The truncated road movie: Thomas Brasch and the Berlin Wall

essay by **Jakob Norberg**

In an interview from 1977, author Thomas Brasch, who had recently moved from the GDR to West Germany, said that people in East Germany experienced the same problems as in any other contemporary industrial society. There were struggles with bureaucracy everywhere, and a declining faith in economic and technological progress. East Germany was no different from Finland or Japan. The Berlin Wall, he added, was really the only "GDR-specific problem".[1] But the Wall was hardly a minor issue. Later in the same interview, he laconically characterized his formative conditions as a writer in a way that suggested the dominating presence of the *Mauer*: "I started writing when the GDR was a functioning state, which was surrounded by a wall."[2]

It is no surprise, then, that the Wall figures in Brasch's first collection of stories, *Vor den Vätern sterben die Söhne*, from the same year, 1977. Brasch had written the stories in the GDR but taken the manuscript with him to West Berlin and published it with Rotbuch, a left-wing publisher there. The longest story of the collection tracks the travels of a group of young people, two men and one woman. In this story, the Wall appears several times: the text alludes to it tacitly, then refers to it explicitly, and finally the characters visit it. Towards the end of the story, the three friends are in Berlin for a blues concert and make their way to the Wall, an episode Brasch renders with absolute terseness: "After the concert we went to the Wall. I thought it was higher than that, Sophie said."[3] Unlike Brasch, the characters never cross over to the West.

Thomas Brasch was obviously neither the first nor the best-known author to write about the Wall.[4] One of the most famous novels on the division of Germany is Christa Wolf's 1963 bestseller *Der geteilte Himmel*. Between Wolf's novel and Brasch's story, however, the heavens have darkened and hardened. For Brasch, the sky is no longer partitioned, but has become a part of the enclosure; it is a lid, a cover. The title of the story mentioned above reads, "Und über uns schließt sich ein Himmel aus Stahl". About fifteen years after the division of the sky referred to in Wolf's novel, the area to the East has turned into a vault; it is a border above people's heads, a boundary that contains and confines them.

But is there a way in which the Wall is not simply mentioned in the title of Brasch's story or gestured to in a brief scene, but somehow inscribed into the text, into its very literary form? I think there is. Let me summarize the story.

Three young East Germans meet, spend some time together, maybe a couple of weeks, and then disperse again. The male narrator meets Robert, a student, at a rare screening of a controversial, prohibited film. After getting into a fight with what are probably undercover secret police agents sent to intimidate the audience, the two escape and leave the city on a motorbike. They travel to the East German coast and stay on the beach for a while. While there, Robert persuades Sophie, a young female nursing student working in a pub, to join them. The three of them share intimate stories, bicker, go bathing, have sex, mockingly participate in a cheesy seaside resort singing competition, go on trips with the motor bike, and attend the American Folk Blues Festival in the capital. After a few days, the group breaks up. Sophie must return to her child and start her hospital work. The narrator works in a factory and cannot extend his sick leave. And Robert tries illegally to cross the German-German border and dies. In their final heated discussion about what to do next – get back to work routines or somehow continue their marginal existence – Robert accidentally smashes the motorbike: there will be no more traveling.

Summarized in this way, the story pattern may seem vaguely familiar. The plot has an unstructured feel to it. It jumps from encounter to encounter, moves through a seemingly random series of events in a journey without a clear destination. It is about a few young people who want to live more freely and wildly, to disregard duties and conventions, until their obligations close in on them again and the resulting tensions strain their relationships. The group seeks a "mobile refuge from social circumstances felt to be lacking or oppressive".[5] They hop on a bike and embrace, however briefly, "the road as a way of life".[6] In other words, Brasch's story belongs to the genre of the road movie, the emblematic countercultural narrative form in which the improvised nomadism of nonconformists with motorized vehicles represents a challenge to the normative-administrative order of the hegemonic majority. The story of their trip more or less begins with Robert sitting behind the narrator on the motorbike and shouting out: "Let's get out of the city, just go wherever, someplace where we can get more air."[7] And then they travel to the shoreline, where they can feel the damp sea breeze on their faces.

