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Ted E. Frank

University of Texas at Arlington

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Günter de Bruyn's *Preisverleihung*:

A GDR Novel with a Mission

Ted E. Frank

Established scholarly opinion in the west has come to regard Günter de Bruyn as an inconsequential GDR writer whose works follow a pattern of sentimentality or even banality. Marcel Reich-Ranicki views de Bruyn as an author of "simple Trivialliteratur," one who writes idyllic stories that have scarcely anything to do with our time.¹ Fritz J. Raddatz sees de Bruyn's 1968 novel *Buridans Esel* as a mixture of philistinism and conscious subtlety that utterly fails to work.² And Werner Brettschneider interprets the same novel as a harmless, open-ended tale, possessing little more than the possibility of humor. "Nichts wird heroisiert, nichts in den Schmutz gezogen," Brettschneider comments disapprovingly. "Die Liebe bleibt und der Alltag bleibt. Der Held muss sich entscheiden, aber der Autor richtet nicht. Er lässt das Urteil offen."³ Such unfavorable West German responses may account for the conspicuous absence of de Bruyn from Hans Jürgen Geerdts' 1972 collection of critical studies on twenty-seven outstanding East German writers⁴—a collection written especially for readers in the Federal Republic—even though de Bruyn had been distinguished in 1964 by being awarded the prestigious *Heinrich-Mann-Preis*, the highest literary honor given by the *Akademie der Künste der DDR* and also awarded to, among others, Günter Kunert, Christa Wolf, Johannes Bobrowski, and Hermann Kant, all of whom have more favorably impressed West German scholars than de Bruyn.

More specific reasons than the above for de Bruyn's general rejection in West Germany can only be conjectured here, since in no case has a western scholar analyzed de Bruyn's works in detail. One can only suppose that critics in the Federal Republic may assume that de Bruyn's novels about contemporary people in a real, easily identifiable world cover ground long since traversed in West German literature,⁵ or that political blinders have prevented the West Germans from recognizing de Bruyn's intent as an author. It will be the purpose of this study to identify this intent as presented by de Bruyn in his 1972 novel *Preisverleihung*, and to suggest that he is grappling with significant problems affecting GDR citizens in the seventies.

Typical of his generation of writers who have achieved their position and fame in the GDR, de Bruyn feels a deep sense of responsibility for promoting that country.⁶ He fulfills this responsibility by writing prose critical of socialism, prose that is not characterized by the familiar clichés of Marxist writing. He neither glorifies past achievements of the state, nor focuses on the transgressions against humanity of socialism's political and cultural antagonists. Instead, and this has not been recognized, Günter de Bruyn exposes—often mercilessly—the grievous shortcomings of many citizens in the now "successful" socialist state of the GDR and holds up these shortcomings for examination, ridicule, and eventual correction.

The principal concern of GDR writers during the past fifteen years, critics agree, has been the role of the individual, especially the individual's self-fulfillment in a society that, by means of a gigantic propaganda apparatus, exhorts its citizens to work collectively for the greatest good of the greatest number. "Für die Konflikte und Widersprüche, die uns in den literarischen Werken der sechziger und siebziger Jahre begegnen," Klaus Schuhmann writes, "ist eine stärkere Intensität der moralischen Auseinandersetzung charakteristisch. Fast alle Schriftsteller, die in den sechziger und siebziger Jahren auf sich aufmerksam machten, stellten sich der Frage: Wie soll man leben?"⁷ Christa Wolf, for example, attempted to answer this question in her novel *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, for which she chose this query by Johannes Becker as a motto: "Was ist das: Dieses Zu-sich-selber-Kommen des Menschen?" In the uncompleted novel *Franziska Linkerhand*, Brigitte Reimann concerned herself with the question, asked by the heroine: "Und als Sie wussten, dass Ihnen ein Leben gehört: was wollten Sie daraus machen?" And at the end of his novel *Auf der Suche nach Gatt*, Erik Neutsch wrote: "Wo wird der Mensch produktiv gemacht, und wo wird er entfremdet? Das ist die Frage des Lebens." Each of these authors has focused on the individual's efforts and failures at self-realization in a Marxist society. But de Bruyn goes beyond them in stressing the importance of the individualistic ethic vis-à-vis the collective work ethic, "Ich halte es für wichtig, dass gerade das Individuelle . . . sehr aufmerksam beachtet wird," he remarks, "denn hier liegt ein ganz wesentlicher gesellschaftlicher Faktor."⁸ At the same time, however, de Bruyn maintains that many GDR citizens are incapable of self-fulfillment, of individualistic productivity that improves and promotes the Marxist state, because these citizens have become empty, indolent, undirected husks of humanity. A hollowness, he argues, afflicts the German Democratic Republic on its coming of age. And he attributes this hollowness to the GDR's failure to recognize and act on this paradoxical truth: as long as many citizens abdicate their responsibility for developing themselves as individuals, they cannot contribute positively to the development of any state, whether Marxist or not. In examining the problems of his society in his time, de Bruyn might be cited as an example of a Marxist writer in the critical tradition of Georg Lukács, who states: "Marxism does not console anyone by playing down difficulties or minimizing the material and moral darkness which surrounds us human beings."⁹ It is precisely such darkness which de Bruyn describes.

