Jurij Brĕzan: Krabat oder die Verwandlung der Welt

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Brézan weaves his novel from components of myths, fairy tales, legends, parables, science fiction and international intrigue. He thus creates a cosmology with Krabat as the central figure. Krabat suffers God's injustice on the seventh day of creation when the gifts of the earth are divided. He receives a cow, a cat, and a lark, while the knight, Reissenberg, is given a horse, land and power over men and women. However, Lucifer -- in defiance of God -- adds the girl Smjala and the Creator's traveller's staff with its depiction of Adam and Eve, the snake of curiosity and the tree of knowledge to Krabat's possessions. Thus provided, Krabat starts on his quest through time and space to rectify the Creator's injustice to men. He fights for the dominance of reason over passion and the forces of evil. His elusive goal is to vanquish fear, hunger, and greed for power and possessions resulting all too often in war. Krabat does not reach his goal, but he makes progress. While absolute power in the hands of privileged individuals is fading, the struggle for power through wealth and the development of science and technology uninhibited by moral considerations threatens anew the survival of mankind.

Brézan anchors his story in his native Sorbian landscape. Krabat originates there, as does the trumpeter Jakub, his constant companion and sensuous, artistic alter-ego, as well as the Serbins, the family furnishing the village leadership through generations. Jan Serbin, a twentieth century man, has become a bio-geneticist and received the Nobel Prize for having discovered the formula permitting control of man's genetic traits. Jan is subjected to pressure generated by an intellectual cartel of scientists wishing to use the formula for the purpose of establishing absolute power over mankind. Jan changes into Krabat, thus finding the strength to withhold his genetic discovery so "daß das Geheimnis des Lebens Geheimnis bleibt,...bis es die Menschen zur Rettung vor sich selbst nicht mehr benötigen(550)."

The novel is difficult reading; the author constantly switches time, place and perspective. His narration fluctuates from third-person to various first-persons, and his characters appear under the guise of different names in different times and places. Fictional reality blends into surrealistic fantasies, abruptly shifting back to concrete situations, people, and landscapes. Warm humor alternates with biting satire, life-affirming optimism with resignation in the face of imperfect human nature. Brézan's characters are two-dimensional in that they lack depth and development. The women in his novel are assigned the tasks of giving love, children, and support to the men.

The aim of the work is a philosophical one; it questions the meaning of the past, examines the present, and attempts to give some direction to the future. Brézan depicts the fight for freedom and dignity by the common people mainly through the history of the Sorbians, and, by implication, of all mankind. Krabat is his symbol for man's tenacious search for knowledge, and in this respect he is related to Faust. But unlike Faust, Krabat's actions are always motivated by his concern for the downtrodden of the earth; his goal, the "Land of Happiness", is forever a part of mankind's future. (For an extended review of this work see Lucia Heine, "Krabat oder die Verwandlung der Welt," in Sinn und Form, XXIX, (May/June 1977), pp. 659-667.)

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