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On Track?--Jurek Becker on Reunification and German Literature

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You are sitting on a train. Good food and drink are at your fingertips. Air conditioning keeps the temperature comfortable, you can choose any type of entertainment you desire. With the blinds drawn, this self-contained environment seems secure. The rest of the world is unimportant. But if you opened the blinds, you would see that the train is hurtling into an abyss. Jurek Becker used this picture to describe the mind sets of many in post-unification Germany. It is, as Becker's metaphor indicates, a mind set often adopted by those whose main goals are blind "progress" and escape.

I spoke with Jurek Becker in the spring of 1993, while he was the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures' Writer in Residence at Washington University in St. Louis. In this role he co-taught a seminar on contemporary German fiction, focusing on the novels that deal with the recent German past. The subject seems to occupy Becker a great deal, and it is one on which he is decidedly outspoken. In preparing for our interview, the staff of the *GDR Bulletin* reviewed, among other materials, a talk Becker gave at the 10th St. Louis Symposium on German Literature in March of 1990. In that talk, printed in several sources, including the Summer/Fall 1990 issue of the *German Quarterly*, Becker focused on the state of German literature after the *Wende*. Since he gave his talk only a few months after the opening of the Berlin wall, we were interested in knowing how developments since then might have influenced his views on the role of literature in post-unification Germany.

Talking to Jurek Becker about changes in eastern Germany since unification, one detects a great deal of bitterness about the manner in which the changes have been implemented. Becker speaks of the "injustice of this unification" pointing out that many of the decisions made were based on the principle that everything associated with the GDR was bad, even if it was reasonable. Few attempts were made, he says, to give equal consideration to East German positions. He points to the issues of Autobahn speed limits, blood-alcohol levels, and abortion as examples of the "conquerors' laws being enforced upon the conquered."

"There is definitely something to mourn," Becker says. "The fall of Eastern Europe is the end of a great hope. Many say that we are now closer to the end."

He is particularly critical of the consumer mentality associated with western-style prosperity.

Such prosperity is, he claims, based on a disregard for the future and a willingness to accumulate wealth while ignoring increasing poverty in other parts of the world.

Becker feels that the imaginations of East Germans have been captured by the prospects of achieving levels of prosperity they have seen in the West, thus pushing other important issues out of the picture. For example, the Easterners--like many West Germans--have lost interest in the history of the GDR. In many ways this is understandable, since in Becker's opinion, GDR history has been portrayed by the western media as a "history of repression." What little interest in history remains is focused on the Stasi debates.

According to Becker, the questions about the connections various people may have had to the *Staatsicherheit* (the answers to which are "dictated by the conquerors") have replaced historical inquiry while taking on a number of other functions among former GDR citizens. "The Stasi debate," claims Becker, "serves to discipline the population of the GDR, [...] to distract them, [...] and to evoke a bad conscience so that they cannot demand as much prosperity." In this sense it would appear that there has been little change since the *Wende*; selective use of history as a manipulative tool perpetuates the cycle which alienates people from their history and prevents them from putting it to more constructive use.

Though it is not completely clear in Becker's remarks whom he holds responsible for this situation, he seems to place much of the blame on the western-dominated media, always out for a sensational story. Sensationalism thrives on the dichotomy of the good and the bad, the innocent and guilty. Becker rejects such simplified notions of guilt as divisive. Citing other eastern block countries like Hungary and Czechoslovakia, he insists that it is possible to examine the past without dividing the population into two opposing camps.

In addition, he points out that the problems in Germany today cannot simply be reduced to the differences between the West and the East. It is not merely a matter of how unfairly the East has been treated by the West, he says. After all, he points out, eastern Germany is no further to the left on the political scale than the rest of the country. All of the *Bundesländer* in the East are governed by the CDU.

While the complete unification of the two Germanys may still be some distance off on the personal and economic levels, to mention just two of the many areas of disparity, Becker sees much less division in German literature. In 1990 he called the

unification of East and West German literatures "unavoidable," and this position has not changed. Three years ago he predicted that:

sie, die bisherige DDR-Literatur, wird unter neuen Firmennamen weiterbestehen, ganz einfach als deutsche Literatur, und das heißt im Klartext: als westdeutsche.¹

As he did then, Becker now views the eclipse of GDR literature as another aspect of the westernization of the GDR state, industry, and other institutions. The most important aspects of GDR literature, he contends were its "critical potential," and its "dissident quality." Neither of these aspects has any resonance now among a population that has been de-politicized. The eastern German reading public has had "its eyes covered and its mouth filled with prosperity,"--or at least the hope of prosperity. No one is interested in literature any more.

