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## Günther Rüter: Greif zur Feder, Kumpel. Schriftsteller, Literatur und Politik in der DDR 1949-1990

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Rüter, Günther. *Greif zur Feder, Kumpel: Schriftsteller, Literatur und Politik in der DDR 1949-1990*. Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1991. 221 pp.

Günther Rüter's book *Greif zur Feder, Kumpel: Schriftsteller, Literatur und Politik in der DDR 1949-1990*, is both a brief history of GDR literature and an attack on the premise that the proper relationship of literature and politics is an overt rather than indirect one. The book is organized chronologically and covers the periods of GDR literature now generally recognized as the essential "epochs" of the country's brief literary and political history from 1945 to the founding of the country in 1949; the years of its early history as a state from 1949 to the 17th of June, 1953; the period of the first so-called "thaw" under Ulbricht to the Bitterfelder Weg; the immediate post-wall period; and finally, the Honecker years from 1971 to the collapse of the country in 1989.

The author's narration of the country's story and its literary history should be familiar enough to scholars of the GDR. Many of the anecdotal notes concerning the GDR's literary personalities like Brecht, Seghers, Huchel, and Janka are by now also familiar to those who work on the culture of the former GDR.

At times the text reads like a startled outsider's view of literary developments further imbued with what is by now that unavoidable clarity of vision which allows Rüter to see much of the period from 1946 to 1961 as an example of cultural failures and hypocrisies. There are few allowances made for that peculiar purity of belief which invaded the psyches of so many in the post-WW II era in Germany. That ideological blinkeredness presumably stemmed at least in part from the conviction held by many of either side of the former iron curtain that anything would be preferable to having the Nazis back again. Thus, Brecht is astonishingly characterized by Rüter as lacking analytical ability when he refused to support the revolt of 1953 and accepted instead the SED's explanation of its origins:

Diese Haltung Brechts ist wenig überzeugend. Sie erinnert eher daran, in einer verworrenen Situation nach einem Strohalm zu greifen, statt zu analysieren, wie es zum Aufstand der Arbeiter kam. Ganz in der Lesart der Partei vertrat Brecht die Auffassung, der Arbeiteraufstand wäre eine von westlichen Banden angezettelte faschistische Konterrevolution gewesen. (68)

Brecht's behavior during the June days and thereafter has certainly puzzled many critics and admirers

alike, but few would suggest that that wiley man lacked analytical ability whatever the reasons for his reticence may have been.

Hermlin and Seghers are subjected to similar scrutiny which, though familiar in western critical discourse for some generations, already has often been accompanied, at least in the case of Brecht, by some more reflection on the peculiarities of these individuals' overall personalities and their political expressions.

Rüter's citation of Janka's view of Seghers' lack of courage -- "Ein wenig Mut hätte ihrem Ruf nicht geschadet und ihre Position nicht gefährdet." (83) -- is more convincing about the underlying fear and confusion which had then already permeated the GDR in cultural as well as in broader political spheres. The might of the totalitarian state did not then confine itself to exiling its opponents but instead incarcerated them as it did Janka. Dealing with this apparatus of terror has always been tremendously intimidating and the numbers of those who actively resisted has always been small, in the GDR, in Germany, and in the rest of the world.

Rüter's treatment of the rather Maoist "Bitterfelder Weg" movement, the attempts by the Ulbricht regime to create solidarity between workers and intellectuals, is a useful review of that period, one of the most famous and least successful in GDR and socialist culture in general. While many of the writers and artists recruited for this "leap into labor" appeared at various symposia, conferences, and party diets, few actually appeared at the workplaces which Bitterfeld was to have symbolized. Indeed, at this same period artists and intellectuals as well as other leading representatives of medicine and other technologies were provided with some of the regime's better and segregated housing leading to that failure of the intellectuals at many levels to maintain a true contact with the masses that they were to have represented and served. The legacy of that separation came home to roost in the days following the 1989 appeals by a group of undoubtedly sincere intellectuals to preserve the GDR as a socialist state, appeals which were resoundingly rejected by the masses.

Rüter's cruel and satiric selection of illustrations -- mostly depicting literary figures together with some high ranking party functionary at a ceremony so familiar in the GDR political and cultural landscape -- is in some ways more evocative of the relationship he is castigating between literature and politics in the GDR than are his often more schoolmasterly written assertions about that relationship.

Schriftsteller, die sich in den Dienst der Politik stellen, gefährden ihre Unabhängigkeit und Chronistenpflicht. Dies ist besonders der Fall, wenn sie einer radikalen Weltanschauungspartei, einem autoritären oder gar totalitären Regime ihre Reverenz erweisen. (13)

Such sentiments with which many certainly might agree are further promulgated by statements like:

Um wie vieles einfacher gestaltet sich demgegenüber das Leben eines Schriftstellers in einer freiheitlichen, liberalen Gesellschaftsordnung. (14)

Or:

Der Schriftsteller ist seinem Wesen nach kompromißlos. Der Politiker, der sich dem Kompromiß "verschließt" würde sich damit in vielen Fällen unmittelbar der Gewalt verschreiben. Demgegenüber schenkte die Politik in der Bundesrepublik den Literaten in kaum nennenswertem Umfang Aufmerksamkeit. (16)

This would come as a surprise to Böll, Grass, or Enzensberger, for example. But Rüter's point should not be forgotten in the midst of his often too didactically phrased assertions about the advantages of free societies. Writers in the GDR did have great difficulties dealing with the politics of their country, and few of them have emerged into the post-GDR period with untarnished laurels, including some who managed to leave for the West by good or bad fortune even before the collapse of 1989. Enzensberger after all suggested in the issue of *Granta* provocatively entitled "Krauts" that those who engage in the public debate in Germany are doomed to be muddled up by that engagement, a reckoning which has been true from Heine to Wolf.

