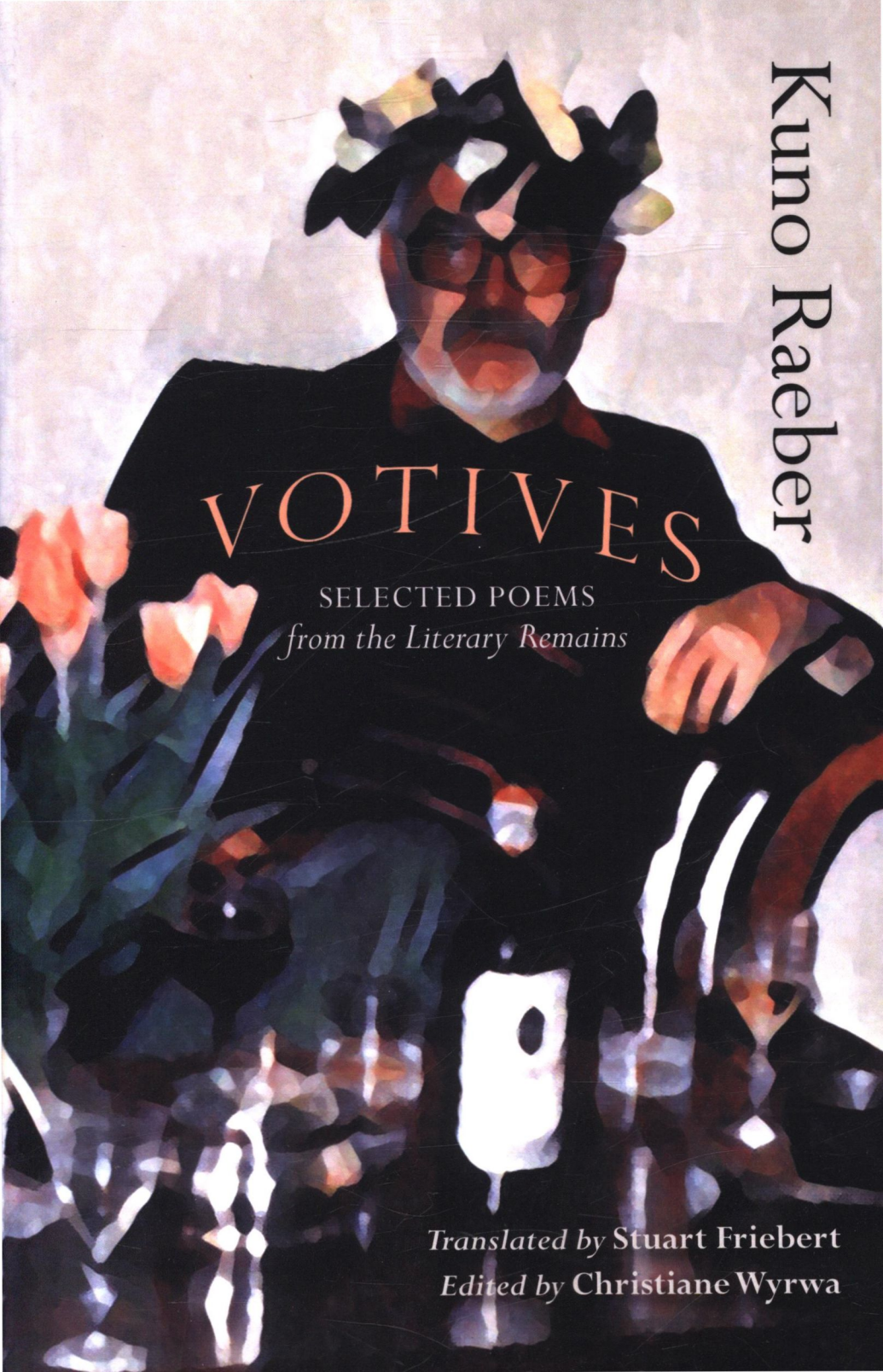
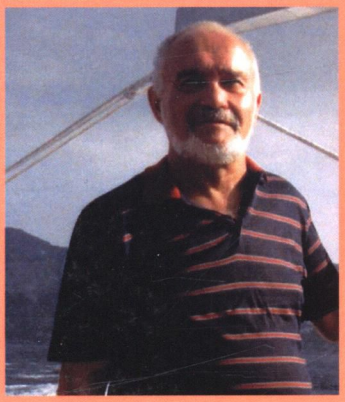

Kuno Raeber
VOTIVES
SELECTED POEMS
from the Literary Remains
Translated by Stuart Friebert
Edited by Christiane Wyrwa

Chosen from among Kuno Raeber's extensive literary remains and arranged thematically, these poems plumb the depths of his spiritual and cultural heritage emanating from ancient worlds, by means of exact descriptions of everyday life that open up into imaginary landscapes. In an interview from 1964, Raeber said he was determined to show "the present in the past and the past in the present."



