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Foreword by Brigitte Kronauer

My mother stood strange and remote behind the register

“My life was uninteresting. My life was bleak, quiet, uneventful, and actually not worth mentioning. My life just flowed along, inconspicuously drifting by very small movements or nothing at all, from the beginning up to this moment, up to now, as I stand before you to tell you something of my life.”

So begins the most recent story by Ror Wolf, “The Forty-Ninth Digression,” published in 2007. Before the narrator’s swiftly ensuing escape into the freer worlds of fantasy – which in Wolf’s work is to be understood as the explosive eruption of an unleashed reality – what reigns at first, as the launch pad, is its consequential opposite: the boredom of gray Sunday afternoons, grown into the anechoic chamber of inert normality. For those who crave images, this is a colorless and soundless meagerness of conventional existence.

More than thirty years ago, Ror Wolf recounted his earliest reading experiences (“Later came something different”). Right at the beginning, in the description of his childhood domestic milieu, we find sentences such as the one quoted in the above epigraph, or: “There was no one there who told me stories”; “My grandfather sat silently on the shoemaker’s chair, incessantly beating soles and heels, the tacks between his lips”; “My grandmother looked out the window, withering mutely.” It is no wonder that such wordlessness and ascetic

lack of activity drive the child, with the power of a law of nature, to the adventures of the written word that await him.

As the author acknowledges, the motive for the flights and expeditions into the extraordinary that are detectable everywhere in his writing could lie in these familial deficiencies; the extraordinary is fabricated in self-defense. It would only be necessary to add that the author has all his life remained in essence that child who can scarcely be restrained by the consensus of the majority about what is and what is not. Even if there is so much more talk and chatter in it than in his mute native environment in the Thuringian town of Saalfeld, our present customary reality appears just as desolate to Wolf as that of the six-year-old did to him before he learned to read and thereby discovered his own imaginary society.

Nowhere are these connections at the intersection of fiction and autobiography manifested more strikingly and, by Wolfian standards, more unguardedly than in “Reports from the life of the father” (1968). When no resistance, no escape is risked, the reality prescribed to us from an early age – a “schematic reality” of a strange, remote mother and strict, authoritarian father – manages to turn us into its carbon copy.

When I first encountered Ror Wolf’s work in the ’60s, in the form of “Pilzer and Pelzer,” the impression of a revolt and resistance against the prevailing literature – which for me meant: against the stifling general interpretation of life – was immense and liberating. That had scarcely anything to do with what Gisela Dischner analyzed rather intellectually in her 1972 essay on Ror Wolf’s prose, entitled “The End of the Bourgeois Self”: “Wolf shows

what happens to human beings whose ‘humanity’ is reduced to the private. Their memories and emotions become exchangeable; the dual character of the commodity as use-value (‘private life’) and exchange-value (the public realm, political and commercial ‘sphere’) has so extensively deformed human beings in bourgeois society that even their private inwardness and individual autonomy turn entirely into farce – they are revealed to be in actuality mutually estranged, isolated monads, which is how Leibniz sought to define them in positive terms.”

The surge of the Wolfian universe opened up to me a self-sufficient anti-world bursting with energy – an anti-world that, as a by-product, cast into sharp relief the poverty and dubiousness of the official one. Here was someone who dealt with fragments of reality in a way I would never have imagined possible, presenting stories in which the structure, dramatic arc, and plot development were not established for all time by mossy authorities; who juggled everyday occurrences, sensations, manic constrictions, and reports of disaster according to fancy and necessity. This ranged from mild estrangement – for example, through the use of unusual, suddenly all the more plausible adjectives (“swollen bathtub”) – to the dense frenzy of racing events hastily dissolving space and time. Instead of progressive plots with climaxes and easily comprehensible psychology, there appeared groups, swarms of objects and living things, to which the author opposed a rustling, a single silk underskirt that made them vanish. Lush descriptions of food were shot through with abstractions, generalizations, conceptualizations, which in their eccentricity achieved genuine elegance. It made you stop short. The one aspect brought out the other in comic intensification. Questions of motivation, classification, meaning, and

plausibility did not come up at all. I did not even pay attention to the content. Individual images, however, made an all the more powerful impression: stooped women during the potato harvest, the death of a horse.

