

AN UNCHANGING BLUE

SELECTED POEMS 1962-1975



ROLF DIETER BRINKMANN

Translated by Mark Terrill

Free Verse Editions

Edited by Jon Thompson

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Introduction

Rolf Dieter Brinkmann was born in Vechta, Germany, on April 16th, 1940, in the midst of World War II, and died on April 23rd, 1975, in London, England, after being struck by a hit-and-run driver while crossing the street to enter a pub. Brinkmann had been in London after being invited to read at the Cambridge Poetry Festival, where he read with John Ashbery, Ed Dorn, Lee Harwood and others. In May, 1975, just a few weeks after his death, Brinkmann's seminal, parameter-expanding poetry collection *Westwärts 1 & 2* appeared, which was posthumously awarded the prestigious Petrarca Prize.

Brinkmann grew up in the predominantly catholic, conservative atmosphere of provincial Northern Germany during the Adenauer era. His father worked as a civil servant; his mother died of cancer in 1957. In 1958, already a difficult and critical student, Brinkmann was forced to leave school after organizing a presentation with lectures about Sartre and existentialism, the lyrical work of Benn and Brecht, as well as the writing of Pound, Rimbaud, Stramm, Hesse, and Heinrich Heine; all apparently too radical for the post-war German school regime. During this time Brinkmann made his first serious attempts at writing poetry, mostly in the tradition of European modernism. In 1958, after having left school, Brinkmann made a trip through Belgium and on to Paris. In 1959 he began an apprenticeship as a book-seller in Essen, Germany, where he also met his later friend and collaborator, Ralf Rainer Rygulla, who was to play an important role in Brinkmann's life as a writer.

In 1960 Brinkmann published his first poems, and in 1961, he moved to Cologne and began studying at the Pädagogische Hochschule. In 1964 he married Maleen Brinkmann, and their son, Robert, was born, who suffered severe brain damage during his birth. In Cologne, Brinkmann met Dieter Wellershof, who at the time worked as an editor at the Kiepenhauer & Witsch Verlag, a distinguished and well known publishing house. Also at this time, Brinkmann received a prize for young artists from the state of Nordrhein-Westfalen. Beginning in 1965, he undertook a series of visits to London, in part to visit his friend, Ralf Rainer Rygulla. In 1968

Brinkmann began experimenting with 8mm film and made several multi-media presentations of his work. At the University of Cologne Brinkmann organized a teach-in which directed criticism towards various aspects of contemporary popular culture, thus estranging himself from the politically engaged student movement. Also at this time, Brinkmann was commissioned by WDR (West German Television) to write a script about the rise and fall of a rock star, called *Der Abstieg* (The Fall). During a public discussion at the Academy of Art in West Berlin with the critics Rudolf Hartung and Marcel Reich-Ranicki, Brinkmann turned the occasion into a minor scandal ("If this book was a machine gun, I'd shoot you with it. ")

In 1969 Brinkmann joined up with Dieter Wellershof, Peter Handke and several other writers to produce a small-press literary magazine entitled *Gummibaum* (*Rubber Tree*), which was printed in small editions and distributed in and around Cologne. In 1970 he began to experiment with photography, a medium which became increasingly present in his work. From 1972 to 1973 he was an artist-in-residence at the Deutsche Akademie Villa Massimo in Rome. During this time Brinkmann went into a self-imposed exile, distancing himself completely from his friends and colleagues, and turning against the politically engaged literature of the sixties, as well as his own contributions to Pop literature, eventually isolating himself from the German literary scene altogether. In 1974 Brinkmann was a visiting writer at the Department of German at the University of Austin in Texas. In April, 1975, Brinkmann went to England to take part in the Cambridge Poetry Festival, and where he met his untimely and tragic death in the streets of London. His remains were shipped back to Germany and he was buried in the family plot of the cemetery in Vechta.

