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Three Veterans and a Rookie: Recent German-American Literature

Flussbettworte / Fluvial Discourse.

By Lisa Kahn. Lewiston: Mellen, 1998. 211 pages, illustrated. \$29.95.

Wortort Tarock unter anderem: Gedichte und Gesichte.

By Peter Pabisch. Deutschschreibende Autoren in Nordamerika, vol. 5. Freeman: Pine Hill, 1999. 75 pages, illustrated.

Wenn Farben blühen: Gedichte zu Blumenbildern von Martina Mohren.

By Margot Scharpenberg. Mühlacker: Stieglitz, 1999. 80 pages, illustrated. DM 29.80.

Adrift between Two Worlds.

By Dolores Hornbach Whelan. Raleigh: Pentland, 1997. 118 pages. \$11.95.

The three veterans of my title, Lisa Kahn, Peter Pabisch, and Margot Scharpenberg, are among the leading contemporary German-American creative writers. Their new publications can only solidify this reputation. The newcomer, Dolores Hornbach Whelan, who immigrated in 1956, makes her literary debut, in English.

Lisa Kahn's *Flussbettworte* is an ambitious project. A fanciful drawing by her son, Peter, precedes the table of contents, which in turn reminds us of something that the size of the book suggested: there are 209 pages, and nearly that many poems. Neither at the beginning nor at the end is there any information on the author. That is, I think, a mistake: each new volume brings new readers, and many of them would appreciate a brief biographical note, if not a more formal introduction.

The opening and title poem stands alone. It is interesting from a typographical standpoint: the title is centered, the first eight lines and four later in the poem are flush left, and the rest begin a couple of characters past the middle. The first lines impressively set the tone for the "Flussbettworte" that follow: "Vorm Überschreiten der Schlafschwelle / schlängeln sie sich aufsteigend aus /

Flut Sumpf Algen ins Ohr / bleiben bei dir im Traum / machen sichs heimisch / unter deinen Lidern in den / Kranzgefäßen im Schoß / raunen:" (1). These lines, in a rhythmical free verse rich in suggestive symbolism, are typical of Kahn's recent poetry, including that of the present collection.

Following this introductory poem, the rest of the volume is divided into sections characterized by bodies of water. The first six refer to European rivers and seas, the seventh is devoted to American lakes, the next to "Mittelmeer und Nil," then come the Gulf of Mexico, the oceans, and the concluding "Mississippi / Cummins Creek," the subjects of which range from "Old Man River" (150-51) to a number of places we do not normally associate with water, such as "Doppelter Mond über Death Valley" (162) and, perhaps my favorite poem in the collection, "Las Vegas" (184-85). We have here in miniature many of the issues and themes found throughout the book, including mythology, long a favorite of Kahn's and prominently featured in the section on the "Mittelmeer." In "Las Vegas," "Wer die Höhlen betritt—und immer herrscht / Halbdunkel im Hades— // darf seine Eurydike / um die Uhr herum suchen . . ." (184).

In conclusion, I would like to refer the readers to the very interesting cycle of twelve poems on a Parisian cemetery, and here quote one of them in its entirety, "Père Lachaise III" (67):

Weder Pförtner noch Auskunftsbüro
des Friedhofs noch Grabreiniger
noch Besucher haben je von einem
Georg Forster
gehört keiner weiß um sein Grab

man will mich die Fremde abschieben
nach Montparnasse nach Montmartre
und ich weiß doch dass er hier ruht
der so lange ruhelos der Reisende
der Revolutionär verlassen nicht
nur von Therese verlassen von
aller Welt

The second collection, *Wortort Tarock unter anderem* by **Peter Pabisch** (professor of German at the University of New Mexico), opens with an informative two-page introduction by Gert Niers, reminding us that this is the author's fifth collection of poetry, that he is the author of a scholarly study entitled *Lushustig: Phänomene deutschsprachiger Lyrik 1945 bis 1980*, and that—as the latter title suggests—his poetry follows in the playful footsteps of, e.g., the Wiener Gruppe. A brief purely biographical sketch is found at the end of the volume.

