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Robert von Hallberg, ed.: Literary Intellectuals and the Dissolution of the State. Professionalism and Conformity in the GDR

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zweiter Hand und mögen durch viele Filter—bewußte und unbewußte—gegangen sein, ehe sie mit ihrer Drucklegung an die Öffentlichkeit kamen. Aber wer selber in den siebziger und achtziger Jahren in der DDR gelebt hat, wird aus eigener Erfahrung das Urteil Englers bestätigen können. “Frauen bildeten die emotional praktische Avantgard der DDR-Gesellschaft, in die Männer eigentlich nur kooptiert werden konnten. Sie lösten das uralte Rätsel wie man seine Würde wahren und dennoch echt sein kann.” Wer das nicht erfahren hat, mag es nicht für möglich halten, aber dem fehlt—und hier kann man einmal sagen: leider—eine sehr DDR-spezifische Erfahrung. Deren Voraussetzungen und Folge beschreibt Engler auch in diesem Kapitel umfassend, bis in die Abgründe der ostdeutschen Anstands- und Sozialpädagogik. Das Kapitel “Form und Seele” von Sitte und wahrer Lieber gehört zu den amüsantesten Exkursen in die Alltagsgeschichte der DDR, vor allem, was die Analyse der Aufklärungsschriften der fünfziger Jahre betrifft. Es enthält aber auch jenen Abschnitt, der als Kernthese von Englers Buch gelten kann und dessen Argumentation sich durch alle Texte zieht. Es ist die These von der Widersprüchlichkeit des ostdeutschen Modernisierungsprozesses nach 1945, die sich aus seinem historischen Ursprung ergibt: “Die kulturelle Emanzipation faßte auch im Osten Fuß, und man übertreibt nicht, wenn man sagt, daß sie dort in manchem dramatischer und nachhaltiger ablief, als im reichen und demokratischen Westen. ... Sie (die Ostdeutschen, H.T.) schüttelten über kommende Zwänge althergebrachte Autoritäten im Himmel wie auf Erden samt der von ihnen geheiligten Verhaltenstraditionen ab und bekamen einen Vorgeschmack auf eine befreitere Art des Menschenseins, der umso bitterer ausfiel, je rabiater sich die neuen Herrscher in die gerade erst geschaffenen Freiheiten und Freizügigkeiten einnisteten.”

Genau darin liegt alle Widersprüchlichkeit der sozialen und politischen Entwicklungsprozesse begründet, aber genau dieses Widerspruchsgeflecht sollte jeder durchleuchten, der heute über jenes verlorene Land namens Deutsche Demokratische Republik schreibt. Englers Buch ist, bei allen seinen Vorzügen, keine leichte Lektüre. Es verlangt vom Leser, weit Auseinanderliegendes zu verbinden, die Übergänge und Brüche der Darstellung mit eigenen Erfahrungen anzureichern und auch die eigene Kritik einzubringen. Daß daraus ein fruchtbarer Dialog über die Geschichte der DDR entsteht, möchte man dem Autor und seinem engagierten Buch im zehnten Jahr der deutschen Einheit und aus gegebenem Anlaß nachdrücklich wünschen.

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Hallberg, Robert von, ed. *Literary Intellectuals and the Dissolution of the State. Professionalism and Conformity in the GDR.* Trans. Kenneth J. Northcott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 366 pp.

This volume is not a treatise that sets out to argue a particular theory about the relationship between literary intellectuals and the dissolution of the state. Instead it is a fascinating collection of interviews with many of the main players in the East German literary scene, both scholarly and artistic. It is divided into four parts: an introductory essay by von Hallberg, a substantial collection of interviews with literary scholars, an equally wide-ranging series of interviews with writers, and three follow-up interviews “after the surprising revelations” of Stasi collaboration by Sascha Anderson and others. Most of the interviews were conducted in Berlin during and after the “Wende” (August–September 1990 and February 1991); the follow-up interviews took place in March of 1992. The volume is thus a remarkable snapshot of the state of mind of a nation’s literary intellectuals at a critical juncture in their history.

One of the most impressive and valuable features of the volume is the fact that von Hallberg somehow gained access to so many diverse literary figures, from Hermann Kant to Hans Joachim Schädlich and Rainer Kunze in the older generation, from Katja Lange-Müller to Sascha Anderson among younger writers. Somehow he got them all to make meaningful and apparently honest statements about their views of the relationship among politics, society, and literature in the GDR. An equally broad range, and equal frankness, exists among the scholars interviewed.

