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'GRASS, WRITTEN APART':

THE CONTEMPORARY GERMAN LONG
POEM FROM PAUL CELAN'S *ENGFÜHRUNG*
(1959) TO PAULUS BÖHMER'S *KADDISH*
(2002)

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The history of modernist poetry in German language has almost entirely been a history of the short poem—at least its official history and only by considering it at first, brief sight. However, if one takes a second, closer look at the development of modernist poetry from, say, Stefan George or even Heinrich Heine, via the expressionists and up to the late work of Paul Celan to capture modernist traditions from Eastern and Western Europe in metaphors proved by its very existence, the panorama of short and long poetry looks much more diverse.

Already the late Heinrich Heine had been working on longer patterns of poetry which by some aspects could be labelled as 'long poems', e.g. the on and on spinning verses of *Atta Troll*, a digression on a dancing bear, or 'Bimini', a long fragment on an Eldorado-like dreamscape he came to terms with a year before his death in 1856.¹ Only twelve years later, in 1868, a first selection from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* appeared in German translation by fellow poet Ferdinand Freiligrath in the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung*, by then one of Germany's leading newspapers.² Whitman's poetry continued to be a matter of translation and reception especially among German Naturalists and Expressionists who considered *Leaves of Grass* as some sort of counterweight to the symbolism of Rilke, Hofmannsthal and George – even though at least George and Rilke had also published many cycles of poems—if you dare consider the poem cycle as one variety of longer poetical structure related to the long poem. However, the poet Ivan Goll who represented at the same time the 'French' wing of German expressionism, had some stimulating attempts to deal

1 Cf. Heinrich Heine: *Sämtliche Schriften*. Ed. Klaus Briegleb. Vol. 7. *Schriften 1837–1844*. Ed. Klaus Briegleb. Frankfurt/Main / Berlin 1981, pp. 491–570; id.: *Sämtliche Schriften*. Vol. 11. *Schriften 1851–1855*. Ed. Walter Klaar. *ibid.* pp. 241–266.

2 Ferdinand Freiligrath: Walt Whitman. In: *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung*. No. 17, 24, 25 (April 24, June 12 and 19, 1868), pp. 257–259, 369–371, 385f.

with the ground-breaking inventions of the European modern long poem made by Blaise Cendrars in *La prose du Transsibérien* and Guillaume Apollinaire in *Zone* by 1912.³ Only a couple of years later, in 1914 and 1918, Goll continued in their footsteps with *Paris brennt* ('Burning Paris') and *Der Panamakanal* ('The Panama canal').⁴ Neither in the 1920's nor later in the 1960's in the aftermath of Claire Goll's silly fight against Paul Celan's soi disant plagiarism, did Ivan Goll's long poetry enter the German canon. Nor were the genuine long poems of Arno Holz given a chance to establish themselves in the German canon, his best-known long poem is *Phantasmus* (1918 and many more editions), which accumulates curious observations of an impressionist hero in 1900 Berlin entirely printed on the middle axis and accompanied with a peculiar theory of verse properly invented by Holz.⁵ Still, Holz remains a renowned figure of German Naturalism, and Goll's *Panamakanal* can be found in the widely recognized Expressionist anthology *Die Menschheitsdämmerung*, published in 1920 and still in print today, just like extracts from Theodor Däubler's long cosmic poem *Das Nordlicht*.⁶ Finally, the Third Reich switched the lights of aesthetic freedom and experiment off for more than a decade, and it wasn't until a new, post-war generation of younger writers emerged in the 1960's that the inventions of the long poem among the English speaking modernists from the 1920's to 1960's came to be widely recognised and reconsidered in the German speaking literary scene. Of course there was a German speaking avant-garde already dealing with European post war experiments in poetry and the attempt to cross the border between the established literary genres of prose and verse writing, e.g. the language poetry of Helmut Heißenbüttel and of the Vienna group (H.C. Artmann, Ernst Jandl, Friederike Mayröcker, Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Rühm) inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gertrude Stein, or the *Concrete Poetry* of Franz Mon and Eugen Gomringer which derived from the theory of cybernetics delivered by philosopher Max Bense at the technical college in Ulm where poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger had been teaching in his early years too. My intention is to show how the long poem in post-war

3 Cf. Apollinaire: Œuvres poétiques. Ed. Michel Décaudin. Paris 1965, pp. 39–44; Blaise Cendrars: Poésies complètes. Ed. Claude Leroy. Paris 2005, pp. 17–34.

