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Helga Königsdorf: Die Entsorgung der Großmutter. Roman

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BOOK REVIEWS

the GDR. Instead of writing plays, he was elected President of the East Berlin *Akademie der Künste* for a short while until its dissolution, directed plays and Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, and filled various senior positions in the *Berliner Ensemble*. He also continued to give interviews. In *Gesammelte Irrtümer III* the focus moves away from the theater into the contemporary situation of Germany, and more pompously, of the world. The mood changes from a playful and often comic appraisal of his works and the theater in which they are staged to an elder statesman's pontifications on things he does not really understand. *Ich bin ein Landvermesser* more often than not falls into this latter mode.

Müller and Kluge discuss the position of Stalin in Russia's collective unconscious, the all-encompassing and all-devouring mechanisms of democracy, the experience of the First World War, and the mind-altering qualities of LSD. There is also, on a more positive note, lengthy exploration of the role and function of myth (especially of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), and Müller's hopes for a new form of epic theater. The problem is that even when Müller is talking about his craft and the types of theater that appeal to him, the opinions are easily found in material published prior to this volume. Anecdotes are wheeled out for another airing, formulations sound hackneyed. There are, of course, moments of originality and sparks of new ideas. Sadly for the reader, they are few, far between and underdeveloped by Kluge.

Kluge is not the ideal interlocutor for Müller. Although he is no sycophant, he is certainly not a combatant who struggles with and challenges Müller's pronouncements. His gentle tone fails to keep his partner in check and allows the occasional excursus to ramble on into tiresome conjecture. He does, however, give an interesting account of the interviews in the foreword to the book, and his organization of the material is refreshing. Rather than following a simple chronology by starting with the first interview and finishing with the last, Kluge applies a montage technique. We start with an interview given while Müller is convalescing after an operation to remove his cancerous gullet. We then move backwards and forwards in time until we reach an interview that took place shortly before Müller's death at the end of 1995. The achronological juxtaposition of the conversations creates an uncertainty in the reader that is most welcome in the book. Müller's views on certain areas, including, quite pointedly, his own mortality, are temporally disturbed. They confront and question each other, and provide contrasts that a strict chronology would ignore.

All the same, passing biographical interest is a high price to pay for a book that all too often restates old views. The alluring title, which draws on K., the central character in Kafka's *Das Schloß*, seems little more than a marketing ploy—it is neither explored nor remarked upon by either speaker after its brief appearance at the end of the second

dialogue. That the volume appeared shortly after Müller's death also seems to point to a triumph of commercialism over content.

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Königsdorf, Helga. *Die Entsorgung der Großmutter. Roman*. Berlin: Aufbau, 1997. 120 pp.

Since the upheaval of 1989, Helga Königsdorf has been one of the most consistently productive voices from the former GDR. In nearly annual volumes—of essays and speeches, prose fiction, poetry, and *Protokolle*—she has alternately provided a seismographic record of her fellow Eastern Germans' attitudes during a period of enormous social upheaval and offered a series of highly self-reflective takes on her own responses to the shifts in social and discursive conditions around her.

With her latest contribution, Königsdorf seems to have pried herself loose from that trauma, shifting her focus to a new terrain. Whereas her latest volume of essays has been criticized for dwelling too easily in a dualistic, "ostalgic" view of German affairs (see, for example, Brigitte Rossbacher's review of *Über die unverzügliche Rettung der Welt in GDR Bulletin*, vol. 23), this short novel, *Die Entsorgung der Großmutter*, contains neither explicit reference to, nor thematization of, East-West relations. The boundaries of this new area of attention are marked in the text's sole, oblique reference to the division and unification of Germany. As Herr Schrader, father and sole wage earner in his family, makes his way into his house and up the stairs in the opening section of the novel, he is preoccupied: "Auch jetzt, während er dem Klavierspiel seiner Tochter lauscht, denkt er, daß es unsichtbare Grenzen gibt, die weniger durchlässig sind, als es alle Wälle und Mauern je sein könnten" (17).

The invisible borders referred to here are those of social status; the anxiety is created by a clash of property relations and family relations, for the Schraders—a "perfect" nuclear family—owe their luxurious domicile to Frau Schrader's mother, in whose house they live. When the grandmother becomes a burden, through the onset of old age (and presumably Alzheimer's), the family is faced with a dilemma: the cost of placing her in an appropriate care facility would necessitate selling the house and moving down the social ladder to a more modest apartment. The Schraders invent their own solution, one that is unveiled incrementally to the increasingly unsettled reader as the domestic *Vorstadt-Garten-Idylle* unravels to reveal the core unhappiness of each family member. At the base of their desperation and their unhappiness lurks the parents' shame of having disposed of the grandmother like an unwanted pet,

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in a city park in a distant metropolis (referred to only as “die Stadt B.”).

