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## From *Essential Chill* to (*Wesentlicher*) *Schauer* Poetry As Particular Act of Translation and Work in Progress

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*“Six years ago there was  
a fine spring day and yet  
there was death.”*

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### **Interfacing Languages with Cultures: A Short Autobiographical Outline**

**S**OON AFTER the end of World War II the German-speaking community in Transylvania and some other regions of Romania was subjected to a series of very severe political reparation and reeducation measures: in January 1945 almost all German men and women aged between 16 and 45 were deported to the Soviet Union into labor camps, where they had to do their share in the construction of the new social order. Young intellectuals, students in the humanities or theology, writers and artists were subjected to political trials, being charged with anticommunist activities and subversive behavior directed against the Romanian state and sentenced to many years of hard labor.<sup>1</sup> It goes without saying that such actions caused immense traumata to the German community of Transylvania, arousing bad feelings not only against the Soviet big

brother in the East, but also against the Romanian majority at home. As a consequence, the German-speaking community gradually split up, whole families choosing to leave Romania for a new life in West Germany. Those who chose to stay in Romania had to put up with the existing political system and its living conditions, while trying to preserve their linguistic and cultural identity, which lead most often to a rather conservative ethnocentric attitude.<sup>2</sup>

On these grounds, the idea of a German getting married to a Romanian was generally rejected by most of the German families in Transylvania. During the early 1950s, however, mixed marriages between Germans and Romanians were no longer avoidable.

My parents, Hildegard and Gheorghe, met in 1951 or '52 and got married in 1953, in spite of the strong disapproval of Hildegard's father, Georg Muerth, who in his turn had married twenty years earlier the Hungarian Erzsébet, with none of the misgivings he would use as arguments against the marriage of his daughter to a Romanian. In 1956 Carmen Elisabeth was born, as the only child of Hildegard and Gheorghe, but under a peculiar threefold constellation of cultures and languages.<sup>3</sup>

Living in a multilingual and multicultural family does not resemble at all any theoretical construct of intercultural paradigms and patterns. It does not necessarily imply mutual understanding and acceptance. On the contrary, opinions frequently collide in matters of education, religious beliefs and cultural traditions and since a child is involved, parents have to take up their options.

However, I daresay today that I lived in privileged circumstances from the very beginning: I was brought up in a threefold world, in which I naturally associated the meaning of *Muttersprache* with the language spoken by my mother, this being German. Romanian was always only my *Vatersprache*, the language I spoke with and associated with my father and, last but not least, I was proud to possess also a *Großmuttersprache*, the Hungarian tongue of my grandmother, Erzsébet. Although I simultaneously learnt German, Hungarian and Romanian as a child, each of these languages meant a distinct universe to me, and I could easily move from one to the other, whenever necessary. Apparently equal in status, I soon tended to rank them into a personal hierarchy.

The most precious to me has been and still is my native or mother tongue (*Muttersprache*): I spoke German with my mother and my grandfather, with the few of my mother's relatives living in Braşov, with my friends in kindergarten and school, with my cats and my dog and with some of the friends left to me in Braşov today. My mother insisted on my being sent to the German school, much against my father's will, who would have liked me to attend a Romanian school. Consequently, German became the language of my education and helped me

gain access to the Protestant religion, to cultural and literary traditions deeply rooted in the spirit of Germanic thinking. It became the language where I felt most at ease and well taken care of. It also taught me clarity and rigor, imposing discipline and order to my thinking. In brief, it became essential to the development of my identity.

Hungarian, my grandmother's tongue, also meant some sort of intimacy. Even though I was never taught to read Hungarian and to write in it, it has always been very useful and dear to me. In our family, many Hungarian words and idioms have been taken over into our German or even into our Romanian speech.

Romanian was at first, almost exclusively, meant to communicate with my father. Using it rather reluctantly, I gained a halfhearted access to my father's world. My *Vatersprache* also happened to be the official language of the country I was born in, which meant that Romanian was not only the link to my father and his family but also to the country and to its political system. In other words, Romanian was first and foremost the official language one had to use in order to adjust to the general requirements of social life.

As a child, I used Romanian as a genuine *lingua franca* that enabled me to communicate with other Romanian, German and Hungarian children I used to play with, and later on as an adult with neighbors, fellow students and colleagues at work. After I started learning English at school (in the fifth grade) I decreed this language as my foster language and I decided that I would by all means become an English teacher—as I actually did—and that I would even write in English.

