

TRANSATLANTICATION:
A TRANSLATION OF YOKO TAWADA'S *ÜBERSEEZUNGEN*

by

SARAH A. RUBIN

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Germanic
Languages and Literatures
and the Honors College of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

June 2004

APPROVED: _____
Dr. Susan Anderson

APPROVED: _____
Dr. Elke Heckner

Sarah Andrea Rubin	for the degree of	Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures	to be taken	June 2004

ÜBERSEEZUNGEN

APPROVED: _____
Dr. Elke Heckner

The collection of short stories *Überseetzungen* by the German-Japanese author Yoko Tawada presents distinct problems for the translator due to its unusual style and content. The stories contained therein use, for example, discussions of peculiarities in the German and English languages to develop themes about the relationship between culture, identity, location, language, and displacement. This thesis, in its preface, explicitly lays out these problems of translation and possible solutions. The foreword discusses the thematic and linguistic content specific to the third section of the collection, *Nord-amerikanische Zungen* (North American Tongues). The body of the thesis consists of a translation of the three stories contained in *Nord-amerikanische Zungen* (North American Tongues) which is consistent with the methods proposed in the preface.

Preface

v

Foreword

xxi

North American Tongues:

I. The Earwitness

1

II. A Disc Story

16

III. Portrait of a Tongue

18

About the Author

47

Works Cited

49

Preface

Yoko Tawada's *Überseetzungen* (2002) presents distinct problems for the translator from the very start: Even its title, which literally means "overseas tongues" but mimics the German word *Übersetzung*, meaning "translation," remains somewhat ineffable in the English. This collection of short stories often bordering on the surreal by Japanese-German Yoko Tawada well earns its praise through Tawada's colorful exploration of her non-native language, its sounds, its words, and the way those words look on a page. The often called poet-novelist, as a child, "found it fun to speak a jumble of words, sheer nonsense, and make grown-ups laugh," and indeed has used this habit to develop a unique form of narrative—one which gracefully but boldly confronts the conventions of traditional story-telling (Itakura). Through this she has, since her first publication in Germany in 1987 and in 1991 in Japan, established a devoted audience in Japan and Europe, and received high and well-deserved accolades in Japan (the Gunzo and Akutagawa awards, for example), Germany (the Adelbert von Chamisso prize), and the U.S.

Überseetzungen, Tawada's most recent work, certainly meets its audience's every expectation: Similar in theme to many of her other texts, these short stories "have to do with the tongue, language, letters, the sound of words, speech, translation, thought," as the title of the collection implies (Bücher: *Überseetzungen*). The three stories translated here, for example, which make up the last of the book's three sections, all deal explicitly

with issues of identity, location, language, and the displacement of each. Certainly this is an issue central to the title itself: As mentioned above, the word *Überseesungen* is one coined by Tawada which plays off of the words *Übersee*, meaning “overseas,” *Zungen* meaning “tongues,” and *Übersetzung*, meaning “translation.” Clearly the implications of this term are far-reaching: *Übersee*, aside from its literal definition, connotes the foreign, the distant. *Zungen*, too, can be understood on several levels: The word denotes not only the physical muscle, but is also more abstractly associated, as in English, with the notion of languages: Foreign tongues and mother tongues both, naturally, play a part in this. *Übersetzung*, while most often equated to the English “translation,” carries with it the notion of transformation, transmission, as well as, more literally, “to set over” (from *über* meaning “over,” and *setzen* meaning “to set”)—similar, perhaps, to most English speakers’ intuitions about the word “translation” (from the Latin *trans-* meaning “through, across,” and the Latin *lat* meaning “to carry”). To bind all of these elements together is a bold act, but one which Tawada does very intentionally. In creating this title, she considers not some but all of these possible understandings, and each one of them is inarguably of distinct relevance to the text.

In particular, it should be noted when discussing the interpretations *Übersee Zungen* (“overseas tongues”) and *Übersetzungen* (“translations”) that the two bear a relationship to one another not only semantically, as seen above, but visually and auditorily, as well. Visually (or orthographically), of course, one interpretation can easily become the other through the change of just one letter. Indeed this concept—that is, that one thing can become another simply by substituting a letter—is one which fascinates Tawada. In the

third story presented here, “Portrait of a Tongue” (“*Porträt einer Zunge*”), the narrator notes, “*Der Kardinal* is called ‘cardinal’ in America, he can become American through the change from K to c” (34). Auditorily, too, the two interpretations of the title are closely bound to one another: The doubled “E” in German, seen in *Übersee*, signifies a long, tense vowel (as in the English word “wade,” for example), while the single “E” in the word *Übersetzung* is pronounced with a phonetically lower, shorter vowel (as in the English word “wed”). Aside from this rather minute phonetic difference, the two are pronounced in much the same manner. Of course these visual and auditory kinships are very clearly intentional, as well: Notions of phonetic, visual, and orthographic differences are extremely relevant to (and prevalent in) not only the three stories presented here, but most of Tawada’s work in general.

The English title used here, “Transatlantication,” certainly captures bits and pieces of Tawada’s creative, playful, and in fact rather profound term, but there are of course many subtleties to the word *Überseetzungen*, as seen above, which cannot be exactly reproduced in an English counterpart. This is, though, the nature of translation: As the German writer and translator Walter Benjamin, an object of Tawada’s admiration, states, “...No translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change” (256).

Benjamin himself, due in particular to the ideas put forth in his philosophical essay “The Task of the Translator” (1921), is in fact not only a figure of academic interest for Tawada, but also the creator of a theory of literature and of translation upon which Tawada draws heavily in her non-fictional and fictional work, including *Überseetzungen*. His influence is clearly present—even pervasive—in the three stories presented here, which emphasize themes of the dislocation of identity, location, and language, as mentioned before, and, relatedly, the idea that what is meant underlyingly—what Benjamin dubs “pure language”—is transformed and distorted when put into spoken or written language. For the narrators of these and other Tawada stories (who is never said—but nevertheless assumed based on biographical commonalities—to be the author herself), there exists a constant battle between the said and the unsaid or, perhaps more accurately, between the sayable and the unsayable. In Where Europe Begins (1989), for example, Tawada writes the following:

Most of the words that came out of my mouth had nothing to do with how I felt. But at the same time I realized that my native tongue didn't have words for how I felt either. It's just that this never occurred to me until I'd begun to live in a foreign language. (87)

Certainly this theme of communication and its limitations is one which unites the stories of *Überseetzungen*, and which unquestionably links her with the philosophy of language and translation espoused by Benjamin. One might wonder, though, if, according to Benjamin, pure language is so difficult to convey in spoken or written language, how an accurate translation could even be possible. That is, if a written text might already be a

mutation of the pure language, how, then, can any translator hope to create anything but a distortion of a distortion?

The answer to this question lies in Benjamin's proposition, contrary to the majority belief, that "it is not the highest praise of a translation, particularly in the age of its origin, to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language" (260). Rather, he asserts, a translation must take on a life of its own—it cannot merely strive to imitate, or even have any significance to, the original text:

Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. (254)

Rather, a translation should indicate that it's a translation by maintaining the strangeness of the original: In one's native language, he asserts, one rarely notices the gaps between pure language and spoken and written language. This incongruity peaks through, though, when one realizes that there is a lack of one-to-one comparability between one's native language and a foreign language. The role of a translation, according to Benjamin, is to maintain, rather than eclipse, the strangeness that results from translating an original text into a target language—only in this realm, where the incompatibility of different languages is exposed, can one even begin to glimpse pure language. The ideal translator then, in accordance with Benjamin's views, is one who can read this pure language of the original text—the meanings behind the words, not specific to any particular language,

and unclouded by often opaque diction and syntax—and document this in his own language.

Though Benjamin has certainly made his mark on the academic sphere of translation (and even beyond this, on fiction such as Tawada's), his view is not the one which is reflected in current popular translation theory. In André Lefevere's essay "Why Waste our Time on Rewrites?: The Trouble with Interpretation and the Role of Rewriting in an Alternative Paradigm," for example, Edward Said is quoted as having said that "recent critical theory has placed undue emphasis on the limitlessness of interpretation." This is one of many critiques of theories such as Benjamin's. Certainly perspectives in this field on what translation should be vary from one extreme to the other, with great political charge and often with little concord.

In the essay "*Being and Time: A Translation of the Nicomachean Ethics?*" for example, Franco Volpi explodes the common notion of translation: He explores the concept that Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), widely considered to be one of the most important and influential philosophical works of the last century, could in fact be considered a "translation" of Aristotle's 350 B.C.E. *Nicomachean Ethics*. This claim is not based on structural similarities between the two works, per se, nor on any linguistic correlation except for between the terms given to a few key concepts: Rather, Volpi's concern is with Heidegger's "re-establishment of basic questions and determinations of Aristotle's practical philosophy" (Volpi 210). If, though, the process of translating is truly (and merely) what Merriam-Webster asserts—that is, "to turn into one's own or

another language; to transfer or turn from one set of symbols to another”—then Volpi and a world of commonly designated masters of translation—Benjamin, Luther, Sallis—encourage violation of this limiting definition.

Though it is certainly true that most, if not all, translators consider their work more than the simple transferring of symbols, the range of opinions on what translation should be (that is, on a proper theory of translation) is quite wide, and includes anti-theorists, the more radical so-called “resistance” theorists, and everything in between. The controversial yet well-respected George Steiner, for example, in his famed self-proclaimed poetics of translation *After Babel* (1975), postulates the following:

Translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in *every* act of communication, in the emission and reception of each and every mode of meaning, be it in the widest semiotic sense or in more specifically verbal exchanges. To understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate. Thus the essential structural and executive means and problems of the act of translation are fully present in acts of speech, of writing, of pictorial encoding inside any given language. Translation between different languages is a particular application of a configuration and model fundamental to human speech. (xii)

He goes on to propose that, as a result of this truth, there can necessarily be no such thing as a prescriptive theory of translation: “At its finest, translation has nothing to gain from the (mathematically) puerile diagrams and flow-charts put forward by would-be theoreticians” (xvi). The hallmark of an ideal translation for Steiner is one that avoids what he calls transfiguration—that is, “where the intrinsic weight and radiance of the translation eclipses that of the source” (xvi). This, in essence, is agreed on by many translators (and evaluators of translations): Indeed it is quite common, though in

opposition to Benjamin's theory, to hear that the best translation is one which doesn't betray the fact that it is one.

