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Productive Mis-Reading: GDR Literature in the USA

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EDITORS' NOTE: Although or because the German Democratic Republic has ceased to exist, considerable interest in GDR culture remains. As long as that interest endures, we plan to continue publishing the *GDR Bulletin*.

ON THE RECEPTION OF GDR LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

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Peter Uwe Hohendahl, Cornell University

In view of the disappearance of the GDR as a distinct political entity in 1990, papers from a conference on reception of its literature and culture which were still predicated on the assumption of its existence as a separate state have themselves now become part of the phenomenon which they set out to examine. The papers which appear in this issue of the *GDR Bulletin* were originally presented at a November, 1988, workshop in Washington, D.C. under the sponsorship of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies and the Goethe House New York. Space limitations unfortunately preclude the publication here of all the contributions, although more may appear in a future issue. In addition to our appreciation of Thomas Fox for his decision to inaugurate a new dimension of the *GDR Bulletin* as a scholarly journal with these selected papers, we want to express particular gratitude to R. Gerald Livingston of AICGS and Jürgen Üwe Ohlau of Goethe House New York for their support of the conference, and to Malve Slocum Burns of AICGS and Barbara Schlöndorff of GoetheHouse for all their efforts to assure a successful and productive meeting in a cordial and comfortable setting.

Conducted as a workshop which was intended to lead to a larger symposium on this topic in 1990, the conference brought together a small group of experts from the GDR, the Federal Republic and the United States. Despite some opening remarks which attempted to introduce the element of confrontation which has often characterized meetings between East and West Germans, the American setting served to promote dialog rather than contestation.* The organizers' intention of opening up new channels of communication among scholars with common interests was facilitated by a format which encouraged discussion and frank exchange between presenters and commentators. The following working papers were presented: Manfred Jäger: "Über Zugänge zur DDR-Literatur auf kulturpolitischen Wegen"; Christel und Heinz Blumensath: "Zur Rezeption der DDR-Literatur im Bildungswesen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland"; "GDR Literature and the Western Book Market," a panel discussion with Mark Rectanus, Ingrid Krüger, Wolfgang Emmerich, and Frank Hörnigk; Angelika Bammer, "The American Feminist Reception of GDR Literature (with a Glance at West Germany)"; Rainer Rosenberg, "DDR-Literatur als Gegenstand der Literaturwissenschaft in der BRD"; Bernhard Zimmermann, "Der Blick nach 'drüben': Zur literaturkritischen Rezeption von DDR-Literatur in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland"; David Bathrick, "Productive Mis-Reading: GDR Literature in the USA." In addition, Hans Joachim Schädlich, Wolfgang Emmerich, Therese Hörnigk, Hans-Jürgen Schmitt, Margy Gerber, Volker Gransow, Patricia Herminhouse, and Peter Hohendahl served as commentators in the various panels and sessions. While the original papers referred to American and West German reception of GDR literature without questioning the historical East-West division, it was not this East-West split, but the process of cultural transmission, including similarities and differences between American and West German responses to East German culture, that concerned both organizers and participants. In the discus-

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sions it became evident that the West German reception had usually been predicated upon the opposition of the two political systems, whereas the American appropriation appeared frequently to have disregarded this opposition or even to have been unaware of its existence. In the U.S. the cultural profile of the GDR was even weaker than its political presence, minimal as that was in 1988. Curiously enough, as a result of recent events in Eastern and Central Europe, American awareness of East Germany is currently much greater. Images of the opening of the Berlin wall on millions of American television screens highlighted the existence of the other Germany at the very time when it was beginning to disintegrate. While the prospect of German unification has been discussed from various perspectives within this country, it does not yet appear to have fundamentally affected the American assessment of GDR literature. This holds both for the indifference of the general reading public as well as for the moderate tone of discourse within the scholarly community, which generally continues to regard GDR literature on its own terms within the socio-political constellation of its origins.

In West Germany, on the other hand, significant changes have occurred in attitudes towards East German culture. The West German press has provided an increasingly critical, if not hostile, image of major East German writers (most prominent among them, Christa Wolf) and academic discourse has likewise taken on a noticeably more adversarial tone. Although it is too early to say what directions new scholarship may take, already it is obvious that a major revisionist movement is underway. Drawing on revelations about the pervasive influence of the East German *Staatssicherheitsdienst*, recent criticism seems to be returning to an earlier image of the GDR as a totalitarian state, i.e. "ein Staat, der nicht sein sollte." Under these conditions the much-debated question of whether there is more than one German literary tradition takes on a different meaning. It may no longer be a question of whether there can or should be a common canon for all German-speaking readers, but rather of whether East German literature should have any place in this corpus at all. The existence of an autonomous East German literary tradition seems to pose a threat to the notion of German unification as it has emerged west of the Elbe during the last eight months. The decision that the GDR would become a part of the Federal Republic according to Article 23 of the West German *Grundgesetz* rather than forge a new constitutional basis for genuine unification is reflected in the current subalternation of East German literature within the literary system of the Federal Republic.

