

Ludwig Rubiner

Brief Sketch by the Translator:

It is only necessary that we march forward. What matters now is the movement. The intensity, and the will to catastrophe. — Ludwig Rubiner, *Der Dichter greift in die Politik*

Ludwig Rubiner, a glittering figure whose brilliance briefly illuminated expressionism before vanishing into its obscure depths. Forgotten in Germany, never known in America, yet undeniably a force of recognition. Like many of the early expressionists—the world-changers, the subversives, the destroyers—Rubiner's beginnings formed in the circuits of the German Boheme. A flirtation with anarchism, mingling in the company of Erich Mühsam and Gustav Landauer, Herwarth Walden and Ferdinand Hardekopf—lives lived beyond bourgeois propriety, beyond Protestant Puritanism and "Prussian excellence."

Rubiner began—like so many before him—not simply as a poet or prose writer, but as a critic, a bohemian, an advocate for intensity and movement. Not quite at home in Nietzsche's philosophy of life, he traced a different trajectory—through the Young Hegelians, through Stirner. *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* as manifesto, as vector, as force. A widening pursuit, a longing for rupture—for an unbinding of the isolation embedded in capitalist relations, relations that approach totality — yet never settle.

Rubiner translated—Verlaine, Sologub, Kusmin, Gogol.

Rubiner spoke—of Brod, Lasker-Schüler, Blass, Heinrich Mann.

Rubiner published—in *Der Pan*, *Der Sturm*, *Die Aktion*.

To move is to deterritorialize. No loyalty to homeland or patriotic squabbles could anchor Rubiner. He passed through Paris, Italy, Russia, Switzerland—continental Europe as a zone of circulation. Was it refuge? Perhaps. But within expressionism, could "refuge" mean anything but an intensification of exile?

Paris—the mother of the Commune, of the Arcades, of the Supreme Being—birthed his manifesto. In Swiss exile, among revolutionaries, the texts continued—provocative, explosive, pyramidal. Returning to Berlin, he engaged in immediate composition: with Franz Jung, Arthur Holitscher, Rudolf Leonhardt, Alfons Goldschmidt, he forged the *Bund für proletarische Kultur*—tracing Bogdanov's line. With Piscator, the Proletarian Theatre, an automatic confrontation with KPD conservatism.

Had death not intercepted in 1920, Rubiner's trajectory might have taken him through the KAPD, through council communism, or through the yet-unfolding intellectual phalanx of Grosz, Brecht, Lania. In February 1920, pneumonia cut his line. The eulogies came from Franz Pfemfert and Felix Hollaender—Pfemfert, acute as ever, attuned to "the latest poetry" and societal upheaval, in resonance with Rubiner's own manifesto. That 1913 manifesto still speaks, still cries out—it does not settle, does not conclude. It screams, it yearns, it constructs. Foundations for an era: the era of Dada, of Proletkult, of Montage and Biomechanics, of Lunacharsky and Meyerhold—of upheaval, of organization and destruction, of movement. Or as Bergson might put it: of duration itself.

The Poet Intervenes in Politics

The legend is the first step toward truth.

—Dostoevsky

A critical poet intervened in politics—a literary figure. Many try to convince me that this is inconsequential, that the matter is being overestimated. I cannot agree. It must be considered that here is a man teaching politics who has shaped the artistic thought of an entire generation. When his psychological journal gains public attention (which is only a matter of persistence), this politics will also have an effect.

I cannot even engage with other people—the pigs of skeptical naïveté—who ask: Why engage in politics at all? Why engage in life? Doesn't everything happen by itself...?

Politics is the public declaration of our moral intentions. And if there were some truth that could prove our moral intention is not a moral duty—there would still be a hundred thousand people ready to regard it as one. That is decisive.

There are some things I know that I am no longer willing to debate. I know that there is only one moral goal in life: intensity, fiery trails of intensity, their bursting, splintering, their detonation. Their scattering, their destruction, and their bearing witness to eternal remembrance in a single second. I know the cannonades of the earth's crust—dust disintegrating, old crusts breaking apart, the seething fire-hiss of the spirit emerging. I know that there is no development. I know that the accumulation of masses does not change the motives behind that accumulation (in people). That quantities never transform into qualities through mere addition (the theory of evolution). Instead, only our civilization progresses (without irony!). Civilization, which is merely the technique of deflecting our exhaustion. Civilization is neither to be fought nor sought; it is something that exists, surrounding us, binding us, imprisoning us—but never truly ruling us. Strictly speaking: the progress of (our) civilization will increasingly prevent us from slapping our table neighbor in the face, but it will never prevent us from wanting to do so.

I know that there are only catastrophes. Conflagrations, explosions, leaps from tall towers, light, wild flailing, amok screams. These are our thousandfold-filtered memories that from the gaping maw of catastrophe, the spirit emerges. There is only one moral goal in life: to strip away the new gentle sweetnesss of recent times from these memories. To halt the progress of civilization. To expel the self-evidence and security of being carried by one's environment. To bring intensity into human life for a fleeting moment: under shocks, horrors, threats, to make the individual's sense of responsibility in the community conscious!