In this text, Königsdorf draws on techniques familiar to her longtime readers: her narrator/observer is curious, but *not prurient; interested, but not identifying; sympathetic, but not pitying*. Between the impassioned engagement of her essays and the biting satire of her early short stories, this small novel forces open a space for critical reflection upon a society that is capable of alienating all of its members equally. For despite the horror of the familial act, none is condemned, nor is anyone idealized. (Far from offering a martyr figure, Oma herself led the way in the search for social status, manipulating her daughter and son-in-law to her own benefit.) Herr Schrader fears losing his new job as a sales clerk (for which he is vastly overqualified after 30 years as a plumber), while Frau Schrader’s dissatisfaction with her life as wife and mother mounts as she enumerates missed chances. From the isolation—and security—of his upstairs bedroom, their grown son Thomas conducts a successful albeit stifled career in mathematical cyberspace; daughter Franziska rebels against all expectations by leaving home abruptly and going in search of a job just months before the *Abitur*.

While the themes are in some sense new, the shape and texture of this novel is not, as it harkens back to Königsdorf’s early short stories. The return of the “old” Königsdorf is signaled by an act of self-quotation, when she refers tongue-in-cheek to “das dritte Kurzsche Problem,” the subject of much difficulty in the short story “Lemma 1” (in *Meine ungehörigen Träume*, 1978). In that tale a promising young mathematician, Johanna Bock, thinks that she has solved the Kurzian problem, but when it becomes clear that one of her theorems is incorrect, the scientific community around her—in the interest of institutional fame—is concerned only with the repression of that fact. Thomas finally discovers a correct proof for the century-old mathematical problem, but he is compelled to hide his knowledge for fear of attracting media attention to a family whose grandmother has so mysteriously disappeared. The double repression of scientific knowledge (a mathematical proof) and juridical/moral knowledge (of the crime/sin of ditching the grandmother) creates its own explosive force that drives Thomas to dig, literally, for the truth in the front garden (where he suspects Oma to lie buried). Here, Königsdorf blends the satirical aspect of her early writings with the more earnest moral discourse that first finds expression in *Respektloser Umgang* (1986).

An additional structural indicator of this expansion upon the satirical mode is offered in the vision of an alternate world. While the individual family members suffer separately their own private worlds of unfulfillment, a counterpoint is offered by periodic reports from the distant city, where a loosely-knit community of warm souls, outsiders all, care for the stray cats that roam the streets. The

fact that they are more successful in tending the cats than in caring for the old woman who crosses their path unexpectedly deepens the note of sadness that permeates the entire tale. The insularity of the distressed, suburban nuclear family—too concrete to be read simply as an allegorical construct—is oppressive; the urban reduction of humanity to a problem of pest removal (or, as the title suggests, waste disposal) is chilling. The novel leaves its reader with the “Katzenfütterin” and her latest new adoptee, altogether a more intact affective relationship than the now disbanded Schrader family. With this new text, Helga Königsdorf persuasively claims a spot for herself as a post-unification German writer in the age of industrial downsizing and the dismantling of social programs. One can only hope that her compatriots, East and West alike, take note.

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Krauß, Angela. *Die Überfliegerin. Erzählung. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1995. 124pp.*

überfliegen=to fly over, overfly; to skim, as in reading

Angela Krauß’s recent work continues her impressionistic excursion through the realm of objects and people we call life. Her time frame is post-unification. In three chronologically related stories, the first-person narrator of *Die Überfliegerin* deconstructs her Leipzig milieu, transcends the socialist umbilical cord to the early twentieth century (symbolized in the railroad yard beneath her window) and takes to the sky to visit the United States and Russia.

Krauß’s *Überfliegerin* is a distant literary cousin to Monika Maron’s *Überläuferin*. Like Maron’s character, this *Überfliegerin* experiences her life in bursts of surrealistic impressions. Like Maron’s character, she appears solitary, perhaps even sedentary, until one day she realizes, “alle um mich herum handeln längst. Sie überholen mich alle.” Her concern is not really keeping up with the new *Hopp-Hopp-Menschen*; she experiences them from a distance. Rather, she realizes that the time has come for deeds. Unlike Maron’s character, however, the impressions of Krauß’s character are instigated not by her imagination, but by her own actions in the world. Krauß’s world is one of objects and people who are very much present, if only in memory. Thus, her narrator’s first act takes the form of a deconstruction of the objects of her everyday life. Strip by strip, layer by layer, the wallpaper comes off the walls, the wallpaper a certain Party Secretary refused to change, allowing history to pass him by. As the layers come down, so too do memories and images of socialist lives. From the protagonist’s window comes the bump and grind of the fading Industrial Revolution. While the narrator is detached