It may seem odd to invoke a very American genre to discuss a text about the GDR, but Brasch's story is already well-stocked with similar references to popular culture from the West. The narrator and his friend sing the songs of the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, and Simon and Garfunkel as they work themselves up into excitement about the folk concert in Berlin. "Every day I have the blues", Robert exclaims on the beach, and the prison legends of American blues artists seem to resonate with their own helplessness.[8] They see their own boxed-in lives reflected in the songs of men on death row in the Louisiana State Penitentiary. The story couldn't possibly contain more interregional encounters, moments of cultural cross-pollination, and transmogrified German-English (or *"denglisch"*) phrases, given the boundaries that were imposed to filter or completely arrest the flow of people, ideas, and goods between East and West. The blues artists who perform have been invited to the GDR, and so are presumably considered non-threatening by the regime, but the three protagonists listening to them associate the music with their own entrapment. It is not an exaggeration to say that the characters in this East German story are animated by cultural energies coming from the Cold War enemy.

Yet the story embodies the pattern of the road movie genre only imperfectly. It is here that we must return to the Wall. Perhaps we can say that the Berlin Wall is not simply mentioned or indicated as a cruel physical barrier in the text, but also shows up in the text as a limit imposed on full participation in a genre, a closing that shows up too early in the unfolding of the generic pattern. "And Over Us a Sky of Steel Is Closing" is an abbreviated, even truncated road movie. The protagonists set out on an impromptu journey away from everything that burdens them: the tedium of factory work, the narrowness of dogmatic Marxist university teaching, the unspoken norms on how to conduct one's social and sexual life, and, most immediately, the censorship and thuggish political oppression. And they have barely started out when they run up against the limit. It takes them little time to travel to the coast, a day's ride interrupted only by a fuel stop, and geographically, that is as far as they ever get. There is no path across the water. Instead, they soon return from the seaside, and even claim that the sea gets irritating after a while, only to find themselves standing finally at the Wall. They travel, but not further and further away from a starting point. Instead, they get to the sea and back again, closer and closer to the impenetrable barrier that seals off their life trajectories. Any road movie might portray claustrophobia and people eager to escape enclosure, but in Brasch's case, the period of relief is really very short. If the text activates the road movie pattern as a possible frame of interpretation, this association serves only to highlight how its heroes can do nothing but move in circles within an enclosed space.

Judging by Brasch's text, there is not enough room for a road movie in the GDR. It is not the fact that the story ends in such a melancholy, desperate way that prevents full membership in the genre, but the fact that it must end so quickly. The road epic has shrunk to a road novella. Yet paradoxically, this curtailed variant may be the ultimate road movie, because it actualizes the idea that traveling is inherently subversive. The heroes are either outlaws escaping from the forces of control, or non-conformists breaking out of their designated place in society.[9] In a party state that oversees and molds every aspect of citizens' behavior, one could argue, the unplanned and aimless road trip can once again become genuinely subversive. While people who crisscross the country, crash local talent shows, steal alcohol, explore their sexuality, and listen to blues music may not be engaging in unequivocal political protest, they are clearly not helping to build the socialist state.

But here we must avoid a tired and facetious account of how intolerant societies keep the idea of rebellion interesting, or how demarcations and discipline help restore the liberating impulse of the road movie. If a repressive party state narrows down the space of permissible behavior, more and more seemingly trivial actions will be classified as implicit protest.[10] And if that same state installs a system of nearly total surveillance and nearly perfect border control, these forms of protest will become completely neutralized, contained, and ineffectual.[11] The result, in Brasch's story, is that the characters go mad out of total helplessness. They are not outlaws on the run from the law because everything they do, no matter how trivial, is potentially suspicious; nor are they wild and free individuals who defy the borders of their world because there really is no road, just a day-long trip to a dead end. The protagonists are stuck in the static condition of inescapable and ineffective rebellion.

