

## Pacing out a Polyglot Poetics: Ulrike Draesner and Rebecca Braun in Dialogue at the Victoria & Albert Museum

Ulrike Draesner (b.1962) is an award-winning poet, novelist, essayist, and translator. In 2016 alone she was awarded two major prizes, the Nicolas-Born Prize for Fiction and the Orphil Poetry Prize, and she has twice been long-listed for the German Book Prize: in 2005 with her novel *Spiele*, and in 2014 with *Sieben Sprünge vom Rand der Welt*. But although she is routinely singled out as a writer representing the best of contemporary German-language writing, she is also much more than a German writer, if language is to be considered one of the core markers of identity. While the 2014 jury of the Joachim-Ringelnatz Poetry Prize praised the way she 'poetisiert die Welt', her personal webpage, remodelled in 2016 in simultaneous English and German versions to better accommodate international interest in the author, differentiates how this might happen. In a text set alongside the quotation from the Ringelnatz Prize speech, the website entry emphasises how manipulating multiple languages and cultural experiences has underpinned her literary vocation:

Her genuine curiosity about the world and the people around her makes Ulrike Draesner a sharp and quick-witted observer of our times. Her writing – intricately woven, humorous, incisive, and compelling – spans a vast thematic spectrum. As a polyglot constantly border-hopping between cultures, disciplines, and genres, it is only natural that Ulrike Draesner examines the taboos and desires of the twenty-first century by way of language itself.<sup>1</sup>

From the experimental Shakespeare translation project of 'Twin Spin' (2000/2013/2016) through to her most recent novel, *Sieben Sprünge* (2014), her work has indeed been characterized by 'border-hopping'.<sup>2</sup> She captures the different ways in which things – objects, patterns of behaviour, concepts – move through texts and the world by means of linguistic and historical slippage. For example, the experience of her old paperback copy of Shakespeare's sonnets disintegrating in her hands, its pages

flying to the floor in random order, suggested to the reader-translator Draesner that perhaps the poems themselves should be sent on a journey. In her 'radical translation' of seventeen of the sonnets, the words themselves 'fell out' and/or 'fielen auf', demanding to be reassembled. As she explained to the budding student translators she met in Lancaster in 2015, the Latin *radix* designates the 'root' words from which she took her own creative cues. The result was that she found in Shakespeare's sonnets from the turn of the seventeenth century a startling set of poems about cloning on the cusp of the twenty-first.

In *Sieben Sprünge* too, multiple things are on the move: characters shuttle back and forth between present-day Poland and Germany and nineteenth and early twentieth-century central Europe, while a guilty family secret that persists like an insect in amber across the decades makes it easier for the central protagonist, Eustachius Grolmann, to relate to the next genus of beings (apes) than to the next generation (his daughter). Beyond this, as Draesner describes in the conversation below, the novel itself is on the move. The 'seventh leap' the reader can take at the end of the printed text lands us on the web, at [www.der-siebte-sprung.de](http://www.der-siebte-sprung.de). Here the novel is re-presented as a series of photographs, oral histories and the core underpinning avenues of research in Polish and German that were compiled during the genesis of the literary work. As readers are encouraged to continue the novel by posting their own stories to the site, the novel as an encapsulated form broadly governed by mimesis and the author's intention has been moved out of itself and reconstituted within interactive, open-ended technology. This shift throws out questions about where the literary text begins and ends.

In another way, too, Draesner is constantly on the move: she undertakes a broad range of projects that demand different kinds of writing for different readers and audiences. She is also the author of a doctoral thesis that honed her reading of medieval manuscripts and, more recently, a set of deliberately literary essays, which, in both their mix of genres and content, 'border-hop' to provide philosophical, gender-aware reflection on key figures from German-, English- and French-

language literature of the last two hundred years.<sup>3</sup> She routinely leads in-depth public discussions of both contemporary writers and the national canon in Germany's top literary venues, but she has equally established her writerly presence in places one might be less likely to look for her: writing a column in the 'Freitext' section of the *Zeit* newspaper, for example, that riffs off everyday events, or guiding the German-language tourist around quirky London destinations in her 2016 travel guide, *Lieblingsorte: London*, published with Insel.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that the writing project that has captured her creative attention since she moved to Oxford for a two-year residency in 2015 is one that exiles the German not just from his language, but also from his artistic studio. The biography of Kurt Schwitters, expressionist poet and painter who had to flee first Germany and then Norway before settling in the Lake District, is also one of losing a whole artistic way of life but nonetheless determining to start again. Painfully beginning from first principles, both in assembling a physical space in which to work and in learning the English words needed to root himself into a local community, Schwitters provides Draesner with the ideal mouthpiece through which to explore the experience of living out of language. This is an experience that has also shaped her own biography, as she has lived on multiple occasions as a German in England. But it is also part of her bigger project. For if she has already broken open the form of the novel with *Sieben Sprünge*, now she is unpicking the monolingual nature of national canons which the novel traditionally supports: English and German versions of her Schwitters story are being written simultaneously, further confounding any easy discussion of origins and readerships.

