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Hermann Kant: Die Summe. Eine Begebenheit

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low-key homosexual "scene" in East Berlin, traces the etymology and practice of onanism, reports on visits to FKK beaches, and wonders aloud about Lautrémont's sexual practices, all subjects perhaps too bawdy for the more prim Academy members. With regard to sexual matters, Berkes points out that the time has come to consider the thoughts of one of Lautrémont's prominent contemporaries, Friedrich Engels, who in 1883 declared: "Es wird nachgerade Zeit, daß wenigstens die deutschen Arbeiter sich gewöhnen, von Dingen, die sie täglich oder nächtlich selbst treiben, von natürlichen, unentbehrlichen und äußerst vergnüglichen Dingen ebenso unbefangen zu sprechen wie die romanischen Völker, wie Homer und Plato, wie Horaz und Juvenal wie das Alte Testament und die 'Neue Rheinische Zeitung'." In line with Engels, Berkes does not shy away from sketching his nocturnal pleasures, be these dreams, fantasies, or reality, and relates such experiences in modest, almost inconspicuous terms.

For all this, Berkes' diary is readable; unfortunately, he includes the driest details of an otherwise uneventful Alltag, many of which burden the reader's endurance. One cannot be exactly bored by Eine schlimme Liebe, but neither can one enthusiastically recommend it.

John Brawner
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Die Summe. Eine Begebenheit. By Hermann Kant. Berlin: Rütten und Loening, 1987, 174 pages.

The first-person narrator of Kant's short novel tells about his participation in a culture conference that was organized by the signatory states of the Helsinki Accords and held in Budapest. Chief of the "Schöpferisches Büro" in the GDR's foreign office, Hans Schleede represents his country in the introductory sessions in which diplomats experimentally simulate the running of a new autonomous organization called KUSTIPEST. Later, artists are to replace the diplomats and run the agency themselves.

The seemingly simple task facing Schleede and his colleagues is complicated by the political diversity of

the participant nations, representing in addition to NATO and the Warsaw Pact neutral states such as Switzerland, Finland, and Austria. As a result, the conference quickly splits into three blocks. Thus in order to determine which nations are to be represented in the nine-member steering board, the participants are forced to accord each block three slots and to allow each block to elect its own delegates.

Once such key operational matters are sorted out, the diplomats make room for the artists, and Schleede, fatigued by the often senseless wrangling about matters of little substance, heads for home.

So far so good. But this simple retelling of the plot says little about the novel's true character. Die Summe exudes none of the embattled optimism evident in Kant's earlier works. Chair of the Writers Union for many years and author of respected novels such as Die Aula and Das Impressum, Kant here takes aim at the sad status of culture-state relations he sees in both the GDR and the West. Governments send to KUSTIPEST representatives who conform to what culture administrators and bureaucrats imagine to be purveyors of good art. Thus the United States delegate is a literature manager who made his name publishing the magazine Reader's Diet, a collection of easily digestible prose. And the GDR's delegate is a little-known manager of an obscure puppet theater. (The choice of a puppeteer probably reflects Kant's experience of how his government handles its own culture.) Both East and West, Schleede muses, envision a culture that is "Akzeptabel von Island bis Malta, einleuchtend im Weißen Haus und am Roten Platz, wertvoll nach Vorsitzendenmaß und von Kanzlern auch" (163).

Alas, Kant's dismay about the inimical intrusion of the state into culture is overshadowed by his clichéd characterization of the participants in EURO CULT. Thus the crew-cut American representative Mr. Fullbacker, who repeatedly confuses GDR and FRG, is forever pulling out a laptop computer to clarify which country belongs to what block. Schleede describes the Austrian delegate as a "Wagner-Sängerin" (33) and an "üppige Schönheit," (102) while the woman representing Greece is of "edelster Gestalt" (40). Holland's representative is an exemplar of "seeluftgereifter Weiblich-

keit" (97). She also smokes a meerschaum pipe. Marcel Unterbrucher from Switzerland looks like a mixture of "Bankgeheimnis, Rotes Kreuz und Bernhardiner Hund" (133). Kant's characters become cheap caricatures.

Kant no doubt intended his sardonically humorous book to be a satire of the real-life conference on culture organized in Budapest in 1985 by the signatories of the Helsinki Accords. This meeting, too, broke into political blocks and was often bogged down by arcane questions of protocol. But Kant's blithe attempt to gloss over serious problems such as censorship and state control of the arts by either ignoring them or seeking to defuse them through humor allows the reader no insight whatsoever into the workings of the conference.

Moreover, Kant's narrative fails even to allude to the counter-conference in 1985 sponsored by dissident Hungarian intellectuals which was attended by writers and artists from 13 different nations. They included names such as Susan Sontag, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and Amos Oz. Hungarian officials attempted to prevent this meeting by refusing access to a hotel hall the organizers had rented, forcing the participants to meet in a private apartment.

All in all Die Summe is a surprisingly bad book. It trivializes serious issues and thoughtlessly seeks to shape humor by playing on old but still divisive ethnic and national stereotypes. No less important, the novel, which drags along with little apparent plot and no engaging personal conflicts, is simply not good reading.

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Der Teufelskreis und andere Stücke. Ausgewählte Werke in Einzelausgaben. By Hedda Zinner. Edited by Eckhard Petersohn. Berlin: Buchverlag Der Morgen, 1986. 654 pages.

This is a volume of six plays by a versatile author, whom Peter Demetz describes as "still of the Weimar generation" yet also as a successful playwright of GDR "establishment theater" (After the Fires: Recent Writing

in the Germanies, Austria and Switzerland. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986, p.236). This volume of plays is not intended as a critical edition; the text contains a one and a half page afterword in which the editor reveals much helpful information: the publication and first performance dates of these dramas, which belong primarily to the decade between 1950 and 1960; the fact that Ms. Zinner herself selected, scrutinized, and authorized the plays for the present edition; some information about her other plays (there are fourteen); and a word about her memoirs entitled Auf dem roten Teppich: Erfahrungen, Gedanken, Impressionen (first edition 1978, new expanded edition in the same series as these plays 1986). In addition to the remarks of the editor, there is a list of other works by Zinner including seven novels, one volume of short stories, a volume of Fabeln, Lieder, Gedichte und Nachdichtungen in addition to her autobiography. All these volumes are published by the same house, most in more than one edition, and all testify to her success in the GDR. Ms. Zinner has also written children's theater scripts as well as radio and television dramas.

Of the six plays reproduced here, one is a comedy entitled Was wäre wenn..., which poses the interesting question: what would happen if the citizens of a GDR border town were led--or misled--to believe that their region was being given to the Federal Republic and that the nobility would be returning to the town castle? Within the typical conventions of three-act comedy--lovers' misunderstandings, heroes and villains from various social niveaus within the classless society, and eventual resolution of all conflicts by marriage--Zinner creates ample occasion to present a political message while providing light entertainment.

Another play, Lützower, is the only historical drama. It is presented in verse form, striking a rather surprising note. The action takes place in March 1813 in Saxony and the play echoes historical dramas of other German playwrights. Despite numerous shocking incidents and reversals for the cause of freedom, the play delivers the hopeful assurance: "Nichts ist umsonst. Der Funke hat gezündet" (433).

The other four plays, entitled Caféhaus Payer, General Landt, Der Teufelskreis, and the most recent play, Ravensbrücker Ballade, all treat the horrors, some