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Liselotte Gumpel: "Concrete Poetry" from East and West Germany. The Language of Exemplarism and Experimentalism

Karl S. Weimar
Brown University

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recent scholarship to what began to occur on the literary scene with the appearance of Ulrich Plenzdorf's Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.

Perhaps the single most significant contribution in the entire collection is Franz Fühmann's "Zum 200. Geburtstag von E. T. A. Hoffmann." Fühmann, as many others in this volume, expresses a clear need for the expression of the irrational. He also makes cogent arguments for the relevance of Romanticism to a socialist society. He contends that E. T. A. Hoffmann stands at the center in the Romantic history of capitalization, that the contrast reflects a deeper pluralism of values in bourgeois society in the transition phase following the French Revolution, that Hoffmann's artists demonstrate the Romantic resistance to turning everything into exchange value.

The opening essay of the collection (Ulrike Krenzlin, "Romantik -- zur Definition") is far too broad to satisfy specialists in any one field since it covers Western as well as Eastern Europe, literature, political history, the visual arts, landscaping, and architecture. The strength of the essay is that it reminds one of the multi-faceted aspects of Romanticism and thus reinforces the "discovery" (recovery?) of the fact that there is indeed a revolutionary, progressive side to Romanticism as well as an anti-libertarian, reactionary side.

Two of the most interesting contributions are those of writers (Peter Hacks, "Der Meineid Dichter" and Günter Kunert, "Pamphlet für K."). The Hacks piece is a brilliant acerbic tour de force worthy of Friedrich Schlegel himself, whom Hacks excoriates as the fountainhead of all German Romantic idiocy. It is the only thoroughly negative (and dated, one-sided) view in the entire collection.

What makes the Kunert piece particularly and poignantly fascinating is the awareness that he is dealing as much with his own existential choices as with Kleist's. The sardonically ambiguous title "Pamphlet für K." is perhaps the most eloquent plea in the entire collection for "rehabilitating" those areas of existence examined by Kleist and the Romantics as well as by their post-Romantic progeny (Büchner and Kafka, among others).

Kunert cites an "official" description of Kleist in Das Lexikon deutschsprachiger Schriftsteller (VEB Bibliographisches Institut Leipzig, 1972) portraying him as confused, bordering on the pathological,

and a victim of "fatalistischer Pessimismus." His response: "eine Welt, die sich als 'gesund' deklariert und ihren Diagnostiker für krank, soweit selber der Normalität enträt, daß sie ihre eigenen Leiden verkennt oder diese als ein Zeichen besonderer Vitalität sogar noch ausstellt."

Leonard L. Duroche
University of
Minnesota

"Concrete" Poetry from East and West
Germany: The Language of Exemplarism and
Experimentation. By Liselotte Gumpel.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.
267 pages. \$15.

Yes, Humpty Dumpty was right. A word means just what its master chooses it to mean, neither more nor less. Therefore he had no trouble explaining or repeating poetry. But, of course, we sympathize with Alice because it all seems "unsatisfactory." Nevertheless so it is, whether in the Looking-Glass-Wonderland or in 1984 or in the two Germanies. Professor Gumpel neatly suggests all this in her subtitle: the language of exemplarism and experimentation, for "concrete" poetry is exemplary in the East and experimental in the West. Obviously we are confronting two diverse kinds of poetry sailing under the same flag (the term, however, occurs only rarely in East German publications). The ideological schism is crystallized here in semantic cleavage: "In the GDR the criterion embodies an imperative to be 'exemplary' and thus stay within the confines of a sociopolitical setting that represents the object-world; in the FRG it constitutes a commitment toward a collective experimental enterprise bent on creating inimitable objects through literary art and on probing the material foundation of those objects" (xiif); setting bounds vs. breaking bounds, manifest content vs. new form, concreteness vs. concretion, dialogical vs. monological writing, Becher-Brecht vs. Benn, national(istic) vs. cosmopolitan movement. The capitalist provenience of the one is identified but Professor Gumpel shrinks from recalling echoes of Stalinism and Nazism in the other -- the familiar paradox of one society shaped by revolutionary politics engaged in conservative aesthetics and another society with conservative politics bursting with radical aesthetics.

