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Bert Papenfuß: mors ex nihilo

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Papenfuß, Bert. *mors ex nihilo*. Berlin: Galrev, 1994. ISBN 3-910161-56-1

Bert Papenfuß is the best-known representative of linguistically innovative East German poetry, thriving in the productive and politically controversial counterculture of East Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg during the late 1970s and 1980s. His latest volume of poems sets forth a series of highly original works with numerous contributions to unofficially published journals and artist books as well as official books such as *dreizehntanz* (1988), *SoJa* (1990) or *nunft* (1992), and the richly illustrated *tiské* (1990) with drawings by the artist A. R. Penck. In those earlier texts Papenfuß often used historical figures such as Till Eulenspiegel or even the Egyptian king Echnaton to concoct a role model for his art of living in the urban counterculture. In *mors ex nihilo*, however, the poet's thoughts on human existence are much more direct and unpretentiously simple: "das derzeitige menschliche leben / . . . / ist kostspielig & zeitraubend / wir hospitalisieren uns selbst dabei." This insight indicates Papenfuß's deeply felt estrangement from the newly introduced market economy and its impact on the psyche of those who once pledged allegiance to anarchic-poetic resistance against the state. Like his kindred spirit, the New York writer Kathy Acker, Papenfuß does not spare his contemporaries his diatribes against lethargy and resignation, a fatal attitude that Acker characterized in *Empire of the Senses* as the "self-victimization" of the poet.

Based on his readings of the anarchist Max Stirner and Silvio Gesell's obscure theory of monetary values, Papenfuß thematizes the new administrative structures in his environment, the Prenzlauer Berg. In particular, he is concerned with the pacifying or silencing of artists by municipal subsidies since they would then give up their fight against the new bureaucracy that is redeveloping the dilapidated city district. Whereas in 1990, immediately after reunification, the poet complied with the craving of Westerners for an aestheticized counterculture, as the lavishly illustrated publications *SoJa* and *tiské* clearly show, here Papenfuß counters the expectations of his new audience. In combination with the most elementary, deliberately clumsy drawings by Jörg Immendorf, a coarse and natural idiom prevails in this volume which consists of three longer cycles of 484 lines, interrupted by blank spaces. First, a "prolog auf dem

schirm" introduces the poet's attacks on the language of advertisement that accompanies the new monetary system. Then in the main section, "der eigentliche mors," daily news reports relate the most bizarre deaths of Berlin's rulers, planned by "oriental" female assassins; for instance, due to one ambush by a roaming piggy bank the "kadi von kummersdorf-teufels- / grund & schluff" is killed. Finally, in a "nachspiel im stall," bizarre and nonsensical death penalties for the bureaucrats are pronounced. All these assaults are part of a game that puts forward the poet's ideas about a vital, sensual, and immoral art of living in contrast to the small-mindedness of his parents' generation. Like a Brechtian minstrel, the poet explains: "unsre voreltern gestatteten dem laster / keine freye werbplätze: sie erlaubten / keine der sitten gefährliche schauspiele." In addition to the would-be assassins, psychiatric patients and gypsies are prominent figures illustrating the suggested transformation of victims into perpetrators. The use of thieves' cant in particular underscores the romantic fascination with robbers, bandits, and West German terrorists.

By drawing on special linguistic registers, such as "Rotwelsch" with its Yiddish expressions, Papenfuß not only develops an original, yet esoteric poetic idiom; he also makes us aware of the loss of historical vocabularies in an era of media communication. As an opponent of the commercialization of Prenzlauer Berg and the cultural politics of the Berlin senate, the poet exercises a language game in which he plays the cunning thief leaving mysterious graffiti on the wall. By subsidizing such a "cat in the bag," the state is confronted with an unruly individual who does not shy away from confrontation. Lines such as "wie ein cassert im sefel, / die katze im staat: / i'm a poet, you better know it" refer to a writer who conceals and reveals his identity at the same time; the "cassert" in the "sefel," in Yiddish the "boar in the dirt," is indeed a pig in a poke. Papenfuß's provocation is a simple one: crude street jargon and *Stammtisch*-verses ("der schnapps ist kurz, / doch das bier ist lang") are mixed with trivial wisdom ("es gibt viele leute im leben, die sieht / man dann hinterher nie wieder"). If there is shock value at all, then it lies in this distancing from a political agenda; instead, purely egotistical means, namely the sensual pleasures of the body, are emphasized. As a result,

the poems speak an ironic language without argument.

