

Offprinted from
MODERN LANGUAGE REVIEW

VOLUME 105, PART 2

APRIL 2010

‘DICHTERIN DER RÜCKKEHR’: HILDE DOMIN IN RETROSPECT. A REVIEW ARTICLE

Hilde Domin, *Die Liebe im Exil: Briefe an Erwin Walter Palm aus den Jahren 1931–1959*. Ed. by JAN BÜRGER and FRANK DRUFFNER. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer. 2009. 379 pp. €19.90. ISBN 978-3-10-015342-5.

Hilde Domin, *Sämtliche Gedichte*. Ed. by NIKOLA HERWEG and MELANIE REINHOLD. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer. 2009. 351 pp. €16. ISBN 978-3-10-015341-8.

‘Dass ich sein kann, wie ich bin’: Hilde Domin. Die Biografie. By MARION TAUSCHWITZ. Heidelberg: Palmyra. 2009. €28. ISBN 978-3-930378-4.

Hilde Domin’s death in 2006 marked the passing of one of the last remaining survivors of the generation of German exile writers. Anyone who knows her work, or encountered her personally at one of the numerous readings which she gave across Europe well into her nineties, will be familiar with her story: over twenty years of wartime exile followed by the return to Germany which signalled her rebirth, her ‘Parthenogenese’,¹ as a poet of increasingly international renown. Over forty years of poetry culminated in her final volume *Der Baum blüht trotzdem*, published in 1999 when she was ninety: by the time of her death, Domin had become a modern classic in Germany, taught in schools and beloved by readers who might not otherwise know much modern poetry. Her burial in Heidelberg approached the status of a state funeral, with among others the Minister for Culture giving a speech in which she mourned the loss not only for Heidelberg, but also for the national culture more generally. By any standards, Hilde Domin was a *grande dame* of German literature.

What remains of her legacy? Domin had decreed with no little pride that her *Nachlass* would go to the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach, to lie alongside the estates of many of her revered colleagues, and the customary efficiency of the Literaturarchiv has quickly opened up new lines of research. The year 2009, which would have marked her hundredth birthday, saw a flurry of publications by and about Domin: Fischer issued an edition of *Sämtliche Gedichte* as well as a volume of correspondence with her husband, *Die Liebe im Exil: Briefe an Erwin Walter Palm aus den Jahren 1931–1959*, while Domin’s former carer and confidante, Marion Tauschwitz, produced what will doubtless stand as the definitive biography, *‘Dass ich sein kann, wie ich bin’: Hilde Domin. Die Biografie*, a labour of love for which Tauschwitz spent several years sifting through the thousands of unpublished letters.

Domin’s work was so inextricably tied to the stations of her life that such biographical documents assume a great importance: without the parabola of

¹ Hilde Domin, ‘Unter Akrobaten und Vögeln’, in *Gesammelte autobiographische Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1993), pp. 21–31 (p. 28).

exile and return, it is hard to imagine that she would have developed in the direction she did. Indeed, it is almost impossible not to divide Domin's life into the periods before, during, and after exile—her very names define these periods. Born in 1909 to a wealthy Jewish family, the then Hilde Löwenstein grew up in the Cologne of the Weimar Republic. In 1929 she went to study law in Heidelberg; after an interim year in Berlin, she returned to the banks of the Neckar, where she soon met the young philologist Erwin Walter Palm. Like many young aesthetes of the time, Palm was in thrall to Stefan George. Tauschwitz brings out the parallels between Palm's courting of the young Hilde—through letters, poems, and endless conversations—and George's courting of Ida Coblentz. Hilde's early poems playfully imitated George, as Tauschwitz shows by comparing the following two poems:²

Das Kind, das lange schlief	Sieh mein kind ich gehe
Dankt für den lieben Brief	Denn du darfst nicht kennen
Doch hast du schon gedacht	Nicht einmal durch nennen
Das Kind sei aufgewacht	Menschen müh und wehe
Das Kind macht sich so Sorgen	Mir ist um dich bange
Noch tage nicht der Morgen	sieh mein kind ich gehe
Du weißt es träumen kleine Kinder	dass auf deiner wange
Doch schlafen sie drum minder?	Nicht der duft verwehe.
(HILDE LÖWENSTEIN)	(STEFAN GEORGE)

Yet the young couple's stay in the idyllic pre-war Heidelberg of Karl Jaspers, Karl Mannheim, and the George-Kreis did not last long. Although Domin recalled that they left Heidelberg in 1932 'ehe wir gestoßen wurden',³ they left in the first instance out of the time-honoured desire to study abroad. Italy was the obvious destination, given Palm's interests in classical philology and architecture. During the 1930s they moved between Florence and Rome, where they married in 1936. Hilde Palm spent much of her time giving language classes to help finance her husband's research. Her self-sacrifice in support of Palm would be a recurring theme of these years in exile, as their correspondence makes clear.

