
POETRY

P E T E R H U C H E L

Selected and Introduced by Joseph Brodsky

In the 20th century, German history has done its best to obscure German poetry. Murder makes better copy, and when foreign troops march into your country you are not in a mood to read their bards and classics, unless of course you work for intelligence. Nor does your interest get much of a boost from those troops' defeat. Nearly 50 years after World War II's carnage, we are still more familiar with the names of the Third Reich's leaders than with those of Else Lasker-Schuler, Gottfried Benn, Gunter Eich, Karl Krolov, Ingeborg Bachmann, or Peter Huchel. Apparently, the dust hasn't settled yet.

Most likely, it never will, which alone turns dust into a form of existence. It turns out that, among its other properties, dust also possesses a voice:

*Gedenke meiner,
Flüstert der Staub.*

Remember me,
whispers the dust.

This is what the dust says according to one of the finest German poets of this century, Peter Huchel. Huchel was born in 1903 and died in 1981. He grew up on a farm in the eastern part of Germany, in Prussia, and studied in Berlin, Freiburg, and Vienna. Between wars, he traveled a fair bit in Hungary, Romania, Turkey, and France. That was a lean time for most Germans, and he'd often pay for his sojourns in these places with the only marketable skill he had acquired in his youth: farm work.

Huchel's poems were first published in various periodicals in the 1920s. In the '30s, he, like many a poet at the time, took up writing verse radio plays, which met with considerable success. In 1933, though, he withdrew his soon-to-be-published first collection of poems because he didn't want to be affiliated with a pro-Nazi group of poets. The war found him rather late, apparently after some looking, on his family farm near Potsdam, and he was drafted into the Wehrmacht in 1941. By that time, he was 38 years old.

Those who served with him in the trenches recall the man scribbling in his notebook while occasionally glancing out the embrasure. In 1945, shortly before the war ended, he deserted to the Russians and was interned. But, partly because of his reputedly anti-Nazi cycle of poems, "Twelve Nights," written during the war, partly because of the socialist sympathies of his youth, he was soon released and started to work in East Berlin for the state radio. In 1949 he became the editor of a highly influential magazine called *Sinn und Form* (Sense and Form).

He stayed on at this job for the next 13 years, in the course of which he

also published several collections of his poetry and reaped various awards in the German Democratic Republic. In 1962, however, because of his independent editorial policies, he was dismissed and placed under house arrest. Presumably because of his prominence on the GDR cultural scene, nothing further was done, and in 1971, as a result of appeals from PEN International, Huchel was allowed to leave. He settled down in West Germany where, 10 years later, he died. He was married twice and had two children.

By the standards of the time and especially of the place, this poet's life was rather uneventful. What's more, his poetry carries very few references to his actual circumstances. One's mind is always more complex than one's reality, and the poet presumably thought it bad manners to draw on a biography so common. He simply was a complex man who ended up with a very primitive history on his lap, or to put it a bit more accurately, he ended up in that history's clutches. To capitalize on his experience in verse would amount to intelligence honoring instinct. This had nothing to do with escapism or even the spirit of privacy, paramount in German lyric poetry for most of this century. This had to do with the man's preservation of his dignity: by showing history where it belongs.

Peter Huchel is often billed as a nature poet. Definitions are always reductive, and in the case of Huchel this label is about as misleading as it is in the case of Robert Frost. They indeed have quite a bit in common, except that unlike Frost, for whom nature mirrors man's negative potential, Huchel, whose work is imbued with a very strong Christian ethos, sees nature as a holy sacrament. This attitude was so strong in Huchel that it led him temporarily to perceive the GDR program of agricultural collectivization as the long-overdue implementation of natural laws.

Huchel's poetry is indeed marked by an instinctive reliance on the natural environment, but the label won't stick. What his poems get from nature is a bit more than nature offers. The severest and most elegiac voice in the German poetry of his time, Huchel not so much describes a landscape as reads what's been wrought upon "terrestrial things" by a pen harder held and more dispassionate than his own. Nature for him, to put it simply, is a page covered dark with a fairly dark writ.

