

AN INTERVIEW WITH HERMANN KANT

JOAN E. HOLMES
University of Kansas

Hermann Kant, current President of the Writers Union of the German Democratic Republic, visited the University of Kansas in November 1979, accompanied by Petra Teutschbein, cultural attachée at the GDR Embassy in Washington, D.C. Kant, a prominent and widely read author of fiction (*Die Aula*, 1964; *Das Impressum*, 1969), read from his latest novel *Der Aufenthalt* (1977), an autobiographical "deutscher Bildungsroman," which will no doubt enter German literary histories as one of the more important novels of the post-war period.

The author, perhaps thinking of the varying quality of German encounters, both political and personal, with Poland over the past forty years, places a poem by Brecht at the beginning of his work:

So bildet sich der Mensch

Indem er ja sagt, indem er nein sagt
Indem er schlägt, indem er geschlagen wird
Indem er sich hier gesellt, indem er sich dort gesellt
So bildet sich der Mensch, indem er sich ändert
Und so entsteht sein Bild in uns
Indem er uns gleicht und indem er uns nicht gleicht.(1)

Brecht's words--"So man forms himself, by changing himself. And so his picture develops in us. By being like us and by not being like us"--serve as a motto not just for Kant's book, but perhaps also for his own participation as a writer, humanist, and Marxist-Leninist in the dialectical process of change. It is perhaps in the spirit of this motto that Kant agreed to an exchange of ideas at the University of Kansas about the role of literature in

socialist Germany.

In the following interview with Professor Joan E. Holmes, who translated the interview into English for *Studies in 20th Century Literature*, Kant candidly discusses his own work, as well as the changing concept of socialist realism and the present controversy surrounding the role of the writer in a socialist system. This controversy is older than the exchange of harsh words between Hermann Kant and Stefan Heym during the summer of 1979. It pre-dates even the Biermann affair of 1976/77. The crux of the matter lies in the nature of Marxist theory and is at least as old as the Sickingen debate of 1859, when Marx, Engels, and Lassalle discussed the kind of literature that the fledgling socialist movement should encourage in order to promote the building of a future communist society. The question of the role of the author and the function of literature has reappeared since that time in various forms--in the formulation of the concept of socialist realism in the 1930's by Gorki and Soviet Party Secretary Zhadanov, in the formalism debates of the 1950's, in the dictates of the Bitterfelder Way (1960's), and in the liberalizing influence of the proclamations of the Eighth Party Congress in 1971. Since the Ninth Party Congress (May 1976), the controversy has become the most critical matter in the cultural policies of the GDR, a country where literature is taken much more seriously than in the United States.

In this interview, Hermann Kant, in the tradition of the Eighth and Ninth Party Congresses, represents a broad interpretation of the concept of socialist realism, while at the same time advocating the responsibility of the author vis à vis the socialist society. He asks whether too much rapid change can be beneficial for society as a whole and answers that both tolerance and caution are required. Perhaps even more important than what was said is the fact that this interview with an author from the GDR could take place at all. One can only hope that the discussion, with other GDR writers as well, will continue in the future.

JH: When I was in the GDR, I noticed that one could find a number of American books and films there. However, in the United States not much GDR literature is readily available. In your opinion, which works from the GDR would be of interest to an American audience?

HK: There are no doubt some inhibitions vis à vis GDR literature. It would be very bold of me to assume that one work or another would be received especially well here. But I think that any country of culture, as long as it is not preoccupied with isolationism, should concern itself to a great extent with the culture, and, of course, literature, of other countries. And I know that our literature has some traits which distinguish it from other literatures (but these traits do not necessarily make it better than other literatures). For example, it has a certain informational function which could be of importance to American readers. I would not like to recommend single works, but perhaps it would be profitable to see what has appeared in the Federal Republic of Germany, to see what has circulated there. Quite a lot has appeared there, a whole series of important writers. American readers could learn quite a lot from that selection.

JH: I noticed that your play *Die Aula* was produced last summer (1979) in Leipzig. How was the play received?

