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## Jürgen Lemke: Ganz normal anders. Auskünfte schwuler Männer

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Krauß, Angela. *Glashaus*. Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau, 1988. 186 pp. *Dienstjahre und andere Prosa*. Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau, 1991. 95 pp.

"Sappho aus Preußen" arrives in Berlin. The demand: "Welche Geschäfte in Preußens Hauptstadt!" She replies: "Liedermacherin, Herr" (*Glashaus*, 33). As she speaks through various characters in the Berlin of several eras, "Sappho's" song is the language of light, dreams, and moments in the eastern part of Germany. She is a central figure in Angela Krauß's *Glashaus* and *Dienstjahre und andere Prosa*, two collections of often lyrical pieces.

Krauß's style is as difficult to define as the catchphrase "postmodern," yet postmodern it undeniably is—as it appropriates the narrator-centric, intensely psychological descriptions of fleeting episodes in a fragmented everyday that characterize so much current German literature in East and West. Although *Glashaus* and *Dienstjahre* depart stylistically from *Das Vergnügen*, Krauß's satirical 1984 interpretation of the "Betriebsroman" genre, the difference between internal reality and its linguistic expression is central to all three works. In *Das Vergnügen*, protagonist Felizitas's speech impediment simultaneously incapacitates and liberates; the psyches populating *Glashaus* and *Dienstjahre* suffer from other language disabilities. But in each work, Krauß isolates problems of perception and communication and works at reducing the difference between the two.

Krauß's writing is at its most effective in pieces such as "Die Tagträumerin," a love story which weaves a woman's grey daily S-Bahn commute with her active fantasy life. When her fairly innocuous daydreams about a fellow commuter threaten to become imperfect reality, she becomes ill. In order for a "happy ending" to take place, the woman's inner and outer existences must meet, if only temporarily. When this happens for the character, it also happens, simply and directly, in Krauß's structure. The heroine meets the subject of her daydreams: "Er war nicht so grazil wie in ihren lebhaften Träumen, aber er war wirklich da" (*Glashaus*, 91). "Frau in Chamois" consists of descriptions painstaking in detail, yet so successfully interwoven as to yield an almost physical impression of the passage of time and of mortality.

The attempt to use words as concretely as possible while simultaneously demonstrating the disastrous effects of the chasm between language and reality can result in some loss of accessibility. In "Ströme," a tale of a thwarted love affair, the protagonist's need to equate the events in his life with the relative strengths of electric currents is not compelling enough to carry the entire piece. The nighttime journey of an engineer in "Dinosaurius" evokes strong corporeal images, but no convincing overall impression.

*Dienstjahre*, published in 1991 (and recipient of the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize), contains three pieces from the 1988 *Glashaus* collection. There are no obvious discrepancies between the volume published before and the one published after the demise of the GDR; as exemplified in *Das Vergnügen*, Krauß was critical of sanctioned GDR art forms well before the events of 1989. Although the style of the prose collections is quite different from that of her novel, *Glashaus* and *Dienstjahre* do not exist in an apolitical vacuum any more than they are irrevocably GDR-specific. "Ein Morgen auf dem Land" presents a party secretary whose "Ermunterung kommt aus der Vorstandsrunde" (*Glashaus*, 91). There is also an 84-year-old "Veteran," tired and confused: "*Der Genossenschaftsbauer ist für den Frieden...*

*Aber der Eintritt in eine Genossenschaft ist kein Zwang, sondern eine objektive Notwendigkeit. Wer hat das gesagt? Wo hat-?"* (72-3). But Krauß's implicit critique is not restricted to the various ways in which SED functionaries warped language, and these two works are not only relevant within the context of a dead or dying socialist regime. The generation whose "Dienstjahre" span the beginnings of the atomic age and the information era experienced the separation of words from things perhaps stronger than any other. In recording the impact of this separation, Krauß has recovered the ability to mean what she says.

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Lemke, Jürgen. *Ganz normal anders. Auskünfte schwuler Männer*. Mit einer Vorbemerkung von Irene Runge. Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1989.

