Transference

Volume 7
Issue 1 | Fall 2019

Article 11

2019

Five Poems from *Born Into* by Uwe Kolbe

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Recommended Citation

Stoehr, Louise (2019) "Five Poems from *Born Into* by Uwe Kolbe," *Transference*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 11.
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol7/iss1/11

Louise Stoehr
Five Poems from *Born Into*

Uwe Kolbe
Hineingeboren

the guilty

die, alas, mostly

of a cold
in a big bed
near an airport
therefore

of natural causes

Born Into

High wide green country,
fence-traversed plain.
Red
Sun-tree on the horizon.
The wind is mine
and mine the birds.

Small green country, narrow,
Barbed-wire countryside.
Black
Tree beside me.
Hard Wind.
Alien birds.

to be a bird, to fly like it

1
the shadows of my wings, winged shadows
my weak arms to hold you therein
i burst, the gentle one too gentle, bursting inward
walking into the evening, toward morning without greetings
down from the clouds, down into the surf of your body's
shore for me, furrowed chalk cliffs, wet sheen in fluctuating light

2
storm petrel, a wagtail's tracks near the creek
early dawning morn, blackening day breaks open
you are sand between pines, evening meal
hastily forgotten one, failing to meet you at times
when do branches dance, the leaves' chaos at the trunk
breaking hearts cloud-shaped, drivel and the art of love

3
inconceivable world fissure, my hands and yours therein

Hymn

Aggressions come from snowless winter
And from the Am-Already-Here syndrome, which kills.

What do I do with my courage on the new
Ship of imagination, in my German utopia?

Wood lies by wood and between stones mortar
The firmness of which lasts a hundred years, until then
May we hesitate and chat about the coal reserves.

Jester's bells jangle as the head moves
Like the coldness of a cosmos under attack,
Of its suns being sucked up into the myth.

With sloppy work and soft songs we gamble away
The seconds of happiness in this soap-bubble construct.

of desolation this discourse

remains of course desolate
and my experience of bliss, complaining,
remains of course missing.

jumping high i think:
a bounce
follows every jump,
and i keep on flying.

Commentary

Uwe Kolbe is one of the major German poets of his generation. Both part of the dissident scene in East Germany and at the same time fiercely independent, he early on reworked literary tradition, detailed observation, and personal experience into poems that clearly express his own poetic vision in a distinct voice.

Born October 17, 1957, in East Berlin, and growing up very close to the Berlin Wall, which was erected in August 1961, Kolbe was drawn to writing at a young age. He published his first volume of poetry, *Hineingeboren* (*Born Into*), in the former German Democratic Republic in 1980 at the age of 23. The title poem alludes to the condition of the first post-Second-World-War generation that literally was "born into" the recently established Communist country of the former German Democratic Republic. Not having lived the parents' experience of war followed by the hope for a new beginning in a new country, this new generation was confronted with life in a closed society that allowed its citizens only limited freedoms. The poems in this selection are taken from that first volume of poetry. It was that collection that first established him as a new voice in the literary scene of East as well as West Germany.

The poems vary in their form from traditional to experimental. As Kolbe has explained in public readings of these poems and their translations, the early experimental poems (giving up capitalization, reducing use of punctuation, using ambiguous syntactic constructions) are based on his attempt to *dissolve* form in order to *solve* poetically the problems of the world. Kolbe currently lives in Dresden and continues to be a prolific writer.

the guilty

"[T]he guilty" is an example of many of Uwe Kolbe's earlier poems that combine political commentary with certain formal characteristics. First of all, Kolbe participates in an approach to German spelling, which is shared by other writers, in which nouns are no longer capitalized and most punctuation is omitted. While some poems, as a result, are hard to read, this particular poem flows very smoothly in the tone of colloquial speech.

The lack of capitalization in German is obviously not evident in the English translation except at the beginning of lines and in the title. In another poem included in this selection, "of desolation this discourse," Kolbe uses the same formal characteristics, and, in that case, the lack of capitalization does affect the lowercased first-person pronoun in the English version.

This translation may also serve as an illustration of translation choices that are influenced by the rhythmic flow and physical appearance of the poem on the page. For example, the somewhat old-fashioned word "alas" for *leider* fits the rhythmic flow of the poem better than alternative translations, such as "unfortunately." Likewise, although "sniffles" may be a more literal translation of *Schnupfen*, "a cold" fits the flow of the poem better.