Draesner is of course not alone in her desire to innovate within the literary craft upon which being a writer necessarily relies. Rebecca Walkowitz's recent study of trends in contemporary world literature, *Born Translated*, shows how other major novelists such as J.M. Coetzee and Kazuo Ishiguro have been operating along similar multilingual seams, while Katherine Hayles and Amy Hungerford have both dedicated book-length studies to practices of digital literature that place the

traditional novel out there, in the interactive world, and this in rather more radical ways than Draesner.<sup>5</sup> Draesner could still have her place in these English-literature-led survey works, and she is certainly at the vanguard of German-language writers who have been noted and feted for their experimentation with form (Felicitas Hoppe and Ulrike Almut Sandig come to mind as other figures whose prose and poetry respectively is marked out by a challenge to conventional literary forms). But to deposit her there might be to neglect other features of her work. For her concern with the German stories of a twentieth century that persists into the present, and her determination to unearth those 'subsongs',<sup>6</sup> the poetic sounds and symbols that structure our contemporary world across languages, is both a homage to language as a technology in itself and a desire to make what it can say and do resonate for her readers in whatever genre she is writing and with direct application to the contemporary world in which we are living. There is a fundamental commitment to readability that stops her writing veering off into self-referential gamesmanship, asserting instead literature's existence as a well-made object in the world.

These observations underpinned Rebecca Braun's suggestion that the following conversation should take its cue not from abstract notions of poetic craft or literary thematics, but rather from concrete historical objects. In her recent research, Braun has been examining how practices of authoring play out in multiple public cultural spaces in addition to the obvious space of the text. This entails changing our perspective on how authors carry value for society: we need to find ways of both looking at and beyond the literary text at the same time. In the conversation that ensues below, the pair therefore also experimented with changing perspective, by seeing how walking through the Europe Galleries at London's Victoria & Albert Museum and engaging with choice objects could provide a new angle on writing and reading German literature. As part of her ongoing 'border-hopping', Draesner opted to express her thoughts in English.

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**RB: Ulrike, we've been walking round the Europe Galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Just to get us started, I was thinking about the museum founder's words, Henry Cole, who said that a museum should be like an open book.<sup>7</sup> I wondered what thoughts you had about whether it's in any way like walking into a book when you come into a place like this?**

UD: I don't know whether I feel like I 'walked' into a book. What would this mean? If you want to express that you got really absorbed, you might say that you walked into the world of the characters, which is not the book. Reading, I forget that I am reading, that I see all the images and scenes only in my mind. I don't walk into books, I am there, present, everywhere, bodiless. As any metaphor, the 'walking' metaphor is illuminating, but it has its drawbacks: you use a metaphor to turn a museum into a book, but add a concrete piece from the museum, the walking. Quite a jumble, I'd say. I'm suspicious about this kind of image and would rather simplify it. In what respect could this museum be a book? It is quite an intriguing idea, and the chronological order of the V&A supports this at first. One walks through the galleries: Europe - Baroque, Europe - Rococo, they might be seen as 'chapters', fine, but chapters in a book would be organised completely differently. The V&A's chapter-chambers house collections of treasures, put together more or less randomly, and they raise questions: which object survived, who could afford to acquire it, what was done to preserve it, why did the museum get hold of it two or three hundred years after the artefact was created?

**But I suppose maybe as you walk through a gallery that's got an almost overwhelming amount of objects on display, you start to make connections, almost in spite of this overwhelming display.**

**You gravitate towards one thing or another, and in a way isn't that happening in a book as well?**

**There are different things that the reader can pick up on and different paths that they can take?**

It might be helpful to differentiate between different genres. I tend to read books from A to B to C, and, while I do so, elements of the text – plot, motifs, colours, emotions, details of any kind – start to connect or reflect one another, and in the aftermath this process is revised and reshaped. There will be scenes I liked best, things I found disgusting, touching, incomprehensible, details again which will

stick to memory and start to crystallize to form the very specific memory of the book I read. Basically, a kind of cloud comes off, containing the most prominent things that surprised me or touched me or made me marvel and think. They form a specific, individual memory of a book, recording its 'atmosphere', a kind of essence of colours and tone. These memory clouds are fascinating results of the process of reading. They depend on your mood, the person you were when you read, your state of development at that time. You might reread the book twenty years later and link back to this memory. The atmosphere will have changed, because you will have changed, but remembering that cloud will give you access to your former self, allow you to see who you were and who you have become, grant you a double self, for a time. Whereas walking through a gallery – just because of the sheer wealth of objects displayed – I tend to pick a display and react to the *random* choice, 'randoming myself', just paying attention to any object which attracts me – for whatever reason. Which could be correlated to how I tend to read a volume of poetry.