The first two poems of the first of the book's four sections illustrate the playful tone. The first, a seventeen-line poem entitled "MORGEN," begins: "frisch und feurig / heiße sonne / brüchig die winternacht / die da blüten ihren

geist / st st (ohne sch)" (2). And the second, reads in its entirety "each and every lioness / likes to wear / the newest dress" (3; the first of only two English poems in the collection). An irregular alternation of rather complex playing with language and aphoristic texts continues throughout the book. "AMERIKA" is introduced: "was du kannst / kannst du / und / was du nicht kannst / kannst du auch" (6; the complete text), to be followed on the next, facing page by the longer "LING," which begins: "gelber schmetter / ling und lingt er / blüht o blüten / im wackerwerk / vor blatt."

The theme of the second and longest section is given in the title, "zu orten mir vorgestellt." Beginning in "Schönbrunn" (12), our journey, at first "Im Zug" (13), later by air, takes us to a variety of destinations. The play element, or at least the purely playful element, is not as important here as it was in the first section, but it is still present. One of its manifestations is the presence of a number of Finnish words, with their totally exotic appearance.

The title of the third section, "wärmere zonen," is itself playful, since the journey we just ended included not only Germany and Finland, among other northerly destinations, but "ATHEN" and "CAMINO REAL" (18-19) as well. Warm here has many frames of reference: passion and friendship, for example, and "16. Juli 1995," the fiftieth anniversary of the explosion of the first atomic bomb, in the author's beloved New Mexico: "... erinnern sich / die zeitungen von heute / in kleinspalten daran" (57). The final and shortest section, "Erstaunliches," marks an eclectic and effective conclusion to an interesting collection of very contemporary German verse. Seven of the author's sketches are interspersed throughout the book.

If Pabisch's poetry is quite different from Kahn's, that of **Margot Scharpenberg**—at least in the present context—is itself entirely different from both of them. Continuing in the vein of her recent work and as the subtitle indicates, *Wenn Farben blühen: Gedichte zu Blumenbildern von Martina Mohren* is a collection of poems exclusively on paintings depicting flowers. The title itself is intertextual: it is taken from a Scharpenberg poem on Emil Nolde's "Blumengarten" published in 1982. For new readers, there is a brief biographical passage on Scharpenberg (74-75), and for the benefit of what surely will prove to be most readers, a similar text on the artist (78-79).

In his introduction, Andreas Hölscher mentions Nolde and Georgia O'Keefe, and these names will convey a general sense of what kind of paintings are reproduced here: bright, lively, and unashamedly beautiful. Hölscher perfectly captures the essence of this remarkable artistic collaboration: "Und dieses sinnliche Erlebnis des Betrachtens der Arbeiten von Martina Mohren geht mit der Lyrik von Margot Scharpenberg eine ideale Symbiose ein" (6).

Turning to the poems, we find that a "Vorwort" in verse (9) is followed by thirty poems on paintings, each one having as its title simply the name of the flower in question (each painting is reproduced in vivid color on the facing page). In spite of the similarity in subject matter, the poems themselves are remarkably diversified in style and approach to the subject. Some are poetically

descriptive, as can be illustrated by the concluding stanza of "Schwertlilien": "aus Iristiefe / äugt durch Bläue Rot / und manchmal büstet Gelb / blitzend die Ränder" (20). Others employ traditional meter and rhyme, while maintaining the serious tone of the lines just quoted, as in the opening of "Gelbe Tulpen," the first three lines of which could be from a Rilke Dinggedicht: "Sie sind auf ihre weißen Ränder stolz / und tragen sie wie hochgeschlagene Kragen / bei ihrem ersten Aufbruch in die frische Luft / man hört sie sozusagen 'Frühling' sagen" (26). While others, reflecting the more playful sounding names of the flowers, are themselves playful. The first stanza of "Gänseblümchen" reads: "Gänseblümchen / nimm dich vor den Tieren bloß in Acht / Gänse grasen auf dem Rasen / und die Hoppelhasen aasen / neben dir im Klee bei Tag und Nacht" (34).

