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## J.H. Reid: Writing Without Taboos. The New East German Literature

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Rathenow, Lutz. *DER WOLF: und die widerspenstigen Geißlein*. Illustrations by Lothar Otto. Halle: Postreiterverlag, 1990. 17 pp.

A persistent problem for any critic of GDR literature has always been how far to go in understanding texts politically. On the one hand, authors like Christa Wolf, Volker Braun, and many others have repeatedly complained about their work being judged on the basis of politics, and most especially about being pegged as "dissident." On the other hand, their themes and public statements have been so obsessively concerned with political issues that I have sometimes wondered what else they could possibly expect. Faced with apparently contradictory expectations, it was extremely difficult for a critic to be fair.

Now I am finding political messages in *DER WOLF: und die widerspenstigen Geißlein* by Lutz Rathenow, a humorous story for children. Some people may feel that I am overinterpreting a simple tale, and that is certainly possible. Nevertheless, political concerns do penetrate even more intimate aspects of GDR life, so it is by no means absurd that they should be found in books for children. And, even if the interpretation turns out to be my fantasy rather than the author's, the idea may still be of interest.

The story by Rathenow is a playful variant of a famous fairy tale by Grimm. A nanny goat leaves home, and her seven little kids wreak havoc with their mischievous play. The wolf comes, and the kids, knowing their mother will be angry about the mess, beg him to swallow them, so they can hide. The wolf proves reluctant and the kids eventually kill him with their games. The little goats then leave home. When the mother returns to find them gone, she considers going to live in the zoo. Instead, however, she decides to look for the kids following their trail of mischief.

The nanny goat, a lover of order and discipline, could be understood as representing the GDR. The wolf, delightfully drawn by Lothar Otto, in a stereotypical Alpine costume, could represent West Germany, big and powerful yet helpless for all that. Wolves were a sort of totem animal for the Nazis, and GDR propaganda often identified West Germany with National Socialism. The mischievous kids might represent GDR citizens, childish but, largely for that reason, not under the control of any government.

History has now provided an ending for the story a bit different from what the author envisaged. The wolf has indeed swallowed the kids and perhaps the nanny goat as well. But no doubt the kids continue to play their childish games, and their adventures will not stop in his belly.

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Reid, J. H. *Writing Without Taboos. The New East German Literature*. New York: Oswald Wolff Books/Berg, 1990. x + 258 pp.

The title of this study by J. H. Reid, a Reader in German at the University of Nottingham, is a clear reference to Erich Honecker's 1971 speech in which the former SED party chief, just having assumed power in the GDR, proclaimed that there were to be "no taboos" in the arts, thus relaxing the hitherto strict cultural policies of his predecessor, Walter Ulbricht. Reid's study focuses then on the parameters of GDR literature following this pronouncement. The manuscript of the book was finished before the tumultuous events in the fall of 1989, and in the "Preface," written in December of that year, Reid points out that some of his prognostications about GDR literature will have to be regarded as historical. Nonetheless, the demise of the GDR put a cap on the Honecker era, making Reid's book one of the first complete, albeit

tentative, assessments of the literature written during that period. In this regard I do have a reservation I will discuss below. To back up his arguments, Reid concentrates on prose works, but references to drama (above all to Heiner Müller) are made, and, where appropriate, poems are also quoted.

