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Graduate Seminar in German Literature: Historisierung der DDR-Literatur

In Spring Semester 1996 I offered an advanced graduate seminar (German 947) on questions of rehistoricizing GDR literature at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. The seminar had several didactic purposes: to provide an overview of developments in GDR literature; to practice critical interpretation through close readings of a discrete number of prose, dramatic, and lyric texts; to assess strategies for historicizing GDR literature; and to raise questions about the epistemology of literary historiography. In addition, the seminar was timed to anticipate the Fall 1996 Wisconsin Workshop on "Contentious Memories: Looking Back at the GDR" so that a pool of advanced students would have the background to participate in the discussions. Through careful planning my colleague Jost Hermand was teaching during the same semester the course on backgrounds to Postwar (East and West) German Literature in the regular rotation of graduate literary historical lectures. Because of various scheduling and interest conflicts only about one-third of the twelve seminar participants were actually able to take advantage of this extra highlighting of the GDR.

The appended syllabus reveals on the one hand a strictly chronological sequencing of the literary texts in order to maintain a sense of the sweep of historical progression and on the other a series of larger issues or "Problemfelder" that were presented as controversies. Especially for the earlier texts, such as Brecht's *Lukullus* or Müller's *Lohndrucker*, it was possible to trace the changing historical reception through semi-public debates or stage productions. For later texts, like Braun's *Hinze-Kunze-Roman* or Hein's *Horns Ende*, comparing the internal documents regarding the censorship process released after 1989 to the published reviews in the press (both East and West) illustrated the contingencies of various reading strategies. The goal was to involve the students in a process of self-reflection about how (literary) historical judgment is constituted.

I planned the first two weekly sessions as pure lectures to introduce the issues, raise pertinent questions, and to sketch out the contours of the terrain we were approaching. The following two sessions were my opportunity to present exemplary analyses, meant as models for the subsequent work of the students. The greatest obstacle to this goal, however, was the students' lack of background, the perennial complaint of us teachers. It turned out that most of them had read very little GDR literature prior to this seminar; only two had visited the GDR beyond the eastern part of Berlin; and of course the larger context of traditions of socialist literature or the history of Marxist debates was, if at all extant, fairly rudimentary. Moreover, the selection of primary texts was demanding both in quantity and quality, so that many of the students – despite their enthusiasm and interest – found it difficult to keep up with the weekly rhythm of readings, prepare critical commentaries, and take the first independent steps in the process of developing a "Referat" for oral presentation that would lead to the final seminar paper. In my eagerness to fill the gaps and provide a common foundation, I found myself maintaining the lecture format, thus shifting the balance in the seminar, which in our graduate program is distinctly defined as a dialogue-based learning situation (in contradistinction to proseminar and lecture formats). By mid-semester we were all frustrated and switched to a mix of more focused, short background lectures, while a group of four students was assigned to prepare and guide the discussion of the respective literary text, thus dividing up the responsibilities and removing some of the weekly pressure.

The final (anonymous) student evaluation of the course agreed unanimously that there was too much reading but at the same time expressed an appreciation for the amount and diversity of material covered. In my estimation all of the students gained a good sense of the scope of GDR literature and most of them began articulating at least some specific problems it poses for literary historians. As is usually the case, only at the end of the semester did I feel we were at a point where we could begin the "real" work. For my part this led to the essay "Whose Story Is This? Rewriting the Literary History of the GDR," and one of the students contributed to the grad students' collective paper on "GDR Studies in the United States," both of which were presented at the Fall 1996 Wisconsin Workshop and are forthcoming in the conference proceedings edited by Hermand and Silberman, *Contentious Memories: Looking Back at the GDR* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997). Moreover, two of the seminar participants have chosen to write their dissertations on GDR-related topics.

In case it is not obvious from my commentary, there is still interest in GDR literature among the students; indeed, this had never been at issue for me. Rather, the question is how to present the literature in a way that intersects with already informed interests while awakening new ones.

Syllabus: Historisierung der DDR-Literatur

By week:

1. Einführung /Orientierung: Was bedeutet Historisierung? Was ist DDR-Literatur?
2. Geschichte der DDR und DDR-Literaturgeschichte
Problemfelder: Periodisierung, Generationen, Verhältnis Kultur und Staat, was ist Kulturpolitik?
3. Bertolt Brecht, *Das Verhör des Lukullus* (1951)
Problemfelder: der Begriff "Kulturation", die Formalismusdebatte, was ist der sozialistische Realismus?
4. Heiner Müller, *Der Lohndrucker* (1956)
Problemfelder: der neue Mensch, der plebejische Held, das Alte und das Neue, "Produktionsstück"/das didaktische Theater
5. Peter Hacks, *Amphytrion* (1968)
Problemfelder: Autonomiebestreben in den 60er Jahren, sozialistische Klassik und das Poetische in der sozialistischen Menschengemeinschaft
6. Irmtraud Morgner, *Leben und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz* (1974)
Problemfelder: Phantasie/Utopie, Literatur von Frauen (Geschlechterkritik), die moderne Struktur
7. Hermann Kant, *Der Aufenthalt* (1977)
Problemfelder: Antifaschismus als Gründungsideologie und Legitimation, Feindbilder in der Literatur, der sozialistische Erziehungsroman
8. Franz Fühmann, *Saiäns Fiktion* (1974-1981)
Problemfelder: die Moderne, Kafka- und Freud-Rezeption in der DDR-Literatur
9. Christa Wolf, *Kein Ort. Nirgends* (1979)
Problemfelder: die Biermann-Ausbürgerung und die Folgen, Romantik-Rezeption in der DDR, U-Topia und Künstlerproblematik
10. Volker Braun, *Hinze-Kunze-Roman* (1985)
Problemfelder: Stagnation und Utopieverlust, Erneuerung der literarischen Formen, Rolle des Künstlers im Sozialismus
2 Referate: Stefan Hermlin, *Abendlicht* (1979, Memoiren);
Bertolt Brecht, *Der Hofmeister* (1950, Stückbearbeitung)
11. Volker Braun (weiter)
2 Referate: Franz Fühmann, "Kameraden" (1955, Novelle);
Erwin Strittmatter, *Ole Bienkopp* (1963, Roman)

12. Christoph Hein, *Horns Ende* (1985)
Problemfelder: Stalinismus, "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" in der DDR, Erkenntnis als literarisches und geschichtsphilosophisches Problem
2 Referate: Erik Neutsch, *Spur der Steine* (1964, Roman);
Sarah Kirsch, *Die Pantherfrau* (1973, Interviews)
13. Christoph Hein (weiter)
2 Referate: Lyrikdebatte 1962 (Volker Braun);
Irina Liebmann, *Was singt der Mond* (1985, Stück)
14. Elke Erb, *Nachts, halb zwei, zu Hause* (1967-1990)
Problemfelder: Avantgarde und oppositionelle Kultur, Sprache und Kommunikation
2 Referate: Wolfgang Hilbig, "Die Kunde von den Bäumen" (1994, Erzählung);
Bernd Pappenfuß-Gorek, Gedichte (Prenzlauer Berg der 80er)
15. Elke Erb (weiter)
2 Referate: Christa Wolf, "Was bleibt?" (1990, Erzählung);
Kerstin Hensel, "Tanz am Kanal" (1993, Erzählung)

Schlußdiskussion – Bleibt was?

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