4 Cf. Iwan Goll: Paris brennt. Ein Poem nebst einem Postkartenalbum. Zagreb 1921; id.: Der Panamakanal. In: Menschheitsdämmerung. Ed. Kurt Pinthus. Reinbek 1960 [or. Berlin 1920], pp. 292–297.

5 Cf. Arno Holz: Werke. Ed. Wilhelm Emrich / Anita Holz. Vols. 1–3. Neuwied / Berlin 1961f.

6 Cf. Theodor Däubler: Das Nordlicht. In: id.: Kritische Ausgabe. Ed. Paolo Chiarini et al. Vol. 6. Ed. Stefan Nienhaus. Dresden 2004. – Noteworthy, not at least because of the notorious scholar himself, among its early interpretations ranges Carl Schmitt's: Theodor Däublers Nordlicht. Drei Studien über die Elemente, den Geist und die Aktualität des Werkes. Berlin 1991 [1916].

Germany emerged and was developed precisely out of these various kinds of investigations after 1945 into new patterns of poetic language, form and meaning.

At the same time, in 1959, Paul Celan's volume *Sprachgitter* appeared, containing as its final section his longest poem ever, 'Engführung' ('Tighthold'), which in a way can be considered as a poetic comment on his work doing the German translation of Alain Resnais' Holocaust documentary *Nuit et brouillard*. Celan's long poem ends with the words: 'Gras. / Gras, / auseinandergeschrieben.⁷ ('Grass. / Grass, / written apart'). As well as the many, often biblical allusions that this ending offers, it's also possible to read this as a reference to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, which we may consider in some ways a Bible of the modern long poem. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* are not that far from Celan's writing-apart of the 'Gras' near the remnants of Auschwitz' gas chambers if we consider what Celan wrote in June 1965 in a letter to fellow poet and academic Walter Höllerer; here Celan draws his colleague's attention to the most devastating American contribution to World War II, the atomic bomb: 'in der ‚Engführung‘ habe ich [...] versucht von den Atomen und Atombomben zu sprechen—*auch davon* zu sprechen' ('in "Engführung" I tried to speak of atoms and atomic bombs—to speak of *that, too*').⁸

Celan's mention of the atomic bomb recalls another famous poem of the time. By 1960, the American poet Gregory Corso had been invited by Walter Höllerer to read his long beat poem 'Bomb' in the overcrowded auditorium of Berlin Technical University (where Höllerer was holding an academic chair), and the following year 1961 Höllerer edited, with Corso's help, the anthology *Junge amerikanische Lyrik* ('Young American poetry') with poems by many of the young leading voices from the New York school scene as well as from the San Francisco renaissance and the Black mountain school, like Robert Creeley, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Charles Olson, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso himself, whose long poem 'Bomb' was printed on a leporello like page to be read not from left to right but from top to bottom.⁹ Corso's Whitmanesque incantation, in a truly beat attitude, celebrates the proximity of beauty and horror in the American way of

7 Paul Celan: *Die Gedichte*. Ed. Barbara Wiedemann. Frankfurt/Main 2003, pp. 113–118. The passage cited here is p. 118 v. 178–180, but has already been prefigured by the opening sequence p. 113 v. 2–5: „VERBRACHT ins / Gelände / mit der untrüglichen Spur: // Gras, auseinandergeschrieben. [...]“. Cf. p. 118 v. 173–177: 'Verbracht / ins Gelände / mit / der untrüglichen / Spur:'. – All translations in the main text are mine (J. R.).

8 Paul Celan: *Die Gedichte*, *ibid.*, p. 668 (Barbara Wiedemann's commentary on 'Engführung').

9 Gregory Corso: *Bomb*. In: Walter Höllerer / Gregory Corso (ed.): *Junge amerikanische Lyrik*. München 1961, p. 24.

life by offering a long list of the bomb's various epithets and apostrophes that reaches a climax in the graphic representation of a mushroom cloud.