Pre-Wall. Post-Wall. East. West. Straight. Gay. The drawing on the book's cover (by J.A.W., one of the men interviewed) illustrates another dichotomy: a man, clothed in a military uniform on the left side, with his left eye closed, and a harlequin costume on his right side, with his right eye open. Pre-Wall=Oppression/Post-Wall=Liberation? No, it is not so simple. The debates about abolishing Paragraph 175 (the "sodomy" law) in "West Germany" and the increasing incidents of gay-bashing by neo-Nazis in "East Germany" provide ample proof of that.

In contrast to the image on the cover, Lemke's interviews with fourteen gay men give us insight into the variety of identities which these men, ranging in age from eighteen to eighty-four, managed to create before the momentous events beginning in late 1989. The "interviews" were conducted between 1981 and 1988, although most took place between 1983 and 1986. The book is really a series of "Protokolle," in the tradition of Maxie Wander's *Guten Morgen, du Schöne* (1977): the men tell Jürgen the stories of their lives and we receive them as well-organized (by Lemke) monologues. There is real art in weaving into a coherent narrative the answers to the many questions the interviewer posed while also omitting the interviewer as an active participant in the narrative process. Lemke has mastered that craft.

Lemke's book achieved great success and a remarkable resonance both inside and outside the GDR. A West German edition was quickly published (with an addition to the subtitle: "Auskünfte schwuler Männer aus der DDR"; Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 1989). Lemke himself adapted several of the interviews into a dramatic version which ran for several months at the Theater im Palast in East Berlin. The book has been translated into English with the translators (of which I am one) providing brief introductions to the interviews: *Gay Voices from East Germany*, ed. John Borneman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991).

Lemke presents a panorama of gay experiences and attitudes. Such is needed in a country where public discussion of homosexuality barely existed. This book is one of barely a handful which brought such discussion into being. (One thinks also of Volker Carow's film *Coming Out* [1990]). Thus, these men's stories validate the stereotype of "The Homosexual Male" made an effeminate hairdresser/interior designer/waiter/actor by a close-binding mother and

distant father, often accompanied by some (sexual) trauma suffered by The Homosexual at an early age. But at the same time they break that image. Where, for example, Lothar exults in his status as ex officio drag queen of the GDR and embraces life in Berlin, R. can't imagine living away from his farm and accepts the confines of his closet as a husband and father. Or the dichotomy is exposed within one man's life story such as Body's. He tells of bouts with alcoholism, incarcerations for assault, all stemming from his refusal to accept his gayness. A doctor (not the first, but the first "enlightened" one) finally helped him to give up drinking and find his own way of being gay.

We are shown a wide spectrum of experiences, among them: working class, married, closeted, openly gay, in long-term relationships, close to one's family, living in isolation, searching for a viable identity or community. But by reading these stories, one comes to realize that all these are only aspects of identities, not complete definitions. That realization begins to end the stereotypes which block real change.

As an American gay man, many of these experiences sound familiar. Some wonderfully so, like the discovery that love is possible or that unforgettable moment of one's first kiss ("Ich habe nie wieder so einen Atem gerochen." — R., 182). Some are all too horribly familiar, like the almost constant policing of your not butch enough wrists and hips for fear of That Secret being discovered. But there are also important differences between the cultural experience of being gay in the U.S. and in the GDR. Several men report on their personal experience of German fascism. While none of the men in the book decry the GDR, these older gay men describe how they welcomed liberation in 1945 and the founding of the German socialist state. Their experiences present important aspects of those years: two ended up in concentration camps, one was a teenager, and barely escaped being sent up at the end of the war. K. tells one of the several chilling anecdotes from that time. He was working as a pharmacist when, one day in the mid-1930's, a gay friend appeared at his drugstore and handed him a note: "Man hat mich angeklagt wegen Paragraph 175. Du mußt mir Gift geben. Meine Schwester will das. Wenn du mir nicht hilfst, muß ich dich anzeigen" (212).

