

INTRODUCTION

In 1946 or 1947, at a late-ish midpoint of his life, but effectively when his career was beginning (all three, mid-point, career, and life were rather skewed by the Third Reich), Günter Eich prepared a CV to be made public at a reading or readings. He had recently written poems (“Camp 16” and “Inventory” and others) that were a departure from his early manner and wanted to indicate as much, and perhaps to warn listeners. I quote the whole of it, partly for the facts, partly for the dry pleasure of Eich’s understatement:

I was born on 1 February 1907 in Lebus, a little one-horse town that now straddles the German border. From the hills on the left bank of the Oder I can look across the river and see the house I was born in, now in Polish hands. I grew up in various towns and villages dotted over Brandenburg. My earliest aim in life was to be a coachman. But once I learned to read, this rather exact ambition was somehow smudged by Meyer’s encyclopedia, the weightiest book in my father’s possession. The world was full of color and complication, that was what I took from this miracle of erudition. Unfortunately, we didn’t have the volumes from *R* to *Z*—and the want of them shows in me to this day.

When we moved to Berlin just before the end of World War I, I attended a theater for the first time in my life. I went home and started writing plays in iambic pentameter. And so my school years came and went, until in spite of my total ignorance of the steam engine, I managed to pass my exams. In accordance with my father’s wishes, I studied law and jurisprudence, and on the side, from my own unfathomable inclinations, Oriental languages. A year spent in Paris fed my inclination toward the arts and weakened any aspirations to bourgeois solidity. From 1932, I lived as a freelance writer, in Dres-

den, Berlin, and finally in a village on the Pomeranian coast. In August 1939 I was drafted into the Wehrmacht for a six-week training course. A little late, in summer 1945, I came back, restored to the status of civilian, but with the balance of my goods and chattels on the far side of the Oder-Neisse-Line. I am presently living in Bavaria, as a registered refugee with a backpack, in readiness for the next trek.

I wrote my first poems at the age of ten, and first saw my name in print at twenty. The poems I have for you now came about after ten years in which I didn't write a line, in POW camp and after. They do not mean to project the reader or listener into a more beautiful world; their aim is to be objective.¹

This was the second “moment,” so to speak, in Eich's poetry: the moment of the Zero Hour and *Germania rasa*, the moment of plain speech after the hateful jargon and lying bluster of Nazism, the moment of the frank avowal and litany of destitution. And it is at this moment that this book begins.

Eich's actual beginnings—the sentimental, derivative, and conventionally lyrical poems in *Gedichte* (1930) and after—promised nothing beyond a minor career in provincial letters. He was scathing later about his early work and, Betjeman-like, had cause to be grateful to the Allied bomb that in 1943 demolished his flat in Berlin, taking his manuscripts with it. When he reappeared as a poet, “after ten years in which I didn't write a line,” he was unrecognizable. I wouldn't even say it was influence, but Eich's poems, humble and lived-in and somehow practical, deserve to be set alongside the Classical Chinese poems he studied and later translated, by and about priests and hermits and wanderers—the sort of thing of which Seamus Heaney wrote, “enviable stuff—/ Unfussy and believable”—with their minimal assertions of flat circumstances, the mischief that can be done by a new calendar or a smell of baking, the loneliness of life in a hole in the ground, without one's dead companions. When Eich first read from them at an early meeting of the Gruppe 47 in 1950, his peers, hearing him, sensed right away that they were dealing with writing of a superior order and awarded him their inaugural prize. (They had managed to raise a sponsor from somewhere; later they—Böll, Grass, etcetera—stumped up for it themselves.)

1. Translated from Günter Eich, *Werke* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991), 4: 464.

And it was perfect, because, on reflection, Eich did exactly what the Gruppe 47 was called into being to do: to cleanse and adjust and simplify the language. (“Inventory”—“Inventur”—remains one of the most widely read poems in German, of any date; it makes a haunting pair with its exact contemporary, Paul Celan’s “Todesfuge.”)