André Lefevere, on the other hand, a contemporary scholar whose ideas on translation have been published in numerous books and journals, presents the following, rather unusual notion of the boundaries of translation:

There have always been different attempts at interpretation undertaken on the basis of a certain concept of what the world should be like (ideology) as well as a certain concept of what literature should be like (poetics) ... They have accepted or rejected works of literature on the basis of the ideology and the poetics they happened to be serving but, much more often, they have adapted works of literature, 'rewritten' them until they happened to fit their own poetics, their own ideology ... There is nothing wrong, or right, about using them in a certain manner, all readers do it all the time. It is simply part of the process by which a work of literature is absorbed into the reader's mental and emotional framework. ("Rewrites" 217)

Still for those in whose minds the role of the dominant translation theory receives primacy, an adherence to the strictly equilateral triangular relationship between author, translator, and reader is the mark of a masterful translation. Proponents of this theory assert that the translator, at one point of the triangle, has an equal duty to the author, at the top of the triangle, and to the reader, at the third point. In this theory, any sign of catering more to either the author or the reader is disrespectful. Advocates of the "resistance" movement, on the other hand, propose the following more radical view:

A translation should patently demonstrate that it is a translation. A less-than-perfect fit...is the 'resistance' of the [source language] culture and [source] language to being shoehorned into a dissimilar cultural-linguistic frame. Translators who follow resistance theory deliberately avoid

excluding any elements that betray the ‘otherness’ of the text’s origin and may even consciously seek them out. Smoothness and transparency are therefore undesirable and even marks of a colonizing mentality. (Landers 52)

Certainly this theory in its insistence that a translation must mark itself as a translation accounts for Benjaminian insights in a way that many others do not. In reality, though, with the exception of the most regimented theorists, translators will tend to produce a final product which could be compared, at best, with a rather lopsided triangle. It seems that any other method—adhering so strictly to one particular theory that one loses sight of the essence of the original text—is a precise example of Steiner’s so-called transfiguration: Even the translators who so radically try to avoid this by preserving the “otherness” of the text could easily destroy entirely the element which is in fact the most important—the mood of the text, and its desired emotional impact.

The translation which follows attempts, rather than to support just one of these theories on the continuum of translation politics, to determine the essence of the original text—the pure language, in Benjamin’s words—and maintain this in the target language. Clearly this approach might yield a result unappealing to those who seek a perfect one-to-one reproduction of an original text. There are things, obviously, which will be lost: One cannot be true, for example, to German word order in an English translation and expect in the same effort to transmit the naturalness and fluency that are a part of the original text. The most essential role of the translator—where translators are what Lefevere calls “artisans of compromise” (*Translating* 6)—lies in interpreting which elements of the original text form its core. “Since they are at home in two cultures and two literatures,”

Lefevere continues, “they also have the power to construct the image of one literature for consumption by the readers of another” (*Translating* 6). Even the claim of most contemporary translation theories—that fidelity to the syntax of an original text can almost never produce a good translation—is slightly overstated: Should the syntax be the most essential element of the original text, the translator must sense this and incorporate this as the core element of his translation. Benjamin certainly has the correct idea in asserting that “the task of the translator consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original” (258).

To best complete this task of grasping the echo of the original text, there are questions a translator must ask himself. Without answers to these, a translator is likely to be inconsistent in his work. There is, of course, no exact rubric for achieving the depth of understanding of a work necessary for its proper translation, but there does exist a loose set of guidelines which one should consider in order to avoid transfiguring, in Steiner’s sense of the word, the text. A translator must first decide, as discussed above, which internal elements of the text form the essence of its character, whether or not these are compatible, and which elements are the least relevant (and therefore the most disposable). He must consider the syntax and diction, for example (perhaps the text is meant to present something poetic, for instance), as well as the mood and any associations the text as a whole (or any single part of it) may evoke for the reader. Aside from a grasp on these internal, linguistic factors, the task moreover requires an in depth analysis of the themes (not simply of the text at hand but of all those which make up the author’s *oeuvre*), of the author’s background, and of texts, people, and incidents to whom the

author refers. More generally, it is an understanding of the context—the culture and values which are a part of the author’s life—which plays such an important role in understanding the core of the text. To be faithful to all of these elements in a text at once is often impossible, but a grasp on them does afford the translator a thorough understanding of the meaning of the text. Based on this, the translator can better recreate in the target language the essence of the original—Benjamin’s so-called “echo.” Indeed, as Benjamin says, “... all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines” (263).

Many of these elements, both internal and external, are absolutely essential in understanding the true core of Tawada’s *Überseetzungen*, and to mediate them is a delicate task. Her background, for example, is of paramount importance to understanding many of the essential themes. Fortunately nearly all of her stories are based on autobiographical experiences, and her openness about these experiences grants the reader great insight about her identity, her values, and her environment. The core internal facets of the text also are usually, though not always, quite explicit. One must though be careful to consider all internal elements during its analysis, so as not to let an essential piece slip out of the translation. Her stream of consciousness style throughout the text, for example, may seem like a simple stylistic consideration, but the fact that it lends a distinct mood and tone to the work—a personal, emotional touch, one could say—is a sign that even elements of style such as these can be a part of the pure language of a text.

Her word play, too, is an element which is fundamental to the core of the text. Word play and sound symbolism, though, are certainly two of the most problematic elements of translation, and even Tawada herself admits that all of her works are written in a specific language precisely because that language affords her certain opportunities which another might not: In an interview, she stated, “Whether to write in German or in Japanese depends on which language lets me play or experiment more freely with images and motifs at the time” (Itakura). As a symptom of this, her stories are repeatedly filled with pages of discussion about the sounds of a particular word, how she categorizes it based on its letters, the way it looks on paper, what she associates with it. These passages undeniably serve to carry the plot and thematic discussion throughout the texts. In addition to this, though, they expose the narrator’s curiosity about and connotations with the words, which produces a narrative personality essential to the story and the author’s intentions. Certainly the creation of a solid, emotional and believable narrator in a text which is written in the first person can be difficult, but in these and most of Tawada’s other stories, the reader comes to know and be fond of the narrator precisely through these linguistic explorations: Embedded in them are descriptions of her quirky thought processes, her unusual associations, her interest in instability and want for stability, her endless sense of isolation, alienation, and displacement. Without these telling passages the emotional facet of *Überseetzungen* would be sorely depleted. The translator must necessarily allow these elements of the story to shine through his text and yet still create a coherent work in the source language, and this is a task to which, it is certain, no prescriptive, over-arching rules can be applied.

In some of these cases, for example, Tawada's intent is so dependent on both sound and meaning that an accurate translation is nearly impossible. In a passage from "*Die Ohrenzeugin*" ("The Earwitness"), Tawada refers to the inclusion of *Schnucki*, a pet name the narrator's colleague Monika uses with her daughter, in a group of words which is based on the shared initial sound *sch-* and an association with animals.. The group includes *schnurren* ("to purr"), *schmatzen* ("to smack"), *schmiegen* ("to nestle" or "to snuggle"), *schwimmen* ("to swim"), *schmusen* ("to smooch" or "to cuddle"), *schnarchen* ("to snore"), and *schlafen* ("to sleep"); she goes on to say that *schreiben* ("to write"), based on its sound, should also belong to the group. The essence of the discussion clearly revolves around commonalities between both sounds and meaning—these are the two elements which must be maintained in a translation. I as the translator face a number of conflicts here, though: Because the beginning of the passage is based specifically on the German word *Schnucki*, it seems that that word should remain unchanged—that is, it should remain in German—in the English translation. If I keeps the German word *Schnucki* in the English translation, though, I should find English counterparts for all the other words in the group, all of which share the same initial *sch-* sound. This isn't such a difficult task: Many of the English equivalents to these particular words are in fact rooted etymologically in Germanic languages. The problem, though, lies in the fact that there is no appropriate English equivalent for the very essential element *schreiben* ("to write") which would share the phonetic feature *sch-* with the others. (While we do see the commonality between *schreiben* and the English words "scribe" and "script," whatever link there may have been between the English "write" and Old German has long since become obsolete.) Knowing that the core of the passage depends more on the

meaning “to write” rather than the specific *sch*- phonetic grouping, I should not put this essential element in danger: Rather, I should find another phonetic element to unite the group which could include the English word “to write.” This translation employs the following English counterparts to the German *sch*- words listed above: Roar, rub, wriggle, run, relax, rip, rest, and write. The fact that the semantics of some of the original words in the group is lost is less important than the fact that the word “to write” is semantically maintained and that the words, still semantically related, all fall into a group based on some phonetic feature. The problem is still not entirely resolved, though: Because, as mentioned above, the discussion is about the word *Schnucki* (and relies on the fact that the word is German) it would be inappropriate to translate this into an English *r*- word. Unfortunately, though, leaving it as it is causes an inconsistency: The word *Schnucki* doesn’t fit in the *r*- group with the other words as it should. Because there is no German pet name which begins with “R” and which would fit semantically into the animal words group (*Schnucki* comes from the adjective *schmuckelig*, meaning “snug, cozy, or cute”), though, I must mask this inconsistency by accompanying *Schnucki* with the phonetically appropriate but nevertheless semantically quite approximate English equivalent “rascal,” as seen below:

The student asked, “What does *Schnucki* mean?” Monika laughed, and an office chair squeaked. The student probably picked up the word while Monika was on the phone with her daughter. I immediately categorized the pet name *Schnucki*—like the English “rascal”—in the “pleasant things animals do” word group. Roar, ram, wriggle, run, relax, rip, rest, and many other words belong to that category. The word “write” should also fall into that category because of its sound. Unfortunately, though, typing on the old computer keys didn’t produce any of those soft “R”-sounds, but rather just the hard “K”-sounds: Clatter, clank, clack, crash, and crack.
(2-3)

In other parts of the work, such as the discussion of *haben* (“to have”) and *hegen* (“to foster”) in “*Porträt einer Zunge*” (“Portrait of a Tongue”), the original text is focused primarily on semantics. The word *haben*, the character P, a college professor, asserts, has for many young German speakers overtaken many other more precise, meaningful words such as *hegen*. As this is a common complaint of English professors in the U.S. (as any college student knows), it seems only appropriate that the whole passage be translated into English. The loss of their orthographic and phonetic similarities is necessary to maintain the true essence of the passage. When, on the other hand, she discusses in “*Die Ohrenzeugin*” (“The Earwitness”) the spellchecker’s suggestion that perhaps “Derrida” should be *dreirad*, German for “tricycle,” the opposite is true: Clearly the element which must be maintained semantically in a translation is the first of the two words, and for the second, it is the phonetic (or even just orthographic) similarity to “Derrida”, but not the semantics, which is essential. Thus each part of every story, clearly, must be treated differently based on the intent of the passage; there can be no one correct fashion of translating such things. As Benjamin said, “...the language of a translation can—in fact, must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*” (260).

Clearly this method of translation opposes many aspects of the more prescriptive theories described above. How, after all, could a translator claiming that one must wholly adhere to strict, designated rules of resistance theory, for example, justify a translation which

makes significant structural, syntactic, and semantic changes on account of preserving the pure language, the echo, the *intentio* of the original? The essence of the issue is this: A translator must do what works, and what works is fidelity to the essence of the original text. Any other method—one which does not protect the core of the original—will yield not a true translation but a cousin of the original.

Indeed this task of mediation, as profoundly delicate as it may seem, is the task any speaker of any language bears each day: To communicate even verbally, as mentioned by Steiner above, is to take on the task of translation. Language in itself naturally functions as an intermediary between the supra-linguistic pure language of the speaker and the listener. The speaker simply and automatically must make decisions on how to best represent (or translate) this pure language into his spoken language based on the syntactic choices available to him, the same way the translator of written texts must “release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work” (Benjamin 261). Certainly when a speaker does this, he doesn’t consider any enumerated rubric or theoretical triangle; rather, he uses his understanding of the context to produce the most accurate and appropriate spoken translation of his internal thoughts. So too, therefore, should the translator of written works, whose job is merely an extension of the task every person bears each day.

