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Kurt Batt: Widerspruch und Übereinkunft. Aufsätze zur Literatur

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Kriterien und Kritik. By Heinz Plavius. Rostock: Hinstorff, 1977. 160 pages. 3,80. - M.

This collection of essays, most of which appeared in Neue Deutsche Literatur, is preceded by a 30 page introduction in which Plavius gives contour to his studies. His major concern is the relationship between literature and reality, and this results in an apologetic for those newer GDR prose works which deviate from the established norms of socialist realism. Such works are characterized by a greater degree of subjectivity, the inclusion of fantastic elements such as parables, legends, and fairy tales, the introduction of the categories of the game and chance, an interest by authors in writing about writing, and an increased concern for GDR history. Although Plavius criticizes similar developments in the West because they represent for him the increasing alienation of the individual from society, he finds their appearance in the GDR to be commendable. He feels that writers are thereby gaining an increased understanding of the role they play in society and are communicating a heightened concept of the importance of literature to their readers. Moreover, Plavius attributes an additional cognitive function to this type of literature: it acts as a "Sinnes- und Erkenntnisorgan" since it creates "Modell...oder Gegenwirklichkeit, Zukunftsprojektion oder ideell-reale Kontour, Entwurf oder Aufforderung." All of the essays revolve around these concerns. Plavius accepts, with reservations, the importance that Fühmann's essays ascribe to myth in literature and he agrees with Fühmann that literature has a singularity of existence and function separate from science. He praises Christa Wolf's Kindheitsmuster for its pioneering attempt to come to terms with past and present by means of a mixture of narrative levels. He sees in the works of the children's author, Alfred Wellm, a productive combination of the elements of chance, social pedagogy, a bridging of generation gaps, and the creation of possible models for the future. He delineates with

appropriation the exemplary nature of three diverse works: Strittmatter's Wundertäter II, which contains introspective explorations of the author's metier, Brežan's Krabat, which presents many parables, and Seghers' Das Vertrauen, which is a straightforward historical retrospective of the events surrounding June 17, 1953. It is refreshing to note that Plavius is attempting to overcome the traditional Marxist distrust of the "experimental" and to thereby expand the parameters of the realistic mode. This endeavor is marred at times by the use of assertive reasoning and the inability to clearly distinguish between the autonomous and non-autonomous aspects of literature. Nevertheless, the book provides a useful and pleasantly composed compendium to the GDR literature of the first half of the Seventies.

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Widerspruch und Übereinkunft: Aufsätze zur Literatur. By Kurt Batt. Reclams Universal-Bibliothek, Band 753. Leipzig: Verlag Philipp Reclam jun., 1978. 384 pages. 2,50.M

Kurt Batt (1931-1975) was not the usual literary critic. Although he studied Germanistik at the University of Leipzig and received a doctorate from the University of Greifswald for a work on Anna Seghers, his brief professional life was spent as a reader for the Hinstorff-Verlag in Rostock. During those years he not only kept abreast of the latest developments in GDR literature by reading the contemporary writers Hinstorff was to publish, but he also wrote introductory essays for editions of such authors as Gotthelf and Lichtenberg, edited works, and wrote articles for such journals as Sinn und Form, Neue Deutsche Literatur, and Weimarer Beiträge. Many of the latter articles appeared in a Reclam Universal-Bibliothek volume titled Revolte intern. The present Reclam collection of his essays, edited and published three years after his death by Konrad Reich and the prominent GDR author Franz Fühmann, gathers twenty pieces of Batt's work, including

fourteen essays published elsewhere between 1961 and 1975 and six from his literary estate.

This collection shows the wide range of Batt's literary interests and his remarkable erudition in German literature. They are organized into four groups. Group I consists of a short sketch of and by the author written in the third person and an essay on his theory of criticism. His orientation is Marxist but relatively free of the cultural politics of many of his contemporaries.

Group II includes eight essays on German authors and/or their works from a long piece on Reinke der Fuchs to a reply to a S. Fischer Verlag "Rundfrage" on Thomas Mann. The essays on Lichtenberg and Gott-helf are precise and offer valuable insights into their work. Two essays on Lion Feuchtwanger deal first with Feuchtwanger's theory (and defense) of historical writing and then with an example of it in his historical novel Die Fuchse im Weinberg. This group of essays is founded out with a convincing argument for "Mundartdichtung in der Nationalliteratur" and a delightful piece on "Barlach als Epistolograph". The six essays in Group III deal with Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Anna Seghers, exile literature, and Expressionism. The title for the collection, Widerspruch und Übereinkunft, is taken from the theme of one of the major essays -- a discussion about the differences of opinion between Lukács and Seghers on the subject of experience and form as documented in their correspondence between 1938 and 1939. In these essays, the weakest in the collection, Batt is indifferent to Brecht, enthusiastic about Seghers, and critical of Lukács. In five of the six essays Lukács comes under attack mainly for his conservatism and failure to appreciate the importance of social change in imperialism and its effects on the artist.

The four essays in Group IV were found in Batt's literary estate. The first is no more than a review of a book by Heinz Plavius about contemporary FRG literature. The remaining three are devoted to the development of GDR literature. Unfortunately, the editors were careless in their treatment of this part of Batt's estate and either failed to notice or ignored the duplication of long sections of text

from one essay to another. The three essays could have yielded a single masterful account of GDR literature and a fitting capstone to this worthwhile and impressive collection.

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Zur Literatur und Literaturwissenschaft der DDR. Edited by Gerd Labrousse in Amsterdam. Beiträge zur neueren Germanistik. Band 7. Amsterdam: Rodopi. 1978. 300 pages.

This volume appears in a distinguished series of Amsterdam Studies on recent German Literature. The articles contained in it are of a uniformly high quality and reflect a serious interest in the once ignored literature of the GDR. The first two articles, by Labrousse and Hoogeveen, wrestle with the theoretical definitions of GDR literature. Labrousse points to the immediate questions for western critics, (i.e. can we in fact actually understand GDR literature given our own conceptions of literature?), while Hoogeveen cannot seem to reach a clear position. Indeed, aside from the very detailed and useful survey of works dealing with all aspects of GDR literature for the past twenty years which makes up the first third of this lengthy conclusion or series of conclusions. What seems to be intended is an intricate questioning of how in fact we in the West can understand GDR literature especially with reference to its own conception of itself and despite the most recent sophisticated theories of reception in the West. I found large sections of the article stylistically too difficult to be able to ascertain what answers Hoogeveen might be offering. While I am certain that his article contains many important insights into theoretical positions in comprehending the phenomenon of GDR literature, the article is for me otherwise an example of the most mannered German academic style which seems intent on making more difficult that, which is already difficult enough.