Considered to be one of the most important poets of post-war Germany, Brinkmann's work is definitely in the marginal outsider vein, approximating a sort of German hybrid of Frank O'Hara, William Burroughs, and W.C. Williams, all of whom were important influences on Brinkmann's work. His permanent confrontation with the post-war German literary establishment (reminding one at times of Jack Spicer and his place in American poetry), and his envelope-pushing experiments with language, syntax and semantics (taken to the extreme in *Westwärts 1 & 2*), led him further and fur-

ther away from the literary scene. His confrontational nature and volatile personality were feared at readings, and together with his huge creative output and his early death, earned him a reputation as the “James Dean of poetry,” a true enfant terrible of contemporary letters. Contrary to his public image, he was known among his friends and colleagues as warm and generous, with a sparkling and spontaneous sense of humor.

During his lifetime, Brinkmann published nine poetry collections, four short story collections, several radio plays, and a highly acclaimed novel, *Keiner weiß mehr* (*No One Knows More*). He also edited and translated two German-language anthologies of contemporary American poetry (primarily Beat and New York School, for which Brinkmann had a particular affinity), and translated Frank O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems* into German, as well as a collection of Ted Berrigan, entitled *Guillaume Apollinaire ist Tot*. During the last years of his life, Brinkmann devoted much of his time to collecting audio, film and photo material, as well as copious notes, for a planned multi-media novel which remained uncompleted at the time of his death. Since Brinkmann’s death, several of his journals have appeared in print, all employing a montage/cut-up technique somewhat reminiscent of Burroughs, and displaying a remorseless self-scrutiny and microscopic attention to details, as well as an eye-catching sense for graphics. A feature-length film directed by Harald Bergmann, entitled *Brinkmann’s Wrath*, was recently produced in Germany, and a new expanded edition of *Westwärts 1 & 2* appeared in 2005, which marked the 30th anniversary of Brinkmann’s death.

My previous collection of Brinkmann translations, *Like a Pilot* (Sulphur River Literary Review Press, Austin, 2001), was made up of a selection of poems taken from *Standphotos* (Rowohlt Verlag, Hamburg, 1980), which incorporates the nine volumes of poetry published during Brinkmann’s lifetime. My criterion for choosing the poems that made up that collection was that they be the most representative of what Brinkmann had achieved *prior* to the publication of *Westwärts 1 & 2*. A man and a woman in a bleak apartment in an even bleaker metropolis, ostensibly discussing some inanimate object, the conversation a rhetorical Ping-Pong game symbolizing some greater urgency, some potential crisis, an underlying decay of the existential status quo; this was typical Brinkmann country. “Per-

sonism” and postmodernism in a high-speed collision on the German autobahn. The frequency of appearances by various Pop icons, be they Godzilla, Batman, Humphrey Bogart, or Ava Gardner’s toe, was roughly in real-time, and not an intentional amplification on my part; many of Brinkmann’s poems deal with contemporary Pop culture again and again, a curious phenomena considering the circumstances of his life, i.e., being born in the midst of World War II in Germany.

Rarely if at all does Brinkmann deal with the various hardships and deprivations that he must have experienced as a child in war-time and post-war Germany. Rather than being obsessed with the question of collective guilt that so preoccupied other post-war German writers, Brinkmann’s stance was one of absolute immediacy; forever looking at the world in the here-and-now, without a trace of sentimentality or nostalgia. When not deconstructing contemporary culture and employing his sardonic wit, Brinkmann could be frighteningly stark and photographically precise, both in the use of his language and the graphic representation of his images. Brinkmann was forever experimenting, constantly morphing from one creative incarnation to the next, and was a definite forerunner of postmodernism, from his earliest attempts at quasi-traditional European modernism up to his final broken-stanza, irregular-enjambment explorations incorporating his relentless questioning of everyday existence and his gift for saying so much with so little, no small feat in the German language.

