

»BRINGT POESIE IN UNSERE STÄDTE!«

Obrigkeitsdeutsch and Exophonic Literature

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In 2004, eight of Germany's *Literaturhäuser* organised a poster campaign entitled *Poesie in die Stadt* [Bring poetry into the city] which placed eight poems by eight different winners of the Adelbert-von-Chamisso-Preis on billboards around German cities. The Chamisso Prize, established in 1985 and awarded annually by the Robert Bosch Stiftung, is given to German-language writers whose mother tongue or family background is not German. The following extract from the Japanese-German writer Yoko Tawada's poem *Kaeshiuta* (2004), was among the eight poems featured:

1 Tawada, Yoko: *Kaeshiuta*. In: *Neue Rundschau* 2 (2004), p. 81f.

2 Greiner, Ulrich: *Da lachen die Fische. Bringt Poesie in unsere Städtel*. In: *Die Zeit* 33 (2004), retrieved from: <http://www.zeit.de/2004/33/Glosse-Lit>.

Ich sei ein Tier mit Hörnern, sagte er,
würde immer in den ersten sieben Jahren des Lebens
verweilen
Verliebe ich sie, würde ich eingehen
Bleibe ich dort, gäbe es keinen Sex
Mein Versuch, ein bewohnbares Alter zu finden
Du hast es schon gefunden
Offen die Hügellandschaft, Eingeschlossensein im
Gehäuse der Kamera
Es gibt keine Haiku über das Innere,
in dem es keine Jahreszeiten gibt¹

[I was a creature with horns, he said
I would always
linger
in the first seven years of life
If I left them, I would die
If I stayed, there'd be no sex
My attempt to find an age to live in
You've found it already
The hilly landscape is open, locked into
the camera's frame
There's no haiku about what's inside
where seasons don't exist]

Translation: Chantal Wright

Ulrich Greiner, literature editor of the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, wrote a column during the *Poesie in die Stadt* campaign criticising the organisers' decision to focus exclusively on Chamisso prizewinners.² There are several strands to Greiner's argument. He concedes that there are »a few« good writers among the eight featured – Yoko Tawada included – but that prose, rather than poetry, is where the talents of these writers lie. Taking his argument in a different and culturally more conservative direction altogether, Greiner states that the featured poets are simply not the best German poets, and this, he argues, is what the poster campaign should have been about – bringing the best of German poetry to the attention of an ignorant public. Germany can easily be outdone by its international competitors in the realms of theatre and the novel, but where poetry is concerned, he continues, the nation holds its own, boasting such illustrious sons as Goethe, Hölderlin, Eichendorff and Mörike.

Greiner is, of course, entitled to his criticism, but it does highlight his failure to understand the nature of the poster campaign, which is undoubtedly populist. The 2006 campaign, for example, featured poems about football written by famous German-language writers like Grass and Jelinek, coinciding with Germany's role as host of the 2006 FIFA World Cup. Greiner's eager promotion of the »great« German poets also implies a clear division in his mind between home-grown classical talent of past centuries and more recent foreign imports who are considerably inferior.

3 Durrell, Martin (Ed.): *Hammer's German Grammar and Usage*. London: Hodder Arnold 42002, p. 329.

4 Ibid.

5 Cf. Biondi, Franco: *Über Obrigkeitsdeutsch und Pluralität in der Sprache*. Tagungsprotokoll der Evangelischen Akademie Iserlohn 6. Iserlohn 1995, pp. 18-23. Saalfeld, Lerke von (Ed.): *Ich habe eine fremde Sprache gewählt*. Ausländische Schriftsteller schreiben Deutsch. Gerlingen: Bleicher 1998, pp. 151-154.

6 Cf. cit. in: Chiellino, Gino: *Am Ufer der Fremde*. Literatur und Arbeitsmigration 1870-1991. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler 1995, p. 383.