**I was just thinking the same thing, actually.**

It could be applied to collections of short stories, too. I open the book, look, turn pages, start to read, go backwards, create an order myself. Which I like, because, on returning to the book two hours or two days or weeks later the path of reading will be different. This creates some extra space for you and the single poem to interact, because you don't feel rushed or dragged into the tension of plot or characters. It grants the time for a kind of silent dialogue to develop between the object and myself, and the object becomes alive and enters the dialogue, and an internal process starts out. Here there seems to me to be another possible link between dealing with a poem and standing in front of, let's say, this German 'Kasten' [in the Europe Gallery].



Early eighteenth-century writing cabinet © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The 'Kasten' is a beautifully designed, carved object made of wood and metal.<sup>8</sup> As the museum's label tells us, it contained a bit of its own story in one of its drawers – and we might come back to this later in our conversation – but first of all it is an object: we take it in, in one go, as something of a specific shape, size, colour, maybe smell etc. With a poem, something similar seems to happen: I turn a page, and there it is – a graphic shape, a work of specific length, rhythm and structure, an image in writing. Only after having perceived this, I start to read and take in the 'semantics' of the words. Some of the objects in the V&A offer word-stories to their beholders as well, and you could read them, from beginning to end. It's important to me that this object- or image-character adheres

to textual art as well. This mute aspect might often be subdued by the talk of the words, but still remains an important part of the dimensions of a literary text, as much as a story might become part of a work of art.

**So you've been talking about that mostly from the reader's point of view – the person who's looking at the object or the way that you might engage with a poem on a page. But I'm thinking now about the curators of the museum, who might echo the point of view of the writer who's putting together the book of poems. We started off saying that the V&A is an apparently random collection of objects, but of course that's what *we* see as visitors to the museum; for the curators, it's just the tip of the iceberg, because they have huge vaults, with a whole archive of objects, documents, records.**

Doesn't it make it even more random?

**Well, yes and no. There are more objects but there's also a great deal of literature behind the scenes, particularly in the V&A. It's also a vast library, which has informed how the curators have assembled the story that they're trying to tell through the objects in the gallery. So, I was just thinking about the book of poems and how you approach that as an author. Presumably the book of poems in a way is the tip of the iceberg for *you*, because there are lots and lots of other poems and memory clouds that you've drawn on and you're just presenting the final published version in a certain order to us. But there's a lot more has gone on behind the scenes isn't there?**

Nicely seen. Still, I think that the situation is very different. As a writer I am dealing with – let's call it material for the moment – material made by myself. When I was working on my most recent collection of poems, *subsong*, I realised that I would want more poems on birds and how their song has been translated into human speech. I started to read books about birds, to listen to them in the wild or on the Internet, and gradually that body of poems grew. Being a curator of a museum, you might go for something similar, browse the market, visit auctions and try to get hold of objects missing from your chapter. You might not succeed in doing so, and this might happen to me as well



which, I suppose, brings us closer to the core of the issue: In many museums, and certainly in the V&A, there is a kind of historical background story being told. It obliges you to something like the historical past, you want to and need to represent it, whatever it might have been. The concept of 'historical truth' has undergone many revisions, we know that this truth is being constructed as we go along. Nevertheless, a plethora of the V&A's objects seem to be here just to tell you about true lives in the historical past: what did vicars wear in the seventeenth century, how did barbers shave, what role did religion play in a household etc. Various strata of society are mirrored; the objects are mimetic or realistic, functioning on orderly space- and timelines. This, to me, doesn't have much in common with composing a volume of poetry.

**What about a novel? That's the genre most closely associated with that mimetic mode you've just been describing, and your most recent novel, *Sieben Sprünge vom Rand der Welt*, does an amazing job of recreating a whole century of European history; also with reference to objects, how people interact with specific things that carry meaning for them.**

It is a contemporary, historical novel. A lot of research went into its making, which provided me with details, some anecdotal stories, very moving encounters. After a while you see a bit more and questions arise. This is the stage where I feel that I am at least approaching writing. You then need to choose: what do I really need, what do I want? Unlike a museum, I'm not obliged for example to talk about religion or specific aspects of food unless my character is interested in it. This renders the process of choosing much more elliptic in a way, which in turn makes research so much harder. I've worked as an academic as well, and of course I use what I've learnt there for my research in fiction. Nevertheless, the process of looking is essentially different: in the first place you usually don't know what you're looking *for* because you have to cover a vast field and wait for inspiration from the material.