Unforeseen as this development was at the time of the Washington conference, it does not contradict the basic insights which emerged there regarding how the particular historical, political, and cultural configuration in which reception of this literature occurs affects the response to it more deeply than any qualities supposed to inhere in the text itself. For this reason it is not unlikely that in the near future the American response will differ significantly from the debate within Germany, where nothing less than issues of national identity are at stake.

*For a review of the conference, see Volker Gransow, "Provinzialismus oder Weltliteratur? DDR-Literaturgeschichte in Washington" in: *Deutschland Archiv* 22 (1989), H.4, 437-439.

PRODUCTIVE MIS-READING: GDR LITERATURE IN THE USA

David Bathrick, Cornell University

I should like to preface my remarks concerning the reception of GDR literature in the United States by the following rather bold, maybe even irresponsible assertions:

1) Seen from the broadest perspective of literary life in this

country as defined by what books appear on bestseller lists, what works and authors are reviewed and discussed in the leading literary periodicals (such as the *New York Review of Books*, *New York Times Book Review*, etc.), what writers have had significant creative influence upon American writers, there is practically no reception of GDR literature in the United States. While there certainly have been mentionings of "the experimental writer" Christa Wolf or the "avant-garde" playwright Heiner Müller in these circles, they are for the most part looked upon as German, not East German writers; as exemplars of interesting, new developments in German speaking literature, who parenthetically happen to live in the GDR, but whose interest for Americans lies in the extent to which they have transcended that rather parochial literary landscape.

2) The preceding should also be seen in relation to a second, even more provocative generalization: although the leading post-war German-speaking writers such as Günter Grass, Heinrich Böll, Martin Walser, Peter Weiss, Peter Handke, Uwe Johnson, Siegfried Lenz, and Ingeborg Bachmann certainly have their followings in this country, none of them have gained the popularity and far reaching impact of a Samuel Beckett, a Borges, a Robbe-Grillet, a Duras, a Marquez, a Kundera, or even a Solzhenitsyn, each of whom in very different ways has been discovered and re-discovered as a part of our own literary world. For the most part, contemporary German writers are seen as just that, German writers--interesting as harbingers of new directions in postwar German culture, or authors of an individual literary tour de force, but also as having very little impact upon the development of literature in this country. Yes, writers like Günter Grass with *The Tin Drum* or Patrick Süskind's *Perfume* made the bestseller list--but as individual, anomalous literary events, in no way comparable to the kind of deep rooted impact of the pre-war writers such as Kafka, Mann, Brecht, Hesse, or Rilke. This I say not with any great satisfaction; much of my professional life has been devoted to modest attempts at reversing this trend. Nor do I wish to suggest that it comes from some profound cultural insight on the part of the American reading public into what is good or bad. My purpose is merely to set the rest of my remarks into a particular context: what I shall be discussing is the reception of GDR literature for the most part within an academically centered Public Sphere and by a segment of that realm--namely those involved in the study of German literature--with strong, in some cases even symbiotic ties to pre-war Germany and/or postwar West Germany: financial ties, as beneficiaries of innumerable subsidies; intellectual and cultural ties because of educational exchange; in some cases family and generational ties by virtue of forced or voluntary exile. Many of our leading Germanists are native Germans, or if not, have spent significant amounts of time there; people whose values and very diverse histories have helped shape the way we look at Germany and through Germany at ourselves. It is not, of course, a one-way street, for if it were, I would not be writing this article. But the extent to which there is another, more American oriented reading of East or West German literature is the extent to which such a reading has established itself *against* the grain of the West German connection: whether as new critics, post-New Critics,¹ feminists, poststructuralists, postmodernists, or as synthesizers of these trends.

* * *

In looking back at the history of how GDR literature has been received and in turn has influenced the study of German literature within the academy in the USA, three distinct historical periods emerge. It is my feeling that one can best understand the evolving US reception of GDR literature by comparing the developments as they evolved in these different phases and as a part of a larger historical context. Thus I have chosen to organize my chronological treatment around the following questions: Who were the key authors who for Americans made up the GDR canon at any

given time? How did the treatment of GDR literature lead to differing methodological approaches? To what extent were American discussions and approaches independent of or filtered through West Germany? What has been the relation of GDR literary studies to the rest of the institution of literary criticism in the USA? Finally, in what directions might current GDR studies go in the near future, given the political events of the Fall of 1989?