By early 1939, however, it was becoming obvious that the Jewish couple could no longer stay in Fascist Italy. Initially they sought refuge in England, in London and then in the Somerset town of Minehead, where Hilde taught languages at a private school. While they made some useful social contacts, meeting among others Virginia Woolf, this was not a happy time given world events. The couple even had themselves prescribed the poison Veronal—this was one of the wartime stories that Domin loved to tell—lest the Nazis invaded

² Marion Tauschwitz, *'Dass ich sein kann, wie ich bin': Hilde Domin. Die Biografie* (Heidelberg: Palmyra, 2009), p. 65.

³ Hilde Domin, 'Dank an Heidelberg', in *Gesammelte autobiographische Schriften*, pp. 63–70 (p. 64).

England, and were relieved when they managed to find a country that would give them a visa without excessive financial compensation. In the summer of 1940 they set sail for the Caribbean island of Santo Domingo, as it was then known.

The couple were to stay there for thirteen years; 'den Krieg überwindern' was the goal, as Hilde wrote in one letter to Palm.⁴ These letters, found after her death carefully set aside in the wardrobe of her Heidelberg flat, provide a vivid insight into life in their exotic exile, and as such they represent an important addition to the history of exile literature. Yet it should be stressed that they are, in the main, more historical than literary: Hilde Domin the poet starts to come into focus only in the final section of letters covering the years 1954–59. In an essay subtitled 'Fast ein Lebenslauf' (1962), Domin explained the reasons behind the relatively late flowering of her lyric gift:

Ich, H.D., bin erstaunlich jung. Ich kam erst 1951 auf die Welt. Weinend, wie jeder in diese Welt kommt. Es war nicht in Deutschland, obwohl Deutsch meine Muttersprache ist. Es wurde spanisch gesprochen, und der Garten vor dem Haus stand voller Kokospalmen. Genauer, es waren elf Palmen. Alles männliche Palmen und also ohne Früchte. Meine Eltern waren tot, als ich auf die Welt kam. Meine Mutter war wenige Wochen zuvor gestorben.⁵

Her letters show, however, that Domin's self-stylization here does not tell the whole story. It was indeed around this time that she started seriously writing poetry, and one of the triggers does seem to have been the news of her mother's faraway death. Yet the language of the pastoral idyll betrays a further emotional strain: 'Alles männliche Palmen und also ohne Früchte' can be read as a punning allusion to her husband Palm's refusal to countenance having children. Domin twice conceived, but aborted the first time and had a miscarriage the second time; the letters make it clear that Palm's disinclination to start a family, as well as his many affairs, were placing an immense emotional pressure on his wife, which found expression in the lyric poems she began writing. 'Was ich bei alledem leide, wie nah ich täglich am Selbstmord bin, das kannst du Dir kaum vorstellen', she writes to Palm in 1952.⁶

Domin's description of her 'zweite Geburt' in 1951 emphasizes the extent to which her birth as a poet was linked not only to emotional events in her life, but also to her particular sense of place.⁷ Hilde Palm took on the *nom de plume* Hilde Domin in honour of the country that had given her refuge: 'Ich

⁴ Hilde Domin to Erwin Walter Palm, 18 October 1942, in *Die Liebe im Exil: Briefe an Erwin Walter Palm aus den Jahren 1931–1959* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2009), p. 176.

⁵ 'Unter Akrobaten und Vögeln', p. 21.

⁶ Domin to Palm, 28 September 1952, *Die Liebe im Exil*, p. 241.