Apart from these real languages I invented a language of my own: some kind of 'creolized' French I used to speak to myself, whenever I was alone as a child. It got lost on the way to adolescence, however, and it was replaced not very effectively by the real French I studied at school for about four years.

## Writing As Care and Emancipation of the Self

**M**Y FATHER died in March 1972. His disappearance meant the gradual disappearance of the Romanian component in our family. But first and foremost it meant my direct confrontation with death, which I had to deal with. The natural fear of death made me turn to writing and almost simultaneously to drawing.

My first poems were written in German and they were inspired by the loss of good family friends, who migrated to Germany, leaving me and my mother

behind in Romania. At the same time I developed the habit of keeping a diary. The notes I made were not written only in German, but also in Romanian and English. From 1973/1974 to 1979 notes were indeed written in these three languages. There are no notes whatsoever explaining my choice or any hints at possible reasons for my preference for one language or another at the respective moment. The impression any reader might get is that of a sequence of notes written at random in more than one language, following however the chronological order of time. Switching from one language to another appeared to be the result of my momentary state of mind. Still viewed as a whole, the diary entries make up a unitary corpus reflecting both facts of objective and subjective reality.

Both the longer and the shorter passages in my early diaries retain impressions, thoughts and all sorts of considerations on everyday (school) life, on emotional states, on lamentations over all sorts of personal disappointments and first and foremost over the feeling of my growing loneliness. On the other hand, many notes deal with art, literature, and sometimes even with philosophy of a personal coinage. Of great concern were my attempts at finding the adequate means of artistic expression:

*I found a harmony, respectively disharmony between color, space and shape. Contrasts between smooth, black surfaces and red or green, rough, vibrating ones. Between open and closed spaces, between abstract shapes leading to nowhere and concrete objects. Two pictures of this type: one "Music by Bach, or Music of the Spheres, or Space Opened," the other: "Prelude by Debussy or Restful Unrest or Space Closed." (cf. diary entry from 21 April 1976, Bucharest, in Manuscript diary no. 2, unpublished)*

Rereading some of the diaries, it becomes obvious that intimate experiences and everyday occurrences were mostly jotted down either in English or German, whereas Romanian was used primarily in connection with my deceased father and my guilty conscience regarding him. Here is an instance of an entry from 7 March 1978 illustrating the way in which two different languages were used in a logical sequence:

*Six years ago there was a fine spring day and yet there was death. De obicei când sosește această zi vreau să fiu cât se poate de nepăsătoare. Dar azi nu s-a putut. Am simțit un fel de sentiment de vinovăție față de acel om care a fost tatăl meu. Mi se pare că l-am uitat prea repede. M-am obișnuit cu acest state of affairs și parcă nici nu ar fi fost vreodată. . . Uitarea intervine oricând și oriunde. Este destul să păstrezi o inițială—Puchianu Gh. Carmen Elisabeta. Ce trist să fi redus la o inițială. Dar nu, e mai mult. Căci noi, Mama și cu mine, îl purtăm în*

*noi orice am face și orice am zice. Îl purtăm în noi oriunde și oricând, căci toți trei am fost vinovați. Și asta rămâne.*

Apart from its melodramatic tone, the passage reveals an inner conflict of the self. Using English and Romanian instead of German my intention may be interpreted as an attempt to get somewhat detached, hiding my emotions behind the mask provided by the respective languages. It is obvious that I associated each language with a separate role assumed by the self in order to dissimulate actual states of mind. On the other hand such deliberate juggling with languages was meant to define my own self as being fundamentally different in comparison to any mono-cultural individual. Due to my cultural, ethnic and linguistic hybridity,<sup>4</sup> I naturally made out “in-between-spaces”<sup>5</sup> in order to adjust to a kind of schizophrenic way of life and thus find the adequate strategies to define my identity inside the different cultural patterns I inherited as my birthright. Each language contains a significant part of my selfhood, which I can hide away or reveal, depending on circumstances and choice.

According to Foucault, such strategies are closely linked to and conditioned by what he termed *care of one's self*.<sup>6</sup> The urge to take care of one's own self may be regarded as basic to the urge of writing about oneself, in order to get a better understanding firstly of yourself and only secondarily of the rest of the world. Keeping diaries and writing letters, the careful registering of so called *hypomnemata*<sup>7</sup> represent the usual forms of this kind of writing. As far as I am concerned, poetry should also be added to the list.