In their discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of literary life in the GDR, the scholars and writers interviewed here confirm the strange combination of security and discouragement that prevailed in much of GDR society. Many an unemployed or underemployed US academic will feel unadulterated envy at certain statements by scholars at the Central Institute for Literary History; as is well-known, many a former GDR intellectual is meanwhile yearning for the flesh-pots of Egypt. It was much easier to make a living as a literary writer under GDR socialism than it is in a capitalist marketplace due to the conventions of the publishing industry and a system of state-sponsored subsidies. Hermann Kant states that, “With 80 percent of the Writers’ Union freelance—that is, living only on the earnings from their books—we were quite alone... no one achieves the percentages that the GDR did” (153). There were less tangible “benefits” to intellectual life in the GDR as well. Marianne Streisand states: “There was always the feeling that you had to change something here, and that something could be changed, because intellectual work had a fairly high

status" (67). Rainer Kirsch cites censorship as evidence of the relatively greater respect accorded literary writing in the GDR: "you only consider someone dangerous if you think he's important. No one was done to death in the GDR, but the idea that literature was important ... persisted" (156).

But even this early, one or two years after unification, both scholars and artists, including Hermann Kant, bemoaned the lack of excitement and ambition that accompanied their privileged status and relative economic security. As Streisand states, "There was a unity and a good understanding among intellectuals. But this was only based on the fact that, somehow or other, you were *anti*. ... [and therefore] you were right. The real differences that existed between people ... were hushed up. In this way, a situation arose where real debate and the ability to be in conflict were never learned in this country" (68). Dorothea Dornhof sums up the contradictions nicely:

Our great scholarly advantage was that we had long periods for thorough, intensive, and solid research without having to rush about pursuing this or that development or having to adapt ourselves to this or that new trend. But there was also a disadvantage, I must admit, for I often lacked any thrust towards innovation. We knew when we were working on a project that we had a publisher ... but there was always the possibility of going on working and, in spite of that, it was somehow unsatisfying. That is the ambivalence of being socially secure in scholarship: on the one hand, you had a lot of space to work thoroughly and do solid research, while, on the other, a lot of it was just deadening. I mean it didn't demand original thought. You could write down the old stuff for the tenth time and just give it a new accent. (100)

Brigitte Burmeister comments that working at the Central Institute for Literary History "was accompanied by a sort of ponderousness and a relationship to time that bothered me: it was as if you had all the time in the world to sit down and work on a project like that" (126). Clearly, some kinds of security can be stultifying.

Similarly, the system that guaranteed an existence for scholars and writers under socialism did not manage to remove hierarchical distinctions or encourage collaboration. As Simone Barck states, "It seldom happened—because the academy was isolated from teaching, our institute as well—that research scholars and university instructors did things together" (85). Dorothea Dornhof expresses her frustration: "There were prejudices at the university—that we at the academy were a bit more elite and had such a lot of time. We did have more time for research, and the

people at the university had to do more teaching. But there was very little readiness among university scholars to introduce things that we had published into their teaching" (104). Petra Boden also confirms this: "Since I've been at the Institute [for Literary History], and all the while that I was at the university, there has never been any cooperation, or if there was, it was as minimal as possible" (110). There is, of course, no reason to think that this situation was unique to socialism; but it is disappointing that a utopian society that aimed for equality did not make more progress in breaking down such boundaries.

The interviewees, regardless of political position, are adamant that censorship, although oppressive and onerous, could be gotten around in the GDR. Commenting about a book with which she expected difficulties from the censor, but that in fact was published without a hitch, Christa Ebert muses, "It may mean that in general—and I think that is the case—there was more fear than necessary. People could have probably done more in a lot of areas than they actually dared to" (121). Brigitte Burmeister states, "we were unduly anxious, and disciplined, and willing to come to terms with prevailing conditions" (130), while Helga Schubert speaks openly about "calculating the risk," especially to her family, before publishing. As Uwe Kolbe somewhat self-righteously states, "I always come back to calling the lot of us cowards. Only others more so than myself, and a lot of them especially so" (255). Overall, a picture emerges of a rather complacent and privileged intellectual elite, most of whom were, at the time of these interviews, still very interested in justifying and differentiating their own behavior.

The atmosphere of accusation and self-justification pervades discussions of the East German Writers' Union as well. Unsurprisingly, the well-situated former head of the union, Hermann Kant, describes the group as notoriously critical towards the government, maintains that only about half the members of the Writers' Union were also members of the party, and defends his own collaboration with the state with an end-justifies-the-means argument: "people forget, of course, that I was often with *them* on behalf of other people, and that I would have achieved nothing for others if *they* had been suspicious of me" (149). Renate Feyl begs to differ when she states that "the union was filled predominantly with members of the SED" (171), while Helga Schubert specifies that "more than half of the members of the Berlin Writers' Union were members of the SED, and for that reason they were always able to discuss everything beforehand" (191). Yet Feyl also comments on the union's function as an "Ersatz" public sphere: "when the Wall was built, the union was important insofar as there was no real public in the country" (170). While other sources will provide more factual information about this

institution, the contradictions presented here among different individuals' experiences and perceptions of the Writers' Union are themselves instructive.

