

Recent Writing of Lutz Rathenow: A New GDR Poetry?

Rathenow, Lutz. *Day of Wonders*. Illustrated by Frank Ruprecht and translated by Rosemary Lanning. New York: North-South Books, 1992. 26 pp.

-----, *Oder was schwimmt da im Auge*. Weilerswist: Verlag Landpresse, 1993. 22 pp.

-----, *Tag der Wunder*. Illustrated by Frank Ruprecht. Zürich: Nord-Süd Verlag, 1992. 26 pp.

-----, *Und sie liebten sich heftiger denn je*. Pforzheim: Hertenstein Press, 1993. 13 pp.

At least since the Industrial Revolution, the fragmentation of society and the rate of social change have created special problems for poets. An unstable social, political and intellectual environment requiring constant attention has left them with two basic alternatives. It is possible to constantly monitor factors such as popular taste, critical opinion and social trends, adjusting one's style accordingly. It is also possible to largely disregard these factors and give free reign to personal eccentricity. Schiller and Goethe provide excellent examples of the former alternative. Immersed in the social life around them, each developed a highly stylized idiom that was versatile and expressive but, in my opinion, impersonal. The foremost example of the latter alternative is their younger contemporary Hölderlin, whose manner of writing, though of extraordinary intensity and subtlety, is so personal that it often verges on verbal disintegration.

In more recent times, Brecht is a good example of the more worldly approach. In his latter poetry, particularly, he attempted, in line with a Leninist philosophy which promoted collective over individual concerns, to eliminate nearly every trace of personal eccentricity. An example of the latter approach would be Rilke or, better still, Nelly Sachs.

In more recent literature of the GDR the two approaches may be found, for example, in the public verse of Volker Braun and the meditative writing of Sarah Kirsch. We should remember, however, that we are speaking of tendencies, which may not be fully realized in the work of one author. The task of assimilating the rapid social changes of modern times is more complex, and it gives rise to similarly intricate responses. There is no single correct approach, and any success is provisional at best. The strategies I have identified are, nevertheless, prevalent enough to have helped to form our

expectations from poetry, even without being fully articulated.

In the case of Lutz Rathenow, they may have led to false expectations. Since he has been an energetic publicist, who achieved considerable visibility, both for himself and for the political causes he has championed--such as open borders in the GDR--, critics have tended to judge his poetry as a public product. Perhaps, however, the poetry serves more as a sort of balance to his public activity, since the voice, even when it touches political themes, is meditative and highly personal. It is hard to find even a single poem of his that sounds as if it were written to be declaimed to a crowd from a podium, as does much early poetry of Volker Braun, or inscribed in a public place, as do many of the later poems of Bertolt Brecht.

There is a further source of confusion. Modern traditions have tended to equate political engagement with the tradition of utopian socialism or at least with some explicit ideology. Those modern writers who felt uncomfortable even on the margins of the socialist movement yet felt called to an engagement have generally given themselves, like Pound and Binn, to Fascism, like Eliot, to conservative Christianity, or, like Yeats, to some sort of mystical nationalism. The notion of a political engagement that is fairly indifferent and sometimes hostile to these ideological traditions seems paradoxical to many people, and evokes suspicion. Yet in a country dedicated to a grandiose ideological system, this may have been the most thorough sort of revolt. The activism of Rathenow is not based on any ideology beyond a commitment to the basic ideals of human decency and integrity, and the rhythms by which people work and play.

A major theme for Rathenow, as for many GDR poets, is the relation of the self to society. His poetry written during the existence of the GDR, when he was surrounded by agents of the Stasi, describes an environment where personal identity may often be preserved only by concealing it. It is often focused on dreams, not out of any belief that these represent a "higher" reality or because they anticipate a social transformation but because dreams resist institutional control.

In his more recent poems, he records the emergence of the self from anonymity. GDR literature did not, by any means, die with the country, and authors of all persuasions who lived there are now joined in the attempt to articulate and understand experiences which were inaccessible to the West. To an extent, it even required the demise of the GDR as a country for these experiences to be

appreciated. Rathenow continues a tradition of GDR literature precisely through a preoccupation with this disintegration.

