

Adam Wiedemann: “Anarchist of Pain” or “Oneiric Surrealist” or “Anarchist Realist”?

Commentary by Murray Edmond. Translations from Polish to English
(unless otherwise assigned) by Murray Edmond and Joanna Forsberg

My hunch would be that Adam Wiedemann would like to avoid all the labels offered in the title above. Of course, they contain some truth. Marcin Baran, Polish poet of the same generation as Wiedemann, calls Wiedemann an “anarchist of pain” (Baran iii) and points out that his work displays “empathy” that “is exceptional” (Baran iii). The designation “oneiric realist” comes from Wojciech Kuczok discussing Wiedemann's *Sceny łózkowe* (“*Bedroom Scenes*”), 2005, a prose book of dreams (Kuczok). The third label “anarchist realist” is simply my own playful coinage; yet even here there is some sense, in that Wiedemann seeks breaks, conjunctions, surprising relationships that would seem impossible until they happen before your eyes in language and then they seem both admissible, if not natural, and often amusing. He asks his poems to trap something passing, like debris snagged by a branch in a flood, but he would not want his poems to be trapped also. His poem “Aesthetics of the Word” that can be found in *Jacket* 29 (www.jacketmagazine.com/29/p-wiedemann.html) has the quality of a mock-manifesto of his poetic:

Ah, words

take on meaning, and then... See, you look like a worn-out beast.

Paradoxically speaking, every one of us
resembles a termites' mound and our denizens

can mingle freely, but only within
a limited range. Limited by what?
Ask rather by whom, we feel we're somebody yet.

And we feel the one above us is somebody, too,
for how could we be ruled by a rude monkey
and speak to it: You swinish, hungover tomato?

More can be said thanks to this poem's form.
(translation Tadeusz Pióro)

This excerpt gives some idea of the kind of jumps and mental flips in Wiedemann's poems. The identity of the poet is dissolving before our eyes, as if controlled by a clumsy special

effect in the movies, somewhat to the poet's own amusement—later in the poem he writes that “my hilarity is on the rise”—while he calmly claims that the form of the poem is going to allow him to keep going, despite the numerous denizens within the termite mound of his self. The audacity of this claim is already a source of amusement even as the claim is being made. The poem is going to find a way to escape from itself and this is not so much through irony as through revelation (the poem works!) or through “fantasy” (the dream, the image) or through fragmentation (from a termite to a monkey to a tomato in seven lines). In these ways Wiedemann evokes the anarchy of the real.

This poem is dated “(Kraków, 23 May 2002)”, where Wiedemann was living at the time. The date in itself is not significant, except perhaps to Wiedemann—who knows? Rather the date is a kind of statement of poetics: I got it all done in one go on that day, that's how I do it. When asked about the way he often dates his poems in an interview, which can be found on Youtube, (www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPFL49Ab6e0&feature=endscreen&NR=1)

Wiedemann explains that he didn't have a job when that poem was written, so it wasn't hard to finish the poem in one day. There is no suggestion, as there was, say, with the poems of Robert Creeley, that the poem has been written without revision, as if its incisive realisation in the moment of composition can never be disturbed by the blasphemy of a second thought. Rather I think of a Polish contemporary of Wiedemann's (born 1967), the more widely known painter, Wilhelm Sasnal (born 1972): “The objective he [Sasnal] claims, is to dispatch each painting in a few hours' studio wrestling” (Bell). When Sasnal says that –“From the day I recognise that something has meaning to me I hold on to it, saying: ‘If this matters to me now, then I hope it will matter to me in the future’” – his words might also apply to the moment seized by Wiedemann's poems. Attention is drawn to the fact that on 23rd May 2002 in Kraków Adam Wiedemann wrote these words down. If they mattered then, then the poem's claim is that they matter now, to the reader.

Wiedemann's language subscribes to none of the conventional preconditions of the “poetic,” by which poetry might be recognised as being poetry. In one way, this makes the task of translation simple; the quick paraphrase doesn't need to then be turned into some highly wrought artifice. Wiedemann's poems often use a prose that seems to approximate everyday speech and make intentional use (and misuse) of idiom. However, idiom in any language is a territory of highly wrought artifice that arises from common shared usage rather than individual facility. In the poem “Loud Essay: Music,” the first of the two poems that Joanna Forsberg and I have translated into English, the combination of the verb *rzępolić* meaning “to scrape” or “to rasp” with the word for violin, *skrzypce* (from the verb “to squeak” and curiously always a plural noun in Polish, just as the word for “door” *drzwi* is also always plural) is a standard idiom for “playing badly,” as the “German woman Music” is described as doing, even though to her face she has been told that she is *piękna* or “beautiful” (see lines 15–18). As in many European languages, nouns are gendered in Polish, either masculine or feminine or neuter. Some nouns are also gendered in English, if not by inflection, then by custom, so that, for instance, a “ship” is always feminine and even a “positive state of affairs” in idiomatic Kiwi English is always feminine: “She'll be right.” Though music has no customary gender in English, it feels quite acceptable that, once defined as such (*Muzyka jest*

Niemką = “Music is a German woman”), music should then be referred to as “she” throughout the poem. Here is Wiedemann’s poem and our translation of it:

GŁOŚNY ESEJ: MUZYKA
dla Germana Ritza

Muzyka jest Niemką
i diabeł jest Niemcem.
Anioły są pochodzenia słowiańskiego.