In the initial phase, the 1950s and the 1960s, the American view of GDR literature represented in many ways a more quintessential version of the rather negative, postwar/ cold war reception occurring in West Germany during the same period. Nurtured by the principles of New Criticism and grounded in an adherence to transcendent notions of the autonomy of art--be it traditional art or high modernism--American scholars who even deigned to deal with the literature of the GDR tended to view it as non-literature or, as one West German critic put it, *Literatur im Dienst*--in short, as official propaganda. Hans Mayer has described this period in West German intellectual life as one infused with *Ideologieverdacht*: a period following the *III. Reich* and in the face of Stalinism in which there was strong suspicion of *any* connection between literature and politics. Certainly one important difference between the Federal Republic and the USA during this time was the fact that many of America's establishment Germanists were those who had been driven into exile and who saw in the politicizing of literature in the GDR a continued assault upon the very thing to which they had devoted themselves since leaving Germany in the first place--namely, the preservation of German culture from totalitarian deformation. For them *Kulturpolitik*, the bringing together of politics and culture, was simply another form of political repression, or worse, cultural barbarism.

Of the few articles appearing in our major scholarly journals that even addressed the subject of East German literature, over half of them were devoted to Bertolt Brecht; others included, of course, the beleaguered poets.³ While most of the articles on Brecht dealt with his early writing and hence could not be considered GDR literature, there were exceptions. One memorable one was a reading by Peter Demetz of Brecht's *Leben des Galilei* in Berlin, in which he worked out the double entendre entailed simply in putting on the revised, more self-critical Charles Laughton version of *Galileo* in the GDR and the changes Brecht made in his German translation for the 1955 production at the Berliner Ensemble.⁴ In my seven years as a graduate student at the University of Chicago between 1960-1967, I remember only one mention of GDR literature, and that was an off-hand remark by a Stefan George specialist who referred us to the poems published by Peter Huchel in his last edited issue of *Sinn und Form* in 1962 as examples of *Sklavensprache*. In short, with the exception of Huchel and Johannes Bobrowski,⁵ GDR literature remained essentially *terra incognita* up to the 1970s. In this regard, it is interesting to note that Rudolf Leonhard of *Die Zeit*, writing in the *New York Times* in 1967, said much the same about West Germany: "if one were to ask the average citizen of Hamburg about German literature east of the Elbe, he would be able to name no more than two writers."⁶ Whereas this might have been true of the average Hamburgian, I think it ignores the already extensive coverage by journalists such as Reich-Ranicki, in articles and in books, which for the most part were completely ignored in the USA.⁷

The early 1970s saw a somewhat abrupt change in focus, fed by the historical context of the anti-war and civil rights movements in the United States, and in the rapidly expanding area of GDR literature following the lead of the Federal Republic. Without attempting to spell out the very complicated events occurring within American *Germanistik* at this period and their relation to a sensed cultural revolution taking place within the academy at large, let me make the following generalizations about the shifts

that occurred in the way American academics began to view the GDR. If the tendency in the 1960s was to take the literature of the GDR out of its context and focus on a few isolated poetic voices viewed within the scope of some international modernist aesthetic norm, the 1970s saw a somewhat radical move in the opposite direction. "Die Literatur der DDR läßt sich nicht ... immanent abhandeln," wrote Peter Uwe Hohendahl and Patricia Herminhouse somewhat programmatically in their 1974 preface to the volume of essays coming from a GDR symposium held in St. Louis entitled *Literatur und Literaturtheorie in der DDR*,⁸ and in so doing they articulated a call for historical contextualization which was paradigmatic for developments occurring within the USA at that time. For certain segments of American *Germanistik* in the mid-1970s, this contextualization of the GDR meant a subtle attempt at *Abgrenzung* from the literature and the literary establishment of the FRG. Again Hohendahl and Herminhouse: "Diese Autoren (in the volume) betrachten die DDR als eine genuine Staats- und Gesellschaftsform, die sich nach 1945 aus den besonderen Bedingungen der deutschen Geschichte entwickelt hat. Daher verliert der Vergleich mit der Bundesrepublik, der für die westdeutsche Forschung zunächst im Vordergrund stand, an Wichtigkeit."⁹ There are two things which emerge from this very interesting formulation which I think are not accidentally emblematic for what a geo-politically more distanced American GDR scholarship felt it could articulate in a way one could not articulate it in West Germany. First of all, we find an unequivocal rejection of the *Alleinvertretungsanspruch*, which was the central pillar of FRG policy at that time-- "eine genuine Staats- und gesellschaftsform." The sub-text of that message, it seems to me, is clear: regardless of what is going on in West Germany, and they have their understandable political constraints, we as *Auslandsgermanisten* do not have to partake in that. We are ready to call a spade a spade and to take the GDR entirely on its own terms as a separate state. A second, related message is a call for the study of GDR literature which would seek not to be comparative in relation to West German literature, which would have its own categories, its own strategies, its own methodological approaches. Radical historicization, radical contextualization--*radikale Abgrenzung*. And how did this shift in policy work itself out in practice, and what were its simplifications for methodological and theoretical developments during that period?

