Review

Ottmar Ette: *Writing-Between-Worlds. TransArea Studies and the Literatures-Without-A-Fixed-Abode.* Trans. Vera M. Kutzinski. Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2016. 339 pp.

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The following review concerns the English translation of Ottmar Ette's book *ZwischenWeltenSchreiben*, published in German in 2005. Ette's study is a remarkably innovative contribution to the field of literary studies. Its translation into English is thus most welcome: its major contributions are now finally accessible to a broader international public. After long decades in which, by proclaiming the death of the author, literary works were dismembered like dead animals in a laboratory, *Writing-Between-Worlds* allows the concept of *life* to enter critical discourse again. Movement is a fact of human life and of its passage into literature. Protagonists move across times and spaces. *Writing-Between-Worlds* can be read as a literary history of transcultural and transareal movements. Through many examples, from the Odyssey to Shoah literature and contemporary Cuban literature, the author discloses the "vectoral imagination" that manifests itself in thinkers and writers throughout cultures.

1 Life and Literature as Movement

Ette's approach to literature sets out from the observation that movement is inherent to human existence. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben, the author conceives life as *bios*, "the form or way of living proper to an individual or group" (297), in opposition to *zoé*, "the simple fact of living common to all living beings" (297). To operate with this concept of life in literary studies means, following Michel Foucault, to draw scholarly attention to the knowledge about life which manifests itself in literature and as literature. The principles and structures which become visible in literary texts may, from this perspective, not necessarily differ from the behavior of matter as observed in the natural sciences. Accordingly, the book starts by illustrating a DNA constituted by names of authors who have traditionally been inscribed into different national literatures (Arenas, García Márquez, Özdamar). The knowledge about life is not necessarily rooted in

the tradition of a geographically or politically circumscribed territory; rather, literary texts are interwoven beyond national and cultural borders. Right at the beginning, Ette discusses a scene from André Aciman's memoir *Out of Egypt* (1994), which he discusses as an "archetypal scene of migration": while the protagonist faces the open ocean in Alexandria, different geographical spaces, nations, and also the future and the past overlap to the point of constituting a "knowledge of eternity" (2): "In the blink of an eye, without beginning and yet not timeless, the transitory and the trans-historical become inextricably interwoven without, however, being completely indistinguishable. Alexandria: once, always." (3)

The experience of Aciman's protagonist, like those of Sevgi Özdamar, Yoko Tawada and the other authors discussed in *Writing-Between-Worlds*, refers to the errant Odysseus, but the reference transcends the level of a mere intertextual allusion or the actualization of a literary topos. The biographies of those authors who either entered the canons of national literatures or shaped the intellectual landscape of early literary and cultural theory, Ette reminds us, were long marked by transcultural, transnational, and translingual movements. Hugo of St. Viktor was born in Saxony and died in Paris, Erich Auerbach was born in Berlin and died in Connecticut, Emma Kann was born in Germany in 1914, fled to Britain, Belgium, France, and Havanna, lived in New York and returned to Germany in 1981. Authors do not have a fixed abode from which their journeys depart or to which they return. Rather, movement is the very ingredient of their biographies and finds entry into their texts as such. Discussing Albert Cohen, whose protagonist finds his way to the "sweet ghetto of [his] dead childhood" (66) after seeking for protection from the world's hostility in the train station lavatory, Ette comments: "The Jewish Odysseus finds his way home" (66). With Odysseus, the analyzed characters share a knowledge about a dimension of life only accessible through movement and migration, often referred to in terms of a vacuum, in which the literary text arises: Japanese-German writer Yoko Tawada speaks of "black holes in the tissue of languages" out of which literature arises (186), and Botho Strauss' poem *Beginninglessness* (*Beginnlosigkeit*, 1992) contains at least four negations (nothing, never, anything, not) in only eight verses (6). At this point, one minor reservation has to be expressed as to the quality of *Writing-Between-Worlds*' English translation. All too often it falsifies Ette's literary sources. For instance, it translates Tawada's "black holes" ("schwarze Löcher") as "speechless holes," for no evident reason. The "introduction" of the otherwise eminently able translator Vera M. Kutzinski, moreover, tends to pin Ottmar Ette's highly complex dialectic thinking down to commonplaces like "literature is always in motion" or "Xenophobia is all around us" and should be read, then, *cum grano salis*. An important contribution of Kutzinski's introduction, on the

other hand, is the image of a tissue being weaved, a so-called "Soierie" of 1765, as an analogon to the written text, constituted through the movement of its threads.[1]