Foreword

Tawada's collection *Überseetzungen* is made up of three sections entitled *Euro-Asiatische Zungen* (Euro-Asian Tongues), *Süd-Afrikanische Zungen* (South African Tongues) and lastly, *Nord-Amerikanische Zungen* (North American Tongues). The latter consists of the three stories translated here, "*Die Ohrenzeugin*" ("The Earwitness"), "*Eine Scheibengeschichte*" ("A Disc Story"), and "*Porträt einer Zunge*" ("Portrait of a Tongue"), which together explore a number of related issues. Central to the section, thematically speaking, are the notions of identity, location, and language, and the displacement of each which the narrator experiences as a woman who was brought up in Japan, who moved to live and work in Germany, and who is visiting the U.S. for an extended period of time.

By no means, though, are Tawada's stories conventional in dealing with these issues: Rather, she uses almost case-study like explorations of language, in a fashion very unique to her, to illustrate her thoughts on cultural boundaries, values, and identity. Because the section *Nord-Amerikanische Zungen* (North American Tongues) has specifically to do with the narrator's experience in the United States, with the English language, and with the relationship which English bears to German, it is of particular relevance to an English speaking audience, especially one with an interest in language and culture. This translation attempts to present Tawada's curiosity about these issues in a way that is accessible even to English speakers with no German experience, despite the way in which

their original presentation relies so specifically on the German language. There are, of course, certain obstacles which interfere with this task. A number of discussions of the relationship between German and English depend on the fact, for example, that Tawada's audience, for the most part, does have knowledge of both of these languages. The audience of an English translation, on the other hand, might not. There are many cases in this edition, therefore, in which the German has been left intact and is accompanied by an English translation, in order to ensure that the English reader may understand Tawada's meaning. These discussions are much more, though, than simple linguistic discussions: They are in fact of extraordinary importance to the text as a whole, as they serve to develop both the characters and the themes of the work.

In "*Die Ohrenzeugin*" ("The Earwitness"), for example, Tawada broaches a number of language-related themes directly through explorations of certain linguistic terms. One of the primary themes which persists throughout the story is the relationship between listening and communicating. Tawada hints at this in the story title, and begins the text with a scene in which the narrator describes her office as a listening organ through which, with her door open a crack, she can overhear all of the faceless voices speaking English, German, Japanese, and French. She describes her associations with and emotional response to hearing at a distance these conversations in different languages, and she discusses how her mother language can sometimes seem strangely distant from her, how English bears a "physical closeness" to German, and how the different sounds and languages compete for space in her field of listening. Later in the story, she tells of a meeting she attended in Switzerland entitled "On the Usefulness of Hearing

Impairments.” Here she became aware that even she, though she has no hearing problem, has holes in her field of listening through which certain elements could fall and then never be heard. She finds, in fact, that there are certain communicative holes which everyone experiences: Since there are certain objects (for example, the slip of paper stapled to the thread of a tea bag) which are nameless in so many languages, there must also be feelings which are nameless as well: “We can never know in life that we have it, only because it doesn’t have a name” (10). It is clear that, for the narrator, language is its own living, breathing element, which changes and grows depending on context and environment, and which can be playful or serious, cooperative or evasive.

Because of its status in Tawada’s work as an indomitable force, independent of the people who speak it, language bears an individual relationship not just to communicating, but also to technology. She discusses, for example, the role of answering machines: “Technological development has made human voices more and more independent from human bodies. One can leave the voices behind, copy them, deposit them, duplicate them, color them, alienate them, speed them up, or reverse them” (4). To the narrator, technology is the enigmatic factor which alienates humans from communication: It separates people from their voices, yet binds together those who understand it with the needful people who don’t.

Tawada also writes in this story about the relationship between language and culture, a theme which is especially prevalent throughout her work. The narrator notices, for example, that certain German words and their English translations function entirely

differently within their different contexts: She mentions that the German *unabhängig* seems so much less euphoric and convincing than its English counterpart, “independent.” The German word *Eingeborene*, which means “indigenous” or “native,” or literally, “one who is born in,” is important to this theme, too: The narrator notes, “If one can designate a ‘Native American’ as an *Eingeborene*, one could think of a ‘native speaker’ as someone who had been *hineingeboren*—born into—a language. I was born into Japanese like one is thrown into a sack” (7). Her discussion of the false cognates *überhören* and “overhear” further emphasizes this theme: The word *überhören* in German literally means “to overhear,” not in the sense that we understand the word “to overhear” in English, but rather with the meaning “to not hear,” the same way “to overlook” in English means “to not see.” “It’s peculiar,” Tawada writes, “that twins like *überhören* and ‘overhear’ can have almost opposite meanings solely because they grew up in different areas” (9).

Tawada extends this idea of the relationship between language and culture to the more specific notion of the mother language and culture. She discusses other people’s perceptions about her mother tongue, Japanese: “Once the American author Ivan Levi, living in Japan at the time, said to me that Japanese society excluded the non-Japanese, and also that the Japanese culture is not open. The only open thing in Japan is the language, he said, anyone is allowed to write it” (12). She also brings up her own perceptions of the way the German people feel about their mother tongue, and how these differ from her cultural-based understanding of language in general:

In Germany most people would not assert that the German language must not be written by others. Indirectly, though, they make it understood that language must be property. They say, for example, that one can never master a foreign language as well as the mother tongue. One notices immediately that the most important thing for them is mastery. My opinion is that it is unnecessary to master a language. Either one has a connection to it or one has none. (12)

The second story presented here, *“Eine Scheibengeschichte”* (“A Disc Story”), similarly deals with the narrator’s associations with specific words, and also with specific letters. As she arrives in the airport in Toronto, the city with three Os in its name, her spine is sore, but her tongue (a central theme throughout the collection *Überseetzungen* as a whole) is moist and elastic: “It prepares itself for an encounter with a foreign language” (16). The letter O, she says, fascinates her. Perhaps part of this fascination is rooted in the fact that her mother tongue is Japanese, but she asserts that it is not the sound but rather the letter O which she finds so interesting: It is an oval disc like the discs in her computer, the discs in her stereo, the DJ’s two discs. She learns from her host, who picks her up at the airport, that when she speaks English, she also has so-called discs in her spine. This short interaction, though, is notably the only element of plot in the story: *“Eine Scheibengeschichte”* (“A Disc Story”) exists, like many of the passages in her other, longer stories, to relate her exploration of her cross- and supra-linguistic associations with a single letter.

The last and longest story of the section, *“Porträt einer Zunge”* (“Portrait of a Tongue”), on the other hand, deals explicitly with not only themes of language, culture, and identity, like the others, but also with friendship. The story, though, is more than just a portrait of

a tongue (although the tongue is, as mentioned above, a recurring element in all three stories): Beyond that, the story in itself is the written version of the painting of the character P—the “Portrait of a Lady”—which the narrator wants to complete. In it, Tawada creates a stunningly detailed picture of the woman P, who in the foreign environment of Massachusetts, shares a community, a background, a language, and an identity with the lost and isolated narrator. While many of the themes in “*Porträt einer Zunge*” (“Portrait of a Tongue”) are carried through from the previous two stories, they are clearly dealt with on a more emotional level here. In Tawada’s treatment of the topic of the status of German in the United States, for example, she goes beyond the more objective discussion seen in “*Die Ohrenzeugin*” (“The Earwitness”): Here, she speaks of German as the binding tie between the narrator and P—the intimate secret, the source of shared identity, of understanding and of friendship. She also discusses the threat of Americanization to this tie: When, for example, P speaks of gallons instead of liters, Fahrenheit instead of Celsius, and when she uses Americanisms like the German word “*professionell*” or the Americanized question “*Wollen wir die Fahrt miteinander teilen?*” (“Do we want to share the drive?”), the narrator feels a distance from her closest friend, as a result of the undeniable effect a foreign environment has on a language and identity.

As in the previous two stories, the narrator, in order to highlight the core themes, discusses her understanding of a number of English and German terms. Clearly this story, more than the others, is a study of feelings and of the language of emotion. The words Tawada explores, therefore, include thematically relevant terms such as *Herz*

(“heart”), and *die Gefühle verletzen* (“to hurt feelings”), a phrase which, in its objectification of the word *Gefühle* (“feelings”), seems quite peculiar to German speakers born before the phrase was borrowed from English. Other terms she explores may initially seem less thematically pertinent, but Tawada always uses them very intentionally to draw attention to some important aspect of the friendship the narrator and P share: *Teilen* (“to share” or “to divide”), therefore, plays a huge role throughout the story, as the narrator tries to determine the true essence of the word—whether, for example, the English “to share” or “to divide” is a more appropriate understanding of its meaning. In this way, she also discusses the German word *haken* (“to hook”), which, despite being an unpleasant word, reminds her of hooking arms with P, of feeling uninhibited (as she did in Germany) about touching the bodies of the same sex, and of her familiar home in Berlin.

In passages related to the narrator’s notion of identity, words such as *Asiaten* (“Asians”) are discussed: P wants to know if the word, when used in Germany, connotes something unpleasant. The narrator goes on to point out the telling relationship between syntax and semantics: One can always water down words of identity, she asserts, by making them adjectives rather than nouns: “An Asian woman,” for example, is quite a different concept than “an Asian.” Identity is discussed, too, in terms of sound: In the passage comparing P’s separate American and German manners of answering the phone, Tawada speaks of “two vocal cords in one person.”

The narrator also expresses a persistent curiosity, seen in the previous two stories as well, about the relationship between English and German: In such passages, the narrator and P discuss the meanings and the strangeness of English terms and idioms such as “dog-eat-dog society,” “chicken-and-egg situation,” “package deal,” and “chip off the old block.” They then do the same with the German *Hexenschuß* (“backache,” but literally “witch shot”), and *Kreislaufstörungen* (literally, “circulatory disturbances”). These discussions are absolutely essential in the development of the characters: They allow the reader a glimpse of the characters’ minds and of their thoughts and perspectives.

There are distinct differences among the three stories which make up this translation—the first two, for example, are much shorter, more objective, and less event driven explorations of identity and language, while the third story is a painting of a woman, of a friendship, and of two women’s bond of shared identity, language, and location, despite displacement from their natural settings. Despite these differences, though, the three stories are clearly united not only by their themes, but also by the methods the author uses to illustrate these themes. Motifs of language, location, and identity, and how different contexts affect each of these essential elements, for example, are persistent throughout the section. In all three stories, too, these motifs, as well as the characters themselves, are developed precisely through these essential discussions of certain linguistic elements. Despite the fact that many of the themes are specific to her language experience and her perspective as a Japanese woman who came to the U.S. from living in Germany, and despite the fact that they are presented in an unconventional fashion, their

core—notions of culture, language, identity, and location—is still accessible to a broad, multilingual audience.

The Earwitness

I left the elevator and looked at my watch. It was three o'clock. The door of computer room number 308 was half opened, I saw Ginhua sitting in front of the screen. On the left side of the hall, the doors with even numbers were lined up, one after the other, on the right side, the ones with odd numbers.

From room number 317 I heard a quiltwork of excited voices. Four pairs sat in the room. Each pair consisted of one person who wrote a text, and another who critiqued it.

Usually it was just the second person who spoke spiritedly, as if the writing had made the first person mute. One of the voices was tough and instructive and grew increasingly louder. It followed me all the way to my office and wouldn't let me go. Why was the voice speaking as if it were giving a sermon? Is writing a sin? I perked up my ears in order to hear some of the content. Right then, though, I heard from behind me a completely different voice, which was speaking German. Immediately the American sermon disappeared from my perception. "Did you hurt yourself?" That was Monika's voice, so it probably came from her office, number 326. "Hurt? I don't understand," answered the voice of an American student. "Hurt?" repeated Monika. In her voice glimmered hope that the student could still perhaps remember this vocabulary word. The German word *verletzt*—"hurt"—suddenly struck me as so familiar, as if it were written on my skin. In America I often noticed a physical closeness to the German language.