First to the canon. If one looks at the author and subject areas that were being written about and taught in American German departments during this period,¹⁰ one finds very little that is substantially different from the FRG. Contextualization meant in its most widely understood sense an understanding, an interpreting, a judging of individual works of literature within the political guidelines and aesthetic norms of official cultural policy as well as within the larger historical framework of the socio-economic structure as a whole. Authors such as Christa Wolf, Heiner Müller, Franz Fühmann, Anna Seghers, Erwin Strittmatter, Peter Hacks, Volker Braun, Brigitte Reimann, Eduard Claudius, Dieter Noll; topic areas such as the Bitterfeld movement, *Arbeiterromane*, *Brigadenstücke*, *anti-faschistische Literatur*, *Ankunft im Alltag: Methodenfragen* such as the Seghers-Lukács exchange, the expressionism debate, the Brecht-Lukács debate, interpretive questions revolving around socialist Realism became the focus of a new literary canon, which at its every register sought to challenge the norms of a *Germanistik* that heretofore had limited its view of 20th-century German literature to Mann, Kafka, Rilke, Grass, Celan, and the new critical, formalistic methodologies deemed most appropriate to treat them.¹¹ Perhaps more true for the USA, the challenging of the canon within GDR literary criticism was part of and even a catalyst for the challenging of the canon all across the board: by feminists looking to promote neglected women writers; by those seeking to inaugurate the study of Afro-American and other minority literatures within the academy; or by those who were concerned with the teaching of

popular/mass culture--film, *Trivialliteratur*, etc.--within an educational paradigm heretofore dedicated to a more circumscribed notion of *belles lettres*. Thus even though the newly discovered GDR canon itself did not vary much from that in West Germany, it had the effect of opening up, of challenging entrenched areas of study.

Viewed from the perspective of methodology, the move toward a radical historicizing by some liberal American Germanists (not necessarily Marxists) brought with it a number of interesting and significant developments. First, the emphasis upon contextual studies forced *Germanisten* to develop interdisciplinary approaches and cross-cultural treatments which in many ways proved to be anticipatory for what today has become the movement toward "German Studies" in the United States. The emphasis upon contextualizing the literature of the GDR in order to be able to judge it fairly, helped to open up the question as to whether one can understand *any* literary or cultural text divorced from a larger cultural context. The development of Marxist and sociological modes of literary criticism in many cases developed hand in hand with the study of the GDR cultural landscape.

But as much as the GDR question was to serve to catalyze the development of interdisciplinary and historical methodologies within and across existing disciplines, it also produced in some instances highly questionable practices emanating from the methodological premises underlying such an approach. The sudden openness, not to say fascination, with a newly discovered literary landscape also led to an occasional notable lack of *any* kind of critical attitude toward the GDR or its cultural creations. The born-again eagerness *not* to be "anti-communist" (whatever that meant) and to view the emergence of the GDR system and its ideological formations *only* within the GDR context, resulted here in a suspension of one's own evaluative position or even an apology for necessary "contradictions," --a stance which resembled very much the official Marxist-Leninist historiography of the GDR itself. If a work was not published or was repressed in the GDR, then it was understood "historically" as not having been meant to be.

One particularly egregious example of this approach can be found in H.G. Hüttich's *Theater in the Planned Society*¹² in which the author opts at the beginning not to deal with the "all-important questions of artistic freedom and aesthetic quality" because to do so "would entail an incisive ideological critique of the sociopolitical structure of the GDR which I do not presume to present in my historically oriented study of contemporary drama (emphasis mine: DB)."¹³ Historical orientation for Hüttich meant an absence of critique in the name of "objectivity." Just how easily such "objective" historicism can lapse into rank apologetics becomes clear in Hüttich's astounding treatment of the building of the Wall in August of 1961: "No one could have been more surprised than the political strategists of East Berlin and Moscow when their desperate move had an overall positive effect on the GDR's population. The border action was, in fact, well worth the bad publicity that had to be taken in stride. It demonstrated once and for all the permanence of the state and its sovereignty [...] The sides were defined. The third-way seekers, the compromisers, the dreamers, and those with rubber spines (emphasis mine: DB) saw the writing on the wall. The result among the population of the GDR was shock, accompanied by a new officially unexpected respect for their government--a respect gained through an exercise of power, the most persuasive of political arguments."¹⁴ When "history" gets linked to power, then for Hüttich might makes right!

