

The Fictional Works of Joseph Breitbach

Joseph Breitbach, hitherto hardly known in Europe, completely unknown in North America, has in the last two years received some recognition in the Federal Republic of Germany through the stage performances of two of his plays, *Die Jubilarin* (1968; "The Jubilee of Miss Schmidt") and *Genosse Veygond* (1970; "Comrade Veygond"). This late recognition is surprising because the author has been publishing, with interruptions, since the late twenties. His best-known work is his novel *Bericht über Bruno* (1962; *Report about Bruno*, 1964) for which he won a literary prize of Rhineland-Palatinate in 1975 and which has since been translated into several languages, including English. In 1978, *feuilletons*, a collection of his literary and political essays, was published and his latest novel, *Das blaue Bidet oder das eigentliche Leben* ("The Blue Bidet or Actual Life"), appeared.

Breitbach was born in Coblenz, Germany, in 1903 as the son of a Lorrainean father and a Tyrolean mother. This accounts for his bilingual, French and German, upbringing. To the present day, Breitbach commutes between France and Germany and has been called "a polished genius because of the constant changing between two cultural circles."¹ His endeavors for reconciliation between France and Germany after the Second World War have been greatly appreciated by politicians of both sides.

During the time of Hitler, Breitbach could not enter Germany because the German government had sentenced him to death and a warrant had been issued for his arrest. Shortly after the National Socialists had come to power, Breitbach's first novel, *Die Wandlung der Susanne Dasseldorf* (1933; "The Transformation of Susanne Dasseldorf"), was banned for it was considered to belong to the category of "trashy and dirty literature."² The novel deals with the French and American occupation in the German Rhineland after the First World War. Other central topics are the decline and decay of German bourgeois society and the rise of the proletariat and of the lower middle class. The main reason for the ban can be attributed to Breitbach's detailed description of homosexual encounters and his unfavorable depiction of women. The author himself rejected his first novel, although on different grounds, and bought all available copies shortly after publication in order to have them destroyed.³ *Die Wandlung der Susanne Dasseldorf* was translated into Italian in 1945. The work is very long, 597 pages, and in parts repetitious and drawn out. Its merits lie in the attempt to depict a time in German history that was uneasy and crucial for its later developments. Some passages, for example the escape of the Dasseldorf family on a motorboat from Coblenz to Königswinter, have been written in an exquisite manner and can be compared favorably to some of the best German prose.

During the time of the ban, Breitbach was living in France where he had already acquired French citizenship. He supported Thomas Mann in his anti-Nazi stand and helped him financially to establish a German periodical, *Mass*

¹Gisela Uellenberg, "Volksstücke eines Skeptikers: Joseph Breitbachs Bühnenwerk," *Der Ausschmitt*, Nr. 10 (1973), pp. 978-84. I have translated this quotation and all the following ones.

²Joseph Breitbach, "Antwort an Klaus Mann," in *Das Neue Tagebuch* (July 21, 1934), pp. 691-92.

³I was able to obtain the—perhaps—only existing copy in North America from a library in the United States.

und Wert, in Zurich, Switzerland, for German writers in exile. Before Breitbach became interested in the life and tradition of the German bourgeois class, he had been an active member of the Communist Party which he had joined as a young man. Nine years later, in 1929, he left the party and has been quoted as stating: "With my heart I had joined the Communist Party, with my intellect I returned nine years later my membership book."⁴ Since then he has been regarded as a conservative. In 1934, Klaus Mann wrote about Breitbach: "He was years ago a left radical; his development changed him into a European conservative."⁵

Breitbach's very first literary work, a short story called "Rot gegen Rot" ("Red against Red"),⁶ was written towards the end of his communist period and published in 1929. The main character is a young elevator operator, Karl, who is a member of the Communist Party, trying eagerly to recruit new members in the department store he works for. Life is uncomplicated for him because "he had his party and concrete views about the order of the world."⁷ However, this order is disturbed, and party duties are neglected when he becomes involved with Lene, a salesgirl at the store. Through his neglect, some party members are arrested; Karl goes voluntarily into exile, studies Marx and dreams in the loneliness of his shabby room of his glory during the next revolution and of the reunion with his girl friend.

This first work of Breitbach contains the conviction to which he still adheres today: that behind all political activities and decisions lie personal motivations. Thus at the end of his short story, the hero does not think of the revolution as of a vehicle towards a better society, but rather as a means towards personal fame and recognition by people that once saw him fail. This is Breitbach's criticism of the members of the Communist Party as he saw them during the time of his own membership. In spite of this critical view, a translation of his story appeared in Russia in 1928 (Spanish and French translations also exist).

