GDR Bulletin

Volume 25
Issue 1 *Spring*

Article 10

1998

Two books on Uwe Johnson

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Recommended Citation
Evers, Kai (1998) "Two books on Uwe Johnson," *GDR Bulletin*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1. https://doi.org/10.4148/gdrb.v25i0.1252

sympathy for the "einfach normale Leute, [deren] Situation alles andere als normal [ist]" (vol. 2, 15), chastises her for doing so: "Diese Leute suchen sich dumm and dämlich nach Arbeit, die kennen überhaupt kein anderes Thema, und du wirfst sie einfach weg!" (vol. 2, 154). Slapstick events, such as individuals being caught peeping through keyholes or a mother-in-law being caught picking food out of her teeth, probably work better on a television screen, but are difficult to enjoy in print.

After the success of *Liebling Kreuzberg*, one hopes for the same in *Wir sind auch nur ein Volk*. However, the periodic insightfulness of some of the characters and the friendship that develops between Grimm and Steinheim are overshadowed by lethargic characters, a humdrum plot, and irksome dialogue. One cannot help but wonder, especially in light of the series' poor ratings in Germany, if the board director's prophesy in the first episode that the series would be a "Flop" (21) has come true.

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Berbig, Roland, and Erdmut Wizisla, eds. *"Wo ich her bin..." Uwe Johnson in der DDR.* Berlin: editionKONTEXT, 1993.

Gansel, Carsten, Bernd Neumann, and Nicolas Riedel, eds. *Internationales Uwe-Johnson-Forum. Beiträge zum Werkverständnis und Materialien zur Rezeptionsgeschichte,* vol. 3. Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 1993.

Since German unification and the ensuing re-evaluation of German post-war literature, Uwe Johnson has emerged as a towering figure, as "*der* DDR-Autor" (Günter Grass) against whom others are bound to fail to measure up. Besides several monographs and countless articles, this new post-GDR interest has spawned regional and international conferences, various anthologies, a series of *Schriften des Uwe Johnson Archivs,* a *Johnson-Jahrbuch* and, six volumes thus far of the *Internationales Uwe-Johnson-Forum.* Recognized as a perceptive critic of both Germanys, a new Uwe Johnson has been created, namely the one who knew too much to be accepted in his own time.

The reception of Johnson's work concentrates primarily on two (interrelated) topics: the development of his modernist writing style and his relationship to the GDR. Berbig and Wizisla dedicate their compilation mainly to the latter field of research and produce—quite intentionally—a mixed bag for the general as well as the more specialized audience. Despite their title, the volume is not comprehensive on the subject of Johnson in the GDR but, rather, is meant to provide pieces of a future mosaic. The implication of *"Wo ich her bin"* needs also to be qualified: except for a short and not-too-informative letter by one of Johnson's schoolmates, there is little material about Johnson's childhood and youth in the GDR. His life before he studied at the University of Leipzig remains largely uninvestigated. The other and at least equally important gap derives from Berbig and Wizisla's decision to omit the topic of Johnson and the *Stasi* until more source material has surfaced.

These limitations notwithstanding, Berbig and Wizisla make good on their promise "den Menschen [Uwe Johnson] wieder kenntlich zu machen" (12). They conduct an insightful interview with Günter Grass, reprint Günter Kunert's reminiscences of his tragicomic encounters with Johnson, and publish for the first time letters that Johnson exchanged with Johannes Bobrowski, Lotte Köhler, Christiane Jansen, and Helen Wolff. Several of those letters do not warrant publication on their own merit but, read together, this chorus of divergent and sometimes marginal voices renders a complex portrayal of a generous, inventive, but suspicious writer who suffered intensely from the loss of his *Heimat* Mecklenburg and who harmed his life and that of others with his deep-set fear of persecution by the *Stasi*. A whole cluster of texts surrounding Johnson's falling out with one of his best friends, Manfred Bierwisch, underscores this impression. A German translation of Johnson's article written for a *Festschrift* honoring Bierwisch is followed by a speech Bierwisch delivered after Johnson's death to explain why, out of fear of repression in the GDR, he rejected this text for his *Festschrift*. Eberhard Fahlke then recounts Johnson's furious and bitter reaction to this rejection and the traces it left in *Jahrestage*.

In another speech included in this collection, Bierwisch provides an account of the importance of Leipzig for Johnson, an account that Bernd Neumann expands in his article "Leipzig, oder: die Schule der Modernität." Neumann portrays the Leipziger atmosphere in which Johnson and his student friends existed as saturated with readings in and discussions about Benjamin, Sartre, and Faulkner. Because of Johnson's familiarity with Western literary discussions, Neumann interprets Johnson's writing style as a truly modernist one. Greg Bond, however, argues in his article implicitly against Neumann when he suggests that the new standards Johnson set with *Mutmassungen über Jakob* "müssen nicht das Produkt von Johnsons Modernismus gewesen sein" (236). Instead of continuing to narrow the focus solely to Western influences—thus following a cold war logic that tried to claim Johnson's work for the West by distancing it from the East-German literature and its theory—Greg Bond argues that Johnson's response to Lukacs's theory was far more complex than his negative published comments would suggest.