Most importantly, the translation preserves the poem's subtle political irony: in a moral universe, we would expect the guilty to pay for their sins; however, that does not represent reality. In the context of the GDR, this poem may be read as a daring political statement. The "guilty" may be understood as the political leaders who are corrupt, but instead of being brought to justice they "die … of natural causes," that is, they escape just punishment. Finally, I would speculate that the colloquial tone of the poem not only underscores the poem's irony but also helped to disguise the political criticism to such an extent that the poem was able to pass GDR censorship.

Born Into

The poem "Hineingeboren," or "Born Into," has become Kolbe's signature poem because it has become the term used to refer to the first generation of writers born into the former German Democratic Republic. At first sight, it has a much more traditional appearance than some of Kolbe's other early poems: it has regular capitalization and punctuation, including capitalization at the beginning of most lines. It is a tightly-woven twelve-line poem in two stanzas in which each line of the first stanza directly corresponds to the equivalent line in the second stanza. Lines 1 and 7 refer to the country, lines 2 and 8 to fences, lines 3 and 9 to color, lines 4 and 10 to a tree, lines 5 and 11 to the wind, and lines 8 and 12 to birds.

These corresponding lines are used to create a stark contrast between the two stanzas, which is heightened by syntactic constructions that do not contain verbs. This poem has been interpreted as a reference to the real political situation in the German Democratic Republic at the time. In addition, it may be read even more metaphorically.

As is so often the case when translating poetry, an initial translation choice influences subsequent translation choices. For example, lines 1, 7 and 8 of the original poem contain the German word *Land*, either alone or embedded in the word *Stacheldrahtlandschaft*. The obvious choice for translating the German *Land* in lines 1 and 7 is "country." For *Stacheldrahtlandschaft* "landscape" might have seemed appropriate, but that would not have retained the internal *land* echo. "Barbed-wire countryside" retains the internal reference and, as a result, fits the flow of the poem. Moreover, while "landscape" refers to natural scenery, there was nothing natural about the former German-German border. Additionally, translating *Stacheldrahtlandschaft* as "barbed-wire landscape" might also suggest the idea of "landscaping," that is, an attempt to make natural features more attractive. I do not see this type of irony in the German original. The choice "countryside," however, suggests a rural region, which is fitting for the geographic location and desolation along most of the former German-German border. It therefore evokes the image of empty spaces that were created in the bleak border regions and then filled with barbed-wire, which here stands metonymically for other border fortifications.

to be a bird, to fly like it

"[T]o be a bird, to fly like it" also does without capitalization, and it is possible to reflect this device in the English version by not capitalizing the first-person pronoun "I." This poem is an early example of Kolbe's interest in the imagery of flying, often expressed through allusions to birds.

In this particular poem, Kolbe delights in the specificity of bird names. The poem's speaker refers to a "storm bird" (*Sturmläufer*) and to a wagtail. The category of "storm bird" encompasses various sea birds, including the storm petrel, which

is perhaps the most specific translation of *Sturmläufer* because the English bird "storm petrel" and the German bird *Sturmläufer* are both believed to be bad omens. While some readers may be inclined to interpret *Sturmläufer* as something other than a bird, such as a reference to the military, in a personal communication Kolbe has affirmed that the poem refers simply to the bird. This is also the case for the reference to the wagtail.

The use of such specific names in the context of poetic devices such as alliteration may lead to translation challenges. I rendered the alliteration of the s-sound in *stelzenspuren* with alliteration with the t-sound in "wagtail's tracks." In the same vein, the last two lines of the first stanza include alliteration and wordplay that fuse images of the body and the sea, thus combining sexuality and nature. The "s" in "surf" in line 5 anticipates the "sh"-sounds in "shore" and "sheen" in line 6; the "f"-sound in "furrowed" and "fluctuating" in line 7 also alliterate.

