

Political dislocation and poetic reorientation in Volker Braun's *Bodenloser Satz*

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Bodenloser Satz was one of the most significant literary products of the period of *Glasnost* leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Braun's indictment of the GDR's political system and economic policy is conveyed through a narrative illustrating their destructive consequences for the landscape and their alienating effect on the people. His images of physical displacement and loss of territory not only reflected the ideological disorientation in East Germany but also anticipated the disenfranchisement of the intelligentsia in the winter of 1989-90. Since reunification they have remained a vehicle for critique of instrumental rationalism and the marginalisation and injustices associated with global capitalism.

The short (32-page) poetic prose work, *Bodenloser Satz* was written in September 1988. By the time it appeared in print, a little over a year later in early December 1989, the Berlin Wall had been opened and the principal premise on which Braun had written it (the continuing existence of an independent East German state capable of embracing an emancipatory reform of socialism) was looking increasingly questionable. The text was fast being overtaken by events. It is nonetheless one of the most important literary articulations of the questioning of the past and imagining of the future which accompanied the experience of national and personal dislocation in a period during which the dramatic changes in the political landscape of Germany and Eastern Europe which followed were at least partially anticipated. Critically reviewing the German Democratic Republic's historical development, Braun gives a devastating assessment of the direction taken by real existing socialism, focussing in particular of the emphasis the Marxist-Leninist state placed on industrialisation and the exploitation of natural resources, at the expense of individual liberty and self-

realisation, communities and life in harmony with nature. *Bodenloser Satz* was, as Wilfried Grauert has put it, a liquidation of the GDR 'ante mortem'.¹

The culmination of more than two decades of growing disillusionment with the East German practice of socialism, a disillusionment fused since the early eighties with fundamental doubts about industrial modernity, the dialectic of the Enlightenment and human progress, it can fairly claim to be his most radical and comprehensive statement on the bankruptcy of the political system.² At the same time, it is a self-critical account of the author's own earlier acceptance and enthusiastic propagation of socialist ideology. He revisits and redefines his relationship with a place whose industrial transformation had served as a central metaphor in his writing for the socialist project, and where he had himself worked as a young man.

Since the dissolution of the GDR and the accession of the East German Länder to the Federal Republic in 1990, the principal thrust of Braun's critical engagement with politics has inevitably changed, and he has become a hard-hitting critic of his country's absorption into global consumer capitalism. *Bodenloser Satz* occupies a unique position in his work as a dramatised, fictional remembering and stock-taking of 40 years of GDR socialism. It presents ideological and psychological dislocation quite literally as eviction from the very place in which East Germans had established their identity in the years of postwar socialist reconstruction, and interprets this loss of 'home' as just punishment for their suppression of the past, (self-)deception and estrangement from the *Heimat*. Its central concerns were, however, to remain relevant after the *Wende*. However unrealistic Braun's hopes for an autonomous socialist East German state may have been, his vision of the need for a radically different relationship with the natural environment is no less important two decades after the text was written.

Bodenloser Satz was originally conceived, along the lines of Christa Wolf's *Kassandra*, as the fifth and final lecture in a series to be delivered as Visiting Professor for Poetics at the University of Frankfurt, in either 1987 or 1988. Following Wolf's example, Braun intended to discuss the genesis of the work, expand on the aesthetic strategies appropriate in the age of

Glasnost and Perestroika, and finish with *Bodenloser Satz* as a 'furious and dreadful' statement on the fate of his country at this time of crisis.³ Other commitments and the pace of political events meant that these lectures never got beyond the draft stage. However, he presented a single lecture from his notes at the University of Leipzig on 12 December, 1989. The literary text appeared separately in the journal *Sinn und Form*, and was published in the West in 1990 as a slim Suhrkamp volume.

