracy* is the eternal drama of identity, of discovering how the many disparate and contradictory characteristics within all of us can coexist and which of them truly define who we are and how we interact with the world. Guillaume is forced to rationalize his opposing loves for Brandt and East Germany, and in doing so must somehow simultaneously mask sides of himself and continually change his external self based on the new context he finds himself in. In order for him to exist in Brandt's world while acting on the orders of Kretschmann's world Guillaume has to come to terms with the contradictions of his loyalties and the coexistence of seemingly incompatible character traits. Brandt, while discussing his own identity crisis, describes the composition of the inner self:

So many people, with so many different views and so many different voices. And inside each of us so many more people still, all struggling to be heard. For a moment one voice rises above the others, and everyone picks up the tune. And then the cacophony resumes. Until sooner or later another voice is raised...

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So many selves exist simultaneously within us and we simply rotate through which self is dominant at any given moment based on the situation. The few moments in the play where Brandt says anything of sincere meaning and depth involve his sense of ambiguity at the role he is currently playing, of the charismatic and accessible politician; he is forced to come to terms with why he is the one in this position of incredible power, why he has been placed in the role of leader. He looks out at the people and "they look at me, and I see the perpetual question in their eyes.

'Why you? Why not me? Why *you*?' " (p. 42) There is a certain arbitrariness to what course one's life ends up taking that has little bearing on one's personal attributes or lack thereof; under slightly different circumstances, almost anyone could have been in Brandt's shoes. He comments to Guillaume that "Who should we have turned out to be, if things had been different? You might have been standing here. I might have been standing there." (p. 69) Identity and fate have a fluidity and flexibility that make it all the more difficult to ever truly determine where one stands. Guillaume could just have easily been a West German as not; it is only through the particular twists of his life that he ended up being an East German spy. So his conflicting loyalties are completely reasonable, as there are no common regulations on how he should think and feel; under other circumstances, he would naturally feel differently, and since the possibilities for his future are so arbitrary, it is expected that he would have conflicting feelings about his current situation. While quoting Walt Whitman, Brandt states " 'Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes.' " (p. 71) It is foolish to attempt to restrict one's identity to the simple externality that one presents to the world when in reality it encompasses such a larger scope of the human experience.

This fluidity of identity and situation is also critical to the physical staging of the play. The play mostly alternates between Guillaume's conversations with Brandt and his exchanges with Kretschmann (with periodic interactions between other characters), and it is critical that Guillaume's precarious position between two opposing worlds is present onstage. Frayn suggests a stage of desks and paperwork

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where the characters not immediately involved in the action can futz with reports and the like until they become caught up in the drama again (which also leaves a great deal of room for play with eavesdropping; Wehner, for example, might be paying more attention to a conversation between Brandt and Ehmke than the text explicitly states). Since most of Guillaume's internal conflict arises from his need to span two separate worlds, the challenge of always being aware to whom he's speaking needs to be clear in the staging. He has to switch from spy to personal assistant almost instantaneously, and his incredible (and necessary) awareness of his surroundings at any given moment should be apparent in the spacing of the separate onstage realms of the East and West German factions.

Throughout the course of the play, Guillaume visibly struggles with his inability to mesh his two conflicting desires: to stay loyal to his country and to his relationship with Brandt. By the end of the play, however, Guillaume is revealed to be a spy and is imprisoned; Brandt resigns as news of the presence of a spy within his organization (and the additional leak of information about his many conquests). These two men who have been paralleled through the entire play (two fatherless Berliners stuck playing roles they don't fully understand) suddenly take very divergent paths in their respective falls from grace. Brandt, Guillaume's "reflection of myself," (p. 73) whom we never fully get a chance to know (making Guillaume's attachment and sacrifice all the more poignant, as it is wholly unclear whether Brandt returns even a modicum of the affection Guillaume feels for him), ends up watching with gratification as the Berlin Wall comes down and "our divided self

becomes one self" (p. 91) while Guillaume is alone and cancerous. Brandt succeeds because he is able to successfully sublimate his contradictory characteristics when appropriate while Guillaume never is fully able to reconcile his disparate loyalties and effectively self-destructs while Brandt remains able to return later as a respected statesman. The play ends with a sense of pity for Guillaume and his plight as a man stuck between two irreconcilable loves (which may or may not have been reciprocated); he spent his life trying to gauge people and situations and ended up failing catastrophically. "Life's such a tangle...! Everyone looking at everyone else. Everyone seeing something different. Everyone trying to guess what everyone else is seeing. It's such an endless shifting unreliable indecipherable unanalysable *mess!*" (p. 75-76) The nature of apparent reality is brought into question as layers and layers of identity are continually peeled off only to reveal even more complex and contradictory emotional states; in the end, *Democracy* is not a chronicle of a spy story gone bad but a tragedy of a man unable to ever fully be himself.