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## Lutz Rathenow: Verirrte Steine oder Wenn Alles Wieder Mal Ganz Anders Kommt

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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

offering date from the both the present day (the volume has no publication date but it may be assumed that it is a contemporary work from the 1990s) and continue in reverse chronological order to the “Wende” and so backwards to “jene Zeit, in der das Gedicht für den Autor ein ‘knorriger Ast’ ist, der ihm dient ‘als Stütze’ und zum Schlag ist es gut” (editor’s text on the inside front cover).

The poems of the first of four sections express the writer’s experiences of the West, memories of the East and of the dark world of informants, secret or not so secret police, and of the difficulty of finding a subject matter for a poetry rooted initially in defiance and opposition to a particular language or at least to a particular set of historical circumstances.

Gedichte werden nicht besser  
durch das Lesen in Stasiakten.

This line from a poem entitled “Was für ein Gedicht” ends with that familiar word from the era of the Prenzlauer Berg fascination of the late 80s and early 90s, “Zersetzung,” allegedly the mission and task, or perhaps the fate, of GDR writers and one certainly shared by German poets since Hölderlin or less hyperbolically since Celan. This transport back into the world of the ex-GDR continues with poems like “IM,” “a.D.,” “Jenaer Elegien,” “Dezember 89,” and this journey or flailing culminates with the four brief lines of a poem intriguingly entitled “Zuversichtliche Zeilen”:

Da nagt und stochert was in deinen Worten  
das krümmt sich hämmernd im Kopf,  
wer will die modernden Träume dir morden,  
lach aus, Münchhausen, pack dich am Schopf.

Thereafter the poems retreat to a more reassuring and familiar past in which perhaps they might still function if the reader allows the context of the former GDR and its post Ulbricht consumer-style socialism to emerge again before her eyes. In “Selbstporträt” dated August 1989 the poet tells us:

Niemand braucht mich zu erkennen.  
Ich esse mir eine neue Identität an.  
Wieso stoße ich nachmittags gegen Menschen  
obwohl sich die Stadt unentwegt leert.  
Was lehrt mich das?  
Ich möchte mich nicht ständig erklären.  
Punkt. Punkt Komma Strich—

The phrase “Ich esse mich eine neue Identität an” suggests the Rathenow of former dissident fame striking out one last time (for now?) against the new consumerism soon to be augmented by the mother of all consumerisms. And it may have been his most effective line, that line which echoes the radicalism not of language but of mission that characterizes most GDR poetry, whether pro or contra Honecker-style socialism.

The poems of that past are reassuring. Here the reader finds the poet in his stride—not the stride of Hölderlin and certainly not the cautious if deliberate uncertainty of Celan. Instead, it is the stride most associated with a poetry of resistance. It is the voice of a poetry with a purpose not clearly or even necessarily associated with language. Busy with opposition to a superficial politics this poetry and its poets do not notice that perfidious *Sprachzersetzung* that Kunert so wonderfully pointed out in a poem, “Hinausschauen,” which could still claim to be about language:

... Gemütlich, die Ellbogen aufs  
Fensterbrett gestützt, ist man sich des Unheils  
nicht bewußt, das hinterrücks geschieht, indem da  
ungeahnte Hände schon die Treppen abreißen, die  
Öfen, Herde, Badewannen, das ganze Haus, so  
daß man, noch eben über einen Spaziergänger  
gebeugt, plötzlich ohne Hintergrund ist, ohne  
festes Dach und ohne Boden unter den Füßen,  
eigentlich bereits in der Luft hängt, und nur für  
die draußen auf der Straße unverändert  
anheimelnd aus dem Fenster sieht: Wie das  
gefährlich ist, ahnt keiner, der vorbeigeht.

Rathenow’s poetry is filled with echoes of heroic times in phrases like “planmäßig aufbauen” (“Kreuzigung, zwei Perspektiven”) and expressionist echoes like “Dem Sterben die Geburt verwehren? / ruft er vor dem Tod. / Da wechselt die Szene / das theater entbrennt— / Asche applaudieren dem Aufbegehren der Jahrhunderte / vor und nach uns. / Zeit, die zu zeitig ist. Zu spät.”