Höllerer had met Corso in the 1950's as he was benefitting from a grant from the Ford Foundation in order to study, travel and make contacts within the United States and its cultural scene. For a German academic, Höllerer's career was peculiar: He not only held a chair in German Literature, was a professional critic, editor and anthologist, a serious writer of experimental prose and poetry, but also, and nowadays mostly remembered as, one of the leading cultural promoters of the late 1950's and 1960's: In 1963, he founded the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin, which is still in existence today, in a villa at the Wannsee just across the shore where in 1942 the Nazi regime had held its infamous secret conference on the genocide on the Jewish people. Höllerer, however, who also had been a soldier in the Wehrmacht and after his release from prisoner-of-warship one of the founding members of the Gruppe 47, wanted the Literarisches Colloquium to be the first place in Berlin for literary debates and exchanges not only within the German speaking culture but also between the East and the West. Twice, the Gruppe 47 had been invited at the Wannsee, and in the term of 1965/66, Höllerer hosted a series of poeto-poetological readings called *Ein Gedicht und sein Autor* ('A poet and its author') whose schedule reads like a who-is-who of international poetry of that time: It includes an astonishingly wide range of poets from Lars Gustafsson to Francis Ponge, from Günter Grass to Robert Creeley, from Zbigniew Herbert to Edoardo Sanguinetti, from Vasko Popa to Yves Bonnefoy, from Friederike Mayröcker to Tadeusz Rozewicz, and with Charles Olson and Lawrence Ferlinghetti (the latter was to share an evening reading with Soviet poet Andrej Wosnessenski) it highlighted at least two prominent exponents of the long poem.¹⁰ Needless to say that Höllerer's own 'theory', or rather manifesto on the long poem, the twelve 'Thesen zum langen Gedicht' ('Propositions on the long poem') shows a debt to the ideas of these American poets and their likes: Höllerer points out (just like Charles Olson did in his theory on 'projective verse') the openness of unlimited space that the long poem seemed to offer, the possibility of including various materials, languages and texts into one very large and dynamic constellation and, finally, the new way of unrestricted ethical communication, of talk and discussion about society and why and how to change it prepared by the freedom of speech that the use of the long poem seemed to signify.¹¹ No doubt Höllerer wanted this to be understood as his contribution to the forthcoming political turmoil eclipsing in 1968. But by then already, Höllerer's propositions on the long poem had been taken over by poetry from the younger, rebellious generations who could have been, or even were, Höllerer's own disciples.

10 Cf. Walter Höllerer (ed.): *Ein Gedicht und sein Autor*. Lyrik und Essay. Berlin 1967.

11 Walter Höllerer: *Thesen zum langen Gedicht*. *Akzente* 2/1965, pp. 128–130.

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However, while Höllersers *propositions* certainly gave a vital new impulse to thinking about the long poem in Germany, it has to be said that not many actual poems were written in, or survive, the turbulent era between 1965 and 1975. The veritable poetical revolution of the German long poem did actually take place a little aside from Höllerser's 'Literaturzirkus', as gossipers boldly labelled the new, Western Berlin based literary establishment. The real inventions to count on the poetical scale were vividly run and in an almost shocking, post-surreal manner spread into public by a genuine poet who least of all had been in touch with Höllerser: Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, born in Northern Germany in 1940 and emerging the Cologne based school of 'Neuer Realismus' ('new realism') hailed by writer Dieter Wellershoff in order to propagate the literary programme of Cologne publisher Kiepenheuer & Witsch where Wellershoff was commissioning editor at the time. Brinkmann began his career writing experimental prose in the vein of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *nouveau roman*; alongside that, he published a few small volumes of rather short poems that were indebted to the aesthetics of the photographic snapshot, glimpses on the banalities and ephemera of everyday life inspired by the ironic laconism of late William Carlos Williams and Robert Creeley. In 1968 however, by the time of the outburst of the student rallies, Brinkmann delivered an overwhelming activity as translator, editor and propagator of the American counterculture, literary avant-garde, pop-art and underground writing of the 1960's: After a volume of Frank O'Hara's poetry translated by himself and accompanied by a large poetological essay in 1968,¹² Brinkmann also co-edited a reader called *Acid* with extracts from the American underground writing ranging from Charles Bukowski to William Burroughs.¹³ In 1969, he edited an anthology called *Silverscreen* with basically new poetry from writers of the so-called 'second generation' of the New York school, such as Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Gerard Malanga or Larry Fagin.¹⁴ Ted Berrigan's poetry too was subject of another volume of translations edited by Brinkmann and issued in 1970, *Guillaume Apollinaire ist tot* ('Guillaume Apollinaire is dead').¹⁵ All the while, Brinkmann's own poetry reflected his various encounters, not only with the American scene in lustful dealing with marginalised aspects of the casual, with film, rock music and other media, but

12 Frank O'Hara: Lunch poems und andere Gedichte. Aus dem Amerikanischen übersetzt und mit einem Essay von Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. Cologne 1969.