In spite of such disinterest, it would seem, at least to the outsider, that there are several possible positions German authors could take which might give literature a more important part in helping to navigate the difficulties Germany faces, especially difficulties resulting from or connected to the unification process. After the *Wende* Becker said, "heute will man keine Meditation darüber hören, was anders gemacht werden sollte, heute will man es anders machen."² I asked him if this observation--which, when made three years ago, certainly could have been interpreted in a very positive light, a kind of call for active reform if you will--can still be applied to the situation today, if active participation in the reforms has established itself as an alternative to reading and writing about the reform. Becker's positive response is qualified. He confirms that there has been more active involvement, but calls the *kind* of involvement he sees "unsatisfactory." He had originally hoped that active involvement in the process of unification would lead to the "elimination of injustices," but today, he indicates, most activity is aimed at establishing prosperity.

Asked if literature could take on a greater role in the East in light of the dissatisfaction surrounding the westernization of eastern Germany, Becker's disappointed reply is simple: "Ich sehe nichts davon." The tendency in the East, he says, is for serious literature to be read less and less, since there is no money for and no interest in books. Becker even views the possibility that eastern German writers could contribute to or help maintain some form of local or regional identity as unlikely for the simple reason that there are no readers. His pessimism about the future of literature is, however, not complete. He still voices hope that books will

regain some of the ground they have lost to more pressing concerns. Even now he says, "Bücherlesen ist nicht das wichtigste, aber nicht alles ist wichtiger."

Some hope still rests on the work of the East German publishing houses as well, according to Becker. Though most of the eastern houses have been bought up by West German firms, publishers such as Aufbau still do have an eastern bent for several reasons. First of all, he says, the GDR authors are still connected to their East German publishers, and the editors have, for the most part, stayed on and are thus familiar with the eastern authors. In addition, the eastern publishers are working in familiar territory and making use of old contacts, while western publishers must build up a system of contacts. In this case, then, it would seem that East German firms are, for once, making gains over their western competitors. Becker also mentions the *Autorenverlage* as possible sources of support for eastern authors, but says that they are relatively unimportant in terms of their share of the book market as a whole.

What alternatives do former East Germans have then if they wish to articulate their views in a landscape dominated by the western media and economic concerns, a landscape which, as Becker sees it, seems to provide no room for literature? Becker is able to point out several possibilities, which although sometimes marginal, do provide a forum for eastern opinions. He mentions regional radio and television stations. In the *print media*, he says, publications such as *Sonntag*, *Freitag*, *Wochenpost*, and *Berliner Zeitung* provide a more eastern perspective, though they do not enjoy great circulation.

Jurek Becker's novels have always dealt with outsiders, perhaps because Becker himself is something of an outsider in many ways. As an author, he is privileged with the possibility of contemplating and commenting on his surroundings from a more detached and considered position than most, and as a successful author, first in the GDR and then in the West, he has made use of this privilege to write books which question that which others often simply accept. In spite of his success in this role, Becker does not always view himself as the questioning voice. When asked what part he would wish for himself in the literature of a united Germany, he states modestly, "Ich möchte Bücher schreiben, die mir selbst auch noch nach fünf Jahren gefallen. Das ist mir bis jetzt noch nicht immer gelungen."

Nevertheless, Becker forges ahead with his work on the theme that seems to have captured his attention: the last five or six years of German history. Although he has said that after *Liebling Kreuzberg* he would not write for television again, he has once again turned to this medium to bring us his views on the reunification. He is currently working on a nine-part television series for the ARD tentatively entitled *Wir sind auch nur ein Volk*. It would seem that despite his pessimism about many aspects of German unification, Becker has not given up trying to make his voice heard, even among a public unreachable through literature. Let us hope that this new television series will prove not only entertaining, but will motivate others to do as Becker has done and peek through the blinds of the speeding train.

¹ Jurek Becker, "Die Wiedervereinigung der deutschen Literatur," *German Quarterly* 63.3/4 (1990): 364.

² Ibid: 363.