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GDR Seminars at the New York MLA 1976

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GDR SEMINARS AT THE NEW YORK MLA 1976

- GDR Prose Fiction: Critical Approaches and Model Analyses
- GDR Literary Criticism and Aesthetics

The papers presented at these seminars reflected the maturity which scholarship on the GDR has attained in the past few years. Instead of posing standard questions concerning the degree of affinity between an author's work and the official cultural-political line, more differentiated critical models were proposed and fruitfully used. Juergen Hoegl's analysis of Ulrich Plenzdorf's Die neuen Leiden des jungen W., for example, employed a semiotic/structuralist framework which enabled him to investigate the extent to which the intention of the novel was reflected in and supported by its linguistic and metaphoric structures. The broader context of pre-literary premises (influence of previous authors, works, etc.) and post-literary effects (reception) suggested by the model was unfortunately omitted due to the time restrictions which plagued the prose seminar to such an extent that the participants were rushed and the discussion by the audience was cut short.

Richard Zipser's contribution on the self-perception of contemporary writers in the GDR, based on interviews which he conducted, emphasized the broad spectrum of interests and concerns in recent literature there. His findings, which will eventually be published in a larger study, should provide extremely useful material for future research in this area. By concentrating on Volker Braun's "Unvollendete Geschichte" (considered by a majority of the respondents to be exemplary of recent trends), Zipser was able to mediate between the empirical data and their application. The unspoken "message" of this paper is that, as the authors' self-understanding in the GDR becomes more differentiated, the critical apparatus designed to interpret them will have to keep pace. Wulf Koepke's paper on the shift in the function of memory as narrative device, which showed that new "formal" methods were developed to correspond with the changing content in GDR novels, reinforced this impression of the seminar as a whole.

One frequently encounters the idea in the interview material that due to the more or less firmly established framework of a socialist society in the GDR the authors could turn to more specific problems; this

also seems to have had its counterpart in the realm of aesthetics. In the seminar on literary criticism the papers by Sara Lennox (on Robert Weimann) and Peter Hohendahl (on the renewed discussion about Lukacs) dealt with phenomena which broaden the framework of that which is normally understood under Marxist aesthetics in the GDR. Again, evidently a position of relative security concerning their basic standpoint allowed these theoreticians in the GDR to discuss topics which for some time were considered "taboo". Weimann's (limited) incorporation of structuralist and "rezeptionsästhetische" theories into a Marxist framework could serve as paradigmatic. Joan Glick's contribution was an exception, but it provided useful background information on the effects of the 9th Party Congress on cultural policy.

As pointed out in the discussion, however, the re-evaluation of Lukacs' role in the development of GDR literary theory ignored -- as in the 50's -- his early work, in which the theory of reification and a critique of bureaucratization are presented, since particularly the latter is not necessarily bound to bourgeois societies and could be applied to the GDR as well. As the recent ousting of Christa Wolf, Günter de Bruyn and others from the board of the writers' congress would indicate, the base of socialism which has been attained is not yet secure enough to withstand constructive criticism from within.

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Wolf Biermann, Liedermacher und Sozialist.
Hrsg. von Thomas Rothschild. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, 1976. 253 Seiten. Mit Beiträgen von Eveljn Andergassen, Ernst Bloch, Rudi Dutschke, Walter Eccli, Juergen Fuchs, Jean-Pierre Hammer, Robert Havemann, Hansguenter Heyme, Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich, Demosthenes Kourtowik, Domenico Marcolini, Walter Mossmann, Rolf Schwendter, Silvia Volckmann und einer Bibliographie von Peter Meuer.

In light of the November, 1976, expatriation of Wolf Biermann (see GDR Bulletin, Dec., 1976: "Der Fall Wolf Biermann"), the publication in the same month of this paper-back volume (editorial deadline: April, 1976) could not have been more opportune. This collection of articles, including two contributions from the GDR as well as others from