Johannes Robert Becher (1891 – 1958) was a German poet, novelist, and literary critic who used his gifts mostly in the service of the Communist Party, becoming the first Culture Minister of the German Democratic Republic following its creation in 1949, and writing the lyrics for the national anthem of that nation. Born in Munich, Becher spent most of the Nazi period and WWII in Moscow before settling in Berlin shortly after the war’s end. Becher’s larger goal, for which his political alliance served admirably, was to use aesthetic discourse to project an idea of “perfected man” (“der vollendete Mensch”) that the defects of bourgeois and capitalist society prevented from coming into being. His poems – after his early, Expressionist phase -- tend towards anthemic abstraction rather than finely observed detail or linguistic innovation. His influences in German were Heinrich von Kleist, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Richard Dehmel, and in French Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud. In addition to a large body of lyric poetry, Becher also wrote two novels – *Levisite* (1926), which resulted in his being charged with treason by the German government, and the autobiographical *Abschied* (1935; *Farewell*) – as well as a substantial amount of literary criticism and theory according to the tenets of socialist realism (*Bemühungen*, 1952-57; *Efforts*). His influence, negligible in countries outside the Iron Curtain, was quite strong on the first generation of East German poets.

Key Critical Works:

Davies, Peter. “Johannes R. Becher and the Agony of Responsibility, 1945-1949.” *German Life and Letters*, Vol. 53, no. 2 (April 2000), pp. 243-60. Explores the significance of Becher’s influence on the cultural life of the GDR.

Dwars, Jens-Fietje. *Abgrund des Widerspruchs : das Leben des Johannes R. Becher*. A lengthy, thorough, and objective work of bio-criticism.

Haase, Horst. *Johannes R. Becher: Leben und Werk*. First published in East Germany, with excessive praise for Becher’s propagandistic work and socialist literary theory.

Robinson, Benjamin. “Morphine as the Tertium Quid between War and Revolution; Or, The Moon Gland Secretes Poppy Sleep over the Western Front of Johannes R. Becher.” *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 73, No. 4 (Autumn, 2000), pp. 387-400. Explores the relationship between Becher’s morphine addiction and his poetic imagery.

Tom Beebee