Monika's student apparently couldn't remember the word *verletzt*. With a whisper she repeated the sentence in English. When I was a child I believed in the existence of an

invisible fairy who sat in my hair and whispered important words in my ear. “Oh, yeah, hurt! Yeah, I am hurt! A bicycle accident!” called out the student, delighted.

Suddenly Japanese sentences approached from the back part of the hall. A feminine and masculine voice conversed with one another, that must have been Emi and Shigeru. I really didn’t need to have any eyes to know what was going on in the hall. My office door was open a crack so that all of the tones and noises could flow into the room. Even through a closed door, though, one could still hear a bit. Every room secretly overheard the noises of the outside world. The hall was like a row of numbered listening organs. My listening organ bore the number 320.

Emi and Shigeru were talking about an event. The content of the conversation was momentarily clear, but strangely my mother language seemed distant from me. The sentences drifted by me, they left behind content but nothing else.

In Cambridge I often heard Japanese. Not only in the Institute for Foreign Languages and Literature, but also in the bus I took from Harvard Square to MIT, in the Fogg Museum, in the Cambridge Adult Education Center, at the counter of the Boston Bank, or even in the little shoe stores and cafés, the Japanese language naturally mixed right into the soundscape of the city. It didn’t trigger any longing in me, though, just a sort of relief that this language belonged in daily life here. In Germany one always has to act as if Japanese is an exotic language.

Apparently the two speakers, Emi and Shigeru, stopped outside Shigeru’s office, number 321, which was directly across from mine. Behind me I again heard the voice of the student speaking German. It blew the Japanese voices out of my field of listening and claimed it entirely for itself. The student asked, “What does *Schnucki* mean?” Monika

laughed, and an office chair squeaked. The student probably picked up the word while Monika was on the phone with her daughter. I immediately categorized the pet name *Schnucki*—like the English “rascal”—in the “pleasant things animals do” word group. Roar, rub, wriggle, run, relax, rip, rest, and many other words belong to that category. The word “write” should also fall into that category because of its sound. Unfortunately, though, typing on the old computer keys didn’t produce any of those soft “R”-sounds, but rather just the hard “K”-sounds: Clatter, clank, clack, crash, and crack.

The telephone rang. It was Bernd, he was calling on account of the meeting at Dartmouth College. He said he was driving there anyway and could pick me up, it would be so nice there. I decided to go with him. I liked the mysterious word “Dartmouth,” it sounded like the name of a sea monster. The vowel in the first syllable opens a wet hollow in the darkness. In the second syllable it becomes clear that this hollow is really the mouth of a sea creature. I looked forward to driving to a mysterious sea. Bernd said goodbye and disappeared in the phone. I can’t describe the distance between our offices because my office was actually his office, which I shared with him during my stay.

It occurred to me that the earpiece of the office phone was unusually heavy. It thus had something archaic about it. Maybe this was how the university wanted to prevent the employees from making long telephone calls. I started thinking about Joseph Beuys’ “Earth Telephone,” a lump of clay mixed with dried grass and directly next to it stood a black telephone from the fifties. These days most of the telephone earpieces are handy and light as a feather. Why should talking on the telephone no longer be bound to the earth?

As a child I pushed mussels to my ears and heard sea sounds inside. That's how I conducted my first overseas conversation. One time I pressed a snow-white magnolia blossom to my ear because it looked like a mussel shell. In ancient times in Japan one thought that spirits landed on magnolia trees. They could land in just the right place even though the trees—unlike the rooms in the Institute—weren't numbered. About a month ago Monika led me to the countless magnolia trees on Beacon Hill. The blossoms opened as if they were the ears of the trees, they caught the soundless words which fell from the sky. It was the 10th of April, the cold crept into our bones. Luminous ears hovered in the evening stillness. A few were slightly flushed, others anticipated the stars which wouldn't appear in the sky until later.

I wanted to call Kurt. He had his office in room number 224, therefore a story lower. Another floor meant another world. One didn't run up or down the stairs in order to reach people there, but rather one called them. I wanted to ask Kurt something about the DAT recorder and the order for a new computer. The more I had to do with technical devices, the more human help I needed. Technology debilitates people like me, that's the humanity of technology: Technical problems bind people to each other or create new stories which can then be passed on from mouth to mouth.

One time Kurt told me that his spell check program had registered the name "Derrida" as a mistake, and had suggested the correction "a rider."

Kurt wasn't in his office. I left a message on the answering machine. Technological development has made human voices more and more independent from human bodies. One can leave the voices behind, copy them, deposit them, duplicate them, color them, alienate them, speed them up, or reverse them. Can a voice really exist independent of a

body, though? I noticed that the word *unabhängig*, German for “independent,” didn’t sound as euphoric as the English word. How do the Americans manage to serve up such a convincing word? Does one receive a secret recipe for that on Independence Day? Just as I hung up the phone, Ginhua came into my office and said she was going home now and that our computer was free. We used a computer in office number 308 to receive and send emails. I had seen Ginhua there often. I was only in her office number 421 one time because it was on a higher floor. I didn’t know if I had been to that floor more than one time. Someone said to me the world is a web of connections, distance no longer plays a role. It seemed to me, though, that it wasn’t distance but closeness which no longer played a role. One can send an email even to someone who sits right nearby. Is the world really a web of connections or is it maybe a web of afflictions?

Ginhua and I both suddenly noticed that we were wearing almost the same clothes. At a closer glance, though, I realized that she was wearing a black dress, whereas I was wearing a black jacket. Two things which looked very similar could be meant in very different ways, just like Derrida and a rider. I asked Ginhua where she had bought her dress. When I spoke English I sometimes asked questions which I could formulate quickly but which weren’t always the ones that I wanted to ask. The probability of getting an interesting answer, though, wasn’t any less because of this. Ginhua said she wouldn’t have bought the dress. She took three things to the dry cleaners and got three back. One didn’t belong to her, it obviously had gotten mixed up with her things, but the man in the shop didn’t want to believe her. She decided therefore to adopt the foreign dress.

I sometimes had a similar feeling while speaking: A word that I wanted to say got switched with another. The lost child didn't ever show himself again, and the stepchild sounded believable and logical, above all, it was well understood. There was no reason, therefore, to search for the biological child. It sometimes left a bad aftertaste, though, and hindered my speech.

It was four o'clock. I went to the computer room, number 308, and found in my mailbox an email from a colleague whose office was in another building. Another building was like another planet, her planet was called E38 and ours was 14N. I couldn't conceive of where E38 could be. The buildings on campus were arranged according to a complicated mathematical system which was completely opaque to me.

In her email the colleague wrote that she wanted to invite me to a weekend in Rhode Island. This smallest state of America gradually gained for me the status of a mysterious sanctuary. Someone told me that many religious denominations which the strictly Puritan-oriented state of Massachusetts did not tolerate survived there. Aside from that, in no other state could one supposedly find so many vampire stories. I wanted to visit the marshlands there in which little vampires—frogs, ticks, and mosquitoes—sang about forgotten wonders and ecstasies, about witchery and magic.

In this email it also said that on Sunday I could go from there to visit a new Indian museum in Connecticut, if such a thing would interest me. The German word *Indianer* sounded childish, incorrect, naïve, and yet alluring. I sometimes entertained the thought of how it might be if I were an Indian. I never pictured myself as an "Asian American," though. Because most of the "Asian Americans" that I had met were oriented towards technology and Christianity. I secretly tried to get closer to Indians. From that fact one

can tell that I've lived a long time in Germany. Without ever having read Karl May, without ever having visited the *Freilichttheater* in Bad Segeberg, I was still infected by the great German dream to be Indian.

Once at the checkout at Trader Joe's I saw a woman with long, lavish hair and gaudy necklaces. She didn't have any customers at the moment and was speaking to a colleague about her studies. I heard words like "literature," "women," or "minorities" and shot Monika a questioning look. She said that the woman is an *Eingeborene*—she is "indigenous." I had completely forgotten that such a German word existed. If one can designate a "native American" as an *Eingeborene*, one could think of a "native speaker" as someone who had been *hineingeboren*—born into—a language. I was born into Japanese like one is thrown into a sack. This language became for me, therefore, my outer skin. The German language, on the other hand, was swallowed by me, and ever since then, has sat in my stomach.

In the next room someone turned on the Xerox machine. I found in my mailbox another 21 emails. One student wrote me that she would be late today on account of a project. Another student asked if he could turn in his essay one week late. The other emails weren't addressed to me personally: A colleague offered discounted tickets for a film festival, the administration department asked about a lost key, and a stranger sent computer jokes: Among others, one was about a mother who emailed her seven-year-old son to let him know that dinner was ready. Bernd had told us that in the United States, 26 emails are written per person, daily.

People are always communicating with one another and exchanging information. The words "communication" and "information" always make me think of a dairy product I

once saw in Starmarket. The product was called “I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter.” The product itself had nothing to do with butter, it was just supposed to trigger the positive memory attached to the word “butter.”

Why, though, should I let butter be taken away from my bread? Butter is supposed to be “unhealthy,” but the word “unhealthy” is being used with increasing frequency for a modern witch-hunt. They say “fat” and by that mean the devil. By “calories,” perhaps they mean heathens. Does a communication taste good without sugar? Does an information taste good without fat? The sense of taste is intelligent. It doesn’t let itself be deceived, as long as it isn’t destroyed.

I left the computer room and in the hallway met Seto, who just came out of her office. Papers were always making noise in her hands. Her footsteps, though, were scarcely heard. She asked me why the bridegroom in one of my stories was a dog. Seto had the nice habit of always conducting conversations about literature in the hallway and in the women’s bathroom. Behind Seto’s back I saw the wide open door of room number 311. Out of the room jumped French fragments of sound, which sounded jovial, spontaneous, and full of zest. They penetrated through the net of Seto’s voice and reached me, though I didn’t understand them. Suddenly I could no longer understand Seto’s English. English and French words mixed with one another, swirled around in the air, and separated from the sequence of the soundgestures which appeared to create meanings. A cloud of foreign sounds came into being and grew into my ears, the material surplus of the

languages poured over and slid away over my sense of hearing. The word *überhören*¹ came to mind, I heard nothing anymore, I *überhörte* everything. But what is with the word “overhear”? This word means to hear something by accident. So does one actually hear something when one *überhört*? It’s peculiar that twins like *überhören* and “overhear” can have almost opposite meanings solely because they grew up in different locations.

I shook my head, shook off broken French fragments and concentrated on Seto’s voice. In the web of her language there were holes, they consisted of pauses to breathe, filler words, and also words which I didn’t know.

A few years ago I was invited to a meeting in Switzerland, the theme was “On the Usefulness of Hearing Impairments.” At the reading in the evening, my texts were translated into sign language. After the reading, I talked for a while with a scientist who primarily read my words from the movement of my lips. She told me it isn’t so, in her case, that she heard everything too quietly or not at all. She could hear clearly, but in the net of her soundworld there were too many big holes. The words which fell through these holes, she couldn’t hear. Suddenly I noticed holes in my soundworld, and since then I haven’t been able to forget about them. Even when I believe I understand the content and the acoustics of a language perfectly, there are many empty spots. These holes must not be stopped up, though, or else one cannot understand anything else. One needs free space in which meanings can be stitched and glued and knitted together.

