

Thematic Continuity in the Novels of Erich Loest

Michael T. O'Pecko, Towson State University

If one does not consider Erich Loest's early work, it is easy to assume that the critical, antiauthoritarian stance of his most well-known novel, *Es geht seinen Gang, oder Mühen in unserer Ebene* (1975; *In a Rut, or Struggles in Our Plains*), represents a break in his literary production. In fact, the rejection of responsibility, power, advancement, and authority cited by critics as the novel's most innovative qualities can be found both in the author's own experience and in most of his works, including his earliest novels. *Es geht seinen Gang* is thus in some ways a logical, if not necessarily expected, outgrowth of the earlier novels.

The German Democratic Republic (GDR) was just one year old and Erich Loest was not quite twenty-four when his first novel, *Jungen, die übrig blieben* (*Left-over Youths*) was published in Leipzig in 1950. Inspired by the author's wartime experiences, the novel and its success brought Loest into conflict with the authorities. As a result of a damning review in the *Tägliche Rundschau*, the newspaper of the Soviet administration, in which Loest was criticized for lacking the necessary "moral distance"¹ vis-à-vis his character's actions as a German soldier in the Third Reich, the East German Socialist Unity Party (SED) concluded that his petit-bourgeois background—Loest's father had owned a hardware store—had prevented him from developing a proletarian class consciousness. To help him attain the proper class perspective, the Party decided to remove him from his position as a journalist and to send him off as a factory worker for an indefinite length of time.²

Taking advantage of the Party's carelessness in arranging a job for him—they simply forgot about him—Loest became a full-time, free-lance writer. As a committed socialist who sincerely believed that the choice between capitalism and communism was the choice between militarism and peace, between exploitation and economic justice, Loest seems not to have considered leaving for the Federal Republic of Germany. Instead, he steeped himself in the theory of socialist realism and in the works of some of the twentieth century's leading novelists, mostly those who were sympathetic to the idea of socialism, writers such as Döblin, Feuchtwanger, Seghers, Heinrich Mann, Dos Passos, Fallada, and Hemingway. During this period, he resolved to use his art as a weapon in the struggle between communism and capitalism.

The first novel to result from these endeavors carried the tendentious title *Die Westmark fällt weiter* (1952; *The West-German Mark Continues to Fall*).

¹ All translations are mine.

² Most biographical information is taken from Loest's autobiography, *Durch die Erde ein Riß* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1981).

Plotted around the real-life exploits of Werner Gladow, a secondary-school student whose ambition was to be the Al Capone of Berlin, *Die Westmark* is an ambitious attempt at presenting a panoramic view of both halves of the divided city. Largely forgotten today, *Die Westmark* is notable for the sincerity of its author's beliefs, and as documentary evidence of a time in the immediate postwar era when it was still possible for honest, idealistic men and women to believe that Soviet communism represented humanity's best hope for achieving peace and economic justice.

After the attempted rebellion in East Berlin and other East German cities on June 17 and 18, 1953, that belief became more difficult to maintain. Loest, who had in the meantime achieved prominence within the GDR's literary organization by becoming the chairperson of the Leipzig chapter of the Writers' Union, responded to the revolt with an article in the *Börsenblatt für den deutschen Buchhandel* (Financial Newspaper for the German Book-Trade) entitled "Elfenbeinturm und Rote Fahne" (Ivory Tower and Red Flag), in which he maintained that the Party and the State had become alienated from the masses, a situation he attributed in great measure to a controlled press, whose routine praise of East-German socialist practice created an audience for the critical Western press, especially RIAS, the radio station in the American sector of Berlin, which reported the problematic aspects of life in the GDR. In short, Loest was pleading for what would now be called "glasnost" as a means to uncover, confront, and solve problems in a socialist society.

Party authorities almost immediately demanded a public apology, but Loest stood by his principles for as long as he could. Condemned in the Leipzig press as a fascist provocateur and removed from his official positions, Loest finally averted more severe strictures by engaging in self-criticism at the Party proceedings instituted to decide his case.

Having apparently survived this crisis, Loest returned to work on his third novel, *Das Jahr der Prüfung* (1954; *The Year of Testing*), which takes as its theme the "Arbeiter-und Bauernfakultät" (Workers' and Farmers' School) or ABF, whose mission was to prepare politically acceptable young people from the traditionally undereducated classes for study at the university through a series of remedial and preparatory courses.

The year 1956 saw immense changes occur in the socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe. Rumors of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the rehabilitation of Władysław Gomułka in Poland and his subsequent reforms, and the student revolts and promises of free elections in Hungary gave GDR liberals the hope that a political and cultural thaw was imminent in their country also.

On October 30, 1956, Loest hosted a group of GDR intellectuals who wished to discuss the changes in Poland with a visiting journalist from Warsaw. Soon, conversation began revolving around the possibility of change in the GDR. One of the bolder conclusions was that change could not occur without the removal of Walter Ulbricht from his position as First Secretary of the SED.