There are heroes, and even as they perish, they threaten movements of terror. The legions of civilization—the thundering masses of greengrocers, porters, journalists, bank clerks, theatergoers, unlucky lottery players, and patriotic brothel-keepers—grind their corpses into pulp with their boot heels.

"We?"

No. I am not alone.

Though this is no proof. But it is a joy.

Who are We?

Who are the comrades? Prostitutes, poets, pimps, collectors of lost objects, petty thieves, idlers, lovers in the midst of embrace, religious lunatics, drunkards, chain-smokers, the unemployed, gluttons, vagabonds, burglars, blackmailers, critics, narcoleptics. Scum. And for moments, all the women of the world. We are the refuse, the dregs, the despised. We are the unemployed, the unemployable, the unwilling to work.

We do not want to work because it is too slow. We are unteachable about progress—it does not exist for us. We believe in the miracle, in the abrupt end to all that flows within us, in our bodies suddenly being consumed by fiery spirit, in eternal fulfillment in a single moment. We seek fiery visions in our memory all our lives, chase after every color, want to hurl ourselves into foreign spaces, into foreign bodies. We transform into organ tones, the vibrations of instruments, slipping through all the clusters of music's cells—out and in again, like lightning.

We light a cigarette, we fit into a new coat, we drink schnapps; women let themselves fall into the water with closed eyes and wild arms (there are also awe-inspiring, incendiary women). We throw ourselves, grinning and twisted, with four arms onto ridiculous chaise longues, penetrate one another across mountains of skirts—it is all miracles to us. And we do it all again and again, because we are never disappointed to the end. Our hope is boundless that the overwhelming pressure of bliss will shatter the daily life of civilization into ruins.

Who are we? We are the people of the great cities. Silhouettes driven into the air between centuries. We are those for whom a mere stay upon the skin is painful; seconds of disappointment would become unforgettable, burning wounds of boredom for a lifetime. Everything must pass so quickly that the past hisses into the air like a trail of dust behind a motor. The air around us must tremble. Never wait! Through fleeting friendships and Russia's fits of rage, the golden trumpeting sermons of France, Italian suspicion, swift uncoverings between conventions, devotion, piercing words, sympathies, ambushes—through England's docks at five in the morning, under a reeking heap of people waiting for work, poised to leap forward and trample the man beside them; through the howling gray dust of Whitechapel...

We no longer want to wait. We cannot endure it any longer.

We love this political poet because he cannot endure it. We were still schoolboys when this European taught us that one does not need to wait. And that "Patience, everything will develop in time" is merely a barroom slogan.

This man, granted to Germany by fate, was always a living catastrophe. His life is already a mythic example of our inability to wait. He always entered the German public sphere with explosions—a public accustomed to murmuring indignantly about swinishness until it calcifies.

His life would be clear if one could imagine this logically constructed spiral: he destroys existences in the great city of Chicago—a ruling critic who extorts cash and victuals from the criticized. A reigning poet whose fat makes the beef magnates applaud. A police chief, a boss whom no one can tolerate anymore. This life is consistent! And why should this act, simply because it takes place in distant Chicago, concern us more than, say, Berlin? Wouldn't this path be even more ours in Berlin—from the critic Tappert, the social fall; to the poet Sudermann, the public fall; to the director Jagow, the political fall?

I always laugh when a synthetic mind fears: destruction. Only the (only!) moral force of the destructive makes us happy. Proof: this political poet has enriched the German language each time. He has taught rudeness that no German before him had conceived. Whenever he revealed something, only indestructible spiritualities were laid bare—connections between our (carefully hidden) daily experiences and, yes, the soul.

And that is why it is good that literature bursts into politics.

II.

The question must be asked: How can a man of our intellect support the swindle of development? (One answers oneself: out of kindness, dissolving into tolerated misunderstanding!)

But where is the famed "development"—and where is it not? Development—the jargon of the nineteenth century—equated with the enhancement of capabilities through the accumulation of quantities. (Qualities from quantities. Nuance as a step.) It truly applies only to what, in physical terms, is called "mass." Thus, in civilization. Everything technical falls under development: the beloved factory chimneys (in the charming lighting of popular painters), the railways ("the mighty rail network"), telephones, the records of the *Titanics*, wireless transmission, soaps, typesetting machines, artificial wines, rubber products, photography, police administrations, cannons, airships, canning factories, fountain pens, afternoon papers, instructions on hypnotism, well-imitated carpets, accumulators, garden tables, plaster casts, rotary presses, mass armies, Harrod, Duval, Aschinger, and Sir Thomas Lipton—all can develop. Or is this an imprecise word? Perhaps more accurately: all can refine and diversify themselves, progress—rearrange atoms under pressure and counterpressure.

