

February 2021

Jean E. Conacher. Transformation and Education in the Literature of the GDR. Camden House, 2020.

Evelyn Preuss

Yale University, evelyn.preuss@gmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Preuss, Evelyn (2021) "Jean E. Conacher. Transformation and Education in the Literature of the GDR. Camden House, 2020.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 45: Iss. 1, Article 18. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2192>

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Abstract

Review of Jean E. Conacher. *Transformation and Education in the Literature of the GDR*. Camden House, 2020. xiv + 293 pp.

Keywords

East Germany, GDR, Intellectual History, Education, Socialism, GDR Literature, Eigensinn

Jean E. Conacher. *Transformation and Education in the Literature of the GDR*. Camden House, 2020. xiv + 293 pp.

Jean Conacher explores the core project of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in her analysis *Transformation and Education in the Literature of the GDR*. The state's society represented, according to its own ideology, a transitional stage in the development towards communism, which it imagined as a qualitatively new, equitable, and just type of social formation. Hence, the GDR's socialism was but a threshold, or rather conveyor belt, that moved technology, people, and social forms into an innovative societal framework that would solve all political contradictions and meet all needs. The idea that the GDR was a revolution in the making established transformation as a base norm: constant change for the better was both assumption and make-believe; it supposedly encompassed everything and everybody. Thus, Conacher's focus on transformation examines the GDR according to the parameters of its own imaginary. Literary analysis based on East Germany's own terms is as overdue as it is necessary to account for the society's utopic potential, its alternative social forms, and its political failures.

Conacher traces ideas of how such a great transition could have been—and whether it was—achieved by investigating the concept that stands for the social process of individual transformation: education. Her approach here takes up the GDR's own Marxism, which regarded the individual and society as mutually conditioning each another. According to this conceptualization, neither can change without the other also changing. Hence, the ways in which society mentors or censors the individual speaks as eloquently to political developments as the active and passive ways in which the individual partakes in society. In order to ascertain these relations, Conacher compares literary representations of educational experiences with both the legal provisions for the GDR's educational reforms and its changing cultural policies, which conferred varying educational tasks onto writers and readers.

Through this dual, yet complementary, lens of transformation and education, Conacher rereads authors who wanted to stay in the GDR in order to contribute to its revolutionary undertaking, often through corrective criticism. Starting with the immediate postwar years and spanning the GDR's forty-year history, Conacher elucidates the interplay between state intervention, authors' responses and broader reception practices. As a result, her study provides a sweeping survey of East German literature that reveals a fascinating reflection and inflection of state policies and doctrines, while refusing to follow the still prevalent binary structures of post-1990 criticism that sought to distinguish between good dissident art and bad *Staatskunst* 'state art,' implying art's subservience to the GDR's ruling elites.

For example, Conacher revises scholarship on the 1950s' *Betriebsroman* 'factory novel'. While Western critics hitherto considered this genre conformist, Conacher demonstrates its effective political and social commentary (64). Authors considered loyal used the party's own program to redress democratic deficits. Textual hints within Hans Marchwitza's 1955 novel *Roheisen* ('Iron Ore') plead for more democracy: "Es wäre vielleicht besser, wenn du anderen Menschen etwas zuhören könntest" (63) 'perhaps it would be better, if you could listen a bit to other people.' At the same time, Marchwitza reminds his readers that, according to the Party's own ideology, the workers should be in charge rather than a functionary "[der] nur den Schulmeister spielt" (63) 'who only acts the schoolmaster.'

Contradicting the notion of the GDR as a totalitarian society, Conacher's study finds evidence for the importance of informal networks to East German culture and politics also expressed in literature. Instead of a top-down autocracy, she observes a deeply democratic impulse to include all layers of society, and especially the underrepresented and underprivileged, in the political decision-making process.

GDR literature increasingly incorporates this democratic concept of the reader into its structure, as Conacher shows. Drawing a developmental arch from the *Aufbau* 'construction' years through the 1960s' and 70s' ambivalences of *Ankunft* 'arrival' to the decade of denouement, she discerns the changing characterizations of mentors and protégés as well as their relationships to one another. Conacher very persuasively shows that they also mirror the relationship between the narrator/author and the readers, as they are addressed by the text. From the ensemble of protagonists in the *Betriebsroman* to the individual at the crossroads between conflicting social experiences and outlooks to the increasingly isolated figures of Christoph Hein's *Der fremde Freund/Drachenblut* (*Distant Lover*), she sets the protagonists' development in relation to the authors' degree of autonomy in society. Conacher finds that authors relay their autonomy to their readers by relinquishing narrational control. Hence, East German literature ultimately translates the author's sovereignty into that of the reader, whose co-production of meaning is not only theorized by authors, but also structurally implied in their texts. Over the country's history, Conacher discerns an increase in the audience's own hermeneutic agency, while authors come to identify as readers' partners rather than tutors. Thus, Conacher's own readers can conclude that GDR literature models a perhaps surprisingly democratic political and social form. The empowerment of audiences through literature—both in theory and in practice—highlights East Germany as more of a people's republic than the post-1990 Federal Republic's state-mandated memory allows. Hence, Conacher's book contributes to a reevaluation of the GDR that supports Andrew Beattie's and

Patricia Hogwood's observations that post-1990 Germany's sponsorship interfered in historiography and, thus, also history.

Rejecting attempts to exclude the majority of East German literature from the literary canon, her book presents an important contribution to the rehabilitation of East German literature after the *Kahlschlag* 'censorship' of the 1990s, which had disqualified the entire corpus as unworthy of attention, scholarly or otherwise. While not directly engaging with the notions of *Eigensinn* 'obstinacy' and informal society, which have gained currency in recent scholarship, her analysis attests to the pervasiveness of informal structures in the former German Democratic Republic, showing how it was promoted and advocated by its literary class.

Accessible and chronological, Conacher's book benefits scholars and students alike. It will help the latter to contextualize East German literature within the GDR's trajectory and the concrete politics of the day; the former will find Conacher's keen analyses on how the texts react to ideology and perceptions of reality compelling.

Evelyn Preuss
Yale University