

REVIEWS

GDR Seminars at San Francisco MLA 1975

Seminar 169 - Drama in the GDR: Die Schlacht by Heiner Müller

This seminar on GDR drama was one of the most successful at the San Francisco MLA. After three brief, but informative and accurate introductory statements--each about five minutes in length, the first outlining the history and development of theater in the GDR, the second clarifying the place of Heiner Müller's dramaturgy in this tradition, and the third explaining the relationship of Die Schlacht to Brecht's Furcht und Elend des dritten Reiches--Heiner Müller then read the scene "Fleischer und Frau" from his own play. From the many comments and questions that followed, a few remarks seem especially noteworthy. One person charged Müller with distorting, in the first scene of the play, the unbroken socialist tradition of the working class which never succumbed to Nazism. Müller responded that it was just such thinking that he was trying to reevaluate in the play. The insistence on the incorruptibility of the German proletariat was, he thought, a cliché of socialist realism which prevented an accurate understanding of history and, hence, the progress of socialism.

Since Die Schlacht, though written in the early fifties, had its world premiere in November 1975 in East Berlin and two weeks later its West German premiere in Hamburg, at a time when Müller was in the U.S., he had never seen the play performed. Two people in the audience who had attended the Berlin production described the performance. Because of the play's skeleton quality of terse language and minimal stage directions, both Müller and the audience listened with interest to the descriptions of the scenes. The final question of the seminar solicited from Müller his own estimate of the play's position in the tradition of East German theater. He thought his presentation of the negative aspects of man's nature (brother murdering brother, father shooting wife and daughter, soldiers eating their comrade, a wife killing her husband, father and mother betraying their son) rather than a rigidly optimistic view of life, was the essence of the work's newness for the East German stage and accordingly spoke for a younger generation of GDR dramatists who desire to present in their works the whole man free of stereotyped characterization.

Starrels, John and Anita Mallinckrodt: Politics in the German Democratic Republic. (New York: Praeger Special Studies Series, 1975. \$22.50. The first systematic study in English of the political system of the GDR, using systems-functional analysis.

Tauchnitzstraße---Twerski-Boulevard. Autorenkollektiv. (Halle: Mitteltd. Vlg., Okt. 1975). Gegenstand sind die Probleme der Entwicklung der sozialistischen Gegenwartsliteratur. Es geht um produktive Formen der Aneignung von Welt und Wirklichkeit, um das Schaffen einer Kunstwirklichkeit, die dem Leser beim Erkennen und Meistern seines Lebens helfen kann.

Töpelmann, Sigrid: Autoren, Figuren, Entwicklungen. Zur erzählenden Literatur in der DDR. (Berlin: Aufbau-Vlg., Nov. 1975). Die Arbeit untersucht erzählende Werke der DDR-Literatur, in denen der Krieg als auslösendes Moment für Entwicklung und Wandlung des Menschen eine besondere Rolle spielt.

Was zählt ist die Wirklichkeit. Anthologie. Hrsg.: W. Liersch. (Halle: Mitteltd. Vlg., Nov. 1975). Äußerungen der Schriftsteller über ihre Arbeits- und Lebenspraxis, vermitteln direkte Einblicke in den Schaffensprozeß, gehen ein Bild vom Werden und Wachsen sozialistischer Literatur in der DDR.

Wenig, Ernst: Das Verhältnis. (Halle: Mitteltd. Vlg., Nov. 1975). Das Buch zeigt, wie sich gesellschaftliche Widersprüche auch noch im Leben der jungen Generation spiegeln, wie auch sie sich ihr Bild von der Zeit erobern muß.

Weiss, Rudolf: Die Suche nach Ole Westergaard. (Berlin: Militärvg. d. DDR (VEB), Sept. 1975). Ein dänischer Schiffsoffizier such seinen vor einem Jahr verschollenen Bruder.

Wander, Fred: Der siebente Brunnen. Erzählung. (Berlin: Aufbau-Vlg., Feb. 1976). Das Leiden und das Heldentum jüdischer Menschen in den Konzentrationslagern wird geschildert.