HK: Well, it was almost a re-make, because the first theater season for *Die Aula* was a long time ago; I do not know how long ago, but it's been at least five or six years. At that time, the novel was dramatized, and there were twenty-six different productions. The success was varied, especially in the smaller theaters, but in the larger ones, the play generally filled the theater. For example, the *Deutsches Theater* in Berlin, an old, respected theater, presented the play approximately three hundred times on the main stage.

JH: Wolfgang Kröplin, author of a review of the performance in Leipzig (*Theater der Zeit*, Nr. 8, 1979), expressed the opinion that it is difficult to produce "Gegenwartsstücke," like *Die Aula*, which were written a few years ago and which are concerned with problems that no longer exist. How would you react to this; how can "Gegenwartsstücke," which are concerned with times that no longer exist, best be played?

HK: I am not entirely of the opinion which you have just expressed. It has to do with the performance and, of course, with the production, including the adequacy of the information supplied in the program notes. But basically it is the case that today's

audience is not so very far removed from the events of these plays. One is surrounded today by people who have experienced these "olden days." And if it were true, what you have just quoted, then one couldn't explain why many of these works dealing with the construction days of the GDR, including *Die Aula*, are sold out within three days after every new edition. *Die Aula* has gone through approximately twenty editions, and 80,000 copies in the GDR. That would be hard to explain if the book were concerned with problems that are no longer understandable.

JH: Kröplin was of the opinion that plays like *Die Aula* can only be produced today with a great deal of humor, because one cannot take their problems seriously anymore. Are you of the same opinion?

HK: No, I don't agree at all. Things which one took seriously earlier retain a portion of their seriousness for all times. Just because plays are done with humor today doesn't mean that the problems they treat aren't to be taken seriously. I think that humor in general is one of the few ways of actually coming to terms with things that are serious. By the way, the novel is a thoroughly humorous novel, and it's no new discovery if Kröplin thinks that the play should be done with humor, because it is supposed to be humorous. It is the story of a victory over a handicap, and therefore, one should laugh.

JH: As we know, *Die Aula* is a "Gegenwartsstück." But how would you define "Gegenwartsliteratur"? For many students of American literature, that concept is foreign indeed.

HK: Yes, I think that's an understandable question, because the designation "Gegenwartsliteratur" does place the work, at least to a certain extent, in a special category. For me, the question is really whether or not the work is real literature, and, if so, then it is of little importance whether it is set during the Thirty Years War, or yesterday. So for me, "Gegenwartsliteratur" is literature that is of value for the present day, that has meaning for today, that is important for today. Only then can one add the second concept--that "Gegenwartsliteratur" has to do with things taking place in the recent past, and which we know very well still concern us or once concerned us. But, I am very much against a narrow defini-

tion of this concept, against limiting it to the breathless immediacy of today's news. There is no sense in that. An author who lets himself in for a race with the calendar often sets himself up for failure. You can write about any topic you choose, but your work has to have meaning beyond the immediate present. That is the most important thing--not whether works result from the present, but whether they have value for the future.

JH: Isn't there a danger in "Gegenwartsliteratur," namely that it is difficult to understand in other times and in other cultures. These works don't translate well, do they?

HK: That appears to be a tempting conclusion, but I am not so certain that it is entirely true. Let's take two examples we all know: Plenzdorf's *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.*, is a very successful example of literature which has issued from and cannot be divorced from the milieu of the GDR, and yet which has generated interest in many parts of the world. Or, to stick stubbornly to my own work, *Die Aula*, as I mentioned, is a work which is read beyond the borders of the GDR. As I mentioned, it was translated into twenty other languages, and is the most frequently re-printed GDR work in the FRG, where the social conditions are clearly quite different and where the background of the readers is different from that of a GDR audience. Lack of knowledge of the conditions which a work of literature portrays is almost irrelevant. What I know, for example, about Iceland, I know only from a novel by Halldor Laxness. What I know about the Deep South, I know for the most part from the novels of Faulkner. One of the functions of literature is to convey information, and what I don't know about the specific conditions discussed I can learn from my reading.

JH: In the GDR today, there is more talk about "Gegenwartsliteratur" than about socialist realism. Has "Gegenwartsliteratur" replaced the concept of socialist realism?