In the case of *Sieben Sprünge*, I talked to an eyewitness who had come to Wrocław in 1945 as a child. When I asked him what he had liked, he told me about toys and, as an aside, mentioned: 'We were

all red, we had red skin'. I wondered whether this meant: that they play at red Indians all the time, or was it a political allusion, being a communist at the age of ten? I had read about how the city was heavily bombed and destroyed by the Germans themselves and the Russians, and even in July '45 there were fires, ruins were still smouldering, ash and dust everywhere. But the dust, as I learnt now, was red, as most of the houses had been built of red brick. Since there wasn't enough water either, people were covered in red dust, which after a while got into your skin and couldn't be entirely washed off. This was the detail I needed, and it started off a process of invention. As a curator in a museum you are not supposed to meddle with your objects, but this is exactly what I do: I don't curate them, I create them.

**There's a lovely metaphor in there about the transience of things as well, isn't there? That the houses had turned to dust and were being carried on people's skin and the people in the end were telling the story.**

I loved the red dust because it was true and beautiful, and, thinking of it today, when most of the people who lived through these times, have become dust themselves, it is true and sad and sadly beautiful in yet another way. Walking through a museum like the V&A and its baroque chambers you encounter many images of death, and it was a touching moment when I looked at this German 'Kasten'. It is a highly representative piece of furniture built for a rich and mighty man as a cabinet for writing and presentation. But the two carpenters who built it left a little letter in it, which is quite amazing because it means that these men, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, were capable of writing. These learned, respectable men wrote that they had finished this piece of furniture, probably after at least a year of work, in the winter months. They had lived in Würzburg for this on a diet of parsnips and kraut, which had made them feel so sick that they left the place immediately after finishing their work. It is touching, because they ask you to pray for them and, should they have died by the time, please pray for their souls. So, in the end, the cabinet talks to you of how it was made as part of the lives of two men, and death looks at you. Both seem to me to be vital moments

of encounters with the past, and they certainly indicate something important for research for fiction: you have to connect emotionally to what you investigate and find. And it won't be the smooth, over-decorated surface of the object - impressive and beautiful as it might be – that will inspire you the most, but the scratch, the flaw, the letter hidden, the story behind, and here they are, these two carpenters, packing up their instruments, walking through the gate of Würzburg , walking through time.

**That's an example of an entirely coincidental story that the museum has told; it wasn't aiming to tell that downtrodden narrative of the people who made it. Originally the collection was brought together because Prince Albert wanted to inspire the British in their own design practices and so that they could learn from the best of European cultures. I'm thinking now about the significance of trying to tell a story of Europe, trying to tell a representative narrative of Europe, which the V&A was trying to do when it started out. And I guess you're walking around as a European looking at this image of Europe that was put together a hundred years ago, and you've found the rogue narrative in there. What other things do you see?**

Well, I think it's quite awful if this is an image of Europe! I've lived in England for some time now, but it still strikes me when I enter a museum like the V&A and see as a heading 'Europe', that this doesn't include Britain. This very particular usage of the word 'Europe', excluding Britain, has never resonated with me. It's worth noticing the linguistic antagonism, because it extends into the objects presented and informs the story of the objects in the V&A. Curiously enough, the V&A tells us a story of Europe as a continent, heavily influenced by Asia in displaying a cornucopia of representative objects, especially furniture, of Asian origin or making. Wealth was expressed by being able to afford some Japanese craftsmen designing your altar or your porcelain, and by acquiring Chinese or Indian decorations and woodcarvings. So the Europe shown to us seems defined by widespread colonial trade, which seems to be a very British way of looking at it. The other prominent topic is Christianity and especially with the early objects from the sixteenth century you feel the battle of the

Reformation going on in the background. Amazing sums of money are being invested into establishing and reinforcing Catholicism, and a lot of pomp. It seems to be everywhere, in the Dutch objects, in the Roman artefacts, in the Italian objects of course, something unifying, a kind of mental discourse of the time, struggling with Christianity and its standing.

**On that point of religion, when you set about telling your story of the twentieth century in *Sieben Sprünge*, was that aspect of human experience something you were interested in too? It's not something that I picked up on particularly in the novel, but does faith at least in part determine how you paint your characters' worlds? It's pretty important, after all, and perhaps especially now.**

There are two families in the novel – a Polish and a German one - and the Polish family are Catholics, of course. So Catholicism plays a certain role. One of the characters carries a cross with her, but she takes it off when she sees the impact of war on everybody and how people treat each other. She loses her faith, but it's not told as a big story, it's just centred in a gesture. My German family are Protestants, and they are not particularly religious, but the eldest character of the novel, Hannes, born in 1892, is heavily influenced by Christian values. His morals and ethics are basically Protestant: be truthful and industrious, and if you oblige yourself, if you swear an oath for example, even if it is to Hitler, you are bound to it for the rest of your life. He has a lawyer test the validity of his oath, but since Hitler *had* come to power legally, the law finds any oath to him binding. And so Hannes goes off again and again to fight for the regime and to follow the ethos of absolute loyalty to his comrades. Sets of Christian values shape the characters' lives, but these values are shown as having been usurped – partly at least – by the state and as being misused for Hitler's oppressive, racial and murderous politics.