Born in 1922 in Klingnau (Aargau), KUNO RAEBER grew up in Lucerne, Switzerland, went on to study philosophy, literature, and history in Basel, Zurich, Geneva, and Paris, and received a PhD in history in 1950. Along the way, he studied for the priesthood, but lost his path after a "spiritual crisis." In 1958, he settled in Munich as a freelance writer, where he spent most of his life, aside from trips abroad to Oberlin as Max Kade Writer-in-Residence and to the Swiss Institute in Rome. An early member of the Gruppe 47, he survived malicious attacks by the group at first, but prevailed with the support of a few sympathetic writers, and by the time he died in 1992, he had won a number of prestigious literary prizes and produced a commanding body of poems, stories, novels, plays, essays, reviews, and translations, which have recently been collected in a definitive seven-volume edition, edited by Christiane Wyrwa and Matthias Klein. Many critics now count him among the most significant writers of the second half of the twentieth century.

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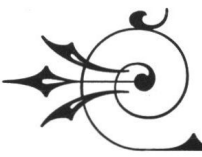

Kuno Raeber

Translated by Stuart Friebert,
with Christiane Wyrwa

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VOTIVES

for Rita, Indomitable Spirit

INTRODUCTION

VOTIVES: Kuno Raeber's *Selected Poems from the Literary Remains*

The Swiss writer Kuno Raeber (1922-1992) wrote definitely "modernist" poems—but at the same time the poet was for him the legitimate successor of the priests, prophets, and magicians of the religious era. Raeber started writing poems as a schoolboy; he published six volumes of poetry from 1950 to 1983; and his literary remains now accessible in the Swiss Literary Archive in Bern consist of veritable "mountains" of papers and note books. Literally thousands of handwritten sheets with drafts and typewritten finished poems have been found in files and boxes, and they are currently being prepared by Walther Morgenthaler and Thomas Binder for digital presentation (www.kunoraeber.ch). The German edition of Raeber's literary oeuvre, *Werkausgabe* (2002-2010) published a first glimpse of poems from these literary remains in *Volume* 7—and this selection is the source of Stuart Friebert's present translations in the volume *Votives.*

The ambiguity of this title combines the poetical and the religious aspects that characterize Raeber's writing. As he grew up in Lucerne, the stronghold of Catholic Switzerland, the church with all the saints and ceremonies, the sounds and images of religious festivals and processions made up the center of his world as a boy. His early diaries show that he started reading and admiring the great poets of the past; he composed poems himself and regarded poetry as the highest spiritual achievement possible. In 1945, Raeber paid no attention to the World War coming to an end, because he lived through a period of intense religious doubts and torments. He was a student of history at the university of Basel and he left his studies to become a Jesuit—but after a short time he suffered a spiritual crisis that made him break with the church and left him in a deep and long-lived depression. It was his first encounter with the Mediterranean world and especially the city of Rome two years later that enabled him to regard the Catholic world of his upbringing not as irretrievably lost but as part of a continual spiritual tradition that included the cultural heritage of the ancient world. This transformation of the lost world of faith into a part of an unbroken

tradition became the central stimulus of his writing. As a modern writer he knew that words cannot produce a 'true image' of the world, but for him the words of poetry are the essential power for approaching the unattainable "vera icon." In an interview in 1964 he said that in his poems he wanted to see and to show the present in the past and past in the present.