HK: No, one cannot talk at all about replacement, because these are two totally different concepts. It would be like comparing apples and oranges. So, one cannot speak of an ersatz. But behind your question is probably the observation that we do not throw around the concept of socialist realism as much as we used to do. That's true. The theoreticians still like to talk about this kind of realism; writers in the GDR are less likely to do so because actually

the whole question is exhausted when a writer says "I am a writer who is also a socialist. I consider myself a realistic author, and if you want to call that combination socialist realism, fine, and if you don't want to call it that, then let it be." At any rate, the time is past when one tried to determine on the basis of five or twenty-five items in a check-list whether a work was a piece of socialist realism or not. It wasn't very useful for literature anyway.

JH: What is socialist realism today?

HK: That is what I have just tried to explain. The definition in the GDR will vary with the address of the person asked. For me, it is a realism that is practiced by anyone who considers himself a socialist. More I cannot say. Anything else would lead to limitations. Some time ago, when I was a student, one said, for example: "Gorki--now there's socialist realism!" Ten years later, it was said: "But Brecht is also socialist realism." And then it was said that *Die Aula* is socialist realism. But then others said that it was almost decadent. So, I really can't do much with such concepts. The most important issue is the ideological-political position of the author and what direction he considers art should take. Should art tend towards realism, or for example, surrealism? Although I think that we cannot imagine the best portion of our GDR literature without its surrealist origins. Take, for example, the latest book by Stefan Hermlin, which I consider a masterwork of our literature--*Abendlicht: Scheinheilige Erinnerungen* (actually the sub-title does not fit at all). One cannot imagine this work without the influence of Eluard.

JH: As reported in the *Berliner Zeitung* (June 23-24, 1979, p. 8), your address to the *Kunst- and Kulturschaffenden der DDR* stressed the continuity of the Eighty and Ninth Party Congresses in the cultural policies of today. Our readers are perhaps not familiar with these two Congresses. Could you please explain what the cultural policies of the Eighth and Ninth Party Congresses mean for the literature of the GDR today?

HK: That's a difficult question, because they presented a comprehensive program. But briefly, the Eighth, as well as the Ninth Party Congress, postulated the absolute equality of the material and cultural needs of society; other congresses, in contrast, had

considered culture important, but not essential. At the Eighth and Ninth Party Congresses, and ever since then, both the material and the cultural needs are mentioned in the same breath, and that has had for us many practical results. It means that the things we need for the practice of our profession, the things necessary for the dissemination of our works no longer have to be begged for--they are a self-evident part of cultural politics in the GDR today. One more very important point: the Eighth and Ninth Party Congresses emphasized again and again (perhaps it will disturb you that it had to be said, but I don't think it should, because I think it wouldn't hurt to say these things in several other parts of the world) that art is something absolutely irreplaceable and that there is no substitute for literature, for example. Previously in the GDR, one had thought that if one were pedagogical enough, and if one spread enough historical knowledge, or presented enough technical knowledge, then the things that art has traditionally dealt with would automatically be taken care of. Naturally, that is not true. That art is an irreplaceable part of life--that was a major thesis of these Congresses; art is as important to us in our daily life as our morning cup of coffee, or, to me at least, a glass of beer with supper.

JH: This year (1979) the GDR is celebrating its 30th anniversary. What have been the main tendencies in GDR literature?

HK: I will try to answer briefly--without a doubt the first period was characterized by a thoroughly didactic literature. A body of literature was promoted that told the people of the GDR either what they did not know, or what they did not want to admit. Both trends were present; the latter was dominant. Initially, the main task for this literature was to tell the truth about fascism, about its crimes, about its culprits and its victims. It was a big help that some authors brought finished works back to the GDR when they returned from exile. Many of these works were among the best we had, for example, Anna Segher's *Das siebte Kreuz*, which could first be published after the author's return to Germany, that is, to what was later the GDR. This very important work became an essential part of our literary culture and our social consciousness. Others wrote about their experiences, too, and these sometimes shocking stories helped our people come to new conclusions. Then, [there is] a third factor that I would like to add--many foreign

works reached Germany for the first time. As one might assume, in the American sector, American literature dominated, just as in our sector there was a lot of Soviet literature which had been almost totally unknown up until that point. But there was not just Soviet literature. I have among my own books, which I started collecting after my return, a great many volumes from the West; important and indispensable works of world literature; I am thinking, for example, of Hemingway, who had an immeasurable influence, especially on our younger authors. Finally, as the fourth factor, many people got involved in literature after the war who had never had anything to do with it. These people were workers and farmers who were encouraged to relate what they thought about, and they sat down and wrote.

