

Resilience in the Absence of Hope

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Volker Braun, *Rubble Flora*, trans.
David Constantine and Karen Leeder.
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VOLKER BRAUN, ONE OF THE most important poets of the former East Germany (officially the German Democratic Republic, or GDR) and today's reunified Germany, has been translated, and now anthologized for the first time for the English-language reading public, by Germanists David Constantine and Karen Leeder, among the most eminent currently working in Britain. Both have a connection to Oxford University: Leeder currently holds a professorship there, while Constantine lectured there for almost 20 years. They have been translating and lecturing their way through Braun's work for many years, and that work has finally borne fruit in an anthology published by Seagull Books. Their long-term commitment to Braun's work has resulted in English versions that convincingly channel Braun's very individual poetic tone. Many of the translated poems were

previously anthologized by Suhrkamp in the 2000 volume *Lustgarten. Preußen*, but *Rubble Flora* thankfully includes some important poems not present in the German collection. It features poems written from 1959 to 2013, but is most densely populated by poems from the late 1980s forward.

The first anthology in a given language is of no little consequence to a poet's fate in that language. How, then, does this anthology present Braun? Although it presents Braun's poems in three different sections, the more salient division, as Leeder's preface suggests, is between the pre- and post-*Wende* poems. Braun's GDR poems are significantly different from those that come after the *Wende*, Germany's peaceful reunification in 1989 and 1990. The former testify to his poetic beginnings, when his poetic mission is formed. This mission remains essentially the same throughout this period and only changes with the fall of the Berlin Wall. This fall, likened by Braun to an earthquake, rearranges the earth under the poet's feet. It also is an earthquake of long duration, for, after the initial event, its aftershocks continue to disturb the poet's balance; he

struggles to maintain his footing, to keep himself upright.

Let us examine these early poems. The second-earliest poem in the collection, “Demand,” published in 1965, describes the youthful Braun’s poetic program. It is the statement of a politically engaged poet. In one respect, “Demand” is not so different from “Auferstanden aus Ruinen,” the GDR anthem penned by Johannes Becher: it is a call to action, and clearly loyal, calling for engagement in the socialist project. He asks for a forest in which to hunt, and a hunting knife with which to skin the prey that he and his youthful contemporaries catch in the forest. It is an exhortation not to rest on past laurels, but to tackle the socialist task afresh. This sounds reasonable enough, even appropriate for a poem of youth. But the tone is vastly different from Becher’s. Let us recall the artist’s task as prescribed by the official aesthetic of Socialist Realism: to portray the achievements of the socialist state in a heroic afterglow. Through this urgent call to action in the present, he has overlooked, possibly even actively rejected this task, just as he rejects the “meal of roast venison” that has been prepared for him. All this must have seemed *frech*—cheeky and insolent—to the reviewing authorities. Inauspicious beginnings indeed!

Another remarkable aspect of the poem is its turn to subjectivity, announced in the repeated phrase: “shout out your desires.” The primary preoccupation of the Soviet bloc since Lenin with respect to the relation between individual and Party, and to the State by extension, had been to make sure that the individual’s subjectivity is not regressive and bourgeois, but in conformity with Party doctrine. In light of the dialectical methodology of the Marxist tradition, one might easily view a one-sided scrutiny of the individual as undialectical, and Braun’s own call to “shout out your desires” as dialectically

necessary. That is, however, not how the GDR cultural authorities viewed Braun’s work in 1965.¹

In particular, Hans Koch, an influential party-liner in the GDR Writer’s Association, criticized Braun’s poetry as anarchic.² Moreover, clearly implied in such a call is that the East German state still left something to be desired and hoped-for—an implication that once again rankled the authorities. In his early years, Braun was threatened with exclusion from the Party for the politics of literary work. Only interventions on his behalf by Christa Wolf and others saved him from this fate.³ These early experiences acquainted Braun with the risks involved in being a poet in the GDR, and references to his sensibility to that risk are a recurrent theme in the GDR poems: he writes of talking “too much for life and limb” (“The Life and Times of Volker Braun”), and of “spouting stuff that one day could cost me my neck” (“Fief”).

Despite the tension between Braun and state authorities, his situation in the GDR did provide him with a clear role: that of cautious gadfly to the real socialist state and of fighter for social justice. One thing perhaps in his favor was that, regardless of the realities of really existing socialism, he was fighting for the same ideals that the state itself claimed to be fighting for.⁴ This striving for justice gave him hope. Hope is a key word in Braun’s vocabulary

1 That year, at the eleventh plenary session of the Central Committee of East Germany’s ruling Socialist Unity Party, the leadership adopted a cultural policy that led to significant censorship in the arts.

