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Jurij Brězan: Krabat oder die Verwandlung der Welt

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Krabat oder die Verwandlung der Welt. Von Jurij Brězan. Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben, 1976. 552 Seiten. DM 11,80.

Brězan 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.

Brězan 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 surrealist 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. Brězan'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. Brězan 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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Kritik in der Zeit: Literaturkritik der DDR.
2nd Edition, Klaus Jarmatz, et al., eds.
Halle/Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1978.
2 vols., 453 and 485 pp. 21,-.

Appearing in its second edition, this collection of essays and statements of position represents a prodigious sampling (120 entries) of the stances taken by critics, the cultural-political hierarchy, and especially by the authors of literary works themselves toward their own native literature. Following an introductory article by chief editor Klaus Jarmatz on the interrelationship of the writer and the critic, the contributions are then organized chronologically as follows: 1945-50, 1950-60, 1960-70 (I and II), and 1970-75. The second volume, covering the period 1966-75, devotes more than half of its pagination (and roughly 30% of the collection's total volume) to the period not previously covered in the first edition (1970-75). The avowed purpose of this publication is "einen Überblick über die wichtigsten und interessantesten literatur- und kulturpolitischen Diskussionen der vergangenen dreißig Jahre zu geben." However, since the editors were operating under the constraint of not being able to increase the length of the new edition beyond that of the first, they regretfully found it necessary to eliminate many of the