

Nevfel Cumart

(English version of Prof. Eoin Bourke's article on Nevfel Cumart, 98. Nlg. / Kritisches Lexikon zur deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur – KLG – 6/2011)

Nevfel Cumart can be called Turkish only in a very limited sense, and cannot be called an immigrant at all, as he was born in Germany. His parents belonged to a minority in southern Turkey who were discriminated against because they spoke Arabic, and thus experienced already in their homeland the restrictions that go hand-in-hand with the condition of alterity, as signalled in the lines from the poem "about language": "the language of my parents / is arabic / spoken only secretly".

Cumart grew up in Northern Germany and has not as good a command of Turkish as he has of German. A formative period of his youth was spent with German foster-parents. Although he completed a carpenter's apprenticeship after his Leaving Certificate, he never worked as a craftsman, which means that he most certainly cannot be referred to as a guest-worker. Instead, he pursued an academic career, finishing a course in Middle Eastern Studies at Bamberg University with an M.A. Nevertheless he was sometimes addressed condescendingly by German citizens with a restricted code formerly referred to as "Bahnhofsdeutsch" (the pidgin German heard in railway stations), or Tarzan German, as Cumart calls it in the poem "still a foreigner": "as long as I can remember / I have had to endure tarzan German: / what you here want? /you no eat pork? / you no have pasaporta / and many other ludicrous distortions". Or at readings he was patronisingly congratulated for his mastery of German, as if a person of Arabian-Turkish descent and corresponding looks would find it more

difficult than others to speak German, even though he has spent almost all of his life in Germany and cultivates a noticeably immaculate and refined German. "I have", he says, "experienced what it means to be neither Turkish nor German." While both the peer groups of his youth and the larger social milieu expected of him to adapt to German codes of behaviour and assume German values, the world of German bureaucracy branded him and his likes first as "guest-worker children" or in officialese as "foreigners", and denied them the right to participate in the public and political life of their actual homeland, let alone to help in shaping it.

Added to that was the authoritarian family life. Cumart's father reacted to the alien and exclusivist German mainstream like many Turkish fathers by being reinforced in his traditionalism and seeking out of fear of the secularizing influences of the highly industrialized and consumer-orientated German environment to make his eldest son, as Cumart puts it, "into a 120% Turk". The young Cumart put up resistance, but at the same time German society put stumbling blocks in his way when searching for an identity by thinking in generalities, i.e. by first registering his southern outer appearance and then projecting upon his personality a specific role expectation.

The problem of such stereotyping has been treated repeatedly by the writers of the first migrant generation, as for instance by Franco Biondi. But that generation could at least derive some solace from the idea, however deluded it sometimes was, of returning at some stage to the homeland. The idea of returning home, said the expert in migratory patterns Ursula Boos-Nünning, was – independent of whether it was achievable or not – one of the most important strategies

for coping with day-to-day life; it reinforced psychic stability and the feeling of solidarity. However, in the second generation, as in Cumart's case, the feeling of falling between two stools was intensified insofar as the compensatory homeland orientation was gradually crumbling. As Cumart writes in his poem "biographical notes": "over there I appear outwardly at home / but in spirit feel often alien / and here outwardly alien / but in spirit very much at home". "In our family life", Cumart has written, "things were very 'Turkish'; but as soon as we went out the door, we found ourselves in Germany. There we were expected to behave like German children. Every day we went on a journey, metaphorically speaking, from Turkey to Germany and back. To satisfy the various and partially contradictory demands made on us by the Turkish and German sides, indeed to be able to cope with them at all, was not easy. To put it succinctly: I looked for stability and orientation in this cultural balancing act, but did not know where I belonged and felt myself torn from pillar to post" (from an essay entitled "The Colours of Foreignness").

This "commuting between worlds" (Jean Apatride), this dichotomy running through everyday life as well as through one's psychic existence threatened to destroy the young Cumart and affected all members of his family in different manifestations. No wonder that his early poetry presents a despairing attempt at self-therapy, a chronicle of suffering and isolation, now spotlighted in auto-biographical detail, now circumscribed in abstract images. Already the title of his second volume that appeared in 1985, "Heart in a Sling", signals the mental trauma. The first poem of youth in the volume summarizes in faltering language the split personality that was to characterize his poetry for some time, a text with which Cumart tends to introduce his frequent readings in schools to get to the

heart of the painfully experienced cultural tug-of-war:
“between / two / worlds / amidst / unending / solitude /
I would like / to be a bridge // But I can / hardly get a
foothold / on the one bank / on the other / I am losing
my footing / more and more // the bridge is breaking /
threatens / to tear me apart / in the middle”.

