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What's Fresh in Contemporary German Poetry? A Look at Two of Today's Movers and Shakers

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What's Fresh in Contemporary German Poetry? A Look at Two of Today's Movers and Shakers

I have long been on my soapbox about the ghettoization of the genre of poetry in the academic world and beyond, and I see a number of different reasons for this anomaly. First, professors and scholars overall are most familiar and comfortable with teaching, discussing, and writing about prose fiction, I believe due to the narrative aspect of that genre. We are all on some level born storytellers and love to read and interpret the tales of others which often fascinate us. Drama, too, draws more critics as well as supporters in the literary arena due to its presentation of dialogue between characters and a dramatic conflict or problem to be resolved or solved, which again peeks the curiosity and tests the waters of readers' and viewers' interest and involvement in the human concerns presented in the play. In contrast, poems are often bite-sized morsels to be savored or critiqued in one sitting, possibly in an abbreviated timeframe, a circumstance that leaves instructors wondering how to structure an entire class around such brief discussions and how to integrate the analysis of poetry into a course or curriculum (we will hear from Jeff about that topic shortly). On top of that, most laymen as well as experts in the field of literature often seem perplexed or reticent when it comes to the lyric genre, for, more often than not, a poem presents an individual distillation of an author's literary program or agenda in verse form by means of a sort of monologue or self-inquiry rather than through the lens of, or as a reflection of, characters and/or a narrator in dialogue and in connection with others in some way, as in drama and fiction.

I have also found that this setting apart of poetry is more prominent in the realm of German-language literary studies than in the English-speaking world. Because in my

dissertation and beyond I have focused on the writing of contemporary women authors, my research has led me to the discovery that feminist critics are just as if not more guilty of marginalizing poetry than their male counterparts. Far more articles, books, and academic theses have been published about fiction than poetry in both Germany and America, though here many more exist on average than abroad. Why is this so? Again, for the same reasons as stated above: it's easier, more comfortable, natural and familiar to talk about prose (and sometimes drama) than the lyric genre, which can at times be any or all of the following: esoteric, hermetic, enigmatic, mystical, highly intellectualized, or at least deeply personal and revealing of the poet's inner world and life.

This having been said, I am thrilled to be here today in a session specially dedicated and geared to German poetry, above all because being a scholar of poetry often feels very isolating, insular, and self-reflective, much like the process of writing poetry itself. And after presenting the above critique of scholars and professors of literature and their preference for fiction, I have to own up that I myself as a college instructor am guilty of that very elision of the genre: in my German lit in translation course this quarter at Otterbein College, I have one novel, three novellas, and two plays on the syllabus, and not a single poem (although Nelly Sachs' *O The Chimneys* is on the reserve shelf, and a senior English creative writing major and poet is writing his paper on her poetry). I did share Günter Eich's poem "Inventur" with the class last week as an excellent example of the *Kahlschlag* or *Stunde Null* era of postwar German literature and as background to a discussion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as a lead-in to our reading of Wolfgang Borchert's *Draußen vor der Tür* (which, incidentally, the student mentioned above found very poetic in language, style, and form).

So, to the topic at hand: today I would like to highlight two volumes of poetry by contemporary German-language poets who are, if not typical, at least of high caliber and whose work exemplifies timely and key encapsulations of late 20th and early 21st century thought and intellectual history. These two prominent voices in recent German-language poetry are Ursula Krechel and SAID, both born in 1947. While an author in multiple genres, Krechel is first and foremost a leading poet in Germany. A native of Trier, she has published a seminal new work, *Stimmen aus dem harten Kern*, in 2005. This long poem, comprised of twelve sections with twelve parts each, and each containing twelve lines, focuses on an imaginary troop of soldiers as they careen through battlefields over many centuries and historical and mythical eras. Krechel's powerful vision is couched in uncompromising poetic language through the texts in this volume. I believe her book will prove to be pivotal to poetry in general as well as to have significance for the socio-political climate surrounding the subject of war today throughout the world.

