

**dr. rudolf scholten:**  
**speech on the occasion of the opening of the april academy 93**

(dr. scholten was austrian federal minister for science and art from 1991 to 1994)

ladies and gentlemen!

in the years between 1647 and 1653, the nuremberg patrician georg philipp harsdörffer published a textbook for grammar school pupils – known as a primer, as was customary in those days, and later scorned as the ‘nuremberg primer’ – which promised, in only six lessons, to "ingrain the art of german verse and rhyme, without any recourse to latin, in 6 hours".

in this undertaking, harsdörffer, who studied law, philosophy and languages in altdorf and strassburg, and who – like a much more famous successor of his – received decisive inspiration on his italian journey, was actually far more modern than his contemporary, the pope of literary theory at that time, martin opitz, who wrote on the same subject that:

"and i should remind you that i regard it as a labour in vain for someone to attempt to set about writing our german poetry, unless he is a poet by nature, is well versed in greek and latin books, and has acquired mastery of it from them".

a school of poetry has now existed in vienna for a year. it sees itself as an autonomously administered institute for teaching and learning literature, as a laboratory for the transformation of literary impulses, as an archive for poetico-paedagogical documents – and even its very name implies that creative writing is teachable and learnable.

christian ide hintze, h.c. artmann, wolfgang bauer and gerhard rühm as the descendants und successors of philipp harsdörffer and martin opitz? a viennese school of poetry as a peculiar curiosity and rarity in europe? is the intention to turn large numbers of austrians into students of poetry or even into poets?

little wonder then, that such a project should encounter scepticism and even rejection in some quarters, particularly among the well-established, official and officious administrators and evaluators of literature. above all, from those who, as always, are of the opinion that to spend taxpayers’ money on the promotion of art or literature is actually a waste of money, in particular when a skill is being promoted which will then only require more state support if it is to be further practised. in such cases, neither the historical evidence of the sappho school of poetry, nor contemporary reference to the jack kerouac school in boulder, colorado, is of any avail.

rather, the austrian ‘what-do-we-need-it-for?’ mentality here corresponds to the utterance of a recently deceased legendary soccer coach, who, in order to show the editor of a sports newspaper what he thought of his style of writing, after a short moment of reflection – probably needed in order to think up something especially defamatory – countered defiantly "you poet, you!".

as a minister who is responsible for both schools and literature, i have followed the development of this project with a certain interest, if also with a certain concerned scepticism. this was because, in my experience, new projects, in particular those which cumulate school and art, usually also accumulate a minister's concerns. in this respect, it is much easier for wolfgang bauer; for him, a school of poetry is especially interesting for the very reason that it attempts to "combine the brutal notion of the school with the rather demure notion of the art of poetry". however it soon became clear – also to me – that the optimists and enthusiasts who had supported it from the very beginning, such as prof. oswald oberhuber, were being proved right.

the *schule für dichtung* in wien got off to a spectacular start: twelve writing classes and tutorials were booked out in a relatively short period of time last year, and 300 further participants only managed to get onto the waiting list.

and h.c. artmann, one of the lecturers at the *schule für dichtung*, very quickly lost his scepticism as to whether the techniques of creative writing really could be taught and learned, when confronted by it in practice, often allowing his pupils to partake of his literary daemons till late in the night. still more astonishing is the fact that the enthusiasm of the teachers and students, and their commitment to something which is at best of marginal interest in our society, also met with an extraordinarily positive reception in the media, both in austria and abroad.

extensive commentaries in the *neue zürcher zeitung*, the *weltwoche*, the *süddeutsche zeitung* and the *frankfurter allgemeine* show that something manifestly exemplary and worthy of imitation had been achieved in austria, namely a project which has attracted the interest of teachers and professors from all over the world. thus, in the first year of the *schule für dichtung*, renowned and established authors, as well as academically successful lecturers, came to vienna, and did not feel it beneath their dignity to have their students rearrange nouns, adjectives and verbs for as long as it took to arrive at more or less usable texts.

as pleasing as this development may be, it will in the future certainly not just be a matter of creating a kind of authors' factory, in which texts are produced as if on a conveyor belt, or of acquiring the talent to write by simply paying a course fee.

as a politician responsible for culture and education, it seems to me that there are two aspects of the *schule für dichtung* that are especially significant, aspects which perhaps, for the time being, have not yet been regarded by the initiators and organisers as being of primary importance, but which nevertheless seem to be particularly significant to me. when, for example in the united states, similar institutions act as schools of 'creative writing', the subject is understood in a much more comprehensive way than solely as part of a literary or poetological category. creative writing is possible in many fields. in the english-speaking world, creative writing can signify good journalism as well as the composition of poems, scientific journalism as well as literary prose, yet above all it signifies a certain reflective distance to one's own language and to one's own powers of expression.

it is precisely these powers of language, of using language, and of understanding language not only as a means of communication, but also as a means of expression, that seem to me to be disappearing with alarming rapidity in our society. the new media are not solely responsible for this, but they certainly do play a considerable role in the process.

on the one hand, language is, in many respects, dissolving into pictorial sequences, and we are confronted at every step by images, instead of the written word or the reflectively formulated spoken word. on the other hand, language itself is tending to become more abstract, poorer in vocabulary, and used simply as a means to an end.

since our world today is unimaginable without either the audiovisual media or increasing rationalisation, it seems to me that a preoccupation with language, and above all with the language of poetry and literature, although no cure-all, is nevertheless an indispensable instrument for maintaining language – in as many of its facets as possible – as an important means of human expression, and for preserving its remaining richness and making people conscious of it once more.

closely connected with that is also the second aspect that makes a school of poetry so important and necessary, precisely at the present time. anne waldman, of the jack kerouac school, who is one of the teaching staff here and who has called allen ginsberg an “activist of the tender brainwaves”, is of the opinion that there are poetic talents in every human being, and that they are there to be liberated. academic poetry, she said, always places itself above something. in contrast, what she is striving for is something that takes as its subject human beings as living creatures. she expands joseph beuys’ principle that everyone could be an artist to assert that everyone could be a poet.

it would be very pleasing if a little more consideration were paid to the theses of beuys and kerouac in institutionalised educational establishments, if the focus were more on the human being as a whole and less on perfecting individual skills and activities.

unfortunately, the trend of our times is going in the opposite direction; in demand now are specialised skills, technical and business know-how, as well as mastery of all those skills and techniques that will later provide young people with the possibility of establishing themselves, as cheaply as possible, in society, and of acquiring certain status symbols, even if their creative potential and the development of personality are neglected in the process. a trend which even a minister for education has to come to terms with, as he must with the fact that, if parents had their way, schools would increasingly ‘train’ people rather than ‘educate’ them.

ladies and gentlemen!

the schule für dichtung, which will now proceed to adopt the title of an academy, has enjoyed an extremely successful first year; its start in the second year seems to me to be equally promising.

those who have contributed to this success include the organisers of this academy, as well as, to a quite exceptional degree, of course the teachers and lecturers from Austria and abroad, but also all the participants, both those authors who are already established and those who are not yet so well established – i.e. all those who have decided to devote a certain amount of their time solely to the study of language and literature.

i would like to thank you all for this commitment and wish you and the schule für dichtung every success also in the future.

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