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Ilse Seehase and Dieter Endler: Roman im Gespräch. Beiträge aus sechs sozialistischen Ländern

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Twelve Years: An American Boyhood in East Germany.
By Joel Agee. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux,
1981. 324 pages. \$14.95.

Joel Agee was eight years old when he departed from Mexico with his mother and her second husband, the German communist writer Bodo Uhse, for the Soviet Zone of Germany in 1948. He resided there until 1960, when, upon the dissolution of her marriage to Uhse, his mother returned with him to the US. Two questions trouble the reader of this unusual autobiography. Why was Agee so selfish with concrete data? Only from the dust cover does one learn the year of his birth; a sketch of his life would have put the reader on more secure ground. Why--and upon this problematic issue the author offers no comment--did Agee wait twenty years to assemble this chronicle of intimate experience? Uhse, editor of Aufbau and, after Peter Huchel, of Sinn und Form, died in 1962; consequently, the delay could hardly have been out of respect for the step-father of whom he was indeed fond. An indication of motivation would have been of value. It might further be asked whether this book would have found a publisher, were the author not the son of a noted American writer. This is not to imply that publication is undeserved; quite the contrary, this account is to be read with profit and fascination by every student of the GDR--or, as Agee always calls it in his English text, "the DDR." In this untranslated reference to his adopted land, one hears the staccato with which the abbreviation is pronounced by its natives, emphasizing the degree to which young Agee identified with the fledgling nation. And identify he did: he was in both the Pioneers and the FDJ; he studied at various schools, in most of which the inhibiting spirit of old Germany survived. Agee was a difficult young man and he portrays a largely losing battle, in which he appears at the end as a common laborer in a Baltic shipyard. Uhse's family was among the "privileged" of the GDR, permitting Agee a life of well-being shared by few in those early days. His awareness of this special position informs his entire account. It is somewhat uncanny to hear an American boy relate Johannes R. Becher's fulminations against the nudist beach in Ahrenshoop, accuse painter Otto Dix of "kissing Alfred Kurella's ass" with his pseudo-Socialist Realism, and tell of the visit to his parents' home of French songstress and Auschwitz survivor Fania Fénelon. The stories in themselves are nothing new; they derive their fascination from the tension with which Agee experienced them. This tension, in turn, is not the result of split national identity in the narrator. Although there is talk of his going to the States to live with his father (who died before his return), Agee is in no way torn between countries--he reads Musil in German and comments upon his reading in his English-language journal. This tension is derived from Agee's inner turmoil and personal agony. Echoes of Golding's concern for an "end of innocence" are often heard; further, Agee is the helpless victim of his own developing sexuality. The personal and public dimensions of his life counterpoint each other in recalling the dream which removed itself ever further from the reality of the GDR during the years in which Agee lived there.

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Zum Roman in der DDR. Edited by Marc Silberman.
Literaturwissenschaft, Gesellschaftswissenschaft 46.
Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1980. 174 pp.