Bodenloser Satz does not look like a poem: it is neither divided into lines nor metrically structured. However, it has all the subjective and non-analytical qualities of poetry, making extensive use of metaphors and images, associations and semantic ambiguities. As in Braun's poetry, intertextuality also plays a major role in it: he cites communist slogans, alludes to Marx and Bloch, draws on formulations and characters from his own earlier works, and reconfigures scenarios from canonical literary works. And he does so in a disjointed structure involving a montage of satirical and grotesque elements, dream sequences, different time frames and heterogeneous elements in a stream of consciousness. Fictional projections of the narrator-author and critical asides are embedded in the framework of a quasi-autobiographical narrative. While the text addresses familiar questions of collective values and identity as well as troubling personal issues, it is thus unusually complex. Fortunately, a series of commentators have shed light on many of its obscurities. In the following reading of the text as an attempt of Braun's to depict, analyse and imagine a solution to his countrymen's disorientation and his own, and to reconfigure their collective identity at this turning point in history, by means of image and narrative, I am indebted in particular to the relevant chapter in Wilfried Grauert's book on aesthetic modernisation in Braun's writing in the 1980s and other chapters in edited books by Katrin Bothe and Rolf Jucker.⁴

The complexity of the text is reflected in the wealth of possible meanings present in Braun's title: *Bodenloser Satz* as 'bottomless sentence' alludes to both literary form and subject matter. 'Satz' refers quite literally to the form of the piece, which is made up of one continuous sentence. It is an 'unfathomable' sentence, one seemingly lacking cohesion and resisting simple

explanation. In terms of content, the word 'Boden' alludes to the brown coal mining which was a key economic activity in the GDR, providing its main domestic source of energy, but literally consumed and destroyed its assets in the process. The vegetation and topsoil were removed, and whole villages bulldozed in parts of the south of the country, while the atmospheric and water pollution deriving from the coal's high sulphur content constituted a serious health hazard to the population. The principal narrative is set in what Braun calls the 'demolition zone' of a village near Leipzig ('ABBRUCHGEBIET, leipziger Raum'),⁵ whose inhabitants are evacuated so that the site can be incorporated in a nearby open cast lignite mine. Taken figuratively, 'bottomless sentence' also announces a statement leading us into an abyss, the black depths of the country's past. The title as a whole suggests a place in which every moral principle ('Grundsatz') is absent, and evokes the dregs of history ('den Bodensatz'). Finally, understood as 'ground-less sentence', it alludes to a traumatic loss of territory and home, prefiguring the experience of the GDR intelligentsia in the winter of 1989-90, which Braun was to sum up in his poem 'Das Eigentum'.⁶ In his late ode, 'Mein Eigentum', Hölderlin had lamented his exclusion from the happy world of those living 'am eignen Heerd in rühmlicher Heimath', and called on the Gods to make poetry his 'freundlich Asyl', a garden in which he might live 'in sichrer Einfalt' among blossoms that do not wither.⁷ In the poem 'An Friedrich Hölderlin' (1970), Braun referred to the exterritorial poet as 'Bodenloser', but assured him that his poetic asylum was now 'volkseigen'.⁸ By the late 1980s, however, Hölderlin's 'Bodenlosigkeit' had assumed a new significance for Braun: the threat to place-identity made it urgently necessary to regain the ground under his and his readers' feet by bringing to light forgotten and suppressed aspects of the story of the brown coal mines.

In the main part of the text, the narrator imagines going back in time and re-entering the village mentioned above, whose population he had participated in forcing to leave their homes thirty years previously. Elements of Braun's personal experience are incorporated: 'und ich gehe stumm auf der

Kippe dahin, die einstige Heide, und stoße auf meine Brigade, mir der ich vor vielen Jahren... denn ich habe diese Arbeit getan' (p. 19). He appears to be transferring to this site experiences gained in the Burghammer coal mine near Hoyerswerda in northern Saxony, where he worked as a civil engineering labourer in the late 1950s. Coal mining and the industrialisation of the economy have featured as common metaphors for the establishment of a socialist society in Braun's plays, poems and prose writing from the beginning.⁹ Distancing himself from the enthusiastic support for modernisation and progress which had outweighed the misgivings already present in his early work over the practical consequences of the reckless industrialisation of the country for the landscape and the people involved, he now emphasises the losses incurred: the old houses lived in by generations of local families being boarded up and left to decay, the lovingly tended vegetable gardens trampled underfoot by drilling teams, the ancient trees and orchards unceremoniously felled, the soil from fertile meadows and corn fields scraped away so that the coal can be extracted. The futility of this wholesale destruction is underlined by the fact that it provides energy to run the power station for a mere twenty hours (p. 37).

