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Leonore Krenzlin: Hermann Kant

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Hughes Leonore Krenzlin: Hermann Kant

BOOK REVIEWS


This is a useful and quite competent book, although, since it is an ambitious monograph on one of the GDR's best writers, one wishes that it would have been more incisive in several important ways.

I have little quarrel with any of Krenzlin's analyses of specific works: these seem to me to be insightful, judicious and sensitive, and the accents are set correctly.

The readings center on Krenzlin's efforts to locate the special characteristics of Kant's work in his reflection of the structure of the Bildungsgesamtkultur in favor of a retrospective illumination of the fascist dictatorship and the early years of the GDR. Thus Die Aula "hob den Leser, wie vorher wohl noch kein anderes Buch, ins Bewusstsein, dass der sozialistische Staat der Gegenwart bereits auf eine Vergangenheit zurückblicken konnte." (62) And it did this by means of a particularly didactic structure in which the episodes "enthalten meist keine zusätzliche, der Deutung enthobenen Schicht. Der Leser ist vielmehr eingeladen, die gedankliche Auseinandersetzung mit der Vergangenheit auf Iswallsche Weise mitzuvollziehen." (73) This is true even of Der Aufenchantat; Krenzlin is keenly sensitive to the novel's very important aspect of development, but she simultaneously sees it as an analysis of an "Umschlagspunkt" (141) in Grossaufnahme.

Not everything in these readings is completely satisfactory. For one thing, she is generally too reluctant to express negative criticism, except in the most inescapable cases and when she does register a major objection, such as to many of the stories in Eine Übertretung, which evidences the "büschen was Extras" it might have had.

Although Krenzlin has made a generally successful attempt to locate the individual works within the development of GDR literature and has devoted a special chapter to Kant's aesthetic position in that development, the categories of her analysis are not always the most convincing. To say, for instance, that Das Impressum is an "Umschlagspunkt" is to pose the question "Which concrete circumstances are beneficial to the development of the individual and which detrimental?" with respect to the social stratum of the decision makers in the GDR (112) to avoid the question of the novel's formal achievements and of its relation to Kant's previous work. Given Krenzlin's sensitivity to the theme of development of the GDR, it is curious that her monograph's greatest weakness should lie precisely in its relative inattention to the development of Kant's own work. It is not enough merely to say, for example, "Kant als Erzähler weitgehend abstreift im Verlauf der ersten Jahre, ist eine flache-didaktische Erzählhaltung" (171 f.) -- a good deal more comment was in order here.

In a section of documentation, Krenzlin has reprinted some of Kant's early political journalism and several contemporary critical discussions, which communicate some idea of the initial reception. As Kant is now presumably somewhat in mid-career, it is good to have this material and altogether useful to have this informative and competent interim retrospective, even though it does not have the "blühen was Excess" it might have had.

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