Breitbach's second short story, "Das Radieschen" ("The Radish"), can be regarded as the continuation of the first one. Here the main character is Lene who herself has become a convinced member of the Party and who in turn is trying to persuade her colleagues to join. But she too fails the Party because of personal reasons: her petty jealous feelings against a co-worker. Hence, her brother calls her "Radieschen," and says, you are "painted red on the outside, but inside, how do you look there!"⁸ Lene also leaves her town because she is ashamed of not having been a responsible party member.

Here again, political actions are based on the private life and feelings of the individual. The author's first literary publications are the beginning of his later anti-communistic statements. The political content was ignored by his early critics who merely called Breitbach's stories "funny," as Max Brod did in his review in the *Prager Tagblatt*.⁹ However, Breitbach was given credit for having depicted the representatives of the lower middle class in a natural and realistic style, without having had to resort to dialect in the dialogues.

⁴Hans Bender, "Konkretes Engagement," *Neue Rundschau*, Nr. 3 (1975), pp. 473-81.

⁵Klaus Mann, "Joseph Breitbach, der richtige," in *Das Neue Tagebuch* (June 30, 1934), pp. 615-16.

⁶The color red stands both for communism and for love.

⁷Joseph Breitbach, "Rot gegen Rot" in *Die Rabenschlacht* (Frankfurt a. Main: S. Fischer, 1973), p. 37.

⁸Joseph Breitbach, "Das Radieschen," in *Die Rabenschlacht*, p. 190.

⁹Review reprinted on the cover of *Die Wandlung der Susanne Dasseldorf* (Berlin: Kiepenheuer, 1933).

Critics also mentioned that Breitbach was familiar with the milieu he was writing about. This was no doubt due to the fact that the author used to work in a department store for many years. Breitbach has been most unwilling to give any details about this area of his life; indeed, he often refuses to give biographical information. In an interview he once said: "I am against anything that is autobiographical."¹⁰ He did, however, reveal that in the thirties he had worked as a journalist for various obscure French newspapers, but also for *Le Figaro* and as a foreign correspondent for *Die Zeit*. For the latter he wrote out of Paris from 1943 to 1956. He used to sign his newspaper articles with the pseudonym Jean Charlot Saleck because he wanted to reserve his real name for his literary works.

Although Breitbach dealt with political issues in his journalistic writings, he did not treat crucial political events in his literary publications. During the German Nazi period, for example, he wrote his second novel in which he dealt with religious issues. This work was completed in 1939. On the day of mobilization, Breitbach wanted to secure his manuscript by sending it to Switzerland. Unfortunately, the post office was closed and the manuscript was later lost during a raid by German police. Only the first chapter survived because it had been published in 1937 in *Mass und Wert* in Zurich. Breitbach has since revised and republished it under the title "Clemens, ein Fragment" (1953). It deals with a young man, Clemens, who has left home because he disagrees with his father's strict religious beliefs. Clemens feigns accidental death by drowning, but is later picked up by police and brought back home. His father who is the sacristan of the village church has thought up a rather macabre punishment for his dishonest son: Clemens is to sleep for two months in the coffin which had been ordered for him when thought dead. This is regarded by the father as part of Clemens's atonement in order to seek reconciliation with God. The fragment ends with the father pointing out to the son the infinite forgiveness of God as opposed to man.

The exposure of man's hidden flaws is the topic of Breitbach's various short stories. The most recent ones, "In der Gärtnerei" ("In the Nursery")¹¹ and "Die Rabenschlacht" ("The Battle with the Ravens"), both 1973, tend to have expressionistic characteristics. Here Breitbach does not describe, but rather expresses through the actions of the narrating "I" the surfacing of the unpredictable in man.

In his short story "Lärm" (1974; "Noise") and in his novel *Bericht über Bruno* Breitbach takes his reader behind the scene of government operations. As in his early short stories, he expresses once more his view that all actions emanate from man's negative feelings. In the novel the reader first witnesses the upbringing of Bruno who is raised by two male figures, namely his grandfather and a private teacher, Rysselgeert. Bruno develops a deep love for the latter, but when he discovers the relationship between his teacher and another male friend, his love changes into hatred. Bruno's almost obsessive demand for truth—although he himself is often dishonest—brings about a clash with his grandfather as well. He is unwilling to accept that his grandfather's position, both as a minister and as a director of a large corporation, forbids the disclosure of certain information.

Breitbach shows Bruno's unreasonable hatred and his desire to take revenge on the two most important people in his life. Bruno advances politically and then

¹⁰Manfred Durzak, *Gespräche über den Roman* (Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), p. 50.

¹¹These stories were published in 1973 in *Die Rabenschlacht*, Breitbach's collection of short stories.

uses ruthlessly all means available in order to obtain a powerful position which enables him to destroy both Rysselgeert and his grandfather.