The importance of workplace and colleagues strikes me as another significant difference. These seem to me to play a much more crucial role in the definition of self in East German society. Thus, the creation of an individual's gay identity is also shaped to a greater extent by that person's relationship to his colleagues, his ability to be open about his sexual orientation at work, etc. While some, like Volker or Bert, are quite open with their colleagues and willingly entertain their naive questions ("Wer ist der Mann? Wer ist die Frau?"), others reflect Joseph's attitude that "Die Gesellschaft hätte mehr von mir haben können" (163).

Societal homophobia, in a society where it was "legal" to "be gay," is described in, for example, the difficulty in obtaining an apartment when one is not attached to a heterosexual family unit. Even those who are open-minded on most matters have trouble when it comes to gays: "die meisten können sich vorstellen, daß zwei Männer es miteinander treiben. Daß sie zärtlich miteinander tanzen, weil es ihnen Freude macht, geht nicht in ihren Schädel. Das ist übrigens auch bei vielen verklemmten Schwulen so" (Bert, 273). What is perhaps more pernicious is that internalized homophobia Bert mentions that erects barriers which are almost impossible to overcome. Winne comments: "Ich bin fest davon überzeugt, Problem Nummer eins ist nicht

unser Verhältnis zu den Normalen, sondern wie gehen wir miteinander um" (189). N., the second to last speaker in the book, has been practically immobilized by such homophobia. He revels in self-pity, whines about his "unattractiveness," and categorizes all gays as neurotic.

Bert, who speaks in the final interview, provides a wonderful burst of youthful optimism and joy in being gay. He describes his decision to leave small-town life for the opportunities of the metropolis (Berlin). Once there, he gradually created a life for himself that includes a lover, the lover's son, an entire apartment building of neighbors, many of whom have become good friends, and his own accepting parents. His story of how his parents reacted to news of his "Veranlagung" supplies a delightful mixture of relief, hope, and love: "Vater stand auf, holte den Bergmannsschnaps, nahm Gläser aus dem Küchenschrank und goß ein. Ich schaute aus dem Fenster, Mutter auf ihre Hände, bis Vater sagte: Also, Mutter, gut, daß er es uns gesagt hat. Prost" (271).

Through the contrast between such stories as N.'s and Bert's and the array of gay life which these men present to the reader, Lemke has provided a volume that marks a shift in East German cultural history. The silenced gay outsider has begun to find a voice. The stories are fascinating. The ones yet to be told—and lived—can only be more so.

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Rathenow, Lutz, with photographs by Harald Hauswald. *Berlin-Ost: Die andere Seite einer Stadt*. Berlin: BasisDruck, 1990. 133 pp.

Having run out of things to say about the political significance of the Berlin Wall, observers sometimes accorded it an almost cosmic meaning. Carl Jung, for example, saw the Wall as an expression of the schizophrenia of modern man, who insists on the separation of matter and spirit. This notion was stimulating, highly dramatic—and ridiculous! But, then, so was the Berlin Wall. Perhaps, a hundred years from now, some new Richard Wagner may write an opera about the Wall, with Ulbricht and Honecker among the characters. Right now, authors will be lucky to get a decent comedy.

Yet, like so many other preposterous things in our lives, the Berlin Wall was long taken for granted. By at least the mid-seventies, even the protests of East German dissidents seldom focused on the Wall. As the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe began to crumble, people suddenly realized how arbitrary the barrier was. As I write this, it is still only about a year and a half since the border between the two Germanys was opened, yet it seems like ages. A number of literary works—propagandistic pieces of Becher and Brecht, for example—that once seemed aesthetically fairly credible now sound positively absurd.

Other works, by contrast, have gained with historical distance. *Berlin-Ost: Die andere Seite einer Stadt*, with text by Rathenow and photographs by Hauswald, was first published in 1987 by Piper Verlag. Now BasisDruck, a press run largely by dissidents of the former East German state, has put out a revised and greatly expanded version. It includes two new chapters by Rathenow, about a score of new photographs by Hauswald and an afterward by Jürgen Fuchs.