Adieu his bald, Reisebriefe. By Richard Christ. Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag. 1979. 213 pages. 8,20.- M.

The study itself has a concrete structure: two introductory chapters (Partition: Two Political Entities and Two Language Communities?; The Background: Exemplarism and Experimentation) and two concluding sections (The Wider Tradition: Teleological Humanism and Creative Zest; Collective Concretism: Representative Anthologies and Invitational Anthologies) which flank the solid core: The Concrete Poem. Chapters are contrastive. The GDR section, for example, is a look at lyrical verse in general from Bobrowski to Gerlach, from sonnet to ballad to ode, all under the label dicentric genres (i.e. discursive); the concrete poets of the FRG under focus are Gomringer, Heissenbüttel, Mon, and the Austrians Jandl and Kriwet, with their Constellations, Combinations, Topographies, Articulations, Verbal Landscapes and Round Disks. This is all sensibly organized and presented but offers little that is new (save the pages on F.Kriwet). The two concluding sections enlarge the Perspective and supplement the samples, properly showing the complex variety and international dimension of (Western) concrete poetry. One could indeed question the rather arbitrary judgment "that only the Concrete poetry of the GDR qualifies as lyrical, because it makes connections with traditional verse..." (xi) and regret the modish jargon (e.g. superized icon). One might have wished that the creative zest, devious wit, and lucid gravity characteristic of (Western) Concrete poetry had been treated with less academic sobriety.

Missing from the otherwise excellent bibliography is Arp's On My Way (1948) worth citing at least for its Jourdan-like retrospective insight: concrete art aims to transform the world. It aims to make existence more bearable... where concrete art enters, melancholy departs, dragging with it its gray suitcases full of black sighs. It is altogether fitting that Dieter Kessler's equally welcome study, Untersuchungen zur Konkreten Dichtung, appeared across the sea also in 1976.

Karl S. Weimar
Brown University

Richard Christ loves to travel alone. He experiences his travels by himself, not with others or with someone he can't avoid. The profession of writer implies, however, exchange; the exchange of ideas with others. Travel letters (Reisebriefe) fulfill this need. The unknown becomes clear through correspondences.

In letters to his publisher, a friend, his daughter and his former teacher, Christ relates his travel impressions of India, the USSR, Austria, the FRG and Slovakia. He also reveals much of his past, relates places visited to his literary encounters and in general arouses one's desire to someday visit most of the places he describes.

One of the great advantages of travel is learning to appreciate one's home. It is difficult for Richard Christ to leave on a trip. His reverence for his homeland offers the reader some interesting insights into life in the GDR by way of contrasts between the FRG, Austria and Cuba. His homesickness is expressed through the leitmotif of trying to find an acceptable beer in the various countries.

His letters from India do not leave the reader with the desire to visit that country. Christ encounters difficulty, sickness and misery. In his letters from Austria, he comments on all the new influences not known at home: Karajan, Boulevardpresse, Gastarbeiter, Pornofilms, etc. He enjoys the visible history and art but deplores the student beggars.

In the USSR Christ enjoys the hospitality and marvels at the sport center at Medeo. In Cuba he is treated to baseball, Castro and the world of Hemingway, which he relives in vivid detail.

In the Pfalz he, at last, locates his acceptable beer and the memories of his childhood and birthplace. The reader gains a good picture of his background. The final letter from Piešťany presents a view of life on a Kur. One wonders if the overwhelming nature of the Frankfurter Buchmesse made Christ ripe for the treatment. He leaves the Kur in good health and is ready to travel as soon as he overcomes the paradox of Raiselust when at home and Heimweh while traveling.

Although he does not discuss his literary his reader's curiosity about a very diverse reader's curiosity about a very diverse world.

Albert Reynolds II
Rancho Cordova, Calif.