As it happened to most intellectuals in communist Romania, after graduation, I too was sent over to my first position as a teacher in the countryside. In 1979 I became a teacher of English at a school in Prahova county, in a village I had never heard of before. Used to the basic amenities of city-dwelling, I all of a sudden had to do with a much less comfortable rural life, which meant a regular cultural shock to me at that time. The only way to overcome such an experience was to read as much as I could in English and German (sometimes in Romanian), to translate (mostly from German into Romanian and the other way around), and to write poetry.

I put down almost everything I was experiencing, feeling and thinking at the time, no matter whether I was in the train that took me from my native town to the train station next to the village I worked in, or whether I was watching over my pupils while they were harvesting the potato or onion fields that belonged to the village. My poems were genuine reflections not only of my inner state, but also of the whole system I had to live in. Reading them even today one can easily reconstruct the socio-political and cultural background of the late 1970s and early 1980s in communist Romania.

As before in my diaries, I went on writing in all three languages—Hungarian I could not seriously take into account as a writing language, except for a brief span, when I fell in love with a Hungarian, to whom I got engaged and wrote several letters as well as a few love poems, of which only one or two were preserved, probably by accident.

Under the political circumstances of the communist dictatorship during the 1980s Romania, and under specific job circumstances, writing poetry took the place of the former diary entries. To me poetry soon turned out to be an effective means of caring about my own selfhood and emancipation, as well as of expressing my revulsion toward the oppressive political system.

### **From *Essential Chill* to (*Wesentlicher*) *Schauer***

**T**O TURN emotionally perceived facts of reality into poetry may be compared to my mind to the act of translation, defined as the transfer of source language meanings to the target language in accordance with certain demands aiming at an effective degree of equivalence.<sup>8</sup> I consider poetry a refined process of translation involving much more than the mere transfer of verbal meanings from one language into another. It also conveys the cultural as well as some socio-political meanings, which lie embedded into the poetic discourse of the source language.

Banal and seemingly unimportant occurrences, ugly details of everyday life may at any time become poetically relevant and worthwhile to be turned into artifacts and to accurately pinpoint personal reactions towards the existing living conditions, the more so during the '80s in Romania. Under the circumstances writing poetry meant a permanent process of reasserting and redefining my own identity by translating everything into poetry, no matter whether it was written in English, German, or Romanian.<sup>9</sup>

Whether or not the respective poems should be regarded as original or translated versions will be illustrated here by one sample of my early poetry:

#### *Essential Chill*

*Suddenly I had a craving  
for snow:  
The faint flickering shadows  
made me think of falling snow  
and I had a sudden craving,*

*a craving for snow-muted streets  
and hushed life, reduced to  
this essential chill  
burning within.*<sup>10</sup>

The poem was written a month or so after I had settled in the village where I was to spend four years of my life.<sup>11</sup> It focuses on a momentary impression and starts *in medias res*: the initial assertion is broken up into two lines in which the alliterative effect of the first and last word is intended to capture attention. Although the poetic I is present, the poem may strike the reader with a surprisingly objective, almost ironical tone and ends in a pointed image. Keywords such as *snow-muted*, *hushed life*, *faint flickering shadows* and *essential chill burning* turn into key images recurring obsessively in many other poems of that time as well as of later stages of my literary work.

In Wordsworthian terms, the poem represents the best possible arrangement of these particular nine lines and stands for the exact representation of what I felt one late evening during the fall of 1979 in “Philipsborough.” It so happened that the English language was best suited at that particular spot in time to translate my momentary emotional state into the respective poem.<sup>12</sup>

A full year later, on 28 October 1980, I wrote another poem, this time in German, in which I took up the idea of *the essential chill* under the title *Wesentliche Kälte*, apparently a word for word translation of the original English title. The poem however differs very much from the English one. It may be regarded as a meteorological description of the state of the weather and its reflex on my own self while writing it out. In other words, outer meteorology turns into inner meteorology, whereas the poetic discourse tends to become itself meta-discourse:

### *Wesentliche Kälte*

*Nach (plötzlich) verpasster  
Oktoberwärme  
herrscht seit gestern kalter Wind.  
Unvorstellbar diese Kälte  
in Haus und Seele.  
Der Tag ist nicht mehr lang genug  
um nur zu lesen,  
womöglich um etwas Neues zu schreiben  
—wenigstens zu bedenken—  
Der Tag ist nicht mehr kurz genug*



