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‘Totentänze’: Volker Braun’s late poems — Postscripts on the end of utopia

This chapter takes its cue from Ian Wallace’s pioneering work on the poet Volker Braun and focuses on Braun’s most recent collection of poetry Auf die schönen Possen (2005) to read it as a ‘poetry of lateness’. This involves analysing themes of old age, illness, death and epitaph as well as reading it against theories of ‘late style’ as set out especially by T.W Adorno and Edward Said. I argue that the collection offers individual and collective reorientation through an aesthetic of ‘catastrophe’ (in Adorno’s sense), which at once recognises a personal and historical lateness but also articulates a form of resistance against it.

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
(T.S. Eliot)

In der Geschichte von Kunst sind
Spätwerke die Katastrophen.
(T.W. Adorno)

Wie, ist es möglich? daß die Verhältnisse
tanzen
(Volker Braun)

This chapter will consider the trope of ‘lateness’ in Volker Braun’s recent collection of poetry Auf die schönen Possen (2005). Our contemporary fascination with the phenomenon of lateness arises from the fact that decline through aging or sickness is a universal. The privileged place that late work occupies in the critical imagination does not only, however, rest on its biographical force, but rather on a more complex relationship between the artist and his or her era. Equally, late thoughts do not necessarily conform to the expectations that have developed around the myth of ‘late style’ (or ‘Spätstil’), to borrow Adorno’s term.

The notion of ‘late style’ is part of a characteristically German discourse grounded in the eighteenth century which figured biography and cultural change through metaphors of biological development, resulting in a trope of rise, culmination and decline. That changed with the valorisation of selfhood in the nineteenth century when a
certain aura accrued to the late work, suggesting that in it an artist on
the threshold of death might plausibly attain transcendence and
communion with the divine spirit, allowing even secular work to be
infused with a deep spiritual orientation. Artistic maturity might
produce a vision less affected by the outward turmoil of youth or the
age in question. This understanding has determined the canonical view
of late work in the twentieth century: the decisive break of a mature
and exceptional (male) artist with his previous style, in favour of a
mode more serene, sometimes primitive or child-like, but in any case
effortlessly transcendent and sublime.4

The 1960s saw a further development in questions of late style,
again predominantly in German scholarship. One especially important
thinker was Adorno. As early as the 1930s he took up the concept of
‘Spätstil’, approaching it from an aesthetics grounded in Marxist
thought rather than individual biography.5 In his influential writings
on late Beethoven, for example, he suggested that the key to late
works lay not then in any psychological or organic life trajectory of
the artist or composer but in the relation of art to its historical context.
Beethoven, he claimed, used the conventions of the bourgeois era in
his late works, but in so doing he was able to express a more
fundamental negation of its values. Late style was thus no longer
interpreted merely as the discordance of the artist with his era; it has
become instead a product of the era’s own inner contradictions and its
governing aesthetic one of fragmentation, dissonance,
‘Zerrissenheit’.6

Sixty years later and explicitly following Adorno, Edward Said, in
his own late, indeed posthumous, work, On Late Style (2006) also
rejected the notion that reconciliation and serenity were hallmarks of
late works.7 With reference to various writers and musicians, but
centrally Adorno and Beethoven, he highlights the fundamental
‘untimeliness’ of late works, which he describes in various different
ways, following Adorno, as a kind of exile; an irascible gesture of
leave-taking; a nostalgic awareness nevertheless preternaturally aware
of the present; or, pithily: ‘Late style is in, but oddly apart from the
present’ (p. 24). Death is represented in a refracted mode, as allegory,
anachronism, anomaly or irony. Instead of harmony and resolution the
privileged style of artistic lateness is according to Said, ‘intransigence,
difficulty, and unresolved contradiction’ (p. 7). As he summarises:
‘This is the prerogative of late style: it has the power to render disen-