Equally in evidence, however, is the intellectuals' refusal to participate in the discourse of the GDR as an "Unrechtsstaat," or the simple-minded equation of Stalinism with Nazism. As Karlheinz Barck argues, "I think that we should be very careful that, as critical intellectuals or scholars, we do not again allow the one to be justified by the other. . . . [That] was Nolte's tendency:

All right, let's finally stop talking about the German past; if we look at it carefully, fascism is really a result of bolschevism" (93). Yet Helga Schubert's statement gives one pause: "There was a lot that we were not allowed to compare—Nazism and Stalinism, for example. In a closed meeting, Stefan Hermlin demanded the death penalty for people who wanted to make such a comparison" (194). This makes one wonder whether resistance to the comparison, no matter how intellectually legitimate, may also be a reflex of the GDR past.

Nowhere are intellectuals' tendencies to identify with and defend, or reject and condemn, the GDR more apparent than in the Christa Wolf controversy, a constant subtext of this volume. Wolf herself, who wisely withdrew at the time, is not interviewed in the volume, but she is constantly present as a lightning-rod and her representative function, both during the GDR period and in the "Schriftstellerdebatte," is clearly recognized by most of those interviewed. As Dorothea Dornhof observes, "Christa Wolf and other writers in the GDR became, so to speak, the conscience of a nation, because we did not have a democratic public. . . . The fact that writers could assume this conscience- or medium-function is connected to the system's strange bureaucratic-administrative, and perhaps also feudal, societal structures. It was a regression to pre-capitalist times" (109). Rainer Kirsch finds that "the rules of common courtesy were . . . suspended" during the Christa Wolf debate and compares the Western attacks on her to the rhetoric used by the Stalinist cultural functionary Andrey Zhdanov: "'The intellectuals have separated themselves from the people'—Zhdanov. How often have I heard that! When I was still in the party, when I was expelled: 'You intellectuals have separated yourselves from the people.' . . . Zhdanov . . . was a bad man of course, he killed people, I know. If you were to hear his remarks today you'd say, 'That's terrible, what he said.' Yet that is precisely the way Western critics talk" (161).

Those not inclined to defend Wolf are equally frank. Hans Joachim Schädlich states acerbically, "There is a huge difference between educating a dictatorship and rejecting it" (218). Helga Schubert's assessment that Wolf was "not a dissident" but a "significant writer," that she was "on the other side," yet also not an intellectual and

even "not really an *artist*" is both self-contradictory and highly personal (197). Among the younger generation, Katja Lange-Müller rejects Christa Wolf not only for ideological and political reasons, but for aesthetic and philosophical ones as well, but there is also a personal edge throughout her diatribe: "Simply through her precise grammatical structure she creates unbelievably complicated entanglements that, as a reader, I am forced to follow only, at the end, for her to tell me that trees are green. I knew that already, without the complicated entanglements, and that annoys me because then I notice how evasive she is. She displays her effort to be just in her narrative, and I think that doesn't work. I consider the goal of a narrative justice in prose as an illusion" (241). Oddly, one of the few dispassionate voices on the topic of Christa Wolf is the one who might be expected to be most passionate: her husband, the writer and editor Gerhard Wolf, who refrains from inflammatory rhetoric and simply answers the questions that are put to him. His protest against the current debate is focused on the terms of the debate, not its leading personalities: "The terms of this questioning ought to be much more widely developed and differentiated than they are now: 'privileged,' 'non-privileged'; 'guilt,' 'non-guilt'; 'state writer,' 'non-state writer.' You don't get there with categories of this sort" (288).

Lange-Müller's somewhat nihilistic statement against Wolf seems typical of a disillusioned younger generation no longer willing to buy into the utopias of its predecessors. That utopian vision is a recurrent theme in the interviews. As Irene Selle states and many others echo, "I think utopia was especially important for the generation that was engaged in reconstruction, the one that was active after the war" (98). Utopianism was and is under attack, not just for generational-ideological reasons, but by outside historical forces as well: "Now for the first time utopians are being forced to name realistic notions and goals for society," says Heinz-Uwe Haus (50). Indeed, for some oppositional voices (such as Hans Joachim Schädlich), utopianism itself was part of the problem in the GDR: "Many intellectuals in the GDR put up with the state, because they had a utopia that corresponded verbally with the dictatorship's alleged utopia. They had, so to speak, the same utopia. . . . Most of them could only express themselves as critics of the realization of a common utopia and not as the possessors of a contrary plan, a totally different utopia" (220). Bert Papenfuß-Gorek sums up the in-your-face anti-utopian position of the younger generation when he says, "I don't find the concept 'hopeless' all that bad. It is not a negative concept. Because hope is always stubbornness, an illusion to which you abandon yourself. I can live very well without hope" (274). (Why does this recall the obstinate words of Eliza Doolittle, "I can do very well without you?")