In *Buridans Esel* the characters are, in de Bruyn's words, "Menschen wie sie überall vorkommen, gewöhnliche Leute."¹⁰ The same might be said of the characters in *Preisverleihung*, where de Bruyn offers us a small collection of typical GDR citizens of the seventies. Frau Irene Overbeck, the female protagonist of the novel, represents those citizens who are a central concern of de Bruyn's: they neither feel responsibility for the present nor look with a critical eye toward the future. Self-satisfaction and apathy mark their and Irene's character. She is, in short, perfectly content with herself and her life in Berlin. "Mit vielen Menschen geht sie über die Weidendammer Brücke," de Bruyn writes, "genießt das Durcheinander von Farben und Geräuschen, die endlose Bewegtheit, das Sekundenlange Ineinanderfallen und Lösen zweier Blicke, die Ratselhaftigkeit

Fremder Worte, für andere bestimmter Sätze. Und sie wünscht sich, nichts sein zu brauchen als Teil dieser Menge, sich von deren Strömung treiben zu lassen, willenlos, verantwortungslos, ohne Wunsch, ohne Schuld, ohne Individualität" [italics mine].¹¹ True, Irene occasionally looks beyond the immediate moment to a day when her husband will receive government permission to move his family into a modern, private apartment and to buy a family car. But she realizes such luxuries are in the still distant future and may possibly never become reality if her husband fails to live up to the government's expectations of him. She therefore quickly diverts her thinking to the immediate moment and reminds herself that it is her duty to be happy here and now: "Wer schon nicht fröhlich sein kann (und wer kann das nicht in dieser Zeit, in diesem Land), kann sich wenigstens fröhlich geben" (p. 10).

Irene's only concerns are her routine chores and duties as a housewife, as a mother of an eighteen-year old daughter, and as a part-time interpreter for the government. Having her morning coffee and cigarette in bed, buying a new hat, impressing upon her daughter the value of good clothes and cosmetics, pleasantly greeting her friends and neighbors, and interpreting for Polish delegations mark the limits of her days. Even her husband's work as a professor of literature at Berlin's Humboldt University does not interest her, for, in her opinion, literature and the arts offer no concrete improvement to life. "Wie ein Meerfisch, der sein ganzes Leben in Salzwasser verbringt, ohne selbst salzig zu werden," de Bruyn observes, "lebt sie bald zwei Jahrzehnte unter analysierenden und theoretisierenden Wissenschaftlern, ohne dass Spuren davon bei ihr zurückbleiben" (p. 146). Irene feels no guilt for her lack of intellectual curiosity, just as she feels no sense of moral responsibility for bettering her life, no sense of aspiration for herself, no sense of individuality. Her life is narrow and empty. But she is oblivious to its hollowness and lives in relative contentment. In suggesting the reason for Irene's adopting a satisfied attitude, de Bruyn reveals the falseness of her position: "Indem sie sich mit dem, was sie ist, zufriedengibt, bleibt sie in ihrer Art ganz, in sich gerundet, perfekt" (p. 146).