Brinkmann’s sudden and accidental death came as a surprise to all. He had frequently alluded to death in his writing, and often mentioned his fears of cancer or even an accidental death in his letters. When an artist such as Brinkmann, at the peak of his powers, constantly morphing from one creative incarnation to the next, is suddenly removed from this life—intentionally or unintentionally—it is nothing other than a major tragedy and a great loss. Thirty-five years after his death, it’s both difficult and painful to speculate as to what Rolf Dieter Brinkmann might have gone on to achieve. Already the poems in *Westwärts 1 & 2* represent a quantum leap from the work in *Standphotos*. His sprawling, all-over-the-page poems all seem to start where Frank O’Hara’s “Biotherm” and Ted Berrigan’s “Tambourine Life” left off. And in *Westwärts 1 & 2* we find a most

decisively political poet indeed, the title poem taking on the rise and fall of Western civilization and culture, while simultaneously tracing the inherent damage incurred by the psyche (both collective and individual), in series after series of multi-lingual, modular stanzas that can be read in whatever order the reader chooses. *Westwärts 1 & 2* represents not only the culmination of Brinkmann's career as a poet, but also stands as a milestone in modern European poetry, much of it seeming almost more relevant today than when it appeared thirty-five years ago. It also shows the amazing developments he made as a poet in the five-year interim since the publication of his previous collection, *Gras*, in 1970. The influence of the New American Poetry and especially the New York School (both generations) make *Westwärts 1 & 2* even more interesting and accessible to American readers, providing a sort of reverse-angle perspective on one of the liveliest epochs in American poetry. *Westwärts 1 & 2* is a highly significant work that bridges two cultures via aesthetically daring, critical and irreverent poetics, and definitely warrants a much wider audience.

The final poem in this collection, "Some Very Popular Songs," is one of several longer poems in *Westwärts 1 & 2*. The poem moves forward and backward through time and space, and shows clearly how Brinkmann was becoming more and more political in the course of his development as a writer. Presenting Adolf Hitler as a human being, with his love affair with Eva Braun, was a very radical move for a German writer in the politically turbulent seventies in West Germany. "Some Very Popular Songs" incorporates many of Brinkmann's signature traits; social/political criticism, intense self-scrutiny, taboo-breaking, travel diaries reworked as poetry, and his trademark trenchant humor.

—Mark Terrill

An Unchanging Blue

Zwischenzeiten

Hand vor Augen oder Hand nicht
vor Augen denn das Licht
wechselt vom Wasser
zum Baum: da
ist es ein Vogel oder nicht ein Vogel
ein Elefant
eine Schnecke
in Abständen
betrachtet vom Balkon aus
doch war kein Balkon
dann vom Fenster her aber nicht
vom Fenster in der Tür stehend
die Hand vor Augen als es
vorbeikam
nicht eintrat
fortging
während die Schatten
wechselten von einer Stimme
zur anderen war
es Fisch war
es Vogel
gewiß nicht noch war es hell nicht
Tag mehr auch nicht Nacht zu dieser
Zeit

Between-Times

Hand before the eyes or hand not
before the eyes then the light
changes from the water
to the tree: there
is it a bird or not a bird
an elephant
a snail
in intervals
observed from a balcony
no not a balcony
then from a window but not
from a window standing in the door
the hand before the eyes as it
came by
did not come in
went away
while the shadows
changed from one mood
to another was
it a fish
a bird
certainly not it was still light no
longer day not night either at this
time

Von der Gegenständlichkeit eines Gedichtes

Die Farbe
der Tinte ist königsblau
die Feder aus Stahl
schreibt die Worte
auf das weiße Papier

die angewandte Grammatik enthält
nichts über Wetteraussichten
und sie mißt dem
Vogelflug nicht die geheime Formel bei
leichter zu sein als die Schwermut ohne Regel
ist die Landschaft angeordnet
das Blattgrün ist fehlerlos die
Bäume verbergen der
vorhanden Sprache
die innere Wildnis

mit der Feder
aus Stahl schreibe ich
die Worte auf das weiße
Papier die Farbe
der Tinte ist
königsblau

Of the Representativeness of a Poem

The color
of the ink is royal blue
the steel pen nib
writes the words
on the white paper

the applied grammar contains
nothing about the weather forecast
and it does not measure the
flight of the bird against the secret formula of
being lighter than the melancholy without rules
is the landscape in order
the leaf-green is faultless the
trees hide the
available language
of the internal wilderness

with the pen nib
of steel I write
the words on the white
paper the color
of the ink is
royal blue