Further insight into Johnson's relationship to the GDR is provided by the first-ever publication of a radio essay in which Johnson presents his edition of Brecht's *Me-ti* book. An accompanying article by Erdmut Wizisla investigates not

only Johnson's interest in Brecht, but also the difficulties surrounding this edition, especially how Johnson, as a *persona non grata* in the GDR, was able to work for a short time in 1965 in the Brecht-Archive. The description of Johnson's difficulties with the GDR authorities can be read together with Margund Hinz and Roland Berbig's excellent account of Herman Kesten's public denunciation of Johnson in 1961. In an article, Kesten intentionally misrepresented Johnson's comments on the Berlin Wall as a defense of the GDR, thus provoking a literary scandal that threatened Johnson's existence as a writer in West Germany. Hinz and Berbig successfully avoid merely repeating Johnson's understandably one-sided account of the scandal in his *Begleitumstände* and give a more balanced portrayal of Kesten's motives and background, a portrayal, however, that turns out to be even more damaging than Johnson's own.

Compared to Berbig and Wizisla's excellent compilation, the third volume of the *Internationales Uwe-Johnson-Forum* presents a very uneven collection of essays. It opens with a reading of *Skizze eines Verunglückten*, in which Stefanie Golish only affirms the general consensus that Johnson failed aesthetically when he tried to fit his assumed betrayal by his wife into a fictional disguise. Looking at the influence and function of the English language in Johnson's *Jahrestage*, Dirk Sangmeister speculates that sometimes "Johnson schlicht Schwierigkeiten hatte, deutsche Übersetzungen zu finden für englische Sätze und Gedanken" (48). Additional essays deal with Johnson's relationship to Berlin, Faulkner's influence on Johnson, and the montage effect in *Jahrestage* and Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*. Greg Bond offers an angry manifesto against the tendency to read Johnson only as a critic of the GDR without considering his criticism of West Germany and that country's entanglement with its Nazi past.

The collection has its strengths. In her excellent essay "Der Prager Frühling als 'Entwurf': Politische Diskurse in Uwe Johnsons 'Jahrestagen,'" Sabine Fischer presents a meticulously documented interpretation of Gesine Cresspahl's development from her initial hope for the realization of a socialist model in the 'Prague Spring' to her increasing resignation over the Soviet *Realpolitik*. Sabine Fischer demonstrates how Johnson interlaces the past (Nazi-Germany and the early GDR) with the present, thus emphasizing the fragility of the new utopian hopes.

Carsten Gansel documents Uwe Johnson's participation in a 1964 attempt to bring East and West German writers together. As the transcript shows, this conversation between Grass, Johnson, Hermann Kant, Paul Wiens and others quickly turned to these authors' very different views about the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. Johnson criticized East-West dialog books like *Der geteilte Himmel* because they failed to reflect the complexity of the topic in their form. Norbert Mecklenburg's analysis of autobiographical narration in the first chapter of Johnson's *Begleitumstände* stands out as one of the few articles that points to a gap in Johnson writings, a gap that neither of these two volumes tries to fill. In opposition to Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*, Johnson's autobiographical memory of the past does not begin until 1945. Mecklenburg speculates as to whether or not there were instances in Johnson's childhood in which he felt an attraction to the totalitarian regime. Surely, it would prove worthwhile to look more closely at Johnson's works from a perspective that not only sees his explicit rejection of all totalitarian regimes but also the less obvious influence of and attractions to them in his works.

This volume of the *Internationales Uwe-Johnson-Forum* would have profited much from the help of a good copyeditor. Printing errors appear from the first sentence of the preface onwards, making many of its arguments either enigmatic or absurd; one hopes at least that Greg Bond does not really believe that "Johnson selbst immer beklagte, daß er selbst ostdeutsche Leser haben durfte" (184).

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Bornemann, John, and Jeffrey M. Peck. *Sojourners. The Return of German Jews and the Question of Identity.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995.

Sojourners documents and presents eleven compelling narratives, or "life histories," of German Jews from two generations exiled during the Nazi period who returned after the end of Hitler's regime to live in Germany. Seven of the individuals interviewed returned to East Berlin and four to West Berlin. The compilation of these narratives relies on multiple interviews, begun in the summer of 1989, and additional written exchanges, ending mostly in 1992, but including some commentary from as late as 1994. The timing of Bornemann and Peck's ethnographic project that inquires into the complexities of personal, communal, ethnic, and national identity constructions, and its correspondence with the political events leading to the end of the GDR and the many social changes accompanying German reunification, make this volume all the more significant, especially for scholars of the GDR. (In a parallel and related project, the authors have produced a video documentary on the lives of exiled German Jews who returned to Germany: the documentary focuses exclusively on the stories of seven people who returned to East Berlin.) An informative introductory essay by Bornemann, "Identifying German Jews," and a concluding essay by Peck that analyzes recurrent themes of home, language and gender positions, "From Surviving to Belonging: Stories of the Returned," frame the protocols of the interviews.

https://newprairiepress.org/gdr/vol25/iss1/10
DOI: 10.4148/gdrb.v25i0.1252