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Hermann Kant: Der Aufenthalt

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Der Aufenthalt. By Hermann Kant. Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1977. 600 pages. DM 10,80.

From its very beginnings, GDR literature has struggled with the themes of fascism, anti-semitism, and war. Der Aufenthalt marks a new quality in dealing with these themes, and adds new perspectives and insights (as does Christa Wolf's comparable novel Kindheitsmuster). Kant structures his story as an educational novel: Mark Niebuhr, born and raised in a small North German town, becomes a soldier in late 1944 at the age of eighteen, receives minimal training, is thrown into combat, flees, and soon is captured. Several camps and prisons constitute the "Magic Mountain" where this unheroic hero is reeducated in a slow and laborious process without the help of a deus ex machina. Kant's view of education remains dialectical and open, even somewhat sceptical, as stated in the motto, which consists of six lines from Brecht's "Messingkauf": "So bildet sich der Mensch . . . Indem er uns gleicht und indem er uns nicht gleicht."

Kant likes to tie his loosely structured novels together with a central idea. In Der Aufenthalt, the central, dramatic idea is the question of Niebuhr's identity: Did he murder a young Polish woman, or did he not? The charge of being a war criminal forces Niebuhr to think about his part in the war--first in solitary confinement, then in a larger cell shared with Polish petty criminals, and lastly, "at the bottom of the pit," in a cell crowded with Gestapo officers, SS leaders, and other Nazi charges. The Polish authorities finally establish Niebuhr's identity. Although not guilty of the murder he has been accused of, Niebuhr has come to realize how deeply he is actually involved in Hitler's war; that it was his young age more than anything else that saved him from becoming guilty of more than killing two enemy soldiers in combat, and that the roots of fascism can be traced to ordinary life, for example, to inconspicuous instances of racism. Niebuhr, at first confused, disoriented, "verwildert," has become a human being who is now ready to live an active, responsible life. In his review of Der Aufenthalt, Marvel Reich-Ranicki, the well-known West German critic, praises this novel--some political and esthetic reservations notwithstanding--as a "serious and honest book" (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, No. 133, June 11, 1977). Kant's

honesty includes the acknowledgment of flaws in Poles and Russians as well. Thus, the narrator provides several examples of traditional antisemitic feelings among Poles. This critical view keeps within certain limits, and is counterbalanced by the suggestion of changes and new beginnings: Niebuhr is told that several good Catholic parents have named their children Mordechaj after the leader of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto (417).

Formally and stylistically, Der Aufenthalt resembles Kant's earlier novels. But the general mood is more somber, the satire is sharper, and Kant's pervasive humor includes many grotesque elements. The "meandering" train of thoughts (the narrator's own expression) may be too long-winded at times. Without denying Kant's skillful use of leitmotifs in general, the reviewer feels that the recollections and recapitulations are occasionally repetitive, and some passages in the witty dialogues turn into belabored witticisms. Yet these minor shortcomings cannot impair the accomplishments of this German "Bildungsroman," and do not weaken the compelling symbolic force of many images, motifs, and scenes. We have to be grateful to Hermann Kant for the work and pain that went into this entertaining stirring, informative, and provocative confession.

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Das rote Kloster: Eine deutsche Erziehung. By Brigitte Klump. Hamburg: Hoffman und Campe, 1978. 334 pages. 26 DM.

Hotel Lux. By Ruth von Mayenburg. Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 1978. 352 pages. 32 DM.

"The red cloister" was the student name for the walled and well-guarded Institute for Journalism at Leipzig University, attended by Klump in the mid-1950's when it was the only training center in this field in the GDR. The author, born in 1935, offers her account of these years after two decades in the BRD as a cathartic effort to come to terms with that part of her life which ended when she came to the West.