CHAPTER 18

Playful Cognizing, or Technical Errors in Harmonyville: The SF of Johanna and Günter Braun (1981 and 1987)

Note 2020: When I was again in Berlin after the reunification of Germany, I tried to find the Brauns, but they had moved to a small city near the Baltic Sea and divulged no way to get in touch with them; they died there in 2008, a few days apart. They continued to publish SF until 1998. Alas, my plan to write a complete overview of GDR SF, a literary genre that suddenly died out after the end of the East German state, was overtaken by more pressing interests. It would have included a much updated, and given their problems with the GDR authorities when the following was written, much less diplomatic chapter about them.

The Brauns, East German (GDR) writers, are a married couple who publish all their works together.[1] Günter Braun, born 1928, son of a railway engineer, served briefly in an anti-aircraft battery in 1945, then worked as drugstore assistant, reporter on provincial newspaper, editor, theater critic, and librarian. Johanna Braun, born 1929, daughter of an optician, worked briefly as farm-hand and in merchandizing, then as typist, secretary, and editor. Since 1955 both have been freelance writers, living in Magdeburg, GDR. They publish their SF books significantly as *Johanna and Günter* Braun.

The Brauns started writing juvenile, often exotic, adventure long-stories blending the Defoe-Cooper tradition with revolutionary themes.[2]

1 This chapter could not have been written without the friendly help in supplying the titles discussed here at length by Günther Claus, Franz Rottensteiner, and the Brauns themselves, as well as by Luc De Vos and Vladimir Gakov. My information on those not seen comes from thirteen items of secondary literature listed in the earlier publication.

2 See what seems a complete list on <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johanna_Braun>.

Interweaving suggestions from music, the movies, and lyrical prose and changing to historical themes of the further or nearer past, they first achieved recognition for some novels at the end of the 1950s. They developed to experimental prose that also touched on neuralgic problems of equal rights for women – a brave combination of new forms to deal with old problems that touched off a number of critiques and public discussions. The beginning of the 1960s can be taken as the period in which they entered into full possession of their narrative voice both in long stories and TV plays: lightly ironical, lyrically oriented toward socioethical characterization rather than toward a surface plot, yet strongly concerned with the integrity of people in the meshes of politics and economics; the short stories in *Die Nase des Neandertalers (The Neanderthal Man's Nose*, 1969) already includes two SF love stories. Possibly their most interesting novel so far, *Bitterfisch* (1974), blends mythomorphic fantasy and everyday GDR life around the eponymous worker-protagonist – an interesting experiment that can be read as a gentler, atheistic counter-project to Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, with brilliant premises that were not explored at full length and brought to a head; it had such a great success in the GDR (they wrote to me) that it has not been republished there since. From 1983 on the Brauns' subsequent SF novels have been published by Suhrkamp publisher in West Germany, outwitting GDR censorship.

From 1972 to 1980, the Brauns published in East Berlin four books of what could be considered as SF: the novels *Der Irrtum des Grossen Zauberers* (The Great Magician's Error, 1972), *Unheimliche Erscheinungsformen auf Omega XI* (Uncanny Phenomena on Omega 11, 1974), and *Conviva ludibundus* (1978), and the stories collected as *Der Fehlfaktor* (The Mistake Factor, 1975). *The Great Magician's Error* is set in a country ruled by a Great Magician whose power is founded on the obligatory daily chewing of a specially cultivated pear. The original, natural pear was – and still is, if accidentally found – an inebriating yet stimulating nourishment. Yet, abused rather than ennobled by the Magician, it induces apathy, routine, and a false sense of irrational pleasure and leisure in the population. The ruling class is represented by specially dressed bureaucrats and technocrats, but they too are rapidly dying out, replaced by computers and robots, notoriously more perfect than men. Our young hero, Input Oliver, drawn to

joyous and interesting knowledge rather than to the boredom of routine, to pranks rather than obedience, is chosen by the Magician to be his successor. In spite of a passing temptation of political and technological power, he manages to defeat from within the despotic rule; he is helped by the female principle of intelligence and subversion in the form of a snake-like girl. In the new state of affairs, men will know how to use machines properly, both in the sense of general accessibility to and of collective responsibility for them, and presumably society will be helped along by the original tonic effect of the natural pears. The parable oscillates between choosing for its vehicle SF or a Hoffmannesque or Andersenian fairy tale, opting at the end for the latter. Nonetheless, it is a large step away from naturalistic juvenile adventure and it has a very interesting tenor, directly applicable to Stalinism and the "warm current" against it within socialism.