13 Rolf Dieter Brinkmann / Ralf-Rainer Rygulla (ed.): *ACID*. Neua amerikanische Szene. Darmstadt 1969.

14 Rolf Dieter Brinkmann (ed.): *Silverscreen*. Neue amerikanische Lyrik. Cologne 1969.

15 Ted Berrigan: *Guillaume Apollinaire ist tot*. Zusammengestellt von Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. Frankfurt/Main 1970.

also with key figures of the French avant-garde who, like Apollinaire, had long passed away but nonetheless utterly seemed to be reborn by the second look Brinkmann had taken on them via the American pop art. His collections *Die Piloten* ('The pilots'),¹⁶ *Standphotos* ('Stills'),¹⁷ *Gras* ('Grass')¹⁸ – the latter both an allusion to the American roots of his poetry as well as to the favourite drug of his generation—and the single long poem *Vanilla* ('Vanilla'), all issued between 1968 and 1970, echo Brinkmann's fascination with found poetry, open structures, chance and accidental materials, and the mixing of various genres, styles and patterns into some new kind of hybrid collage. By demonstrating the elements of his pop art writing, the long poem *Vanilla* also intends a dialogue with the historical avantgardes (the title 'Vanilla' recalls a poem by Tristan Tzara) and tends to confront the techniques of collage, montage and found objects with lifestyle, media, culture and knowledge around 1969.¹⁹

It wasn't until 1975 that Brinkmann came out with a new collection of poetry following a five year period spent on travelling, rereading, rewriting, recutting, reassembling and retransforming his literature from pop to critical, from (re-) producing established avant-garde patterns to reinventing a style he felt was appropriate for his own needs of expression. *Westwärts 1&2* ('Westward 1&2') was soon to be considered one of the ground-breaking books of Brinkmann's generation not only because of Brinkmann's premature death on April 23rd in a car accident in London opposite a Bayswater pub called *The Shakespeare's* just a week before the official release of the volume in May 1975: *Westwärts 1&2* offered nothing less than a new language which on one hand articulated the new political and ethical experiences since 1968, and on the other, was profoundly shaped by the new, truly global landscapes of media, technology, and transportation.²⁰ The volume's title refers to two long poems, 'Westwärts' and 'Westwärts, Teil 2' ('Westbound, part two'),²¹ basically wild, anarchic air

16 Id.: *Die Piloten*. Neue Gedichte. Cologne 1968.

17 Id.: *Standphotos*. Duisburg 1969.

18 Id.: *Gras*. Cologne 1970. – The collections *Die Piloten*, *Standphotos* and *Gras* reappeared in Brinkmann's collected poems 1962–1970: Id.: *Standphotos*. Gedichte 1962–1970. Reinbek 1980.

19 Id.: *Vanille*. In: *März-Texte 1*. Darmstadt 1969, pp. 106–140. Cf. on 'Vanille' Jörgen Schäfer: *Vanille*. In: Jan Röhnert / Gunter Geduldig (ed.): Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. Seine Gedichte in Einzelinterpretationen. Berlin / Boston 2012, pp. 277–287.