But what cannot develop is that which creates development: the—excuse me—spirit. A man may sell penny rolls to hurried customers and, twenty years later, take over the bankrupt exhibition park. That is development. The path from a sausage roll to the next million-dollar bankruptcy is continuous—a progression.

But ideas do not crawl forth in the same manner. Between the idea of, say, the airship and the idea of the airplane, there is neither development nor progress. They are entirely independent of each other. Ideas are always there—and always new. And every idea is a catastrophe, like every new person one encounters.

Once, when the critical poet was seized by fury (instinctively siding with the spirit against civilization), he used this phrase about the typical poet of civilization: "In Germany, anyone who does not shove the knife into their throat is called an aesthete." One cannot reinforce the (understandable yet comical)

ambition of civilization's representatives—to regard their wave of development as the wave of the world—except by pelting it with wittier, more moral mockery.

Civilization can be learned. Eating, expressing oneself within limits, being inoffensive: taste. Everything can be learned. To say this of the spirit, however, immediately becomes comical. Not perhaps out of lack of habit.

Rather, from its supreme superiority over the purely quantitative, the adhesive, the massive—that which, in scientific terms, is the inertia of civilization.

One sees, the point here is not to be against civilization. That would be an absurdity. Just as well one might wish to be against "quantity" or against "matter." Verses lined with the hues of Rousseau's prism—"See, we primitives are still...," or "We courtesans are still the better humans," or "See, we artists..."—are nonsense. Civilization is something that exists. But this existing thing is a very partial matter of the world. Beyond it, there is still spirit, spirit, spirit.

A good poet does not write about factories, radio towers, or automobiles, but about the force lines that emanate from these things in space. The thing exists for humans. We are not idyllists. – Now that the gaping awe before technology is over, because it has been classified as something self-evident; now there is no fundamental difference between the *Iliad* and Heinrich Mann's *Small Town*. No fundamental one. How close this brings the *Iliad*! – Force lines construct a poem. (And only as long as one could believe that civilization filled the entire world, that a Marconi transmitter was not merely the expression of an idea but a thing in itself—and as long as one held this primitive belief—was Homer considered "outdated." However: only the Marconi transmitters become outdated!)

A telephone is convenient, but sometimes it must be destroyed.

Civilization is beneficial, but it accrues too much interest. If civilization had its way, the largest belly would be awarded a prize—yet something within man seems to resist this.

For if the whole mechanism does not occasionally rupture and send everyone into a deathly fright, then life is boring. I quote the poet: "Immer Salamiwurst..."

We rejoice at every man who, for a moment, coagulates the entire developmental situation of civilization. The simple-minded might babble: "Because the gesture is beautiful." No—because he brings movement into what is otherwise cohesive. Glorious is he who disrupts continuity. Derision against habituation. Craters against democrats.

It is unworthy of the political writer, the agitator, the intellectual, the shaper of fundamental forms—it is unworthy of him to believe he must lower himself beneath his capabilities for us. The Marxist (evolutionary) proof that nineteenth-century civilization must one day be accessible to all is an overestimation of this civilization.

We demand that the poet thrust himself into the commercial tracks, these little corners full of winks, these press feuds full of feigned excitement, these little mysteries where everything is already clear, this postponement of crises. Into the sordines of this perpetual *Keep calm* tactic, along with its dietarily

compensated excitement on a schedule of weeks, days, and hours. Into these movements of mining, railways, and petroleum interests. He must enter the pathetophone performance they call politics.

And even if obstacles arise; if he no longer quite believes in his own life, does not see his own fury, does not recognize his own catastrophes; no longer knows that he has lashed out, that the whirlwind of his actions has carried him along spirals (not on gentle plains). Even if he is impressed by the natural sciences, if he attends the church of development on Sundays; if he believes in Marxism, in the accumulation of civilization yielding an accumulation of spirit. Even if he feels more bound to some fixed idea of heavenly ascensions of the environment than to the signs of his own life: he does the immeasurable, because he intervenes in politics.

Russian revolutionaries were criticized for going into remote villages and declaring: Come out, the Tsar has ordered you to revolt! – They were accused of supporting the absolutist principle. False, false, empty talk! They did well. (The valuable thing in this game: to overthrow through support!) What matters is to generate upheaval.

When the poet, the agitator, enters politics—when he transforms self-indulgences and self-torments into the disgust of action, when he relishes the vile bliss of being a voice for others (having until then been his own voice); when he undergoes this invaluable self-surrender, which is reserved only for the most concentrated man—then, in this transformation of forces, an immeasurable moral energy is unleashed. It radiates into space, detonates under the seats of writers, pleasure-seekers, politicians.

He must believe in his intensity, in his explosive power. The issue is neither our civilization nor its development. The political poet must not exhaust his situation in insights but must push away inhibitions.

In Germany, where my brothers once cursed themselves before these lines were written (and where one falls out with those one loves, because they were written), in this land of damnation and flagellation, the point is not to move from our legend to some truth. It is only necessary that we march forward.

What matters now is the movement. The intensity, and the will to catastrophe.