¹ The word *überhören* in German literally means “to overhear,” not in the sense that we understand the word “to overhear” in English, but rather with the meaning “to not hear,” the same way “to overlook” in English means “to not look.”

Just as I wanted to go back to my office, Whitney came out of her office, number 318.

She had a mug in her hand. Out of the mug stuck a little piece of paper which was stapled to the thread of a tea bag. What is this tiny piece of paper called? What's it called in German? What's it called in English? What's it called at all? I had discussed with Whitney the week before how strange it is that many familiar objects appear to be nameless. With objects it's probably not so bad because we can touch them anyway. What's it like, though, for a nameless feeling? We can never know in life that we have it, only because it doesn't have a name.

Whitney said she just received an email from a musician in Berlin, which however was unfortunately unreadable, one could only read the first two words, *Liebe Whitney*. I also knew this musician quite well. "Should I write her an email and ask what she wrote you?" I asked her. There is a Japanese children's song that goes something like this: a black goat gets a letter from a white goat and, before reading it, eats it up. She then regrets it, though, and writes the white goat a letter and asks what was written in the first letter. The white goat, before reading it, eats this letter up. She, too, regrets it later and writes back in order to find out what was written in the letter, and it keeps going on just like that.

Can a language fly over an ocean? I sometimes received emails with empty spaces. A friend from Hamburg wrote me that the German umlauts on the way to America often fall in the Atlantic and disappear. Japanese characters, on the other hand, fall in the Pacific and don't arrive, either. The oceans are probably already overfilled with umlauts and ideographs. What would the "ocean engineers" from MIT do with all the letters? Do whales eat umlauts?

I heard the clattering of little wheels from the direction of the elevator, it grew increasingly louder. A few of my students had such wheels under the soles of their shoes. Just like the Walkman, these wheels were extra body parts for young people. I looked at the clock, it was only five o'clock. It couldn't be my students.

I sat down at the desk in my office and searched for a passage in *Privatsprache und Privaterfahrungen* by Wittgenstein. Maybe I could read a paragraph from it with my students. The text had to do with the question of whether one could communicate pain verbally. The example of pain was reiterated so insistently that it lost its status as an example. The pains moved to the center of the text and posed the question to the reader, How can one think about language without thinking about pain? "Did you hurt yourself?" A question which asks about wounds, injuries, sicknesses, and pains. An ancient sentence with which language begins. When I am talking about pains, they are absent, it's only like this that I can speak at all.

Since one month ago, I found the fragments by Wittgenstein, which read like notes, more interesting than they ever had been before. With desperate gestures and rustling compulsion for repetition, this language pointed to something which couldn't go into a language. I should have taken a bigger interest in Chomsky since I already was working at MIT.

To pain, to perceive, to put up, to put on. I can't understand almost all of the languages of the world, but I learned German by chance. What a coincidence that Wittgenstein also wrote in German, even though there are so many other languages in the world!

In Germany I was always viewed as a foreigner who touched the language of the natives from outside. American students, on the other hand, never doubted that German was one

of my languages, just as English was their language. No matter from where and when they had immigrated to America, English was for them their own language. They didn't set language and cultures in a one to one relationship. At least one assumed that English could offer space for all forms of culture.

Once the American author Ivan Levi, living in Japan at the time, said to me that Japanese society excluded the non-Japanese, and also that the Japanese culture is not open. The only open thing in Japan is the language, he said, anyone is allowed to write it. His words boldly broke a taboo for most Japanese, who wanted to secure their national identity precisely through the inviolability of the holy mother language.

In Germany most people would not assert that the German language must not be written by others. Indirectly, though, they make it understood that language must be property.

They say, for example, that one can never master a foreign language as well as the mother tongue. One notices immediately that the most important thing for them is mastery. My opinion is that it is unnecessary to master a language. Either one has a connection to it or one has none.

Others say that only in one's mother tongue can one authentically express one's feelings, in a foreign language one involuntarily lies. They feel disturbed in their search for authenticity when they see their language on foreign tongues.

There are also people who assert that childhood is absent in a foreign language. I have found nowhere more childhood, though, than in the German language. *Schmatzen, schnaufen, schluchzen, schlürfen*: Many German words are onomatopoeic. To the newborn perhaps every language sounds like German does to me.

My thoughts were interrupted by the Chinese language. In the hallway two masculine voices were talking with one another. It sounded earthily fragrant, robust, yet still playful, like in an old mask theater. I understood not one word of Chinese, but could recognize both speakers by their voices: One is a big, robust Chinese man, the other a thin, blond English man. Both belonged to the Chinese department and taught Chinese. The relationship between faces and languages seems to be arbitrary. Chinese is a fashionable language right now, while meanwhile Japanese has fallen slightly out of fashion. Most students learn Spanish as a foreign language. German seems to belong to the dying out minorities.

One can decide which foreign languages one wants to learn, while with the mother tongue one has no choice. Gertrude Stein wrote, "I am an American and I have lived half my life in Paris, not the half which made me but the half in which I made what I made." One could thus also maybe say that the mother tongue makes the person, the person, however, can make something in a foreign language.

Can one really freely decide, though, which foreign language one wants to learn? Did I really want to learn English and not Russian in school? Was it my decision that I didn't learn Chinese? It is amazing that a person who cannot choose his mother tongue can hold tightly to the belief that he can make free decisions. In America, absolute freedom of decision is a part of the daily scene. Even at a simple coffee stop the customer can, as an independent individual, make endless decisions: He can choose between "tall" and "large," "non-fat" and "half and half," "decaf" and "regular." After all of these numerous individual decisions I always got a coffee which disappointed my tongue.

Sometimes I think that maybe one should listen better instead of wanting to decide.

Through listening I can find a vibration which carries me along. It doesn't know the divisions between inside and outside, must and want, await and act. To listen—*hören*—doesn't mean to obey—*gehören*—but many people don't like to listen because it's a passive demeanor.

It was six o'clock. On my desk lay a few timeworn books about the writing of essays which I had gotten free from the library. There were many books and classes for people who wanted to write "creatively." The mythos of writing grew and grew, although writing was mostly explained through practiced example. I took one of the books in my hand and leafed through. An example sentence immediately caught my eye: "In a college education the students must have the freedom to put their courses together on their own. If they are forced to study a boring subject like German, which they find neither important nor interesting, they lose the motivation to study." I clapped the book closed and didn't read any further. It is strange that this example sentence was printed in a textbook. Usually the Americans are always so politically correct that they, under no circumstances, want to offend a cultural group. Do the people perhaps not know that Celan, Kafka, Benjamin, Bachmann, and many other authors thought and wrote in German? Could one imagine this century without Marx and Freud? If they had had a different mother tongue, they would potentially have written completely different books. I angrily laid the book aside and grabbed a college newspaper. On the first page of the paper there was an interview with Alan Lightman. I remembered how I, three months ago—it was my first day at the Institute—coincidentally had met this author. At the place where our hallway appeared to end, no real end was located, but rather the hallway

made a kink and led to the right toward the “Writing Program” Department. I met the author behind the kink. Where language has a kink, writing begins.

The paper posed the author with the question, “Why did you leave Harvard and come to MIT?” I actually had a huge need to think of a satisfactory answer to this question. In that moment, though, I heard Monika’s footsteps and suddenly understood not one single English sentence. There were two or three other women in the Institute who wore similar sounding shoes. Monika could be distinguished from the others because she always went *allegro*. Earlier I had thought only cats could recognize people by their footsteps. Now I knew that I too could hear much more than I had once believed. Every person was a source of numerous noises: It walked, stumbled, coughed, laughed, groaned, drank, knocked, typed, and photocopied.

I closed the paper. In a few seconds, Monika would knock on my door and begin some question with her Rhinelandish, charming formula *Hör’ mal!*—“Listen up!” It was more than just a regional coloring, though, because *Hör’ mal!* was definitely a stronger request than *Sag’ mal!*—“Talk to me!” Listening binds one person to the voice of the other, it is something obligatory. *Hör’ mal!* It always seemed to me as if listening were actually exactly what she was asking me to do. *Hör’ mal!* Yes, I’ll keep listening, I will not busy myself with anything else except overhearing everything audible and inaudible.

A Disc Story

When I sit in an airplane, I have no room to move my body. My back becomes stiff, my feet and calves swell up, my tailbone doesn't sit quite right, and my skin dries out. Only my tongue becomes moister and more elastic. It prepares itself for an encounter with a foreign language.

I arrived in Toronto and pronounced the name of the place with delight: Toronto. How extraordinary that the sound O occurred three times in the name of a city! I was already enthusiastic about city names in which the sound O occurred only twice. Three times, though, was so much better.

Specifically it was not the sound O but the letter O which fascinated me. O was an oval disc.

The word "Toronto" means "big water."

I was picked up by a pleasant, tall host who spoke English.

How are you? he asked me.

I have back pain from sitting so long in the airplane, I answered.

That's because of the "discs" in your spine, he said.

I don't have any diskette in my body, neither a floppy disc nor a compact disc, and certainly not a CD-Rom, I retorted.

Could be that CDs have nothing to do with vertebral discs in another language, but when we speak English, we have discs in our spine. That's where all of the postures we've held during our lives are saved. And always when a disc pops out of the spine and chafes a nerve, painful music is played.

On that day I metamorphosed into a CD rack,
A column with thirty three compartments,
In each compartment there is a CD,
Not sorted alphabetically,
Exempt from all genres,
I am a DJ without hands,
Two discs are turning simultaneously,
Or three discs or four or five, six, seven ...
Oh, it dances and dizzies,
One no longer hears music,
One only hears
Where it meets and chafes,
Where an understanding is painstakingly avoided,
Where it tumbles and bogs down,
Where it laughs and gets out of tempo,
Where it flashes,
In Toronto, the city with the three discs in its name,
I heard music in my spine,
A trip knows no movement, but makes the tongue moist. When it speaks, the body is
metamorphosed.

Portrait of a Tongue

I remember a school essay which I wrote as a seven-year-old girl. “My Sister” read the title of the essay, the content consisted of a list of false words which came out of my sister’s mouth. She was at that time just four years old and said for example “toothbreast” in place of “toothbrush,” “mother-in-lies” instead of “mother-in-law,” “waschine” in place of “washing machine.” My sister was for me a fascinating language machine. “I am happy that I have a little sister”—With this sentence I ended my essay.

I had always written more than painted even though I wanted to become an artist. One time I tried to paint a picture of a woman, it had the working title “Portrait of a Lady.” I had already long left behind traditional portrait painting, but didn’t yet know what one could do instead if one wanted to capture a face.

What did this woman look like? Whom did she resemble? I first thought of Catherine Deneuve and rented from the video store a few films which she was in. I tried to woo the actress out of the screen and onto the picture. My paintbrush drowned, though, in the streaming pictures of the film.

Her name is Piroshka since when I asked her later what she would want to be called in a novel, she gave me that name. However maybe I had understood the name incorrectly, because I didn’t find it in my name dictionary. What should I do now? Maybe I should just say P, P for permanent and provisional, poetic and practical.

When I began to meet P daily, the similarity between her and the movie actress disappeared. I saw in her face a silk face, a polished face, a luminous face and many other faces in her face. The more often I saw her, the less I could say what she really looked like.

