The 'Polyglot Poetics' of Ulrike Draesner's *Schwitters (in the Lakes)*[1]

Tom Marshall
University of Cambridge, UNITED KINGDOM
tmem2@cam.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Drawing from my experience working with novelist Ulrike Draesner on her forthcoming pair of novels – the German-language *Schwitters* and the English-language *Schwitters in the Lakes* – this article provides a unique insight into how a "polyglot poetics" functions in action and how the author's process of translating her work from English to German and vice-versa has taken place. Extracts from Draesner's novels are cited alongside examples of the rewarding difficulties in translating or rewording insights which often defy translation. Springing from Draesner's efforts is a bold and radical linguistic experiment from which an 'ordinary' translator would have necessarily shrunk, given the dramatic structural changes between the two. Having situated this achievement in the context of self-translation studies and questions about the originality and hybridity of texts, the article concludes by proposing Draesner's "polyglot poetics" as a model for understanding other self-translators and writers whose work goes beyond what is generally understood by self-translation.

KEYWORDS: self-translation; polyglot poetics; multilingualism; Draesner; Schwitters; German

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Aufgrund meiner Erfahrungen aus der Zusammenarbeit mit Schriftstellerin Ulrike Draesner an ihren in Kürze erscheinenden Romanen *Schwitters* (auf Deutsch verfasst) und *Schwitters in the Lakes* (auf Englisch verfasst), bietet dieses Paper einen einzigartigen Einblick, wie „polyglot poetics" in der Praxis funktionieren – und wie die Autorin ihren Roman aus dem Englischen ins Deutsche und umgekerht übersetzte. Anhand von Auszügen aus beiden Romanen werden beispielhaft Schwierigkeiten diskutiert, auf die man beim Übersetzen oder Umformulieren etwas beinah Unübersetzbaren stößt. Im Ergebnis werden die Grundlinien eines radikalen, zweisprachigen Experimentes sichtbar, das ein Fremdübersetzer so nie hätte unternehmen können, da die Unterschiede verschiedenste Schichten der narrativen Struktur betreffen. Danach platziert das Paper Draesners Leistung in den Kontext von Forschung zur Selbstübersetzung und Fragen nach der Originalität bzw. Hybridität von Texten. Abschließend wird vorgeschlagen, Draesners „polyglot poetics" als

[1] This article is a significantly extended version of remarks first delivered in a paper at the *Rethinking Anglo-German Relations* graduate conference in Oxford in June 2019.

allgemeines Denkmodell zu verwenden und insbesondere in Fällen anderer Selbstübersetzungen in Anschlag zu bringen, die den herkömmlichen Übersetzungskontext sprengen.

STICHWÖRTER: Selbstübersetzen; polyglot poetics; Mehrsprachigkeit; Draesner; Schwitters; Germanistik

The oeuvre of the acclaimed German novelist and poet Ulrike Draesner, both fiction and non-fiction, demonstrates what has been called a "polyglot poetics" (Braun 2018), most notably in the ways in which English and German intersect within her work.[2] In this article I particularly focus on her as-yet-unpublished duology, the German-language novel *Schwitters* and its English-language counterpart *Schwitters in the Lakes*,[3] and outline the way in which this radical project of hers defies easy categorisation even within pre-existing frameworks and approaches used in the field of self-translation studies. My observations are informed by a variety of sources including interviews conducted with Draesner, other scholars' prior engagement with her work, some of her previously published fiction, and lastly by my own correspondence and first-hand collaborations with her on translating and adapting some of her work for an English audience. In my conclusion, I will suggest that this phenomenon of "polyglot poetics" which distinguishes Draesner's work could be adopted as a broader term, one used by academics, novelists and poets alike, to describe the work of other self-translators and authors whose creative processes might resemble Draesner's and whose work similarly resists the standard label of self-translation.

Defining Polyglot Poetics

Since "polyglot poetics" is a far from commonplace phrase, we should identify its precise meaning before proceeding any further. The term was coined by Tobias Döring in a paper given at a symposium on Draesner's works in Oxford in April 2016 and has been adopted on several occasions since, by both Rebecca Braun and by Draesner herself. Döring suggests that

[2] This term was first used by Tobias Döring in a paper on Ulrike Draesner's works given at a conference in Oxford in 2016, but first appeared in print in Rebecca Braun's 'Pacing out a Polyglot Poetics: An Interview with Ulrike Draesner at the Victoria & Albert Museum' (January 2018). It was also used later that same month, without being applied to Draesner, in connection with Nigel Smith's history of early modern European literature. Döring's paper will subsequently appear in *Ulrike Draesner: A Companion*, to be published in October 2020; I have been granted early access to the paper and will refer to manuscript page numbers throughout this article.