2 “Volker Braun: Training des Aufrechten Gangs.” Planetlyrik.de. 23 July 2019. Online at www.planetlyrik.de/volker-braun-training-des-aufrechten-gangs/2017/07/.

3 Christa Wolf, *Lettre à Siegfried Wagner*, trans. Alain and Renate Lance. Œuvres Ouvertes. Online at oeuvresouvertes.net/spip.php?article3728.

4 An analogous dynamic gave American activists for racial equality purchase against the segregationist policies of the South.

throughout the volume. In “Demand”, he speaks of “the ocean of our hopes.” Hope is evident in Braun’s thought “that here [i.e. in the GDR] the world might find an example of gentleness” (“The Life and Times of Volker Braun”), and in Braun’s poem about Walter Benjamin’s attempted escape to the US, an escape cut short by Benjamin’s suicide. Here he gently chides Benjamin’s suicide as having been “too hasty.” Written during the period of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*, when the Soviet bloc was ‘opening’ and ‘restructuring’ in the 1980s, Braun seems confident that efforts of the Left are going to bear fruit in positive change, just as Benjamin’s fellow travelers were granted free passage to Portugal the day after his suicide. “The life bears the work, if I may say, up this steep slope / In every work there is a place where we feel a gust of cold blowing towards us like the approach of dawn” (“Walter Benjamin in the Pyrenees”). It is a poem of hope and an admonition against despair.

Hope is a key word and concept for Braun, not merely in his early poems, but even more so for the poetry written after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. In these, hope becomes a negative, an absence. In “Property”, he writes: “It was hope that came before this fall,” implying two things: positively, that he had lived in hope before the fall of the Wall; negatively, implying that that hope is gone. Elsewhere he confirms this implication by saying “not even by a hope am I better off than you” (“My Brother”). His hope was to a great extent a hope of contributing his part to positive social change. The poem “Marlboro is Red. Red is Marlboro” states that this hope is gone: “I’ll never live toward a turningpoint again.”⁵ The result of all this is a loss of a task and a sense of

⁵ “Turningpoint” is the translation here for that vastly important term *Wende*.

uselessness: “No longer driven to find the place and the solving word / I belong to all the useless peoples” (“Magma”).

Braun clearly doesn’t believe that the new, capitalist system in the reunified Germany after 1989 admits of change, hence his hopelessness. His poems give evidence that he believes the writer in his new situation has no social function; instead his role is that of consumer, with everyone else: “I shop therefore I am” (“Shakespeare Shuttle”). This role leaves him and everyone else with two main tasks in life, “SHOPPING AND FUCKING.” In “Lagerfeld”, Braun vents his disgust for the prurience and garish extravagance of capitalism. He fears that “Nothing will ever change” (“Bay of the Dead”).

This affirmation of life involves saying “yes” not only to the things we enjoy, but also to those we find distasteful.

What is Braun as a poet to do in these new circumstances? This is a question to which he has no ready answer. Or rather, he has various answers depending on his state of mind. Sometimes he is pessimistic, resigned to accepting the role which Capitalism assigns to him. In a phrase that sounds Prufrockian in English: “I am to hone my wit upon our fall and keep my distance in the shopping mall” (“Cashing Up”). Elsewhere he seems more optimistic. In a poem entitled “When He Could See Again”, he says: “I’ll praise the world as it appears.” Despite Braun’s sense of hopelessness and aimlessness, he keeps on writing, and a new poetic role opens up in

the process through the very act of writing: he becomes a seismograph of the aftershocks of the great earthquake, with all their ups and downs, their heavings and groanings.

One of the attitudes in this seismographic poetry is a kind of poetic mourning for the socialist ideas that got lost in the process of building really existing socialism, expressed in the poems taken from his collection, *Neue Totentänze* (*New Dances of Death*). These dances are a way of thinking and writing about death. But while the notion of death is fraught with finality, these are dances, and as such, imply process, a deferral of the end. Death, yes; but a death in progress, never quite finalized. This is arguably an appropriate approach to the death of ideas, since ideas flow in and out of being, and as such are not susceptible of burial—even though the forces of Capitalism, for all their professed love for competition, are eager to throw the final bits of earth on the grave of Socialism for good and all. The *Totentänze* allow the dancers to parade before us in a macabre procession.