Irene's inability to assume a critical, morally responsible attitude toward even her own life, her inability to be an individual, also characterizes her husband's colleague Professor Liebscher, who, having attained the highest academic rank in the educational structure of the GDR, sets himself up as an example of a successful man. "Erfolg haben ist Pflicht für jeden" (p. 63), he proclaims, but fails to see that, in obtaining this success, he has abdicated his ethical responsibility to himself and, in turn, to his students. For professional rank and the accompanying luxury of a modern, private apartment, Liebscher sold himself to the party. In doing so, he has forfeited his professional integrity, his right as a teacher to theorize, to pose questions, and to arrive at and express his own ideas and interpretations. Such losses, however, mean little to him. "Immer sind Kompromisse möglich" (p. 63), he argues, implying such compromises as promulgating the dictates of the party rather than the dictates of one's conscience. An unquestioning Marxist, Liebscher maintains that every citizen's foremost responsibilities are to believe in the validity of the existing social and political order of the GDR, to fit oneself into that order, and to promote it uncritically and unconditionally. Anyone not subscribing to this viewpoint, Lieb-

scher insists, is a "Kleinbürger," a man of "subjektiver Ehrlichkeit" (p. 61), a man with "mangelnder Prinzipienheit" (p. 148). That he himself, as well as his phases, are clichés, outmoded and empty forms, never occurs to him.

Another character who has attained success according to Liebscher's compromise-formula is Paul Schuster, the author to whom, on this day of the "Preisverleihung," GDR officials are presenting one of the country's most prestigious literary awards. But Schuster's most recent novel, despite its official acclaim, embodies little truth and less reality. As de Bruyn makes clear, it consists only of what the party wants the public to read.

Significant here is the point that Schuster did not always write made-to-order novels. Twenty years ago, as a young fisherman-turned-writer, he had portrayed reality and people as they were. But he had not been able to publish his manuscripts. "Du siehst die Dinge, wie sie sind," a party editor had informed him, "uns interessiert aber wie sie werden" (p. 107). Schuster's desire to record what he saw gradually faded. To become a published author, to achieve official recognition, he compromised. He adapted his work to themes and subjects approved by the party. As an author, then, Paul Schuster has achieved success in the GDR, the success that, Liebscher argues, it is everyone's duty to achieve, the success that the party rewards. But ultimately it is a success demanding that one forfeit himself and his moral responsibility. Schuster, like Liebscher, no longer has an ethical center in himself, having yielded it up to conform to the ethos of the party.

Through these three characters, Günter de Bruyn depicts the potentially catastrophic moral and intellectual corrosion that he sees threatening the German Democratic Republic. He knows and explicitly details the adaptation to the demands of the ruling political party that an individual must make in order to function within the GDR. And in doing so he reveals the profoundly ironic outcome of the state's long-term reliance on the following principle (which had helped guarantee the GDR's early strength): the necessity of the state's undisputed domination of the individual. It is this principle that now subverts the state by draining even its exemplary citizens of their identity and integrity as individuals. The accomplishments of even the most gifted continue to be viewed by the state in collective terms, as means to its own ends, means to enhance its own power, growth, and progress. The Marxist movement in the seventies, de Bruyn emphasizes, continues to discourage, even discredit, physical and moral effort put forth by the individual in his own behalf. Marxism in its present form in the GDR does not subscribe to the new view of the individual's relationship to the state as being, as Klaus Schuhmann insists in a recent article, "geschichtlicher Natur," changing "in dem Masse, wie sich Individuum und Gesellschaft wandeln und neue Verhältnisse eingehen."¹² The GDR government persists in encouraging its citizens, as it did in the fifties, to adapt themselves exclusively to the state's demands, to move along the Marxist road with the Marxist crowd, as Liebscher, Schuster, and Irene move, without a sense of personal desire and individuality and also without a feeling of guilt. Such adaptation leads to precisely that hollowness and conformity exhibited by de Bruyn's three characters, who have permitted themselves to become what