In Brasch's story, East Germany is a functioning state surrounded by a wall, a circumscribed, homogeneous space with no exit or threshold, a single cell.[12] The GDR citizen is confined to one area, but, according to Brasch, also trapped in a single phase of life, or kept in an extended childhood. The non-journey corresponds to personal non-development. In another interview from 1977, Brasch explained that there was no way for East German citizens to keep out of politics, since all actions were judged by their ideological potential, but that there was also no way of formulating political alternatives in cooperation with others. As a result, people were reduced to a state of "childish obstinacy".[13] These observations bring home the harrowing meaning of the collection's title, "The Sons Die Before the Fathers". The "sons", the heirs of socialism, never leave adolescence, or never cross the threshold from one space or one age to another. The road trip and the life journey are both contained and sealed off by barriers.

To read Brasch's texts is to witness people scurrying about and never growing up under a sky of steel. This can be a discomforting experience. *Vor den Vätern sterben die Söhne* was published in West Germany but not in the East, for obvious reasons. The truncated road movie was bound to one of the two German states, the GDR, and never describes a place outside it, although the author and the first generation of readers were located outside. Today, the reader, critic, or scholar inherits this position outside East Germany, and slips into the role of someone watching as people suffocate inside the *"Riesenknast"*, or gigantic prison, next door.[14]

Brasch himself said that he paid no attention to the geopolitical map when writing, and he clearly wanted to avoid ranking the two Germanys or celebrating either of them. When interviewers in the West invited him to facilitate self-congratulatory West German attitudes by speaking of his first-hand experience of GDR horrors, he declined. But because the 1977 collection of stories could only be published in the West, there was never a time when it could avoid placing the reader in the position of an external witness to stunted development under conditions of confinement. In the text written in and about the East, but made available in the West, the border lies between the reader and the events represented. Brasch's *Vor den Vätern sterben die Söhne* is a case of "dislocated literature"[15]: the collection crossed the demarcation line of the Cold War, and was immediately approached as a document of life behind the Wall.

Modern literature often guides its readers behind the scenes. In a complex world, authors can take us into spaces and minds that would otherwise be inaccessible and unknown to us. Brasch does so, but so do countless other authors; this is nothing remarkable. In the case of Brasch's story about a leaden sky, however, the author and the initial and primary book market were just on the other side of the Berlin Wall, and the story does not make its readers invisible spectators of scenes in distant, inaccessible places. Rather, I would suggest, it pulls the reader quite close to the neighboring, country-wide prison, and even shows the reader models of privileged spectatorship. For instance, one West German in the truncated road movie is a tourist chatting to the desperate Robert at a train station. It is clear that this traveler represents the opportunity to move freely and even visit inside the prison, a role shared by West German readers. "I'm sorry", the young visitor from the West says glibly, "every time I'm here I forget that you people can't get out".[16]

Brasch lets us peek over the Wall. And what we then see is how this wall destroys the people on the other side of it. Given the collection's publication history, the topic of Brasch's novella could not be simply life in East Germany, but rather life in East Germany as observed from somewhere else, or as seen by witnesses who are more mobile. Today, the text should perhaps not be read as a document of East German conditions, but rather as a document of East German conditions that was inevitably offered up for the voyeuristic consumption of a West German audience.