More disturbing perhaps is the author's notion of a "politische Enthaltensamkeit der Literatur in Westdeutschland" (42ff.). Of course, it is clear what the author means. In comparison to the "Indienstnahme" of GDR literature and its producers by the state, no such apparent integration of culture and state occurred at that level of direct influence in West Germany. One hears almost a certain wistfulness in Rüter's otherwise more often hostile text, as if the very predicaments of the GDR which got many of its major cultural figures into those troubles that they individually and collectively still face today were risks worth taking -- providing, of course, that the risks did not culminate in any real consequences or bring about any real personal dangers. That is unquestionably the great advantage of the political disempowerment of literature in the

West, that its producers are, if uninfluential in the public sphere beyond their level of income, at least rarely made politically and criminally liable for their productions.

Rüter approaches the dilemmas of former GDR writers today in his subsequent treatment of Christa Wolf. He finds her work -- even *Der Geteilte Himmel* -- worthy of critical praise and the author worthy of credit for her courage and her leadership in the GDR, and he is especially appreciative of her work of "Vergangenheitsbewältigung": "Vor allem ist es aber Christa Wolf zu verdanken, Vergangenheit und Gegenwart miteinander verknüpft zu haben. Sie tat dies mit ihrem umfangreichen Roman *Kindheitsmuster* 1979 ..." (143). Rüter's subsequent appraisal of Wolf during the events leading to the collapse of the Honecker regime is more questioning and echoes much of the recent West German discussion of the writer:

Christa Wolf lud Verantwortung auf sich, weil sie sich der Solidarität mit ihren Kollegen, denen Unrecht geschah, verweigerte und ein politisches System an herausgehobener Stelle unterstützte, das die Menschen zwang, in Lüge und Unfreiheit zu leben. (122)

The text treats the later periods of GDR literature thoroughly. It is also filled with quotations from literary texts and from political figures none of which is more telling, perhaps, than the brief citation from Erich Honecker's otherwise far more voluminous writings: "Unsere DDR ist ein sauberer Staat." (117)

These quotations together with the illustrations mentioned earlier, would have been ideologically telling enough to provide the verdicts which Rüter is otherwise often at too much pedagogical pain to diffuse among his readers. Some readers may find these instructions about art under totalitarian and free regimes rather painfully naive. Nevertheless, the reader will also find this book a useful overview of the major events and figures of the GDR's literary and political history. Rüter does not agree with the premises of the GDR's literary theory and theoreticians, as well as many producers, that there is an inextricable linkage between literature and politics, something that is for western thinking too overt and superficial a level. The results of that combination of literature and politics in the GDR were for Rüter and many others questionable in many cases and at worst reduced the literature of the GDR to a footnote in German literary history similar to the canonical footnote status of the literature of

"Junges Deutschland" despite some heroic attempts to render that literature readable in today's context.

Reading the latter part of his book, some may feel that the author himself is somewhat bemused by the commitment of the writers to the state even when they opposed that state as did Kunert, Kunze, Biermann, and others, all of whom are quoted and referred to often. Even their opposition made the political a central part of their literary oeuvre. If the book stimulates its readers to engage with the question about the actual nature of the ideological and its concomitant political formulations in the realm of literature it will have served an even more useful purpose than being another western representation of the awful GDR.

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Pannen, Stefan. *Die Weiterleiter. Funktion und Selbstverständnis ostdeutscher Journalisten*. Köln: Edition Deutschland Archiv im Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1992. 227 pp.

At its foundation in September, 1989, as East Germany was coming apart at the seams, New Forum issued a proclamation whose very first sentence was not a call for free elections or the reorganization of the economy or the resignation of the government and the "Politbüro" or the freedom to travel, but rather for an end to the breakdown in communications between state and society, to the sorry condition of journalism in the country. By all accounts, the men and women who operated the media were, next to the people who ran the government or worked for the Stasi, the least liked group in the GDR. Lutz Rathenow's criticism of the profession was merciless: journalistic activity was simply a synonym for mendacity, opportunism, and sheer boredom. Christoph Hein's was devastatingly ironic: at the 10th Writers' Congress in 1987 he thanked the media for turning people off to them, thereby increasing the sale of books. And the person-in-the-street's was anecdotal: an East German applies for a travel permit to the GDR, and as the astonished "Vopo" points out that he is already there, he explains that he wants to visit the other GDR, the one he keeps reading about in the papers.

Stefan Pannen's book is a highly informative attempt to see the world of the GDR journalists from the inside out. To ascertain what their own world was like and what they thought about themselves, he interviewed 22 of them and scrutinized some 110 novels and stories by 82 GDR authors, many of them with journalistic experience. Pannen is quick to point out that the East German journalists were caught between a rock and a hard place. The "Stasi" knew about the rotten state of the nation and reported the facts to the government in intimate detail; on the whole, the party functionaries closed their eyes to the conditions of real existing socialism and embellished things in their speeches and plans; the journalists, who were generally as informed as the Stasi, were not allowed to pass on the truth, but, like the party, glossed over and embellished. Their dual function as part of the state apparatus is epitomized in the term Pannen uses to refer to them in the title of his book. It was their job to transmit in a form suitable for the masses the information given to them from on high "Weiter-leiter" and to be instruments of enlightenment "An-leiter."

In their dual role as professionals who were not supposed to tell lies and as servants of the regime