With the exception of Marc Silberman's own article on Hermann Kant's Aufenthalt, all the pieces in this anthology previously appeared elsewhere--mostly in prominent journals (NDL, WB, SuF, Basis) between 1966 and 1977. It is useful to have them collected into one volume, but given the amount of good criticism on the GDR novel that has appeared in less accessible places, it is curious that the editor did not choose to bring some of that more obscure but no less deserving material to light. It is fine to see Frank Trommler's well-known article "Von Stalin zu Hölderlin" (Basis II) again, but in order to fit in here, it has had to undergo such extensive cutting that the reader interested in the GDR Entwicklungsroman would be well advised to consult the original anyway. Such reservations aside, it seems to me that Silberman has presented a well-balanced picture of the kinds of GDR novel criticism that have developed in both the GDR and the FRG. Aside from Trommler's piece, other articles which broadly survey and orient are Lutz-W. Wolff's on the proletarian factory novel from 1948-1956, Dieter Schlenstedt's on "Ankunft und Anspruch" and Kurt Batt's on "Realität und Phantasie." Specific interpretations, necessarily uneven in their insights and conviction, are devoted to Noll's Werner Holt (Hans Jürgen Geerdts), Kant's Aula (Heinrich Mohr) and Aufenthalt (Silberman), Wolf's Geteilter Himmel and Christa T. (Wolf Promies) and Kindheitsmuster (Sigrid Bock). In the confines of so short an anthology, this may be too much Kant and Wolf, but it does emphasize their centrality in the topic, which can hardly be debated. The editor has divided the nine articles into five categories, and his attribution is usually judicious: "Wandlung," "Bewahrung," "Eingliederung," "Die sich befreiende Subjektivität," and "Auseinandersetzung mit der faschistischen Vergangenheit." Silberman's introduction is a 17 page capsule summary of the development of literary criticism in the GDR. Although it necessarily omits a number of significant issues, it seems to me that the accents are correctly set. This will be a useful volume to Germanists who have not been following GDR criticism for very long and who do not have library access to the original sources.

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Roman im Gespräch: Beiträge aus sechs sozialistischen Ländern. Hrsg. von Ilse Seehase und Dieter Endler. Halle-Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1980. 392 pages. 12 M.

As the title indicates, this collection brings together sixteen contributions on the development of the novel in six socialist literatures: Bulgarian, Polish, Slovak, Czech, Hungarian and Rumanian. The volume aims at introducing the range of prose writing in these literatures during the sixties and seventies within four clearly marked categories: the historical novel, the worker-hero novel, the social novel of the sixties and the interiorized novel of the seventies. All contributions were previously published in the country of origin, most in 1977/78.

The editors' brief preface characterizes the scope of the collection as an attempt to document the lively discussions about the renewal of the novel and prose aesthetics during the last twenty years. The major focus falls on the shift during the late sixties from totalizing structures to more intense subjective forms. As a result, the editors consider these essays to be part of a larger discussion about realism and strategies to activate readers. Because I am not a specialist in contemporary Eastern European prose, I can offer nothing more than general impressions about the quality of argument in these articles. First of all, the selections range from impromptu round-table discussions to panoramic overviews and short reviews of individual works. On the whole, there seems to be more summary of developments than a convincing account of why such changes came about. The clearest statement of this latter sort comes from the editors who insist that the trend toward the "modern" novel in the sixties cannot be accounted for purely as a reaction to the mistakes of cultural policies in the fifties (eg. dogmatism and schematicism). Nonetheless, several critics explicitly mention 1956 as a watershed year and do not hesitate to name frankly the disparity between ideal and reality which typifies the literature before that time. On the whole, a naive assumption prevails about the relationship between history and literary history which contends that, because reality became more complex in the sixties, so too did the novelistic solutions which reflect that reality. Besides the problematic nature of such an unmediated view of the Basis/Überbau model, "history" itself is curiously absent from these essays: Czechoslovakia 1968, Poland 1970 and 1976, etc.

It is interesting to note a general consensus that, after the energetic renewal of the novel in the sixties, a period of formal and thematic exhaustion set in. On the one hand, there is hope expressed that the proliferation of short prose may lead to a "new synthesis." On the other hand, in one of the most interesting contributions--the only one by a literary writer--the Polish author Włodzimierz Sokorski rejects the notion of a crisis in current Polish novels (1976/77), but regards their lackluster quality as the result of the existence of such acute ideological contradictions in society that writers defer to secondary problems for their material. In view of the turmoil in Poland during the last year, his commentary seems no less than prophetic. This collection strikes me, finally, as an attempt to legitimate the status of socialist integration in Eastern Europe. Despite the editors' claims that the collection will demonstrate national differences, there is a remarkable similarity in the normative and historical evaluation employed by most of the critics. In this connection, the introductory essay--a comparative typology of Soviet novels by a Soviet scholar--sets the tone for what I would call an official view of prose developments in these six literatures.