20 Rolf Dieter Brinkmann: *Westwärts 1&2*. Gedichte. Reinbek 1975.

21 Ibid. pp. 42–60. Cf. on 'Westwärts' and 'Westwärts, Teil 2' Andreas Kramer: *Westwärts; Westwärts, Teil*. In: Röhnert / Geduldig (ed.): Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. op. cit. pp. 825–846. – Cf. on Brinkmann's long poetry in general also Andreas Kramer: 'Der Raum macht weiter'. Überlegungen zum langen Gedicht bei Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. In: Gudrun Schulz / Martin Kagel (ed.): Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. Blicke ostwärts – westwärts. Beiträge des 1. Internationalen Symposiums zu Leben und Werk Rolf Dieter Brinkmanns,

travelogues from a journey to and fro Western Germany and the United States where Brinkmann had been writer-in-residence from January to May 1974 at the University of Texas, Austin. Brinkmann's late long poems in *Westwärts 1&2* show the influence of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* in the liberal arrangement of lines, and in the typography of the page. Lines proceed according to jumps, cuts and gaps in time and space, they include traces of the author's reading as well as voices from inside the poetical subject and from the outside world while at the same time maintaining the will to 'make it cohere' (to paraphrase Pound), that is to say to combine various materials with the unspoken hope or assumption that some kind of new, unexpected meaning might emerge out of these fragments. Indeed it is possible to regard Brinkmann's final volume, with its diverse long poems and remarkable and soon-to-be-anthologized shorter poems and framed as it was by two series of photos taken by the author, in its entirety as one long poem—the long poem of the poet's struggle to break with the literary canon, with the traditions and conventions of German poetry as they had developed by that stage, and also a long poem of Brinkmann's generation's struggle to define itself between the memory of war, their guilty fathers, and their own radical political attempts. On another level, then, Brinkmann's book of the long poem can also be seen as an unique attempt to regain some personal meaning in a universe already prefigured by depersonalised structures of media, policy and government. If subjectivity means to have a personal style, then for Brinkmann only the wild, anarchic style of his long poetry enables the subject to catch a hint of subjectivity for himself in the midst of anonymously administrated speech, time and space. In conclusion, the long poem helps Brinkmann to situate his poetical self in space and time in an attitude of writing which in a very eccentric and eclectic way is already ahead, and aware, of the kind of 'rhizomatic' writing Deleuze and Guattari come to cultivate in *A Thousand Plateaus*. But to Brinkmann, this kind of writing is all but a mere attitude: It shows his fight against 'Kulturindustrie' ('cultural industry'), as Enzensberger once put it, by developing the wild, often delirious style of his long poetry proper to himself.

3

Compared to Brinkmann's strong vanguardism to confound life and writing in an entire long poem, the long poetry of his Cologne fellow Jürgen Becker (born in 1932) seems far more reflective, calm, at times even meditative, but it also proved to be a more stable and lasting body of considerable longer poems issued until the present day. Just like Brinkmann's, Becker's poetry is deeply attached to the media—Becker too often refers to photographic or cinematographic

Vechta 2000. Vechta 2001, pp. 269–284.

perceptions in his long poems—, even though he deals much more with radio (he used to work as a cultural editor for Deutschlandfunk) where Brinkmann is into film or magazines. Too old to be a disciple of Walter Höllerer, Jürgen Becker's relationship to the founder of the Literarisches Colloquium was merely friendship and participation in the literary events he organized in Berlin, like the late meetings of Gruppe 47. Seen from the present, Becker may figure as the most gifted, successful and persistent poet to write the kind of long poem Höllerer might have had in mind when propagating his 'propositions on the long poem': Experimental, but still plain and balanced enough to enter into some kind of public discourse, both self-confident and critical, reflecting on form, thought and (another) avant-garde tradition, mixing personal remembering with history, Becker was, and still is, the man to give the modern long poem a stable place among German poetry today. There is a stream-of-consciousness-quality to Becker's poems similar to the kind of subconscious flow to be found in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* or Wallace Stevens' longer poems. In Becker's case, this reveals the poet's interest in involuntarily remembering things past by simply letting his perception wander along the view of certain landscapes which can be both urban or rural (Becker divides his time between Cologne and the nearby countryside). The insights which appear in the even flow of Becker's long poems may be the kind of privileged Proustian moments where, for Becker, the clash of landscape and memory reveals a hidden truth or some new meaning, which only can be discovered by following the meandering stream and the many voices of the long poem.²²

As Becker's famous collection from 1974, *Das Ende der Landschaftsmalerei* ('The end of landscape painting') reveals,²³ landscape to Becker is no longer merely a static category of cultural geography, but a dynamic and continuous process, namely that of constructing a poetic landscape of its own out of memory, perception, thought, and images. Landscape is not a simple fact on the map, but refers also to the 'making' of a landscape in the mind of the poet who looks at, lives in and writes about that landscape. Thus, Becker attempts to rewrite landscape and the perception of landscape in his own brand of the long poem. The reader of Becker's poems is also actively involved in this process of making a landscape, of poiesis in the literal sense.