The eight SF stories collected in *The Mistake Factor* are largely parallels to – and finger-exercises for – both the above SF novel and the following one, yet they are also well worth an independent analysis. Indeed, several among them I would insert into any anthology of the best European SF. Their basic conflict is as a rule some variant of the opposition between a critical, socialist humanism and a technocratic-cum-philistine self-satisfaction. In the story "Das System R" (System R), the SF gimmick of reversible time is used for almost plotless delineation of the rise and fall of a careerist without scruples who can only operate within strict limits of meaning and imagination and breaks down when faced with the truly new. In "Raumfahrerauswahl" (Choosing Astronauts), such a psychological discussion is conducted much better: the earthy and quirky independence of Merkur and Elektra (the two astronauts of the Brauns' second novel) as well as of their examiners is revealed in an amusing series of mutual tests, amounting to an *exemplum* not only for the fitness of astronauts but of people in general to cohabit, to be not simply humans but "human to each other" ("irgendwie Mensch sein" vs. "irgendwie zueinander Mensch sein"). Two stories present a philistine "total harmony" which in the nature of things cannot avoid breaking down: in "Der grosse Kalos-Prozess" (The Great Kalos Trial), the breakdown of that harmony is simply a biological accident, and the story is saved only by an intricate and very well conducted collage of shifting viewpoints by trial

witnesses and reporters, revealing as much about themselves as about the case in hand; in the slighter "Kunstfehler in Harmonopolis" (Technical Mistakes in Harmonyville), written in detective mystery form, the motivation is, much more interestingly, a philistine insistence on subservient art (the story's title is itself a pun on both technical mistake and artistic erroneousness, "fehlerhafte Kunst").

Three further stories can be discussed in terms of collision between a techno-bureaucratic behavior or frame of mind and a fusion of new productivity with beauty and tradition (thus looking forward to their third novel). "Jonatans Rückkehr" (Jonathan's Return) develops this in the guise of a semi-humorous variation on the US "tough guy" crime story; in a computerized future, an old-fashioned safe-cracker hankering after romantic personal involvement à la the *Threepenny Opera* can only satisfy it by opening a city quarter of fictitious crime for tourists. The short story "Cäsars Kuhglockengeläut" (The Jingling of Caesar's Cowbells) is much more significant. It is very well told by an involved narrator changing her opinion about the protagonist as she comes to understand that he, despite his lack of sentimentality, stands for the incorporation of esthetics into productivity. It is a *tour de force* of economic clarity, set in a down-to-earth near future and successfully blending the serious theme of a socialist-realist "production tale" with understated sexiness and graceful wit in order to create a deceptively simple SF story. But the masterpiece of this vein and the whole collection is the title story, "The Mistake Factor": in a utopian future, the protagonist is sent to find the reasons for the malfunctioning of a computer made of "ideum" conductors and directing the whole economy. The vivid settings of a national park comprise the Bertolt Brecht Lake, whose rejuvenating qualities are being investigated by a female scientist, and the inertia-inducing Computer Centre nearby. The narrator-protagonist finally finds out that a banal malfunctioning was never made public because of self-satisfaction induced by the humming apparatus:

> We are fascinated by the perfectness of our grandiose machine. We stare at it as at a fetish. Its noises are music to our ears. Probably people earlier stared in this way at statues of the idols which they had created for themselves … Our critical thinking has withered away …. Believe me, first comes intoxication, and then pacification.