Repression in the GDR followed the crackdown in Hungary, which began several days later, and Loest was arrested along with other intellectuals who had attended the discussion in his apartment. He was convicted of engaging in subversive activities and sentenced to seven and one-half years of prison at Bautzen and his property was confiscated by the state.

In 1975 Loest published *Es geht seinen Gang*, the story of Wolfgang (Wolffi) Wülff, a young engineer whose sensitivity to the feelings of children and whose lack of commitment to his own career advancement eventually lead to divorce from his ambitious wife and separation from his beloved young daughter. The novel, one of the finest literary depictions of everyday life in the GDR in the seventies, was particularly noted for its sympathetic portrayal of a young man who rejected the GDR's societal expectations in order to uphold his own moral code.

Es geht seinen Gang has been the only one of Loest's works to garner significant critical comment. James Knowlton sees it as representative of the GDR novel of the seventies, which stresses "the vulnerability of the individual in the totality of social relationships and [places] subjectivity as a potentially subversive factor in the center of its considerations."³ Wolffi Wülff "rejects responsibility, power, advancement in favor of a private idyll grounded in an ambience of family and friends."⁴ Thomas C. Fox calls Wülff an "unheroic hero" and refers to his "inner emigration," explaining that he "does his work, little more; that alone represents resistance in an achievement-oriented society." Fox attributes Wülff's attitude to the fact that in prison Loest "developed an allergy to authority."⁵

But this was not the first time that Loest had depicted the struggle between authority and a critical, questioning individual. Walter Uhlig, for example, the "unheroic hero" of *Jungen, die übrig blieben*, is described contemptuously by a lieutenant in the Wehrmacht as being characterized "by a basic lack of discipline, an inner revolt, a spiritual resistance."⁶ Uhlig himself recognizes this lack of discipline as one of the principal components of his character when he tells his father that what he finds difficult in the military is "not the marching, the hours spent on duty, the physical exertion or the little bit of mental exertion that they demand from you. It's simply saying yessir, it's the obeying, the standing at attention in front of some stupid corporal" (46). While Uhlig, the hero of an East German novel, might be expected to reject the Nazi state, he also struggles with the benevolently portrayed authority of the Soviet Occupation Zone, where Uhlig first succumbs to what might be termed "subversive subjectivity" by avoiding legitimate employment and becoming a black marketeer who spends his evenings drinking, dancing, and listening to

³ James Knowlton, "'Mit dem Sozialismus gewachsen': Erich Loest's Novel *Es geht seinen Gang*, oder *Mühen in unserer Ebene* and Recent GDR Cultural Policy," *Neophilologus* 68.4 (1984): 588.

⁴ Knowlton 589.

⁵ Thomas C. Fox, "Oobliadooh or EIKENGETTNOSETTISFEKSCHIN: Music, Language, and Opposition in GDR Literature," *Germanic Review* 61.3 (1986): 113, 111.

⁶ Erich Loest, *Jungen, die übrig blieben* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985) 35.

Western music, before he eventually comes to understand work as a means of living with and for others (264) and becomes something of an East German Stakhanovite (272).

In *Die Westmark fällt weiter*, Bernd Ahlsen, the sympathetically portrayed counterpart to the young gangster, Eugen Klamm, also displays some of the same traits as Wolfi Wülff, in particular his unwillingness to do more for the party or state than his job. He is confronted on this point by his girl friend, Margot Bornemann, an exemplary young woman who spends most of her free time in organized activities sponsored by the Free German Youth (FDJ): "other people are building a new state and a new economy for you, . . . and you simply sit down in the warm nest." When Bernd finally does become a member of the FDJ, he does so to help other people have work, peace, and the opportunity to learn, to help show the white, black, and yellow peoples of the world that they are friends and need not attack one another.⁷

Das Jahr der Prüfung is replete with examples of conflicts in which critical, independent thinking is shown as preferable to authoritarian dogmatism. When Ingrid Kowalski, for example, asks her husband Herbert whether his decision to try to correct a comrade's problematic behavior by himself, without going to the FDJ's steering committee, is the proper course of action, he replies, "In general, that would be wrong. But I think it's right in this instance."⁸ Even Ortmann, the local Party Secretary, when asked to intervene in an affair in which a student is accused of preferring pacifism to the GDR's stance of military preparedness against the West, concludes, "it was alien to this philosophy [Marxism-Leninism] to expect anything from enforced discipline" (123). Finally, the misuse of the Party's authority by Rudolf Pronberg, the chairperson of the local FDJ group, to further his own career at the expense of his comrades' idealism and personal quirks temporarily leads Ingrid Teubner, the novel's central character, into the error of believing "that everything that she had ever heard from the Party and the FDJ seemed to her to be a lie" (298).

It is clear that rejection of responsibility and authority are not new to *Es geht seinen Gang*. In the earlier novels, Loest's characters gradually abandoned the role of an outsider in favor of meaningful activity within the framework of the Party and the State. What is new in this novel is the inability of the Party and the State to inspire trust and enthusiasm in its idealistic youth.

⁷ Erich Loest, *Die Westmark fällt weiter* (Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1953) 327, 512.

⁸ Erich Loest, *Das Jahr der Prüfung* (Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1954) 308.