So, those would be the characteristics of the first period. The second period is characterized by the attempt to depict the new social reality of the GDR, including its basis in industry and agriculture. I need only to mention the catchword "Bitterfelder Weg." It was around for a long time and led to some useful things. Once the *Times Literary Supplement* defined the difference between West German and GDR literature in the following way: the West German literary world has little to do with the work-a-day world; in the GDR it almost always does, at least during the period of the Bitterfelder Weg.⁽³⁾ That was an important catching-up process, and like all processes that are oriented towards catching up, it had to have its end, had to result in a normalization. And that's where we are today. I think that we now have a literature which would not be able to mention something it was not interested in. Diversity has increased greatly. We have not forgotten the old, but we have added the new.

JH: In your opinion, what were the greatest accomplishments in GDR literature in the last thirty years?

HK: I would like to point out very diplomatically that I have an elective office as President of the GDR Writers Union, and if I were to start passing out grades, I would have difficulties at the next election! My colleagues might not elect me again; actually that might be just fine with me, but I wouldn't want to provoke the matter in this way!

JH: In which aspects of your own work, then, do you see your

greatest contribution to GDR literature?

HK: An author cannot really assess that, but I think that I can say with some assurance that my work has not been entirely useless, and if I would have to mention something, I would say that I am one of the many who have brought something new into our literature in so far as I am a working man who has assumed the role of an intellectual. And my main work so far consists of reports about what we call the educational revolution. As a product of this revolution, I am indebted to others for writing about it. By the same token, I am a product of anti-fascism, and feel the same obligation to write about its evolution.

JH: And now a question about events during the past summer. The GDR had troubles with its authors again; could you explain the problem, and perhaps tell us what kind of a role you played, and what these events mean for GDR literature?(4)

HK: Yes, that's again a very complicated matter; please forgive me if I present things in a very condensed manner. Basically, it was less a literary affair than a political one, a political affair that took place in the literary arena. You must consider the following: we have made enormous gains in the cultural area in the last ten years, more specifically in the literary area. We have achieved a great deal. The diversity of our literature has increased astonishingly. Also, the social standing of the author has improved. This has occurred at the same time as the process of *détente*, which has affected our society in every respect. We all know that a series of treaties which aim at *détente* and the reduction of animosity between the two German states were ratified. These two elements--the development of a social consciousness of authors and the greater reduction of international tension--have, in my opinion, led to an attitude among some of my colleagues that if that is possible, then everything else has to be possible as well. They, then, look to the realization of every dream and every plan. Others, including myself, are opposed to this view. We believe that we have reached what we have because of a stubborn struggle, rational discussion, and hard negotiation. We feel it is not possible to jump immediately from one situation into the next; we must proceed with caution and thought. This, in short, has caused the basic difference between the two groups. Some of my colleagues

with whom we were disagreeing are of the opinion that if there should be détente, then ideological boundaries are no longer relevant, and as a result, one should be able to do or not do whatever one wants. In my opinion, that is not a very realistic attitude. That is approximately the heart of the disagreement. In the final analysis, that was what it was all about. It was not about one author writing a controversial book and another author not liking it. That was only a result of this basic difference in opinion.

JH: As president of the Writers Union, what kind of a role did you play in the whole matter?

HK: Not as President of the Writers Union, but... I am the President of the Writers Union because I am Hermann Kant. I am not Hermann Kant because I am President of the Writers Union. I have to say that now at the outset. What I contributed to the discussion were not convictions which were whispered in my ear because I am President of the Writers Union. They were my own convictions.

One of the consequences of the thesis that writing literature is work just like any other work is that this work must be carried out without sensationalism and without putting excessive demands on one's partner (i.e., the state apparatus, JEH). I do think that an author does something special but he cannot demand a special status for himself. And furthermore, I think that if there are differences of opinion, then one should not ally himself with outsiders who will exploit these differences in an unfriendly way. That is very important. I have no sympathy for those who join up with the opposition just because they want to fight with me. I can very well understand that someone may not be of my opinion, but the discussion must take place at home, among ourselves, with our means, for us, and with the goal to improve the situation, and not just to create sensation.