The apologetic aspects of some versions of the so-called contextual approach were met with two counter-readings in the USA which are reflective of how discussions within literature and literary criticism in this country have been helpful in developing more broadly conceived critical positions: in this case, a more fundamental critique of the GDR and of its official Marxist-Leninism than I think was occurring at the same time in West

Germany. The first of these focuses in particular upon Heiner Müller, Christa Wolf, and the sensed importance of their problematizing the instrumental character of orthodox Marxism. The discussion of Heiner Müller was of particular importance in that his notion of history was based on rupture and catastrophe as derived from the thought of Walter Benjamin. This position was seen to offer a potential Marxist critique of the ideological function of orthodox historiography, which emphasized the state as the necessary continuation of the progressive forces of the workers movement and which in so doing served to legitimate repression and forms of dictatorship as inherently necessary.¹⁵

Similarly, some American Marxists who looked to Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* and the critique of instrumental rationality of modernization as a lever by which to reveal the scientism of Marxist-Leninism as inherently conformist, found in the works of Christa Wolf (*Selbstversuch*), Heiner Müller, and Günter Kunert a poetic correlative to such a position. The development of the means of production and unquestioning promotion of science do not lead inexorably to a more humanistic socialism, these authors were heard to argue, but can produce ecological or social disasters on the order of what was later to occur with Chernobyl.

But not just ecological disasters--which brings us to a second reading, namely the feminist critique of Marxism. For many feminists in the United States, it is the instrumentality of Marxist thinking which comprises its most "male," "patriarchal" moment. Which is the reason why the works of Christa Wolf have had their strongest reception outside of *Germanistik* among feminists: why Wolf has provided a fascinating interface between the competing epistemologies of Marxism and feminism. There is no question, feminists have contended, that Wolf stands firmly in the tradition of a critical Marxism close to Bloch, Benjamin, and Brecht. Nevertheless, the argument continues, it is precisely a component of her literary achievement to have imbued her critical Marxism with "female experience," an experience which "unconsciously" unmasks the limits of orthodox Marxism and its patriarchal underpinnings. "Thus when Wolf, like other critical Marxists, talks about infusing dialectical materialism with the capacities of fantasy and love, her argument takes on a uniquely real character. ... What has been attributed to Wolf in all her works as her 'critical,' 'human,' or 'utopian' Marxism is in effect, then, most concretely her female perception of history; and the utopian 'traces' and 'hopes' which Bloch talks about in his theoretical works take on an indelibly material character in the reality of women mediated by Wolf."¹⁶

What I think is important about the readings I have described as a critique of Marxism is the extent to which the authors and their works are used outside of the GDR context. For instance, in the above quotation there is an attempt by American feminists to situate Wolf as a "mediator" between new left, critical theory, Marxism and what is called the "reality" or "experience" of women. In other, more essentialist feminist readings, Marxism and the whole aspect of Marxist critique is non-existent in the effort to locate Wolf completely within a feminist position and to see her ideological orientation and her GDR history as of considerably less importance.¹⁷ For this reason, it has often been pointed out, by Christa Wolf and others, that the Western feminist attempt to appropriate GDR writers such as Morgner or Wolf involves a profound de-contextualizing. And this, of course, is precisely the point--and brings us to another paradox. The very moment that a particular reception takes on a kind of significance and profile within the receiving culture is inevitably the moment that it reflects strongly the values and *Erkenntnisinteressen* of that same receiving culture, and thereby necessarily "distorts." For distortion, or in the parlance of contemporary theory, "mis-reading," when it is a productive, cross-cultural misreading, often involves bringing to the surface aspects of an author's work which are either subordinate or repressed within the framework from which

it comes. What we are observing in the case of Wolf's feminist reception in the USA is indeed a de-contextualization, but also a *re-contextualization* of an author's work across a very different and revealing cultural grid.

Which brings us to a second point concerning methodology. As much as the younger Germanists of the second period rejected the norms and repudiated the methodological assumptions of their new critical predecessors, their emphasis upon history and context often contained a steadfast refusal to deal in any meaningful way with GDR literature as literature; as aesthetic construct; as a discursive formation. The paradoxical result of this behavior was that although coming from very different starting points, their focus upon theme and politics and history to the exclusion of point of view and narrativity and imagery seemed implicitly to affirm the very stereotypes that had prevailed in the 1950s concerning GDR literature being politics rather than art. More importantly, it simply ignored the most vital aspect of the contextual question itself: namely, the specific functions and modalities of language and metaphor in the organization of public discourse and in the empowering of speech--both as modes of control as well as a subversive voice. In the so-called "historically oriented" (Huettich) or narrowly contextual readings--i.e. readings focusing on literature as a reflection of or in response to the prevailing *Kulturpolitik* of any given period--literary texts were simply taken at face value: as transparent articulations on the subject of ecology, family, women's experience, gays, life in the factory, etc., regardless of the narrative strategies or linguistic codes they had employed to communicate such. Perhaps not surprisingly, the tendency to ignore the discursive contextualization of language as language has led students who are interested in such questions either to focus on the avant-garde (Müller, Wolf) or to move to other fields.