The mining process is described in terms of violence, loaded negatively through links with militarism (the giant bucket chain excavators are likened to tanks closing in on the village), and presented as a consequence of denial of the past and emotional alienation. This is the final stage of Braun's break with the Leninist interpretation of Marx's conception of human self-realisation through interaction with nature. His poem 'Durchgearbeitete Landschaft' (1971)¹⁰ had expressed a sense of unease at the violence involved in mining, but continued to celebrate the human achievement in extracting coal to generate power, and to justify the means by the ends. (The poem ended with the image of an idyllic recreational wooded lakeland on the recultivated site.) A decade later, Braun cited passages from 'Durchgearbeitete Landschaft' in the poem 'Material V: Burghammer',¹¹ but radicalised the negative aspects of mining, and omitted the closing gesture of reconciliation. *Bodenloser Satz* is an extended reworking of this rejection of the mindset of

heroic struggle with the elements and systematic subjugation of nature to rational exploitation and reordering (see especially the motto taken from 'Burghammer', and pp. 36f., where Braun quotes phrases from both earlier poems).

At the same time, he reinterprets the gendering of the land as a female body, to be subdued and made productive in an erotically charged embrace, which had characterised his early, vitalist writing. The story he tells of Klara, who works in the village shop, and the colliery surveyor Karl, suggests that love of the homeland has been corrupted into a desperate gratification of lust akin to prostitution, just as the socialist ideal has been reduced to material consumption and production targets. Braun's imaginary revisitiation of the village marked out for demolition in the path of the mining machinery is motivated above all by a wish to establish a new relationship with the land, and become at home in it again. Klara, who personifies the locality, demands that Karl possess her wherever nature is at its most beautiful, in a flowery arcadian dell near the river, in a grove shaded by alders and ash trees, and in a sunny cornfield.

Their union corresponds to the sweeping aside of these places by the giant overburden excavators, and reflects the brutality and alienation characterising the process whereby the land is prepared for the removal of the coal: 'und er hielt sie sacht umfaßt, aber sie drückte ihn ein wenig von sich, ein seltsamer Reflex, es mußte eine kleine Lücke klaffen zwischen dern zueinanderstrebenden Leibern, als wolle ihr Eigensinn dazwischenkommen mit einem Vorbehalt' (p. 17). Alienation from place and the natural environment is the outward equivalent of GDR citizens' estrangement from their inner natures: the country's crisis has arisen, as the narrator comments, 'WEIL WIR DAS LAND NICHT LIEBEN, NICHT MEHR, NOCH NICHT' (p. 33). Braun ends the text with a utopian vision of harmonious engagement with women and nature. His protagonist Karl recognises the destructive nature of his professional and social actions, gives up his job, and, having finally proven himself worthy of Klara's love, is embraced by her. His conversion, out of love for Klara, suggests the possibility of a free, egalitarian society practising solidarity and reciprocity, in which men no longer subordinate

all emotional and aesthetic values to material gain, and exercise a less brutally exploitative relationship with the environment.

In the face of the pointless destruction, the author/narrator has a momentary vision of the landscape rising up and avenging itself on humanity, the trees being accompanied by the Slavic peoples who had been historically displaced by German settlers, by murdered Russian prisoners of war, and the figures from fairy tales and sagas who had animated it before its 'disenchantment' by modernity (p. 37). However, this anxiety yields to a counter-vision of a peaceful, cooperative, forgiving nature: the slender trees struggling to re-establish themselves on a recultivated part of the site offer mercy, patience and encouragement to his confused people, as if remembering men as considerate, brotherly and understanding, as friends and carers. The embarrassed Karl is smothered in blossom (pp. 38f.).

