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Leonore Krenzlin: Hermann Kant

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BOOK REVIEWS

GDR MONITOR

Issue No. 5 (Spring, 1981) of the GDR Monitor is somewhat uneven in the quality of its short articles. Three stand out as particularly useful: Derek Fogg's "Riddles and Reality in Hermann Kant's Novel Die Aula" (p. 27-33) unravels "a treasure trove of allusions -- puns, symbols, and images" which seem to have escaped most critics of Kant's work. Fogg's astute readings of several figures and formulations, and particularly his interpretation of Quasi Riek, were confirmed by Hermann Kant himself, thus making them particularly valuable to readers who have been mystified by some aspects of the novel. Christine Cosentino's "Literary Correlations between Sarah Kirsch's Poem 'Der Rest des Fadens' and Elke Erb's volume Der Faden der Geduld" (p. 52-56) convincingly establishes connections between Erb's essay "Zufälle und Geduld," the events surrounding the expulsion of Wolf Biermann, and Kirsch's poem. Finally, Jennifer Taylor deals with a number of generally unknown popular plays in "Immortal fascism? The representation of the Federal Republic in some minor dramatic works of the GDR." (p. 34-42) Although her analysis does not appreciably change critical consensus on the depiction of fascism, her attention to stage works accessible only in manuscript form illuminates an important facet of GDR history.

DEUTSCHE BÜCHER

The first 1981 issue of Deutsche Bücher (Vol. XI, No. 1) contains a lengthy "Gespräch" with Adolf Endler, providing useful and provocative insights into the work of this often difficult poet. The colloquy, which began as an interview of Endler by Gregor Laschen and Ton Naaijken in November, 1980, was subsequently edited and enlarged by Endler. As a result, it elaborates much more extensively on significant points than the more spontaneous interview. Of particular interest is the anger with which Endler registers the lack of resonance his work has had in the GDR (none of his three volumes of poetry was ever reviewed in any of the major literary journals there). Describing his writing as "ein stetes Anschreiben gegen Festgeschriebenes," Endler analyzes the "grotesken Widerspruch ... zwischen Höhe des theoretischen Anspruchs und der eventuellen Wichtigkeit dessen, was ihn begründen soll, (das Gedicht)" which led him to turn to prose writing. The Endler feature concludes with a pre-publication excerpt from his novel Neblich, which confirms his own estimate of it as prose, "welche die in der DDR geltenden Konventionen in bezug auf erzählende Literatur weit hinter sich läßt."

The "Gespräch mit Jurij Brězan (p. 85-94) in Heft 2 of the same year is a product of an interview with Marieluise de Waijer-Wilke at the Leipzig book fair in spring 1981 and focuses on Brezan's self-perception as a Sorbian writer and the discrepancy between advances in technology and the continuing moral-ethical backwardness of mankind which led him to write Krabat oder Die Verwandlung der Welt: "Wie viel freilich die Kunst beitragen kann, diesen heute bedrohlichen, morgen tödlichen Zustand zum Guten zu verändern, weiß ich nicht. Manchmal ist mir, als sei hier die Kunst wie ein Steinzeitspeer gegenüber einem Panzer." An excerpt from his current work-in-progress, Der Alte Mann und der Tod (working title) concludes the Brězan feature.

Hermann Kant. By Leonore Krenzlin. Schriftsteller der Gegenwart 7. Berlin: Volk und Wissen, 1981. 264 pp. DDR 4.20 M.

This is a useful and quite competent book, although, since it is an ambitious monograph on one of the GDR's best writers, one wishes that it would have been more incisive in several important ways.

I have little quarrel with any of Krenzlin's analyses of specific works; these seem to me to be insightful, judicious and sensitive, and the accents are set correctly. The readings center on Krenzlin's efforts to locate the special characteristics of Kant's work in his reflection of the structure of the Bildungsroman in favor of a retrospective illumination of the fascist dictatorship and the early years of the GDR. Thus Die Aula "hob den Lesern, wie vorher wohl noch kein anderes Buch, ins Bewusstsein, dass der sozialistische Staat der Gegenwart bereits auf eine Vergangenheit zurückblicken konnte." (62) And it did this by means of a particularly didactic structure in which the episodes "enthalten meist keine zusätzliche, der Deutung sich erst allmählich öffnende Schicht. Der Leser ist vielmehr eingeladen, die gedankliche Auseinandersetzung mit der Vergangenheit auf Iswallische Weise mitzuvollziehen." (73) This is true even of Der Aufenthalt; Krenzlin is keenly sensitive toward that novel's very important aspect of development, but she simultaneously sees it as an analysis of an "Umschlagspunkt (: . .) in Grossaufnahme." (164) Not everything in these readings is completely satisfactory. For one thing, she is generally too reluctant to express negative criticism, except in the most inescapable cases. And when she does register a major objection, such as to many of the stories in Eine Übertretung, which evidences "deutliche Schwächen der Durchformung," she too quickly dismisses her own criticism by designating the entire collection "ein Zwischenspiel," (141) disregarding the fact that this is one of only five volumes of narrative prose that Kant has published.

Although Krenzlin has made a generally successful attempt to locate the individual works within the development of GDR literature and has devoted a special chapter to Kant's aesthetic position in that development, the categories of her analysis are not always the most convincing. To say, for instance, that the merit of Das Impressum was to have posed the question "Which concrete circumstances are beneficial to the development of the individual and which detrimental?" with respect to the social stratum of the decision makers in the GDR (113) is to avoid the question of the novel's formal achievements and of its relation to Kant's previous work. Given Krenzlin's sensitivity to the theme of development of the GDR, it is curious that her monograph's greatest weakness should lie precisely in its relative inattention to the development of Kant's own work. It is not enough merely to say, for example, "Kant als Erzähler weitgehend abstreift im Verlauf der ersten Jahre, ist eine flach-didaktische Erzählhaltung" (171 f.) -- a good deal more comment was in order here. In a section of documentation, Krenzlin has reprinted some of Kant's early political journalism and several contemporary critical discussions, which communicate some idea of the initial reception. As Kant is now presumably somewhere in mid-career, it is good to have this material and altogether useful to have this informative and competent interim retrospective, even though it does not have the "büschen was Extras" it might have had.

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