"The socialist experiment" is a common phrase that is obviously attractive to socialism's critics: to call socialism an experiment is to imply that a particular hypothesis – the proposition that socialism constitutes a viable and desirable political and economic system – was conclusively refuted when put to an empirical test, namely the attempt to construct a socialist society in the Eastern part of Germany and

Illustration: Moa Thelander

other places. No laws of history brought socialism about; it was a man-made endeavor that failed. But Brasch's cut-off road movie highlights another meaning of the "socialist experiment". When reading his story, we approach the text as a window onto a clearly delimited space in which a dreary human action is being played out. The protagonists are cast in the role of lab rats to be studied. What happens to human relationships under conditions of internment? How does detention affect well-being? These are questions that force themselves upon us when we are reading across the border. Brasch's novella does two things: it presents lives smothered by incarceration, and it also places the reader on the other side of the barrier, as a witness to the road movie that crashes into the Wall. ×

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references

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2 "Ich begann zu schreiben, als die DDR ein funktionierender Staat war, um den eine Mauer stand." Thomas Brasch, *"Ich merke mich nur im Chaos"*, p. 25.

3 "Nach dem Konzert gingen wir an die Mauer. Ich habe sie mir höher vorgestellt, sagte Sophie." Thomas Brasch, *Vor den Vätern sterben die Söhne*, Frankfurt am Main 2002, p. 56.

4 See Michael Opitz, "Mauer in der Literatur der DDR", in *Metzler Lexikon DDR-Literatur: Autoren, Institutionen, Debatten*, ed. Michael Opitz and Michael Hofmann, Stuttgart 2009, pp. 213–218.

5 David Laderman, *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie*, Austin 2002, p. 2.

6 Daniel Lopez, *Films by genre*, Jefferson, NC 1993, pp. 256–57.

7 "Weiter […] raus aus der Stadt, irgendwohin, wo man mehr Luft kriegt." Thomas Brasch, *Vor den Vätern sterben die Söhne*, p. 35.

8 "Every day I have the blues." Thomas Brasch, *Vor den Vätern sterben die Söhne*, p. 54.

9 See Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, "Introduction", in *The Road Movie Book*, ed. Cohan and Hark, New York 1997, pp. 1–14.

10 See Detlef Pollack and Dieter Rink, "Einleitung", in *Zwischen Verweigerung und Opposition: Politischer Protest in der DDR 1970–1989*, Frankfurt am Main 1997, pp. 7–29.

11 On Stasi surveillance in the GDR, see Jens Gieseke, *Mielke-Konzern: Die Geschichte der Stasi 1945–1990*, Stuttgart 2001.

12 On the space of the cell, see Sven Rücker, "Das Gesetz der Überschreitung: Eine philosophische Geschichte der Grenzen", Diss., FU Berlin, 2010, p. 324.

13 Thomas Hoernigk, Eberhard Knödler-Bunte, and Lienhard Awrzyn, "Interview with Thomas Brasch", trans. Eric Rentschler and Edward Weintraut, in *New German Critique* 12 (1977), pp. 141–168.

14 Thomas Brasch, *Vor den Vätern sterben die Söhne*, p. 129.

15 I borrow this phrase from Markus Huss, Kaisa Kaakinen, and Jenny Willner, the organizers of the Baltic "Dislocating Literature" network.

16 "Entschuldigen Sie […] jedesmal, wenn ich hier bin, vergesse ich, daß Sie ja nicht rauskommen." Thomas Brasch, *Vor den Vätern sterben die Söhne*, p. 61.

Baltic-Russian literature: writing from nowhere?

Illustration: Moa Thelander

commentary by **Taisija Laukkonen**

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a new "Russian minority"[1] began to take shape on the territory of the independent Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia). It was new in a number of ways. Historically, whether large or small, a Russian community had always been present in these territories. However, the independent cultural status of this minority within a separate state was not a foregone conclusion, even though there were precedents, as, for example, in Lithuania between the First and Second World Wars.

The post-Soviet Russian diaspora in the Baltic countries was novel not only in and of itself, but in comparison with other communities in the post-colonial world. First, the transformation of a group from the status of linguistic and cultural dominance to one of a minority occurred without a change of residence. This is most unusual in traditional diasporas. Second, certain cultural pretensions remained with regard to differences in the prestige of literary traditions.[2] The enthusiasm for the "preservation of Russian culture" that was characteristic of the Russian diaspora beyond the borders of the Soviet Union throughout the 20th century was no longer appealing, given the disappearance of the obvious obstacles to repatriation and participation in the life of modern Russia.