Frank: Günter de Bruyn's *Preisverleihung*: A GDR Novel with a Mi
 Christa Wolf, in the following proclamation, claims she refuses to allow herself to become: "Ich kann und will mich nicht einlassen auf einen blanken historischen Determinismus, der in Individuen, Schichten, Klassen, Völkern nur die Objekte einer sich unumstösslich durchsetzenden historischen Gesetzmässigkeit sähe und dem eine vollkommen fatalistische Geschichtsphilosophie entspräche; ebensowenig aber auf einen öden Pragmatismus, der in der Moral von Klassen und Individuen nichts sieht als ein Mittel zum Zweck, beliebig manipulierbar, beliebig ignorierbar, mal nützliches, mal unnützes Vehikel."¹³ Christa Wolf is typical of a few contemporary citizens of the GDR who, with de Bruyn, would insist that one of the developments wrought in the twenty-five years since the founding of the State of the Workers and Farmers is an altered role for the individual in his relation to the state. For the new breed of GDR socialist self-emancipation and self-fulfillment are mandatory; only these can lead citizens to increased productivity, to a securer life, and to an even stronger Marxist state.

There is in de Bruyn's novel one character who forms an exception to the pattern of conformity and hollowness discussed above and could hence serve as a prototype for the ideal GDR socialist of the immediate future. This man is the hero of the novel although he is atypical and unsuccessful in the present GDR. Dr. Teo Overbeck, Assistant at the Humboldt University and specialist in the literature of German romanticism, has neither been promoted in rank, although he joined the faculty at the same time and at the same rank as Liebscher, nor has he been offered a modern, private apartment, but with his family must share a small house with a retired factory worker. Overbeck has been passed over by the ruling GDR political party because he has resisted adapting himself uncritically to it. He maintains his independence and augments the maturity he has already achieved through a continuing process of growth, a process that to him seems natural.

Als Kind ist der Vater Gottvater, der Lehrer Schulze der Lehrer schlechthin, und alle Flüsse heissen Spree und alle Staatschefs Ulbricht, und aller Wald ist Kiefernwald. Wenn man grösser wird aber, der Vater nicht mehr allwissend ist, man Buchenwälder gesehen und von Wolga und Mississippi gehört hat, glaubt man doch, dann und wann einmal selbstentscheiden zu können, entwickelt sich so was wie Gewissen, wie Würde, wie Selbstachtung, Verantwortung, Selbstbewusstsein oder wie man das altmodisch oder nicht nennen soll. Dann glaubt man sich verpflichtet, wenn Fehler gemacht werden, korrigieren zu müssen, wenn schlechte Bücher ausgezeichnet werden, öffentlich sagen zu müssen, dass sie schlecht sind. (p. 150)

Teo had not always inclined toward individual, critical thought. De Bruyn, as the realist that he is, has his hero take part early in life in the careerism expounded by Liebscher and Schuster. As a student, Teo was convinced that the young, struggling political system of the fifties provided "Chancengelegenheiten für alle" (p. 16). Hence, he supported it, worked in student groups in the fields and villages of the country, and learned and applied rules meant to promote Marxism throughout the state. But Teo did not become its instrument. On the contrary. Within him grew the urge, "sich einen neuen Kreis eigner Art zu

suchen" (p. 41). A fervent and unyielding search for understanding of himself and the life about him forced him to endless questioning. He came to recognize, as he trained in his discipline, "dass Wissenserweiterung schöne Einfachheiten von Lehrsätzen zerstört, dass auch Grösse veraltet, auch eiserne Denkmäler stürzen können, Irrtümer immer und überall möglich sind, dass es nicht auf Rechthaberei, sondern auf Wahrheitsfindung ankommt, dass es zwar bequem, aber dumm ist, einmal gefundene Wahrheiten wie ewige zu behandeln, dass man immer lernender belien muss" (p. 82).

The conflict in Teo's soul throughout the novel is set off by the opposition between his active, inquiring, individualistic search in life and the passive, satisfied conformity of those about him. Teo refuses such conformity, "denn die Ruhe, die Zufriedenheit, die Schmerzlosigkeit sind der Tod des Talents" (p. 134). Although charged with the responsibility of doing so, on this day of the "Preisverleihung," Teo cannot publicly praise Schuster's book, "weil es nicht Welt, sondern Papier reflektiert" (p. 151). Schuster has ceased to observe, to see, to think, to learn—hence, to become. All that he has become, in Teo's eyes, is intellectually and ethically dead, as have his works. Teo himself refuses to forfeit his own becoming—his personal sense of responsibility and integrity, the personal attributes that set him apart, that permit him to look critically at life, that force him constantly to think and to ask questions. Questions are, de Bruyn maintains, "die Stufen, die zur Wahrheit hinaufführen" (p. 102).