[3] The publication of *Schwitters* is scheduled for August 2020, but no publication date has been given for *Schwitters in the Lakes* at the time of writing. I will use the title *Schwitters (in the Lakes)* throughout as a concise way of referring to both books at once.

"polyglot poetics" describes the way the English presences in several of Draesner's German-language works form attempts to "defamiliarize conventional uses and notions of language" (2020:9). As part of this process, Draesner deconstructs familiar phrases, words, concepts, and lexemes, often uncoupling them from their original meanings and treating them as mere units of sound, drawing startling parallels with similar-sounding units from other languages – most commonly English, but others are frequently present too – and then juxtaposing the meanings in a way that provokes readers into re-evaluating both. I see polyglot poetics as prioritizing the situating of linguistic expression as a place where familiarity and strangeness interact, so as to create new meaning in startling collocations.

This article discusses Draesner's polyglot poetics insofar as it juxtaposes German and English forms, but it is worth noting that alongside these languages, Draesner is also fluent in French, and additionally has knowledge of Spanish, Russian, Italian, Latin, Old English, Old High German, Middle High German, Sinhala, Ancient Greek, and Polish to varying degrees. Though many of these also feature in her work (she has been called a "polyglot constantly border-hopping between cultures, disciplines and genres"),[4] it is German and English which have by far loomed the largest, and which are the most relevant for *Schwitters (in the Lakes)*. English literature exerts a significant and noticeable influence over her fiction. As she writes herself:

> …most of what I know about narrative or poetic forms I learned by examples set in English… my path was paved by Hölderlin, first, and changed by Keats. In fiction Virginia Woolf and James Joyce were formative for my ideas about structure and voice. (Draesner 2020e:14)[5]

English-language resonances in her German novels and poems have always been there – from comparatively minor matters, such as quirky *Denglisch* turns of phrase, to more central concerns, such as relationships between English and German characters – and they have played a part in her non-fiction too, from translations of Gertrude Stein and Shakespeare's sonnets to analyses of Virginia Woolf and A. S. Byatt. In her own words:

> …there have always been certain underlying English structures to my writing in German. Those are sometimes linguistic, but more often they are literary […] this

[4] These comments from the judging panel of the Joachim-Ringelplatz-Prize 2014 are cited on the English-language version of Draesner's website at http://www.draesner.de/en/ (accessed 4 February 2020).

[5] A number of essays and articles cited in this article, as well as Draesner's pair of novels, are still awaiting publication. Page numbers for these texts are based on early manuscripts viewed by the author and as such published page numbers will differ from those cited here. This applies to citations and quotations from Döring 2020 and Draesner 2020d/2020e/2020f.

> has given a certain edge, some degree of weirdness even, to my writing in German, because it never really absolutely fits into German traditions. (Draesner 2020e:14)

Many German writers have previously been influenced by English literature, including such luminaries as Lessing and Goethe. But fewer have composed in both languages (e.g. Stefan Heym), or self-translated their works from one to the other (e.g. Hannah Arendt and Klaus Mann). Fewer still, if any, have done what Draesner has done in *Schwitters (in the Lakes)*: namely, composing what is in many ways the same novel simultaneously in two languages, but with important structural differences between the two.

Two Languages, Two Different Bodies

As the title(s) suggest, these two novels are primarily concerned with the life of Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948). Those wishing for full biographies of this twentieth-century DADA artist are advised to look elsewhere (e.g. Webster 1997), especially since neither of Draesner's texts tell his full life story from cradle to grave. The earliest point we encounter him in either text is in 1936, shortly before he fled from his Hannover home and began an exile that – as we see in both novels – took him from Norway to the Isle of Man, where he was held captive for fourteen months in Camp Hutchinson as an 'Enemy Alien', and then on to London. Both works depict the last years of Schwitters' life in the Lake District, where he died in early 1948 at the age of 60, the day after his long-awaited English naturalisation papers arrived in the post, papers he had been too weak to sign. Both depict the aftermath of his death and the effect it has on his son Ernst and his English lover Edith Thomas, whom he had christened 'Wantee' after the way in which she asked if he wanted a cup of tea (Webster 1997:330). As *Schwitters (in the Lakes)* portrays him, Schwitters is as fascinating for his playfulness and sense of mischief as he is for his surrealist collages and installation art (the most famous of which are his *Merzbau* structures). He is also presented as an innovator in all sorts of media, linguistic as well as sculptural, as much a writer as an artist. He even wrote a little poetry in English, but more significantly relied on the language to write letters to his son (his only living relative, and also a native German speaker) from 1945 onwards, at which point he more or less abandoned his mother tongue much as he felt Germany had abandoned him (Braun 2018:125). His exile was in this sense linguistic as much as it was spatial.