Often the later poems riff on more or less recent political themes, such as his writerly role in the GDR (“Bay of the Dead”), the unraveling of the Warsaw Pact (“End of October”), the death of Che Guevara (“After the Massacre of Illusions”), the rewritten world map (“The Empire Considers a Map of the World”), the insatiable drive of nations to lay claim to every scrap of unoccupied land (“Ultimatum for Parsley Island”), the tragedies of the World Trade Center and Utøya (“Wilderness”). This topsy-turvy world creates for Braun the difficulty of finding balance, an issue that Braun explicitly addresses in a poem aptly entitled “Balance.”

Some poems resist classification under the very political pre- and post-*Wende* rubrics, because they deal with aspects of human experience as such. This type of

poem can be found throughout the collection. Braun appears in poems of this sort as a man of the present moment, a tactile, sensuous man, who prizes the *feeling* of life above all. In my view, this attitude resides at the core of Braun’s poetry. The experience of sex occupies a place of privilege in such poems, as we see in the poem “Oysters”, whose final word is a throaty “yes!” to life. An interesting twist is that this affirmation of life involves saying “yes” not only to the things we enjoy, but also to those we find distasteful, as the poet’s friend swallows the oysters both “with gusto and disgust.” Ostensibly about the experience of eating oysters, the poem calls oysters those little “cunts of the sea”: eating and oral sex are thus conflated in a celebration of sensuous experience. Another such poem is the poem “Italian Night.” Here again, sex is the centerpiece, as the two lovers enjoy the delights of their bed. But also the visceral enthusiasm of sports fans is eulogized as they celebrate the victory of their hometown soccer team in the town square.⁶ Braun draws a contrast between these vital experiences and the activity of the “fools” concerned with the shroud of Turin. The poem implies that the faithful are essentially celebrating Death while the lovers and the fans celebrate Life. That may oversimplify Christian doctrine, but that’s how Braun sees it. In the later poems, the feeling of Life is seen through the lens of an aging poet. The poem “Hidden” testifies to the persistence of desire, while “My Fear” deals with the fear of desire’s extinction.

Through all this, we notice Braun’s resilience in the face of crisis and disorientation. The circumstances that silenced the production of many creative

⁶ This poem dates to 1976, when Turin’s soccer team, the *Granati*—so named for the ruby-red color of their jerseys—became the champions of the Italian Soccer League.

people did not silence him. Perhaps the final poem in the collection, “Demon,” could be read as a comment on this creative resilience: “I’m governed by a curious spirit / Joys it brings and sadness too / I know I can’t be cured of it / There’s nothing anyone can do.” This “demon” is no evil spirit, as the English word misleadingly connotes, but a guiding and motivating spirit which helps one fulfill one’s destiny. Braun’s life is animated by this curious spirit, whose driving force has persisted through the heavings and groanings of the earthquake that has upended Braun’s world—and our own.

Braun’s poetry in this volume is only moderately difficult; he doesn’t attempt to conceal his meaning. However, it is a very literate poetry and full of various modes of textual interplay. References to canonical literary works abound, ranging from classical antiquity to Dante to Shakespeare and Sir Philip Sidney. Moreover, references to the history of the workers’ movement and its literary touchstones (e.g. Büchner, Marx, Brecht, Benjamin), references that would have been familiar to those in the Soviet Bloc, are generally less familiar to readers in capitalist countries. References in the post-Wende poetry (e.g., the disasters at Utøya and the World Trade Center) become more familiar to Western readers. Use of these references runs the gamut from allusion to quotation to poetic spinoff.

Braun’s verse forms extend from the sonnet (usually unrhymed) to free verse, to the prose poem. Free verse is used for his

longer poems, and sometimes Braun interjects an interlude of prose poetry into a mostly free verse poem (e.g. “Shakespeare Shuttle”). The individual stanzas of “Tides” are even haiku-like in their compression. Among the shorter poems, a twelve-line form is often used, whether divided into stanzas or not, but he uses ten lines for the “Dances of Death.” His verse is usually unrhymed, although rhyme does appear in some shorter poems. The final poem in the volume, “Demon,” is a particularly interesting example. Its title invites comparison with Goethe’s poem of the same name, but its use of rhyme and very personal tone present a stark contrast to the Olympian universality of Goethe’s poem. Braun’s translators in this volume generally do an excellent job of homing in on Braun’s tone and recreating a convincing equivalent in English. Here, however, they have overshot the mark: the translation’s tone is too flippant, almost suggestive of doggerel verse. Braun’s original is more serious.

Rubble Flora is an appealing volume, printed in a handy size that is particularly well suited to lyric poetry, with an attractive dust jacket. It is generally well-edited, although I did find a couple of typographical errors (p. 5 “Drum the flood of your all your hopes”; p. 13 “GRANTA”). The volume also includes the sources of the selections with years of publication, a section of notes, and a helpful introduction by Karen Leeder. ■