**Perhaps we could just go back to the idea of objects and telling a European story. I know that you're working on a project to try and recreate the voice of Kurt Schwitters and his experience in exile. So, he came to the UK where he would have been perceived as 'a German'. I wondered if**

**you could just tell us a little about how you've set about telling *his* story and the significance of objects in that, because of course Schwitters's artistic style was to put together all sorts of different kinds of objects...**

It's wonderful to be in the V&A with all these richly decorated, beautiful, valuable objects. And if you just walk through the European galleries, it's so... I mean, I'd like to add something: we are shown baroque and rococo splendour, basically documenting wealth and power. There's no trace of the French Revolution. There's no trace of dirt or failure, on the contrary: the museum creates a world of riches and gold, getting ever more pompous. Slightly one-sided, you'd think. But just take it, for the moment, bear these images in your mind... and come with me to look at the one object by Schwitters on display in the Tate Britain, it's called *Relief and Relief*. If you look at it now, it will strike you how revolutionary it was to pick up all sorts of discarded objects – lengths of wire, rubber, flotsam –, put them into a frame and use them as the material for an object of art. He started doing this after the First World War and kept working on this basis after he had come to England in 1940. Objects to him were quite manifold, and everywhere: the discarded bus ticket, found on the ground, or a sweet wrapper, shards of glass in a London street. He always wore a huge coat, obviously, or a long coat with huge pockets to store things, or dragged a wheelbarrow along. That's what he had done in Hanover – his hometown – and how he tried to continue.

Another very important object / non-object for him was landscape. As a young man he received a sound education in the traditional art of painting at the Dresden Academy of Arts. He loved wild, hilly landscapes and went out to paint in the open. Coming to England in '41 from Norway, exiled from his first exile, he was interned at a prisoners' camp on the Isle of Man for a year where, in order to earn money, he fell back on his ability to do portraits. In summer '45 he moved to the Lake District, into a landscape offering him an intricate variety of views, perspectives and continuous change. He used it for his non-traditional art, allowing it to rhythmically, bodily shape his perception.

I find him translating views or mountain ridges, abstracted to lines, into his last work, a mural in a barn, which was meant to become, in its entirety, a sculpture into which you could walk.



Detail taken from the Merz Barn wall on display in the Hatton Gallery, Newcastle © DACS 2017

He had started this in Hanover, where he built his first Merzbau, which at the time represented an absolutely new and innovative way of thinking about the connections between perception, objects and space.<sup>9</sup> Much of the landscape of the Lake District became a sort of spatial 'object' to him that he then translated into his third Merzbau, the Merz Barn. With the result that, from what we can tell, it differs quite fundamentally from his earlier work in how lines move, objects are inserted and colours applied. I remember reading a study that showed how the outline of a certain Norwegian mountain range reappeared in one of his collages. So these, too, might be far more mimetic in a reflective, mirroring way than one would assume at first sight.

**It's a really interesting recurrent motif in our conversation, this idea of space around the artistic object, or the space that you need when you are trying to be creative, and how you manage space, whether it's how the poem looks on the page, or how the poems within a collection relate to one another, or the path that you trace through your novel.**

Yes, it's been on my mind quite a lot because I think that, at least for my writing, space is a central concept. Of course it's connected to time, and if you talk about narrative you talk about time, but you talk about space as well. It struck me many years ago that, looking at how children acquire language, you encounter a double process of formation. At the age of between two and three, children start to use the first person pronoun 'I' after having gone through a phase of referring to themselves in the third person. But even before then they would have developed a concept of space. The first question that toddlers ask, or seem to use to orientate themselves, is not, 'who am I?' but 'where am I?' Even a very small child would communicate to you that it doesn't want to be in its chair but in your arms. The concept of space is fundamental for language acquisition. One of the basic gestures of mankind is to be able to point and understand pointing, relating yourself and others to a point in space, which presupposes the creation of three-dimensional images. At the same time, language is spatial in many of its concepts and in its own structure, for example a sentence or paragraph. It develops in time and space. And for narrative, what do you make of this? Even if you have just one word like 'you', this 'you' implies a double space and a relationship. So it helps to set up a space in your mind - sometimes you use it as a kind of 'plot' to create characters. Space makes them move, it creates action. And I've always been wondering about the concept of 'Heimat' in German – homeland, being at home. It might basically, if you try to get rid of all the ideologies surrounding it, be a wise concept because it seems to know something about how space forms our bodies, how a very specific space kind of *is* inscribed into the formation of your psyches, of your tastes, of your subjectivity.

