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Stephan Hermlin: Abendlicht

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Der Literaturhistoriker wünschte sich eine wesentlich umfangreichere Sammlung dieser Gedichte, besonders weil die Lyrikbücher der einzelnen Autoren so schnell vergriffen sind. Die Vorzüge der kleinen Auswahl liegen in der ästhetischen Qualität vieler Beispiele, in der Dokumentation eines wichtigen Aspektes der lyrischen Szene in der DDR und vielleicht auch in der Brauchbarkeit für literaturdidaktische Zwecke.

Wolfgang Ertl
University of Iowa

Abendlicht. By Stephan Hermlin. Leipzig: Verlag Philipp Reclam. 1979. 140 pp. 10,- M.

To call Stephan Hermlin's Abendlicht an autobiography would be deceptively simplistic. It is, to be sure, a candid chronicle of the author's life from his beginnings as an upper middle-class, naive -- though poetically sensitive -- child in Weimar Germany where "es konnte mir nichts geschehen, niemand wollte mir Böses (43)," to his coming of age as a youth filled with doubts and dread in Nazi Germany, to his later years as a committed GDR writer, aware of the strengths and virtues of the working class, whose eloquent spokesman Hermlin seems to become in the course of this work: "Das Schreiben von Gedichten wurde mir zur Gewohnheit... Was ich hervorbrachte, konnte nicht ohne Einfluss meiner Lebensumstände bleiben, der politischen Ziele, die ich gemeinsam mit anderen erreichen wollte, der Gesellschaft, die mir erstrebenswert zu sein schien (117)." Abendlicht is, in short, a sort of "Bildungsroman" in miniature, following its authorial narrator-turned-hero through a series of incisive and often poignant episodes, which together mark Hermlin's journey from childhood naiveté to adult awareness -- and back again, for it is in his "remembrance of things past" that Hermlin hopes to find answers to the questions of good and evil implicitly raised in the work. This is indeed the significance of the work's title, "Abendlicht," i.e., the light of truth sought by the author throughout his life and gradually -- if at times only dimly -- perceived in later life.

Specifically the work recalls significant stages in the author's development: his tentative first steps out of an idyllic dream world into the "real world" of political actualities, his entry into the Communist Youth League, his debates with and gradual estrangement from childhood friends, who would go on to embrace Nazism, his father's arrest and deportation to Sachsenhausen, his brother's death as a fighter pilot during the war -- all have found a place in Hermlin's record; yet the work is at no time marred by the inclusion of such purely factual material. Rather Hermlin has been careful to select only those episodes from his life which, as "rites of passage", are representative of another time, another way of life, and another world which, like the past itself, are now merely an irrevocable memory. It is through such recollections that Hermlin comes to realize what he has gained, and, indeed, what he has lost in the process. And though this may be autobiographical, one cannot help but feel that it is in many ways not only the story of Hermlin himself, but that of his country as well. Hermlin's style underscores the work's theme perfectly. In an almost contrapuntal fashion he juxtaposes a purely poetic language replete with lyrical metaphors, neo-romantic impressions of an idyllic childhood, with other more objectively realistic descriptions of socio-political life as he experienced it during the turbulent 1920's, 30's, and 40's. In this regard Hermlin nostalgically associates childhood innocence and harmony with the art of music to such an extent, that music per se becomes the central vehicle for the conveyance of Hermlin's ideas. From the opening paragraph on he consciously equates certain forms of music, instruments, composers, or their works with the conflicting realities he had to confront in his attempt to grasp -- and articulate -- the truth of his past and present. Add to this the various visual and olfactory images employed so skillfully by Hermlin, and what emerges is a poetic work almost elegiac in its sense of loss. Indeed, not since Johannes R. Becher's Abschied or more recently Christa Wolf's Kindheitsmuster has a more compelling work appeared.

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