I photographed her in front of an Armenian vegetable shop. Green salad leaves shone in the sunlight, oranges and bananas beamed, but P's face in the pictures looked completely different than she had looked in my eyes.

I always bought for myself the Armenian crispbread called *ak-mak*: A magical name. In the sound of this name I saw much more clearly than in the photo how P stood in front of the shop.

At that time I was an "artist in residence" in Massachusetts for four months. I was happy that I was liberated from the dusty Berlin Frauencafé "Caenis," where I had served five days out of the week. The women who sat in the café weren't exactly without charm, but their language disappointed me too often. It sounded cold but loud; audacious but without critical poignancy; cut off from the magical world of objects; arrogant out of fear and possessive.

Since an old friend of mine worked as a musician in Boston, my colleagues from the café assumed that we were going out. I wouldn't, however, have crossed the Atlantic just for

him. Our connection had been put to rest when we had fought vehemently during the preparation of an installation.

Secretly I wanted to experience a new sensory adventure in a women's bookstore in Massachusetts, the mysterious webpage of which I had seen just by coincidence on the internet. It had become impossible for me to fall in love in Berlin. The sentences which jumped into my ears chilled me immediately. In America—so I thought—they don't speak. That's nice. I mean, they do speak, but they only speak American, and that will surely be refreshing as it doesn't yet carry my fingerprint.

The city in which I lived was called Watertown, the city of water. In Germany I know many place names with a *Berg*—a mountain—or a *Tal*—a valley—on the end, but I've never been in a *Wasser* city.

I told P of my plan to paint the "Portrait of a Lady." "I am not a lady," replied P with a smile. Some women living abroad stay forever young because they have distance from their mother tongue. They love their old mother and her language from afar without getting jaded by it.

P was in her early twenties when she left the Rhineland and immigrated to America. In the first year she worked as an au pair in a suburb of New York, after which she traveled around through America, then she began to work at Harvard University, where she later earned her Ph.D.

For her tour through America P had a 99 dollar Greyhound pass. The bus ride took a long time, but she wasn't bored. One time during a bus trip she and a friend made fun of the man who sat in front of them. They both spoke German and assumed that the man didn't understand what they were saying because they hadn't met anyone who understood German for a long time. When the bus had reached its final station, the man stood up, turned around slowly and said in German, I wish you a wonderful rest of the evening in San Francisco.

The grey hounds still live on the sides of the busses and run to and from between American cities. I looked up the word "greyhound" in my dictionary and found two translations: "Wind dog" and "wind game." Suddenly both popped up in my memory, I had seen them once before: Two dogs. The first ran with the wind, stretched its body in the air and, turning into a line. The second, however, made itself into a ball and rolled away down the slope. Both had grey fur. I had seen them. Probably in a cartoon.

"Grey is not a color," my hairdresser in Berlin had said to me. "An old customer of mine would like to leave her hair the way it is. In principle I agree with this attitude. But nevertheless: Grey is really not a color."

P taught me a word which roughly meant "grey mixed with black." I can't, however, remember the word anymore.

One says “to have grey hair.” How strange. One says to have long legs, to have a fat stomach, to have wrinkles on one’s face, to have pain, to have a nice life.

A colleague of P’s, who was of Greek descent, one day stopped dying her hair black. Now she looks good, said P to me, that is to say, it wouldn’t look good to dye one’s hair completely black at an older age. P herself has a mixed autumnal hair color. In it I saw acacia honey, canola honey, silver, and much more.

P complained that her American students too often use the verb “to have.” One does not say “to have doubt” but “to foster doubt.”

That is not really different in Berlin, though, I replied. One doesn’t foster anything these days, neither doubt nor love.

The word “to have” calms us with a capitalistic, enlightened gesture, as if one could have various feelings just like one can have a house and furniture. “To foster,” though, indicates an uncanny relationship between people and their feelings.

I have certainly encountered the word “to foster” often in novels or in a knight’s tale, but in everyday life I have hardly heard it used at all.

In my inner dictionary, “to foster” and “to be content” lie next to one another. Once P said to me that she would like to read more literature as soon as she no longer has to earn her bread. It is for her still the nicest idea to lie in bed in winter and read a book, she said. She used the word “to be content.” That is also one of those words which I hear

only rarely, I said to her. It has almost been forgotten, while its negation “to be discontent” is still often used.

It was the day on which I had an event at the Goethe Institute in Boston. P called me and asked, “*Wollen wir die Fahrt miteinander teilen?*”—“Do we want to share the drive?” At first I didn’t understand what she wanted to say. I associated the word *teilen*—“share”—with the fare and I was somewhat surprised. In the course of the conversation it turned out that P wanted to give me a ride in her car. Other people would have said, “Should I take you in my car?” or “Should I drive you there?” How clumsy these common formulations sound in comparison with her offer!

The expression which P had used was influenced by American English. It didn’t change the fact, however, that we indeed shared the ride with one another. It was not important that I reached the destination faster and more comfortably. Rather, P gave me the feeling that we had shared a piece of time together.

P showed me the famous Widener Library. There we met by coincidence an acquaintance of P’s, an American. P spoke with him about seminars, formulations popped up like “to share reading experiences with students.” In Berlin I had never heard that one would share the pleasure in a text with the students. That would have sounded unbearably hypocritical.

The word “share” in English appeared to me like a good-natured gesture, while the German word *teilen* sounded matter of fact, even cold. One *teilt* a piece of cake with his siblings, one doesn’t do it voluntarily, one divides—*teilt*—it with a sharp knife. If it’s

not fairly *geteilt*, there is an argument. The moment of the separation is more important than that of the giving. “When I was still in college, I shared—*teilte*—a room with another student,” I used to say. The word *Teilung* always reminded me of poverty or of the Berlin wall.

After we went swimming together, P stood with wet hair in front of me in the locker room and told me about her daughter’s comprehensive school. This school is well-known due to its integration projects, she said. Its goal is a shared academic experience for people from diverse ethnic groups. Her daughter, she continued, was very engaged with this project.

After swimming I always feel as if I were lacking warmth and nourishment. P had a banana in her purse. I didn’t have anything to eat with me. She broke the banana in the middle and gave me the upper half.

The next day we met a journalist who worked for the newspaper “the Boston Globe.” She said she was in the swimming pool the day before and had heard two German speaking voices behind a row of lockers in the locker room. She couldn’t understand one word, of course. “Lucky that she didn’t understand,” P said to me later and smiled. My cheeks became hot. We shared not only a banana, but also a secret.

Children like to think up secret languages and are happy that other people can’t understand them. One doesn’t always have the desire to share a language with an anonymous mass. In America one doesn’t have to think up a secret language. German is

secretive enough. When I spoke with P on the street, German seemed to me like an imaginary language for children.

An event at Wellesley College. An author from Buenos Aires stood on the stage. As she was being introduced, the titles of a few of her books were named, among others *El cielo divido*—The Divided Heaven. P tugged on my sleeve and grinned because she had once written an essay about Christa Wolf's book *Der geteilte Himmel*. Actually I imagined it would be nice to *teilen* a heaven with someone.

My feeling about the word *teilen* is conflicted. “Share” or “divide”?

After swimming we had to photocopy something in the copy shop, to eat a bagel with lachs, to shop in the Armenian vegetable store, and then to be on the freeway in time to reach Walden Pond before sunset. After we quickly finished shopping, I said jokingly to P, “We were efficient.” She winced and said she hadn't heard that word in a long time. When I asked for the English equivalent, on the spur of the moment the word “competitive” came to her mind. An ocean probably lies between those words. In order to qualify as “efficient,” it's enough if one's own achievement is acknowledged by one's grandmother and one's uncle. The competitive ones, on the other hand, must give the impression that they could beat the entire international competition.

We spoke about the word “competitive” on another day as well. It was raining, and we were on the way to Wellesley College, where readings of Jewish women authors were supposed to take place. P said her daughter wouldn't find it nice if one were to label her

as competitive. Since the word already implies that one was shaped by competitive thinking.

“Yesterday my daughter left for a week for a field trip,” she said with a depressed voice. She was inaccessible and worn out, as if she were a half of a person. She was on the search just then for a new position. When I asked her why she wasn’t feeling well, she answered in Americanized German: “*Meine professionelle Situation bedrückt mich.*”—My professional situation depresses me.

Professionell in German sounds efficient and cliché, while the word for “occupation”—*Beruf*—still sounds serious and almost religious. One receives a calling to a *Beruf*. I would like therefore neither to be *professionell* nor to have a *Beruf*.

I dreamt of four dogs which were playing out a circus number in my room. I anticipated something terrible. Then another dog came into the room, he was much bigger than the others. He bit all four dogs to death.

“Do you know what a dog-eat-dog society means?” P asked me in the car. We were on the way to Walden Pond. In the middle of the nineteenth century the writer Henry David Thoreau led in a self-made log house a very modest life. He wanted to demonstrate how little money one needs in order to survive. He stayed two years there and wrote down exactly how much money he spent. It was a penniless life, but no dog’s life. Only every now and then he compared himself with a half-famished dog.

We got out of the car. A woman with a child and a dog strolled along the water. “We often came here when the children were still small,” said P. She forgot to explain to me what a dog-eat-dog society means.

It was always the nightmare from which I woke up bathed in sweat or screaming: Several animals are playing near me, suddenly one of them attacks another. A game begins, each animal tries to kill a smaller one. I try to separate them from each other, close all the doors that I find, lock the smallest animal in the cage and hold the biggest one back. Again and again, though, they succeed in coming together in order to proceed with the murder game.

Before she left the house, P always said with a great speed, “Hat, cane, umbrella, coat, scarf, song book, glasses.”

P pronounces the word *erklären* with difficulty and haltingly, which is not typical for her. This word carries remorse and tears beneath her skin. “I’ll explain—*erklären*—that to you.” Because that sounded unexpectedly guilty, I reacted quickly: “No, no, it’s not necessary, you don’t have to explain anything to me.” We were to meet a few people to eat, and P couldn’t pick me up on time. She said it had been a confusing, complicated day. She wanted to explain everything to me. I didn’t mind at all that she came too late. I was concerned with the guilty tone tacked onto the word *erklären*.

Erklären had been until then a meaningless word to me. It had caught my attention only once, namely when reading Ingeborg Bachmann's poem "*Erklär mir, Liebe.*"

When one called her, she answered with a flying voice. The last O from her "*Halloo!*" swung up in an American way. When she herself called, though, she spoke from the first syllable on in a deeper, German tone. Two vocal cords in one person.

Sometimes she spoke hesitatingly, with silent breaks, as if she thought in gallons but spoke in liters.

"Last year at this time it was unusually warm, I think it was over 80 degrees!" When I didn't respond, she added quietly, "I of course again don't know how much that is in Celsius." How long does it take until one can feel a number directly on the skin without having to convert it? Can the body forget a measurement with which it grew up?

"So it was 80 degrees." I accept everything just how P says it. The calculation stalls, but the words are there, they are tangible like rocks. The number eighty sounds good, it is for me neither cold nor hot.

80 minus 32 divided by 9 times 5 would be the temperature which my skin could feel.

Maybe in childhood the temperature in the form of numbers plays no big role. A child finds it cold or warm, doesn't for the most part have thoughts about the temperature, and

continues to play. As an adult one always would like to know if it's warm or not and becomes suddenly unsure so that one looks at the thermometer.

"What is the sensation of temperature called in American English?" I asked P. I don't remember if she gave me an answer or not.

