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Review: Marion Tauschwitz's Biography of Hilde Domin



Reading Marion Tauschwitz's engrossing biography of Hilde Domin - [Dass ich sein kann, wie ich bin](#) ("*That I can be as I am*") - I couldn't help but think about how different her life would have been if she and her husband had been allowed to immigrate to the United States. Instead, the Nazi threat forced them to leave their beloved Rome, then England, and they were finally granted refuge in the Dominican Republic.

It sounded almost as a chastisement when Marcel Reich-Ranicki said in 1995 that Hilde Domin "had the fortune to spend the Third Reich in a paradise" while other writers hid in Amsterdam or ended up in Buchenwald. But Santo Domingo in 1940 was hardly a "paradise". Marion Tauschwitz did some very thorough research on the island and also pored over Domin's correspondence from the decade she spent there. Hilde Domin and her husband Erwin Walter Palm lived in primitive conditions, and barely scraped together a living through teaching and translation work. To escape the intense heat of the city they would flee to the mountains, where they were subjected to earthquakes, mudslides and tropical diseases.

Besides the physical discomfort of the Dominican "paradise", Domin suffered from her hot and cold marriage with Palm. Domin and Palm were locked in a toxic, co-dependent relationship which lasted until his death in 1986. The book explores the

vicissitudes of the Domin - Palm marriage in great detail. Erwin Walter Palm was a gifted art historian but a frustrated artist who never got the recognition he thought he deserved for his poems and plays. He would also leave his wife for months at a time for extended lecture tours throughout Latin America. The marriage was childless (his decision) and Hilde Domin sacrificed decades of her life to advance the career of her husband - earning money, typing and editing his manuscripts, making connections and applying for grants on his behalf. Driven to despair (and nearly suicide) by the hardship and her husband's seeming indifference, Domin turned to writing poetry late in life, almost as a form of therapy. Palm was, of course, jealous of her talent and banished her to the *Menstruationshütte* when she wanted to write.

There is nothing light and airy - "tropical" - about Hilde Domin's poetry. Rather, her poems are entreaties to the exhausted, the exiled, the downtrodden to consider the possibility of hope, redemption or resurrection, as in *Abel steh auf*, one of her more famous poems. They are poems written by someone who was forced into exile, who for most of her life lived out of a suitcase, who, however was open to the idea of reconciliation with the homeland that expelled her and murdered her family.

Nicht müde werden
sondern dem Wunder
leise
wie einem Vogel
die Hand hinhalten.

(Do not grow weary but gently to the wonder as if a bird should lightly hold out your hand.)

Hilde Domin and Erwin Walter Palm did return to Germany in 1954. It was not the easiest homecoming for either. She never viewed herself as a "Jewish poet", but she was forced into that role. Neo-Nazis with their German shepherds patrolled the street in front of her apartment in Heidelberg, and for years she would get threatening phone calls from right-wing extremists. She was never fully accepted by the literary establishment in postwar Germany, and did not receive the accolades and awards she deserved until very late in life.

Marion Tauschwitz does a good job describing the internecine battles and petty feuds among publishers, academics, writers and awards committees that made life

miserable for Hilde Domin and her husband. What is lacking is an appreciation of her poetry. Poems are cited in connection with biographical events, but their meanings or importance are ignored. There is no discussion of the literary influences on Domin, nor of her place in postwar German poetry. Also missing is an analysis of Domin's work in literary criticism and theory. Her 1968 work *Wozu Lyrik heute* is the most important theory of poetry since Gottfried Benn's *Probleme der Lyrik*, and, with its emphasis on the poem's liberating, utopian impulse, can be seen in the tradition of Schiller's *Über naive und sentimentale Dichtung*.

Exile in sweltering Santo Domingo was the defining period in Hilde Domin's life, but, paradoxically, it was on a small island in the cold Atlantic off the coast of Maine - where I now sit - that Hilde Domin came into her own as a poet. She later remembered her brief stay in Vinalhaven as one of the happiest times in her life, a place where she also wrote some of her most memorable poems. Here is one of her Vinalhaven poems with my (attempted) translation:

Windgeschenke

Die Luft ein Archipel
von Duftinseln.
Schwaden von Lindenblüten
und sonnigem Heu,
süß vertraut,
stehen und warten auf mich
als umhüllten mich Tücher,
von lange her
aus sanftem Zuhause
von der Mutter gewoben.

Ich bin wie im Traum
und kann den Windgeschenken
kaum glauben.
Wolken von Zärtlichkeit
fangen mich ein,

und das Glück beißt
seinen kleinen Zahn
in mein Herz.

(Wind-Gifts

*The air an archipelago
of fragrance islands.
Billows of lime blossoms
and sun-drenched hay,
sweetly familiar,
stand still and wait for me
as if I were wrapped in sheets
long ago
woven by mother
from the soft home.*

*It's as if I'm dreaming
and can hardly believe
the wind-gifts.*

*Clouds of tenderness
close around me,
and happiness sinks
its small tooth
into my heart.)*