In Kurt Schwitters, then, we have an artist who is fundamentally torn – ruptured, split – between Germany and England. In this sense, he fits ideally as a protagonist in an expression of Draesner's polyglot poetics: as the novels show, he is German, yet exiled, forced to begin a new life in the UK; treated as a foreigner, given different rations to others, and confronted with various national stereotypes; faced with the necessity of speaking, reading and writing a new tongue, what he came to call his "tongue of survival" (Draesner 2020e:15). Draesner explains her rationale for initially choosing English as the language in which to tell the story of Kurt-in-exile as follows:

> …this would have been how he perceived the world through the language and how I could follow him much more specifically. At a practical level, any subcutaneous German left in my English could easily be attributed to him. That's why he is so perfect. He is my mask. (Draesner 2020e:15)

It was only when a friend to whom she gave a few English pages for an artistic project asked her if he could see the 'original' German, a manuscript which did not exist, which had never existed, that the potential magnitude of the enterprise sank in. Draesner's decision to compose another novel covering the same events in Schwitters' life, this time in German and entitled simply *Schwitters*, has led to the formation of a "split novel; split in that it is in two languages and two different bodies – a book in England and a book in Germany" (Draesner 2020e:15). The tone and timbre of his German and English lives are paralleled in each text, alongside the cultural and artistic traditions that form the canvas on which he paints his corner: Benn, Kandinsky, Shelley, Wordsworth, Beckett, Karl Valentin. The process of composing this particular pair of works involved an ongoing (and frequently painstaking) negotiation, a conversation, between the two texts. Although the German text is longer, each book includes sequences that do not feature in the other.

On being asked by the author, specifically for this article, how she would describe the differences between the two, Draesner summarised as follows:

> Die Geschichte des nicht-englischen Lebens von Kurt Schwitters wird in der deutschen Version des Romans en bloc und vor der englischen Zeit erzählt. Der Roman verfährt hier chronologischer und stellt vor allem den Abschied aus Hannover – die Schwierigkeiten, die Entscheidung zu fällen, die politischen Verstrickungen der Zeit und die Verfolgung jüdischer Bürger unmittelbar in Kurts Umgebung dar. Im englischen Manuskript hingegen sind wir immer mit Kurt auf der Insel – und das deutsche Leben erscheint so, wie es in der englischen Identität möglich ist: als eine Schicht unter der neuen Lebenswirklichkeit – etwas, das vergessen sein soll, aber in Schüben zurückkehrt. Kurz gesagt: Der eine Roman

> setzt als Grundton die deutsche Identität der Figur und erzählt von ihrer Zerschlagung. Der englische Roman setzt als Grundton die englische Identität der Figur und erzählt, wie sie gegen den Willen der Figur von unten immer wieder zerlöchert wird. EINE Geschichte, in zwei Identitäten und daher auch zwei Sprachen erzählt.
>
> The story of Kurt Schwitters' non-English life is told in the German version of the novel en bloc, and before the English period. Here the novel proceeds more chronologically, presenting above all the departure from Hannover – the difficulties of coming to the decision; the political entanglements of the time; and the persecution of Jewish citizens directly in Kurt's neighbourhood. In the English manuscript, on the other hand, we are on the island with Kurt the whole time – and [Schwitters'] German life shows up as far as is possible within the English identity: as a layer beneath the new reality of day-to-day life – something to be forgotten, but which returns in phases. In short: the one novel sets the character's German identity as its keynote, and tells of its destruction; the English novel sets the character's English identity as its keynote and tells of how it is repeatedly perforated from below against the character's will. ONE story, told in two identities and hence also in two languages (Draesner 2020a, translation mine).[6]

As the above suggests, the differences between the works go beyond certain chapters appearing in one but not the other. What is arguably most fascinating about Draesner's multilingual project is that the *structures* of the two works are not the same – both reflecting and shaping the fact that one's perspective of Schwitters will depend on the cultural and linguistic background from which one approaches him. The German text begins in Hannover in 1936, amid a backdrop of unease and rising fascism with which a German-reading public will be immediately familiar, and then proceeds to tell Schwitters' journey into exile in a more-or-less linear fashion right up until his death and beyond, followed by an epilogue set in the mid-1960s as Schwitters' *Merzbau* is transferred (nay, translated!) to Newcastle's Hatton Gallery. The English text, on the other hand, begins with Schwitters as an elderly invalid in the Lake District, sitting on a fellside surrounded by sheep and enjoying the landscape; what insights we get into his pre-English existence emerge as flashback chapters away from his life in his adopted homeland, adding depth and colour to this strange old German hermit.