Here there was finally no dilly-dallying: The attack was in the form! It seemed to me as if someone had fiercely stirred a soup on which skin had been forming for eternities; or cast a stone into a pond that had been stagnant for too long and was filled with algae; or smashed into a thousand pieces a glass pane that had become opaque with mist and with the ponderous significance of a postwar literature magnificently suited for school lessons in the higher grades, so that the shards suddenly set off wildly rotating flashes of light.

This author did not confront the reader with life lessons in worn-out clothing, with morals and messages, which could easily and perhaps even more felicitously have been summed up in a succinct sentence. He consoled or, depending on the circumstances, assailed no one with cozy notions of this sort. Instead, he bombarded the reader – mostly quite comically, always vividly – with the stark formal language of a reality uprooted from the rut, which consequently became an incalculable reality, unlimited in its possibilities and only intermittently familiar.

As an ironically mollifying gesture toward the good old days, there were in this reality men who, very belle époque, smoked cigars, wore top hats, and enjoyed life on steamships. Clinging to these expressive relics, the men nonetheless offered no guarantee of any constancy, recalled them only for the sake of the glaring contrast, do so to this day as a leitmotif in Wolf's prose, and are an unavoidable signal of a savoir vivre at once avuncular and playboyish.

Behind the mollifying transports into the antiquated (for which the author no doubt nurtures not only a sanctimonious fondness, but also an undiminished one!), one can read the benevolent mockery of the bourgeois expectation that, at least in books, all should remain as it once was. That is to say: if, with our hearty participation, the world and its lifestyle do change, we should still be permitted to treat ourselves in the evening to cultivated absorption in a book as if we still lived in the nineteenth century and its novels.

Ror Wolf's hectic joviality is less palatable in this regard. Over the work lies the duplicity of his kindred spirit, Robert Walser, who surmised that literature exists so as to distract pleasantly from complexities – but then in his prose did nothing other than incessantly create complexities.

Ror Wolf's heroes are caught in an overwhelming, unregulated reality, wildly sprouting forth from under its reductive signposts – a reality in which they find their way only with great effort. They lack from the outset or they misplace the healthy human reason that would accomplish the conventional registration of sense impressions.

The experience of a reader who is actually ready to plunge headlong into adventure is not far from that of the characters of this electrified cosmos pulsating between rigidity and chaotic turbulence, where, as in real life, motion is more important than an elaborately constructed plot. The stagnant scenes and frozen moments repeatedly break out of their stasis into commotion and agitation, into a swift succession of repetitions, variations, and loops, then congeal once again into a tableau and start to flow. The images intertwine, break apart; catastrophic particles of reality are recast into supple material, into notes,

into tones, are lightheaded to the point of frivolity and at the same time constitute the writer's revenge on the extremely recognizable, terrible, scarcely bearable conditions of the world.

“It goes without saying that manipulation is involved: condensation and compression, the breaking-up and reassembling of sentences and series of sentences and the courses of games,” the author writes in “Concluding Remarks on Soccer” (1980). This pertains to how he deals with the “enormous word vortexes of reporters.” But the method can also safely be applied to Wolf's treatment of initially wordless events. They arise as incessant and powerful processes of derailment, of blooming, dying away, growing, decomposing, freezing, of nourishment, of vanishing, of breakdowns, of temptation and decline, of slaughter, as vastly proliferating mushroom colonies overgrowing life and landscape.

To preserve the semblance of order nonetheless, there are in Wolf's work, as a counter to the wreaked or disclosed chaos, “pieces of advice” and “real-world lessons” that, in strictly alphabetical but capriciously gap-ridden order, approach natural phenomena and human embarrassments in a grave manner. In this, his smile is directed less at a grandfatherly lexicon style than at the contemporary futility of all our efforts at definition and orientation in the face of the uncontainable. Indeed, we are not uninterruptedly modern, but rather partially intermingled with the old-fashioned!