⁷ One of Domin's longest essays is called 'Meine Wohnungen' (1973). See *Gesammelte autobiographische Schriften*, pp. 71–138.

nannte mich | ich selber rief mich | mit dem Namen einer Insel.⁸ Yet Domin's rebirth as a poet ultimately owed more to her return than to her exile, as she acknowledged in retrospect:

[Ich] ging heim, in das Wort. [. . .] Das Wort aber war das deutsche Wort. Deswegen fuhr ich wieder zurück über das Meer dahin, wo das Wort lebt. Es war drei Jahre nach meiner Geburt. Ich war 22 Jahre weg gewesen.⁹

This is arguably what distinguishes Domin's work from other comparable exile writers of her generation. Hans-Georg Gadamer's famous description of Domin as the 'Dichterin der Rückkehr' speaks if nothing else to the chronology of her career: she did not start publishing poetry until the late 1950s, well after her return to Germany. Certainly the publication of the wartime correspondence goes some way to redressing this imbalance, shifting the weight of emphasis backwards from the post-war poetry to the formative years in exile. Previously unknown poems from this period, included in the letters but now also gathered in the *Sämtliche Gedichte*, testify to her feeling of living in a golden cage: 'Die Inselkäfigexistenz | — ich wünsche ihr die Pestilenz', writes Domin in 1949.¹⁰ One of her favourite images for life in exile, recurring both in the correspondence and in the poetry, is that of the homeless snail: 'einer Schnecke müßte es so ähnlich zumute sein, wenn sie auf einmal ihr Haus verlöre'.¹¹ Beyond the sentimentality of the animal imagery—Domin and Palm address each other in the letters as 'Hase' and 'Affe'—the image distills the feeling of vulnerability that characterizes these exile years.

Vulnerability and its pendant, security, can be seen in retrospect to be the driving force behind Domin's first collection, *Nur eine Rose als Stütze* (1959). The iconic title suggests the oscillation between ephemeral beauty and emotional succour that characterizes much of her best poetry, and it is revealing to trace the earlier versions of the title in the letters: Domin toyed with 'Mit einer Rose als Balanzierstab' and 'Auf eine Rose gestützt', before settling on what would become her single most famous phrase. Walter Jens wrote at the time that the 'Rose' represented the German language, which itself was the 'Stütze' to which German artists and intellectuals clung in exile.¹² The title poem vividly conveys this sense of searching for a balance between artistic adventure and emotional security:

⁸ 'Landen dürfen', in *Sämtliche Gedichte* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2009), p. 238.

⁹ 'Unter Akrobaten und Vögeln', p. 22.

¹⁰ Domin to Palm, 27 August 1949, *Die Liebe im Exil*, p. 210; also *Sämtliche Gedichte*, p. 289.

¹¹ Domin to Palm, 9 February 1936, *Die Liebe im Exil*, p. 106.

¹² Walter Jens, 'Vollkommenheit im Einfachen', *Die Zeit*, 27 November 1959. Celan had said something very similar in his speech in Bremen the year before: 'Erreichbar, nah und unverloren blieb inmitten der Verluste dies eine: die Sprache. Sie, die Sprache, blieb unverloren, ja, trotz allem' ('Ansprache anlässlich der Entgegennahme des Literaturpreises der freien Hansestadt Bremen', in Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. III (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1983), pp. 185–202 (p. 185)).

Ich richte mir ein Zimmer ein in der Luft
 unter den Akrobaten und Vögeln:
 mein Bett auf dem Trapez des Gefühls
 wie ein Nest im Wind
 auf der äußersten Spitze des Zweigs.

The opening poem of the collection, 'Ziehende Landschaft', suggests a similar dialectic:

Man muß weggehen können
 und doch sein wie ein Baum:
 als bliebe die Wurzel im Boden,
 als zöge die Landschaft und wir ständen fest.

It is not hard to interpret such poems biographically, as the expression of an exile's longing for roots. Yet aside from the obvious contemporary resonance of such subjects for Domin's generation, what appealed to readers about her work was its simplicity, born in particular of the influence of the Spanish and Italian poets she encountered and translated in her years abroad. Lorca, Ungaretti and especially the later Nobel Prize winner Vicente Aleixandre, whom Domin translated for the volume of translations from Hispanic poetry edited by her husband, *Rose aus Asche* (1955), set the tone for much of her early poetry. 'Sie sah sich als spanischer Autor in deutscher Sprache', writes Tauschwitz.¹³ There is undoubtedly no little snobbery in the German academy towards Domin's work on account of its simplicity, and it is true that her poems sometimes flirt with banality. Yet at their best they distil a lucidity and directness that makes them both accessible and memorable: 'Nennt | das Runde rund | und das Eckige eckig', wrote Domin in the title poem of the collection *Ich will dich* (1970).¹⁴ This 'Vollkommenheit im Einfachen', to quote the title of Walter Jens's ecstatic review of *Nur eine Rose als Stütze*, endeared her to readers far beyond the confines of the academy; in 1963 she boasted to her husband that her books were selling better than those of Celan.¹⁵ Domin was certainly aware of the strangely intimate relationship between writer and reader that her poems could entrain: 'Gedichte sind einer der kürzesten Wege von Mensch zu Mensch, ersetzen jahrelange Bekanntschaft auf der Stelle.'¹⁶