In one sense, both texts are complete in and of themselves. A German reader will not *need* to purchase and read *Schwitters in the Lakes* to understand *Schwitters*, and the same is true the other way round in the (more common) case of the English reader who knows no German. The story each text tells of Kurt Schwitters can be enjoyed in isolation. Yet in another sense both texts are somewhat incomplete without the other: neither quite tells the whole story, just as

[6] Note that 'perforation' is also used to represent identity trauma in Fay Weldon's 1995 novel *Splitting* (p. 55).

recounting only the English or the German phase of Schwitters' life would not tell the whole story. The manuscripts may be separate objects telling distinct narratives, but they cannot be truly disentangled. All translations may be a form of rewriting, as Lefevere has suggested (1992:2–5), but in this instance it is as though each text rewrites the other, and indeed continues to haunt the other by its absence.

The most rewarding experience will be, as Eskin suggests (2019:4), for the bilingual reader who can read the two works in tandem, as I have had the privilege of doing whilst proofreading and assisting the author on various questions as to the linguistic accuracy of the English text. At the time of my involvement, many chapters already existed in the English version but needed minor tweaking; others had been written first in German and the question of whether or not they should be reworked into English was still up in the air. In many ways, and as I found collaborating with her on other projects, Draesner's work often seems to defy translation – everywhere one finds the same playfulness with language that Schwitters (and another of Draesner's artistic inspirations, Gertrude Stein) deployed: puns, wordplay, linguistic ironies, multilingual neologisms, light-hearted repurposing of idioms, and semiotically dense compound nouns. In other words, Draesner set herself an exceedingly difficult challenge in trying to infuse both texts with her specific brand of linguistic innovation, and my own ability in my native tongue was frequently of little use in offering up suggestions for wording in the English text. Take the absurdist pomp of the pithy description of Kurt's fiercely National Socialist mother-in-law as "Grüßkanone, Wedelreich"; how could that be rendered in English? After some time I suggested the necessarily much lengthier "the saluting canon, Reich that waved but never wavered"; in the end, the phrase was lost on the cutting room floor in both manuscripts, but note how much more elegant than the English the German is, how much less laborious its expression of the context. It might be observed that my (arguably somewhat unorthodox) deviation from the original above would have exceeded a professional translator's remit, but it should be born in mind that my task was simply to provide suggestions which Draesner was free to accept, reject, or reword as appropriate: I was more of an 'English consultant' than a translator.

Simultaneous Self-Translation

This raises an important question, however: are these texts the result of self-translation? Perhaps not as the term is often employed, given that they were self-translated in both

directions. One of the earliest definitions of the process comes from the Slovak academic Anton Popoviĉ, who called it "the translation of an original work into another language by the author himself [or herself]" (1976:19; addition mine). Popoviĉ here presumes the existence in the first place of an "original work", in most cases an already published one, before the translation process begins (as is naturally the norm for most professional translators who would not have access to manuscripts during the composition period). Christopher Whyte has also described self-translation as meaning "that the author of a literary text *completed* in one language *subsequently* reproduces it in a second language" (2002:64; emphasis mine); in other words, he presupposes a chronology in which the text is written and finished in an original language and only later is it reworked into a target language. Theoretically, however, self-translators are in the unique position, as Draesner was, of being able to work in both languages at the same time while the text is still being composed, performing what has been called "simultaneous self-translation" (Grutman 2009:259). The fact that this is, in practice, a not especially common occurrence only makes Draesner's achievement all the more unusual.

Schwitters (in the Lakes) is unusual also in that it was first begun in English and only reworked into the author's native German partway through the composition process. It has been observed that "while it is customary for literary translators to work from a *foreign* tongue into their *native* language, self-translators seem less likely to do so" (Grutman and Van Bolderen 2014:327; emphasis mine). The most famous exception to this is Samuel Beckett, who after a certain point in his life wrote first in French and produced the English-language manuscripts shortly afterwards (it is worth noting that Beckett makes a cameo of sorts in both novels). In one sense Draesner is another such exception, although to describe her as such elides the aforementioned differences between the two versions, which go beyond simply the linguistic and into the more fundamentally structural. Indeed, Helena Tanqueiro identifies Beckett, Joyce, Nabokov and Kundera as acting "more like translators than authors" in their self-translated work (2000:58); the same could not be said of Draesner.