> I have lived through it myself. But if we now get in there aware that there is a mistake factor, that the humming is in no way perfect, then we are stronger than this machine. For we are men.

The allegorical aspects of this tale – opposing the rejuvenation connected with a critical non-pacifying, anti-bureaucratic Marxism of Brecht's stripe (which has to be drunk at the source) to the suppression of critical examination in a huge but tired technocracy – are obvious. However, it can also be enjoyed as a scientific puzzle or as the psychological story of a hero divided between the enclosed and sterile apparatus and the female principle of inquisitive and erotic life in the open. In short, this parable has both a consistent tenor and a consistent – that is, empirically believable – surface or vehicle. Its final resolution, where the evicted computer crew comes to its senses after one week out of the machine's power, is certainly utopian – in a sense which will vary from positive to contemptuous according to the reader. But the "conflict in good faith," where both sides share finally the same values, seems to me a quite acceptable form not only in socialist utopianism but in any SF taking the basic ethos of science seriously.

The only not quite satisfactory story of this collection is to my mind "Homo Pipogenus erectus," where a Faustian pact between a lazy humanity and its badly programmed creative powers results in the formation of an intelligent bird-derived pseudo-humanity, in the vein of Čapek's Salamanders or indeed of Frankenstein's Creature. The Shelleyan dilemma of an unpleasant yet rightly autonomous creation remains here not only unresolved but also unclear and narratively unconcluded. But the eight stories contain to my mind three small masterpieces ("Choosing," "Caesar," and "Mistake Factor"), four good and amusing stories, and one dud: on balance, an extremely respectable showing. It amounts to a system that not only has a common conflictual denominator – one could call it, from the wittily ironical title of one story, "Technical Errors in Harmonyville" – but also a common stock of characters and devices, in particular a precise and beautifully flexible control of the narrative voice. Most important, at the heart of the stories there can be found the feminine principle associated with sexual emotion, productive self-management, and critical intelligence, while the male principle is (in an amusing subversion of patriarchal chauvinism) associated with instinct and/or domestic practicality.

The Brauns' second novel, *Uncanny Phenomena on Omega 11* ("Phenomena" does not quite render the witty possibilities, exploited in several places, of what would literally be "Forms of Appearing") has the two astronauts met in the "Choosing" story investigating a call for help from a colony of Terran refugees on the planet Omega 11. Their apt names, Merkur Erdenson and Elektra Eulenn, suggest, while never directly allegorizing, their complementary tempers: in the first case, a mercurial intellectual and bodily agility of the novel's disrespectful narrator, representative of the best Earth (*Erde*) has at that moment to offer; and in the second case an owl-like (*Eule*) fundamental knowledge and wisdom as well as partial blindness, the somewhat literal-minded naivety of a prize-winning scientist (with a hint at Teutonic bureaucratic precision, and possibly at the great mathematician Euler), finally redeemed by the capacity of adapting to new situations. The erotic and cognitive interplay between the playful Merkur and the serious Elektra (following the already mentioned inversion of gender roles, and with the Graeco-Roman names the Brauns often use), are treated with delicate verisimilitude and provide one main strand of the plot: from their grudging acceptance of each other, through connubial bliss on the trip, to estrangement on the planet because of Elektra's initial credulity toward the orderly appearing help-seekers who turn out to be evil plotters, and then to smooth teamwork in solving the political problem found, and their final growing apart during the return trip.

The mirror image of that strand is the adventure-puzzle, which besides the treacherous Lumes (an exploiting elite who had fled utopian Earth in "the grey prehistory" and have by now degenerated) gradually reveals the presence of two more races, originally created by the Lumes through genetic manipulation and now controlled through cunning use of inbuilt physiological addictions – that is, incessant labor for the working and incessant thinking for the intellectual servant race or class. Our heroes circumvent all this by brain rather than brawn – no arms nor even fistfights are resorted to – and leave a planet of liberated and slowly intermingling races (including the Lumes, who are tolerantly pensioned off). The lightly ironic and playful touch is reaffirmed at the end: Elektra evades Merkur's desire to take back with them Ludana, a girl from the intellectuals' race, and back on Earth Merkur returns to his repairman's job: "I mean, we can