JH: And finally, the obligatory concluding question: What are you working on now? Will there be a novel about America?

HK: Ever since good old Kafka bequeathed us an *Amerika*-fragment, one should be forewarned before he lets himself in for such a gigantic theme. Of course, it would be possible to create some-

thing out of the experience of having barely touched a continent, that would be quite legitimate, but no, no... I will certainly say or write this and that about America in the things that I do in the future; naturally the fact that I could travel at least a little, may play a role, but no... I've been working for some time on a novel which carries the presumptuous title *Konzeption*. But somehow that is what it's about. I am trying to tell a story that reaches back to origins, from conception to birth to growing up, that tries to show something about this society in which I live.

NOTES

1. "Man forms himself" by Bertolt Brecht

"So man forms himself

By saying yes, by saying no

By winning, by losing

By associating here, by associating there

So man forms himself, by changing himself

And so his picture develops in us

By being like us and by not being like us."

(Translated by Joan E. Holmes)

2. Developments in the GDR from April to August, 1979

Beginning of April. In an effort to control buying in Intershops, GDR citizens are required to exchange hard currency for vouchers.

April 14. East Germany announces new restrictions on foreign journalists, which forbid them the interviewing of any GDR citizens without prior permission. Further, this decree, which replaces the regulations of 1973, requires that journalists inform authorities at least 24 hours in advance of all trips planned outside Berlin. Klaus Bölling, a Bonn spokesman, said "the measures contradict the spirit of good neighborly relations" and were in violation of the 1975 Helsinki agreements. (Note: the category "journalist" may be broad enough in the GDR to include academicians.)

Mid-April. Wolfgang Harich moves to Vienna.

End of April. It is announced that the 71 year-old chief of the "Staatssicherheitsdienst" (Secret Police), Erich Mielke, would be replaced by Werner Walde, 53. The house arrest of Robert Havemann, which began November 26, 1976, continues under stricter surveillance than before. Two dissidents, Rudolf Bahro, economist and author of *The Alternative*, and Niko Hübner, who refused military service in the GDR, continue to receive extensive news coverage in West Germany. For the first time publicly, a GDR Minister (Erich Mielke) confirms difficulties in the GDR economy: shortages, manipulation of the plan, inability to fulfill the current plan (*Der Spiegel*, April 23, 1979, p. 68-71).

May 6. Stefan Heym, author of the novel *Collin*, which was published in West Germany without the approval of the GDR Bureau for Authors' Rights, speaks in an interview with *The New York Times* (May 8, 1979) about "a revival of Stalinism," and a campaign of repression against leading writers. Heym is accused of currency violations for having received money from a West German publisher. The penalty could be two to ten years in prison and/or up to 10,000 Marks fine. He reports that recent works by Jurek Becker, Klaus Poche, Erich Loest, Rolf Schneider, Werner Heiduczek, and Karl-Heinz Jakobs have been refused publication in the GDR in the past few months.

May 7. *Der Spiegel* carries an interview with Robert Havemann's wife, Katja Havemann.

Mid-May. The house arrest of Robert Havemann is lifted.

May 21. According to *Der Spiegel* (Nr. 21, p. 115), the GDR attempts to drive Stefan Heym to the West with a propaganda campaign. *Der Spiegel* reports that the GDR weekly newspaper *Sonntag* has described Heym as "an author of little talent" driven by "egoism" and "primitive anti-communism," whose primary concern is "to induce hate of the GDR." The friction between Heym and the GDR regime dates back many years; the latest exchange of accusations results from the publication of Heym's *Collin* early in 1979 in C. Bertelsmann Verlag in Munich. After an interview in East Berlin with Heym, Peter van Loyen, (ZDF), is asked to leave the GDR. Heym is described in a GDR publication as "a former USA-citizen," a condemning phrase, according to some experts (*Der Spiegel*, Nr. 21, May 21, 1979, p. 115).