Wolter, Christine: Wie ich meine Unschuld verlor. Erzählungen. (Berlin: Aufbau-Vlg., Feb. 1976). In schwierigen Lebenssituationen suchen die Heldinnen nach Möglichkeiten, sich zu behaupten, ihr Leben selbst zu gestalten.

Ziergiebel, Herbert: Vizedura und andere merkwürdige Begebenheiten. (Berlin: Eulenspiegel Vlg., Dez. 1975). Ein vielfältiger Spektrum von Geschichten, die vom Spaß über die Groteske bis zur Satire reichen.

Seminar 125 - The GDR Novel

Although the program consisted of thorough papers by five well-informed scholars, their works stimulated little comment and evoked few questions. It is important to ask why the drama seminar was more successful than the seminar on the novel, especially since many of the same people attended both sessions. The presence of Müller, a dramatist whose openness and sincerity was recognized by those in attendance, added, to be sure, human interest besides expertise. But it was not the figure of the artist which made the seminar a success. The seminar's success resulted from the preparation of the audience prior to attendance. Because the drama seminar was limited to discussion of one short play, the text of which was widely distributed before the seminar, virtually everyone in attendance had read it in preparation for the event. As a result, the audience was familiar with the text and eager to ask questions, offer comments and exchange opinions. Hence, the meeting created a lively, educational, memorable experience.

In contrast, the five papers in the seminar on the novel treated patterns of conflict in recent GDR novels, presented analyses of Karl-Heinz Jakob's Die Interviewer, Hermann Kant's Impressum, Günter Künert's Gast aus England, and explored narrative consciousness in the works of Christa Wolf. This comprehensive program meant a participant, to have been prepared for the seminar, had to have read several novels and short stories just to challenge the speakers, to make comments, or to ask penetrating questions. Although it can be assumed everyone in the audience had read some of the stories, and a few were familiar with most, no one could have recently read all of them. Thus, the necessary familiarity with the text required for fruitful discussion was lacking. While it is true the papers themselves were available prior to the meeting, it is not so much familiarity with the papers, but with the primary works that is important.

The events at the last MLA seminars indicate that the seminar format is most successful when the topic is a single work or a single author and the distribution of necessary materials (texts or papers) occurs as much in advance of the meeting as possible.

Becker, Jurek. Jacob the Liar. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975)

The recent publication of Jurek Becker's Jakob der Lügner in an English translation by Melvin Kornfeld is an event to be welcomed - not only in view of the paucity of well-translated GDR literature, but because it is a remarkable work which will be of interest to teachers of German literature in translation as well as to a wider reading public. This first novel by the Polish-born (1937) GDR resident has been widely praised since it was first published in 1969. The story of a Polish ghetto under Nazi control, Jacob the Liar succeeds in the feat of lacing with humor the atmosphere of terror and despair. It remains an appealing and readable work despite the bleak subject.

The translation is sensitive and accurate. It conveys the flavor of humor which is in the tradition of Sholem Aleichem (whose name is even mentioned by the hero Jacob). The colloquial tone is successfully maintained, as is the distinctive voice of the narrator. There are a few phrases whose translation one might dispute, and two lines are omitted on page 198. But these are insignificant shortcomings in an otherwise excellent translation.

This novel will stimulate classroom discussion on a number of issues. One is the problematic morality of the hero's actions. At great personal risk, Jacob provides his fellow ghetto residents with bogus optimistic "radio reports" on the rapid progress of Soviet troops through Poland. Although spirits are raised and suicides decline, Jacob's "news service" also produces tragic consequences. At several points the story can be related to the GDR. For example, Jacob speculates on the inferior quality of the prewar German language newspapers: "That's the way newspapers were in those days and that's the way newspapers still are. Nobody has shown them since any better method." (103) Behind the narrative of ghetto events lurks the general question of the role of information in society. Berlin, East-West relations, and the West German residence of former Nazis are touched upon during the narrator's postwar search for documentation. The narrative technique is worthy of examination, as are the attitudes toward Germany and individual Germans. Characters display unusual patience, even understanding for their persecutors.

Jacob the Liar represents a departure from the usual war stories studied in literature 2