The conflict with his father is conveyed laconically and with epigrammatic trenchancy in the poem “a lesson for life”: “how I / was to live / I learnt / often in the evenings / from my father / with every blow / a bit more exactly”. The fact that the father’s behaviour was motivated by concern about his children did not lessen the pathogeny of the situation – his “endless love” became a curse. The first stanza of the poem reads: “out of love they stuck pepper into my mouth / out of love they locked me into the dark / out of love I was beaten / out of love.” The father’s clinging to the culture of his homeland resulted in “five broken hearts / longing and homesickness / and a child / that became an eternally sick rebel” (“memories”). The story of his childhood is one of physical and psychosomatic ailments, whereby the atmosphere of collective sickness is conveyed in many texts by negative images such as suffocation, darkness, coldness, burning skin, choked throats, washed-out eye-sockets, nights without dawn. Sometimes, however, the illnesses are called by their names: the father’s partial blindness, the mother’s stomach pains, his own and his brother’s depressiveness, his stomach ulcers and psoriasis: “my skin /a seismograph of the world inside / and outside”. In the poem “my pains” we hear the plaintive voice of the father, whose long-term physical impairments caused by his work as a welder and the frequently more intensive exploitation of guest-workers as well as by the psychic stress caused by the double alienation – the capitalistic and the cultural kind -: “all that could be

endured / but the worst thing / the worst thing is this
endless pain / in my heart / that is quite unbearable”.

Cumart, however, does not only tell of his own and his family’s afflictions but rather from the start acted as a mouthpiece for the fellow-sufferers of the first and second guest-worker generations and also for asylum-seekers, as in the poem “times”, which is written in the ironically lapidary style of his poetic model Erich Fried and leaves the conclusion up to the reader: “there were times / when / turkish consuls / issued / turkish passports / to german jews / to rescue them / from the gas chambers // today / german consuls / make turkish women / undergo pregnancy tests / before they / stamp / german visas / into turkish passports / to permit / a three-week vacation / in Germany”.

Cumart’s own application for naturalization was first rejected in the year 1983 on the grounds that he could “become a burden on German society”. After a second application in 1992, this time successful, Cumart slated German bureaucracy in his poem “state citizenship”. The first stanzas adhere parodistically to the style of lifeless and intentionally unwieldy compounds of German officialese: “a hectographed letter / with a registered post certificate / letter head regional administration lüneburg / attachment underlined /three and a half lines of instructions about legal advice / thereunder a seal / in addition an accreditation // between all the sentences / paragraphs and abbreviations / in the middle of the rectangles dots / parentheses and gaps / hyphens and dashes / unnoticeable brief almost concealed: / your naturalization application / has been granted”. Cumart had at last been able to convince the authorities that he was, in the language of the official notification, “of benefit to German society”. In the last stanza of the poem the voice of the recipient lets itself be heard with

emotive expressions and epic metaphors of endless wandering, but concludes with a sobering conversion to officialese in a turnabout in the style of Heinrich Heine that relativizes the momentary enthusiasm: “after nine miserable years / almost to the very day / the odyssey / leads at last into a safe harbour - / at least with regard to the legality of residency.”

Cumart is indeed a benefit to German society in a very real sense, in that for years he has been one of the most sought-after guest poets in the schools of so-called “trouble spots” all over Germany, where the ethnically mixed listeners have possibly “never before seen an author”, as Cumart says, but who can identify directly with his experiences even on a pre-intellectual level. His themes as well as his ability to bring them across in a deeply affecting way makes him the most suitable person possible to carry out what he calls his cultural groundwork or his “turf-digging” – i.e. readings, lectures and creative writing workshops in schools of all levels – with enormous resonance, as is confirmed by reports in innumerable local gazettes throughout Germany. This constitutes an achievement in social pedagogy that is of inestimable value in the combatting of stereotyping and everyday racism. This work has produced a volume edited by him with the title “The Colours of Foreignness – Bavarian Schoolgirls and Schoolboys Write about Their Homeland, Friendship and Identity” of 2009. His basic thesis and message in such work is the late insight in his own development that being rooted in a second or even third culture can enrich the person affected rather than putting her/him at a disadvantage, and consequently forms an essential contribution to the debate on integration which in 2010 was triggered off by Thilo Sarrazin’s book against multiculturalism, “Germany is doing Away with Itself”, and occasionally reached peaks of hysteria.

Cumart questions concepts like “homeland” and “foreignness”, for instance by an apparently anomalous title like “At Home in Foreign Parts”. His later volumes, if read diachronically, constitute an artistic odyssey that leads away from a biographical poetry tormented by inward conflict to a synthesis of the diverse cultures, on a voyage of discovery that sometimes strikes the reader as being a healing process. The introductory poem in the volume “A Melting Pot in a Sea of Flames” bears the title “second generation” and reads: “on our / shoulders / the burden / of two worlds // our spirit / a melting pot / in the flaming sea / of thousand-year old cultures // we are friends of the sun / and of the night”. In “between two worlds” the respective demands still threatened to tear the poet apart, whereas here he goes to meet them. “The declaration of a twofold identity, writes Karin E. Yeşilada, embraces (only) two worlds, while on the other hand the ‘thousand-year-old cultures’ imply a diversity beyond bipolar dimensions: the melting pot stands for a hybrid mixture of cultural variety.” The bi- or even multipolarity is still referred to as a “burden”, but its unique potentiality is hinted at in the image of the melting pot, and while a “sea of flames” has connotations of purgatory and suffering, it also suggests passion and above all purification. And the last stanza with its mutually complementary images of “sun” and “night” presents the most confident stance to date of a self that is not only plagued by the two cultures but rather of a self that reconciles them and opens up to a consciousness of plurality, of “us”, that dissolves the hitherto isolation of the singular “me”. In the poem “towards home” the poet describes his feelings during the landing of a plane from Turkey in Berlin, “having come / from my home / to my home”: “and in this moment / my body / stretched itself / in a painful / and at the same time / almost comforting way // through europe / over the bridge / lay gently down / over the asiatic peninsula / where my dreams

