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Boria Sax
White Plains, NY

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Boria Sax
White Plains, New York

Lutz Rathenow and the Adenauer Prize Some Thoughts on Politics, Kitsch and Literature

On July 16, 1996 in Munich Lutz Rathenow received the Adenauer Prize for literature, awarded by the conservative Konrad Adenauer Foundation, for his collection of stories entitled *Sisyphos*.¹ The ceremonial occasion was attended by Chancellor Helmut Kohl as well as many other government dignitaries. For Rathenow, a former dissident of East Germany, it may have been a triumph, yet some observers saw an irony in the occasion. Was Rathenow, who had spent most of his career fighting authority, now changing camps? Had he become conservative and complaisant? Asked about this repeatedly by journalists, he replied that he welcomed the opportunity to begin a dialogue with the conservatives and their constituency.

In a regime which itself wished to claim the glamour of revolt, the dissidents of former East Germany had been constantly under attack as “reactionaries” and even “fascists,” labels that carried particular resonance in the wake of Nazi Germany. As a result, those in dissident communities had constantly felt pressured to affirm their leftist credentials, both through their rhetoric and associations. Often dissidents of the Eastern Bloc, particularly in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, tried to work exclusively with leftist circles in the West, a policy that may have hurt their cause considerably. To be free of such pressure must surely, for Rathenow and others, now be a relief.

Furthermore, dissidence itself need not be a destiny. Nelson Mandela, for example, gave up the strain and glamour of dissident status to become the efficient, if slightly conservative, president of South Africa. Vaclav Havel did the same thing in former Czechoslovakia, later in the Czech Republic. Rathenow’s acceptance of the prize contradicts our romantic image of the artist as a social outcast and political rebel, but perhaps this was even part of Rathenow’s intent. Like any stereotype, the image of the artist as a romantic rebel can easily become stifling. More seriously, it deprives the poet’s protests of serious meaning, since they become an inevitable expression of a personality rather than a considered response to abuse.

Still, the acceptance of the Adenauer prize had something incongruous. Officials at the ceremony such as Finance Minister Theo Waigel and Bavarian Minister Reinhold Bockelt constantly invoked the late Franz Josef Strauß as an inspiration in their opening speeches. In a letter to me during 1978 Rathenow had referred to Strauß

as a “figure of darkness,” whom he also called “for me the incarnation of everything negative in the German character.” In a letter a bit later, he had paired Strauß with Hitler, both of whom he compared with Ronald Reagan. If the Lutz Rathenow of 1978 had been present at the ceremony to view the man he would become, what might he have thought?

Perhaps fortunately for all of us, time travel remains a province of science fiction. Given the massive social changes that have occurred over the past decades, it would be odd indeed if an individual had not reconsidered some of his former views. The demonization of Strauß was once a cliché of left-wing communities. From the late seventies through the eighties, Rathenow and I exchanged letters across the proverbial “iron curtain” (He in East Germany and I in the United States), and I sometimes translated his literary works. Together with Rathenow, I have, since that time, also made the transition from a sentimental leftist position to a political skepticism, liberal in spirit yet uncommitted to any faction or program.

Another related charge that is a bit less openly leveled against Rathenow is that of surrendering to banality. An official ceremony like that at which the reward was presented can itself seem hardly more than one enormous platitude. Certainly on nearly all such official occasions the gap between the usual moralistic rhetoric and the placid faces can indeed be comic, just as the power of the dignitaries can be seductive.

Today, however, platitudes are so prevalent in everything from advertising to political rhetoric that nobody can banish them, even from poetry or literary prose. They are part of our language – English, Spanish, French or German – which itself is now formed as much through soap operas and action adventure films as through direct human interaction. Even words like “freedom” or “love” now ring of banality. In the eighties, when Rathenow and a few others complained about the Berlin Wall, most of the intelligentsia in both West and East dismissed his concern as a banality. Today, anyone who tries to speak with urgency about environmental devastation, the growing gap between rich and poor or any of the other terrible problems that confront us, is certain to be charged with dealing in banalities. Sometimes it seems that the things worth saying have all become platitudes.

An ideal of undergraduate anthologies is the poet as a heroic guardian of the language, resisting the temptation

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of the cliché and the overly used phrase. He is a sort of gardener, ensuring freshness of his crop by weeding out all that is insipid or sick. Unfortunately, the soil has grown thin through excessive irrigation, and such a gardener will end up with a rather barren and uninteresting plot of land. Rathenow has always known better than to attempt to eliminate clichés entirely. Rather, he uses, them to illuminate social and political dynamics.

Saul Friedländer offers a highly perceptive analysis of kitsch and its relation to the Holocaust. Far from simple nonsense, kitsch, in his view, has origins in myth. It detaches images detached from their context, then lulls us through their constant repetition. The Nazi movement was, in the view of Friedländer, based on images of apocalyptic destruction which had been stylized into banality. Behind the platitudes about heroic struggle lay longing for annihilation.²

An example of this (mine, not Friedländer's) might be the propaganda film "Triumph of the Will," directed by Leni Riefenstahl and often regarded as a masterpiece, even by opponents of the Nazi movement. Though perhaps technically innovative, conceptually it depicts an unbroken series of banalities from smiling children to military parades. The Führer honors the men who died in battle. The Führer chats with simple peasants in their traditional dress. He inveighs against the enemies of Germany. The abiding impression, despite the blandness of individual scenes, is one of intoxicating power.