The poem “Jahr um Jahr” repeats the theme of GDR boredom, that affliction of the state which for a time tried astonishingly to combine rampant consumerism with the lessons of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin.

Er zählt die Tage bis zum Abitur: zählt die Zeit bis zu seiner Einberufung: dann bis zu jedem Urlaub: bis zur Entlassung sogar die Stunden: später zählt er, wann das Studium endlich beginne: und wartet auf das Ende des Semesters: diese oder jene ganz besondere Prüfung: endlich das Diplom: er zählt nicht lange bis zur eigenen Wohnung: und viel zu lange, bis er endlich die gewünschte Arbeit hat: und das Auto: und und und: und rechnet mit dem Kalender, wann wieder Ferien sind: zählt die Tage (siehe Titel des Gedichts).

All of this does not accord with the stanza of a poem from his earlier days entitled "Geburtstag, der dreißigste":

Wer Themen sucht, soll aufhören.  
Ich schreibe, wie ich schießen würde,  
auf das was mich prügelt:  
Blindlinge. Gut gezielt—

What we get in this volume in both the new and older poems are "Themen." The GDR poet retains his identity. He has not eaten himself into a new one. He remains the craftsman of the message; perhaps not yet long enough in the West to face the predicament to which the editors of *Mikado* referred earlier: the need to find a language "diesseits und jenseits des Vokabulars der Macht und der Anpassung."

What is not reassuring in these poems is precisely what Senocak refers to as "die Existenz einer Geheimsprache, die innerhalb des Deutschen wie ein Immunsystem wirkte, und die Sprache vor der Sprache schützte." Rathenow's poems in this collection echo the preference of so much GDR (and not only GDR) German poetry for themes and missions, for ideas and abstractions and this in a language which was a site—not a home—for the work of Hölderlin, Rilke, Hoffmannsthal, and Celan. It is certainly unfair to expect that former GDR writers, especially those debilitated by so much praise for their missions of dissidence outside of language, would upon entering the more complex arena of western style consumerist hegemony be the locations of linguistic resistance. For those ex-GDR writers like Kunert or Huchel or Hermlin who did manage this transformation, the means to that accomplishment were primarily in their earlier fascination with language itself, with poetry as a

language-centered art, precisely not either a socialist realism or an anti-socialist realism. Some of the younger poets of that middle generation like Ender, Erb or Sarah Kirsch are likewise devotees of language, connoisseurs of words and their fragility, lovers of viruses that evade the immune system that protects so much German from the other, the "pharmakos" as Eric Santner calls it, which has so long frightened and fascinated German culture.

It is unfair to expect this but still one hopes; and hope fuels the criticism of this retrospective volume by a poet who, one hopes, soon will discover the thin ice on which he too is walking and, giving up former reputations and their accompanying linguistic self-protection, will break through with a cautious plunge into a poetry in which language is a more central issue.

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Reid, J. H., ed. *German Monitor: Re-assessing the GDR: Papers from a Nottingham Conference*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994. 170 pp. ISBN: 90-5183-698-8.

As J. H. Reid explains in the preface to this collection of nine essays in both English and German, "the papers . . . were all . . . delivered at the Institute for German, Austrian and Swiss Affairs at the University of Nottingham during a conference organized by Hinrich Siefkin and Janet Wharton . . . at the beginning of January 1994." (5) Making no claim to inclusiveness ("one topic, for example, which was barely touched on is that of the position of women in the former GDR" (5)), the book first offers five essays of interest to political scientists: "Die DDR im Licht neuer gesellschaftlicher Deutungsmuster" (Rolf Badstübner), "Between Gain in Prosperity and Loss of Competence: Reflections on the Social and Political Situation of the East German People after German Unification" (Detlef Schubert), "Attitudes to the GDR and German Unification (Gert-Joachim Glaebner), "The Political Opposition in the GDR" (Günter Minnerup), and "Looking on Anxiously: British Reactions to German Unification, 1989-92" (Mike Dennis).

The last-named essay contains some rather raw quotations and examples of singularly crude humor