Chapter 1, "Congruence and Divergence," addresses the question of the GDR's identity within the context of its literature and in relation to the literature of the other German-speaking countries, especially West Germany. "Writers, Politicians and Taboos," chapter 2, traces the often rocky road travelled together by writers and cultural politicians in the GDR between the dogmatic days of socialist realism and those of fewer taboos. In "Beyond Formalism," chapter 3, the aesthetics leading up to and during the time period in question are explored. Starting essentially with Christa Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968) and ending with Brigitte Burmeister's novel, *Anders oder Vom Aufenthalt in der Fremde* (1987), Reid illustrates the considerable measure of aesthetic independence GDR literature achieved from the conventional forms of socialist realism. In the remaining chapters, Reid leaves aesthetics and concentrates on the content of the Honecker era literature, viewing it from different perspectives. The title of chapter 4, "Difficulties Crossing the Plain," refers to Brecht's early postwar poem, "Wahrnehmung," which had characterized the "difficulties of the mountains" as having been overcome, i.e., socialism had been established in at least a rudimentary form, and now, in crossing the plain, it was a matter of the complex process of refining it. It is Christoph Hein's *Der fremde Freund* (1982) which sums up most completely for Reid the themes of this chapter, namely the outstanding social issues of the GDR and the existential aspirations of the individual. "How Did We Become As We Are?," chapter 5, investigates one of the areas of the past to which GDR authors have often turned their attention, the Third Reich. Reid most closely analyzes Jurek Becker's *Jakob der Lügner* (1969) and *Der Boxer* (1976), Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* (1976) and Hermann Kant's *Der Aufenthalt* (1977) as significant examples in this regard. The GDR's Stalinist past and how it relates to the present is the focus of chapter 6. "Stalinism Past and Present." Quite appropriately, Reid offers the most detailed analyses of Christoph Hein's *Horns Ende* (1985) and Werner Heiduczek's *Tod am Meer* (1977), a novel certainly deserving of more attention than it has received in the past by literary scholars of the GDR. "Prussians, Saxons and Others," chapter 7, takes a look at many GDR writers' interest in the more remote past of German history. Reid is quick to point out, however, that GDR writers often used this past to allude to the present. With regard to the Prussians, Reid concentrates on Martin Stade's *Der König und sein Narr* (1975), a novel that deals with the relationship between Frederick William I and the philosopher, Jacob Paul Gundling. Joachim Walther's *Bewerbung bei Hofe* (1982) is the novel Reid has chosen to analyze most closely regarding the Saxons. It tells the story of Johann Christian Günther's failed attempt to become a poet at the Dresden court of August the Strong. "En Route to Utopia," the final chapter, inquires about what remained of the socialist dream in the works of GDR writers during the time period of the study. In such works as Irmtraud Morgner's *Amanda* (1983), Wolf's *Kassandra* (1983) and *Störfall* (1987), and Helga Königsdorf's *Respektloser Umgang* (1987), Reid explores the increasing scepticism toward the scientific-technical revolution. Whereas for Reid these works still contained utopian aspirations, the GDR's science fiction was replete with dystopian elements. In this connection Reid pays particular attention to Fritz Rudolf Fries' *Verlegung eines mittleren Reiches* (1984) and Franz Fühmann's *Saiäns-Fiktschen* (1981). It is Fühmann's collection of short stories that Reid sees as having manifested to the greatest degree the

development of GDR literature during the years covered by the study. With its critical portrayal of the potential future of socialism (and capitalism), its satire on the rewriting of history to suit ideology, and its insistence on the individual as opposed to the collective, *Saiäns-Fiktschen* is far from the GDR literature written before the Honecker era under the strict dictates of socialist realism. Taboos remained, of course, given the Biermann affair of 1976 and the literary works banned under Honecker. The notes at the end of each chapter provide the German original of the quotes Reid has translated into English in his text. Appended to his book is an extensive bibliography of primary (also including English translations of GDR texts) and secondary sources, and an index.

It is the index which will be of much value to those interested in GDR literature who wish to use Reid's study for refreshing their memory of the themes in the major works of GDR literature written during the period in question. However, by no means is it my intention to relegate Reid's efforts to the status of a reference work. Although *Writing Without Taboos* concentrates on the Honecker era, in many ways it forms an English counterpart to Wolfgang Emmerich's *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR* (1981 and 1989). Its essayistic style free of too much esoteric jargon makes for an eminently enjoyable and informative study. However, whereas Emmerich proceeds chronologically through GDR literature, Reid does so horizontally. From the thematic perspective of each chapter, he looks at all of GDR literature during the Honecker era. Thus, the same prose work may be mentioned and analyzed more than once as it relates to the themes of the various chapters. The chapters can be read autonomously, but reading them all together makes for a broad understanding of GDR literature after the taboo speech.

One might question Reid's apparent eagerness to have his study published before the direction of the GDR's political development in the fall of 1989 became more evident. The patience of another year (this is of course easy to say on my part!) and a corresponding addition to the manuscript could have included that final phase of literary production before the country's demise. Although this was no longer the literature of the Honecker era per se, it was not completely free of taboos. Including a final chapter from this perspective would have shed additional light on what ultimately still remained taboo during the time preceding the *Wende*.