7 Cf. cit. in: Dayıoğlu-Yücel, Yasemin: *Von der Gastarbeit zur Identitätsarbeit*. Integritätsverhandlungen in türkischen-deutschen Texten von Şenocak, Özdamar, Ağaoğlu und der Online-Community vaybee!. Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen 2005, p. 133.

8 Ugrešić was speaking in English at a symposium that took place on 17 May 2006 at the Literarisches Colloquium in Berlin in honour of the Serbian writer David Albahari and his German translators Mirjana and Klaus Wittmann.

The most striking element of Greiner's criticism, however, is his dismissal of the verb construction in line three of the extract from Tawada's poem »Verließe ich sie, würde ich eingehen« [If I left them, I would die] as an incorrect use of the subjunctive. Greiner is presumably maintaining that this line, which contains a suppressed wenn-dann [if-then] structure, should in fact read ›verließe ich sie, ginge ich ein‹. In fact both ›würde ich eingehen‹ and ›ginge ich ein‹ are valid forms of Konjunktiv II. In Durrell's terminology they are referred to as the »conditional« and the »past subjunctive« respectively, and occur as alternative forms of Konjunktiv II with roughly equal frequency when used with the verb ›gehen‹.³ ›Würde ich eingehen‹, which makes use of a form often also referred to as the würde-Umschreibung [würde-circumlocution], is more colloquial than ›ginge ich ein‹, but it is still correct. Durrell maintains that although the use of past subjunctives is often encouraged as good style, »in practice they often sound stilted or archaic«.⁴ There seems, however, to be a logical, linguistic reason for Tawada's use of the circumlocution. If the third line of the poem did indeed read ›verließe ich sie, ginge ich ein‹, the reader might understand both clauses in the line as conditions, and hence perhaps as the beginning of a list, rather than understanding the second clause as a suppressed dann-clause. If this were the case, it would translate into English as ›if I left them, if I died‹ rather than ›if I left them, I would die‹. Of the eleven lines featured on the billboard, Greiner cites only lines one to three, and so the reader does not learn that line four contains a further example of a suppressed wenn-dann-clause »Bleibe ich dort, gäbe es keinen Sex« [If I stayed, there would be no sex] which contains Greiner's preferred form of Konjunktiv II rather than the colloquial alternative ›Bleibe ich dort, würde es keinen Sex geben‹. Line four places line three in its proper context, suggesting that Tawada is fully aware that there is more than one form of Konjunktiv II. It also supports the argument that her use of ›würde‹ was deliberate, aimed at avoiding the potential for misunderstanding described above. Greiner, it appears, did not read Tawada's poem very carefully and was over-hasty in his charge of grammatical inaccuracy.

We might speculate, on the basis of his newspaper column, that Tawada's successful literary integration makes Greiner uneasy. Her mastery of the ›colonial‹ language may be perceived as a challenge to the literary critic, who resorts to what the Italian-German writer Franco Biondi has referred to as »Obrigkeitsdeutsch« [literally: authority German], a phenomenon where German publishers and literary critics insist upon the authority of German grammar and conventional linguistic usage as well as upon their own authority as native speakers to enforce these rules.⁵

The phenomenon explored in this brief case study is one of a variety of responses commonly encountered by German exophonic writers – writers for whom German is an adopted language rather than their mother tongue. Mastery of the language is often not enough to placate the critics: Greiner's »falscher Konjunktiv« finds parallels in a tasteless excess of metaphor in Franco Biondi's complex and underappreciated novel *Die Unversöhnlichen*⁶ and by Reich-Ranicki's dismissal of Emine Sevgi Özdamar's creativity as almost entirely the result of literal translation (Das Literarische Quartett, broadcast on 6 June 1998).⁷ Such are the challenges faced by exophonic writers, one of several categories of writers who work in what the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić has referred to as the »grey zone« between a national literature and the literature of a host country, a zone which surpasses and subverts the conceptual apparatus of literary critics, university departments, teachers and readers.⁸

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