As these quotes will, I hope, make clear, Scharpenberg's is a subtle poetic voice. No review can do justice to good poetry, and that difficulty is compounded in this case by the absence of the paintings, which go hand in hand with the poems.

The final book under review, *Adrift between Two Worlds* by **Dolores Hornbach Whelan**, is different from those discussed above in two important respects: this is the author's first collection of verse, and it is, as the title suggests, entirely in English (with the partial exception of the final poem, which appears in English and German versions). We are told very little about the author in a brief note on the back cover. A search for other titles by her reveals that she wrote and later published a dissertation on Eduard von Bauernfeld, confirming suggestions in the poetry that she holds the doctorate. Otherwise, the poems reveal much about her.

The first chapter, "New World Found," opens with one of the more delightful sequences in the collection, the first two stanzas of "Entry" (2): "At Idlewild in 1956 / (The Ellis Island of more recent years), / An eight-month pregnant woman seeks admittance / To milk and honey's land of liberty // "Let me in, please let me in." / "Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin!" Although it is easy to be distracted by the date 1956, the first four lines, the first stanza, are perfect blank verse. Indeed, they sound like the beginning of a traditional extremely positive immigrant poem (if stylistically more impressive than most). And then the mood is shattered by the incongruous nursery rhyme. Of course, things get worse. The poor woman is asked: "Well, do you plan to overthrow / The government of the United States?" and "Do you plan to earn your income as a prostitute?" a question followed by the comment "Her husband had to clarify the meaning." The woman's understandable reaction is to ask her husband for a ticket "back to Heidelberg, / . . . where / A woman doesn't have to be an anarchist / Or whore to make a living." The remaining poems in this first section have varied themes, but the attitude toward America is on the whole not very positive. Some are purely personal, without any cultural implications. The form alternates between free verse and a stanzaic pattern with rhyme and meter (typically for humorous effect, as in "Entry").

Patriotic readers will become apprehensive upon reading the title of the second section, "Inside the Rotting Apple," and they will find their fears fully realized in the third poem, "Lady Liberty" (44-45), without question the most negative poem I have ever seen about the Statue of Liberty. Nonetheless, it is a powerful and clever statement. A parody of Goethe's "Prometheus," it begins "If you must, lady on the pedestal, / Practice with your lawbook-boomerang; / Throw it on elm trees or sycamores / Like boys behead pink thistle tops. / Don't throw your book at me." Toward the end we read: "Bathe, Liberty, in your light, / The greedy, the criminals and the fakes. / As ever, you keep on turning your back / On those who are decent and honest." Perhaps the single American institution most frequently selected for censure is the educational establishment, especially its emphasis on technology: "... But they shout, / 'We'll kick butt of Japs and kraut / With our high technology! / Who needs hearts, civility?'" (68). Not all of the criticism of America is as serious. In the first line of a delightful poem, we read the exhortation: "Americans, rise from your slumber!" Within this first stanza there follow six lines, rhyming couplets, leading up to the concluding line: "You need a salad of cucumber!" (21).

In the fourth section, "Old World Lost," the tone is often rather sentimental, but not in a negative sense. "Corpus Christi 1933," a series of reflections upon viewing a picture of herself as a child dressed up in her Sunday finery, is especially poignant. The final two sections, "From This World to the Next" and "Life Goes On," are clearly manifestations of a long illness mentioned in the very brief introduction. Although "Pater Noster" (98-102), the Lord's Prayer with the speaker's contemporary but not irreverent commentary, is quite interesting, on the whole these final poems are in my opinion the weakest in the collection.

But it would be thoroughly inappropriate to conclude the discussion of *Adrift Between Two Worlds* on a negative note. This is a very impressive first collection, and I look forward to reading more of Whelan's poetry, in English or German.

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