Too many GDR citizens in the seventies, de Bruyn warns in *Preisverleihung*, resemble Pual Schuster, Professor Liebscher, and Irene Overbeck — citizens who believe themselves "fertig zu sein" (p. 85), who practice "gut Lernen, aber schlecht Denken" (p. 39). Too few resemble Teo Overbeck—a diligent, hard-working citizen "mit Gedanken . . . und Fragen" (p. 39), a citizen with "Vorwärtsbewegung, die nur durch strenge Kräfteeregulierung nicht ins Stocken gerät" (p. 113). In de Bruyn's eyes, the development of the GDR depends precisely on this type of person, one who methodically presses forward, assuming a responsible role in the state. Morally and intellectually indolent citizens who have lost all responsibility to themselves have also failed to dispatch their responsibilities to the state, which needs individuals who will grow, think, learn, who will correct errors when they see them, who will constantly raise questions and seek out answers, individuals who would, insofar as is possible in any society, determine their own paths and control their own destinies, individuals evaluated according to criteria that might seem, at first glance, to derive their inspiration from nineteenth-century romanticism, precisely that movement, with its glorification of the individual, that Marxism has often vehemently rejected.

But de Bruyn, a confirmed Marxist and one indebted and dedicated to the GDR, does not propose a revolt against authority in the name of feeling and unchecked expansion of the self. He does not advocate unbridled individualism. He moves beyond this stage of exaggerated commitment to self. He seems to insist not that every citizen of the GDR be bequeathed unlimited power to act on the world as he wishes, but that every citizen develop the power to act on himself—to expand the self, but also to exercise checks on that expansion. At times the individual must stimulate, at times he must restrict himself; at all times he

must maintain acute powers of judgment and discrimination—powers not easily attained nor easily retained, powers that recognize and arbitrate the struggle between good and evil in the individual soul, powers that make the individual aware, active, ardent, powers that direct him to act on himself. In man's soul there must be, de Bruyn seems to argue with Irving Babbitt, "a power that sits in judgment on the ordinary self,"¹⁴ a power, as Babbitt explains it, that is restraining, informing, centralizing, and is anterior to both intellect and emotion.¹⁵

Teo Overbeck, de Bruyn's hero, struggles to maintain and to exercise this power. Irene, Liebscher, and Schuster have lost it. The reader's persistent impression of Teo is of him restlessly struggling, questioning, and seeking answers. A conflict rages within him between his own morality and the morality (or lack of morality) of those around him. He struggles intellectually to comprehend all that is perplexing, uncomfortable, and evil. He questions and searches to a point bordering on insanity. He will not heed Liebscher's advice to him: "Tu, was du musst, aber nicht mehr als du willst" (p. 63). He wants to do precisely the opposite—to do more than he must, to believe in personal effort and to exercise responsibility. He cannot understand those who allow themselves to be molded exclusively by outside forces.

Marxism in the GDR must not, de Bruyn seems to be arguing here, discredit the activities an individual engages in toward personal ends, his sense of personal responsibility, his desire to refine himself morally. Every citizen must be permitted or encouraged to develop the power to discriminate, to agree or disagree, to criticize openly, and to engage in personal struggle. Only with citizens thus capable can the German Democratic Republic carry out the historical revolutionary character of Marxism in the seventies and beyond.

