

“To the Base – against Self-Satisfaction”: Erwin Strittmatter’s Contribution to the Discussion at the Bitterfeld Conference [Excerpt] (April 24, 1959)

Abstract

In April 1959, a literary conference was held at the cultural palace of the Bitterfeld Electrochemical *Kombinat* [combine] in the GDR. At the end of the conference, writers were given two demands: to encourage workers to engage in literary activities, and to deal more strongly with Socialist reality and thus overcome the opposition between workers and the intellectual elite. Erwin Strittmatter, one of East Germany’s best-known writers, underscored the second demand a few days later in *Neues Deutschland*. He called upon writers to discover new subject matter of immediate relevance in industrial and agricultural enterprises through direct contact with the world of the workers, and to give it literary shape in the spirit of Socialist Realism.

Source

Hans Marchwitza often said about himself: “I should be spending more time at my desk, but I am too curious about everything that is happening in the Republic.” Such a love for today and the future is something I would wish for many of our young writers. We are not curious enough. I am not talking about old wives’ curiosity; sometimes we have no lack of that. I am not talking about the curiosity that is characteristic of the researcher and investigator. In our Republic, people are continually changing, and they in turn are transforming their environment, namely in a forward direction. Everyday, heroic deeds are being accomplished in the din of the factories, the dust of construction sites, and in the expansive fields of the agricultural production cooperatives. And the heroes are, as Eduard Claudius says, people by our side. Do we see them? Have we coined the poetic phrase “hero of labor”? No, our politician comrades coined it, and they were often much more poetic than us.

Why are Meetings Boring?

We complain that our meetings of the Writers’ League are not interesting enough, that they are boring. Why are they boring? Because we are not full of experiences gathered during outings and excursions. The Berlin league, in particular, has done a lot of experimenting. They had the material come to them, so to speak. They invited people who were well acquainted with practical matters out there and had them recount what was going on in the world. Occasionally, we heard about outrageous events that called out for artistic treatment. We listened to these events, clicked our tongues, and said: terribly interesting, but unfortunately we have our work and don’t know what to do first. We thus acted like bureaucrats and allowed ourselves to be taken captive by the work that happened to be on our desks, without realizing what would have been important to deal with. We overlooked the larger context. That can never be the right way for us to arrive at an improved literature that is close to the people.

A few weeks ago, we tried something new. Seven or eight writers who look after brigades of Socialist labor and work in them came together. Suddenly it became clear that a meeting did not have to be boring by any means. Even after the end of the meeting, some stayed and exchanged their discoveries and experiences. I’ve said it many times, and I say it again: he who has contact with our reality, with our people, in short, with our current and future readers, need not search desperately for themes and

outlines for a new work.

The “Hard Way of Writing”

But there are other things that impede the truly creative and forward-looking discussion within the league. We are currently in the process of preparing a discussion about the so-called “hard way of writing.” A few of our young and a few of our no longer quite so young authors have borrowed this way of writing from not very progressive American or West German writers. They say something like this: What sort of drivel are you spouting about the heroes of our workday being poetic and kind people? Reality is harsh. The “Black Pump” *Kombinat* [combine] is not being built by innocent lambs. That’s for sure! But neither is it being built solely by rowdies, drunks, soldiers of fortune, or by the sorts of workers who double and triple their efforts for the sake of a fat paycheck. Last week, a colleague at the member meeting of the Berlin league said something like this: you can go into an enterprise from two ends; in one case, with the intent to understand the people at the production sites, to learn to love them; in the other case, as though you were going into the Zoological Gardens and making scientific observations. He said it even a little more bluntly. Immediately, however, a storm of protest arose among the members: who in the world goes to the workers this way! They did not want to accept the second approach as true. And yet there is among us this kind of loveless literary approach to the labor of our workers: all poeticizing about the workers and the work is strictly disapproved of; the writing about process and people is bare and cold, as though the workers were machine parts who just happen to be able to think. Something like this, I believe, is also expressed in the so-called “hard way of writing.”

To make a long story short: we are preparing a discussion about this way of writing, the “hard way of writing.” But already during the preparations for this discussion we have discovered that there is no clarity about it among our board members, who are regarded as models by our colleagues. That is not so bad, some say, why a separate discussion about this way of writing? It is simply one artistic device among others. I believe the problem is more serious.

Since I have been in the league and have slowly been able to get a sense of what is going on, I can see that our young authors are turning toward and applying themselves to this way of writing. The problem is serious because our workers notice instinctively, but sometimes also quite consciously, that in this way people are speaking badly of them, writing badly about them. All their thinking and feeling is suppressed. Their heart is manipulated into their paycheck. They feel that they are not understood and say: We are not like that. Even when one tries to convince them that this is real art they are dealing with, they have to know it and adjust to it and get used to it. What arrogance!