There are traces of this in everybody's life. I remember having these lovely baguettes in France in the morning, and you take these very baguettes home, eat them there, and they taste much worse. The same holds true of English tea. I love it, took a package of extra strong breakfast tea back to Germany the other week – and was bitterly disappointed. It's not only the water, there must be other factors influencing this, like the humidity of the air, surrounding smells, height of the landscape etc. We don't seem to have much of a concept of this, but it concerns quite a common experience, and you might well start to think about this. If you take language to be a space as well, formed by space and the climate and how sounds carry in a landscape, then you realize that we always move in a double space – 'real' material space and the space of the language we are using. It is space we carry around with us, something enveloping your head like one of these transparent spheres that are sometimes given to children to play with. If you are able to use more than one language, you very clearly feel that the very moment you enter another one, everything changes, including yourself. My voice shifts as do the stories I tell, even if they might superficially be 'the same', answering a simple question like 'where were you born?' The wording and the space opened up for those who listen will be different depending on which language I use in answering.

**And you've been working on a text that explores exactly that, haven't you?**

Schwitters makes a case for this in many ways. In Germany he's basically known as a poet, especially for his 'Ursonate', his sound poetry. If you read about him, you will of course realise that he did some art as well. He was persecuted by the Nazis for his poetry and his degenerate art, fortunately he left early enough, in 1937. He went into exile to Norway and kept on writing but the writing kind of became less and less. He set up house together with his son, I assume that they spoke German with each other, Kurt Schwitters' correspondence is all in German, but he learned some Norwegian and communicated with people in shops etc. in Norwegian. In England, though, where he lived for eight years, something else happened. English seems to have kind of grasped him and built a second space around him, especially since he had an English girlfriend from '42 onwards, so, all of a sudden,



his daily life was turned upside down and became English. He also started to translate some of his earlier work into English, with the help of his partner, Edith Thomas, and his perception of what surrounded him and who he was gradually changed. England really grew on him, he became very fond of English tea, English sweets, of bitter beer (his favourite!) and, as the whole person is being 'migrated', Schwitters' artistic focus changes as well. He stops writing in German, more or less, and when I went into the archives, I saw that from '45 onwards he used English instead of German for the letters he wrote to his son; and his son answered in English in return.

**Was his son in England as well at that point?**

No, he left England in '45 and went back to Norway. They had a close relationship. Schwitters' wife died in '43, his parents were dead, his son was his last relative. And they abandoned their German, as much as Germany had abandoned them. True enough, his English remained fairly clumsy, but when I discovered him as a character for a novel and read about his life, it became perfectly clear that I had to write him in English. It would mirror him, his split and changing identity; and it would reflect my effort to give voice to exile as a process rather than a state. I felt that I would be the right person to make him talk as this being between nations and languages, cultures and allegiances. My German shines through my English, I wouldn't be able to entirely suppress this – actually, in Schwitters' case, that would be the right thing to happen: blunders and oblique ways of expressing himself would have been part of his daily life. After a while the project split once more, or redoubled itself: I realised that it should be a book existing in two languages 'simultaneously', blurring the concept of there being one original and its translation. So I am writing it in both languages now, there seems to be a constant flow of ideas, either from some English paragraph into its German 'translation' which would never be word for word, or the other way round. Both novels should be published simultaneously.

And the project I'm working on is like... well, let me phrase it the other way around: I have my doubts about the novel as a form, in general. What's the point of writing novels nowadays? Of

course you can reiterate what has been done, but this might get a bit boring in the long run. Making use of a specific literary form to me also means trying to develop it, to discover new potential and give it a contemporary significance. The novel in its modern form is a wonderfully flexible genre, invented in the wake of the French Revolution and the way it forges the modern subject. So what can we do with it and how far have we got? We have already had naturalism, realism, psychological realism, modernist movements of various sorts, language experiments, existentialism, postmodernism. What do we do today, considering contemporary media usage, considering globalised commerce, reconsidering authenticity, language, individuality? There's a wide range of possibilities, but still, you have to choose, to find one, to invent a new one. For me, this was the crucial question already for the *Sieben Sprünge* novel. How do I translate my topic, forced migration and its long-term consequences through various generations, into the novel's form?

Taking the topic seriously, taking the topic to its extreme, meant not only to tell about it, but to make it tell - apply it to the literary form I'm using. In the end, I needed to force the novel out of its traditional, comfortable, bookish bed into exile. But then, what *are* feasible ways for exiling a novel? By, obviously, not *destroying* the form, but *getting* at it. In the end, *Sieben Sprünge* was exiled by being forced into the Internet. The novel's last page bears, or rather is, a QR code that catapults you onto the page [www.der-siebte-sprung.de](http://www.der-siebte-sprung.de) where you'll find seven chapters. The site is owned by me, there is no advertising. It invites you to witness the making of the novel, the research in Poland and Germany, the documents used, and to contribute yourself to a kind of communal space of talk, which, actually, is the basis of the novel – referring back to private, secluded meetings of groups of refugees in their new homes in the 1950s, discussing futures and past, losses and prospects – and the feeling that they would never arrive. I remember their voices, sounds and songs long-gone, and some of this flow is mirrored in the novel *Sieben Sprünge's* nine first-person narrators. The Schwitters books will create another way to force the novel into exile: being a German writer, I write the novel in English, translate it back into German – and sometimes the other way round, hopefully

get the book published in both languages, but two separate bodies, which will exactly mirror Schwitters' and other refugees' life situations.