This has caused the new Russian diaspora to look for a different basis for its identity, and one of the steps that seemed necessary was the identification of cultural boundaries. Historical precedents of this kind of cultural mission include both assimilation of the achievements of Western cultures, and eastern, northern, or southern exoticism. In classical Russian literature, the images of the representatives were often developed through exotic dismissal. During the Soviet era, the Baltic socialist republics were considered the Westernized outskirts of the Soviet Union and, as such, the bearers of the prestige of Western culture. However, in the post-Soviet "world without borders", the newly emerged Baltic nations are neither one nor the other: too familiar to be considered exotic and, at the same time, not Western enough as far as the *real* West is concerned. Writers of Russian-German, Russian-French, and Russian-English cross-border cultural exchange appear to play the role of intermediaries in a culturally prestigious dialogue of equals, whereas Russian authors in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, having to develop their identity through their position in a cultural "beyond", find themselves struggling for legitimacy, uniqueness, and value their cultural dialogue.

Relations between the new Baltic national states and their Russian minorities are somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, the states were not interested in supporting or culturally advertising anything *Russian*, which, in the minds of some of the population, was synonymous with *Soviet*. On the other hand, attention to minorities is one of the most important characteristics of a contemporary democratic country, all the more so for members of the European Union. However, this does not imply that the dialogue with Russian culture is imposed from above. The cultural prestige of the Russian literary tradition is sufficiently high, compared to those of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, that those authors who are interested in accessing a wider international market cannot help but see a whole range of new opportunities in such a dialogue.

Despite the similarity of the general situation in the three Baltic States, the status of local Russian literature is different in each one. This is only partially due to the percentage of each state that is ethnically Russians.

In Lithuania, there is just one professional literary periodical in Russian, *Vilnius* magazine, which is published twice a year, sometimes even less frequently. It carries mainly Russian translations of Lithuanian authors and reviews by Lithuanian literary critics. A smaller portion of the magazine is devoted to work by local Russian-language writers. Although the Lithuanian Union of Writers can boast more than a dozen who are Russian-speaking, their activity goes almost unnoticed. In Latvia, in contrast, literary life is noticeably active, with numerous literary clubs and several periodicals. In Estonia, there is, in addition to periodicals, an electronic magazine called *Novye Oblaka* [New Clouds] that unites young Russian-language writers in Estonia. In addition, the *Eesti Kulturkapital* fund grants awards to local Russian-language writers annually.

Since Russian-language literary activity is more evident in Latvia and Estonia than it is in Lithuania, the latter is represented by only three authors on the New Literary Map of Russia[3] – which claims to represent the entire Russian-language "literary world" – whereas Estonia is represented by eleven authors and Latvia by sixteen. For comparison, Finland is represented by as many as four authors, even though its Russian-speaking community is noticeably smaller than that of Lithuania. Moreover, Russian authors from Latvia (Sergei Moreyno and Sergei Timofeyev) and from Estonia (Yelena Skulskaya and Andrei Ivanov) have been among the nominees for the Russian Award[4] twice during the six years of its existence, whereas there has not been a single recipient from Lithuania.