I would like to add one further criticism of Reid's treatment of the year 1968. Although it is quite appropriate to focus on *Nachdenken über Christa T.* as the advent of a new GDR literature, Günter de Bruyn's *Buridans Esel* of the same year should have deserved more than just a mention in passing. Many of the themes in Wolf's novel are common to de Bruyn's as well. Along the same lines, *Christa T.* did not come about in a vacuum. It was preceded by such novels as Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel*, Erwin Strittmatter's *Ole Bienkopp* (both 1963) and Erik Neutsch's *Spur der Steine* (1964), all of which demonstrated initial cracks in the hitherto solid foundations of socialist realism. Reid does mention all three novels and briefly discusses Wolf's earlier work. I believe, however, that a more detailed discussion would have done more complete justice to tracing the development of GDR literature under Honecker. After all, as Reid himself admits, Honecker's taboo speech merely gave blessing to literary developments already going on in the GDR.

I had some problems with Reid's placement of commas, but he presumably adhered to British English convention. The publisher's job with the book is impeccable. I discovered no printing errors.

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Wolf, Markus. *Die Troika. Geschichte eines nichtgedrehten Films. Nach einer Idee von Konrad Wolf.* Berlin/Weimar: Aufbau, 1989 (and Düsseldorf: Classen, 1989), 352 p.

As the subtitles indicate, *Die Troika* is Markus Wolf's attempt to realize an uncompleted project of his brother, the filmmaker Konrad Wolf, who died of cancer in 1982: to tell the life stories of three (actually four) boyhood friends, who, in the foreign environment of Stalin's Moscow of the 1930s, forged a lasting bond of friendship despite their differing backgrounds: Konrad Wolf (Koni) himself, son of physician/dramatist Friedrich Wolf, who, as a Jew and Communist, had sought exile in the USSR in 1933; Victor Fischer (Vitja), son of the American journalist Louis Fischer, who, a Soviet sympathizer, had moved to the USSR in the late 1920s and wrote for various liberal American newspapers; and Lothar Wloch (Lotka), son of the Berlin blue-collar worker and Communist activist Wilhelm Wloch, who continued his antifascist resistance from his new base in Moscow after 1933.

Konrad Wolf's film idea, which, according to his brother, dominated his mind and emotions in the months--even years--before his death, was to treat three *Schnittpunkte* in the lives of these friends: their common childhood/teenage years (1933-39/41) in Moscow; their chance meeting again in Berlin in 1945--one of the "horses" of the troika, Vitja, is replaced here by his older brother Jura (George Fischer); and the reunion of the three (four)--as 50-year-olds--in the United States in 1975.

The fascination of the idea derives from the very different (both outer and inner) development of the troika members, the direction of which was predetermined by their parents' and their own experiences in the USSR. Disillusioned by the Stalinist purges and then the Hitler-Stalin pact, Louis Fischer turned his back on the USSR, taking his family back to the United States, where his two sons were "Americanized"; both served in the US army during WW II and were part of the American occupation force in Germany in the immediate postwar period. A victim of the Stalinist purges, the antifascist activist Wilhelm Wloch died in Soviet imprisonment in 1941, with the result that his widow returned to Nazi Germany with her children: the "middle horse" of the troika, Lothar, fought in the *Wehrmacht*--on the Soviet front. Of the three families, only the Wolfs remained in the USSR and maintained their allegiance to the Soviet Union. Konrad Wolf returned to Germany in the spring of 1945 as an officer of the Red Army, even serving briefly as the mayor of Soviet-occupied Bernau (near Berlin). The boyhood friends had become "der Amerikaner," "der Deutsche," and "der Russe." The American (George Fischer) later went to Harvard and became an "establishment" professor of Soviet Studies; the German--Lothar--founded a construction company in West Berlin, profiting--albeit with a guilty conscience--from the postwar economic boom; the "Russian" Konrad Wolf assumed an active role in the construction of the German socialist state, becoming a leading figure in GDR cultural life and eventually president of the *Akademie der Künste*.

Konrad Wolf's work on the troika idea began in 1977, in the aftermath of the Biermann expatriation. It is clear from conversations with Wolf and comments of scriptwriter Angel Wagenstein documented in the book that Wolf intended to present the positions of all three men, without prejudgement. The result, which no doubt would have been highly controversial and may well have languished in the film archives, would have been both a gripping story and an important pre-Gorbachevian contribution to the opening up of GDR society: a critical look at Stalinist society and a juxtaposition of Eastern and Western points of view.

To reconstruct the three *Schnittpunkte*, Markus Wolf evidently worked from notes, photographs, and tape recordings contained in