Papenfuß does not share his compatriots' anxieties regarding the death knell that accompanies the end of the socialist regime. Rather, he mocks the yearning of the Easterners (the "unvolx" or non-people) for a consumer culture and its symbol, the banana ("a paradepromenade in einem trabananbant"). Contemplating the reversal of vice and virtue and the ubiquitous moral judgments of the West on the conspicuous misdemeanors in the East, he suggests that one should act like a stubborn dromedary on the racetrack of life. Almost at the end of the volume, the poet asks himself why he follows bourgeois habits and yet resists subordination; in Berlin dialect, he answers that in so doing he receives information about himself. Apparently the individual finds true fulfillment of his (male) desire in playful and anarchic activities only—an art of living that is, paradoxically enough, inextricably linked to the societal support of the arts.

In comparison to the remarkable volumes *SoJa* or *dreizehntanz*, Papenfuß's poetic idiom has become less inventive and thematically comprehensive. The sparkling battle of words with "the state" has lost its bite and the howling of the amorous tomcat in Berlin's backyards is fading. Nevertheless, without ever changing his eccentric point of view, Bert Papenfuß presents the reader with an informative poetic document of the drastic socio-economic changes in East Berlin. Most probably, Papenfuß's strategy of a provocative anti-aesthetic poetry will not win him new readers but old aficionados will rest assured that he is still the most prolific and interesting poet of the Prenzlauer Berg.

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Rathenow, Lutz. *Verirrte Steine oder Wenn Alles Wieder Mal Ganz Anders Kommt* Merlin Verlag n.p. n.d.

Ich schloß deshalb auf die Existenz einer Geheimsprache, die innerhalb des Deutschen wie ein Immunsystem wirkte, und die Sprache vor der Sprache schützte. Man kommunizierte intensiv, um sich vor den Folgen der Kommunikation zu schützen. Diese deutsche Errungenschaft, die durch die Erfahrung aus der Geschichte genährt worden ist,

ist mittlerweile auf der ganzen Welt verbreitet. Man kann schneller, länger, reichhaltiger, länger und ohne Folgen kommunizieren. Im Mittelpunkt eines Gesprächs steht nicht ein offener Kreis, in dem man das Einverständnis einsammelt, sondern ein schwarzes Loch, dessen Dunkel eine unergrundbare Tiefe vermuten läßt.

These words of the Turkish-German writer Zafer Senocak pose the problem with which poetry of all language arts perhaps is most acquainted. By its very nature poetry transforms itself into this problem, drawing the attention of its presently increasing readership or "listenership" to the fragility of words in context.

It might be supposed that poets from the former German Democratic Republic, now plunged into the very lack of context which allegedly characterizes late capitalist culture or post-modernity, would speak most directly to this problem of communication and the fragility of words in context. The much discussed Prenzlauer Berg poets are described, for example, by Wolfgang Emmerich in his still normative work on GDR literature in the following context:

Was aber bleibt einer Literatur, die keine Botschaft mehr verkünden will, die, so Uwe Kolbe, "Glauben [. . .] nicht mit weiterem Glauben" ersetzen will? Nun, sie setzt auf die Sprache, und zwar in einer Radikalität und Ausschließlichkeit, die der DDR-Literatur bislang fremd war. (Wolfgang Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR*. Frankfurt/Main: Luchterhand, 1989. 431)

Several pages earlier in the same volume Emmerich quotes the editors of the journal *Mikado*:

"Vielleicht war entscheidend für uns zu spüren, daß jemand um seine eigene Sprache ringt, ohne eilig jede Realität zu opfern. Mit anderen Worten: Wir suchten die Brisanz der Gegenwart in der Sprache, diesseits und jenseits des Vokabulars der Macht und der Anpassung" (Emmerich 429).

Lutz Rathenow, whose many poetic offerings appear in volumes so numerous that their titles alone constitute the entire vocabulary of one of the poems in this collection by Merlin Verlag, belongs to this tradition. The poems collected in this present