Krechel's contemporary, the Iranian-German poet SAID, was born in Tehran and emigrated to Germany at the age of 17 for political reasons. His volume *Wo ich sterbe ist meine Fremde* (1987, 5th ed. 2000) offers keen insight into his life as an exile in Germany over the decades since the sixties and his brief return to his native country between the fall of the Shah and the ascension of Khomeini. Former president of the German PEN Association and the 2006 recipient of the Goethe-Medal, SAID stands out as an exemplary German-language poet engaged with issues concerning displaced writers and his ongoing attempt to negotiate the assumption of a lyric voice in the language of his adopted homeland.

First, to Krechel: One of the most prolific German-speaking authors today, Krechel has shown herself to be versatile and adept as a writer in multiple genres over the past three and a half decades. However, her most recent publication, *Stimmen aus dem harten Kern* from last year, may prove to be her *Meisterwerk*. As I mentioned above, it is a long poem, formalistically crafted into twelves: twelve sections, twelve poems in each, and each with twelve long lines of approximately the same length with six beats per line. At present, *Stimmen* is particularly timely for its focus on living in a world with war—though the long poem is neither strident nor purely topical. Its depth and breadth reach beyond the events of the day and offer a philosophical, yet realistic portrayal—neither glamorized nor catastrophized—of the experience of the soldier through the depiction of day-to-day life from primarily that perspective. Krechel manages to speak in a lyric voice that stretches the reader’s imagination yet that also remains believable and convincing in her description of the human face of war.

I’d like to share with you an excerpt from a review of *Stimmen aus dem harten Kern* by Ute Eisinger titled “Verflüchtigung des Erlässlichen: Ursula Krechel gibt dem Wir eine Stimme” (http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez_id=8427&ausgabe=200509):

Krechel lässt...Vertreter unterschiedlicher Zeit- und Gesellschaftsschichten ihre Erlebnisse von Gewalt austauschen. Dafür zitiert sie aus Tagebüchern und literarischen Texten über Krieg, Prostitution, Immigration, Kolonialismus und Ausbeutung. Es kommen Kinder, Frauen, Kriegsteilnehmer aus dem Schützengraben, von der Flucht oder aus besetzten Gebieten zu Wort. Im Konzert der Stimmen, das trotz vielfältiger Perspektivenwechsel nie collagiert wirkt, sondern das - und genau darin liegt ja die Homerische Qualität - die Dichterstimme kohärent durch den poetischen Fluss führt, treiben ein paar literarische Anspielungen - Liedtexte, das Bildungsgut der Anfangszeilen aus Ovids Zeitenklage - immer wieder an die Oberfläche. Sie lassen uns erkennen und machen bewusst, worin die Gemeinsamkeiten bestehen, die uns - jene Generationen, die hier und jetzt als auch gestern und morgen anwesend sind und mit den selben Erfahrungen leben oder sie kennen müssen - verbinden und unsere Zivilisation bestimmen.

This critic is pointing out the value of Krechel's book as an important work, one of epic proportions, which manages to blend voices and perspectives from many different eras and parts of society, while still remaining precise in her vision of how centuries of human conflict and suffering have shaped our collective unconscious and will unfold to influence our common destiny on the earth.

Two poems from *Stimmen* were included in the recent issue of the PEN International magazine which accompanied the International PEN Congress in Berlin in May 2006 with the theme of "Writing in a World without Peace." I was privileged to translate these two poems of Krechel's for the issue, along with several short poems by SAID from his volume *Wo ich sterbe ist meine Fremde [I Will Die in my Foreign Home]*.

