German-American Literary Reviews

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Verwandeln: 60 verstreute und neue Gedichte.
By Margot Scharpenberg. Duisburg: Gilles & Francke Verlag, 2009. 128 pages.

Margot Scharpenberg is no newcomer to German-American literature. The Cologne-born author, who has resided in New York since 1962, has meanwhile brought out 27 volumes of poetry and three prose books—all in prestigious German publishing houses. In January 2009, she gave the first reading of her newly published collection *Verwandeln. 60 verstreute und neue Gedichte* in a packed auditorium at *Deutsches Haus* of New York University (Peter Beicken, University of Maryland, gave the introduction). In a wide retrospective gesture, this volume covers all major themes of Margot Scharpenberg's poetic œuvre. The title poem (11) follows the concept of metamorphosis which is of central importance to the creative process and the self-analysis of this author. Remarkable in this collection are sounding attempts into the depths of semantics and plays on words relying on rhyme as a poetic instrument. However, the lightness of the poetic discourse and the application of rhyme patterns overshadow a more complex and darker ground of our existence and, thereby, of the author's philosophical intention. What seems so simple and comes so easily actually deceives the eye of the reader.

Clearly, the rhyme in Margot Scharpenberg's late poetry has a function of irony and playfulness. On the other hand, rhyme is a stylistic feature of poetry for children and is, therefore, used in children's books. If—as it is the case in this collection—rhyme is being applied as a playful poetic tool at a late stage of an author's career, the circle of life and literary production is being completed. Baudelaire once stated: "Le génie c'est l'enfance retrouvé à volonté." Like in a circular movement, childhood memories and recollections of earlier

stages of life have found their way into this volume, as can be observed in "Wald" (93–94), "Köln, St. Ursula: Reliquiare" (86–87), and "Kleine Ballade (Köln 1944)" (48).

At the same time, the reader of this volume repeatedly comes across forms of spiritual poetry, of a *memento mori* (as expressed similarly in the preceding collection, *Von Partituren, Lesezeichen und so weiter*). The sections "zeitlich" (59–69) and "Schnittmuster" (105–7) reflect on the temporality of our existence and on the poetic speaker's final phase of life, but the texts are not laments or elegies—the certainty of death is pronounced without fear, even in a playful manner that finds new comparisons for old events. In "Umzug" (109–10), death is referred to as a carpenter with ruler and pencil, in "Übung" (115–16) innocuous instructions for physical exercises serve as metaphors for vital procedures ending in the "Halt" of our existence.

A serene wisdom carries the section "Sichten—Einsichten—Wünsche" (91–104), preparing the spirit of the last poem of the collection "Gedächtnis (für alle)" that sets next to basic states of the human mind, such as doubt and desperation, an indestructible hope (117). However, this juxtaposition does not indicate a naive, optimistic outlook but rather a fierce amazement about the fact that hope is still possible at all.

Any critique of Margot Scharpenberg's poetry cannot afford to omit an analysis of her specific form of a pictorial poem or lyrical dialog with a work of art (*Bildgespräch*) as presented in "Licht—Amsterdamer Museumsbesuche" (19–46) and "Kölner Kirchenbesuche" (71–89). This poetic concept relates to a conversational pattern or dialog, a mutually stimulating act of observation and reflection whose result is more than just a description or interpretation. Her approach does not try to repeat with different means or to translate from one medium to another. In her picture-inspired poems, the contemplations triggered by a work of art are being released into the autonomy of the poetic discourse. Her poem is artistically strong enough to stand on its own, even to walk away from the other medium. Therefore, it is not any longer necessary to use the work of art as an illustration or visual explanation of the poem. Even if the reader is not familiar with the art works that are displayed in various museums in Amsterdam or Cologne or elsewhere, the poem can be recognized—and enjoyed—in its own right. Consequently, the poems of this volume are not accompanied by photos. There is no need for visual support. The poem "Köln, St. Andreas: Löwenpaar" (73–74) may serve as one of many examples. The purpose and content of the poem are not so much the description of the work of art, but the reflection that the work of art sets free in the eyes of the beholder, of the poetic ego. That way, there is even room for a German-American component: the lions at the entrance to the main branch of the New York Public Library—they are guarding books, i.e., other relics

than their sacral brothers. Obviously, we are dealing with a playful assortment of thoughts and creative associations generated in the mind of the observer.

Another recurring motif in Margot Scharpenberg's poetry is language—scrutinized and interpreted in regard to its relevance to our human existence. In "Definition" (97), language—specifically in the form of words—is the defining criteria of being human. In her autobiographical note at the end of this volume, the author adds: "Aber was allen Themen als Grund unterliegt, ist Zeit, Zeitlichkeit, Veränderung." (121). This concept is reflected in the poem from which the entire volume draws its title, "Verwandeln," a *Bildgespräch* inspired by a painting by Elke Imhof and executed in the aforementioned compositional style of the author. It can be read as an individual poem, but also as a confession and self-explanation of the author. In as much as she remains faithful to the essence of her poetry, she remains faithful to herself. It is true that by now the tone of her poetry has loosened up, has become lighter and seemingly light-hearted. However, within her adherence to the same choice of themes, her philosophical view has become more stringent and radical. Insofar, a difference between her early and her late production can be discerned.

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