develop as far as you wish, there'll always be something to repair," are the final words of the novel. I would venture to read the ending as delicately suggesting that the time for the "ludic" spirit of playfulness has not arrived yet in the refreshingly imperfect future utopia of the novel, whose own future yet remains open, reparable. This would be of a piece with the emphasis placed in the course of the whole story on the necessity of fusing play with physical or intellectual work: it is this insight that enables Merkur and the Earth values to overcome at key junctures the extreme, almost Wellsian, class isolation and specialization on Omega 11. This is also the message of the book to the readers, who are in a Brechtian term called "the ancestors" – read: the potential ancestors of a life as productive play.

The last novel of the 1970s, *Conviva ludibundus*, develops precisely this theme, and begins almost exactly at the point where the former novel left off. Toward its close, Merkur and Elektra were protesting against a statue of them being erected on Omega 11 – a clear "violation of personality," forbidden on the enlightened Earth. This hidden pun on the "cult of personality" for Stalin in Russia and the imitators in Russian satellite States opens the narration of Professor Philemon, chief seabed gardener, concerning the strange intelligent "bio-electronic life-form" in the sea: Philemon is dreading the "cult rituals" he is threatened with for his approaching 90th birthday. The Conviva, probably created by accident, and whose Latin name translates approximately as "playful boon-companion," is the indispensable symbiotic link in the production of the famed "Green Medallion" mussels which contain all the vitamins, enzymes, and trace-elements necessary for the humans of the third millennium; only its discoverer Philemon has a tacit, gardener-like understanding of the Conviva's needs and nature. In the plot of the novel, Philemon's scientific successor, Professor Dr H. H. Mittelzwerck (the speaking name could translate roughly as "ridiculous mediocre pygmy"), intervenes to "rationalize" the cultivation of mussels by erecting "necessary" enclosures. The resulting disappearance of the mussel is to be made good by equipping a Verne-like super-technological super-vehicle, designed to navigate in all elements, to seek for it. Both Philemon and the popular performer Friederike, called Kutz, are invited to participate in the expedition of this Ship of State which is also a Ship of Fools. The leader is, of course, Mittelzwerck, a typically

dour, unimaginative, hardworking, upwardly mobile, conscientious, vain, and pompous "assiduoaspiringascendentity" (*Fleissstrebeaufstiegswesen*). The expedition develops following the hallowed folktale scheme of the temporary triumph and final downfall of the scientific villain, who manages – by misusing some scraps of Philemon's knowledge – to turn the Convivas into unstoppable producers of gigantic, watery, tasteless mussels as well as information-gatherers about the fate of every grain of sand on the seabed (a sideswipe on the secret police of GDR, but possibly not only of it). Catastrophe for the vessel and the world is only averted by Kutz: unwittingly, teaching the Convivas playful "attractions" or "numbers," she deprograms them from sterile production of things and data. Prefigured in Kutz's "dress-tease" number and her song about "The grey waters of boredom" earlier on in the novel, this scene, with its mobile aquatic bioconstructions (the Convivas are large one-celled beings which can come together into changing multicelled shapes) and multi-dimensional ballets, is the novel's *pièce de résistance*, not too far from the description of mimoids in Lem's *Solaris*. Parabolically: an ever-dynamic beauty, organized by art, is the only antidote to elitist and self-perpetuating power with nasty hints of possible ubiquitous psychological and ideological supervision by authorities – which leads to technocratic catastrophe.

This latest SF novel by the Brauns in the 1970s seems to me darker and weightier, perhaps even more bitter, than the earlier ones. True, it ends well, but all is not well in it. For the first time the sympathetic and right narrator remains more or less passive: conversely, the antagonist has grown more powerful and menacing. Thus the happy ending seems more in the nature of a Pascalian bet than a result of the right side's strength. To put it into Schiller's terms, the "naive" optimism of most of the earlier works is giving way to a "sentimental," though probably no less believable, approach. This also sets the Brauns' pendulum between SF and folktale again going somewhat toward the folktale side (e.g., the mumbo-jumbo with Philemon's pocket-calculator), though this novel is still clearly to be considered as parabolic SF.