**It's an amazing project. Were you inspired by the work you did with Tom Cheeseman in *Twin Spin*?**

**Because in a way you've done something similar, haven't you, with the Shakespearean sonnets?**

For me this was quite different because the *English* was different – it was Shakespeare, there was an original, and I just did a translation, though my translation uses the English and German languages in many ways, making use of their respective idiosyncrasies by wilfully mistranslating the odd word, introducing strange idioms and puns.

**But you did send Shakespeare into exile with your translation, right?**

That's true, you can read it like that – I like your view - but I didn't make the connection before you just mentioned it. To me, my way of working now basically seems to be the other way round in comparison to these so-called radical translations of Shakespeare's procreation sonnets. These translations are based on German idioms, German words, whereas on the other side there is poor Schwitters in an English meadow on a foggy day in October '47, unhappy about how he feels - he's quite ill, and he wants to finish this barn. He's just been to a pharmacist, walked into the shop and said 'I have a recipe for my heart', which of course, in the novel, is a bad pun. There is only one word in German for 'recipe' and 'prescription'. In the novel the pharmacist stares at Schwitters, uncomprehending, and asks, 'Do you have to pay for it?' This is the moment when Schwitters realises that something went wrong. He says, 'Yes, usually I have to', finally the pharmacist understands and Schwitters is angry with himself, because it was such a stupid mistake after years and years in Britain. But he decides to be stubborn, go home and brew some concoction for his heart, according to a 'recipe'. German is the basis of the whole episode. Puns and misunderstandings grow out of the German matrix of the character. The challenge, of course, is to translate this back into German, since not a single one of these puns works in German.

For the German novel I have to invent entirely new moves for Schwitters in this double-grid of languages and his reflection of what I call 'foreignty'. I coined this word, hoping it might express some of this state of 'being a foreigner' – when your sovereignty seems to have been replaced by bewilderment and loss of control. It's a paradoxical state, defining you by what you are not.

Schwitters gets caught up in-between identities and languages; being in exile eats up a lot of his strength, since his entire existence has become paradoxical. Given the choice, he wouldn't be in the place where he is, but, under the circumstances, he is happy to be there, to have reached it at all, he is unhappily happy about it and, in spite of many efforts, not part of it, he feels his strangeness and suffers from the fact that none of the people he's surrounded by know his German past; so he's like a translated person, and that's what I try to retranslate into the German text.

**I'm just thinking about the extent to which the whole genre is being exiled in what you're describing. What you elaborated upon there was how language and the person's mastery of language goes into exile and is changed by being in exile. But at the level of genre, you are taking the novel and you are making it fundamentally translated; that this project will only exist as two texts, so there won't be an original. The genre itself, as you're using it, is going to have multiple languages and multiple versions underpinning it.**

Yes, exactly, there won't be an original. Even with the website of the *Sieben Sprünge* you could wonder about what the original was. It rather creates circles than originals. The website presents a lot of historical material from Poland or Germany, which obviously went into the making of the novel. But you might read the novel first. Going to the website then is like taking a leap – but you will also see a different pattern. What will be the original? It doesn't make sense to talk about originals here, and I like your idea: there won't be an original of the Schwitters novel because perhaps being in exile or being forced to migrate means that you as a person are kind of split, you will have a double-sided, more prominently double-sided history or story of your personal life, you might have two – not backgrounds or foregrounds – two grounds, spaces surrounding you, various languages

and incompatible life experiences. And you may well find yourself in this very uncomfortable position of bridging something, not pertaining to one system or another; living betwixt. In English there is the idiom 'to fall between two stools', and if you do, you fail, you fall to the ground and that's it. But in German the idiom is 'zwischen zwei Stühlen sitzen', so you don't really fall, but are caught in a really uncomfortable position...

**But you're still sitting...**

One buttock on one chair, the other one on the other. But still sitting, exactly. So I cannot use the English idiom to express the German situation, which linguistically mirrors the situation of exile. I shall have to invent a third form of exiling or migrating novels.