The poems you will find here belong, however, to a later, postwar Huchel. Men's last words are often of greater consequence than their first, and this goes for poets as well. As one perceptive critic of Huchel has remarked, he began with hymns and ended with psalms. This is a fair description of this poet's evolution. In his later poetry, nature plays a lesser role, since it is no longer for him home or solace. But it is the same implacable, immanent pen, scribbling here slowly upon a terrestrial thing that is, this time, the poet's own heart: a shrinking page increasingly conscious of its finality. History enters here, but not so much that of Germany as of his whole life and with it, of the civilization to which he belongs and which he is about to exit. That is what accounts for that life and that civilization overlapping, and for the poems' long view. As perspectives go, this one is fairly universal.

"How can one write poetry after Auschwitz?" asked Theodor Adorno. It is for a German poet, obviously, to provide the answer.

The Angels

A shadow stands,
crosses the room,
smoke,
where an old woman,
the goose-wing
in her feeble hand,
brushes the oven shelf.
A fire burns.
Remember me,
whispers the dust.

November fog and rain, rain
and the sleep of cats.
The sky black
and muddy above the river.
Time flows from gaping emptiness,
flows over the fins
and gills of the fish
and over the frozen stare
of the angels,
who drop down with blackened wings,
behind the gaunt twilight, to the daughters of Cain.

A shadow stands,
crosses the room,
smoke.
A fire burns.
Remember me,
whispers the dust.

The Ammonite

Sick of the gods and their fires
I lived without the law
in the deepest part of the valley of Hinnom.
Gone were my old companions,
the balance of heaven and earth;
only the ram was true,
his festering lameness dragged across the stars.
Under his horns of stone,
their smokeless glimmering, I slept at night,
fired urns each day
that I'd smash to pieces on the rocks
in the evening sun.
I never saw the twilight, a cat in the cedars,
or the birds take wing,
the water's splendor
as it ran across my arms,
while I mixed the vats of clay.
The smell of death made me blind.

Aristeas I

First light of dawn,
as the gold of the dead lay buried
in clouds. The wind slept there,
in branches
where the crow sat plumed in fog.

The branches flew,
its wingbeat hard against the gray light
of the alders,
the milky skin of the steppe.

I, Aristeas,
as crow has followed god,
I wend my way,
drawn onward by a dream,
through laurel groves of fog,
to search the morning on stiff wings.
I've spied
in snow-encrusted caves,
faces, one-eyed, lit by fires,
sunk deep in smoke.
And horses stood, manes frozen,
hitched to posts with reins of soot.

The crow brushed past
the wintry gate,
through starved undergrowth.
The frost stirred.
And a parched tongue spoke:
Here is a past without pain.

Aristeas II

The solitude
of piers in brackish water;
at the leaky planking of a boat
a dead rat scrapes.
Here I sit at noon,
in the shade of the customs house,
an old man
on a millstone.

Once a river pilot,
later I steered ships, poor cargoes,
through the tides up north.
The captains paid in contraband,
it was enough to live, with women enough
and sailcloth.

The names grow dim;
no one deciphers the text
that lingers behind my lids.
I, Aristeas, son of Caystrobios,
am missing, presumed dead,
exiled by the god
to this narrow dirty harbor,
not far from the Cimmerian boat,
where people trade in skins and amulets.

At night the fulling mill still pounds.
Sometimes I squat like a crow,
high up in the poplars by the river,
motionless in the setting sun,
awaiting the death
that dwells on ice-bound rafts.

The Grave of Odysseus

None shall find
the grave of Odysseus,
no thrust of the spade
the encrusted helmet
in the mist of petrified bones.

Don't look for the cave
beneath the earth,
where a draught of soot, a mere shadow,
injured by the torch's flaring pitch,
went to its dead companions,
its hands raised, weaponless,
smeared with the blood of slaughtered sheep.

All is mine, said the dust;
the sun's grave beyond the desert,
reefs filled with the water's deafening roar,
the endless noon, that still gives warning
to the sea-pirate's son from Ithaca,
the rudder, gnawed by salt,
the charts and manifests
of the ancient Homer.

(The Elder Tree)

The elder opens its moons,
all passes into silence;
the fluid lights in the stream,
the water-borne planetarium
of Archimedes,
astronomical signs,
Babylonian in their origins.

Son,
Enkidu, my little son,
you abandoned your mother, the gazelle,
your father, the wild donkey,
that you might go to Uruk with the whore.
The milk-bearing goats have fled.
The steppe is withered.