Grutman and Van Bolderen also identify several typical reasons why an author might translate their own work: to enjoy the privilege of greater leeway than a professional translator; to avoid the expenses incurred by hiring someone else to do it for them; to circumvent censorship; to gain more direct access to a new audience; and to replace pre-existing but dissatisfying translations of their work (2014:325–6). Draesner's rationale (stated above) for writing *Schwitters in the Lakes* in English was to capture how Schwitters would have perceived the

world while in exile in England, while *Schwitters* allows her to address aspects of his German life which are "zu schmerzvoll" ("too painful", Draesner 2020a) for Schwitters-in-England to dwell on. In other words, the creation of this two-fold work does not quite fit any of the above reasons commonly given for self-translation. More appropriate, perhaps, would be Lefevere's idea that translation involves adapting a text to fit into a certain poetics, a term he identifies as having two core components: (a) "an inventory of literary devices, genres, motifs, prototypical characters and situations, and symbols" and (b) "what the role of literature is, or should be, in the social system as a whole" (1992:26). The efforts Draesner has taken to compose and structure the two texts differently ensure that *Schwitters* is more appropriately targeted at the dominant poetics of her German audience and *Schwitters in the Lakes* that of a potential English audience.

Draesner of course *has* had far greater freedom in 'altering' the text than a professional translator might, since the differences between the two versions are built into the core concept of the project. This has often been pointed out regarding the authority of self-translators: Koller writes that "the author-translator [feels] justified in introducing changes into the text where an 'ordinary' translator might hesitate" (1979/1992:197); Cordingley refers to self-translators taking "liberties of which regular translators would never dream" (2013:2); and Grutman and Van Bolderen contrast the "wiggle room" which is "begrudgingly" allowed most modern translators with the "poetic licence" of the self-translator, claiming that "the self-translating writer is commonly allowed to endow her [or his] work with an aura of authenticity that is rarely, if ever, granted to 'standard' translations" (2014:324; addition mine). Many translators do of course correspond with authors or collaborate closely to ensure that authorial intent is respected, but the assumption persists that the author-translator has a greater authority over the text than a professional translator. More than forty years ago Popovič suggested that self-translation "cannot be regarded as a variant of the original text but as a true translation" (1976:19), but most self-translations are now treated by many as of something of a higher pedigree than a mere translation: Cordingley refers to "another 'version' or new 'original' of a text" (2013:2), a little like finding Shakespeare's plays in different folios or redactions of medieval manuscripts. The respect accorded to author-translators' "new 'originals'", however, is not necessarily reflective of the text's quality so much as the (literally) authoritative status of the author themselves.

The concept of multiple originals appears in remarks critic and translator Michael Eskin (2019:2) has made on reading drafts of Draesner's novel: "vom Schwitters-Roman gibt es zwei Originale – ein englisches und ein deutsches –, was soviel bedeutet wie kein einziges...", going on to add that "beide ~~Originale~~ sind nur Abschattungen von etwas, das nur in Abschattungen existiert" ("there are two originals of the Schwitters novel – an English and a German – which is tantamount to saying there is none at all... Both ~~originals~~ are only shadows of something which exists only in shadow", translation mine). During the process of composition, Draesner also stated that "there won't be an original of the Schwitters novel" (Braun 2018:127). The very nature of what we mean by "original" as opposed to "translation", therefore, is thrown into doubt by this singular pair, this twofold single work, as Eskin illustrates neatly with the struck-through "~~Originale~~". The *Schwitters (in the Lakes)* project raises questions which can be, and indeed have been, asked about all self-translated texts (e.g. "are the two texts both original creations? Is either text complete? … Can either version belong within a single language or literary tradition?" (Hokenson and Munson 2014:2)); but in certain respects these questions are all the more pertinent in this case. Readers, bilingual and monolingual alike, will be invited to ponder whether either text can possibly constitute an "original" or whether the project problematizes the very question of "~~originals~~".

The dramatic discrepancies between the two versions outlined above could certainly be categorised as one of Cordingley's "liberties of which regular translators would never dream"; on the other hand, such liberties seem to create so fundamental a difference in the reading experience of both texts that it is hard not to see them as going beyond the amendments and innovations made even by more daring self-translators, and approaching the realm of simultaneous composition in two languages. If, then, this project exceeds the conventional boundaries of "self-translation", we need a new term to describe it; I propose that polyglot poetics is exactly that term. In turning to more concrete examples from the texts themselves to see this enigmatic process in action, we find a different, more literal meaning of "self-translation" which **does** prove fitting for *Schwitters (in the Lakes)*.

