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Brigitte Klump: Das rote Kloster. Eine deutsche Erziehung -- Ruth von Mayenburg: Hotel Lux

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Der Aufenthalt. By Hermann Kant. Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1977. 600 pages. DM 10,80.

From its very beginnings, GDR literature has struggled with the themes of fascism, anti-semitism, and war. Der Aufenthalt marks a new quality in dealing with these themes, and adds new perspectives and insights (as does Christa Wolf's comparable novel Kindheitsmuster). Kant structures his story as an educational novel: Mark Niebuhr, born and raised in a small North German town, becomes a soldier in late 1944 at the age of eighteen, receives minimal training, is thrown into combat, flees, and soon is captured. Several camps and prisons constitute the "Magic Mountain" where this unheroic hero is reeducated in a slow and laborious process without the help of a deus ex machina. Kant's view of education remains dialectical and open, even somewhat sceptical, as stated in the motto, which consists of six lines from Brecht's "Messingkauf": "So bildet sich der Mensch . . . Indem er uns gleicht und indem er uns nicht gleicht." Kant likes to tie his loosely structured novels together with a central idea. In Der Aufenthalt, the central, dramatic idea is the question of Niebuhr's identity: Did he murder a young Polish woman, or did he not? The charge of being a war criminal forces Niebuhr to think about his part in the war--first in solitary confinement, then in a larger cell shared with Polish petty criminals, and lastly, "at the bottom of the pit," in a cell crowded with Gestapo officers, SS leaders, and other Nazi charges. The Polish authorities finally establish Niebuhr's identity. Although not guilty of the murder he has been accused of, Niebuhr has come to realize how deeply he is actually involved in Hitler's war; that it was his young age more than anything else that saved him from becoming guilty of more than killing two enemy soldiers in combat, and that the roots of fascism can be traced to ordinary life, for example, to inconspicuous instances of racism. Niebuhr, at first confused, disoriented, "verwildert," has become a human being who is now ready to live an active, responsible life. In his review of Der Aufenthalt, Marvel Reich-Ranicki, the well-known West German critic, praises this novel--some political and esthetic reservations notwithstanding--as a "serious and honest book" (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, No. 133, June 11, 1977). Kant's

honesty includes the acknowledgment of flaws in Poles and Russians as well. Thus, the narrator provides several examples of traditional antisemitic feelings among Poles. This critical view keeps within certain limits, and is counterbalanced by the suggestion of changes and new beginnings: Niebuhr is told that several good Catholic parents have named their children Mordechaj after the leader of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto (417). Formally and stylistically, Der Aufenthalt resembles Kant's earlier novels. But the general mood is more somber, the satire is sharper, and Kant's pervasive humor includes many grotesque elements. The "meandering" train of thoughts (the narrator's own expression) may be too long-winded at times. Without denying Kant's skillful use of leitmotifs in general, the reviewer feels that the recollections and recapitulations are occasionally repetitive, and some passages in the witty dialogues turn into belabored witticisms. Yet these minor shortcomings cannot impair the accomplishments of this German "Bildungsroman," and do not weaken the compelling symbolic force of many images, motifs, and scenes. We have to be grateful to Hermann Kant for the work and pain that went into this entertaining stirring, informative, and provocative confession.

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Das rote Kloster: Eine deutsche Erziehung. By Brigitte Klump. Hamburg: Hoffman und Campe, 1978. 334 pages. 26 DM.

Hotel Lux. By Ruth von Mayenburg. Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 1978. 352 pages. 32 DM.

"The red cloister" was the student name for the walled and well-guarded Institute for Journalism at Leipzig University, attended by Klump in the mid-1950's when it was the only training center in this field in the GDR. The author, born in 1935, offers her account of these years after two decades in the BRD as a cathartic effort to come to terms with that part of her life which ended when she came to the West.

difficulty in evaluating the book lies in deciding whether Klump is a 20th century Gretchen only the parody thereof. She took leave of simple agrarian beginnings ambitiously determined to become a drama critic--out of socialist commitment. The book contains the material of a trivial novel: a naive country girl, largely because of her physical beauty, finds herself involved with the men who are to become leading figures in the cultural-political life of the GDR a generation later. The secret police enter on the scene; the heroine is given assignments to be executed, through erotic surrender if necessary. Hopeless conflicts between ideal and reality beset the girl; attempted suicide worsens her lot. Flight to the West is the only course which remains open to her.

The surprise is that the book rises far above banality. Klump's story derives its significance from the intensity of pathos with which it is told.

In addition to the early portraits of contemporary leaders in the GDR, Klump tells of her association with Rainer Kunze and Helga Novak in Leipzig and with Wolf Biermann in Berlin.

The author's dual interest in theater and journalism prompted a visit to the Berliner Ensemble where she won the sympathy of Helene Weigel. This, in turn, made possible for her a practicum at that theatre immediately after the death of Brecht in 1956.

It is Weigel who emerges as the great positive figure of the book; indeed, the motherly concern which she expressed for Klump makes of her almost the heroic stereotype demanded by doctrinaire socialist realism. Weigel suggested writing as therapy for the obviously troubled girl, for which reason she stands as the god-mother of this project, completed 20 years after the advice was given. The book demands inclusion in the Brecht bibliography.

Klump represents that multitude of GDR citizens who want socialism, but not the socialism now practiced there. She stresses, therefore, that her book is not a betrayal of socialism, but rather the unmasking of its traitors.

Moscow's Hotel Lux became the official residence of the Comintern beginning with the Third International, for which Lenin had called while in exile in 1914. During the second war, it became a major ghetto within the USSR for leading Communists who sought refuge from countries overrun by fascism. It sheltered an average of 600 persons from 20 nations in these years; among them Germans were heavily in the majority. Mayenburg--then the wife of the Austrian Ernst Fischer--lived in the Lux from 1938 to 1945.

Through her residency she was in a position to observe the deeply personal and often dark side of the lives of those who were to return from exile to undertake the institution of Soviet-styled socialism in their native lands. Wilhelm Pieck and Walter Ulbricht were among Mayenburg's daily associates, as was Herbert Wehner, who was to leave Communism for a position of leadership in the West German SPD.

The book is an exposition of the story of life in the GDR related by Klump; Lux residents were the victims of nocturnal arrests, purges and liquidations at the hands of the NKVD, whose model is followed by the SSD--the "Stasi"--in its control of the students in the "red cloister". The tragedy which extends beyond Mayenburg's documentation lay in the inability of the committed individuals who lived there to exclude from their post-war political activity the machinations of the police state.

It is unfortunate that Mayenburg did not concentrate upon a more detailed account of her own years in the Lux; she has chosen rather to engage in extensive reconstruction of events in which she was in no way involved, such as the struggle for the control of China in the 1920's and Trotsky's murder in Mexico in 1940. Her Lux co-inhabitants included such literary figures as Erich Weinert, Willi Bredel, Theodor Plievier, Fritz Erpenbeck and even Johannes R. Becher. All, however, are mentioned only in passing.

Although both books are highly interesting and even entertaining, it is Klump who has made the more significant contribution to cultural and historical documentation.

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