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Jurek Becker: Jacob the Liar

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Seminar 125 - The GDR Novel

Although the program consisted of thorough papers by five well-informed scholars, their works stimulated little comment and evoked few questions. It is important to ask why the drama seminar was more successful than the seminar on the novel, especially since many of the same people attended both sessions. The presence of Müller, a dramatist whose openness and sincerity was recognized by those in attendance, added, to be sure, human interest besides expertise. But it was not the figure of the artist which made the seminar a success. The seminar's success resulted from the preparation of the audience prior to attendance. Because the drama seminar was limited to discussion of one short play, the text of which was widely distributed before the seminar, virtually everyone in attendance had read it in preparation for the event. As a result, the audience was familiar with the text and eager to ask questions, offer comments and exchange opinions. Hence, the meeting created a lively, educational, memorable experience.

In contrast, the five papers in the seminar on the novel treated patterns of conflict in recent GDR novels, presented analyses of Karl-Heinz Jakob's Die Interviewer, Hermann Kant's Impressum, Günter Künert's Gast aus England, and explored narrative consciousness in the works of Christa Wolf. This comprehensive program meant a participant, to have been prepared for the seminar, had to have read several novels and short stories just to challenge the speakers, to make comments, or to ask penetrating questions. Although it can be assumed everyone in the audience had read some of the stories, and a few were familiar with most, no one could have recently read all of them. Thus, the necessary familiarity with the text required for fruitful discussion was lacking. While it is true the papers themselves were available prior to the meeting, it is not so much familiarity with the papers, but with the primary works that is important.

The events at the last MLA seminars indicate that the seminar format is most successful when the topic is a single work or a single author and the distribution of necessary materials (texts or papers) occurs as much in advance of the meeting as possible.

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Becker, Jurek. Jacob the Liar. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975)

The recent publication of Jurek Becker's Jakob der Lügner in an English translation by Melvin Kornfeld is an event to be welcomed - not only in view of the paucity of well-translated GDR literature, but because it is a remarkable work which will be of interest to teachers of German literature in translation as well as to a wider reading public. This first novel by the Polish-born (1937) GDR resident has been widely praised since it was first published in 1969. The story of a Polish ghetto under Nazi control, Jacob the Liar succeeds in the feat of lacing with humor the atmosphere of terror and despair. It remains an appealing and readable work despite the bleak subject.

The translation is sensitive and accurate. It conveys the flavor of humor which is in the tradition of Sholem Aleichem (whose name is even mentioned by the hero Jacob). The colloquial tone is successfully maintained, as is the distinctive voice of the narrator. There are a few phrases whose translation one might dispute, and two lines are omitted on page 198. But these are insignificant shortcomings in an otherwise excellent translation.

This novel will stimulate classroom discussion on a number of issues. One is the problematic morality of the hero's actions. At great personal risk, Jacob provides his fellow ghetto residents with bogus optimistic "radio reports" on the rapid progress of Soviet troops through Poland. Although spirits are raised and suicides decline, Jacob's "news service" also produces tragic consequences. At several points the story can be related to the GDR. For example, Jacob speculates on the inferior quality of the prewar German language newspapers: "That's the way newspapers were in those days and that's the way newspapers still are. Nobody has shown them since any better method." (103) Behind the narrative of ghetto events lurks the general question of the role of information in society. Berlin, East-West relations, and the West German residence of former Nazis are touched upon during the narrator's postwar search for documentation. The narrative technique is worthy of examination, as are the attitudes toward Germany and individual Germans. Characters display unusual patience, even understanding for their persecutors.

Jacob the Liar represents a departure from the usual war stories studied in literature

courses. It is a view from inside the ghetto, written in the Yiddish tradition by a Polish story-teller whose language is German. I believe it has intriguing possibilities as an alternative to familiar viewpoints. (Unfortunately the price of the hardcover edition is \$7.95. Perhaps the publisher will issue a paperback edition as well.)

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Marion von Salisch: Zwischen Selbstaufgabe und Selbstverwirklichung. Zum Problem der Persönlichkeitsstruktur im Werk Christa Wolfs. Stuttgart: Klett 1975. (= Literaturwissenschaft - Gesellschaftswissenschaft, 12.) 78 S., kart., 6.30 DM.