got lost.” As in other poems in which the wounds of the soul express themselves in psychosomatic form, here too the feeling of biculturalism is expressed somatically, but in an absolutely positive way. Soul and body, Europe and Asia Minor are now in harmony with each other. And this time the bridge holds out “between two worlds” that once threatened to tear him apart. The search for a synthesis of cultures that characterizes his life becomes very clear in the documentary film “My Home is in Foreign Parts”.

In writing and lecturing Cumart has remained loyal to his distinctive style which Stefan Neuhaus has called the “Cumart sound”. Typical are the simple vocabulary, the paratactic syntax, the fragmented sentence construction, the parallelisms and refrain-like repetitions, the condensed images. This can have a rhythmic and euphonic effect where it wants to evoke cosmic spaces or prime elements, lapidary where it polemicalizes against inhuman conditions, prosaic where the naked facts of everyday life are to be verbalized, or narrative where an anecdote or story is to speak for itself. His poetry is always syntactically elementary even if sometimes semantically multi-layered, which has probably contributed to its widespread reception among young listeners and readers.

Cumart’s deepening awareness of the thousands-of-years-old culture of his ancestors – stimulated by journeys to Turkey and North Africa as well as by his Arabic studies – has brought new registers to play in his more recent poetry. A feeling for images and spaces has arisen that evokes more southern climatic zones than the temperate, bright grey, overcast Northern Germany: snakes, ants, straying wolves, pomegranates, highly symbolic ancient foods such as milk and bread, “pillars of the peloponese”, “saffron yellow from egypt”, an over and over again the elemental images of

rock, sea, sun, moon and stars. Not only spatial but also temporal dimensions broaden out into the epic, the metaphorical language quotes from Arabian fairy tales, the protagonists grow into colossal fabulous figures: “my father’s father’s father / had eyes of stone / lived through the ice age // I carve doves / with night-wings of oak / send them towards the sun” (“patience”). Endlessly ancient events, “the myths of the earth”, are felt as prenatal experiences of the self – flood, earthquake, mountain folds and ice age – as if the poetic self had become the bearer of a dark collective memory: I stem from this rock / I survives millennia // neither lightning nor thunder created me / first the sea washed my legs / red rain rinses my hair / both legs flowed out of this mountain // when the birds struck my eyes / struck incessantly like the waves / hot tears gushed suddenly forth / breathless I took the first step” (“where I come from”).

The autobiographic confessions of the earlier poetry are elevated in a way that detaches them from the everyday past as in the poem “judgement”, in which the father and mother figures re-appear as archetypes: “my father / the hoary patriarch // my mother / the ailing demi-goddess // thrust me / into their world / with the sentence / of sonship / for life // reprieve / was not in sight / I became the breed of wolves // stuck my fangs / into fleshy future”. The poetic expansion of time and space into cosmic dimensions goes hand in hand with an exchange of past and future. In the autobiographical early poetry the past meant catastrophe while the future presented the realm of hope. In Cumart’s later poetry things are inverted – the future is presented in an increasingly ecological perspective as hopeless. This is implied in the poem “history”: “when my grandfather / set his foot on the earth / two stars appeared in the sky // when my father / reached the size of 172

centimetres / he got to know living far away // when I
become ash / elephants will have already died out”.

In contrast, a sinister prognosis is explicit in the poem “development”. Initially the archaic world of ancestors is called forth in poetically cogent images. However, the prospect of the post-industrial future of the children’s generation is described in dark vatic tones as a catastrophe of apocalyptic dimensions as if it were already happening – a contrast perceived by a poet in whose consciousness the ancient rustic world of Anatolia and the technologically over-developed world of Germany stand side by side: “my ancestors rode on tigers / with sabre teeth and yellow hide / bows and lances sturdily shouldered / they slept in high treetops / their cover the firmament / drank water alongside the giraffes / survived the whirling of the earth // my children / never yet caught sight of the sun / they are dying of thirst despite all the seas / a poison pulsates in their lungs / also burns in their eyes / the fire in the sparse forests / is now spreading to all the houses”.

Eoin Bourke

Nevfel Cumart – Primary literature

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