De Bruyn, when evaluating Paul Schuster's novel as one undeserving of any literary award, public recognition, or commendation, argues explicitly that a work has no place in today's world if it reflects only an artificial existence rather than the truth of life. He states further, "wirken kann ein Buch nur durch vollständige Aufrichtigkeit" (p. 121). And since he refers to his own novel as "ein intimes Buch . . . ein aktuelles Buch,"¹⁶ the reader must conclude that de Bruyn has intended to incorporate in *Preisverleihung* the qualities he himself advocates—the truth as he sees it about GDR citizens in the seventies. Like the novelist Schuster during his early period of writing, de Bruyn has always made it his mission as an author to describe things not in the golden haze of an ideal Marxist future but in the clear light of the present, not "wie sie werden," but rather "wie sie sind."¹⁷ The task of the foregoing study has been to show how in his novel *Preisverleihung* de Bruyn can be understood to have succeeded in that mission.

University of Texas at Arlington

NOTES

- ¹ *Zur Literatur der DDR* (München: Piper Verlag, 1974), p. 99.
- ² *Traditionen und Tendenzen: Materialien zur Literatur der DDR* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), p. 348.
- ³ *Zwischen literarischer Autonomie und Staatsdienst: Die Literatur in der DDR* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1972), p. 134.
- ⁴ *Literatur der DDR in Einzeldarstellungen* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kroner Verlag, 1972).
- ⁵ West German scholars have, perhaps, put too much emphasis on the plots in de Bruyn's works. The author himself attaches little importance to them. "Der äussere Handlungsverlauf ist nicht sehr wichtig genommen, er allein sagt wenig von dem, was der Roman sagen will," de Bruyn comments about *Buridans Esel*. "Ich dachte deshalb in einem frühen Stadium der Arbeit auch daran, die Geschichte zu Anfang kurz zu erzählen und dann zu fragen, was denn nun wirklich geschehen sei, d.h. im Innern der Beteiligten. Das zeigt deutlich mein Misstrauen gegen Geschichten, deren äusserer Ablauf Lehren vermitteln soll." See: Sigrid Töpelmann, "Interview mit Günter de Bruyn," *Weimarer Beiträge*, XIV (1968), 1175.
- ⁶ Werner Brettschneider in *Zwischen literarischer Autonomie und Staatsdienst*, pp. 48-59, divides East German writers into three groups: those born between 1880 and 1900, those born between 1901 and 1920, and those born since then. In contrast to the writers of groups one and two who concerned themselves with laying the foundation for a new, a socialist society, the writers of the third group, to which de Bruyn belongs (born 1926) are not, Brettschneider points out, the creators of a new society but its children, who write with a different purpose than their elders. They look on their society with a critical eye and have one concern above all others: "Es geht um mehr Sozialismus, um einen besseren, einen menschlicheren Sozialismus."
- ⁷ "Zu einigen Aspekten des Verhältnisses von Individuum und Gesellschaft in der sozialistischen Gegenwartsliteratur der sechziger und siebziger Jahre," in *Literatur und Geschichtsbewusstsein: Entwicklungstendenzen der DDR-Literatur in den sechziger und siebziger Jahren*, ed. Manfred Diersch and Walfried Hartinger (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1976), p. 89.
- ⁸ Töpelmann, "Interview," 1171.
- ⁹ *Studies in European Realism* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964), p. 2.
- ¹⁰ Töpelmann, "Interview," 1181.
- ¹¹ Günter de Bruyn, *Preisverleihung* (Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1972), p. 32. All further page references are included in my text and will be to this edition.
- ¹² "Zu einigen Aspekten," p. 88.
- ¹³ As quoted by Klaus Schuhmann in "Zu einigen Aspekten," p. 115.
- ¹⁴ *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), p. 111.
- ¹⁵ *Rousseau and Romanticism*, p. 130.
- ¹⁶ Günter de Bruyn, "Bedingungen des Glücks," *Neue deutsche Literatur* (1971), 33.

¹⁷Even in his formative years as a writer, de Bruyn concerned himself with portraying truth. "Und als ich, lange erfolglos, begann," de Bruyn states, "die Aufgabe, die mir gestellt war, als Schreiber zu erfüllen, da wurde mir klar, dass ich damals, bei der ersten Lektüre des *Grischa* gelernt hatte, dass die oberste Pflicht beim Schreiben darin besteht, die Wahrheit zu sagen, im Kleinen wie im Grossen, in Teilen wie im Ganzen." See: Sigrid Töpelmann, "Zu de Bruyns Erzählweise," *Weimarer Beiträge*, XIV (1968), 1186.

