Gerd Labroisse, ed.: Zur Literatur und Literaturwissenschaft der DDR

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fourteen essays published elsewhere between 1961 and 1975 and six from his literary estate. This collection shows the wide range of Batt's literary interests and his remarkable erudition in German literature. They are organized into four groups. Group I consists of a short sketch of and by the author written in the third person and an essay on his theory of criticism. His orientation is Marxist but relatively free of the cultural politics of many of his contemporaries.

Group II includes eight essays on German authors and/or their works from a long piece on Heinke der Fuchs to a reply to a S. Fischer Verlag "Rundfrage" on Thomas Mann. The essays on Lichtenberg and Gott-helf are precise and offer valuable insights into their work. Two essays on Lion Feuchtwanger deal first with Feuchtwanger's theory (and defense) of historical writing and then with an example of it in his historical novel Die Füchse im Weinberg. This group of essays is rounded out with a convincing argument for "Hundartrichtung in der Nationalliteratur" and a delightful piece on "Barlach als Epistolograph".

The six essays in Group III deal with Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Anna Seghers, exile literature, and Expressionism. The title for the collection, Widerspruch und Übereinkunft, is taken from the theme of one of the major essays -- a discussion about the differences of opinion between Lukács and Seghers on the subject of experience and form as documented in their correspondence between 1938 and 1939. In these essays, the weakest in the collection, Batt is indifferent to Brecht, enthusiastic about Seghers, and critical of Lukács. In five of the six essays Lukács comes under attack mainly for his conservatism and failure to appreciate the importance of social change in imperialism and its effects on the artist.

The four essays in Group IV were found in Batt's literary estate. The first is no more than a review of a book by Heinz Plavius about contemporary FRG literature. The remaining three are devoted to the development of GDR literature. Unfortunately, the editors were careless in their treatment of this part of Batt's estate and either failed to notice or ignored the duplication of long sections of text from one essay to another. The three essays could have yielded a single masterful account of GDR literature and a fitting capstone to this worthwhile and impressive collection.

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This volume appears in a distinguished series of Amsterdam Studies on recent German literature. The articles contained in it are of a uniformly high quality and reflect a serious interest in the once ignored literature of the GDR.

The first two articles, by Labroisse and Hoogeveen, wrestle with the theoretical definitions of GDR literature. Labroisse points to the immediate questions for western critics, (i.e. can we in fact actually understand GDR literature given our own conceptions of literature?), while Hoogeveen cannot seem to reach a clear position. Indeed, aside from the very detailed and useful survey of works dealing with all aspects of GDR literature for the past twenty years which makes up the first third of this lengthy conclusion or series of conclusions, what seems to be intended is an intricate questioning of how in fact we in the West can understand GDR literature especially with reference to its own conception of itself and despite the most recent sophisticated theories of reception in the West. I found large sections of the article stylistically too difficult to be able to ascertain what answers Hoogeveen might be offering. While I am certain that his article contains many important insights into theoretical positions in comprehending the phenomenon of GDR literature, the article is for me otherwise an example of the most mannered German academic style which seems intent on making more difficult that, which is already difficult enough.
The Endler article is a lively review of GDR lyric poetry from the somewhat playful point of view of one of its primary figures. Laschen's work on Arendt's poetry is the beginning in this collection of what I see as the most significant aspect of the volume. The articles following Labroisse's and Hoogeveen's, are all excellent examples of literary criticism and analysis, which consciously but not self-consciously deals with literary problems in GDR literature, such as Erbeaneignung dissent, and the individual versus the collective. But with the exception of Werner Krogmann's at times naive questions about the impact of literature on society with reference to the exile of Hermann, most seem to be positive answers to the question first raised by Labroisse and elaborated on by Hoogeveen: it is possible for critics in the West to deal with GDR literature, even on some of its own terms, without becoming non-literary and overly "political" in an anti-literary sense.

Each of the separate articles is well worth reading for the information and analysis it provides. Laschen's and Maaijen's works on Arendt are excellent interpretations of Arendt's overall role in GDR and other German poetry, the former linking him tightly to German Expressionism. Hoeffert's analysis of Braun's preoccupation with Faust themes enlightens the reader further about the now "classical" problem of Erbeaneignung and its meaning for a writer viewed in the GDR by many as a "left wing radical". I.A. and J.J. White raise an interesting point in their interpretation of Edgar Wibeau as a Schelm figure and position this work and its author more in the mainstream of European writing which sees existential tragedy in aloneness and individuation but disaster in enforced socialization models. Krogmann, despite his perplexing naivete about politics and literature in non-liberal societies, offers a fine analysis of the beginnings of the middle generation's (Christa Wolf, Günter Kunert, Hermann Kant, Max Walter Schulz) parting of ways with regard to interpretations of literature's role in GDR society.