As it turned out, denial of a utopian vision—of any

social or moral function for literature—did not protect the younger generation from further disillusionment, as became apparent when Sascha Anderson was exposed as a Stasi collaborator. Von Hallberg observes that Christa Wolf and the poets of Prenzlauer Berg formed the two poles of literary possibilities late in the GDR: “If one wanted a literature of character, one read the texts of the critical writers, chiefly Christa Wolf. But if one believed rather that art is produced by linguistic orders that have an agency of their own far more interesting than the moral character of one author, one might well prefer writers of the Prenzlauer Berg scene” (31). As von Hallberg notes, “... there were features of this application of French thought that appeared instantly problematic to me. One of these was the cultivation of indifference, then as now an extreme reaction against the tendencies of the engaged generation of Biermann and Braun.... ‘Structuralist and poststructuralist theories ... provided an alternative to Marxism-Leninism for the Prenzlauer Berg writers,’ as one apologist put it. (Von Hallberg refers to Ulf Christian Hesenfelder, “Waghalsiges Spiel im Wirbel der Phrasen,” *FAZ* 122, May 29, 1991.)

One of the questions now is how well this alternative served these writers” (24–25). An American cannot help seeing in this an echo of the controversy over Paul de Man and deconstructionism, another case in which an “amoral” mode of thought may have served to cover up for the thinker’s immoral behavior. In von Hallberg’s first interview with Anderson (before the “surprising revelations”), Anderson’s nihilistic indifference is clear: “who are we to be strong against? ... we’re in a period in which everything has become senseless. It is the senselessness of strength” (258). But there is also a veiled plea for understanding that is almost pathetic in hindsight: “if the Stasi informants are sitting down with you, it’s better than if they’re slinking around outside the door or threatening you at night ... We also knew some of them, and we used to drink together. We all drank a lot, and after we’d had a few they would tell us their side of the story as well... They needed some human warmth” (259–260). This sounds more like someone desperate to get something off his chest than an indifferent postmodernist. Although Anderson steadfastly refuses to show repentance in the later interview, instead talking himself and his interviewer in circles, it is this covert call for understanding of a “them” that is really an “I” that remains with this reader.

It is to von Hallberg’s credit that he seems to represent the interviews accurately even when they were apparently difficult; from a defensive Hermann Kant to a bristling Christoph Hein to a babbling Sascha Anderson, von Hallberg lets his readers see the rough edges in the interviews (and the interviewees). Since the translation is intended for an English-speaking audience, von Hallberg has added many endnotes that would not be necessary for

a German-speaking readership, explaining, for instance, the historical importance of Anna Seghers, Rudolf Bahro, and other figures who are well-known in Germany but not in America. The translation (by Kenneth J. Northcott) appears accurate, but sometimes makes the speakers sound stiffer than they probably are in German; for instance, “Historians’ War” (for *Historikerstreit*, 93); “reality has hauled in the black utopias” (if the original was “eingeholt,” then “caught up with would have been a better translation, 165); “publicity” where “public sphere” (*Öffentlichkeit*) was clearly meant (170). There are other such instances, but not enough to disturb most readers.

The volume will be most appreciated by those already familiar with GDR literary history and its aftermath; many of the interviews read like extended glosses on main events that are never related in detail. Von Hallberg states that his intended audience is more familiar with literary and intellectual life in the United States than in the GDR, “someone who, though curious, is not well read in the literature of the GDR.” He states that “these conversations are the record of my own education in the literary life of the GDR” (x), yet one has the sense that any really basic facts he may have had to learn have been omitted or confined to the footnotes. Von Hallberg, whose previous scholarship is largely in American poetry, really wants to make a comparison between the situation of GDR literary intellectuals and that of American academics and writers, a thesis he states most clearly in his conclusion: “The very instruments we create for working with one another—departmental structures, methodological collectives, critical journals, conferences—carry not only the promise of intellectual refinement of issues through critical exchange but also the threat of inhibiting dissent and independence, precisely because they promote conventionality and predictable intellectual discourse” (318). In my opinion, this thesis is both worthy of consideration and troublesome: worthy as description, but lacking in prescription. Von Hallberg does not say what he would like to substitute for current mechanisms of institutional and state support for literary creativity and scholarship: the “market,” with its well-known leveling effects that threaten to reduce literature to Steele and Crichton (even, increasingly, in Germany)? or the “private sector,” which will predictably be dominated by conservative-funded think tanks that encourage a conformist professionalism of their own? He seems to rely on the old liberal hope that, if he points out the problem, all right-thinking people will acknowledge and correct it of their own accord. In this way, perhaps his own attitude shows the greatest similarity between American intellectuals and (former) East German ones.

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