2 A Poetics of Movement

Human beings do not always travel with a fixed destination or point of return; the same should apply to the critics who read the transcultural and translingual movements in literary texts. A "poetics of movement" is required in order to transcend the stiff borders between academic disciplines, especially between the so-called national philologies, which should increasingly take into account the "vectoral imagination" that underlies each text. Erich Auerbach's methodological claim that "our philological home is the earth; it can no longer be the nation" is at the very heart of a philological rethinking of the Goethean concept of *Weltliteratur*. Ottmar Ette illustrates the "poetics of movement" with precision on a vast corpus of texts, paintings, and cartographic material. For instance, he points out the lack of a "fixed Abode" in Cuban literatures through the analysis of the – in terms of cultural belonging – highly ambivalent concept of the island. In Reinaldo Funes' painting *La Isla* (2006), a house which is "multiply partitioned" and "at once construction site, dwelling, and Tower of Babel" (109) occupies the whole space of an island. The house is "a world of its own and an inexorable model for an insular situation and a writing that finds its home there" (108). Isolation, exile, relation, and openness define the island as a space marked by self-similarity and simultaneously by "multiply broken" boundaries (108). Moreover, Ette convincingly analyzes the accelerated globalization focusing on phenomena of mass migration throughout the 20th century. The "vectoral imagination" is seen as characteristic of Europe's intellectual and cultural landscapes starting with the myth of raped Europa, who would allegorize the homeless condition of the (European) migrant. From a methodological standpoint, the question remains if this vectoral imagination that orients itself towards directions instead of fixed itineraries can be identified with the idea of an exilic existence or with the notion of homelessness. The roots of both these notions (exile and homelessness) are located on the one hand in Nietzsche's question: "We, children of the future, how

1 On the formal level, there are several typographic errors which occasionally disturb the reading process, such as "1939–2945" (75), a comma at the end of a paragraph on page 68 or "has to mediated" on page 80.

could we be at home in the present?" (50), in which homelessness is "at once a distinction and an honour" among contemporary Europeans. On the other hand, Ette points out the "dialectic of homelessness" that pervades Horkheimer and Adorno's reading of the Homeric hero in their *Dialectic of Enlightment*. The idea of a homeland is not linked to settledness or opposed to a nomadic existence, but rather related to "an element of *having* escaped"; "a homeland is preserved in the endless movement of exile" (49). One might ask if the notion of exile is not intertwined with the idea of an exclusion from a somewhat fixed belonging and thus something quite different from the imagination without a fixed abode for which Ottmar Ette intercedes. As convincing as the claim for the implementation of a transareal thinking in philology is, questions remain as to its implementation on the microtextual level. In the aforementioned poem of Botho Strauss, for instance, or in Yoko Tawada's essay volume *Talismann* (1996), "a loss is always yet to be re-presented" (7), Ette concludes. The eight-verse poem, nevertheless, contains no mention of loss, aside from its negations: "Again I am here, / where I never was. / Nothing is different from how it was not. / On the halved table, the checkered / wax cloth the glass, / that never held anything. / Everything remains just / as I had never left it." (6) A similar question arises when Yoko Tawada's expression "I lost my soul" is read as "her soul, and her writing, has lost its fixed abode" (185). Taken literally, Tawada's text reflects the "I" that travels to Japan or to Germany and on the way loses its soul, not knowing anymore where it is: "During my first journey to Europe on the Trans-Siberian Railroad I lost my soul. [...] After that, I have flown back and forth so often that I no longer know where my soul is at any moment in time." (185) The "poetics of movement" or, in Ette's terms, the "vectoral imagination" seems to go far beyond the loss of a "fixed abode," since it entails a loss of knowledge ("not knowing anymore"), intimately linked to the loss of the "soul." A similar phenomenon can be read in the poem *Coming home to the German language*, by Emma Kann: "When I return to the German language / it is not the language I knew" (70), utters the lyrical I. Are we here in front of a loss of knowledge instead of what Ottmar Ette calls a knowledge-for-living? In these cases, the "poetics of movement" seem to apply in the first place to the writer's biographies and thus needs further refinement for its application at the text-immanent level.