On the whole, chances are that this is a critical point in the Brauns' evolution. The horizon of utopian ethics remains constant throughout their development, but by 1978 the road to it leads through increasingly heavy

obstacles. This evolution reminds one in some ways of the Strugatskys', except that the Brauns have on the one hand not concentrated on writing SF (or near-SF) and on the other hand have not succumbed to the Russians' frequent temptation to symbolistic abstraction, presenting societal effects without a clear causal chain. Still, it is heartening to note that the shift from light irony to more somber satire has remained accompanied by comedy and wit, flowing out of their central orientation toward disrespectful and funny inversion of received authority – power structures as well as opinions – in favor of continual playful cognizing. In that sense the Brauns are in the best German tradition of *exempla*, parables or witty *contes philosophiques* tempering Teutonic earnestness with productive play, which runs – to cite some great names – from Brant and Lessing through some Romantics such as Jean Paul or Tieck to Brecht (whom they not infrequently allude to). Their tough-minded gentleness is able to treat serious power struggles without slam-bang violence, using, as *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* has it, pencils instead of pistols. They do not like fathers, but only – as discussed apropos of *Omega 11* – the forefathers of the playfully radical novum. In that sense, their whole characterization and tone places them at the strategic pivot in GDR writing between the SF of Branstner or Ziergiebel and the "high lit" of Anna Seghers and especially of Christa Wolf (both of whom, significantly, have also written SF) or Irmtraud Morgner.

To complete my account with a very brief overview of the 1980s, the Brauns have, while keeping to their constant horizons, become embattled faced with what they perceive as a stronger repressive current in the GDR (among other things, they left the official Union of Writers). This attitude, and the attendant pragmatic pressures on them as freelance writers, has resulted in a genre diversification of their writings. Outside of SF this has led to some brilliant works of travelogue, Hoffmannesque fantasy, essays, a fictional biography of Socrates as parable on the difficulties of an independent and disrespectful thinker, and even a book of witty culinary recipes crossbred with erotics. In SF, this has resulted in a number of short stories published in various East and West German anthologies, and in the books *Der Utofant* (The Utofant: A Periodical from the Third Millennium Found in the Future, 1981), *Das Kugeltranszendentale Vorhaben* (The Spherico-Transcendental Design, 1983), *Die unhörbaren Töne* (The Inaudible Sounds,

1984), and *Der x-mal vervielfachte Held* (The X-times Multiplied Hero, 6 stories, 1985) – the three latter, just like the Socrates book, published only in West Germany. These are more fragmentary and as a rule briefer then their earlier writings, but just as elegant and ironical. Thus, increasingly dark and forlorn, the Brauns' playful cognizing yet remains part of the "warm current" in socialism, colliding with the cold one.

Possibly the best way to conclude this account, which has so often led me to mention of the Brauns' artful manipulation of narrative voices, is to say that they have managed to attain a distinct narrative voice of their own. This is not a small success. If one compared them only with other writers from the Warsaw Pact countries (to some of whom they are paradoxically more comparable than to a West German writer such as Herbert Franke – though they sometimes remind me also of Ursula Le Guin), one would immediately have to raise the question: who has a characteristic narrative voice there, among the surely nearly 200 writers of SF? The strongest one is, of course, Lem's voice: quite distinct are those of the Strugatskys and of Shefner, the late Ivan Yefremov and Ilya Varshavski each had a habitus of his own, perhaps half a dozen other Soviet writers might also be found to have one, so do or did perhaps four or five more such voices in Bucharest and Budapest, and there was one in Prague. And from the 1970s, there are the Brauns in Magdeburg: a place, a voice, on the SF map of Europe. Denying the division into "high" and "low" fictional genres (the very terms proclaim its elitism and mindlessness), this also means: on the literary map of our times.