Biographical Fiction by GDR Women Writers: Reassessing the Cultural Heritage

This article examines works of biographical fiction about female historical figures published by GDR women writers in the late 1980s. By comparing Sigrid Damm’s Cornelia Goethe and Johanna Hoffmann’s Charlotte von Stein in their presentations of Goethe and of the women who were close to him, I propose to demonstrate the varying degrees to which the orthodox GDR approach to the cultural heritage had, by this stage, been displaced in literature by more critical discourses, in particular feminism. I then argue that these works and others written both before and after 1989 share a broad plot structure which can be read as an indirect critique of the course of GDR history. In conclusion, reasons will be advanced as to why biographical fiction was a productive genre for writers in the GDR.

A remarkable phenomenon in GDR literature of the late 1980s was the wave of interest in historical lives as a subject for fiction. Renate Feyl presents the married life of Luise Adelgunde Victoria Gottsched. 1988 saw the publication of two works about Caroline Schlegel-Schelling, by Brigitte Struzyk and Volker Ebersbach. In 1985, Jens Sparschuh produced a novel entitled Der große Coup. Aus den geheimen Tage- und Nachtbüchern des Johann Peter Eckermann. In the same year, Sigrid Damm wrote a partly fictional biography of J.M.R. Lenz, before turning her attention to Cornelia Goethe in a work that was to appear in 1987.1

Biographical fiction was nothing new in the GDR at this stage – from the 1970s onwards, writers of fiction had played a central role in reassessing historical figures and redefining the authorised approach to the national heritage. However, a shift of interests was now apparent. The works of the 1970s tended to deal with literary outsiders previously excluded from the GDR canon of ‘progressive’ literature, such as Kleist, Hölderlin, Kafka and the Romantics, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Jean Paul. Writers including Christa and Gerhard Wolf, Günter de Bruyn and Günter Kunert identified themselves with these earlier artists and drew parallels between their pre-

dicament and their own in the GDR. These works have been the subject of extensive discussion. The texts appearing a decade later have attracted much less attention. These feature protagonists who are, likewise, marginal figures, but who tend to belong to two slightly different categories of outsider: women, and various lesser associates of Goethe. I shall focus here on two texts which, in their choice of protagonist, unite these two categories: Sigrid Damm’s *Cornelia Goethe* of 1987 and Johanna Hoffmann’s *Charlotte von Stein*, which appeared a year later in 1988.

Damm’s *Cornelia Goethe* is not a novel in the conventional sense. A first-person narrator, on the surface barely distinguishable from Damm herself, records her engagement with the life of Goethe’s younger sister. The text combines factual evidence resulting from Damm’s research with extensive narratorial reflection and analysis. The narrator complements the evidence available with imaginative speculation based on her empathy with Cornelia. Published by Aufbau in the East and by Insel in the West, Damm’s work reached a surprisingly wide audience and gained the acclaim of critics including Wolfgang Emmerich, Karin Wurst and Hannes

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