Bücher über einzelne Autoren der DDR-Literatur sind leider immer noch eine Seltenheit. Allein schon aus diesem Grund ist das Heftchen von Marion von Salisch über Christa Wolf eine erfreuliche Neuerscheinung. Da es zudem bei Klett in der Serie "Literaturwissenschaft - Gesellschaftswissenschaft" erschienen ist, also vor allem Gymnasiallehrer und Schüler ansprechen will, war eine didaktisch durchdachte Darstellung zu erwarten.

Leider wird gerade diese Hoffnung nicht ganz erfüllt. Zwar begrenzt sich Salisch klug auf eine Analyse des zentralen "Zusammenhangs" von "Lebens- und Schreibweise" (Klappentext) in den beiden Romanen Christa Wolfs. Auch weiß sie, daß sie ihre Aufgabe kaum "ohne Kenntnis der ökonomisch-politischen Verhältnisse in der DDR" lösen könnte. Wenn es dann trotzdem zu einer unglücklichen und unübersichtlichen Trennung von literarischen und soziologischen Ansätzen kommt, dann beweist das, wie schwer es selbst der Gutwillige hat, der Situation der DDR-Literatur mit einem angemessenen Instrumentarium beizukommen. So werden einmal mehr die soziopolitischen Maßstäbe nicht gleichzeitig und wechselwirksam mit ästhetischen Kriterien am jeweiligen Text angelegt, sondern als Kapitel über die "offiziellen Persönlichkeitsverhältnisse in der DDR" (die übrigens merkwürdigerweise an Hand einer Studie eines Frankfurter Kollektivs anstatt durch DDR-Quellen referiert werden) den Werkinterpretation undialektisch

quasi als Nachgedanke anhängt.

Was nicht heißen soll, daß das was Salisch über die Stärken und Schwächen der beiden Bücher von Christa Wolf zu sagen hat, nicht zutreffend wäre. Zurecht kritisiert sie die Klischees im Geteilten Himmel; und zurecht lobt sie die "epische Prosa" von Nachdenken über Christa T. als zukunftsweisende Neuerung (ohne allerdings auf die sich in "Kindheitsmuster" verstärkende Gefahr eines neuen Formalismus hinzuweisen). Abgerundet wird die Untersuchung durch einen informativen Kurzhinweis auf Christa Wolfs literarische und essayistische Reaktion auf die Anforderungen unseres wissenschaftlich-technischen Zeitalters.

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Magdeburger DDR-Realismus: Volker Brauns
"Unvollendete Geschichte"

Was Millionen DDR-Bürger seit Jahrzehnten wissen, was aber die Funktionärskaste nur zögernd zur Kenntnis nimmt, daß das kein Sozialismus sein kann, was täglich in Presse, Rundfunk und Fernsehen dafür ausgegeben wird, sondern seine Perversion: in der Skizze "Unvollendete Geschichte" des halb oppositionellen, halb staatstreuen DDR-Schriftstellers Volker Braun vom Jahrgang 1939 wird es endlich auch offiziell ausgesprochen. Dieses Stück selbstkritischer DDR-Prosa von 39 Seiten, nachzulesen in Sinn und Form Heft 5/1975 (S.941-979), stammt mithin von einem Autor, der 1945 erst sechs Jahre alt war, der Staatspartei SED als Schulbildung, Studium, Aufstieg und Dichterruhm verdankt; ideologische Restbestände 'bürgerlichen' Denkens dürfte es, zumal Volker Braun nach dem Abitur noch einige Jahre, wie es der 'Bitterfelder Weg' vorschrieb, an der 'ökonomischen Basis' arbeitete, da nicht mehr geben.

Die neue Erzählung nun, die er den, nach eigener Einschätzung, kulturpolitisch aufgeschlosseneren Nachfolgern Walter Ulbrichts zumutet, dürfte zum explosiven Diskussionsstoff der beiden SED-Fraktionen auf dem IX. Parteitag im Mai 1976 werden: am 23. Dezember eines ungenannten Jahres hat der "Ratsvorsitzende des Kreises K." mit seiner achtzehnjährigen Tochter Karin eine Aussprache, ihren politisch unzuverlässigen Freund Frank betreffend ("er müsse sie warnen"), der wie 2