His two new books of poems, *Oder was schwimmt da im Auge* and *Und sie liebten sich heftiger denn je* deal, often indirectly, with the disintegration of the integrating ideology of utopian socialism and the attendant need for human beings to accept a greater autonomy. One excellent example, from the former book, is the poem "Sisyphos bleibt zurück": "Krank von der Sucht, Bilder zu finden./Der Stein der Weisen gesprengt,/tausend Kieselsteine -/knirschen dem einen die Ohren voll,/tausend abertausende Kiesel/

schnippen die Kinder ins Meer." We can view the "philosopher's stone" here as socialist ideology or, for that matter, any grand system that purports to synthesize and direct all of human experience. The end of the twentieth century has brought the destruction of such systems, not only Marxism but also Psychoanalysis and others. What does that leave?

Fragments of wisdom that are like pebbles. And who are the children? We are, of course. With our grandiose historical dramas, our worship for Lenin or Elvis, we have been indulging in infantile fantasies. The image of tossing the pebbles in the water simultaneously evokes the recovery of a sense of magic in everyday objects and the necessity of finally growing up.

The otherwise lovely poem is, in my opinion, flawed only by the unnecessarily obscure initial line and possibly the title. These might be compared to the rock and mud still clinging to a freshly mined nugget of gold. We can think of them as remnants of an environment from which this poem is emerging, yet which are not yet fully overcome. Many of Rathenow's poems seem unfinished. While this is, strictly speaking, a weakness, it does dramatize the problem of attempting to write about a society that is in rapid transition.

The theme of individual identity is treated more directly in *Und sie liebten sich heftiger als denn je*, a collection of love poems. The characters here, as in much of Rathenow's work, are never given names, but simply referred to as "he" and "her." This is an instance of the famous "alienation effect," generally understood as a way to avoid personal identification with the characters. The technique has roots in medieval drama, and it was employed by several Expressionists to show the impersonal grandeur of the machine age. Brecht used it systematically to represent what he held to be the abstract structures of society. Rathenow puts the technique to almost the

opposite use, an ironic pose of anonymity that only dramatizes the unfathomable nature of personality. The characters appear to lack names not because they have too little individuality but because they have too much, something that no label could do justice to.

Like *Finnegan's Wake* by James Joyce, this collection begins and ends in a single sentence, perhaps to suggest an affirmation of human constancy. This sentence, in turn, is buried in a dreamlike passage, out of which contours gradually emerge. "She" is asleep, while "he" is waking. They doubt one another, quarrel, engage in amorous intrigues, see strange sights and find themselves back where they began. Prints by Axel Hertenstein accompany the text and compliment it well in the subtle blending of cheerfulness and melancholy.

At the same time, the use of illustrations begins to take the book out of the purely literary realm. This may be, in part, due to a discontent with "literature," not as an activity but as a bureaucratic realm which has moved Rathenow to turn to books for children in recent years. *Tag der Wunder*, in the English version *Day of Wonders*, was probably, I am inclined to guess, not written exclusively with children in mind. It is a sort of poem in prose, presented in a context where it is more likely to be enjoyed and not simply analyzed. The tale is certainly animated by a sense of childhood wonder, though I have heard the criticism, possibly with some justification, that is mostly for adults.

A giant, knight, dragon and Indian, all of whom have outlived the age of fable, try to enact heroic dramas but can only stumble and run until they fall asleep. Along comes a young girl, Alice, floating over the ground with balloons in her hair, and wakes them. She marries the knight, who makes a toy of his old armor for their child. As the two float away giant and Indian say farewell, while the dragon sends up the fireworks then climbs a rainbow to his home. So what does all this mean? Ideally, perhaps, not a great deal. The story has an innocence that resists efforts at interpretation. But it is hard for a reader who knows about the author not to at least think of the grandiose, romantic, and often imaginary battles fought by Communists, Westerners and their adversaries in that "age of fable" sometimes known as "the Cold War." As for the lyrical yet witty illustrations by Frank Ruprecht, they may not mean a great deal, but I can barely imagine how anyone, child or adult, could fail to enjoy them.

And how good are the poems of Rathenow? Evaluation and ranking are certainly necessary for the teaching and collection of poetry, though not

necessarily for their appreciation. But today it seems that every group of five to twenty poets has become a sort of school, each with its own aesthetic and style. It is amazing that a public as tiny as that for poetry could fragment so much! The literary arts, in sum, reflect a social fragmentation that may even threaten to destroy them. The poetry of Rathenow shows considerable verbal skill and handles important themes. But, for the present, it may be best to postpone further evaluation for him or any other poet, until we can agree on some sort of reasonably clear criteria. Otherwise criticism, like poetry itself, can easily degenerate into simple advertising or petty feuding.

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