The Translated Self

Draesner's own background makes her particularly suited to tackling the complications that arise in transgressively writing across different literary and cultural borders and traditions, even across different tongues. Her father's family, German speakers living in Silesia, fled for

Germany in 1945, with the result that she grew up amid the giddy cocktail of, in her own words, "Protestants vs. Catholics, farmers vs. middle class citizens, Bavarian vs Silesian rites, recipes, songs, traditions, clothes" (Draesner 2020b:43). This background, she writes,

> created a kind of 'de-rootedness', by which I don't mean 'rootlessness' but rather movability. Surrounded by roots, but standing beside them. Rootable, yet easily detached. Half rooted down, half elsewhere – and always longing for both. Which in turn means constant motion, tending towards paradox: you're nomadically rooted. (Draesner 2020b:51)

A preoccupation with exile, migration, multilingualism, and the associated questions of identity has been central to her work, most notably in her sprawling 2014 novel *Sieben Sprünge vom Rand der Welt*, but it also forms the backbone of *Schwitters (in the Lakes)*, and will underpin a planned third novel in this thematic triptych, *Die Lügen unserer* ***Mütter sind die Besten*** ("The Lies of our **Mothers are the Best**"; the emphasis is part of the title), as yet still in its early stages.

These themes manifest themselves in *Schwitters (in the Lakes)* in various ways. Here, for example, is the evocative opening of the first chapter of the English text, in which we meet Kurt as he sits on a Cumbrian fellside:

> Stretching its spinsterly fingers, the fog crept through the air a few inches above the meadow, which it seemed to render visible and hide each time it took a breath. Spinsterly presumably wasn't the right word, presumably 'presumably' wasn't the right word, he was suspicious of himself, 'spinsterly' was probably a deduction, a deuce casting dice in his head, from 'Gespinst'. Still, he liked the sounds that entered him, the fine fingerishness of fog hovering above an English meadow, he liked how it managed to hover&creep, ever changing shapes. (Draesner 2020f:2)

The reader's attention is drawn, like Kurt's, to the resemblance between English "spinsterly" (of, or resembling, an older unmarried woman) and German "*Gespinst*" (gossamer), two words which share a common etymology. Webster's Dictionary defines "spinster" as both "a woman who spins, or whose occupation is to spin" and "hence, the common title by which a woman without rank or distinction is designated" (1828:640), while Duden associates "*Gespinst*" with the verb "*spinnen*" (to spin). That "*spinnen*" can also colloquially mean "to be mad" and that a "*Hirngespinst*" refers to a fantasy or phantom adds a certain degree of weight to Kurt's being "suspicious of himself", an association only reinforced in the equivalent passage in the German novel (Draesner 2020c:221), in which we find the addition of "*Gespenst*" (ghost, spectre). What is particularly distinctive in this expression of polyglot poetics is that the familiarity and

strangeness of different English and German words alongside one another are not just triggered in the mind of the reader by the sight and sound of particular words, but that they are central to the thoughts of the protagonist himself. At its simplest form we have here a character wondering how best to express himself, agonising over *le mot juste* as novelists and poets must, as Draesner has had to do; *Schwitters (in the Lakes)* regularly comments in this way on the creative processes that spawned it.

This is true of the English text in particular, which is filtered through the German-in-exile voice of Schwitters and the English-garnished-with-German voice of Draesner (and, in places, albeit only very, very occasionally, through my own contributory voice as German-speaking-Englishman). The opportunities this strange polyphony provides, in terms of the text commenting on its own use of language, result in quite a different kind of reading experience, even more so for the bilingual reader who is conscious of the weight of both languages behind any given passage. The linguistic concerns on which Kurt muses throughout both books, as he does in the above passage, remain central throughout – they are not dry and dusty matters, the domain of textbooks and grammatical treatises, but vitally important, the living life-blood of a man who has been uprooted, physically, artistically, linguistically, and who now finds himself trying to adopt a new identity, a new language, a new home, attempting to write a fresh narrative on top of the palimpsest of his life. As Besemeres states, "it is a given of contemporary literary theory that the self is constituted by language" (2002:12). Schwitters, in the novel as much as he did in life, carries out the ultimate act of self-translation: not the act of translating one's own work from one tongue to another, but literally a "translation of the self". This is an apt description in the sense that he has undergone a mental, spiritual, linguistic transformation: a more literal example would be *A Midsummer Night Dream*'s 'thou art translated!' to refer to Bottom gaining a donkey's head. The phrase also refers, however, to his having been literally moved across a physical space, as in the Latin *translatio imperii* for the process by which consolidated power and the seat of empire would shift from one capital to another. Cordingley notes that "the subject of the self-translated text is very often hybridity itself… hybridity characterises not only many self-translators' external and textual environments, but the internal bilingual and bicultural space out of which their creativity emerges" (2013:3); this phenomenon of hybridity is a cornerstone of Schwitters' experiences as Draesner presents them. Kurt Schwitters, post-1940, is a hybrid, translated self; Draesner has described him as a "translated person" (Braun 2018:127).