In Raeber's earliest publication, *Vision at Midday* (1950), fourteen poems in highly elaborate language celebrated natural scenes full of spiritual meaning. But he soon turned away from the model of authors like Rilke and George when he moved to Rome in 1951. Working as a teacher of Latin and history, he began a close study of modern poets like T.S. Eliot, Lorca, and Valéry that led to a considerable change in his writing. From now on his poems present scenes of nature and common everyday life blending with images of the Christian tradition or mythical figures from the literary heritage of Greece or Rome. He filled his diaries with constant thoughts about the composition of poetry; and he began writing a theoretical essay. From 1952 to 1958 he was a university lecturer of history in Germany; and when the publication of his second volume, *The Transferred Ships* (1957), was positively received by the press, he left the academic world and lived as a freelance writer in Munich. The title of his book referred to a scene in the *Aeneid* of Virgil and the unrhymed poems intertwine contemporary scenes with images from religious and mythical legends. Soon after, Raeber published his next volume *Poems* (1960) with the first examples of long poems consisting of several numbered parts or stanzas. It was followed by *River Bank* (1963), presenting shorter poems in which repetitions of phrases or words or sounds play an important role. By the mid-1960s, however, when Raeber had become well acclaimed in German poetry, he had also begun to experiment with forms of prose. After a first attempt at writing a novel that met with severe criticism, but also with a perceptive letter of advice from his friend Ingeborg Bachmann, he concentrated for a long time on his attempts to work out the appropriate language for writing prose; and he even gave up composing poetry altogether for more than a decade.

In the midst of this difficult period as a writer, a great and unexpected change came from the US. Stuart Friebert, who was teaching German literature at Oberlin College in Ohio, had read Raeber's poems,

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met him during a visit with students to Europe, and persuaded him to come to Oberlin as Max Kade Writer-in-Residence. Raeber's stay at Oberlin in the academic year 1967-68 turned out to be very stimulating; he visited New York several times and managed a breakthrough with his prose that in the following years led to the successful completion of stories and novels before he took up writing poetry again. In 1981, after a pause of eighteen years he published the volume *Reductions* with one-hundred-one poems showing a new form of language in simple and very short texts. Many topics of earlier poems had meanwhile found expression in his prose works, and he commented that his poetic "reductions" simply aimed at a music of words. Raeber's last poetry volume, *Turned Away Turned Towards,* was published in 1983, and for the first time he used written German and also the Swiss dialect of his childhood that he called "Luzerner Alemannisch." The dialect is not confined to childhood memories and topics: there are also poems about New York (www.worldliteraturetoday.org/. . . /kuno-raebers-new-york-poems) as well as on the Spanish Escorial palace in both languages. The standard German poems present longer texts again with numbered parts or stanzas; and the subjects chosen round off his predilection of the topics from nature and culture that characterize his whole oeuvre.

The fact that many of Raeber's poems can be read in English is due to the unswerving efforts of Stuart Friebert. His first letter to Kuno Raeber dates from 1965, and for half a century after their first personal communication, Friebert has read and studied the poems. Meanwhile he has translated examples from all of Raeber's poetry volumes; many single texts were published in magazines, and there are two entire books, *Be Quiet* (Tiger Bark Press, 2015) and *Watch Out* (Lost Horse Press, 2016). Whereas the volumes published by the author always assemble poems that were written in the few preceding years—in the case of *Reductions* even only several months—Stuart Friebert has sorted the poems from different volumes in both of his books into groups under a subtitle of thematic reference. For the reader of Raeber's original volumes, his form of selection is as surprising as it turns out to be convincing. His arrangement shows that the translation process from one language into another also involves an interpretation establishing new associations and combinations among the poems, a kind of meta-discourse creating new unities among the texts. The present volume, *Votives,* with poems

from the literary remains, which were written between 1946 and 1979, also follows this principle of arrangement; and thus poems from different periods of Raeber's composition process are seen in new connections and surroundings.

The subtitles of the seven groups quoting an expression from one of the selected poems refer to general conditions or situations of human life: for instance, "Full of Children" or "Alone and Lonely," or they can refer to places like "Out There" or to the passing of time in "Once Again" and "Dust Just Now." The topics of the poems show a wide range of varieties in the presentation of splinters and reflections of perception that will in the course of the text be blended into an image of completion. In the poem "Noon" the perception of the reader in the coffeehouse is composed of manifold vivid visual and acoustic impressions of everyday life in the city around him, before it takes a great "leap with eye and ear" into the center that holds all the aspects of the image together. Some poems concentrate on simple natural objects like "Cloud" or "Lake" or "Bird," others imagine mythical animals like "The Unicorn" or "Sea Wonder."