But that is only beginning. Eich, to his great credit, continued to develop. His second moment, so to speak, is the unease within his own skin that he experienced and gave voice to in the fifties and sixties, as wounds healed, and civilization, so to speak, grew back. Eich was a political poet in a generation that was only just learning to be political again. His admirers were often half a generation or a generation younger than himself, and they didn’t have his instinctive purity of style and outlook. While what they wrote was manifestly political, it was often not a poem, or not literature; it was they who were to decree, a little later, that novels were bourgeois or poems impossible. Their first love was politics, their second everything else; and Eich was always a poet. They were always embattled; he, seemingly, never—though of course even naming his sequence of tiny pieces “Long Poems” contains some sort of witty or implied rebuke. Eich wrote on Germany at the time of the Economic Miracle, the *Wirtschaftswunder*, the decade that Gunter Grass—a later 47er—called “die falschen Fünfziger,” the fake fifties. Where for Rilke, thirty, forty, fifty years earlier, the poet’s imperative had been to praise, for Eich it was to unsettle, disturb, provoke, rile. “Seid Sand im Getriebe,” gum up the works, was his very widely circulated injunction. The unsleeping or rebellious conscience of the individual was the only possible weapon against a normative, dulling, and complacent society—and always, by implication, a return of totalitarianism. In his poems and radio plays—a genre in which he was both a pioneer and an acknowledged master—and in the poems *in* his radio plays, like those included here from his best-known piece, “Dreams” (1951), Eich warns. He is a German sibyl, as compressed and oblique as the Greek original. In him, wisdom becomes picture.

Eich wrote relatively little, and most of what he wrote was short. He had no sideline in theoretical or critical prose, wrote no fiction or autobiography, only the poems and radio plays, and in the 1960s, perhaps fearing any sort of regular or predictable production, he seemed to set even those aside, and turned instead to puppet plays—a pyrrhic form, if ever there was one—and a personally evolved genre he called “*Maulwürfe*” (“moles”), something

seditionously uncategorizable between a prose poem and a Kafka short story. His personal life was as quietly surprising: he lived with the writer Ilse Aichinger (whom he married in 1953) in various villages in Bavaria and Austria—one lovely address was Kirchstrasse 71¼—a quiet rusticity punctuated with long and exotic, and for the period, unusually wide-ranging reading tours that took him all over the world, mostly on behalf of the Goethe Institute. In 1955 he was in Portugal; in 1960, Yugoslavia; in 1961, the Balkans and the Near East; in 1962, Asia; in 1963, Scandinavia; in 1966, West Africa; in 1967, Iran, and so on. These travels—which make themselves felt in a strained or diluted way in the poems—are perhaps the only external mark of success in Eich's life. Because Eich seems to have been entirely without the careerist ambitions of most poets—even the successful ones. Books were tickled out of him by impatient or silver-tongued publishers; prizes came to him without anxiety or agitation on his part: the most important radio drama prize, the Hörspielpreis der Kriegsblinden (Radio Play Award from the War-Blind) in 1953; the most important German literary prize, the Georg Büchner Preis, in 1959. In few, rather obscure and determinedly downbeat interviews he made no bones about his moods or perspectives:

Good morning, Herr Eich, welcome!

Good morning, Herr Thoma.

Herr Eich, the principal field of your literary endeavors is the radio play, is that correct?

Yes, well, it used to be.

Used to be? You mean to say it no longer is?

Oh Lord, I didn't mean it to come out like that. I expect I'll write another radio play some time, but at the moment the prospect seems a little remote.²

It is entitled, with ringing implausibility, "What Really Interests Me Is Language." The whole thing—an interview from 1967—is like being politely turned away at the door by a nicely turned out, but still grumpy, old man.

2. Ibid., p. 504.

Eich won't have been the first or last poet to refuse to play ball; to protect the sources of his creativity, while at the same time being utterly, even alarmingly, frank about his morale and personal circumstances. (He reminds me a little of the way I used to reply to "How are you?" in English, before I understood it wasn't a question.) No reader of the poems will be surprised by Eich's *nolo*. After all, here is the man, or the voice, that declares what little use he has for the spa, or for Mexico, or society weddings. "I prefer/ to lay lettuce leaves / in a sandwich," he says, "and stay in the wrong." Most characteristically he is looking back on things, or at the end of things; summer is over, August is over, the thriller is finished (what will he do without it?), the biography has been set down, it is "too late for modesty," papers are "posthumous." Often too the poet is sitting on packed bags, waiting to move off into the new era; "greetings, cemeteries!" he declares boisterously, or he makes plans—hardly likely—to see in the new millennium, or to feast in the grave at the price of an obol. Things don't transpire as he would wish, or again he is uneasy in some strangely altered reality, as when he is driven out of his home—by herrings, wouldn't you know it. It isn't that tedious get-out, surrealism, by the way; it's merely what poetry is supposed to do: "thinking in images." To my mind, there's something in Eich of Paul Klee's pictures: both are home-made, modest in scale, immediately delightful, inventive, cogent. An Eich poem too can be a space shared with fish, or color, or a large arrow. Both Eich and Klee have a childlike quality, while not being in the least childish: an adult precociousness. Günter Eich, as much as Anton Webern (her subject at the beginning) or Klee or any of the others listed, has the kind of pioneering modern qualities that Elizabeth Bishop once tentatively identified:

I am crazy about some of the short instrumental pieces. They seem exactly like what I'd always wanted, vaguely, to hear and never had, and really "contemporary." That strange kind of modesty that I think one feels in almost everything contemporary one really likes—Kafka, say, or Marianne [Moore], or even Eliot, and Klee and Kokoschka and Schwitters . . . Modesty, care, *space*, a sort of helplessness but determination at the same time.³

3. *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, ed. Thomas Travisano and Saskia Hamilton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), p. 250.