*um in Schlaf und Träume zu versinken.  
Allmählich wärmt sich mein Ofen,  
das offene Buch passt  
vollkommen in das Bild,  
die Feder in klannten Fingern,  
gleitet stockend über die Heftseite.  
Draußen schimmert es feucht.  
Es riecht mir grau und  
wesentliche Kälte  
bleibt brennend heiß in Seele  
und Gesicht.<sup>13</sup>*

In 1983, I composed still another poem on the motif of coldness/chill in relation to my own self:

*(Wesentlicher) Schauer*

*Schneesehnsucht—plötzlich da:  
Der matte Schatten vor dem Tor  
erinnert mich an fallenden Schnee,  
an schneeedämpfte Straßen,  
stummes Leben und  
Schauer im Rücken.*

*Wesentlich kalt brennen  
Schauer in mir.<sup>14</sup>*

Dated 27 November 1983, the poem strikingly recalls the English poem of 1979. At first sight, one might consider it a translation or at least a paraphrase. The assumption may be supported by the identical title phrase and similar recurrent keywords and images: *Schatten* for *shadows*, *schneeedämpft* for *snow muted*, *stummes Leben* for *hushed life*, *Schauer* for *chill*. Upon second thoughts however, the poem may also be interpreted as a “translation” of the German version dated October 1980.

Finally, an even later version of this poem entitled *Schauer* was first published in 1988 in an anthology of younger German poets<sup>15</sup> and was included 2002 in my first volume of poetry published in Germany<sup>16</sup>:



*Schauer**Schneesehnsucht, plötzlich da:*

*der matte Schatten vor dem Tor  
 erinnert an fallenden Schnee,  
 an schneegedämpfte Straßen,  
 stummes Leben und Schauer im Rücken.*

*Wesentlich kalt gliht es in mir.*

This variant of the poem is three lines shorter than the original English text and obviously shorter than both previous German versions. The title itself is restricted to the noun, which apparently triggers the whole discourse and to which the discourse of the poem gradually converges. Consequently the last version of the poem is characterized by greater conciseness. The first line consists of an elliptical statement that logically calls for the following one, which however is set off as a separate unit of four lines and consists of a repetitive pattern of nouns in association with either adverbials or adjectives. The dominant image is that of snow (*Schnee*) or rather of snow remembered, of some kind of reminiscence or innuendo of snow, in association with mute life (*stummes Leben*) and a chill creeping up one's back (*Schauer im Rücken*).

Considering the two versions of the German poem in addition to its English version the process of elaborating the best possible artifact illustrates the way in which I attained the necessary distance from both my initial emotional state and the final outcome of that particular state. So the tenor of these final German lines turns out to be much more detached and ironic than the lines of the English poem, the reference to my own self being reduced to the terse mention of the first person pronoun at the end of the poem. The final line should be read as a sentence, allowing for no counterargument whatsoever at that point. At the time this poem was written, it so happened that the German language had proven to be best suited to my compositional intention *vis-à-vis* reality.

**In Lieu of a Conclusion**

**D**URING THE 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s writing in more than one language provided me, in my capacity of a multicultural subject, with more than one instrument to define my selfhood in relation to the socio-cultural condition generated by the oppressive ideological system I

lived in at the time. Under those circumstances, I could strategically take refuge in the separate cultural enclaves offered by my manifold nature and use my languages as dissimulation masks or roles of the self.

Writing in more than one language turned out to be the adequate strategy on my way to autoscopic self-probing, on the one hand, and to artistic maturity, on the other. Consequently, I gave up writing in English as well as in Romanian in favor of writing in German.<sup>17</sup>

The example I referred to above may illustrate the sometimes long and tedious work of composing a poem, but it may also prove that at different moments, and under different circumstances, a similar impulse triggers off representations and reflections, translating images into poetry in different languages. As I have tried to demonstrate above, the outcome has each time been a self-sufficient poem, which at best translates the initial approximation of reality into one language or another, in accordance with my momentary artistic intentions. □

