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## Thomas Rietzschel, ed.: Über Deutschland. Schriftsteller geben Auskunft

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How the editor, Thomas Rietzschel, found the fifteen contributors for this collection does not become clear. I suspect the driving forces were primarily commercial, since books “on the German question” do have a steady market. Poets and writers reflecting on what it means to be German, on what “Deutschland” might be, on the relationship of literature to politics in the aftermath of unification—much of this turns out to be quite predictable here.

In the vacuum created by the discrediting of socialism through the abject collapse of the rickety framework built by Stalin and Honecker, Germans, both intellectuals and ordinary citizens, apparently have no overarching theory with which to analyze their experiences. Two options remain for organizing personal lives and granting them meaning: either inscribing oneself into the old master-narrative of “Deutschland” recited by Kohl et al, or dwelling within personal anecdote. Of the two, only the second option brings any useful information (*Auskunft*) at all.

But it is not so easy to bear witness in the German context, the German discourse. There is always the threat that one will be denounced as a “Nestbeschmutzer,” so that one prefers to hide behind far-flung generalizations when offering criticism. Thus, Günter Kunert offers platitudes:

Das Gefühl vieler Ostdeutscher, durch die Vereinigung verraten und verkauft worden zu sein, basiert keinesfalls allein auf realen ökonomischen Vorgängen; es speist sich genauso aus der Vergangenheit, aus dem Zustand einer inneren, ständig unterdrückten Unsicherheit, unter deren Herrschaft jegliches Agieren und Reagieren stand. Jenes Moment des Insichruhens, der Selbstübereinstimmung, das uns bei anderen Völkern stets aufs neue frappiert, ist den Deutschen mit dem ersten Weltkrieg verlorengegangen (23).

At best, these claims might provoke searching questions about where those other imagined communities without inner dissent might be found and whether it would be a good thing in any case to

give up some hesitancy in actions. Horst Drescher, who gives snippets “Aus dem Zettelkasten,” suggests, and who would disagree, “In der zusammengebrochenen Literaturlandschaft der ehemaligen DDR liegt ein unerhörtes, aber auch ungeheuerliches Potential. Das, was erzählt werden muß und bald” (104).

A different source of deformation is the pressure on writers and intellectuals to maintain their legitimacy, to reinforce their authority, by speaking as representatives or advocates of literariness. Hans Christoph Buch mocks the very literary sovereignty he displays:

Ich könnte von André Breton und André Gide sprechen, oder von Jean-Paul Sartre und Albert Camus, deren philosophischer Streit um die Fehlbarkeit und Unfehlbarkeit der marxistischen Kirche weder durch das Ableben seiner Protagonisten noch durch den Untergang des Sowjetreichs beendet worden ist. Ähnliches gilt, in jüngerer Zeit, für Gabriel García Márquez und Carlos Fuentes auf der einen, Octavio Paz und Mario Vargas Llosa auf der anderen Seite (27).

Without even a blush, Buch puts all of those behind him, declaring that he would rather talk about himself. At last, we exclaim, only to be disappointed by the cursory account of some oppositional stances Buch took during the years of the GDR. Rather than giving us something new, he concludes with a quotation from Lu Hsün. Nothing against Lu Hsün, but what happened to *Auskunft*?

Similarly, Thomas Hettche operates with a cleverly constructed literary conceit. He goes in quest of “Kaisersaschern,” the fictional town from *Doktor Faustus*. This leads Hettche to those “real” places on the “real” German landscape and allows him to uncover horrors such as GDR strip mines and the forced labor camps of Nazi Germany. The danger of seeing history through literary sleight-of-hand is that style begins to supplant substance, as when Hettche pauses to tell us about the hotel where he slept in Quedlinburg:

Unter meinen Schritten knarrt der mit PVC belegte Holzboden, gibt sanft nach,

wie mit Schaumstoff unterfüttert, verströmt einen unangenehm süßlichen Geruch. In der Nacht lärmen Betrunkene auf dem Marktplatz und in meinen Schlaf hinein, und ich träume von sumpfigen Bodenbelägen und unterirdischen Gängen (48).

Ah, the tunnels and crypts of German history beneath the pavement of the present. But did he dream that or would he like to have dreamt it? Is the search for “Kaisersaschern” really a direct route to the German past, or is it a tour map from the postmodern guidebook?

Another dimension interrupts the attempts by inhabitants of the former GDR to articulate their personal experience. Their habits of a lifetime of dissembling die hard. Those who have tried to engage them in conversation come to recognize that moment in the story when there is an abrupt shift away from the personal experience into the language of phrases. Phrases are safe and they come easily. Wulf Kirsten, ostensibly a poet, cranks out sentences like this:

Was wirtschaftlich unabdingbaren Erfordernissen entsprechen mag, läßt sich mit den individuellen, psychologischen Umstellungsproblemen nicht zeitgleich bewerkstelligen. Die totale soziale Umschichtung, für viel zu viele mit Arbeitslosigkeit und Existenznot verbunden, sorgt für Unruhe, für Unzufriedenheit und ist schuld daran, daß ein Großteil der Bevölkerung, in seiner bislang nie in Frage gestellten Sicherheit getroffen oder wenigstens verunsichert, von einer Staatsverdrossenheit in die andere getaumelt ist (83).

I think he means that people are worried about unemployment and angry at the government, but, like so many others of his generation, he cannot bring himself to say so directly. Like the narrator in Hein’s *Drachenblut*, the speaker in Kirsten’s text is at a great remove from the person. Particularly disappointing in this regard is Günter de Bruyn’s “Fremd im eignen Land,” which sets out to give a personal testimony. But what we get instead is couched in the impersonal report characterized by the third person and the passive construction:

Als selbständig Denkender hatte man weniger Bundesgenossen. Denn oben und unten begann man sich mit den gegebenen Zuständen einzurichten. Die Überwachung wurde perfekter, aber leiser (165).

It is not fair to blame a survivor like de Bruyn, or anyone else who has lived under a totalitarian regime for decades, for the inability to break through to a dialogue again, but it is crucial to take note of the phenomenon. The best, yet still allusive, introduction of himself as citizen of the former GDR, is made by Thomas Rosenlöcher, whose image of the “Ostfadennudel” is witty and incisive (91-92).

In sharp contrast to the relatively skimpy contributions by the Germans are four by well-informed “outsiders.” Jan Faktor, a Czech who chose to move to Berlin in GDR days, makes keen observations on how it was possible for GDR intellectuals to continue to cling to their system when it had long since been repudiated in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. He is particularly insightful in recognizing that the steady presence of West Germany—both as foil and as model—was something not available to other Eastern Europeans. This deserves some serious, extended scrutiny. Jiri Grusa stresses that unification means that Germany, which had since 1945 been oriented towards the Atlantic and the West, belongs once again to the Eastern European sphere, with all of its economic and ethnic problems. Recent events in the Balkans have already borne him out on this point. The observations of Herta Müller, from her perspective as a German refugee from Rumania, are trenchant, as she grapples with the contradictions that arise when Germans resort to ethnicity as a category for dealing with people. Equally moving is the piece by Chaim Noll, whose vignettes of Germans abroad are typical and true. They won’t make him popular in “Deutschland,” but they go to the core of reservations many of us, together with Heine or Tucholsky, have had.

Three poems, one each by Sarah Kirsch, Wolfgang Hilbig, and Durs Grünbein, embellish what is, at DM 20, an over-priced paperback.

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