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Susan M. Johnson: The Works of Jurek Becker: A Thematic Analysis

Gregory Baer
Washington University

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Abrechnung erst durch das Timing und die Umstände ihrer Publikation. Denn was hier ohne besonderen literarischen Anspruch hingeschrieben ist und hastig auf den Markt kommt, könnte von den kleinen und mittelgroßen Wendehälsen in Jankas eigenem Land leicht zu einer bequemen Schuldabwälzung auf die Toten bzw. die Oberen verführen, wo man doch--wie schon einmal, 1945--in diesem Deutschland besser damit bedient wäre, sich zuerst an die eigene Nase zu fassen. Ein wenig zu vorsichtig-sachlich, um nicht zu sagen: unkritisch, wirkt das Nachwort von Michael Rohrwasser, der vor Jahr und Tag Gescheites über saubere Mädel und starke Genossen in der proletarisch-revolutionären Literatur zu Papier gebracht hatte. Und schlichtweg unakzeptabel wäre es, wenn sich die Vermutung bewahrheiten würde, daß eine Bonner Behörde offensichtlich mit Blick auf Deutschland-einig-Vaterland Jankas Erinnerungen wie eine Reklameschrift als Postwurfsendung weltweit an Germanisten frei Haus liefert.

Richard von Weizsäcker, der im Gegensatz zu vielen anderen in diesem deutschen Winter, dem es irgendwie an Stil und Größe fehlt, um zu einem echten politischen Frühling zu werden, einen kühlen Kopf bewahrt, hat gewarnt davor, sich "mit kleinen Siegesfeiern des westlichen Lebensmodells (zu) begnügen." Denn mit der Rolle des Sozialismus als Korrektiv für die "Auswüchse des lernfähigen Kapitalismus" sei es "erst dann zu Ende, wenn es endgültig nichts mehr zu kritisieren und zu korrigieren gäbe. Wer aber will das im Ernst behaupten?"

Ob man in Bonn und Leipzig aus Schadenfreude oder in Eile wohl überlesen hat, daß auch, daß selbst Walter Janka ausdrücklich und mehrfach in seinem Buch statt auf "der Rücknahme der sozialistischen Verhältnisse" auf deren "Festigung und Vermenschlichung" besteht?

Alexander Stephan
University of Florida

Johnson, Susan M. *The Works of Jurek Becker: A Thematic Analysis*. New York: Peter Lang, 1988. 214 pp.

In the introductory chapter of her study, Susan M. Johnson notes that there has been "only a small amount of scholarly literature devoted to Becker's prose." As she points out, except for Jakob der Lügner and, to a lesser extent, *Irreführung der Behörden*, most of the discussion of Becker's writing has been in the form of reviews. To fill this gap in scholarship, Johnson presents us with her comparative analysis of Becker's six novels and single collection of short stories.

At the beginning of her study, Johnson expresses her hope that her book may "shed light on Becker as a man, on literature in the German Democratic Republic, and on problems inherent in political literature and exile." To accomplish this task, she analyzes six themes of Becker's works: captivity, survival, deception, resistance, storytelling and apathy. A final chapter examines Becker's status as an exile writer.

In selecting these themes Johnson demonstrates insight into the ideas prevalent throughout Becker's works, and in their analysis she captures many of the nuances of Becker's writing, demonstrating the necessary ability to read between the lines in her interpretations. Her chapter on resistance is an excellent example of just such a reading. As Johnson points out, Becker thematicizes resistance through both its presence and its absence. The author discusses both the acts of resistance and the occasions on which the characters fail to resist the oppressive societies in which they live. She then analyzes what such actions tell the reader about the characters' move toward physical and intellectual freedom. Her arguments here, as in the rest of the analysis, are firmly grounded in passages from Becker's texts.

Johnson's book, however, is not without its problems. The most

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apparent of these are the numerous stylistic errors. Spelling, typing and grammatical mistakes are all too frequent, with as many as four on a single page. Even the title of one of Becker's novels is misspelled in the bibliography. Whether these errors can be blamed on Johnson or her publisher is debatable, but in any case, they point to a sense of urgency to transform the dissertation, on which this study is based, into a book. This urgency is underlined by Johnson's reference to her work both as "this book" and "this dissertation." The transformation from dissertation to book is also evident in the occasionally awkward references in the introduction to Becker's most recent novel, *Bronsteins Kinder*, which Johnson seems to have added in order to make her work more current.

Despite occasional awkwardness at the beginning of her book, Johnson's discussion of *Bronsteins Kinder* in the last chapter contributes to a better overall understanding of Becker's work. In this chapter she compares Becker's later works, written in the West, with those written in the East to show how Becker's exile from the GDR has not significantly affected the themes of his writing and thus has not transformed him into an "exile writer" in the traditional sense of the term.

Somewhat more disturbing than the problems mentioned above are the occasional factual errors in Johnson's reading of Becker's texts. When Aron Blank in *Der Boxer* "hides from the chaos in the streets [of East Berlin] and sneaks his family away from potential danger for a summer vacation on the sea," Johnson attributes this to the construction of the Berlin Wall. The novel, however, makes it clear that Aron is reacting to the workers' uprisings of June 17, 1953, years before the Wall was built. Though such mistakes may seem unimportant to the overall scope of the work, they mean that readers not thoroughly familiar with Becker's work would do well to check up on the facts in the original texts.

Johnson achieves her goal of shedding light on Becker as a man, and thereby establishes a firmer basis for the future readings of his works. She makes good use of correspondence and interviews with Becker to clarify several uncertainties about the author, among them his place in the tradition of Jewish storytelling and the effects that storytelling have had on Becker's prose.

Johnson's third goal of providing readers with a better understanding of GDR literature meets with slightly less success. Her portrayal of the East German literary landscape is sketchy at best and consists mainly of fleeting references to literary movements decreed by the SED and of mention of the expatriation of Wolf Biermann. Her argument that Becker should not be viewed as an exile writer because of his return to GDR themes in his most recent works seems to place him in the tradition of GDR authors, but Johnson discusses very few other East German writers in any detail. Like many other Western critics, Johnson also downplays the place of history in Becker's novels, although an analysis of the role of history in works such as *Der Boxer* and *Bronsteins Kinder* might have added to her discussion of several of Becker's themes.

Overall, Johnson's book makes valuable contributions to scholarly work on Jurek Becker. In spite of its problems, it is sure to provide the critical reader with new information and insights on Becker and his writing.

Gregory Baer
Washington University

Kozik, Christa. *Tausendundzweite Nacht: Gedichte*. Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben, 1988. 134 pp.

I received *Tausendundzweite Nacht* by Christa Kozik in the mail, just as the newspapers were carrying spectacular reports of the Berlin Wall coming down. The book helped me to retain some perspective on the GDR during those turbulent weeks, since it reminded me that there are patterns of everyday life and thought