Behind the city gate
with its seven bolts of iron
Gilgamesh, who wanders both heaven and earth,
has shown you
how to cut the cords of death.

Noon burned darkly on the brickworks,
Gold lay darkly in the chamber of the king.
Turn back, Enkidu.
What has Gilgamesh bequeathed?
The graceful head of the gazelle downcast.
The dust rained on your bones.

Elegy

It is your hour,
man upon Chios,
it draws near to you over the rocks
and sets fire to your heart.
The evening breeze mows
the shadows of the pines.
Your eye is blind.
But in the gull's cry
you know the sea's metallic shimmer,
the sea with the dolphin's black skin,
the stiff oar-stroke of the wind
hard by the coast.

Down the path,
where tufts of goat-hair
wave upon the thistle,
the cithara, seven-stringed, holds forth
in the hum of telegraph wires.
A single wall has remained,
crowned with undulating tiles.
The clay pot shattered,
in which life's bill of sale,
sealed, has lain.

Rock-high spindrift,
rock-lapping breakers,
sea with the cat shark's skin.
At the cape of a cloud,
awash in the swell of sky,
white with the salt
of wave after receding wave,
is the moon's lightship.
It illumines the voyage to Ios,
where boys wait
on the shore
with empty nets
and lice in their hair.

Melpomene

Bitter, the forest, full of thorns,
no coastal breeze, no foothills,
the grass lay matted, our death to come
with the sound of horses' hooves, endless
across the low hills of the steppes, we returned
to search the sky for battlements
that would not give way.

Hostile the villages,
huts emptied in haste,
smoked skins in rafters,
snare nets and bone amulets.
Throughout the land only evil venerated,
animal heads in the mist, fortunes told
with cut wands of the willow.

Later, in the north,
stag-eyed men
rode by on horseback.
We buried our dead.
It was hard
to sink our axes in that earth,
we used fire to thaw the ground.

The blood of roosters killed in sacrifice
was not accepted.

Brandenburg

Behind cold pitch ovens
I walked in the burnt fragrance of pine bogs,
where a farmhand sat at his woodcutter's fire;
he didn't look up,
he set the teeth of his saw.

In the evening
the red Uhlan still dances
with farmers' daughters on the threshing floor of fog,
his tunic open
to the swarms from off the marshes.

Submerged
in the water hemlock
the Prussian calash.

View from a Winter Window

White willows, rounded by dancing snow,
brooms that sweep the mist.
Wood and misfortune
grow at night.
My gauge
the fever's curve.

Who goes there without light
and without mouth,
dragging a steel trap
across the ice?

Sages of the forest,
the foxes with bad teeth,
sit aloof in the darkness
and stare into the fire.

Under the Constellation of Hercules

A town,
no larger
than the circle
a buzzard traces
in the evening sky.

A wall,
rough-hewn, stained
with reddish lichen.
The sound of a bell, that carries
over shimmering water
the smoke
of olive.
Fire,
fed by straw
and damp foliage,
stirred by voices
you don't recognize.

Already straining forward in the night,
in freezing harness,
Hercules drags
the chained harrow of his stars
across the northern sky.

Winter Morning in Ireland

At night the devil sits
in the fog's confessional
and counsels desperate souls.
In the morning he's transformed himself
into a magpie,
flying mute above the narrow path.

In winter's dungeon
on branches of scrub oak,
the brittle gold of the dead.
Light roots out the cold.
Familiar faces of the rooftops
reappear.

Above the sea
the genuflection of the wind,
the first braying of a donkey.
The shadow of a bird drifts
across the cliff's rocky precipice.

The surf,
its gliding ramparts of water and light,
the Irish Sea
does not confide, if the rain
will bury the noon.

The Ninth Hour

Heat etches into stone
the word of the prophet.
A man labors
up the hill,
in his shepherd's bag
the ninth hour,
the nail and the hammer.

In the air the dry shimmer of the flock
is torn apart
and falls as tinder behind the horizon.

Peace

The 'birds' nomadic hour.
In the prickly awns
of threshed corn
the mild vacancy of summer lingers on.
In the gun embrasures of the water tower
the grass grows wild.

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