Ror Wolf does not proceed in conformity with genre, he remarked in a 1993 interview, because he writes what he wants to write. It could not be expressed more modestly and properly. For what is essential to literary

production plainly consists neither of opposition to a code nor of its virtuoso fulfillment. For the writer, what is of central importance is to articulate his highly personal truth and divergence from the preexisting interpretation of the world – that is, to aim for the greatest proximity to reality by the measure of his observation and sensibility. Only this aspiration guarantees the continued existence of literature as an art form. This venerable ambition alone has always wrested from life the power and splendor of forms that are by now perhaps “more natural,” but by no means simply repeatable by later writers without loss of substance.

Time and again in Wolf’s writing we come upon a certain provocation. At his most radical, the world seems to provide him images, objects and concepts solely so that he can use them as ingredients in his mobile paintings, as flavoring and spice for his “meals.” At the same time, all these panoramas created by Wolf say: “This here is not the world under the old umbrella of stories, but rather it is, if not identical to the structure of true reality, nonetheless much more similar and akin to it!”

To look from today’s perspective at Ror Wolf’s prose up to now is to experience something astonishing. The initially disconcerting effect of his rebellious formal language, the decisive betting on form at a time when – but for a few exceptions – instead of literature dismay, message, and contemplation dominated, suddenly proves to be a harbinger of an awareness of life that has meanwhile become ubiquitous.

Wolf neither let himself be carried away nor talked into making statements of cultural criticism. That is why his impetus in this regard – the

other side of his acrobatic prose excesses, more nightmarish and apocalyptic than surreal – was scarcely noticed. Aesthetic form infiltrates from behind and, when it is sparked by raw life as it is here, much more lastingly than assertions. It proves true corporeally.

And does so, of all things, in the most precise content.

What we enjoyed in Wolf's work as absurdly, wondrously enigmatic entertainment (thereby making things too easy for ourselves, for it is not about a charmingly zany young writer, but rather a considerable imposition with possibilities, not to be overlooked, of disgust, sympathy, sadism) has formally turned into our everyday life, whether we render an account of it to ourselves or not, whether the prevailing literature reflects or obscures it.

This does not apply only to adventure-seeking global tourism, which borders on fantastic heedlessness, and the pomposity of media commentary and theorization prompted by the most banal as well as the weightiest events without any discernible hierarchy. Our consciousness, which originally was conceivably halfway individual, is bombarded by a mass of collaged, assembled scraps of knowledge and news, no longer organizable and overtaxing everyone. A nervous condition that we willingly reinforce in our strange addiction to mixing facts and simulation through distracted, insatiable zapping between news show, salad dressing commercial, opera, shaving cream advertisement, sports, erotic drama, terror. The (Western) reality: a colportage of reality; a fiction without beginning and end, indifferent, cruel, without context, incomprehensible, thoroughly sexualized, and in interspersed snippets lachrymosely emotional. And over yet again. At the same time, we maintain a

cast-iron tranquility, exorbitant in our demand for disasters that we, as Ror Wolf's anachronistic travelers demonstrated for us, ultimately let pass by. At breakfast and in the evening on the sofa, as stolidly upright survivors who have slipped away, now and again getting fleetingly worked up, we let them pass by.

To the observation that he does not exactly make it easy for the reader, Ror Wolf replies: "I don't want to make it easier for him than the world does." And yet he does precisely that. For he does not simply imitate the ruins and idiocies of civilization that have become the norm and in their garishness have also become dull; nor does he grumble about it. He responds, once more, through form! I am almost certain that there resides in the brain of this author an outstandingly functioning transformative apparatus that out of straw and dirt automatically makes gold – and out of negation, melody.

Or else it must be the generous smile of great art, though we should never deceive ourselves about this smile's knotty origins.

Ror Wolf, born in 1932, is, besides Thomas Bernhard and Arno Schmidt, one of the most idiosyncratic and prominent authors of German Literature after 1945. He is also a master of fine arts. Since the early Sixties he creates surrealistic collages. His radio dramas count among the most successful of German radio plays. Ror Wolf has received numerous awards, most recently the *Friedrich Hölderlin Award* in recognition of his contribution to German language and literature.

Ross Benjamin is a writer and a translator of German literature living in Brooklyn. His work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Bookforum*, *The Nation*, and other publications. His translations of Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion* (Archipelago Books) and Kevin Vennemann's *Close to Jedenew* (Melville House) were published in 2008. He was a 2003–2004 *Fulbright* Scholar in Berlin.

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