May 23. The *Schriftstellerverband* (GDR Writers Union) proclaims in *Neues Deutschland* (May 24, 1979, p. 4) that any member who breaks the law (referring to the ban on publishing in the Federal Republic of Germany without prior approval from the Bureau for Authors' Rights) cannot receive the support of the Writers Union.

Further, loyalty and party discipline are emphasized.

May 26/27. The official "organ" of the Socialist Unity Party, *Neues Deutschland*, begins publishing letters expressing loyalty to the cultural policies of the GDR and condemning Western journalism (*Neues Deutschland*, "Offenes Wort zur rechten Zeit," May 26/27, 1979, p. 4). In the days to follow, the *Verband des Theaterschaffenden*, the *Verband der Komponisten und Musikwissenschaften der DDR*, and the *Schriftstellerverband*, among others, express solidarity with the state.

May 31. *Neues Deutschland* prints the address by Hermann Kant, President of the GDR Writers Union, to the Executive Committee of the Writers Union, in which he criticizes Heym's *Collin* and characterizes it as "an embarrassing accident" ("ein peinliches Unglück"). Rolf Schneider's *November* is also attacked. Further, Kant refutes a letter of May 16 to Erich Honecker, in which Kurt Bartsch, Jurek Becker, Adolf Endler, Klaus Schlesinger, Dieter Schubert, and Martin Stade condemn recent developments in GDR cultural policy. The letter accuses the GDR of attempting to silence authors like Stefan Heym. Kant counters that interviews in West Germany, in which authors like Heym accuse Kant of being a Nazi because of a few weeks in the Hitler army as a teenager in 1945, are counter-productive. Further, he questions the value of name-calling (Seypel had written a letter to Honecker accusing Kant of "opportunism, career-making, toadying, white-washing, deep-seated Stalinism, and neo-Stalinistic games" ("Opportunismus, Iarrierismus, der Lieberdienererei, Schönfärberei, des tiefsitzenden Stalinismus mit seinen neostalinistischen Spielarten").

Earlier, Dieter Noll, author of *Kippenberg*, had accused the Western media of a campaign of hate ("Hetzkampagne") against the GDR (*Neues Deutschland*, May 22, 1979, p. 4). He criticized Heym, Seypel, and Schneider for "co-operating with the enemy in order to achieve some fame, apparently because they are incapable of finding acclaim in the GDR." Noll, like Kant, bases his criticism on works not published in East Germany, and therefore unknown to the readership of *Neues Deutschland*. Later in the summer, Seypel moves permanently to West Germany.

June 7. The Berlin Writers Union votes to close Kurt Bartsch, Adolf Endler, Stefan Heym, Karl-Heinz Jakobs, Klaus Poche, Klaus Schlesinger, Rolf Schneider, Dieter Schubert and Joachim Seypel out of the Writers Union.

June 23/24. Hermann Kant in an open letter to Erich Honecker in *Neues Deutschland* expresses solidarity with the principles of the Eighth and Ninth Party Congresses.

June 25. *Der Spiegel* reports that Robert Havemann has been fined 10,000 Marks. Earlier, Stefan Heym had been fined 9,000 Marks.

July 27. *The Washington Post* (p. A 21) reports that "a sweeping new set of laws--possibly the most far-reaching of their kind in Eastern Europe--goes into effect next week, aimed at repressing dissent and restricting East Germans' contacts with Westerners. The new laws, among other things, make it treasonable to pass, even verbally, unclassified information, including book manuscripts, to foreigners. The punishment is two to twelve years in jail.

October 8. On the 30th anniversary of its founding, the GDR grants amnesty to the economist Rudolf Bahro and Niko Hübner, both of whom move to West Germany.

3. In 1959, a group of writers and critics met in the highly industrialized city of Bitterfeld at the invitation of the *Mitteldeutscher Verlag* of Halle to discuss the development of a "partisan socialist national culture." In the key address, Alfred Kurella encouraged writers to work in factories and in the country in order to be able to write first-hand about workers. He also encouraged workers to take up the pen ("Greif zur Feder, Kumpel!"). A second congress was held in 1964. This movement produced works like *Spur der Steine* by Erik Neutsch, Hermann Kant's *Die Aula*, Christa Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel*, and Volker Braun's *Provokation für mich*.

4. Please see footnote two.