In my opinion, the defining factor here is the absence (or presence, for that matter) of an established literary tradition. This, in turn, is connected to the unofficial, uncensored literature that came to light at the end of 1980s. It undermined the existing literary hierarchy and demanded a re-examination of the history of Russian literature of the second half of the 20th century. From this point of view, Latvia and Estonia find themselves at an advantage as compared to Lithuania. Authors from Riga (the capital of Latvia), united by the *Rodnik* [Brook] magazine, were involved with the samizdat[5] in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) and, therefore, influenced the development of contemporary Russian literature.[6] The importance of Estonia for unorthodox Soviet culture is un-deniable, first because of the Tartu School of Semiotics led by Yuri Lotman, and second because of the literary works of the unofficial novelist Sergei Dovlatov. As a result, the new generations of Latvian and Estonian authors rightfully consider themselves heirs to a prestigious tradition of unofficial Russian art in its local form. It is commonly thought that, in Lithuania, it was mainly Soviet Russian literature that developed – the symbolic value of which is now called into question.

Whereas national literary institutions are mainly interested in the participation of local Russian literature in the dialogue between two cultures – and as a rule, it is local authors who translate contemporary Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian literature into Russian – Russian critics and prize juries prefer authors whose creative writing fits into a wider intercultural context.

Recently, two Baltic novelists, Lena Eltang of Lithuania and Andrei Ivanov of Estonia, have become unexpected discoveries for Russian critics. The literary trajectories of these authors are different, and they vividly demonstrate the difference in the status of Russian literature in the two countries. The first novel by Lena Eltang was published in 2006 in St. Petersburg and appeared on the shortlists of two prestigious Russian awards, the National Bestseller and an Andrei Biely[7] Award. Her next novel, *Kamennye Klyony* [Stone maples], became the first recipient of the *Nos* [Nose] award,[8] which is aimed at "identifying and supporting new trends" in contemporary Russian literature. Only then did Lithuanian society at large become interested in this Russian writer, who had resided in Lithuania since 1989.

The story of Andrei Ivanov is entirely different. His novel *Hanuman's Travel to Lolland* was first published in 2009 with the support of the Eesti Kulturkapital Fund and received the Fund's award. In 2011, the novel was republished in Moscow and was included on the shortlist of the "Russian Booker" prize. Thus, it was the Estonian cultural industry that facilitated the publication debut of the book.

Although Ivanov, as a writer, is often compared with Eltang, their literary trajectories are different, as are the texture and the subject matter of their novels. The main characters of Ivanov's mischievous novel are Hanuman, an Indian, and the narrator Eudge, a Russian-Estonian. The two reside illegally in a Danish refugee camp. Their dream is to visit Lolland, a Danish island. Russian critics see the refugee camp – with its mixed lot of representatives from "third world" countries, contrasted with well-off Danish citizens – as a parody of contemporary Europe. According to the author, the first version of the novel was written in phonetic English, but the final one was done in Russian. The very name of the novel mislead the reader, sounding as it does like a travelogue whereas the main characters never travel to Lolland.

Critics often compare Lena Eltang's works to the intellectual crypto-detective novels of Umberto Eco, and to the refined language of Fowles and Borges. Her novels are narrated in the first person, but are always refracted through the specifics of various "personal" genres. For example, her first novel, *Pobeg Kumaniki* [Blueberry shoot], appeared in LiveJournal (a web site and a web journal) as notes of a fictitious character, who many readers believed really existed. The book was also published in the same way, as the notes of either a student, or a madman named Moses-Morass, and e-mails and diaries of characters (members of an archaeological expedition to Malta or their correspondents) that probably exist only in the imagination of the main character.

Eltang's novels are far from unambiguous. To the best of my knowledge, the first attempt to translate *Pobeg Kumaniki* into English was a fiasco, due mainly to the tight texture of the language and its close resemblance to poetry. The main character of the second novel, Sasha Sonly, a woman with Russian roots, lives in Wales, owns a boarding house called "Kamennye Klyony", keeps a diary and communicates with her surroundings by writing notes. This novel also consists mainly of letters, diaries and notes in guest books; here, too, the author creates a polyphonically complex, multi-layered "reality" rather than the pretense of an objective narrative.

In their attempts to determine the cultural-geographic coordinates and language characteristics of Eltang's and Ivanov's novels, Russian literary critics may well begin from different points, but they converge on one and the same key