Wolf Biermann: Reading at The Prague Writers' Festival

Transcription of his songs

And as we reached the shore
And as we reached the shore
And sat in the row-boat much longer
There it was, that we saw the sky
At its most beautiful in the water
And a pair of minnows flew through
The pear tree. The aeroplane swam
Across the lake and smashed
Gently into the willow’s trunk
- the willow’s trunk
What will become, merely, of our dreams
In this ruptured land
The wounds do not want to close up
Under the filthy bandage
And what will become of our friends
And what else of you, of me -
I would like best of all to get out of here
And I stay most willingly here
- most willingly here

Melancholy

for Emile Cioran

1

Because I see no land anymore in any country
On all industry’s crap no cock is crowing
The little people stagger over every edge
To poor, too rich, to small in megalomania
Because desires proliferate like a cancer
I am a glutton who’s never happy
Because fear of death flirts as lust for life
Because limitless freedom has limits
And because I never forgave my enemies anything
And because I myself see and yet still don’t get it
Melancholy
    Melancholy in the heart
    The black bile

2

Because cowardice in front of a true friend cripples me
Because daring in front of a false friend fools me
Because you can’t tame tyrants with tears
And because no song stops the spree killers
Because I sniffed at glory at the front of the platform
And licked till I was so thirsty at the salt
Because doubt crawled into my certainty
And I have debts blamelessly round my neck
Because I withstood and still prostrated myself
And get no more soul money on the spot
Melancholy
Melancholy in the heart
The black bile

He who preaches hope, yeah, he’s lying. But
He who kills hope is a bastard
And I do both and shout: please do
Take what you need – too much is unhealthy!
Because without any reason all is hope, just
Like how love needs no reasons
And because I give dreams a hiding
Because the chimney only smokes from heresy
And because a heretic burns and shines brightly as never
And magnificently rises again in every event
   Melancholy
      Melancholy in the heart
         The black bile

Because I can form my child only after
My own image, like God: too stupid, too weak
And because it finds its own ways: blindly
It runs after the heard into corruption
The grandchildren will fight it out better! He who
Believes it has peace in his soul and a screw loose
Because the cemetery's peace robs all my calm
Because I’m so dog-tired of all
This rescuing humanity and I don’t ever sleep
Because I’ve got a skinny girl and wanted a buxom one
Melancholy
   Melancholy in the heart
      The black bile

My dear, when I’m with you, and it
Suits, because we think of each other, when I
Sway you into the heavens, when the poison
Swims away in the river of beatitude, when
Blood and hate turn into milk and honey
When a friend needs us, and we can make
Up a bed for him and drink a glass too
And a peace makes the war comfy for us
Then it happens that I escape her for a bit
Yes, because I stand and fall again and again
Melancholy
   Melancholy in the heart
      The black bile

The Ballad of the Prussian Icarus

There, where the Friedrichstrasse gingerly
Makes its step over the water
There hangs over the Spree
The Weidendammerbrücke. You can see
Prussia’s Eagle there beautifully
When I stand on the railings
Then the Prussian Icarus is standing there
With grey wings of cast iron
His arms hurt so much
He does not fly away – he does not crash
Raises no wind – and does not go soft
On the railings over the Spree

2

The barbed wire slowly takes root
Deep in the skin, in the chest and leg
In the brain, in the grey cells
Girded with the bound of wires
Our country is an island land
With leaden waves breaking around it
There the Prussian Icarus stands
With grey wings of cast iron
His arms hurt so much
He does not fly away – he does not crash
He raises no wind, and does not go soft
On the railings over the Spree

3

And if you want to get out, you must go
I’ve already seen loads take off
From our half a country
I’ll hang on in here, until this
Hated bird claws me cold
And drags me over the edge
Then I’ll be the Prussian Icarus
With grey wings of cast iron
Then my arms will hurt so much
Then I’ll fly high – then I’ll crash
Raise some wind – then I’ll go soft
On the railings over the Spree

4/The Barlach song

Oh, Mother, close the windows, do,
The rain is surely coming
And yonder is the bank of clouds
That wants to fall upon us.

What is in store for us
We have so much to dread
And down to earth from heaven
Angels are falling dead.

Oh, Mother, close the doors, do,
The rats are surely coming
The hungry ones are out in front
Those that have eaten follow.

What is in store for us
We have so much to dread
And down to earth from heaven
Angels are falling dead.

Mother, close your eyes, please do,
The rain and rats are coming
And through the cracks that we forgot
They all will soon be crowding.

What is in store for us
We have so much to dread
And down to earth from heaven
Angels are falling dead.

**Soldier, Soldier**

1
Soldier soldier, a hollow form
Soldier soldier, in uniform
Soldier soldier, you're all the same
Soldier soldier, it's not a game
Soldier soldier, I cannot place
Soldier soldier, your unknown face
Soldiers are identical
The quick, the dead and all

2
Soldier soldier, where will it lead
Soldier soldier, please use your head
Soldier soldier, no-one will win
Soldier soldier, in war again
Soldier soldier, the world like you
Soldier soldier, is young and green
But now the world has split in two
And you stand in between

3
Soldier soldier, a hollow form
Soldier soldier, in uniform
Soldier soldier, you're all the same
Soldier soldier, it's not a game
Soldier soldier, I cannot place
Soldier soldier, your unknown face
Soldiers are identical
The quick, the dead and all