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Mit dem Schlimmsten wurde schon gerechnet. Prosa.
Von Lutz Rathenow. Frankfurt/M., Berlin: Ullstein,
1980. 200 Seiten. 25,- DM.

Ein schuldloser Mann lässt sich widerstandslos von einem gesichtslosen Bürokraten zur Hinrichtung schicken. Am Heiligen Abend begeht ein Mann, nachdem er an den kommenden Besuch seiner Familie, an die Weihnachtsgeschenke denkt, Selbstmord. Ein Mann betritt die Strasse, auf seinem Gesicht ein Ausdruck der Freude, und wird, eben wegen dieser Freude, fast in eine Schlägerei verwickelt. Ein Herrscher geht anonym unter das Volk und wird zum Todesopfer seiner eigenen Gesetze. Ein Beamter unterschreibt--unter Verwendung bürokratischer Logik--sein eigenes Todesurteil. Ein Major a.D. dressiert Hasen zum absoluten Gehorsam. Über Kleinigkeiten entsteht ein Duell, in dem der Gast den Gastgeber tötet. Um Ungeziefer zu bekämpfen, verwandelt ein Kleingärtner seinen Garten in eine Art Niemandsland, mit Selbstschussanlagen, elektrifiziertem Stacheldraht, Minen. Das ist die Welt, die Lutz Rathenow in einer zum Teil realistischen, zum Teil an Kafka geschulden Prosa konstruiert--eine verlogene, autoritätshörige Welt, in der ritualisiertes, sinnleeres Leben in Verunsicherung, Machtlosigkeit, Passivität, Selbstmord mündet. Den Leser darf es also gar nicht wundern, dass dieser 42 Erzählungen enthaltende Band in der DDR nicht erschienen--was nicht heissen will, dass Rathenows Geschichten irgendwie DDR-feindlich verstanden werden sollen. Im Gegenteil: mit einigen Ausnahmen, wo die DDR namentlich erwähnt wird, fehlt der spezifische Bezug auf DDR-Wirklichkeit. Es geht Rathenow um den Verfall zwischenmenschlicher Beziehungen in einem nicht national zu definierenden Zusammenhang. Der märchenhaft-satirische Charakter vieler dieser Geschichten betont dies. Rathenows Literatur verweist auf den autoritären Charakter gegenwärtiger Gesellschaftsbeziehungen, auf die aus Entfremdung und Vereinzelung entstehende Manipulierbarkeit als bestimmendes Moment der heutigen Zeit. Er vollzieht das aber in einer Weise, die es dem Leser nicht leicht macht, sich mit den erzählten Gestalten und Handlungen zu identifizieren. Rathenow erzählt nämlich mit einem derart hohen Grad an Abstraktion--typisch für das Märchen, die Satire, für surrealistische Prosa--dass der Leser sich dabei schwer tut, den Sinn (oder auch die Sinnlosigkeit) dieser Geschichten zu begreifen. Das Gefühl des Schreckens, das hier oft in den Alltag hereinbricht und diesen zu Nicht-Bekanntem verfremdet, macht die Gestalten und durch sie auch den Leser betroffen. Und darum geht es Rathenow wohl: Durch Betroffenheit als eine Art Verfremdungseffekt zwingt er den Leser zum Nachdenken über seine eigene Lage, vielleicht zum Handeln. Prosa wie die von Rathenow ist nicht jedermanns Sache: Das Lesen macht Mühe, es fehlt oft der reine Unterhaltungswert. Trotzdem bietet dieses erste Buch des 1952 geborenen Autors Einblicke in eine Art von DDR-Literatur, die weitgehend unbekannt ist. Hier gibt es weder positive Helden noch Optimismus, weder gesellschaftlichen Fortschritt noch Hoffnung; hier herrscht im Angesicht von Angst und Schrecken, Feigheit, Tatenlosigkeit, Verzweiflung.

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