For Raeber, the principle of letting exactly described elements of everyday reality softly glide into a magic or imaginary world constitutes a characteristic element of his poetry. His firm belief that the art of poetry makes the past and the present simultaneous can also be seen in the choice of subjects for his poems. For instance, the poems mentioning a personal name in the headline can refer to the completely real person of General de Gaulle in the year 1958, when the poem was written, or they go back to the historical Roman emperor Diocletian who is imagined rowing his boat in the subterranean hall of water, or they leave historical figures and reach even farther back to the mythical world of Helen of Troy. Some of the poems are set in a completely magical world like, "When with spread wings you," where a voice of good advice is directed at a winged creature and warns that the life-threatening dangers of falling into trees or the sea or high-voltage poles must be preferred to the risks of falling into the hands of dryads and najads. The long poem on St. Vitus, one of the fourteen auxiliary saints of the Catholic church, presents a special mixture of legend and contemporary reality. The eight stanzas of the long poem *"In honorem Sancti Viti"* closely follow the narrative of the life of this saint as it is written in the famous

"Legenda aurea" collection of the Middle Ages. So we can easily accept that seven angels are circling round his head; but when his dungeon is set in a house shaken by the last bus or when it is the lift in the skyscraper that finally sets the saint free to walk among the office workers, we experience a typical Raeber surprise.

The longest serial composition of this volume consists of nine "Hare" poems, the single instance in Raeber's work that he wrote poems for a special commission. The Swiss musician Antoinette Vischer (1909–1973), internationally renowned for her art of playing the harpsichord, was a personal friend. Since 1960 she lived in a country house near Basel built by the architect Rolf Gutmann. She called it "House of the Nine Hares" and she organized cultural events and meetings in her home with famous musicians, like John Cage and other artists and writers. Several poets among her guests were asked by her to compose "hare poems," and some examples of these texts were published in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in March 1966. Raeber wrote a poem each for the nine hares; sometimes one of the hares speaks, "my step / doesn't snap, doesn't break, my ear / bends to the tiniest / little branch"; in some the other hares are addressed and earnestly given good advice, "don't stray, angry / nosy little hares," and they are all real animals sitting there, "ears straight up." But as in Raeber's poetry the present is shown in the past and the past in the present, in poem III the hare can glide noiselessly into the realm of Osiris and the Pharaoh, and in poem VI "the memory of the nine ancient holy hares" is kept alive; in poem VIII the glass house of Snow White from the fairy tale is carried through the thicket by the elephant sleep, who is asked to "raise his trunk, send out dream-music."

The final section of the volume *Votives* comes to a very appropriate conclusion with the last two poems written in 1979, "Downward, Upward" and "Word"; both are earlier versions of texts that were printed in Raeber's volume *Reductions* of 1981 in their final form. These later poems with abstract topics, as in the "recollections" of "Downward, Upward," are usually very short and often their vocabulary is based on the juxtaposition of opposites or contrasts, as presented in the verbs "fall down" and "rise," in the adjectives "ponderous" and "slight," and also repetitions or slight variations of sounds, as in "to the long lost others" are frequently used elements. Especially the poem "Word" has a salient

position in Raeber's work: he used the final version as the concluding poem, really as his last word in this collection of one-hundred-one poems. The version of 1979 already shows the principle elements as a concise definition of the poetic process.

So *Votives,* the poems that Stuart Friebert has selected from Kuno Raeber's literary remains, make the reader acquainted with characteristic forms and topics that the Swiss author used from his early to his late writing. As shown so many times before, Friebert's translations find exact counterparts for Raeber's vocabulary, not only for the later poems with their simple phrases, but also for the unusual and complicated combinations and word constructions of the earlier texts. Above all, he succeeds in reproducing the characteristic speech rhythms and sound patterns that make up the art of Raeber's poetry.

Of all the detailed commentaries on the writing of poetry that accompany his poetic production over decades, of all thoughts he scribbled spontaneously or put into carefully considered words either in his diaries or in the prefaces to his volumes of poems, let us finish with one of his definitions that remained true for all his writings. In his diary of 13th February 1956 we read:

> "A poem that requires only good diligence, a poetical paraphrase of something else that can be experienced in a non-poetic way, and that is afterwards expressed in verses, such a poem seems to me meaningless and boring. Being poetical, that is an attitude, a way of thinking about the world which is given from the beginning. For the poet, everything is poetry. And he attempts by supreme effort of his whole being, it is by giving his whole being into the bargain that he tries to make poetry visible, audible, readable in the word. To transform the inner shape into an outward one and thus cause the purest coincidence, the identification. And this must never look like an effort or exertion, in the product the strenuous endeavor must be entirely consumed, burnt down, vanquished, transmuted into cheerfulness. So that it looks like playing, that it is truly a most noble, most exuberant, free, spiritual game."

—*Christiane Wyrwa*

FULL OF CHILDREN

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