Since the early 1970s, mining had not only been a metaphor in Braun's work for socialist reconstruction, but also an image for writing, and particularly for literary self-examination and reflection on the role of the writer.¹² In *Bodenloser Satz*, Braun again links mining with writing, drawing attention to the parallel between the coal miners' work and his own quest for truths such as the reason why he (unlike Günter Kunert or Sarah Kirsch) never left the country, by playing on the two meanings of *Grund*, 'ground' and 'reason': 'ich muß nur weiterbohren... und den Grund durchwühlen, der mich bleiben ließ; um meine phantastische Herkunft zu bekennen' (p. 14). However, this mining of the truth about the past differs in that it is, for all the violence involved, an attentive laying bare of what has been concealed, akin to a geological probe or an archaeological dig:

und ich grabe das Land wieder auf, um mich zu erklären, um mich zu verraten... und etwas zu finden, das wir nicht beachtet hatten... wie wir die Halden noch einmal duschsieben, die verfüllten, dünne begrünnten Fluren zum zweitenmal öffnen, um den elenden Rest aus der Tiefe zu reißen, das verachtete unterste Flöz, die klägliche Wahrheit... oder was wir sonst vergaßen; tiefer, hinab (p. 18).

This is not the Promethean process of ruthless industrial exploitation of mineral resources, but rather one of careful

retrieval of objects telling us about our ancestors and ourselves. In his Leipzig poetics lecture, Braun describes his new aesthetic strategy as a procedure involving not plunging into the depths of the circumstances, but calculated descent, with eyes wide open, taking in the vastness of the formation:

ein archäologisches,
erkundendes Verfahren

die Deckgebirge des Scheins abtragend
Schicht für Schicht aufdeckend
immer tiefer grabend
in die Keller, in die Verliese unserer Existenz
mit eine Schreibstrategie, die sich bestimmter
"Technik" bedient, erarbeiteter und neuer Mittel,
die erlauben, in die Widersprüche zu steigen
[...]
die *eine* Bewegung: hinab, hinab
um die Erfahrung zu *verwirklichen* im Text, in
seiner Struktur, seiner Stringenz

bis ich etwas zu sehen glaube, *den Grund*
meines Verhängnisses, falsch zu leben und zu lieben¹³

The ground is a sedimentation of human history, revealing past suffering, injustice and violence in the past. The poet clears away illusions and false consciousness, deconstructing the patterns of thinking and behaviour responsible for the perversion of the socialist utopia in the GDR.

The narrator watches council workers disinterring human remains from the village cemetery in preparation for their relocation so that the area can be mined. This involves dealing with a mass grave of wartime Russian slave labourers. We are told (pp. 25f.) how villagers failed to protest when these unfortunate people were kept in cattle trucks in a siding, without food or water, and to intervene when the SS forced the survivors to bury the dead next to the railway embankment before shooting them.¹⁴ The founding myth of the GDR, the assumption that East Germans, unlike their Western cousins, had essentially been anti-fascists, is thus exposed as a lie. The East German people are, Braun suggests, not entirely innocent of the crimes against humanity in the Third Reich. Failure to acknowledge their part in them has condemned them to self-

alienation, leading in turn to the suppression of legitimate individual aspirations and needs in the name of the collective, and ruthless exploitation of the natural environment.

The open cast coal mine which Braun chooses as the setting for his narrative is stripped of its significance as a site of collective self-realisation and of the construction of a socialist society through metabolic interaction with nature, and endowed with new meaning as one of violent destruction and self-deception, testimony to the bankruptcy of the state and its ideology. It is as much a mythical place as a real one: as we have seen, though Braun locates it in the Leipziger Tieflandsbucht, a once fertile area with many woods and streams which has been mined since the 1920s, he conflates it with the Burghammer mine near Hoyerswerda, where he worked in the late fifties, blending autobiographical fact with fiction. The ten thousand-year-old Hardt heath with its larches, firs and birch trees whose annihilation he twice refers to (pp. 35 and 37) lies south of Leipzig, just beyond the A38 Autobahn where it skirts the city to the South, and to the West of the road to Borna (today designated 'Straße der Braunkohle'). However, the echo of Hölderlin's famous poem 'Der Winkel von Hardt', which celebrated as the epitome of *Heimat* a rock formation in the Black Forest which was known in folk memory as a natural refuge and place of security for the persecuted, is unlikely to be accidental.¹⁵