We see the artist's translated selfhood manifested in his language throughout the text in moments of sharp linguistic insight that double up as beats of characterisation and humour. Sometimes it is simply his recognition of his bilingual life: "his brain used languages as sledges now: hopped on, hopped off. Though they dragged him along alright, they altered the way he thought and talked about himself" (Draesner 2020f:37). But elsewhere there are more concrete examples. Chapter Two of the English text, for instance, sees Kurt walking into a pharmacy and asking for a "recipe for a cream" (Draesner 2020f:7), thinking of the German *Rezept*, meaning both "recipe" and "prescription", which, as he reminds himself, is a "false friend" (Draesner 2020f:8). He muses on the (rather romanticized) literal meaning of the German word for tramp, *Landstreicher*, "the one who ranges the countryside" (Draesner 2020f:14); *streichen* can also mean "to paint", and Kurt enjoys the thought of being a literal *Landstreicher*, someone who paints the countryside all over with his tracks. He is confused by how rules seem to work in one direction but not another: "time gapped him (Wantee kept telling him that in English each verb could become a noun, so it ought to work the other way round as well)" (Draesner 2020f:128). English verbs that, unlike their German counterparts, cannot be parted from their dependent prepositions puzzle him: "you couldn't separate a verb from its preposition in English. No bark the tree up" (Draesner 2020f:13), he thinks, on the basis that "to bark up the wrong tree", if it were a German phrase, would necessarily place the preposition "up" at the end of the sentence rather than beside the verb. Lastly, as in moments such as "did he walk or was he walking? ... he needed to develop a continuous form" (Draesner 2020f:9) or "he needed a better commandment of time and tense. He's telling himself that he has been enjoying it" (Draesner 2020f:10), he grapples with the challenges of the present continuous tense, the way in which he now perceives time differently because he thinks in another language, and how that shift in perception necessarily engenders different thoughts about life as a whole. Contrast these last examples with the German "ihm gefiel es hier. Ihm, dem nicht zu bedauernden Kurt, in seinem fortdauerlichen Ambleside" ("he liked it here – he, the not-to-be-pitied Kurt, in his continuous Ambleside", Draesner 2020c:237, translation mine), in which the "*Dauer*" lexeme ("duration, perpetuity, endurance") appears in terms of both permanence and commiseration.

Draesner's English version of the novel is also, of course, the product of her own translated self. Braun observes that "Schwitters provides Draesner with the ideal mouthpiece through which to explore the experience of living out of language" (2018:113), a means by which Draesner examines questions of linguistic identity with strong resonances for her own personal background as the descendant of German migrants who fled Poland. She herself has frequently

lived as a German in England (albeit by choice rather than in exile), another way in which her personal experiences align with Schwitters'. As Grutman and Van Bolderen put it, when it comes to self-translation, the "authors of both versions are the same physical person. Which is not to say that these authors are absolutely identical" (2014:323). The Beckett whose authorial voice expresses itself in English is not quite the same individual as the Beckett whose authorial voice expresses itself in French. Draesner-in-English and Draesner-in-German may in some ways be similar, but they are not completely alike. As Caroline Summers has illustrated, a unified, coherent but nonetheless flexible and fluctuating author-function (Foucault 1977) can be applied to translated works (where Foucault's "author-function" refers to a construct incorporating a variety of discourses drawn from published works, known details about the author, biographies or interviews, academic and popular responses and interpretations, etc.). A given author-function will differ in, say, Germany or England, depending on "the dominant narratives of the receiving culture" (Summers 2012:173), and such author-functions "not only coincide but also challenge and reconfigure one another" (Summers 2012:174). That Draesner explicitly crafted, reworked and structured *Schwitters* and *Schwitters in the Lakes* for maximum impact on their respective readerships in different languages – in other words, that she actively shapes her different but parallel author-functions rather than letting them be imposed upon her by other translators – is another part of her polyglot poetics initiative.