If the basic analysis of Friedländer is, as I believe, correct, what happened to that longing for annihilation that once animated the Nazi movement? If, indeed, this longing was profoundly rooted in German (and, for that matter, Western) culture, it is unlikely to have vanished with the fall of Berlin. Political policies, even ideologies, can certainly change abruptly, but underlying patterns of thought are far more constant.

This view of the Holocaust, articulated by Friedländer about a decade ago, is certainly ominous for contemporary society. Kitsch of death? So many popular movies today are hardly more than a sequence of bombs, fires, shoot-outs and vehicles crashing in flames (even fist fights are becoming banal), strung loosely together with the barest excuse for a plot. Those which do best at the box office are, like *Independence Day*, most apocalyptic in their scenes of destruction. "Hey, can I see your invitation?" says a security guard to the elegantly dressed Arnold Schwarzenegger at a ritzy party in one recent Hollywood film. "Sure," says Arnold, smiling pleasantly. He then flicks a button on a detonator, and the sky flashes a brilliant yellow and red.

This infatuation with destruction may be too nuanced and elusive for most studies of sociologists, let alone the speeches of politicians, but it is explored by poets and philosophers. Kafka, writing mostly between the two

world wars, combined images of the absurd with the rhetoric of normality. Lutz Rathenow, following in the same tradition, has explored juxtaposition of kitsch and death, precisely the phenomenon that Friedländer identified in the Third Reich, in the society of contemporary Germany. One difference between Rathenow and, say, Riefenstahl, is that the Nazis always attempted to obscure their banalization of violence and destruction. Rathenow, by contrast, constantly illuminates this and comments implicitly upon it. He endeavors to lay bare the senselessness of the violence that surround us, stripping apocalyptic destruction of its romance.

Rathenow, one of the very few writers in the former GDR who was consistently critical of his state, now uses his insight into East German society to illuminate the problems of united Germany and, by extension, global culture. East Germany, with its Prussian obsession with the military, provided martial training in public schools. Little boys and girls practiced exercises like the throwing of grenades. Perhaps even more significant, in the view of Rathenow, is the way frustrations of daily life converge in a sort of rage, which the state attempted, with only limited success, to channel against perceived enemies. Furthermore, the state created an atmosphere of suspicion and secrecy through the employment of a massive network of informers who worked, officially and unofficially, for the State Security Police. All of these factors remain in the united German state: a preoccupation with weapons and military skills, a massive sense of anger and a climate of mistrust. Now, however, they are no longer subject to the rigid controls imposed by a highly centralized ruling body. In the comparatively anarchic society of Western Germany, they find new and frightening expression.

One very representative tale, which concludes the collection *Sisyphos*, is "töten lernen," in which a man gradually learns to kill on an ever greater scale. He begins with ants. From there he goes on to become a border guard, responsible for killing human beings. After German unification he easily manages to obtain a gun from the military surplus. Then he becomes a murderer for sport, whose grotesque and elaborate crimes are executed in a spirit of play.

The book is filled with such images of destruction, yet they are always transparent in their lack of meaning. The horrors are deliberately stripped of excitement and pathos. A man in one story quarrels with his host over how many times humanity, using the new biological weapons, might be annihilated. They agree to a duel, and the protagonist kills his host simply so as not to be thought discourteous. In another story, the protagonist uses the guile of a professional assassin to kill a cat in secret, in hope that this will create peace inside his home. Once again life matters less than the sense of normality.

Yet one more tale is of a man who carefully plans an obituary as a work of art. The stories describe a society in love with death, though it is not always easy to tell if that is the former German Democratic Republic, united Germany or the entire Western world.

Rathenow also did not make his acceptance speech of the Adenauer prize into an occasion for mutual flattery. Rather, he spoke thoughtfully of the need to confront the recent past, not as an adventure with a happy end but as an abiding source of pain. It is not simply a matter of accusation or confession, nor of separating those who collaborated from those who did not. The Holocaust, after all, has not exactly been forgotten, yet its most visible monument is a continued proliferation of kitsch, from melodramatic adventures to pornographic fantasies. The Holocaust was also, until recently, the legitimation of Soviet power in the East and, for that matter, the policies of the United States and Israel today. But to learn more constructive lessons from history will require the anguished process of recognizing responsibilities which cut across political lines.

Rathenow ended his speech with a quotation from Max Horkheimer: "The important division is between respect and contempt for what is alive, not between the so-called 'right' and 'left' ... The cliques may fight one another when their interests require it, but their real enemy is the individual who understands them."³

What, then, are "right" and "left"? Truly, banalities. And what is banality? An illusion! Those who treat platitudes with too much contempt are deceived, just as are those who present them as solutions. The appearance of blandness is never more than a cover, behind which may be anger and vulnerability, hope and rage

Notes

- ¹ Lutz Rathenow, *Sisyphos: Erzählungen* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 1995)
- ² Saul Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, trans. Thomas Weyr (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).
- ³ Lutz Rathenow, "Gedanken über die Macht des Wortes..." *Deutschland Magazin* 28.7/8 (July/Aug. 1996): 27.