## Notes

1. One of the worst trials was that held in 1958 in Braşov (Kronstadt, Brassó) against a group of German writers and theologians (*Schwarze Kirche Prozess*).
2. That conflicts were inherent under such circumstances is to my mind a logical consequence of ethnic and biopolitical strategies during interwar Romania as delineated for example by Marius Turda in his article “The Nation as Object: Race, Blood and Biopolitics in Interwar Romania.” *Slavic Review* 66, 3 (Fall 2007): 413–441, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20060295>. Accessed: 03/05/2013 03:29.
3. The socio-cultural phenomenon of mixed marriages in Romania and particularly in Transylvania has been dealt with by some researchers mainly with reference to the interwar period: cf. Ioan Bolovan, Bogdan Crăciun, and Daniela Mârza, “Mixed Marriages in a Multiethnic and Multiconfessional Environment: A Case Study on the City of Cluj (1900–1939),” *Transylvanian Review* 21, Supplement no. 4 (2012): 405–412; Daniel Chirot: “Social Change in Communist Romania,” *Social Forces* 57, 2, Special Issue (Dec. 1978): 457–499, as well as in literary works by German writers living in Romania: cf. Puchianu, *Patula lacht* (Passau: Stutz, 2012).
4. Cf. David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London, 2000), 192: “The term is widely used in postcolonial theory to describe the newness of the many different forms of migrant or minority discourses that flourish in the diasporas of the modern and postmodern periods.”
5. Cf. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London–New York: Routledge, 1994).
6. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Ästhetik der Existenz: Schriften zur Lebenskunst*, trans. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2007), 253–279, 287–317.

7. Cf. *ibid.*, 140 sqq.
8. Cf. *Brockhaus Enzyklopädie*, 19<sup>th</sup> edition, vol. 22 (Wiesbaden, 1994), 542 sq.
9. Writing poems in different languages may also be interpreted as some act of dissimulating identity and performing different roles respectively, as I argued as keynote speaker in 2008 in Iași: cf. “Ich bin Pendler von Beruf: Einige Überlegungen am Rande der (weiblichen) Erfahrung zwischen (Lehr)All-Tag und schriftstellerischer All-Nacht am Beispiel der eigenen Anfangslyrik,” in *Die Fiktive Frau: Konstruktionen von Weiblichkeit in der deutschsprachigen Literatur* (Iași: Ed. Universității “Al. I. Cuza”; Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 2009), 441–453.
10. Cf. Manuscript no. 1, 11 October 1979, Filipeștii de Târg.
11. Self-ironically I renamed the village Philipsborough, an English equivalent for the Romanian Filipeștii de Târg.
12. In November of the same year the following Romanian poem was written:

*Suflul iernii*

*E iarnă iar  
și prea devreme.  
Ninsoarea mărunță  
acopenă subțire pământul înghețat  
și ultima licărire autumnală din grădini.  
Îmi simt suflarea înghețată în forme ciudate,  
le simt sărutul rece pe buzele dornice de cald și sper  
să nu le aud  
spărgându-se pe glic.*

*E iarnă iar și frig  
și prea devreme.*

The poem takes up some ideas of its English pre-text, especially the idea of the too early arrival of winter. The poem is centered upon the acute feeling of coldness and upon the implicit loneliness of the poetic I. The text also reflects an epigonal atmosphere of post-romantic emotions and reminds vaguely of Bacovia’s neurotic poetry from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed I soon gave up writing Romanian poetry, having realized the shortcomings of my Romanian language and poetry.

13. Manuscript no. 3.
14. *Ibid.*
15. H. Bara, H. Britz, H. Balan, J. Modoi, and C. Puchianu, *Der zweite Horizont*, ed. Franz Hodjak (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1988), p. 108.
16. Carmen Elisabeth Puchianu, *Unvermeidlich Schnee* (Passau: Stutz, 2002), 17.
17. However I frequently use English titles for some of my German poems, such as “Commuter’s Monday Morn’,” “English Teacher in the Countryside,” “Soulscape,” “Entertainer,” to mention only some, in order to create a certain detachment or ironical stance. At the same time I signal in this way my emotional affiliation to pat-

terns and motifs taken over from British and American modernist and postmodern literature/poetry, so far ignored to a large extent by my critics.

**Abstract**

From *Essential Chill* to *(Wesentlicher) Schauer*:

Poetry As Particular Act of Translation and Work in Progress

The paper deals with the linguistic and cultural choices facing someone who was born and grew up into a multilingual and multicultural family. I have also focused on the fact that under certain cultural and political circumstances, writing in more than one language is not only possible, but even necessary. My analysis proceeds with several poems which I have written in English and German trying to establish whether such artifacts should be regarded as translations from one language into the other, or, conversely, if one's poetry should be conceived as the outcome of a particular kind of translation. My paper is further concerned with making an autobiographical statement which I have deemed necessary for my readers to grasp the status I have legitimately earned inside the present-day German literature produced in Romania.

**Keywords**

identity, writing, German literature in Romania, poetry as translation