This intention may even lead to some mild utopian desire as in his longest poem so far, the *Gedicht von der wiedervereinigten Landschaft* ('Poem of the

22 Cf. the large companion to the poet's work by Andreas Wirthensohn: *Annäherungen an einen vorläufigen Zusammenhang. Zum Werk Jürgen Beckers*. Würzburg 2000; and a collection of essays on Becker in Heinz Ludwig Arnold (ed.): *Jürgen Becker. Text + Kritik 159*. Munich 2003.

23 Jürgen Becker: *Das Ende der Landschaftsmalerei*. Gedichte. Frankfurt/Main 1974.

reunited landscape’) which appeared in 1988,²⁴ a book-length poem in five parts with a total of hundred pages. Despite the title’s allusion, it has by no means to do with any political aim to reunify the two Germanys existing by then, but nonetheless is some time ahead of the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and political unification in 1990. Becker’s long poem may keep the oncoming, still unknown event hidden unspeakable somewhere in the back of its subject’s minds, but indeed the poem contains a much more fundamental reflection on the mere possibility to ‘unify’ the landscapes of memory, or even of different memories, with the landscape of a present where what seems to be traces of the past demands to be discovered, uplifted, ‘read’ and interpreted by both reader and writer, wanderer and perceiver of a space who places his interchangeable personality (re-)unites by searching, opening, clearing, stepping and travelling sometimes long forgotten paths, roads and routes between present and past.²⁵

There is, nonetheless, an underlying ethical dimension in the poetic project of approaching past spaces of memory with the present space in the course of the long poem. In Becker’s case, politics, if not life at all, follow poetry indeed or at least parallel the subconscious utopian desire the long poem contains. Of course, once fulfilled, only the very moment of promise remains left from the utopian desire, or the one, singular moment of liberated space in Eastern Germany where the author had spent his childhood years during and right after the war—the poem thus also shows the way the poet’s earlier and later selves meet or coincide, and indeed become temporarily unified. This moment of unison, these moments of encounter cannot last but are outlived by the casual programme, the everyday babble, economics and publicity – politics are getting back to work to build on the official history of reunification which is not part of Becker’s business any more. The politics of Becker’s long poem, instead, cannot even be reached in such a plain political sense; their aim of an imaginary unison of time present and past in the space of writing necessarily remains utopian in its core. It is a goal one can’t even wish ever to be reached but only come close to in continuing the impulse of writing the long poem.

4

A similar impulse is driving poet Paulus Böhmer to continue writing the by any means largest and maybe most powerful body of long poems existing in contemporary German poetry or even beyond. Böhmer, born in Berlin in 1936,

24 Id.: *Das Gedicht von der wiedervereinigten Landschaft*. Ibid. 1988.

25 Cf. Jan Röhnert: *Die offene Spur der Wirklichkeit. Jürgen Beckers poetischer Impuls*. In: Id. (ed.): *Poesie und Praxis. Sechs Dichter im Jahr der Wissenschaften*. Jena 2009, pp. 79–82.

in his wartime childhood grew up in the Ruhrgebiet and later lived in the rural region of upper Hessen on a castle belonging to his family before he settled in Frankfurt/Main where he still lives today. In the 1960's, during his studies in West Berlin, he belonged to the inner circle of Walter Höllerer's disciples, but he was also acquainted with Rolf Dieter Brinkmann via the März Verlag, based in Darmstadt and around 1968 the most successful and provocative publisher of the rebel generation. But it wasn't until the 1980's that Böhmer's fame as a singular poet slowly began to rise, and until recently when he was awarded the Goethe medals both of Frankfurt and of Hessen, the Hölty award of Hannover, and the Robert Gernhardt grant, he was practically unknown outside the poetical scene. Although hailed by many voices of the present generation of poets, he still remains a poet's poet and his work, unlike Brinkmann's or Becker's, is far from being widely recognised or even canonized. This may be partly due to the exuberant length and sheer variety of materials contained in his long poems that even readers familiar with modern long poetry can find challenging. It may also be partly due to Böhmer's widespread activities in the 1960's, 70's and 80's when, besides writing long poetry, he was, in the midst of student rebellion writing blue novels (using a pseudonym), working in advertising and in the horticultural and gardening industry where he became a serious plant grower for grass and bush gardening. Between 1983 and 2003, he managed the Frankfurt based Hessisches Literaturbüro, a cultural institution for the literary scene similar to, but on a smaller scale than, Höllerer's 'Colloquium'. During this time, Böhmer's reputation became more stable and settled, so that it seems to be the length and complexity of his poems that make him an outsider of a literary scene which continues to demand shorter, and easy accessible, poems, if any at all.