"To me it's now 18 degrees," I thought, "and to me it's now summer."

When I met her for the first time, I noticed first about P that she spoke similarly to Frau E, an American who has lived many years in Germany and has an important post with a German cultural foundation.

It confused me when two people with different biographies spoke similarly. I was much less surprised when two people coincidentally looked similar.

In Boston I noticed that the vocal cords narrate a younger history than the faces. Namely, the second generation of migrants spoke with perfect American articulation, while their faces were similar to those of their ancestors.

"Do you know what a chicken-and-egg situation is?" P asked me. "Yes, I can imagine what it could mean." "And what is it called in German?" "I don't know." I leafed through a dictionary which lay next to the telephone. "It's a *Zwickmühle*," I read out loud. "That's a bit different, though," said P.

Since I had already opened the dictionary, I also looked up the other word “dog-eat-dog society”: *Ellbogengesellschaft*—elbow society. Thus the chicken changed into a pinch mill—a *Zwickmühle*—and the dog into an elbow—an *Ellbogen*.

Sometimes P begins in the middle of a sentence to speak slower and hesitatingly, as if she had noticed the betrayal of the language and didn’t want to keep speaking. Then she makes a clever jump, which seems spontaneous and without purpose. That’s how she hits right on target.

Of all the consonants which P pronounces, I love above all “m.” It sounds cheerful and sensuous.

An important friend of hers, Frau G, she says, is a Frau with character, a Frau with wit—with *Pfiff*. She likes women with *Pfiff*, who would never “step on her toes.”

One time during a phone conversation we start to collect all of the expressions in which clothing items appeared. *Aus dem Ärmel schütteln*: To have empty pockets. *Jemanden beim Kragen packen*: To grab someone by the collar. *Sich auf die Socken machen*: To get a fire under one’s britches.

P had a sister who was ten years older than she. While the mother left her a lot of space, the sister criticized immediately when P did something wrong. “When did she criticize

you?” I asked her. “When I for example left banana peels in bed,” she answered with a serious face.

A peaceful photo in which an older woman sits on a sofa with a man of approximately the same age. Both smile. “Who is that?” I asked P. She mentioned two first names. The two had come back then from the Rhineland to New England for her Ph.D. celebration, she said.

Her parents always preferred the older sister to her, but she had no problem with that because this sister was supposed to carry on the father’s business, P told me in a bookstore while we searched for Eva Hoffman’s book Lost in Translation. The sister even as a young woman sat every day in the shop and read dime novels while P searched for a peephole into the wide world. P sensed even as a girl that she would one day leave her hometown.

As a rule she can’t stand pastries baked in oil with sugar. When her mother was still living, she always received for Christmas a package with *Lebkuchen*. She passed it along to her students.

A newborn child lies alone in a half dark room and sleeps. It is still and cold, all curtains are closed. The parents of the child have left the house. No one knows why. The child lies alone in bed and of course can not yet speak. P dreamt sometimes of this child and wanted to take it in her arms, but always woke up before she touched it.

When P gave me the recipe for Panna Cotta, she used the pound measurement. The following story, though, she told in kilograms: A longtime friend of hers weighed just forty kilograms when she died. She was beaten by her husband, tried to save herself through alcoholic anesthetization, and one day stopped eating. P told me the story in a half empty parking lot in front of a supermarket.

I remember well my first day in Massachusetts. It was already dark when my plane landed at the airport. P called my landlord from the car. My landlord was from France. It was the first time that I heard her speak French. Later I heard her French a couple more times. The language came out of her mouth as though completely normal. Much more natural than German or American English.

P said to me she couldn't reach such a level in any foreign language as in American English. Nevertheless, she said, she had an accent in American English, while she had none in French. Her French friends confirmed it. In French it wasn't necessary to her to speak with an accent. An accent preserves the memories of the mother tongue. Without the accent one can be swallowed up by the presence of the foreign language.

When she says the word "*kann*," sometimes between the "k" and "a" a painful teary sound slips out.

She often asked me what I did the day before. When I put the same question to her, she told me what her daughter did. A change of subject. A couple years ago in Chicago, the poet B.K. had told me she found the English expression “changing subjects” ingenious because it pointed to an often ignored fact: One changes oneself into another subject by changing topics.

P’s handwriting looked sensual, rhythmic, and youthful. Everything that occurred to her she wrote down spontaneously. She then threw these note-letters together with a found newspaper article, a photo, or some other note in my mail box which I had at the Institute. The first letter asked if we wanted to go together to the reading by W.C. The second letter said that I couldn’t even go because I would be in New York on that day. The third letter asked if I know the poet J.H. The fourth said I should immediately call D.K. in Providence and S.W. in Vancouver.

I tried to write a journal the way P wrote these notes. Without a continuous story line, without a climax, not determined, not pragmatic, by no means esoteric. I should write down things which don’t yet have visible importance. The most important things are often scattered, peculiar and very small.

P described Frau W, who worked for a German radio station and lived in Bremen, as “my new girlfriend.” She had met her at a meeting and visited her at home later.

In the German language, though, there is no “new girlfriend”—at least not with adults—unless it connotes a steady and also sexual relationship. Or else if a girlfriend is

new, one doesn't know if she is really a girlfriend. Therefore in Germany there are only old girlfriends.

P said she mostly tries not to lose touch with the people whom she once knew well.

A philosopher from Munich told me about his dissertation advisor who had lived a long time in America. When years after he defended his dissertation they coincidentally met on Leopoldstraße in Munich, she shouted loudly from afar, "Hello, my sweetheart!" Other pedestrians looked around curiously in order to find out who the sweetheart of the professor was. The philosopher hid himself quickly behind a building.

Terms of affection—how much love is in them and how many of them are Americanisms?

I had actually learned long ago to stay unemotional with Americanisms. At the Freien Universität in Berlin I had known an Anglicist who often addressed me as "my heart" or "my love."

P was pleased when a cardinal sang in front of her window. The word *Kardinal* appeared to me like an official designation of a post. *Der Kardinal* is called "cardinal" in America, he can become American through the change from K to c.

Some birds exist in her heart only with American names, others in German.

I have the feeling that in my life I have waited for delayed trains much more often than other people. Not only in Warsaw or in New Delhi, but also in *Bahnhof Zoo*. In the waiting room of a train station I was successful a couple times at writing difficult parts of a book. I am especially glad to wait in a bleak room.

“I’m glad to wait, just like how I’m glad to get lost,” I said.

“I’m gradually getting the feeling that you really mean exactly what you say,” answered P.

She sometimes came too late to our swim time. I enjoyed waiting for her. When she was delayed, she had something to tell. When she was out of breath while speaking, strange slips snuck in between two sentences like, for example, “I’m coming too late to my divorce.”

I was afraid after swimming to go out on the street with wet hair. It couldn’t be determined where this fear came from. I rarely had colds, and when I did have a cold, then never because of wet hair. Just the expression “wet hair” made me afraid even in midsummer. P freed me of this fear when she simply said to me, “I always go home with wet hair.”

“He’s a chip off the old block.” *Er ist ganz der Vater*. P said in the past she thought it was, He’s a chip of the old block. Her husband laughed a bit and said, “That doesn’t

make sense. Or maybe it does?” The daughter laughed likewise. I was invited to dinner and watched three faces with three different mouths.

That evening the word “off” wouldn’t let me go. “Off” means *weg*. I imagined how one cuts a chip out of a father’s body in order to make a child out of it. This idiomatic expression surely has been around much longer than gene technology. “Off” also means *aus*. Something incurable resonates with the word.

P hooked arms with me, it was raining, and we had only one umbrella. In America one only rarely touched the bodies of the same sex. I missed the touching, I missed Berlin.

Haken—to hook—is no pleasant word. Nevertheless I missed a feeling that the word carried with it. In America no person except P hooked arms with me. In a conversation, too, rarely was a word hooked onto.

A few girlfriends with whom P had studied were already professors. P on account of her family had to give up a position which would have promoted her career. And now, when she had more time again, she had no more energy. She told everything gently, without fury, without sorrow. It was something “inconvenient,” she said.

“It was inconvenient that I had so little money then, while the others were very rich,” I said months later to a friend in Berlin. The word came unexpectedly out of my mouth, like a piece of memory. My conversation partner looked at me as one looks at an insane person, and corrected me. “You mean, it was dumb that you had little money.”

It is inconvenient when one can't find oneself in any known love story.

A career as a researcher no longer interested her, she said. "I'm not a research-person, as you see," she said. P wanted to read more, to read literature. The word "research-person" stayed in my memory.

P reads a lot and passionately. She sets herself up in the writing room and reads.

P reads every night before she falls asleep.

When eating she sometimes gave the impression that she was reading. She places a piece of bread, cheese, and other small things in an aesthetic half circle and begins to eat as if it were a ritual. I lack an adjective to describe her tranquility.

One time I observed while eating how the ill-humored daughter strained her mother's nerves. It was a kind of German cheese which the daughter found "disgusting." P reprimanded her in a deep, calm tone and continued to eat.

"When I read interpretations of poems, I sometimes get the feeling that I have to puke," P said. I was surprised. "Puke" sounded unusually hateful in her vocabulary.

I asked her to read some of her favorite poems on tape. She read Karoline von Günderode's "*Der Kuss im Traum*," and the sound was suddenly very close to me.

“Were you ever so poor that you were hungry?” This question suddenly occurred to her while we were strolling on Newbury Street. In the cool April air the lights of the quaint shops blinked festively. I didn’t understand the question right away because the sentence was formulated much too clearly and at the same time was loaded with pain. I repeated it for myself and thought, That’s how I want to write.

P had studied for one year in Paris before she came to America. At the time she went walking in the evenings, read meticulously through the menus which hung outside in front of the restaurants, but couldn’t go out to eat one single time.

I told her a second time about my plan to paint her portrait. This time she responded with the interjection “How magnificent!” in a tone which sounded to me somewhat too grandmotherly. I wasn’t sure what she understood by a portrait.

Another time she said, “For heaven’s sake!”

In order to explain to me the expression “package deal,” P told the following story:

When she taught at a well-known university in New England, she was very unhappy because she lived alone with the baby. Her husband worked in a different part of the USA and could visit her only on the weekend. After some time he received a professorship at Harvard University. She resigned from her good position in order to move with the child and him to Cambridge. The position that she could get there was not good for her academic career, and that was a “package deal.”

Also at the time when she worked as an au pair in a suburb of New York, she was unhappy. She ate very many sweets in order to overcome the unhappiness.

The word “suburbs” embodied a horror for her. There the splendid houses fall silent on their gigantic plots of land. When the men go to work, the housewives bring them to the train station in the car and then drive back to the house. Then they open the first bottle. Their bottle opener is an antique, while the glass comes from the supermarket.

I didn't visit the musician Y.M. in Boston. During the entire four months of my stay I didn't think about him. I also didn't go to the women's bookstore. I also forgot why I had wanted to cross the Atlantic and what had bothered me in Berlin.

P has a preference for leather shoes which are sleek. In a shoe store she caressed all of the shoes that came into her hands.

In the beginning of March I flew for a week to Berlin. I had appointments that I couldn't call off. When I came back to Boston from the short stay, I called P. She greeted me with “welcome back.”

Sometimes I drove for two, three days to New York. Every time when I came back, P greeted me with this English expression. How would she have said it in German? Nice that you're here again? The sentence is too long. Can one prolong a feeling just because the grammar requires it?

