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Klaus Jarmatz et al., eds.: Kritik in der Zeit. Literaturkritik der DDR

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Krabat oder die Verwandlung der Welt. Von
Jurij Brézan. Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben,
1976. 552 Seiten. DM 11,80.

Brézan weaves his novel from components of myths, fairy tales, legends, parables, science fiction and international intrigue. He thus creates a cosmology with Krabat as the central figure. Krabat suffers God's injustice on the seventh day of creation when the gifts of the earth are divided. He receives a cow, a cat, and a lark, while the knight, Reissenberg, is given a horse, land and power over men and women. However, Lucifer -- in defiance of God -- adds the girl Smjala and the Creator's traveller's staff with its depiction of Adam and Eve, the snake of curiosity and the tree of knowledge to Krabat's possessions. Thus provided, Krabat starts on his quest through time and space to rectify the Creator's injustice to men. He fights for the dominance of reason over passion and the forces of evil. His elusive goal is to vanquish fear, hunger, and greed for power and possessions resulting all too often in war. Krabat does not reach his goal, but he makes progress. While absolute power in the hands of privileged individuals is fading, the struggle for power through wealth and the development of science and technology uninhibited by moral considerations threatens anew the survival of mankind.

Brézan anchors his story in his native Sorbian landscape. Krabat originates there, as does the trumpeter Jakub, his constant companion and sensuous, artistic alter-ego, as well as the Serbins, the family furnishing the village leadership through generations. Jan Serbin, a twentieth century man, has become a bio-geneticist and received the Nobel Prize for having discovered the formula permitting control of man's genetic traits. Jan is subjected to pressure generated by an intellectual cartel of scientists wishing to use the formula for the purpose of establishing absolute power over mankind. Jan changes into Krabat, thus finding the strength to withhold his genetic discovery so "daß das Geheimnis des Lebens Geheimnis bleibt,...bis es die Menschen zur Rettung vor sich selbst nicht mehr benötigen(550)."

The novel is difficult reading; the author constantly switches time, place and perspective. His narration fluctuates from third-person to various first-persons, and his characters appear under the guise of different names in different times and places. Fictional reality blends into surrealist fantasies, abruptly shifting back to concrete situations, people, and landscapes. Warm humor alternates with biting satire, life-affirming optimism

with resignation in the face of imperfect human nature. Brézan's characters are two-dimensional in that they lack depth and development. The women in his novel are assigned the tasks of giving love, children, and support to the men.

The aim of the work is a philosophical one; it questions the meaning of the past, examines the present, and attempts to give some direction to the future. Brézan depicts the fight for freedom and dignity by the common people mainly through the history of the Sorbians, and, by implication, of all mankind. Krabat is his symbol for man's tenacious search for knowledge, and in this respect he is related to Faust. But unlike Faust, Krabat's actions are always motivated by his concern for the downtrodden of the earth; his goal, the "Land of Happiness", is forever a part of mankind's future. (For an extended review of this work see Lucia Heine, "Krabat oder die Verwandlung der Welt," in Sinn und Form, XXIX, (May/June 1977), pp. 659-667.)

- Ursula Lawson
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Kritik in der Zeit: Literaturkritik der DDR.
2nd Edition, Klaus Jarmatz, et al., eds.
Halle/Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1978.
2 vols., 453 and 485 pp. 21,-.

Appearing in its second edition, this collection of essays and statements of position represents a prodigious sampling (120 entries) of the stances taken by critics, the cultural-political hierarchy, and especially by the authors of literary works themselves toward their own native literature. Following an introductory article by chief editor Klaus Jarmatz on the interrelationship of the writer and the critic, the contributions are then organized chronologically as follows: 1945-50, 1950-60, 1960-70 (I and II), and 1970-75. The second volume, covering the period 1966-75, devotes more than half of its pagination (and roughly 30% of the collection's total volume) to the period not previously covered in the first edition (1970-75). The avowed purpose of this publication is "einen Überblick über die wichtigsten und interessantesten literatur- und kulturpolitischen Diskussionen der vergangenen dreißig Jahre zu geben." However, since the editors were operating under the constraint of not being able to increase the length of the new edition beyond that of the first, they regretfully found it necessary to eliminate many of the

articles which appeared in the original edition. The result is that the articles become more numerous as we proceed towards the present, thus tacitly reflecting the philosophy that the more recent the time period the more valid its essays in providing an overview of the "most important and most interesting" aspects of the history of GDR literary criticism. Such a methodology is surely spurious. In fact, the combination of elimination and expansion which produced this second edition may prove to be its greatest drawback. However, the chief editor's plans to publish supplementary volumes to cover each subsequent decade of GDR literary criticism is a welcome future alternative.

In deciding to include an era of criticism actually predating the formation of the GDR the editors provide us with a helpful glimpse at the work of those (e.g., Becher, Brecht, Seghers, F. Wolf, A. Zweig) who were most actively preparing the ground for a viable post-war German socialist literature. One is struck by the predominance in this section, and indeed throughout the collection, of criticism by the artists themselves, which sufficiently attests to the significant role they have played in defining, interpreting and evaluating literary production in the GDR.

The inclusion of articles dealing with controversies is one of the anthology's most interesting aspects. Such issues as the Brecht/Lukács debate, the epic/dramatic controversy in drama, the discussion of Formalism, the lyric debate, and the deliberations on Socialist satire are all brought to the fore. However, one misses the voice of such faded luminaries as Huchel, and the single article focusing attention on the most sensational, if not most controversial, work of the early 70's (Plenzdorf's Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.) is all too skimpy. There is no discussion of the innovative and high-quality dramaturgical efforts of Heiner Müller. Indeed, the entire range of essays does not devote much print to drama except in the earlier years.

The programmatic statements interspersed throughout the collection are welcome inclusions in that they serve as reminders of the cultural-political climate of the time. Speeches by Pieck and Ulbricht are offered, but any statement by Honecker, such as his address before the Eighth Party Congress in 1971, is curiously missing.

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Literarisches Klima: Ganz neue Xenien, doppelte Ausführung. By Johannes Bobrowski. Ed. by Gerhard Rostin, Postscript by Bernd Leistner, Illustrations by Klaus Ensikat. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1978. 110 pp.

Eric Trunz's note, in the Hamburg Goethe edition, to the 33rd Xenie provides a good picture of the general tone of Goethe's epigrams: "Man vermutet, 'K' sei Kosegarten und der 'Tadler' sei Tieck, doch das ist unsicher, und wieder ist alles zugleich ins Allgemeine erhoben" (I, 520). Future editors will rarely be forced to make similar statements about Bobrowski's "ganz neue Xenien". Although the personal references, to be sure, usually have general as well as specific implications, they leave little to the imagination of the reader who is familiar with the German literary scene. But if many of the references are clear now, that may not be the case in the near future. The first annotated Bobrowski edition will require a lot of space to explain lines like "Unter geteiltem Himmel tritt Ole Bienkopp die Spur der / Steine im Herbstrauch..." ("Neue Erfolgstitel," 30) and "Ganz in Weiß kommt Gaspard, am Rüsseltier-Chronometer / rückt der Zeiger..." ("Hollerer," 73), to cite but two of dozens of examples. These and other Xenien will lose their force with time, as the figures they address pass into history, including perhaps even one of my favorites, "Die Zukunft der Gruppe 47" (80). But now they are lively and current and downright fun to read.