How are we now to have a discussion with the younger writers, whom this concerns, if the older and more experienced ones do not agree on the anti-humanism of this way of writing, if they do not consider the problem all that serious. We end up creating confusion. That must not be. The unresolved problems continue to smolder. The old comrades are seized by resignation in one way, the young comrades in another, and the entire life of the organization is paralyzed.

What, for example, was done when the new secretariat presented the plan for the future work of the league? At first, the formal inadequacies of this plan were discussed. The language was not beautiful enough, it had too much functionary jargon, and so on and so forth. And that occurred even though this working plan was not intended for publication. But was it really only formal reasons that stretched the discussion out endlessly? There were even efforts to adopt the working plan only three months later, at the next meeting of the league. Why so? One gets closer to an answer if one looks at the following point.

Against Indecisiveness

Among other things, it was said that the term “revisionism” did not belong in the working plan of a mass organization like the Writers’ League. Or: one had to explain and analyze the term precisely, for one could not expect that writers who are not in the party would know what revisionism is.

Are our writers that backward? Don’t they read the controversies in our daily papers? Don’t they live in our world? If not, then they cannot write for our world, either.

Perhaps a few of our older comrade writers do not like those passages in our working plan that note insistently that writers must by all means establish relationships with the workers and their enterprises, indeed, that they should work there from time to time. Such discomfort would be understandable. They lived through a lot and surely still have a large stock of experiences – for example, from the history of the workers’ movement – that the youth urgently need to know about. Thus one should not ask anything unreasonable of them. One should let them write in peace. Yet, there is one thing I believe that one can demand of them: they, especially, should help us inspire the younger writers; they should tell the young writers that they can find their material for a literature that is close to the people only if they have a good relationship to the working day of our Republic.

I’ve done an overview of the works that the writers have embarked upon, and this overview shows the following: among the 109 literary works by writers in the Republic, 69 deal with current topics, 16 with historical matters, ten with the Second World War, seven with the fortunes of the workers’ movement, and seven with the problem of West Germany.

Among the Berlin writers, the planned works are as follows: of 70 planned works, 39 are devoted to current topics, six to historical matters, seven to themes about the Second World War, 13 to the history of the workers’ movement, and six to the problems of West Germany. I am already hearing your responses to what I have just said: “He tells us about administrative goings-on, and now he is doing something similar.” To make sure you are right, I’ll also add the percentage numbers:

In the Republic, the treatment of current issues is 62.7%, in Berlin, 55.5; by contrast, in 1958 the share of contemporary literature was 42%. Calm yourselves, please! I am well aware that the percentage figures about the intended works and work plans of our writers are of little value. These plans have to be brought to fruition first. But even then, it is doubtful whether every work meets the standards, especially the standards of quality. That is why the figures I have given are incomplete indicators.

Among the writers of the Republic who are dealing with contemporary issues, we find the following names: Max Zimmering, Armin Müller, Hasso Grabner, Benno Voelkner, Herbert Jobst, Herbert A. W. Kasten, Regina Hastedt, Martha Nawrath, Martin Viertel, and so on.

In Berlin: Willi Bredel, Elfriede Brüning, Walter Gorrish, Egel-Wiens, Heinz Kahlau, Jo Schulz, Ludwig Turek, Otto Gotsche, Gustav von Wangenheim, Alex Wedding, Hedda Zinner, Erwin Strittmatter, and so on and so forth.

On the 10th Anniversary of our Republic

Many writers are preparing special works in which they give expression to their bond to the Republic. In addition, the Writers’ League will publish two anthologies on the same occasion. One has the working title: “We Grew with It.” It will talk especially about how writers in our Republic develop. So far, twenty writers have resettled to building sites of the Republic, though only six of them are Berlin writers.

However, when it comes to the Writers’ League itself, one can say somewhat more optimistically during the last few weeks: “Things are happening!” In the last members meeting, in particular, there was a discussion about participating in the brigades of Socialist labor. Something like an exchange of

experiences already took place. And by now, additional writers have joined these brigades or committed themselves to start working there, as for example Alex Wedding, Klein, Jakobs, Rackwitz, Pijet, Victor, and others. However, given the many writers living in Berlin, this is still a small number. All told, 30 writers have so far established relationships with the brigades of Socialist labor. It is my ardent wish that we arrive at the point where this is seen as a gap in one's education, and the attitude is that one cannot join the discussion if one does not have one's second home somewhere in an enterprise or on a state-owned farm or in an agricultural production cooperative. To be sure, a modest beginning has been made, but it must not be reason for self-satisfaction.

Source: *Neues Deutschland*, no. 116, April 28, 1959; reprinted in E. Schubbe, ed., *Dokumente zur Kunst-, Literatur- und Kulturpolitik der SED [Documents on the Artistic, Literary, and Cultural Politics of the SED]*. Stuttgart: Seewald Verlag, 1972, pp. 562-64.

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