Eich is a great poet of temperament. Even English, with its famously extensive vocabulary, has trouble, I think, finding words for him—I think fortuitously of the closing lines of this selection, “The gray of parrot feathers / eludes description”—and that’s without even thinking of America, with its reflex shudder at anything “negative” or “pessimistic,” much less “morbid.” I would argue that there is a kind of temperament trap around Eich. One may use words like bitter, sour, grouchy, grumpy, gloomy, mordant, tart, but none of them gets the speed or the adroitness or the surprisingness or the sheer pleasure of these poems. There is nothing muddy or lingering or predictable about the writing, which is urgent, clear, and warm. The poems are not—one might think of someone like Larkin—self-steeped; each one, even the smallest of them, say, “Roman Footnote” or “Perspective from the *Spezial-Keller*” or “Old Postcards, 11” is a brisk and honest negotiation with the world. Yes, the gestures of many of them—beginning with their brief dimensions and clipped speech—are of refusal, but that doesn’t make them negative. Rather, Eich affirms one of the most ancient human freedoms, that of saying “no.” He is irascible, pessimistic, solitary, misanthropic, but these are all sources of joy, for him and for the reader. A German critic has said that “late Eich”—and my selection is mainly “late”, everything is from the second half of Eich’s life, and a lot of it from his last five years—might one day come to have a significance and weight similar to “late Beethoven.” In form, content, personnel, and psychological equipment, these poems are reduced to their barest minimum. Indeed, in some of the best and most moving of them—“Two in the Afternoon,” “Half,” “Confined to Bed,” “Optics,” “Names,” “Hospital Colors”—consciousness is further disciplined and bent by sensory impairment or illness. In the hour of its death, a blind dog dreams and mistakes; human deafness, forgetfulness, fears (those “enemies” that make their appearance in a surprising number of the poems), dimming sight, and isolation condition a sharper, stranger world through which the poem must make its way. In the end, it seems to me, in a piece like “And,” Eich was making poems almost without words.

I don’t think there’s much to say about my translations, but then I probably always think that. It’s a matter of coming to Eich’s conclusions with getting on for as much grace, surprise, celerity, and quiddity as he displays in his originals. I haven’t taken any very great liberties—I might say I haven’t had to. As I generally do, I’ve always had in mind the reader with nothing but English. I’ve therefore used my own poetic instincts and intelligence—

well, it seemed better than not using them. On occasion, I've reversed the order of phrases, more rarely of whole sentences. I've sometimes written a more leisurely English, thinking that (for reason of its fabled understatement) it would work better, as in "I don't think I can stay here." I've occasionally sharpened elements in the German, as in "*nosing* down the hill," and even gone so far as adding the odd word, the bakers, for instance, "stretching in the *pale* morning wind." I've put "bagpipes" for "blowpipe," and "rhinoceros" where the German would seem to require "hippopotamus"; it's done for the associations of stubbornness and cruelty in its thick skin; "hippopotamus" is too frivolous a word in English to be in any way helpful. Poems from radio plays—I have done the celebrated poems from *Träume* (Dreams) of 1951—and the sonorous "Rain in Eltville" and the terrifying "Examine Your Fingertips" are in a different category again: not pared down, but bouncy, public, and rhetorical. They have been translated accordingly, specifically the poem "Dreams," with concrete detail to match from various parts of the English-speaking world. My thinking is that we are so much more mongrel and global than we were then, and I haven't wanted to leave the poem as a sort of period piece.

I think I've evolved in these translations a specific diction to treat with Eich: *mulish, crimped, pashminas, safety matches, squabble, humans, looped, grandstand, tipping, proposed itself*. Not exactly showy or difficult, much less obscure words, but words that have a quality of relict or disject, a certain melancholy residue of boisterousness, that imply perhaps a more systematic and thoroughgoing vocabulary and a more powerful grammatical current to wash them ashore, words that have a quality of having been beached. Here, I realize, is for me a source of the quiet and immense and eerie power of Eich: words are like stray, chance, isolated survivals after some catastrophe, of unpredictable utility and beauty, most likely misapplied and unhelpful in any given context, like the "sodden ruches" of a waitress's blouse. Eich was, after all, a great admirer and appreciator of Beckett's. If there is any licence I have taken, it may have been that.

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