

10. teaching and learning

10.2. h.c. artmann, renate ganser, meinhard rauchensteiner and dagmar travner on the teachability and learnability of literature

h.c. artmann: geese or cranes?

a talk with renate ganser, meinhard rauchensteiner and dagmar travner on 20 june 1992 in vienna.

travner: rather than doing an interview, i thought we could have a discussion, and consider the teachability and learnability of poetry.

artmann: i can only repeat what i have already said before, namely that i can't tell anybody what they should do, i can only tell them what they shouldn't do – and that from my own very subjective perspective. what i myself would not write, i can tell someone that, but i can't explain how i do it, or how i approach it – that comes spontaneously for me.

travner: a 'gut feeling' so to speak.

artmann: that is also a very old expression. a 'gut feeling' – that's an excuse.

travner: 'the daemon'?

artmann: rather 'the spontaneous'. i believe it is more neutral to put it like that. what emerges spontaneously i first of all have to write down, on the typewriter, and then comes the technical work of course, which one has to learn for oneself over 20 or 30 years: the refining, rearranging and so on. but first of all i have some slip of paper, where everything is noted down. that already has to be pretty complete in itself, one should not change a lot about it, only a few details. sometimes one can learn something from mistakes – for instance if one types a wrong letter.

travner: you once gave the example of a stone becoming polished, for instance in popular poetry.

artmann: yes of course, that is the case in popular poetry. for example, when i read from *die sonne war ein gruenes ei* ('the sun is was a green egg'), i am not reading a different text, but i interpret completely different situations. that's spoken literature, otherwise it's only on paper. that applies especially to dramatic works, theatre texts. one should really only print the book after the first performance. beforehand, it's just paper. after working with the actors, i then say to myself: "yes, that's actually much better now, let's write it like that." – it's different for everybody. i can work better that way, if it's not a translation, where of course i try to orient myself to the original. with my own texts i would say: "yes, do this, it is actually much better." in this way it then acquires that polished quality and a certain naturalness. with very fast things, like this terrible eurocop series, one notices that such a process was missing. the language that they speak in that – it knocks your socks off! old hans moser, for instance, was notorious for the fact that he always recited his own texts. that is why he was funny. other actors rattle off a text that has been spewn out for them.

travner: and from which stage onwards can one teach something? assuming that what the daemon dictated to someone is on the slip of paper. then one has to be able to learn how it can be polished and refined, what is usable and what isn't.

artmann: you have to work away at that for about 15 to 20 years. of course, there are very young geniuses, who pack it in, for instance rimbaud, he stopped when he was 18. but he was finished! or georg heym. that is what gerhard (rühm) said, that one definitely has to delve into literature and literary history. if one doesn't know it, then one does something that has already been done. the other way round, one knows what one can write now and what one cannot write. if i am making music, then i have to have studied a bit of music history, and if am making literature i have to study the history of literature.

rauchensteiner: to what extent is imitation important for the learning process?

artmann: in my opinion not at all.

rauchensteiner: yet in some cultures one is only completely educated when, as a pupil, one can imitate the master in such a way that it is not possible to tell the difference between them.

artmann: but that was a few hundred years ago. it was like that in classical cultures, for example in the japanese, or in the celtic regions. the individual is much more present today.

rauchensteiner: which means that this kind of learning process no longer works. imitation has therefore lost this function.

artmann: it's boring for the reader.

travner: not for publication but as a 'practical lesson'.

artmann: but that's pointless. if one can't publish it, then it's not worth doing. i have to support my wife and child.

travner: so what do you want to teach your students then?

artmann: no idea. they compel me to do something.

ganser: what do you think of the idea of teaching certain rules for rhyming, for example?

artmann: you can buy a book for that, everything will be in there, it's all about a feeling. there are people who can dance and there are those who never manage it.

ganser: but you also have to learn to dance.

artmann: you can only learn to dance if you have a feeling for rhythm. and if you don't have it, then that's the end of it. it's exactly the same with a language. either you have a talent for it or you don't. one person has the gift and they can learn a language, others even master the language perfectly and speak so that it sends shivers up your spine. for instance, the italians. i have heard italian scholars of german talk and it just knocks you out.

ganser: and where does industry come in, or even the will?

artmann: you shouldn't use any industry whatsoever. that is the worst thing that you can do.

rauchensteiner: isn't there the possibility, in a learning process involving several students, of nurturing and enacting precisely the oral debate that you were talking about before?

artmann: what i value about this school is that a great exchange of ideas can take place here. that may have an effect or it may not, but at least the exchange of ideas is there. we used to have that among ourselves, we would sit in cafés and discuss these things, but without saying that we were a school of poetry. a gaggle of geese is also a school. or of cranes. that is the good thing about it, that one can talk to other people, but that one should sit down like at school, and say now you have to ... and so on, – no. i don't know how wolfi bauer does it. his way of doing things is fantastic. everyone is great in their own way, and we all seemed to be great to ourselves, and were never jealous of one another. that was the great thing about us. there is only jealousy among musicians and painters. everyone was full of conviction about themselves. but the others were the best in their own ways. that was how it was. at any rate that's how i imagine it in my own naive way. i don't know how it is today. konrad bayer was not at all jealous. gerhard ruehm – gerhard is one of my best friends, this isn't a mark anthony speech that i am making here – he is just as vain as i am, that's what it's all about, after all. that is of course what is poetic. that is what i actually wanted to talk about: poetry and vanity. it occurred to me again today. – i am now only speaking about writing a poem, not about novels or other literary genres. but vanity is part of it, and vanity has to be expressed in words.