"to be a bird, to fly like it" contrasts public and private spheres. The reader, of course, has to supply the context of what "inconceivable world fissure" in the last line means. This may be a clear reference to the political situation at the time the poem was written, that is, the East-West conflict of the Cold War. This may also be a more general reference to the experience of a lover and his beloved in a hostile world. It is a testament to Uwe Kolbe's poetic genius that he was able to craft a potentially critical poem that nevertheless slipped through the censors of the publishing world in the former GDR. As with most of Kolbe's poems, this poem's strength lies in that ambiguity that the reader has to resolve for him- or herself.

Hymn

It is difficult to discern which poem by Uwe Kolbe is the most ironic. His original German "Hymne" certainly is among the top contenders in this category. "Hymne," at first sight, means "Hymn" in English, but it also may refer to a country's national anthem. The translation of this title as "Hymn," however, is the correct choice because of the poetic tradition in which Uwe Kolbe places himself.

A hymn is a song of praise, typically of a god. As Nor-

bert Gabriel argues, a hymn is "always with reference to something other, sublime."[1] There is a long-standing tradition in German literature of writing hymns. One of Kolbe's literary heroes, Friedrich Hölderlin, is well known for his hymns, such as "Patmos" and "Andenken" ("Memories"). The irony in Kolbe's "Hymn" results as the poem abruptly shifts from the expectation created by the exalted title to its anticlimactic concerns of a worldly nature. The main point here is that the poem itself is not about praise but about concerns. A line-by-line examination of this poem is more appropriate for a lengthier article, so one example may suffice to illustrate this main point.

Nowhere is the anticlimactic nature of "Hymn" more evident than in the poem's final stanza's reference to "sloppy work and soft songs" with which "we gamble away" our happiness. I understand this as a direct and ironic reference to Hölderlin's hymn "Andenken." The famous line of Hölderlin's poem, *Was bleibet aber, stiften die Dichter*, is typically translated as "what remains, however, the poets provide." I would argue that while this is an adequate translation, it might help to think about the word *stiften* in terms of the English word "legislate." This is in line with much of Romantic thinking, such as when Shelley says in his *A Defence of Poetry*: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." As a result, the Romantics praised the poet as a prophet who may save the world. This is in stark contrast to the poetic project of "sloppy work and soft songs" in Kolbe's "Hymn." And just to leave no doubt about the degeneration of the Romantic project of high hopes, the last line of this poem makes clear that even the gambled-away happiness is just wishful thinking in its "soap-bubble construct."

As with all translations, choices abound, and this not the space to go into minute detail; however, a few examples deserve mention. First, in line 4, translating *Fantasie* as "imagination" is preferable to the almost self-obvious cognate "fantasy" because "fantasy" primarily denotes wild, visionary fancy and illusion. While this may indeed have turned out to be the case in political reality of the former GDR, there was no way the Kolbe at the time of writing this poem could have predicted this outcome;

[1] Norbert Gabriel. *Studien zur Geschichte der deutschen Hymne*. München, W. Fink, 1992. (p. 54, my translation)

moreover, the positive terms of "courage" in line 3 and "utopia" in line 4 support the choice of "imagination," which Webster's defines as "the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality."

of desolation this discourse

The final poem in this selection, "of desolation this discourse," is another of Kolbe's formally non-traditional poems. It reflects the poet's underlying optimism in the face of adversity, and leaves open the question of what nature this adversity might be, perhaps personal, perhaps political, or even existential. This poem posed an interesting translation issue. The use of the German words *Ödnis* and *öde* evokes the German translation *Das öde Land* of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. In order to maintain the play between noun and adjective, it was not possible to include this allusion in the English version of Kolbe's poem. However, it was possible to maintain this play with words by using "desolation" and "desolate."

On the other hand, translating *Reden* as "discourse" was a natural choice because *Reden* in the context of this poem seemed to be less casual than "talking," "speaking," or "speech" but also less formal than such options as "oration." As a consequence of this translation choice, the English title includes an alliteration, and there is a slight resonance between "discourse" and the English translation of *natürlich* as "of course" in lines 1 and 3 of the poem.

As Uwe Kolbe has stated, "With few exceptions, translations are just about the best thing that can happen to a poem." Thus I wish the readers of these selected poems the best experience of Uwe Kolbe's early works.

Source text:

Uwe Kolbe. *Hineingeboren: Gedichte 1975–1979. Mit einer Nachbemerkung von Franz Fühmann*. Suhrkamp, 1982, pp. 25, 39, 46, 115, 129.