In looking at the third period of GDR reception in the United States (since 1980) one can say that the interest in the GDR reached its peak with the Biermann expulsion in 1976, and that thereafter there has been a steady waning in terms of courses offered, articles published, symposia organized, etc. This is not to say that there is not a continued and solid treatment of the subject,¹⁸ but rather that GDR studies is no longer the fashionable mode it once was. The reasons for this waning are manifold, of course, although some relate to things that I have alluded to thus far. Let us now summarize these points as a way of coming to a conclusion.

With the growing interest in the question of German national identity, there has been a tendency in the United States to look at what is similar rather than what separates the two Germanys--not just similarities in their shared histories, but the similarities in the way German intellectuals are beginning to understand those histories, their cultural expressions, etc. Moreover, the fact that Müller and Wolf, arguably the two most important German speaking authors writing today, have often been looked upon by a broader American reading public as German and not East German writers says as much about identity changes occurring within and between the two Germanys today, as it does about American ignorance concerning the politics of central Europe. The recontextualization of Christa Wolf and Heiner Müller by a public outside the university has meant a reading of and confrontation with their writings by particularly American constituencies: For Wolf, by a feminist readership which has discovered in her work an important locus of interface between questions of the political and the personal, private and public, patriarchy and the glimpsed sense of its transcendence. With Müller, it is a theatrical public sphere, located in an area running from Off-Broadway to the college theater circuit, discussed in avant-garde theatre journals both within and outside of the academy. In the broadest sweep, Müller is seen as a German avant-gardist, who has given imagistic language to Robert Wilson's visual scenic chaos; who in some barely understood way repre-

sents the latest exemplar of European avant-gardism which might pose an aesthetic but also a political alternative to the stultifying neo-realism (in the guise of post-modernism) now commanding the American stage. The East German part of his biography simply makes him more bizarre: the Marxism and politics are communicated intuitively through images and language.

Writing in *Performing Arts Journal*, Bonnie Marranca gives voice to the importance of Müller as an icon of both Germanys, as someone "who walks through the world, his *Doppelgänger* in Greece, in Rome, in Jamaica, in Peru," whose world "is that of a curved space-time, his unities past, present and future."¹⁹

In bloody cruel ink Müller retraces the classics in contemporary scenes, framing the violence and dislocation that is commonly celebrated as their poetry and passion. His texts are satyr plays attaching themselves like bindweed to great works of the western tradition, trailing over the fourth wall of Berlin, prolific morning glory. A homeless man who lives at whim either East or West of the wailing wall, Müller, a man split in half, is the disembodied emblem of his divided country. At home here or there, he lives best in literature.²⁰

"Disembodied," "homeless," timeless, Müller's reception at the hands of the American theatrical avant-garde has wrested him out of the GDR context and thrust him forward as a spokesperson for a new drama "of no borders," as a playwright who is "writing the history of the world. Backwards."²¹

Looking within the academy and in the area of literary criticism, the only hope for a uniquely American reading of GDR literature depends on the extent to which textual and cross-cultural reading and not simply narrowly historical contextualization becomes a central strategy for an approach to this subject. Up to now this has seldom been the case, with the result that some of our more interesting students have turned to other authors and to other canons.

Certainly recent developments--the opening of the borders between East and West Germany and the increasingly rapid move toward reunification--will force us to look at GDR literature with new perspectives; will necessitate that we *redraw* the lines of historical periodization, rethink the interpretive strategies away from a too narrow, non-discursive notion of historical contextualization. It will mean, finally, that we challenge the categorial borders which have heretofore so comfortably served us in the process of evaluating this very foreign terrain.

While the "we" in the preceding exhortation obviously includes West German GDR scholars as well, I would nevertheless argue that the American perspective offers and even necessitates a very special locus and opportunity from which to pose particular kinds of questions, to push alternative practices or even to emphasize glimpsed tendencies, such as the underlying *similarities* between the voices of East and West German writers in recent years.

In what follows, I should like to suggest two ways American Germanists might reconsider our approaches to this area both as a body of work produced within the forty-five year period of a divided Germany and in the post-1989 transitional period, as GDR or former GDR writers become situated and find their voice in a federated or confederated future state.

My initial focus will be concerned with questions of periodization. Histories of GDR literature from the East and the West have tended for the most part to locate the sutures of literary development--its important events, turning points, and reorientations--in relation to major political or cultural-political occurrences, rather than to listen attentively to individual texts. Khrushchev's 1956 de-Stalinization speech, the 1959 Bitterfeld movement, the building of the wall, the *Neues ökonomisches System* of the 1960s, the coming to power of Honecker and his no-more-tabus speech, the 1976 Biermann expulsion are some of the signposts often employed. Focussing on such markers permitted one to map out

literary production in seismographic relation to some deeper historio-sociological narrative, some more compelling institutional sub-text.

