

“A learning experience not only for Germans”

Thoughts on Nevfel Cumart’s more recent poetry

Eight years ago Nevfel Cumart’s first English-German volume of poetry *Waves of Time – Wellen der Zeit* was published. At that time he had already received several literary prizes and stipends for his poetry and prose, and since then he has been lauded among other things as “one of the most distinguished and sought-after performers in the German-speaking world”. In 2000 Stefan Neuhaus wrote in his epilogue to Cumart’s poetry volume *Planting Seeds in Dreams*:

“It can be said that Cumart won over his audience by dint of hard work. Untiring in his efforts, he tours Germany, reads from his poetry in schools and community-based educational projects, adult evening classes and universities. His publishing house sells thousands of his volumes every year in print runs that are certainly untypically high for poetry. In addition to this he is inundated with letters from school-goers and students who are writing essays and dissertations about his poetry because they feel that these poems equally address their intellect and emotions. To be able to express feelings without becoming trivial – surely that is an art that can only be called timeless.”

In his writing and the performance of his poems Cumart has remained true to his own distinctive style, one that Neuhaus refers to as the “Cumart sound”, typified by simple vocabulary, paratactic syntax,

segmented sentence-structures, parallelisms, refrain-like repetitions and an imagery that gets to the core of things. The language can be rhythmical and resonant where he sets out to conjure up cosmic spaces or evoke archetypal elements of nature, lapidary where he polemicizes against inhuman conditions, prosaic where the naked facts of everyday life are to find expression, or narrative where an anecdote or story is to speak for itself. In general his poetic diction is unadorned even where it is semantically complex, a factor that has contributed much to the favourable reception it enjoys particularly among young readers.

Cumart's themes also show continuity. As in earlier collections they reappear in the form of a personal record, even if subtle shifts have taken place of late. The traumatic conflict between the child and his parents expressed in the poem *Lebenslehre / life lesson* ("how I was to live / I often learned / in the evenings / from my father // with each blow / a little clearer") has at last been resolved. Instead he draws an empathetic picture of the lives of his parents and of their psychological and physical deterioration as a result of West German "guest worker" policies of the fifties, when both of them were torn away from their indigenous culture and gregarious extended families and thrown into a disabling and callous industrial world (mother cumart, working life). Equally, the trope of the bridge breaking in two that symbolized a cultural tug-of-war and identity conflict between the poet's German and Turkish selves has made way for a more measured treatment of the theme of *Heimat* and belonging. The

Turkish world is by no means embellished; on the contrary, the glaring human rights violations in Turkey are confronted head-on (turkish careers, turkish statistics). On the other hand in a number of beautiful poems Cumart celebrates the affectionate encounters with his relatives and friends in the streets of Adana – for instance, with Uncle Vehbi, Cousin Cahit, Aunt Schahdiye or the chickpea vendor – as a way of illustrating the benefits of alterity and its contribution to his own character development. This has made him realize that “nation” is an inadequate or even problematic touchstone for the establishment of identity and that it can be enormously enriching to partake in two cultures (or even three, when one adds the Greek dimension – despite the age-old enmity between Turkey and Greece – which the poet has gained through his beloved wife Sofia). Moreover, the greater the diversity between the cultures, the more enriching he considers their influence to be.

Frequently German forms of bonding are designed not only to tie the members of the in-group closer together but also to make the exclusion of outsiders more explicit, as in the case of allotment gardeners’ clubs, male choirs or “Stammtische” (pub tables reserved for selected regulars). Yet it is not totally out of the question for the occasional foreigner to be elevated to membership of such inner circles, but he has to demonstrate a 100% acculturation before gaining admittance. The English saying “my home is my castle”, often quoted with great smugness in Germany, contrasts strongly with the very different social

intercourse in Mediterranean countries: the natural congeniality in public places, the Italian *passagiata* (promenading before the evening meal), the demonstration of affection even between men, the spontaneous dropping-by to welcome someone or take one's leave, the mutual visits – all that is conveyed in Cumart's depictions of street life in Adana. The members of the first generation of Southern European labour migrants tried to recreate this more cordial form of sociability by gathering in the main stations, the symbolic link with the homeland. Some of them still continue to do so, but they do it under the watchful eye of the station police and ironically also under the Coca-Cola sign, the emblem of globalization (Munich main station). The pidgin German cobbled together by the first generation to meet the most basic needs of communication was ridiculed as "Station German", because that's where it was most frequently heard. The scorn with which the restricted code and unorthodox grammar of "Guestworker German" is treated is all the more uncalled-for as many Germans themselves aped this code in their dealings with immigrants and thus cemented it in the mistaken belief that they were doing a good turn for these "aliens" coming from a supposedly more primitive stage of culture ("deutsche Sprach, schwere Sprach"). Even Nevfel Cumart, who was born and grew up in Germany and is a polyglot of considerable proficiency, is occasionally confronted with what he calls "Tarzan German" (still a stranger) due to his somewhat Arabian looks, although his flawless command of German ought to become perfectly obvious after the first few words exchanged.

One guesses that a less benign intent underlies the native Germans' apparently well-meaning (if patronising) wish to be helpful, namely the subconscious attempt to consign their "foreign" counterpart firmly to the realm of "the Other", thereby consolidating their own superior position and keeping the relationship simple and unequivocal. It is after all easier to engage with stereotypes than people who cannot be readily pigeon-holed. Such an attitude leads inevitably to institutionalized discrimination (manhunters), to bizarre asylum policies (exam) and is epitomized in the inability of some officials to grasp the fact that Germany has become a multicultural country (a shred of homeland).

Since the publication of his first English-German poetry volume in 1998 Nevfel Cumart has seen much of the world. Places like Bali, Hanoi, Bangkok, Jamaica or New York which he visited on his travels have supplied the material for poems that give one cause for reflection. They are not only full of exotic and impressionistic detail (and whenever they are, it is presented with delightful originality such as in the poems sunset on bali and st. lucia), but they also provide object lessons in sharp social criticism (new york) and cogent anti-war poetry (from a vietnamese song). Moreover, countries he never visited which are crisis points and the focus of interest in global politics give him cause to strongly disavow the dangerously simplistic myth of the "axis of evil" and the mixed blessing of being liberated by George W. Bush (iraq 2003, the dictator's bread). Whenever he returns to cities such as Dublin, his keen

eye quickly perceives the negative aspects of the Irish economic boom in the context of the Great Leveller of globalization (dublin five years later).

The deep earnestness of Cumart's poetry is tempered again and again by humour, self-irony and occasional scurrility, but in general it tends towards an image of the world that is sombre, permeated with discord and forsaken by God. Battling with despair, he draws consolation from the perpetual cycles of nature and a conception of God which is interconnected with these. The poet is unfettered by any dogma or orthodox doctrine – the only signs of a poetic credo point, perhaps, towards a form of pantheism. He finds solace in his rhapsodies to his "beloved" and more recently in a new family member in the shape of Amelia, the little "desert acacia" and source of unmitigated delight. A whole series of panegyrics to his daughter, which are entirely free of pedagogic precepts and instead extol the miracle of the new being in all its aspects, manifest a fatherly love of such totality and intensity that it puts to shame those who weigh up whether they should have a baby or buy a new car. There is something to be learnt for us all in these poems.

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