The difficulty of Böhmer's poetry lies, even to many of his skilled readers, in the encyclopaedic claim and the baroque complexity of his long poems. If Brinkmann tries to defend the space and time of his individual experience against the schemes of mass society in the body of the long poem, and if Becker tries to embody present and past time within the long poem's individual space, Böhmer even aims to conquer the power of time, or time passing, at all by creating an ever expanding verbal universe huge enough to summon up with all kinds of real, unreal or surreal imagination contained in human knowledge, speech, media, art and philosophy, reaching from the organic to the inorganic world, from the terrestrial to the cosmic, from the natural sciences to pornography, from the sublime to the silly, and then back again. There simply seems to be no aspect of human nature, cognition and imagination left out in Böhmer's poetry. But it is unlikely this is done merely to offer a poetic encyclopaedia of contemporary life, instead it shows a life-time of writing steadily competing with the destructive forces of time, the temporal limits of human nature and the old theme of human vanity which persists even in the technological and scientific civilisation we are living in. Boehmer's poetry is, in other words, forever struggling against 'death'

(in all its meanings), knowing this is a fight that cannot be won but conducting this struggle without the kind of pathos usually ascribed to it. The long poem thus becomes a witness of this struggle: The continuity in the flow of the long poem seems to guarantee that there is still 'time left' against THE time.

Published as poem-in-progress during the 1990's in various collections and introduced as a whole in two volumes containing more than 700 pages altogether in 2002 and 2006, the long poem *Kaddish*, a body of 21 singular cantos, remains Böhmer's opus magnum and is certainly one of the richest, and most original, treasures in contemporary German letters. Its title is less an allusion to Allen Ginsberg's proper long poem *Kaddish*, and more a universal formula to commemorate an uncountable number of people and lives passing or having passed away and derives from the ancient Jewish prayer commemorating the dead – Böhmer's wife Lydia had moved from Israel to Germany after World War II, and together they have been translating modern Jewish writers such as Jehuda Amichai or Asher Reich. If Paul Celan's poetry can hardly be understood without considering the event of Auschwitz and the unimaginable number people killed in it, Böhmer's *Kaddish* also starts from this point on but it continues to evoke the mere fact of perennial dying (and living, too) on a more and more universal scale and in a simultaneous approach which tries to leave nothing which happens or ever may happen preferably out of the endlessly ongoing verbal stream.

Böhmer's long poetry is exclusively set out in lines centred on the middle axis of the page, thus giving the poem an almost organic, breath-like flow which can be linked to the body's sympathetic and parasympathetic reactions. Although then poet Arno Holz had already been using the print in middle axis in his impressionist long poem *Phantasia* around 1900, Böhmer claims to have come in touch with this poetical scheme during the reading beat poet Gregory Corso had delivered in 1960 on one of Höllerer's legendary literary evenings at Berlin technical university. As Gregory Corso's emphatic celebration of the atomic bomb reminds of Walt Whitman's rhapsodic celebration of the United States going to war within their endless plains of grass, Böhmer's *Kaddish* in his enumerations of living and dying too is Whitmanesque. It paradoxically turns from memento mori into carpe diem, that is to say, from mourning of people, things and memories passing away into a feast of life, friends and sensations—firstly, because everything recalled upon is going to be kept back (and remembered) on the poem's page; secondly, because nothing can really get lost once it is remembered and put down in the long poem's archive; and