The letters of the late 1950s show how quickly Domin was able to establish herself in literary circles upon her return to post-war Germany. Throughout her life she was an indefatigable cultivator of contacts, and her *Nachlass* includes letters to some of the biggest names of the time, including Hesse, Eich, Aichinger, Celan, Bachmann, Böll, Enzensberger, Gadamer, Szondi,

¹³ Tauschwitz, p. 473. See also ch. 12, pp. 281–94.

¹⁴ *Sämtliche Gedichte*, p. 156.

¹⁵ See Tauschwitz, p. 370.

¹⁶ 'Was einem mit seinen Gedichten passieren kann', in *Gesammelte autobiographische Schriften*, pp. 184–217 (p. 192).

Reich-Ranicki, and Nelly Sachs, to name just a few. The letters to Sachs are particularly important, ranging across questions of poetology, exile, Jewishness after the Shoah, and the public role of the ‘engaged’ writer. In an open letter on the occasion of Sachs’s seventy-fifth birthday in 1966, Domin describes language as ‘das Gedächtnis der Menschheit’, and lyric poetry as ‘wie ein großes Glockenläuten: damit alle aufhorchen’. Her view of the role of poetry in this letter is typical of the tireless optimism which saw her characterized as the ‘Dichterin des Dennoch’:¹⁷ ‘In Wahrheit gibt es kein Gedicht “gegen”, das nicht zugleich, und weit mehr, auch ein Gedicht “für” wäre.’¹⁸ Countless poems testify to her refreshingly unfashionable optimism, as in the poem ‘Notrufer’:

In mir ist immer
Glaube,
als sei das goldene Seil
wer es auch auswirft
dem Notrufer
heilig geschuldet.¹⁹

This *Jasagen trotzdem* found its most famous expression in the poem ‘Abel steh auf’ (in the collection *Ich will dich*), a poem which had no little currency in the student movements of the 1970s and which can be seen as an affirmative version of the Sisyphus myth popularized by Camus and the Existentialists:

Abel steh auf
es muß neu gespielt werden
täglich muß es neu gespielt werden
täglich muß die Antwort noch vor uns sein²⁰

Alongside her growing reputation as a poet during the 1960s—*Nur eine Rose als Stütze* was followed by *Rückkehr der Schiffe* (1962), *Hier* (1964), *Höhlenbilder* (1968), and *Ich will dich* (1970)—Domin also published a novel and established herself as an influential critic. Her novel *Das zweite Paradies* (1968) is largely autobiographical, as both the letters and in particular Tauschwitz’s biography make clear. The protagonist is torn between two men, her husband Constantin and her lover Wolfgang, just as Domin herself fell in love in the late 1950s with Rudolf Hirsch, her publisher at Fischer (and the publisher of Celan and Thomas Bernhard, among others). The ‘second paradise’ is not the Eden of exile, but rather an almost Goethean

¹⁷ This is the title of a previous, much less substantial biography of Domin by Ilka Scheidgen: *Hilde Domin: Dichterin des Dennoch* (Lahr: Kaufmann, 2006).

¹⁸ ‘Offener Brief an Nelly Sachs: Zur Frage der Exildichtung’, in *Gesammelte autobiographische Schriften*, pp. 167–75 (pp. 174–75).

¹⁹ *Sämtliche Gedichte*, p. 214.