Rozważania o aniołach
działają na człowieka uspakajająco.
Dobrze, że czuwa nad tobą jakiś anioł.

Rozważania o narodowości
potrafią człowieka
nieźle rozdrażnić.

Zaraz pojawia się
problem zdrady
i spieprzaj ty podły zdrajco.

Dlaczego ja tak cierpię
pyta nas muzyka,
na co odpowiadamy: Bo jesteś tak piękna.

Lecz tak naprawdę nie szanujemy jej
i niech tam sobie rzępoli
na tych swoich skrzypcach.

Niech sobie lata
po pokoju
jak mucha.

Anioły muzykanci:
diabeł dla nich pisze
a Pan Bóg słucha

(choć
jest
Arabem z Mezopotamii).

Kraków, 23.11.02

LOUD ESSAY: MUSIC

for German Ritz

Music is a German woman
and the Devil is a German man.
Angels are the descendants of Slavs.

Contemplations about angels
can make people calm.
That's good, since any angel keeps watch over you.

Contemplations about nationalities
can make a person
extremely irritated.

Right away there appears
the problem of betrayal
so piss off you nasty traitor.

Why do I suffer so much
music asks us
to which we answer: Because you are so beautiful.

But truly we don't respect her
and let her scrape away
on her violin.

Let her buzz around
the room
like a fly.

Angel musicians:
the Devil is writing for them
and the Lord God listens

(even if
he is
an Arab from Mesopotamia).

Kraków, 23.11.02

The title of the poem, "Loud Essay: Music" plays a small disruption of what would more logically, or naturally, or unthinkingly, read "Loud Music: Essay." The dedication—for German Ritz—references the Professor of Polish and Czech Literature and convenor of the

“Slavic Seminar” at the University of Zurich. So, when the first stanza plays out its clichés about nationalities, the diabolic Germans and the angelic Slavs, we are pointed back to this German who teaches Polish and Czech literature—what kind of devil is this, whose very name is “German” but whose sympathies tend to the East? Out of such clichés come irritations and sufferings. Music asks, in a faux-naïve voice, *Dlaczego ja tak cierpię* “Why do I suffer so much?” Because of its inflected nouns, Polish can disrupt its standard word order, as with the line *pyta nas muzyka*, literally “asks us music,” without becoming almost incomprehensible. However English too also mildly disrupts itself for reasons of emphasis, so that the Polish, *Zaraz pojawia się / problem zdrady* transfers directly into English—“right away there appears/ the problem of betrayal”—and manages to mimic colloquial speech with a clumsy but emphatic inversion of normal English word order.

Wiedemann graduated in Polish literature studies from the venerable Jagiellonian University in Kraków; now, as well as being a poet and short story writer, he writes as a music critic.

“Loud Essay: Music” takes the essay form of the academy and the over-arching viewpoint of the professional critic and combines these into an ironic mixture of logic and absurdity:

“Music is a German woman / and the devil is a German man. / Angels are the descendants of Slavs.” The poem “Aesthetics of the Word,” quoted earlier, takes a decidedly more mocking tone towards the syllogistic absurdities of the academy:

imagine: the cream of the Kraków professoriate
in a debate with the cream of the Warsaw professoriate. They should
show such things at the movies for the crowd’s amusement.

Too bad the crowd doesn’t know what’s good.

Wiedemann is far from being a religious poet, but religion permeates “Loud Essay.” The power of the Polish Catholic Church means that religion in Poland is highly political in a way it cannot be in countries that are much more nominally secular. There was a motion put forward in the Polish Parliament (the *Sejm*) that Jesus Christ be made the official head of state. This motion came from a faction for whom it was not a frivolous suggestion, but other members of the Parliament, realising how this might be perceived by outsiders, cast about for a way to avoid the vote without finding themselves in a position of voting against the Lord Jesus. All was resolved when a speaker rose to point out that Jesus was already head of state, so no vote was required. The idea that the Lord God might be an Arab from Mesopotamia is clearly designed to startle conventional notions, until one suddenly admits that, yes, Jesus could very well be described as an Arab from Mesopotamia. The poem teases.