26 Cf. Jan Röhnert: 'Picasso Passo im Palais d'Amorph.' Der Dichter Paulus Böhmer und der Surrealismus. In: Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift 2/2005, pp. 191–204; id.: Der Homer der Datenströme. Einladung, Paulus Böhmer zu lesen. Laudatio zur Verleihung des Hölty-Preises für Lyrik 2010. In: Gegenstrophe. Blätter zur Lyrik 3 (2011), pp. 78–89.

thirdly, because, like in techniques of surrealist collage and montage—Böhmer has been painting too—everything can mingle and mix with everything thus, in result, it can never be lost but only, like in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, endlessly be transformed into something else.²⁶

Reading Böhmer's *Kaddish* in this way may enable the reader to glimpse a new vision of life, space and time, and if his long poem does not conquer time at all, it still may help to conquer, or at least to question, the ordinary way we perceive time and space.

In the end of his *propositions*, Walter Höllerer had claimed that long poems were a necessary precondition for writing shorter ones ('Das lange Gedicht als Vorbedingung für kurze Gedichte');²⁶ in other words, he implied that one's ability to write short poems depended on having written long poems, having attempted and experienced the opening-up of time and space that this genre so generously affords. Having in mind Adorno's dictum of 1948 that it was barbaric to write poems after Auschwitz, Höllerer might have seen a way out of this prohibition by redefining the very nature of poetry itself with the help of the Western, basically Northern American model of long poem offered by poets like Ferlinghetti or Olson and which had had no equivalent yet at all in German literature.

Seen from the perspective of the 21st century, Höllerer may have been wrong about the relation between long and shorter poems, and it's hard to make out a simple dependency between two diverging genres of poetry, but Höllerer by that time also hardly had any example of long poem in the German language which would fit into the scheme of his *propositions*. The openness, the new spaces for experience, perception and speech he wished to be shaped and filled by calling for the long poem can now be judged by the actual long poems which have been written and published ever since. The long poem, thanks to major poets like Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, Jürgen Becker and Paulus Böhmer, has become an equal means of poetic expression along with the continuing rush of shorter poems by all kinds of poets in contemporary German literature.

By dealing with the categories of space and time in an unique approach a shorter poem hardly has or can fulfil to the extent a long poem does, the long poem has proved its singular qualities. As Gottfried Benn in his speech 'Soll die Dichtung das Leben bessern?' ('Is poetry there to improve life?') back in 1955 already had remarked, the fact that the fragmentary, the quickly noted, the 'untamed' written material was equally, or even more, important to the poet himself,²⁷ and as Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, continuing Benn's remark, refers to

27 Cf. Walter Höllerer: Thesen zum langen Gedicht (cf. fn. 11), p. 130.

28 Cf. Gottfried Benn: Soll die Dichtung das Leben bessern? In: Id.: Gesammelte Werke. Ed. by Dieter Wellershoff. Vol. 2. Frankfurt/Main 2003, pp. 1147–1157, here p. 1153f. In his statement, Benn agrees with a remark he quotes from Mayakovskij: „Zum Schluß

‘Notizgedichte’ (‘Poems in note-form’) when pointing out to some aspects of his longer poems,²⁸ the ‘other tradition’ of the long poem in contemporary German poetry I have outlined here, may be the only German tradition so far which kept in touch with an avant-garde consciousness of art which was to deliver a new perception of the world we inhabit and the human self we are. The desire of getting total and instant access to the universe of things surrounding us can’t ever be stilled by any media, not even the Internet. By the end of the day, the long poem, more than any technical substitute, seems to deliver a much more surprising, and conscious, way of dealing with this old desire of being one with the world, and it also seems a way of being aware this desire can never fully be reached while we’re still trying do so.

noch Majakowski. Er notiert: ‘Die Arbeit des Dichters muß zur Steigerung der Meisterschaft und zur Sammlung dichterischer *Vorfabrikate* Tag für Tag fortgesetzt werden. Ein gutes *Notizbuch* ist wichtiger als die Fähigkeit, in überlebten Versmaßen zu schreiben.’ Beachten Sie an diesem Ausspruch die Worte ‘Vorfabrikate’ und ‘Notizbuch’. Wir befinden uns hiermit bereits im Vorfeld abstrakter, bewußter, artistischer Kunst.’ (The italics are Benn’s.)

29 Cf. Rolf Dieter Brinkmann: Briefe an Hartmut. Reinbek 1999, pp. 251f., 263f.