²⁰ *Sämtliche Gedichte*, p. 170.

notion of 'Verzicht', the recognition of the need to work through troubled feelings and come out the other side: 'die Aufgabe [. . .] besteht [darin], naß zu werden bis auf die Knochen. Hindurchzuwatet. Und auf der andern Seite weiterzugehen.'²¹

Meanwhile, in 1966 Domin edited the pioneering anthology *Doppelinterpretationen*, in which she cajoled all her friends and contacts into interpreting a poem of their own alongside an interpretation by a leading critic. Poets of the calibre of Eich, Fried, Bachmann, Sachs, Grass, Rühmkorf, Krolow, and Heissenbüttel were persuaded to participate; what emerged was a unique experiment, pitting poets' views of their own work against those of critics. The results of the volume may have been mixed, with some poets being much more forthcoming about their work than others, but the attempt was groundbreaking and widely received. For the first time, poetry was to be seen simultaneously 'von innen und von außen sozusagen', as Domin writes in her introduction.²²

This same phrase recurs two years later in the introduction to Domin's most sustained attempt to come to terms with the role of poetry and art in modern society, *Wozu Lyrik heute: Dichtung und Leser in der gesteuerten Gesellschaft* (1968). The book combined aesthetic theory, literary criticism, hermeneutics, and sociology à la Adorno to produce a snapshot of contemporary poetry 'von innen und von außen',²³ standing up for what Domin saw as an endangered species. Already in *Doppelinterpretationen*, Domin had been developing a theory of poetry as a kind of Brechtian 'Gebrauchsartikel': 'Das Gedicht ist für jeden da, der es benutzen will', she wrote in 1966.²⁴ Yet by 1968 she had nuanced her position:

Das Gedicht, glaube ich, ist ein Gebrauchsartikel eigener Art. Es wird gebraucht, aber es verbraucht sich nicht wie andere Gebrauchsartikel, bei denen jedes Benutzen das Abnutzen in sich schließt. [. . .] Es ist daher ein 'magischer Gebrauchsartikel', etwas wie ein Schuh, der sich jedem Fuß anpaßt.²⁵

By the time she gave the Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen in 1987–88, Domin had combined her natural optimism, her belief in the doctrine of the 'dennoch', with her view of poetry as a privileged 'Gebrauchsartikel', to produce a lecture series entitled *Das Gedicht als Augenblick der Freiheit* (1988).

After the death of her husband in 1988, the 1990s were largely a decade of prizes and collected editions. In 1999 appeared her last volume, *Der Baum blüht trotzdem*, largely gathering older, unpublished poems. Domin continued

²¹ Hilde Domin, *Das zweite Paradies* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1968), p. 125.

²² Hilde Domin, *Doppelinterpretationen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1969), p. 30.

²³ Hilde Domin, *Wozu Lyrik heute. Dichtung und Leser in der gesteuerten Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1993), p. 19.

²⁴ *Doppelinterpretationen*, p. 44.

²⁵ *Wozu Lyrik heute*, p. 29.

to give public readings well into her nineties: in 2003 she toured Spain, in 2005 she read in Oxford and London. She had the unusual habit of always reading her poems twice; combined with her biographical reminiscences, this gave her readings a rare force. Yet she was becoming increasingly frail, and it came as no great surprise when, at the age of 96, she did not recover from the consequences of a fall near her home in Heidelberg.

‘What is Hilde Domin’s place in the history of German literature?’ asked Marcel Reich-Ranicki in his *laudatio* for her when she was awarded the Konrad Adenauer Prize in 1995. On a branch between Brecht and Benn, was his answer, a small but vibrant leaf.²⁶ Although Domin must ultimately be classed as a minor poet, she played a major role in the history of post-war German literature. Her enforced emigration during the war makes her an important witness to the era, as both Marion Tauschwitz’s biography and the judiciously edited volume of correspondence with Erwin Walter Palm testify; yet she also saw exile as ‘äußerstes Paradigma der Existenz des Dichters überhaupt’.²⁷ The defining metaphor of her poetry is lightness, and this persisted throughout her career: the first half of her debut collection in 1959 was called ‘Aufbruch ohne Gewicht’, and nearly fifty years later visitors to her flat near the castle in Heidelberg would be greeted by the legendary paper dove which hung in her study. In both life and art Hilde Domin’s twin goals were lightness and optimism. They can perhaps best be summarized by the brief poem which she liked to write in her books as a dedication:

Nicht müde werden
sondern dem Wunder
leise
wie einem Vogel
die Hand hinhalten.²⁸

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²⁶ See Tauschwitz, p. 473.

²⁷ *Wozu Lyrik heute*, p. 21.

²⁸ *Sämtliche Gedichte*, p. 142.