But what happens if in looking back from 9 November 1989, one were to pose the following question: when and how did the internalized cultural-discursive wall separating GDR writers from colleagues and audiences in the West first begin to show its fissures? When did these artists begin to speak through and beyond their own immediate literary constituencies to a broader national or international audience on the basis of a profoundly altered discursive practice? Or viewed in light of the younger generation, when did writers cease to be in dialogue with their own social and traditional context? AND WHY? Here new points of reference appear--new, more literary events, turning points, and awarenesses. Seen from such a perspective, it is not Ulbricht's *sozialistische Menschengemeinschaft* or Honecker's coming to power or Biermann's expulsion or even Gorbachev's *Perestroika* which mark the foreground, but rather, profound changes in narrative strategy. One such example of this, in my estimation, is the 1968 appearance of Christa Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.* With the publication of this remarkable book, we find not only a radical move *inward*--a break with a discursive paradigm based upon a dialectical materialist, i.e. an objectivist epistemology--but beyond that a problematizing of all the categories which had heretofore been accepted notions of socialist discourse: of history, of science, of one's political role, of the private sphere, of the situation and nature of the individual subject. If the narrative "I" in Wolf's *The Divided Heaven* of 1963 accepted, albeit with pain and resignation, the geo-political and ultimately psychological borders marking a third generation²² (those born ca. 1930 and after) of younger socialist writer/intellectuals who had "arrived" in socialism--*Ankunftsliteratur* was the operable term here--her *Christa T.* and subsequent *Kindheitsmuster* looked inward in a way that opened out upon Germany as a whole. Yes, there are cultural-political (the *11. Plenum* in December 1965), economic (NÖS), and even geo-political (Prague invasion) events connected with Wolf's turning point, but as explanatory models they remain insufficient and hence secondary to the importance of the *textual codes themselves* as signifiers of an historical breakthrough.

The ideological borders which had once helped to parcel the fascist legacy unproblematically to the other side of the wall--which separated good technology from bad, genuine material democracy from its capitalist/pluralist sham--began to crumble for good in the late 1960s--not only for Christa Wolf, but for Stefan Hermlin, Volker Braun, Jurek Becker, Heiner Müller, Sarah and Rainer Kirsch, most poignantly for Franz Fühmann. All were writers who sought and found an archimedean point outside of the *language* of orthodoxy from which to question the givens; and who in so doing began to speak abroad.

But as much as these second and third generation voices questioned the simplistic constructs of a discourse, as Marxists and in dialogue with tradition they still spoke within (if also against) the *lingua franca* of the GDR project as a whole. Such was not the case with a number of writers and works appearing in the late 1970s and 1980s, whose voices are marked by an absolute refusal to even partake in dialogue--negatively or positively--with the traditions, horizons or concerns of that older, now critical generation running from Christa Wolf to Volker Braun. The most forceful example of this is the younger group of poets who have asserted--discursively and most provocatively--that they simply have been *hineingeboren* (Uwe Kolbe) in the GDR: not with a choice to stay or leave, and certainly not with any commitment to socialism. These poets--besides Kolbe names like Fritz Hendrik Melle, Rüdiger Rosenthal, Christa Moog, Sasha Anderson come to mind--refuse to think "historically," to write specifically about GDR reality, to engage ideologically with either the official apparatus or the older generation. If there are politics here, it lies in

silence rather than speech.

In terms of re-periodization, the refusal to speak within or even against "the" discourse--Christoph Hein's *Der fremde Freund* and Helga Königsdorf's *Respektloser Umgang* are further examples--signals the end of the wall before the end of the wall. More than just a break with official ideology, it marks the way that within the cultural sphere we begin to get a reorienting of discursive identity as a move toward the end of separatism. This is not to argue for convergence or against the importance of historical experience. It is merely to relocate the historical question within the sphere of textual articulation.

All of which brings me to a final emphasis. To undertake a re-contextualization of GDR literature demands that we return to that tradition with readings far more sensitive to its literary production as discursive practice rather than historical reflection. Whether we are looking at a socialist novel of the 1950s or a recent poem by Christa Moog--we are confronting linguistic organization as re-encoding, as survival, as rejection or as refusal to speak. And it is this re-contextualization through attention to varieties of discourse--our own as well as the metalanguages of a rapidly self-transforming Germany--which can help us generate more differentiated, indeed more historical readings in the years to come.

Notes

¹See Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1980).

²Lothar von Balleseck, *Dichter im Dienst* (Wiesbaden: Limes Verlag, 1963)

³See Jack Zipes, "Zur Dämmerung der amerikanischen Germanistik," *Diskussion Deutsch* 7 (1977), 84-103. Zipes reports that between 1945 and 1974 there appeared in *Monatshefte*, *German Quarterly*, and *Germanic Review*, the three leading American journals of *Germanistik*, nine articles dealing with GDR literature, four reports about the GDR and fifteen articles dealing with Brecht.

