



Sara Jones. *Complicity, Censorship and Criticism: Negotiating Space in the GDR Literary Sphere*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011. IX, 221 S. ISBN 978-3-11-023796-2.

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S. Jones: Complicity, Censorship and Criticism

Studies of literary censorship usually focus on the structures (i.e., the gatekeepers) and the mechanics (i.e., producing a particular wording of a piece of writing) of text production. Sara Jones, in her study of three GDR authors, shifts the research focus to the “fluid boundaries between opposition and conformity” (p. 21) and investigates, how and if the three writers, each of whom occupied a different political stance, achieved a position of clarity in their relationship to the state power. The three writers include Herrmann Kant, a high functionary of the GDR literary scene (the President of the Writers’ Union between 1978 and 1989, a Party member and an “Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter”, IM, of the Stasi); Stefan Heym, a writer with an international reputation, an outspoken critic of the regime and never a Party member; and Elfriede Brüning, an author of middle-brow literature little known outside the GDR, a loyal Party-member and supporter of the GDR cultural policy.

The second, and more intriguing, innovation of Jones’ approach is her selection and treatment of sources. She combines archival material with autobiographies of the three writers and also with their fictional texts. The majority of the archival materials are Stasi files on the writers (a scant source in Brüning’s case) and documentation from the publishing houses and the Writers’ Union. It is the interplay and overlaps of the fictional and non-fictional and the ways in which one type of sources informs on the other that brings a fresh perspective to the study of cultural history of state socialism. New Historicists, most notably Stephen Greenblatt, have been promoting this general approach to cultural history and the

history of ideas since the 1980s, working, particularly, on the Elizabethan era, but it has not so far gained ground in the study of state socialism.

Apart from the introduction and the conclusion, the book consists of three chapters, each devoted to one writer. The structure of the chapters mirrors the main book title: in detailed textual analyses, Jones discusses, first, the relation of each writer to and with the ruling elite, then documented or subjectively perceived acts of censorship against each of the writers, before she turns her attention to the writers’ expressions of criticism of the GDR cultural policy. The final part of each chapter interrogates pre-Wende fictional texts by the three writers for traces of particular critical views and attitudes, such they chose to deflect or suppress in their official dealings with power and that are not, therefore, revealed in the archival documents, although the authors themselves claimed them in their (largely) post-Wende autobiographies. Jones chooses texts that could be classified as autobiographical fiction and whose publication was complicated by censorship for this last part of her analysis. Thus, Kant’s novel “Das Impressum” (“The Imprint”, 1972) is read against his autobiography “Abspann” (“Closing Credits”, 1991), Heym’s “Collin” (1981) against “Nachruf” (“Obituary”, 1988), and Brüning’s novella “Septemberreise” (“Journey in September” 1974) and novel “Wie andere Leute auch” (“Just like other people”, 1983) against “Und außerdem war es mein Leben” (“And besides, it was my life”, 1994).

Central to this study are two arguments, one pertaining to the research subject, the other to methodology, in

particular, to the sources for research in cultural history. Concerning the former, Jones argues against closed theoretical models of state-socialist societies, be it “totalitarianism” or “dictatorship”, because these by definition do not allow for the investigation of ambiguity in the relationship to power. Instead of working within the usual binary of “Power” (Macht) and “Intellect” (Geist), she explores the blurred line between them within each of her writers and draws broader implications for the role of intellectuals in the GDR system and for the functioning of the system as such. Ambiguity emerges as the defining feature of the literary and political practice of GDR intellectuals from this analysis. Jones sees a powerful source of this ambiguity in the “loyalty trap of antifascism” for GDR intellectuals: that is, the shared participation of the intellectuals and the ruling elite in the founding myth of antifascism that joined them despite disagreements over cultural policy and the intellectuals’ criticism that the ruling elite had compromised socialist ideals (pp. 9–11). Sara Jones credits Wolfgang Emmerich with the concept of the “loyalty trap of antifascism”: Wolfgang Emmerich, *Between Hypertrophy and Melancholy—The GDR Literary Intelligentsia in a Historical Context*, in: *Universitas* 35 (1993), 4, pp 273–85. Language becomes the tool by means of which the ambiguity plays out and the negotiations occur between the intellectuals and the power. The writers, publishers, reviewers and the political managers of the GDR culture all use the same expressive language in achieving their aims and/or in making allowances for criticism. Jones draws on the study by David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech. The Politics of Culture in the GDR*, London 1995. Bathrick observed that the language of literature was a part and a co-creator of the official discourse, even when it expressed criticism (pp. 17–19). The study, in fact, is a wonderful exemplification of the Foucauldian concept of discourse: due to the key function of discourse to exclude all statements external to it as untrue, any critical voices have to acknowledge the existing discursive structures and speak from within discourse.

The methodological argument follows, in part, from the theoretical position of treating literature as a part of the official discourse. Jones is aware of the limitations of fictional and biographical texts in terms of their factual reliability, but she also points out that the Stasi documents have similar limitations. First, in cases when a report was a compilation of reports by several IMs, it was always already a subjective interpretation, and second, reports written by Stasi officers had to adhere to a particular terminology and phraseology, a sub-discourse, developed within the Stasi system and unknown to outsiders, including the IMs. This discourse generated mean-

ings that did not necessarily correspond to the meanings intended by the IMs. This Jones identifies as a source of discrepancy between the archival documents and the autobiographies in question, a discrepancy that caused substantial controversy in literary press after the opening of the Stasi archives: the writers presented themselves in their autobiographies one way, the Stasi files showed them in another. Therefore, she argues, if both literature and the archival sources (whether Stasi or the Writers’ Union) are parts of the same discourse, they must be considered together in the pursuit of a better understating of GDR cultural history. She shows through detailed analyses how one type of a source complements another, suggests alternative meanings and helps outline the delimitations of the ambiguity passing through every individual.

A study of this ambition in the detail of textual analysis and treatment of sources can hardly be expected to be without flaws. Although the book was published within de Gruyter’s *Interdisciplinary German Cultural Studies* and thus presumes an audience specialised in German Studies, it would benefit from the inclusion of a more general context of the theory of censorship instead of just the German work on censorship.

The second problematic issue is gender. Jones detects the difficulty in separating censorship on the grounds of politics and of gender in the publication histories of Brüning’s texts and attempts a thorough analysis in the context of GDR feminism. Nevertheless, gender analysis only works if the same phenomenon is studied in relation to both women and men and its potential remains underutilized if, as in this study, gender is used as a category of analysis only in a single case. The emphasis on gender in the analysis of Brüning thus creates a heterogeneous element that does not relate to another chapter in the book, although in other respects each chapter builds on another. The interplay of gender and political power, which is beginning to emerge from current gender research on state socialism, is thus only tentatively suggested, but any arguments are by definition inconclusive.

On the whole, nevertheless, “Complicity, Censorship and Criticism. Negotiating Space in the GDR Literary Sphere” by Sara Jones is a useful contribution to the growing body of research in cultural history that strives to overcome the “us” and “them”, “victims” and “perpetrators” dichotomies that have so far dominated East Central European Area Studies, broaden the spectrum of categories, and develop new analytical tools for the study of state socialism.

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