With this depiction of the misuse of political power in order to satisfy abnormal personal needs and attitudes, Breitbach not only takes the reader behind the scenes of the political world, but he also points at leaders such as Hitler. In the beginning of the novel, Bruno contemplates "what he would be capable of doing if he possessed the power of a Hitler or Stalin."¹²

With regard to the form, the novel is narrated by the grandfather who also plays a major part in the book. Due to his political position in the story, he is extremely well informed for he has the secret police to report to him; he has access to top secret documents and enjoys the aid of technical spying equipment such as bugging devices.

Ignoring the linguistic experiments of some of his contemporaries, as for example Günter Grass, Breitbach wrote his novel strictly in accordance with grammatical rules and almost exclusively in the subjunctive, the most difficult mood in many languages. His expert use of language has been praised by his critics. Even his spoken German during a television interview in 1975 was given epithets such as "flawless," "polished," "versatile" and "poetic."¹³

In his latest work, *Das blaue Bidet*, Breitbach has demonstrated again his ability to use language effectively and with precision. This novel deals with a sixty-year old man, Barbe, who sells his company and leaves literally everything behind in order to finally gain the freedom he had always longed for: "To breathe, that's what I want, to finally breathe and to be free."¹⁴ Thus he travels without any luggage—his expression of ultimate freedom—and becomes highly suspect to the authorities and to people in general. Later he falls into the other extreme of purchasing so many utensils—including a portable bidet—for his trip to the South that he clashes again with the law.

Breitbach's key phrase in this novel is: "to be free of all needs."¹⁵ This comprises the emotional need for human relationships as well as petty daily necessities. The main character in Breitbach's book is unable to free himself of either, and hence becomes progressively more involved and dependent on his needs and is finally the victim of this weakness.

The author does not condemn Barbe, but rather demonstrates through him how difficult or impossible it is to control one's desire. Breitbach's self-irony permeates the novel and shows that he does not exclude himself.

In this latest work, the author has combined major issues and topics of his former writings. Therefore we observe again his criticism of the practice of communism and of young people—here a student—who idealize it. We also notice the treatment of prostitution and homosexuality throughout the novel. Here, as in most of Breitbach's writings, the depiction of women is negative.

¹²Joseph Breitbach, *Bericht über Bruno* (Frankfurt a. Main. S. Fischer, 1962), p. 11.

¹³Momos, "Wurzeln nur in der Luft," *Die Zeit*, (28 Feb. 1975).

¹⁴Joseph Breitbach, *Das blaue Bidet oder Das eigentliche Leben* (Frankfurt a. Main: S. Fischer, 1978), p. 11.

¹⁵Joseph Breitbach, *Das blaue Bidet*, p. 196.

It is obvious from all of Breitbach's works that he writes with great care and often rewrites his prose in order to improve it. He also has the tendency to publish chapters of his works before they appear in book form. In 1976, for example, he released the first act of an unpublished play, "Der Araber von Schiltigheim" ("The Arab of Schiltigheim"), and of his forthcoming novel, "Frau Berta" ("Mrs. Berta"), he has already released two chapters. At present he is working on another play with the tentative title "Ein makelloser Held" ("A flawless Hero").

The year 1978 was a very productive one for Breitbach. It was also the year when he was honored with the rather beautiful edition of *Wechselrede* ("Dialog") which was issued for his 75th birthday. It contains comments and tributes of writers and politicians who have known Breitbach. This and the fact that his plays have recently been performed on stage and television, as well as the filming of his short stories and his novel *Bericht über Bruno* show that there is a growing awareness and appreciation of his work today. His reputation as a literary figure has greatly increased within the last few years. It can, therefore, be said with some confidence that his literary work will have some impact on contemporary German literature.

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From Rogue to Redeemer: R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*

R. K. Narayan has been described in *The Times Literary Supplement* as "a writer having few equals among modern novelists."¹ His novel *The Guide* is a fine example of his talent at its mature best, yet though it has received some incidental comment in a few general accounts of Narayan's work (such as the insightful accounts given by William Walsh,² S. C. Harrex,³ and also Keith Garembian⁴), it has received little detailed critical attention in Western literary journals.

In this novel, Narayan presents in his characteristically muted manner, the story of a radical spiritual conversion. It dramatizes one of Narayan's recurring themes—self-abnegation as the means to spiritual peace. Through his eventful career, Raju's primary motive has always remained his own self-gratification and it is not till the very end that he is moved to do something "in which he was not

¹"Well Met In Malgudi," *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 May 1958, p. 254.

²See William Walsh, "Sweet Mangoes and Malt Vinegar: the Novels of R. K. Narayan," in *A Human Idiom: Literature and Humanity* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), pp. 128-48.

³S. C. Harrex, "R. K. Narayan and the Temple of Indian Fiction," *Meanjin*, 31, No. 4 (1972), 97-107.

⁴Keith Garembian, "Strategy and Theme in the Art of R. K. Narayan," *Ariel Review of English Literature*, 5, No. 4 (1974), 70-81.