⁴Peter Demetz, "Galileo in East Berlin: Notes on the Drama in the DDR," *German Quarterly* 37 (1964), 239-245.

⁵Sigfrid Hoefert, "Der Nachhall finnischer Dichtung in der Lyrik J. Bobrowskis," *German Quarterly* 41 (1968), 220-230. Hoefert does not mention Bobrowski's role as a poet in the GDR.

⁶Cited in Theodore Huebner, *The Literature of East Germany* (New York: Friedrich Ungar Publishing Co., 1970), p. vii. Huebner's monograph was the first such work to appear on GDR literature in the USA.

⁷Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Literarisches Leben in Deutschland* (Munich: Piper & Co., 1965); and *Deutsche Literatur in West und Ost* (Munich: Piper & Co., 1965).

⁸Peter Uwe Hohendahl und Patricia Herminhouse, *Literatur und Literaturtheorie in der DDR* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976), p. 8.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰The first *Hauptseminare* in GDR literature were taught starting in 1970.

¹¹See John Flores' excellent monograph entitled *Poetry in East Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971) for the best example of this kind of approach.

¹²H.G. Hüttich, *Theater in the Planned Society. Contemporary Drama in the German Democratic Republic in its Historical, Political, and Cultural Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976).

¹³*Ibid.*, p. xxii-xxiii.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 112-113.

¹⁵See Helen Fehervary, "Enlightenment or Entanglement," *New German Critique* 8 (Spring, 1976); David Bathrick, "Affirmative and Negative Culture: The Avant-garde in the GDR," *Social Research* (Spring 1980).

¹⁶Sara Lennox and Helen Fehervary, "Introduction," *New German Critique* 13 (Winter 1978), 112.

¹⁷See Marilyn Sibley Fries (ed.), *Responses to Christa Wolf: Critical Essays* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990)

¹⁸The annual meeting of the GDR Symposium at Conway, New Hampshire has provided a focus on GDR literature which has been important for the continued treatment of GDR literature in the USA. Many of these papers have appeared in the annual publication entitled *Studies in GDR*

Culture and Society. Selected Papers from the New Hampshire Symposium on the German Democratic Republic, ed. by M. Gerber (Lanham/New York/London). In addition, annual meetings of the Modern Language Association (MLA) have also continued to include sessions of GDR literature.

¹⁹Bonnie Marranca, "Despoiled Shores: Heiner Müller's Natural History Lessons," *Performing Arts Journal* (1989), 19.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 18.

²¹*Ibid.*, 17.

²²See Wolfgang Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte. Erweiterte Ausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand Verlag, 1989), S. 424-245, who divides the literary generations into those born before 1914 (first generation), those born between 1914 and 1929 (second generation) those born between 1930 and 1950 (third generation) and those born after 1950 (fourth generation).

WHOSE GERMAN LITERATURE? GDR-LITERATURE, GERMAN LITERATURE AND THE QUESTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY*

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The issue of national identity as it has affected the reception of GDR literature in the Federal Republic is reflected in the insistence with which the old question of one, two or four German literatures re-surfaced in the 1980s. The debate was not a new one: it emerged simultaneously with West German discovery of GDR literature in the mid-1960s, when it was necessarily characterized more by admissions of insufficient knowledge of this literature than by convincing arguments on either side.¹ At that time some critics, such as Karl-Otto Conrady, thought to recognize an imminent *Wende* in GDR literature which would lead to convergence with West German literature,² while others concurred with Hans Mayer's provocative premise regarding the emergence of "zwei grundverschiedene Strukturen des literarischen Lebens auf deutschem Boden."³ Initially, however, the debate about the claims for a new socialist German literature and language was grounded at least as much in political convictions as in any general knowledge of the literature itself. In the wake of *Ospolitik*, the 1970s were marked by a dramatic increase in knowledge of this literature. A veritable "boom" of research, much of it by a generation of younger critics who were historically and ideologically more disposed to assume its specificity, developed parallel to vastly expanded representation of GDR literature on the West German book market.

The early 1980s, however, were marked by a renewed tendency to question the particularist notion of separate German literatures. The development can be traced to several factors, not the least of them in the sphere of international politics. Shocked by the potential for nuclear devastation which the armaments race of the two superpowers had thrust upon them, Germans on both sides of the border became increasingly aware of their common concerns on this and other issues. At the same time, the sweeping cultural dislocations which resulted from the Biermann affair of 1976 and the subsequent exodus of East German writers, many of whom still identified themselves with the GDR, cast severe doubt on any notion of GDR literature which was bound to political borders, leading both Raddatz and Mayer to retract their earlier positions on the singularity of GDR literature.⁴ Literature East and West appeared to be growing together both aesthetically and thematically (the preoccupation with individual subjectivity, accelerated environmental disasters, the feminist agenda, and the problematic legacy of the German past), casting ever more doubt on the GDR's continued claims for its concept of a *sozialistische*