Poland is sometimes said to be “90% Catholic” (though a large swathe of that 90% performs a conventional and socially acceptable kind of religious observance). However my experience in Poland has been to meet many more Buddhists than Catholics. The second poem we have translated, “I am sitting like Buddha and I have a belly like Buddha,” plays with the presence of Buddha in Poland:

SIEDZĘ JAK BUDDA I MAM BRZUCH JAK BUDDA

W Indiach co drugie dziecko wie, kto to był Budda,
a w Polsce ani jedno. Tylko Iza

opowiedziała dziecku co nieco o Buddzie
i teraz się obawia, czy mu nie namieszała

w głowie. Niektórzy mają nieźle namieszane,
taka jest kolej rzeczy. Jednemu manieszał

ojciec święty, a drugiemu własna matka. Co?
Nie ma się czym przejmować? Przecież Budda

Nie istnieje, zwyczajnie przestał istnieć,
i to jest właśnie ta jego wybitna zasługa.

I AM SITTING LIKE BUDDHA AND I HAVE A BELLY LIKE BUDDHA

In India every second child knows who Buddha was,
but in Poland not even one. Only Iza

told her child a little something about Buddha
and now she worries that she's mixed the child up

in its head. People get pretty mixed up,
it's the way things go. One got mixed up by

the holy father, and another one by its own mother. What?
We shouldn't be worried about this? Still, Buddha

doesn't exist, he simply stopped existing,
and this is exactly his extraordinary merit.

The situation of the poem suggests not someone sitting in meditation, but someone suddenly noticing that they are in the same position as Buddha and therefore, just as Buddha stopped existing, so will they when the time comes. Maybe the sitter is even drunk, with his round Buddha belly. That's the insight, the moment of nirvana, of the poem, moving from a sudden noticing of the self to a noticing about Buddha—a jump resulting from waking up to insight, that is quite Buddhist in its enactment of a momentary flash of awareness and its embrace of absurdity. That absurdity has a long and honourable history in Polish writing, for example in

such figures as Witold Gombrowicz and Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński. This poem conjures with the idea that something's real value is its non-existence.

The language of the poem is unexceptional and colloquial, a semi-spoken language, a processing of thoughts out loud. Whether this processing represents a kind of inner dialogue where the speaker interrupts himself (*Co? Nie ma sie czym przemowac? / What? We shouldn't be worried about this?*) or whether there is actually another voice that questions the speaker as he tracks his own thinking, cannot be determined finally; but, internal or external, there is dialogue in the poem, as the *sensei* ("teacher") might apply questioning to the *seito* ("pupil") in the Zen tradition of Buddhist teaching and learning. The poem attempts to wake itself up.

Postscript:

The completed translations and commentary were sent to Adam Wiedemann for comment. Among a range of enlightening and useful feedback, such as pointing out that the dating of "Loud Essay: Music" places it directly in the wake of the American invasion of Iraq (i.e. it is a political poem), he said that he did not feel translations needed to be literal. His example was that there was no need to make "music" a woman until she naturally appears as one in stanza six. In the light of this invitation to depart from our close following of the Polish in our English version, I offer below a second rendering of "Loud Essay: Music." (Incidentally, Adam Wiedemann wrote that he quite liked the term "anarchist realist" but that "realistic anarchist" might be preferable):

LOUD ESSAY: MUSIC

for German Ritz

Music is German.
The Devil is German.
Angels are Slavic.

Thoughts about angels
deliver tranquillity (as they should)
and those angels stand guard.

Thoughts about different
ethnicities can get
right under your skin.

How do you know
who's on your side
so best to tell them to piss off.

Music has a question:
Why do I suffer so?
Because you are beautiful, we reply.

But of course we don't mean it
we just tolerate her squeaking
old violin

and the way she buzzes
round the room
like a noisy fly.

Who writes the music for
the Angels? The Devil of course
and God himself listens

(despite the fact
he's actually
an Arab from Mesopotamia).

Kraków, 23.11.02

Selected Bibliography for Adam Wiedemann

Poetry: *Samczyk* (“Male”) 1996; *Bajki zwierzęce* (“Animals Fables”) 1996; *Rozrusznik* (“Starter”) 1998; *Ciasteczka a kremem* (“Cream Cakes”) 1998; *Konwalia* 2001; *Kalipso* 2004; *Pensum* 2007; *Filtry* 2008; *Czyste czyny* 2009.

“Głosny Esej: Muzyka” was published in *Kalipso*

“Siedzę Jak Budda I Mam Brzuch Jak Budda” was published in *Pensum*

Short stories: *Wszędobylstwo porządku* (“Ubiquity of order”) 1997; *Sęk Pies Brew* (“Sink Piss Brave”)—*Cinq pieces breves* Ganirel Faures—minature compositions; *Sceny łóżkowe* (“Bedroom Scenes”) 2005.

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