**But what you're achieving by that is really emphasising the importance of language. And you could argue that in all of the debates about realism and telling representative stories from the past - and thinking right back to when we were talking about how the objects in the V&A tell a story -, that language perhaps tends to play second fiddle in those understandings of narrative and the novel.**

**But what you're saying is that the linguistic experience is *all*.**

Language has always played first fiddle for me, and I cannot imagine that this will change. It is probably why I'm a poet as well as a writer of fiction. For me, and my writing, this has become clearer since I came to England in autumn 2015. I don't believe that languages are as neatly separated and ordered as our standard models would make us believe. Rather, I understand my writing as based on a 'polyglot poetics', which would mean that I try to capture voices; voices which have been suppressed for various reasons: voices of spectres and ghosts, voices talking about taboos, voices of the past; I aim to make them come alive, translating them into a form and a language or languages we can understand. In the nineteenth century, with the concept of nationalism on the rise, languages were also defined in primarily national terms, but I think authors have always had a strong urge and potential to think and go beyond this. If you look at literature, if you relate this back to the baroque and rococo rooms of the V&A, what you see is that in art – and

this applies to literature as well – communication would usually have reached across borders and linguistic barriers, which is amazing in the case of literature because this presupposes a process of translation. Forms like the sonnet or the novel were not inventions in or for a specific language; they went European very quickly.

I have been thinking lately that old Goethe might be quite topical at the moment: he popularized the word 'Weltliteratur'. And right he was, literature as a means to communicate globally, literature not defined by 'national' issues, but by what it means to be human and inhabit and share this planet. To me this forms part of the essential spirit and liberty of literature. Why not make it more prominent in writing? This too comes out of my English sojourn: let's open up the German tongue and see it as an advantage and as potential not to think in linguistic caskets or boxes. What goes into the making of a literary text, what are the limitations? Nobody lives in just one language, we all use several languages, private and public ones, languages of childhood, middle and old age, of soothing and scolding; accents, regional differences or dialects might come in. And it is exactly this multitude which, in the end, allows you to read the letters hidden in the drawers – as the letter about two men's lives and their creation of a beautiful piece of art was hidden in the German 'Kasten' we discovered earlier.

**I love the way you've expressed a 'polyglot poetics' in response to the Europe Galleries at the V&A, and you've even found a way of linking world literature to objects in the world through thinking about language and space. That's fantastic. It's seems our talk has come full circle.<sup>10</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted on Draesner's English-language homepage: <http://www.draesner.de/en/> (accessed 13 July 2017). The German homepage displays the same text in German.

<sup>2</sup> Draesner's 17 radical translations first appeared in Peter Waterhouse, ed., *To Change the Subject: Die Übersetzung der Worte in Sprache*, Göttingen 2000. The original sonnets, Draesner's radical translations, and Tom Cheesman's back-translation of Draesner's poems were published in 2013 in William Shakespeare, Ulrike Draesner, Tom Cheesman, Olive Ond, *Thymine*, Swansea 2013, and again in 2016 as part of an exhibition catalogue specially printed on the occasion of a symposium on Draesner's work at Oxford University: Ulrike Draesner and Tom Cheesman, *Twin Spin: 17 Shakespeare Sonnets*, Oxford 2016.

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<sup>3</sup> Ulrike Draesner, *Schöne Frauen lesen: Über Ingeborg Bachmann, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, Friederike Mayröcker, Virginia Woolf u.v.a.*, Munich 2007; Ulrike Draesner, *Heimliche Helden: Über Heinrich von Kleist, Jean-Henri Fabre, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Gottfried Benn, Karl Valentin u.v.a.*, Munich 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Recent texts can be accessed through her website: <http://www.draesner.de/essays-interviews/> (accessed 13 July 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*, New York 2015; N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*, Chicago 2012; Amy Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, Stanford 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Ulrike Draesner, *subsong: Gedichte*, Munich 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Cole is described as having declared that the South Kensington Museum, as it was then known, 'will be like a book with its pages open and not shut': see Oliver Winchester, 'A Book with its Pages always Open?', in Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale (eds), *Museums, Equality and Social Justice*, Abingdon 2012, pp.142-55, p.153.

<sup>8</sup> Extensive information about the cabinet's provenance and contextualising historical information is available online from the V&A's searchable database: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70687/writing-cabinet-arend-jacob/> (accessed 13 July 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Schwitters designed four so-called 'Merzbauten', which were large 3-D collages made from found things incorporated into architectural spaces or landscapes. These constructions followed his pattern of exile, with the first developed in various rooms of the family home in Hanover, the second and third in his homes in Norway, and the fourth in a barn in Elterwater, Cumbria - the 'Merz Barn'. The term 'Merz' designated a creative technique of making things from found objects and fragments. It was also applied to a periodical that Schwitters published from 1923-32 and which showcased different kinds of creative work that built on this approach. A useful overview of Schwitters's various 'Merz' projects can be found at the website of the Hatton Gallery, Newcastle, where the wall from his Merz Barn is on display:

<https://hattongallery.org.uk/collections/kurt-schwitters-merz-barn-wall> (last accessed 13 July 2017).

<sup>10</sup> With especial thanks to Matthew Shaw for his transcription of the conversation.