rauchensteiner: gerhard ruehm worked very concretely with texts in his class.

artmann: yes, it depends, gerhard ruehm is very versatile. he has poems of the same kind that i write, and then the abstract texts. he calls it concrete poetry. concrete and abstract: it is always mixed up. one can say something in purely mathematical or musical forms, but if i take the thusnelda romances or his chansons for example, then first of all someone should tell me how he thought that up. his dialect poems or the "suicide's wreath" ("Söbstmeadagraunz" or "Selbstmörderkranz") are surprisingly colourful. i don't know my dialect stories off by heart, for example, but i know his by heart.

travner: let's get back to the theme. i have here the lecture by gerhard ruehm. he says: "what is teachable in poetry, as in music and visual art, are material experiences and approaches, formal questions, as dealt with in poetics, linguistic and psycho-linguistic aspects, transcending the borders with the neighbouring arts, interculturally comparative poetics and" – something which seems all-important to me – "a critical study of poetic tendencies and traditions."

artmann: i would immediately endorse that, but something like that never occurs to me, i am not an academic.

travner: moreover he says: "the human being only lives to a relatively small extent from his or her own experiences, to a far greater extent from experiences that have been handed down."

artmann: that all serves to elaborate a poem, yet i first have to carry the poem within myself and it has to emerge from me.

travner: that means that first of all one has to have a talent, so that it can 'emerge', but a knowledge of possible forms is important for reworking.

artmann: yes, it also has a lot to do with experience, just as gerhard describes in his text.

travner: but in the process, a teacher, or a group, or a place where ideas are exchanged, can help one progress.

artmann: an exchange of ideas yes, but not a teacher. i don't like teachers. i don't hate them, but they seem dubious to me.

travner: but someone who already has experience...

artmann: but that is a completely different organism that i am supposed to rework with my great teaching. after all, every human being is completely different.

travner: what do you think about a so-called master class at the university of applied arts, for example?

artmann: yes, of course, that is all well and good, but i don't know what i can contribute to it.

rauchensteiner: it requires a certain practice to be able to 'let it all out'. in a certain definite form i mean.

artmann: the worst thing that one can say when someone writes is: "he has found his form". that's like saying: "he is dead." but that is what has always been said. i am thinking of those reviews in which it is written that "he found his form at 50." – now he can go and die. one never finds one's form.

travner: it is a matter of always finding a new form, or seeking one, and so one develops from one step to the next.

artmann: certainly. but not a step higher. into another dimension. it might lie to the left or the right, or to the front or behind. it is not the case that what has already been written somehow suffers in that way, that it is worse, as would be the case with steps.

travner: yet that would mean that to a certain extent you are on the same level as someone younger, who is also seeking his form.

artmann: yes, the basic tenor remains the same. i am seeking my form in just the same way. when exchanging views with people, one can get a lot further with young people than with older people, who are set in their ways.

ganser: how much does the search for a new form have to do with a new anxiety?

artmann: anxiety is very important.

rauchensteiner: do you believe that poetry is always adopting a more artificial language?

artmann: for myself, poetry has nothing to do with thinking. it is an expression of feelings, as stupid as that may sound. – one often hears or reads the sentence to the effect that "goethe wrote a poetry of thoughts." – but for me, goethe is not a poet at all.

rauchensteiner: and celan?

artmann: celan is an absolute surrealist for me and i knew him well. he later becomes more and more abstract, but "sand from the urns" ... i would advise any finn or swede to come to austria and become a bit more baroque, yet as an austrian one has to cast off the baroque and become clearer and more intellectual again. and to do that

one has to go north. in the north there is neither the baroque nor mannerism. after sweden, i wrote in a completely different way. i sometimes have a desire for a totally lucid clarity, for a salty smell. and then one gets back into the baroque, back to the over-elaborate. i value the baroque in music and in literature a great deal. baroque in the visual arts i find atrocious. one enters many romanesque churches and sees only corny old baroque works hanging inside.

rauchensteiner: what does 'creativity' mean to you?

artmann: to answer that, i would have to go and sit on the toilet and then it would all come to mind. that is really the only place in the world where you can have ideas. whenever i needed some title or other for a magazine, i went to the toilet. i always had an idea there. now hintze wants a title for the autumn class ... (leafs through the programme) incidentally, the last time that i met allen ginsberg, in rotterdam, i said to him: "you look more and more like woody allen's psychiatrist." – he liked that! basically, ginsberg is a very amicable and nice guy, but you can't take him seriously.

rauchensteiner: and khai vinh?

artmann: please, i know the poems of ho chi minh, which are not so bad. mao tse tung also wrote excruciatingly beautiful poems. any organised human being can write a poem in those latitudes.

rauchensteiner: and why is that?

artmann: it is education. any civil servant has to be able to write a poem.

rauchensteiner: so there is a learnability of poetry after all?

artmann: well, that is a very rigid poetic form.

travner: but isn't the rigid form useful at the beginning, in order to at least learn how to use the tools of the trade?

artmann: one cannot get away from such a rigid form. we are in central europe, we have a quite different tradition. there is no comparison. i've worked with the japanese, who write incredibly modern texts. it's wonderful. we worked for 10 days, and wrote poem after poem, chain poems. they were read out, and were immediately translated from japanese into german, or from german into japanese. it went tremendously smoothly. afterwards, the next one wrote another poem, continuing it. i would never have thought that something like that could work.

edited by meinhard rauchensteiner, translated from german by peter waugh
(from: c. i. hintze. d. travner. *ueber die lehr- und lernbarkeit von literatur*. vienna. 1993)
the book can be ordered from the vienna poetry school (schule für dichtung, sfd):
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