Further evidence that fascist dictatorship and connivance in murder are the foundations on which an East German socialism bent on destroying the *Heimat* was built is provided by the slogan which Braun puts in the mouth of the mining brigade leader, 'Unsere Ehre heißt Treue' (p. 22). Far from reflecting the socialist conception of workers' honour, this echoes both the SS's motto ('Meine Ehre heißt Treue') and a phrase of Hagen's in the *Nibelungenlied*. It suggests a continuity in the GDR not only with the Third Reich, but also with a Germanic mindset of apocalyptic destruction.¹⁶

Braun goes further, however, suggesting that at the root of human nature may lie no non-alienated, liberated subject, but a libidinous drive in which invention is indistinguishable from destruction. The insertion of his spade 'in den Untergrund des

Bewußtseins, wo die Angst ruht, die Lust, das Verlangen', exposes 'die Lust des Produzierens / die Qual, die ungeheure Verlockung' (p. 34). At bottom, he here suggests, all human work is to blame. So-called 'progress' has reduced the future to a barren 'disused mining pit of time, infilled with water and ashes' (p. 35). This despairing of hope for political reorientation and to aspirations to a more sustainable relationship with nature is reflected in the fragmentation of the text and the framing of the scenario of reconciliation in a dream or fictional imagining.

Though optimism and pessimism are thus finely balanced in *Bodenloser Satz*,¹⁷ Braun gives the final word to the possibility of emancipatory change. The principal theme of the opening dream sequence of the text is also release from a state of depression causing emotional inertia and physical paralysis, and awakening to recognition of the impoverishment of his life, through a sexual encounter on what appears to be a trip to West Germany or Switzerland. Despite the degradation of women in prostitution, and environmental pollution, Western capitalism is characterised by a vitality missing in the GDR. We can infer that it is the narrator's powerful longing for an unalienated existence which prompts him to revisit the past and seek out the truth of how the situation has arisen, and gives him the courage to imagine the change at the end of the text.

This is confirmed by further examples of Braun's use of intertextual allusion. In addition to quoting and adapting passages from his own earlier poems, stories and plays, querying his earlier faith in socialism, he alludes to a whole range of literary narratives which introduce cultural resonances and evoke philosophical parallels. Passages in *Bodenloser Satz* echo, for instance, Dante's descent into hell and redemption by Laura, Lear's madness, the approach of Birnham wood in *Macbeth*, Faust's misguided attempt to control the elements by dyke-building at the end of *Faust II*, and Kafka's tale of sacrifice and attempted redemption 'In der Strafkolonie'. However, it is Friedrich Hebbel's nineteenth-century domestic tragedy *Maria Magdalena* (1844) which provides the names of Braun's fictional protagonists Klara, Karl and Anton (the mayor of the village which is sacrificed to the coal mine), and constitutes the sole extended point of reference. Faced with the prospect of

giving birth to an illegitimate child and damaging her stern father Anton's reputation, Hebbel's Klara had committed suicide by plunging into a well. Braun has Klara, Karl and Anton no longer bound up in a tragedy deriving from the constrictions of patriarchal, bourgeois morality: their problems now derive rather from narrow-minded socialist ideology and an instrumental relationship with nature. Reconciliation also replaces the tragic ending.¹⁸

Braun exposed the falsehood of the country's self-image as a nation of coal miners heroically subjugating, exploiting and recultivating the land. In his narrative, the destruction of the village to make way for open cast mining is interpreted as a belated punishment for the silence of the villagers when the Russian slave labourers were starved to death and shot, and ever since the event:

jetzt kommen sie raus, um sich zu rächen; für die VERBRANNT ERDE, jetzt wird unsere Erde verbrannt; verwüstet bis in die Tiefe; das ist die Rache; die Rache der Geschichte, das letzte Gefecht; der Tagebau; das ist der Ausgleich, der Ort der Gerechtigkeit; des Fortschritts, Kollege, der Fortschritt zieht ein, mit seinen Greifern (pp. 24f.)

Bodenloser Satz recognised the need to replace the SED regime with a new form of society in which mechanisms of domination in relations between men, between the sexes, and between nature and culture are radically restructured. The continuing necessity for such a vision, which draws on Bloch's 'konkrete Allianztechnik',¹⁹ is evident in more recent texts revisiting the subject of open cast mining such as Chapter 25 of *Machwerk oder Das Schichtbuch des Flick von Lauchhammer*, which is reproduced in this volume.



