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## Gabriele Eckart: Hitchhiking. Twelve German Tales

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Eckart, Gabriele. *Hitchhiking. Twelve German Tales*. Trans. Wayne Kvam. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. 144 pp.

These stories are GDR stories, written in the decade before the barriers between East and West disintegrated. As such, they depict a world that has disappeared, tales of GDR bag ladies, hack writers for the party, young love thwarted by indifference and misunderstandings, the trials of a young woman working on a construction crew, the disappointments experienced by tourists from the country who come for a week's vacation in East Berlin. These are modest stories. Their pretensions are only toward recreating everyday life in a country during the last decade of its life, when it was becoming increasingly disillusioned with a governmental system whose social ideals often seemed at odds with individual reality.

It is this reality that Eckart documents. Most of the stories are frankly autobiographical in nature. As evident as in her documentary work (e.g. notably *So sehe ich die Sache*), these narratives reveal Eckart's ear for verbal nuances. Here the nuances are framed within a tangible non-verbal context--the personal narrator's cursory reference to movements, hesitations, exchanged glances, treasured mementos, reiterated remarks that convey tensions between socially prescribed behaviors and individual responses to those prescriptions. It is this tension that individuates perception about otherwise "typical," largely drab, uniform lives.

Set mainly in Berlin, the apartments described are reached after walking up foul-smelling stairways; in the summer courtyards behind these buildings, the garbage simmers in its containers. The narrator (and other figures she depicts) try to escape. In one such effort, the storyteller discovers a retired couple facing the loss of their summer home outside Berlin. Progress, in the name of government plans to raze the dwellings, dictates that a chicken farm will replace their haven.

Here, it seems to me, lies the special poignancy of these stories. They recreate the reactive patterns, speech, and interactions among people under Socialism, yet, concomitantly, the problems these people face transcend specific political constraints. Generational differences ("The Attic"), differences in class ("Street Sweepers," "Construction Site"), the pitfalls of self realization ("The Tall Girl," "Feldberg and Back") all have their echoes in the stories of, for example, a Judy Troy. In other words, ideologies may be less significant, in the late twentieth century, than are the commonly experienced effects of life in

technocratic cultures. At the same time, several stories also suggest perspectives unique to the GDR. The title piece, in which a literate truck driver identifies the author and gently chides her condescension in "always telling stories," evokes a persona created by the GDR's emphasis on the importance of writing and writers.

During this period of backlash against virtually all things GDR, the revelations about degrees of relationships with the Stasi (which the author, like other GDR writers, has had to address), these stories capture a voice that seems engagingly naive in its straightforward and uncomplicated style. For US readers unfamiliar with the mundane vicissitudes of life "under Communism" (as opposed to the high drama in allegorical Schwarzenegger movies or *The Hunt for Red October*), these stories present a modest, but nonetheless penetrating gaze inward, recreating a life at once alien, yet recognizable to readers in the West.

Wayne Kvam is to be highly commended for mediating the linguistic difficulties posed by the need to render echoes of the unfamiliar in the prosaic German idiom Eckart uses so effectively. His notes define organizations and terminology unfamiliar to the average US reader, thereby clarifying what would otherwise be opaque references or acronyms. Coupled with an insightful afterword, the translation preserves and explicates texts valuable for historical (as *Zeitdokumente*) as well as aesthetic reasons. *Hitchhiking* can be recommended for any reading list dealing with life in the GDR. Read concomitantly with statements by the Writers' Union or government promulgations about life in East Germany, these "Twelve German Tales" focus incisively on the mundane impact of late twentieth-century dictates and ideologies.

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