SAID's book, currently in its fifth edition—a rare occurrence for publications in contemporary poetry—speaks about the poet's return to his native Iran after having lived in exile in Germany since the age of 17. The poet had initially left Iran due to his political activities and left-leaning beliefs in opposition to the repressive regime of the Shah in 1965 and was subsequently able to return only briefly following the Shah's ouster and in the early days of the establishment of the fundamentalist Islamic government of Khomeini. The new state proved to be as repressive as the previous one, obviously, however, on the other extreme of the political spectrum, but also markedly brutal and relentless in terms of persecuting, imprisoning, torturing and executing scores of dissidents, many friends and acquaintances of the author, again similar to the repressive purges which took place under the Shah and which had initially precipitated SAID's leaving the country. His use of only one name is in fact a precautionary measure since the poet still fears possible reprisals and persecution even in exile due to his

outspoken criticism of his native country's human rights abuses, unjust imprisonments, torture, and killings, under both forms of government.

This writer, who has like Krechel published in multiple genres but who is also primarily known as a poet, speaks compellingly in these lines about the effect of displacement and writing as an exile in the language of his adopted homeland—and about the inability to go home again in a literal sense. Any brief hope of the possibility of a longer visit or permanent repatriation is quickly dashed during his short time in Tehran. SAID quickly learns that Iran has fast become a nation of the mullahs which will not tolerate any display of political dissent, not to mention any demonstration of affection which bars physical contact between the sexes:

Geliebte,
auf diesen Straßen kann ich
nicht einmal Deine Hand halten.
Wie verspottet hier
die Liebe ist.
Wo ich sterbe,
ist meine Fremde.

These last lines, which are the book's title, show the juxtaposition the author faces in exile: a life in the adopted homeland which requires the use of his non-native language, together with a long-lasting, possibly permanent disavowal of his native country and language.

In Germany today, where the vast majority of immigrants are of Turkish descent, the general public is slowly gaining more awareness of the situation of exiled persons

from other countries in the Near East and the writers who voice their concerns. SAID is not the only Persian writer in Germany today, although he is likely to be the most prominent and recognized. His voice offers an uncompromising appraisal of just how living as a displaced author impacts his vantage point and accompanying vision. Whatever difficulties still exist in Germany today due to the country's attempt to integrate its citizens and immigrants of numerous different ethnicities and origins of national heritage, SAID reminds us as readers in the US of a twofold message: First, human rights abuses can take place in any area of the world, by any nation, whether democratic or a dictatorship. Second, while he has found refuge in Munich for all of his adult life, we in the West—in the United States and Western Europe—still need to be held accountable for the current atrocities that are being perpetrated in the name of democracy and freedom.

His frustration with the lack of commiseration with his cause amongst his fellow citizens in Germany is expressed best in the poem below:

Ich habe gesehen
tausend Hände,
die nach einem Flugblatt schreien.
Im Exil suchten wir
mit tausend Flugblättern
nach einer Hand.

While in Germany, he and other exiles now have the concrete, physical means to spread the word about the injustice and human rights abuses that he has experienced personally and vicariously through the loss of numerous friends, acquaintances, and former fellow

citizens in Iran. Yet ironically, now in his adopted homeland, where political demonstrations and dissent are permitted and common, he is not able to rouse the interest of the German populace due to a general air of complacency and apathy for his concerns.

In closing, I would like to encourage you to explore the writings of these two thought-provoking and highly skilled poets in the German language. As I stated at the beginning of my talk, I feel compelled, as a literary critic in the field of German poetry, to lend my voice in support of, and to help spread the word about, the poetic programs of Ursula Krechel and SAID. Through my personal contact with both of these writers, I am convinced that even such accomplished and distinctive poets sometimes, if not often, have the sense that they are writing in a vacuum because of the dearth of attention granted them in the field of literary criticism. While both authors have been the recipients of numerous awards and honors, fellowships, grants, and writer-in-residence positions, their crucial contributions to contemporary German poetry have not been recognized sufficiently in the secondary literature or the press, both here and in Germany. Because the lyric genre remains the strange bedfellow of fiction and drama, or the fifth wheel on the wagon, the best work of Krechel and SAID may unfortunately remain less celebrated than is deserving, and their vision for a better world will remain available to only the few of us who have read and become attuned to the messages imbedded in their lyric discourse.

Thank you very much.

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