3 Borders and Literature

The concept of literatures without a fixed Abode goes along with a claim for the establishment of TransArea Studies. Both notions are interlinked by the idea of the border. The apparent paradox between the undermining of national borders

and their multiplication in Literatures-without-a-fixed-Abode[2] resolves itself when connected to the principles TransArea Studies could follow. In contrast to translocal, transregional, or transnational movements, *transareal* movements "occur between different areas, such as, for instance, the Caribbean or Eastern Europe" (36). The scholarly goal is to focus more on phenomena of translation and transmission, since "for TransArea studies, routes and vectors matter more than spaces; shifting borders matter more than static ones; and relations and communication matter more than territories" (38). A transareal analysis considers the intraspatial relations of an area, for instance "the diverse inter-island communications" of the Caribbean, as well as its connections to the colonial powers and its territorial possessions outside the islands.

Since movements shape spaces and their meaning, TransArea Studies may throw a particular light on what Giorgio Agamben called the rift between nativity and nationality (54). During the 20th century, stateless persons and refugees challenged traditional ideas about the nation state as a basis for processes of identity formation. Juan Goytisolo, who left Catalonia to live in Morocco, already had foreseen that German literature would be written by Turks and English literature by Pakistanis (55). But the idea of transareal movements affects also the linguistic level: What is the writer's relation to the idea of a mother tongue? What is the link between language, identity, and authenticity? *Writing-Between-Worlds* carefully analyzes these questions and shows their particular relevance for the case of self-translations. Here the borders between translation and writing almost vanish:

> For an author to translate his own text is not only a form of self-interpretation but also a *réécriture*, a rewriting at an interlingual and translingual level that forever oscillates between different languages. Insisting on strict borders between writing and translating is inappropriate in such cases. (166)

A particularly fascinating example for a movement of crossing borders is, furthermore, offered by the aforementioned Emma Kann in her poem *To someone far away* (1940): "Your name may not enter the brain, / For there it would only produce pain." (68) For Ottmar Ette, the physis functions here as a space for refuge. But, taken literally, doesn't the poem cross the borders between the symbolic (name) and the concrete (brain) and define the movement between these two areas as the origin of pain? Are there text-specific 'areas' that are crossed beyond the spheres of geography and language?

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2 "Writing-without-a-fixed-Abode undermines national borders. Rather than challenge the existence of these borders, it frequently multiplies them." (55)

Writing-Between-Worlds also shows how borders on different levels (national, linguistic, local) may be crossed within the work of one and the same author, as for instance in the case of Emine Sevgi Özdamar, a Turkish writer who was awarded the Kleist prize in 2004. Processes of travelling between both Germanies, between Turkey and Germany and also between the Turkish and the German language, show "the arbitrariness of national borders, the futility of securing them, and also the possibility for overcoming them" (208). At the very center of TransArea Studies stands then a fractal and discontinuous space whose interrelations become visible in dynamic figures of movement, for literary production as well as for its reception (58).

4 Conclusion

As in his former books *ÜberLebensWissen* (2004) and *ZusammenLebensWissen* (2010), Ottmar Ette conceives of literary scholarship as a life-science. *Writing-Between-Worlds* is the dawn of a philological practice in which literature is not understood as empty word play, but, on the contrary, as knowledge about life that comes into being. The hermeneutic task is no longer to stick to the written words but to "relate the visible to the invisible, to its deeper cause," as stated in a quotation by Michel Foucault (293). Even if the criteria for a hermeneutic work that remains true to the written text still need to be specified, *Writing-Between-Worlds* can be considered a gem in the literary studies of the early 21st century.