I loved it how P, after swimming, stood under the shower and stuck her face, beaming with curiosity, through the veil of the water in order to ask me something. She pondered exactly how she could ask something. I waited in suspense for her voice which came through to me through the water noise. The questions from P were questions of affection.

We rode together in the subway. Across from us sat two students. P asked me if one uses the word *Asiaten*, German for “Asians,” in Germany. Theoretically one can use it, but it has a slightly unpleasant aftertaste. History had left something unclean in the sound, which I however couldn’t name. P appeared to sense that although she didn’t live in Germany. My colleagues in the café in Berlin, on the other hand, had no nose for languages. I couldn’t give P a clear answer.

The two students got out. “You know, that very dark lipstick on the lips, I find that very nice on Asian people,” P said. I hadn’t paid attention to what sort of color the students’ lips were.

In Chinatown we both bought a little tin of Tiger Balm. I liked above all the picture of the tiger. P found the tiny tin practical because one could take it everywhere. “You sometimes also have dry lips,” she said to me. I was surprised and secretly happy that she had paid attention to my lips.

Now it occurs to me: I was never in Chinatown with P. Where could we have had this dialogue?

When one speaks hotly, one quickly gets dry lips.

One can water down identity-craving words by converting the noun into an adjective. An Asian person, an academic woman, a writing-addicted person.

WASP means white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, she explained to me while we undressed in the changing room at the swimming pool. An Anglo-Saxon person is a Germanic person, but not every Germanic person is an Anglo-Saxon person. A person from the Rhineland is for example normally not an Anglo-Saxon person. Moreover P was not a Protestant person. She therefore would only be one-third WASP.

In a hotel downtown I met the poet M.B.P., who was just in Boston on account of the lesbian congress. She gave me the book S/HE.

She grew up in the middle of the WASP culture, she said. The people to whom she now found herself belonging she designated jokingly as “kinky people.” The designation lesbian would probably be too dusty for her.

In an advertisement for house hunting was the notation WASPHN. The next-to-last letter “H” probably meant heterosexual, and the “N” stood for non-smoker.

P and I went together to a concert in which the students from various universities were supposed to play. There were four groups in total, three small orchestras and a piano

quartet. In both of the first groups, which played Mozart and Beethoven, all of the students were Asian Americans. The enthusiasm for German classical music has a long history in East Asia already. We saw in the program, though, not only East Asian last names, but also Southeast Asian and South Asian names.

“Where are the WASPs?” P said ironically and studied the program more closely. Was anyone with the name Schmidt or Hoffmann playing too? Also in both the groups that were still coming, she found no European last names at first. With the young WASPs, Afro-American music is popular, Mozart, on the other hand, is not cool. At a second glance, though, P found the name “Andersson” in the last group and was pleased. Finally the last group stepped onto the stage, we saw an African American student sit down at the grand piano.

One time I went with P and her husband to a dance theater. During intermission P went outside. Her husband pointed at a woman who sat in the first row. “That is the grandmother of the sister of the daughter of my wife.” At first I thought that he had unnecessarily formed a complicated German sentence. Who should have been the grandmother of the sister of the daughter of his wife? After more exact deliberation I realized his achievement: That was the mother of his former wife, and his explanation had become so long because he had left out his former wife.

It was fun for him to form accurate sentences in various languages. He had also learned Danish and other languages, but in Europe he had for the most part been disappointed because no one wanted him to speak any language other than English.

Another time I sat only with P in a theater. It was an Irish play, and I understood hardly one word. A limping man, a ship, night, the escape from the birthplace and the homecoming: Those are the pictures which stuck with me, but I'm not sure if they have something to do with the content of the play. "There's nothing nicer for me than to sit in a theater and listen for hours to a language that I don't understand," I said later to P.

P had two grown-up stepdaughters. "I got passes for the swimming pool for all three daughters, but not one single one of them has come along even one single time. You embody all three by coming along," she said to me. I swim badly, went swimming with her in spite of that two times a week, though. A swimming body is strangely naked and embodies nothing.

I don't want to embody anything, let alone substitute anything. But what am I before her? I have neither a family nor a position, I am nothing more than a living creature with sensory organs, a word collector, a writer who writes incessantly.

We went down Newbury Street. P told me, laughing, about class the day before. She read with her students Brecht's "*Leben des Galilei*." When they read the dialogue between the inquisitor and Virginia together and discussed what the inquisitor actually wanted from Virginia, one student said, "He is hitting on her." P laughed loudly. And I believed to have understood through her laughter the character of this American expression.

We searched for a restaurant, it was getting a bit cooler, the streets were getting increasingly busy. Two unfamiliar men in suits came up to us. One of them said to us in a playfully polite tone, “Good evening!” When we didn’t respond, he simply kept walking. P grinned and whispered in my ear, “He is hitting on us.”

P told about a new friend in Berlin who actively worked on various projects but was always exhausted because she had to shift completely on her own since she didn’t receive any support from an institute.

Through an unfortunate movement in the library I got a backache—a *Hexenschuß*. I told this to P and had a strange inhibition about saying the word *Hexenschuß*—literally “witch shot.” It suddenly seemed inadequately medieval to me, I saw a witch with a hammer hitting me on my spine. I didn’t go to a doctor. What could I have said to him? Of course I could have also looked it up in a dictionary and memorized the corresponding English word. I didn’t want, however, to replace a witch, a *Hexe*, with a medical term.

In the last week in America I wasn’t doing well. It was as if I had a sickness, the name of which I had forgotten. It occurred to me what my family doctor had once said to me: In many languages there is no word for *Wallung*, therefore the women who spoke these languages would have no hot flashes.

Thirty-five years ago when P worked as an au pair for the first time in America, her host mother once said to her she should say nothing to the little child which could hurt his feelings. P burst into laughter involuntarily. Hurt feelings! What a strange concept! A person could get hurt, but she had never yet heard the expression *die Gefühle verletzen* in German. Later one began to use this expression in Germany, too.

To have, to repress, or to show a feeling: Feeling has become objectified these days, and therefore one can hurt it. I imagine a feeling like a piece of meat, pink, moist, and lukewarm. If a lie—a *Lüge*—were to come into feeling—*Gefühl*—then poultry—*Geflügel*—could come into being.

“She has her heart in the right place,” P described one of her old friends. The word “heart”—*Herz*—sounded so concrete from her mouth, I thought I could touch it right then. Most likely I therefore immediately thought, The heart lies, though, in the left place.

P pronounced the word *Herz* in a special way. The core of the *Herz*, an Er, disappeared in her throat, and the sibilant on the end stayed on the tongue a long time.

“Ja, mein Herz,” she sometimes said to me. I was embarrassed when I heard the word *Herz*. To me it was too warm and too vulnerable. The words “artichoke heart,” however, always gave me pleasure.

Thirty-five years ago when P worked as an au pair for the first time in America, her host mother once said to her she should say nothing to the little child which could hurt his feelings. P burst into laughter involuntarily. Hurt feelings! What a strange concept! A person could get hurt, but she had never yet heard the expression *die Gefühle verletzen* in German. Later one began to use this expression in Germany, too.

To have, to repress, or to show a feeling: Feeling has become objectified these days, and therefore one can hurt it. I imagine a feeling like a piece of meat, pink, moist, and lukewarm. If a lie—a *Lüge*—were to come into feeling—*Gefühl*—then poultry—*Geflügel*—could come into being.

“She has her heart in the right place,” P described one of her old friends. The word “heart”—*Herz*—sounded so concrete from her mouth, I thought I could touch it right then. Most likely I therefore immediately thought, The heart lies, though, in the left place.

P pronounced the word *Herz* in a special way. The core of the *Herz*, an Er, disappeared in her throat, and the sibilant on the end stayed on the tongue a long time.

“Ja, mein Herz,” she sometimes said to me. I was embarrassed when I heard the word *Herz*. To me it was too warm and too vulnerable. The words “artichoke heart,” however, always gave me pleasure.

About the Author

Tawada was born in 1960 in Kunitachi, a suburb of Tokyo, and distributed photocopies of her first novel at 12. After discovering the masters of the German literary sphere such as Thomas Mann, she began studying German in high school. After graduating from Waseda University, where she focused on Russian literature, she left on the Trans-Siberian Railroad for Hamburg, Germany. There she later earned a master's degree in German literature and began the writing--in Japanese--of her award-winning novel *The Bridegroom was a Dog*, a surrealist exploration of cultural and gender identity in Tokyo. She is one of extremely few distinguished Japanese authors to have left Asia permanently: "A number of prominent modern writers, from Mori Ogai and Natsume Soseki to Oe Kenzaburo and Ikezawa Natsuki, have sojourned abroad, but few if any have actually gone to live, work, and create in a foreign country," according to Thomas Rimer, reviewer for TheJapanPage.com. "Visual artists, of course, have done so...But writers use words, and surely their tools thus bind them to their culture in a fashion difficult to escape." While it may of course be true that a writer is bound by language to a culture and its traditions, Tawada proves that one can be equally bound to a non-native language and culture as to the one in which the writer was born: Rimer says of Tawada's writings, "These strange, gnomic, and sometimes bizarre stories are very much bound up, both in style and content, within the fabric of [Japanese and German] themselves."

Tawada went on to write many poems, short stories, and novels in German and Japanese in Hamburg, where she still lives, including, for example, *Opium für Ovid* (*Opium for Ovid*), *Talisman*, and *Wo Europa anfängt* (*Where Europe Begins*). Her most recent short stories, collected in *Überseetzungen* and published in 2002, existed until now only in German, and, according to a review in the March 2002 *Literaturblatt*, meets all expectations:

Again she is able to present the most theoretical facts as transparent and lucid with unbelievable precision and clarity through the use of clear, evident images like the foreign language as a see-through wall. ("Bücher: *Überseetzungen*")

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." Trans. Harry Zohn. Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume I, 1913-1926. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996.
- "Bücher: *Überseezungen*." Amazon.de. 14 November 2003
<http://www.amazon.de/exec/obidos/ASIN/3887691865/qid=1068191065/sr=2-1/ref=sr_aps_prod_1_1/302-7500499-7128044>.
- Itakura, Kimie. "World Press Review--Yoko Tawada." World Press Review. 16 November 2003 <<http://www.worldpress.org/asia/0102asahi.htm>>.
- Landers, Clifford E. Literary Translation: A Practical Guide. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2001.
- Lefevere, André. "Why Waste our Time on Rewrites?: The Trouble with Interpretation and the Role of Rewriting in an Alternative Paradigm." The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation. Ed. Theo Hermans. London: Croom Helm, 1985.
- Lefevere, André. Translating Literature: Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992.
- Rimer, Thomas. "TheJapanPage.com: Columns." Kodansha International Ltd. 16 November 2003 <<http://www.thejapanpage.com/html/columns/Detailed/73.shtml>>.
- Steiner, George. After Babel: Aspects of Language & Translation. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Tawada, Yoko. Überseezungen. Tübingen: Konkursbuchverlag, 2002.
- Tawada, Yoko. Where Europe Begins. Trans. Susan Bernofsky and Yumi Selden. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1989.
- Volpi, Franco. "*Being and Time*: A 'Translation' of the *Nicomachean Ethics*?" Trans. John Protevi. Reading Heidegger from the Start: Essays in his Earliest Thought. Eds. Theodore Kisiel and John van Buren. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.