Soldiers are identical
-the quick, the dead and all

**Graves**

On Crete I found a cemetery
For the Führer and the Fatherland
There slept many German soldiers
In a barrow at the roadside
And over them grew abundant
The yellow raisin wine
Too sweet! The wine for raisins
I crammed it into me
And on Formentera, there the dead
Live comfortably right
Next to a big car dump
That scared me a bit
Just like soldiers with their weapons
The dead lie prepared
With gutted cars
For the journey into eternity
Wherever I seek people
I also like to visit graves
In Barcelona, there the
Dead live super modern
They lie in blocks of flats
The building’s made of boxes of stone
And stare, as they used to at the TV
But now out to sea
In Moscow is the Nuns’ Cemetery
There, with a stone and a small portrait
Lie the murderers and their victims
They lie bone on bone
And swear and wimper and shove
And scratch each other sore
And scream, with bloody earth
In their lacerated mouths
So I grazed at some graves
Ate up flowers, wilted
And loaded onto my soul
A Jewish gravestone in Prague
The dead live quite peculiarly
They speak so quietly and clearly
Even their life’s lies
Become true in silence
I know it, the dead live
And want somebody to visit them
He who passes the stiffs by stiffly
He’ll be bewitched and cursed
- not me! My father’s gravestone
Is everywhere. I do not need
To seek his grave for long
It is so easy to find
There, where a chimney smokes

Encouragement

Dedicated to Peter Huchel

You, don’t let yourself harden
In these hard times
Those who are all too hard, break
Those who are all too sharp, stab
And break off immediately
You, don’t let yourself get bitter
In these bitter times
The ruling ones are trembling
- You’ll be first behind bars -
But definitely not at your sorrow
You, don’t let yourself get scared
In these fearful times
That’s just what they want to happen
That we lay down arms
Before the great battle’s even begun
You, don’t let yourself be consumed
Use your time
You can’t disappear
You need us, and we need
Just your cheerfulness
We don’t want to silence it
In these times of silence
The greenery bursts from the branches
We want to show that to everybody
Then they’ll know the score

Only he who changes stays true to himself

for Arno Lustiger

I swam through blood into the great light
Curious I came out of the belly
I was an animal. And I was a person
From the start and I learned too
At the Gestapo in interrogation
I drank from the breast, without shyness,
The truth with mother’s milk:
Only he who changes stays true to himself
Then I took off from Hamburg
At sixteen to the Promised Land
There were millions on the same road
As me, just running in the opposite direction
I wanted to get away from home
To home! The journey isn’t new:
The young seek a fatherland
Only he who changes stays true to himself
So I came over: guileless
And blindly enthusiastic like a child
Soon I saw that even the red gods
Were only bastard humans
My father did not make me
So that I could rehash old lies
So I shouted out my truth:
Only he who changes stays true to himself
Hot or cold, there was always war there
I went from West to East to West
And held onto my weapons,
The guitar and the pencil
I remain what I always was
Half Jewish brat and half a Goy
But one thing I know clear as day:
Only he who changes stays true to himself
With women I’ve never had anything!
But luck. I was so green and blind
And knew only at the front of the back of my head
That women are people too
Now I know down to the smallest part
With which I please my woman:
I think male domination stinks
Only he who changes stays true to himself
I was despondent from the beginning
And I’ve always hoped anew
Thus can one live. Death is coming soon
I know Joe Black, I’ve met him often
He remains my enemy, for whom nor I
Scatter rhyming roses at the end
With my last breath I croke:
**Rencontre à Paris**

for J. B.

The old friends, they’re getting old  
- over there – and differently from me  
The time in the East is a different time  
Friends are getting old  
And when we finally do see each other  
In this world, by the way  
Then we will be tremendously happy  
Of those of whom not even the ashes remain  
- we blow into old fire  
The friend has found the friend  
We were so helplessly fond of each other  
And licked each other’s wounds  
Ah, long dried tears drop  
We natter the long silence to death  
And yet cannot stop the holes  
We stay forever in the same boat  
- and have long since journeyed on different rivers!  
What we used to risk! Now we weigh up:  
East against West. State against State  
And each wants to want. And nobody wants to have to  
We value each other. We! To the grave:  
We gauge each other. And sniff out betrayal  
And register the new features in  
A trusted face. We still know each other  
- oh yes we do! – and don’t recognise each other  
The old friends, they’re getting old  
- over there – and differently from me  
The time in the East is a different time  
We smile at each other  
And then fall silent  
With tender bitterness

**Homeland**

I seek peace and find conflict  
As though craving lively life  
My long time is too short  
Want to have everything, give everything  
Because I’m a friend-eater  
I’m hungry for my homeland – always!  
That is the death, I want to head for it  
But never ever to arrive  
To sleep deeply, to dream without screams  
To wake and then doze a bit  
A sip of tea, a piece of bread and butter  
To easily solve all problems of humanity  
To bear the unbearable  
In an eternally young war of freedom:  
Defeat hides in victory  
Despite everything, to risk loving!  
At night a glass of Rioja  
Woman! Woman, you are my little bacchante
Let’s be a beast with two backs!
You fly again, and me too a little
I will build you the ballad text
When my Salamander’s bitten-off
Tail grows back again
And thus, you rascals, one writes songs
I seek peace and find conflict
As though craving lively life
My long time is too short!
Want to have everything, give everything
Because I’m an enemy-eater
I’m hungry for revenge – always!
That is the death, I want to head for it
But never ever to arrive