The Burghammer lignite mine, part of the Schwarze Pumpe industrial complex near Hoyerswerda, where Braun worked 1958-60

Notes

¹ See the title of the chapter on *Bodenloser Satz* in Wilfried Grauert's book *Ästhetische Modernisierung bei Volker Braun. Studien zu Texten aus den achtziger Jahren*, Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1995: 'Liquidation (nicht nur) des realen Sozialismus ante mortem oder Erzählen am Ende einer Epoche(nillusion)'.

² Wilfried Grauert notes: 'Von der publizistischen und wissenschaftlichen Kritik ist *Bodenloser Satz* mit Anerkennung und Beifall aufgenommen worden. Über den literarischen Rang dieses Prosatextes besteht unter den Rezensenten Einigkeit; im Hinblick auf die kritische Radikalität dieser Bilanz und des ästhetischen Raffinements ihrer literarischen Form kann man diesen Prosatext getrost als eine (vorläufige) Summe [of Braun's work] lesen.' – *Ästhetische Modernisierung bei Volker Braun*, p. 138.

³ Volker Braun, '12.12.1989', in *Kopfbahnhof . Almanach 3. ...denn die Natur ist nicht der Menschen Schemel*, Leipzig: Reclam 1991, pp. 256-75, here pp. 257 and 272.

⁴ Grauert, *Ästhetische Modernisierung bei Volker Braun*, pp. 137-65; Katrin Bothe, 'Der Text als geologische Formation. "Archäologisches Schreiben" als poetologisches Programm im Werk Volker Brauns', in Rolf Jucker, ed., *Volker Braun in Perspective*, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi (German Monitor 58), 2004, 1-36; Rolf Jucker, 'Von der "Ziehviehlisation" (1959) zur "ZUVIELISATION" (1987): Zivilisationskritik im Werk Volker Brauns', in Rolf Jucker, ed., *Volker Braun*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press 1995, 55-67.

⁵ Braun, *Bodenloser Satz*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1990, p. 13. Page numbers in brackets below refer to this edition, which was published in March 1990. The text first appeared in *Sinn und Form* 1989, no. 6, pp. 1235-46.

⁶ Braun, *Die Zickzackbrücke. Ein Abrißkalender*, Halle, 1992, p. 84.

⁷ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. by Friedrich Beißner, 7 vols, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1943-77, vol. 1, , p. 304f.

⁸ Braun, *Gegen die symmetrische Welt. Gedichte*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1974, p. 18.

⁹ See in particular the semi-autobiographical story 'Der Schlamm' (1959), and the play *Die Kipper*, of which he wrote several versions between 1963 and 1973.

¹⁰ Braun, *Gegen die symmetrische Welt*, pp. 34f.

¹¹ Braun, *Langsamer knirschender Morgen. Gedichte*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1987, pp. 35-9.

¹² See Katrin Bothe's discussion of the poem 'Hanß Georg Braun, u.a.' as a work of quasi-autobiographical remembering, seeking not only traces of his ancestors in the landscape, but also his own identity in a landscape of the soul (pp. 2f.). She also shows how 'Material V: Burghammer' develops the motif of mining as literary self-examination, by varying motifs from Goethe's poems 'Harzreise im Winter' and 'Ilmenau' (pp. 9-12). From the mid-seventies onwards, she notes (p. 19), this metaphorical dimension of mining became increasingly important in Braun's writing.

¹³ Braun, '12.12.1989', pp. 270f.

¹⁴ Many prisoners died under such circumstances during the evacuations in late 1944 and early 1945, when the concentration camps in Poland, and later in Saxony, were closed because of the advancing Allied armies.

¹⁵ See Grauert, *Ästhetische Modernisierung*, p. 148.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 142. There is a further allusion to the *Nibelungenlied* on p. 38, where Braun writes of 'our final shape, that of robber dwarves hoarding rusty treasures'.

¹⁷ Grauert describes the text as a polyphonic discourse within which different positions are assigned equal validity, and compete for social acceptance – ibid., p. 123.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 150-3.

¹⁹ Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1959, p. 802.