Draesner herself has made the comparison between the translated self and the translated novel, one which applies to both herself and Schwitters:

> …being in exile or being forced to migrate means that you as a person are kind of split, you will have a double-sided, more prominently double-sided history or story of your personal life, you might have two – not backgrounds or foregrounds – two grounds, spaces surrounding you, various languages and incompatible life experiences. And you may well find yourself in this very uncomfortable position of bridging something, not pertaining to one system or another; living betwixt. (Braun 2018:127–8)

As hinted at already, there is in all this talk of translated selves something advantageous about English relying on the same word to mean both "move across a physical plane" and "convey meaning in a different language from the original", in that by doing so the spatial and linguistic meanings are inherently juxtaposed with one another and their respective connotations can never be fully entangled. Contrast this with French and Italian, which, as Stierle observes, use *translation/traslazione* for literal displacement but *traduction/traduzione* for the act of translating one language to another (1996:56). German's equivalent word *übersetzen*, however,

can be used in both contexts, much like "translate". Implicit in the polysemy of the English and German terms is an understanding, however subconscious or unintentional, of the associations between voice and place.

Those associations call to mind the German word *Heimat*, a semantically rich and in many respects troubled term which fundamentally means "home", but can also be translated as "homeland" or "native country" and which inevitably has a history of connections with German nationalism and National Socialism.[7] Depending on usage, it can have temporal, spatial, linguistic and cultural resonances. Questions about what *Heimat* really means for Schwitters, this exiled curio of a man, this almost nomadic artist, recur in both landscape and in language throughout *Schwitters (in the Lakes)*; the term is used on fifteen occasions in the German text (e.g. Draesner 2020c:27, 75, 115, 123), and "homeland" once in the English (Draesner 2020f:27). Chapter Twelve of the English text gives us this delightful passage:

> He loved to listen to the villagers in the pub. Their words about the weather weren't clad social messages. They simply meant: 'This is our home.' The landscape sat in their bowels, their limbs, their hearts. They knew Viking routes of trading wool, each fell, each crumbled rock, each formation of clouds. Probably their dreams were moulded by crates and riffs as early as in their mothers' wombs. How did a place translate into flesh? How did a place translate into art through flesh? The becks' constant splashing and gurgling over the boulders, the electromagnetic fields of enormous columns of clouds, the sodden fields, the surprisingly metallic August skies, tarnished Verdigris, the colour of copper or orange in fog, the sound and taste of sheep. (Draesner 2020f:105)

Fittingly for both Draesner and Schwitters, the extract positively hums with that heartfelt, fascinated, curious distance required when not working in one's mother tongue but nonetheless describing with love an adopted homeland: Schwitters' love of listening to discussions about weather, the strange physicality of language and of sense of belonging, and the fascination with the way a place can "translate into flesh". The word "translate" is, of course, no accident here; neither is the phrase "the sound and taste of sheep", which doubles up both as an aspect of life in Ambleside (e.g. farming and cooking) and as a reflection of the way Kurt savours English words. Engaging examples abound elsewhere in the text: Kurt wonders why "relationship" contains the suffix "-ship", with all its attendant connotations of constantly needing to go and to stay, to be moored and anchored, to be set free and waved goodbye, and whether this reflects an island nation's obsession with ships (2020f:50). Then there is the following train of thought:

[7] For a good overview of the concept of 'Heimat', see Boa and Palfreyman 2000.

> [Kurt reflected that Wantee] would say 'well' instead of no. After a while he'd sense a 'no' suspended in mid-air, not having the faintest idea how it had got there. This amazing talent she shared with all their neighbours. It was, he kept telling himself, the natural result of speaking a language that didn't let you hear any difference between know and no. (Draesner 2020f:33)

This is the gift of the stranger in an adopted homeland: they possess the ability to look both from without and from within and provide insights which simply may not occur to the native speakers around them. Theirs is an inherently translated self, and it is the richer for it.

Facing Strangeness

Earlier in this article I described Draesner's polyglot poetics in terms of deconstructing the familiar, specifically by dissociating meanings and sounds and paralleling both in unusual sequences and permutations. We might expect this linguistic freewheeling to appear more frequently in verse rather than prose – see, for example, the multilingual, polyphonic canvas of *The Waste Land*, or indeed much of Draesner's own poetic oeuvre – and, as such, there is a degree of unfamiliarity, almost discordance, in its occurring in the middle of a narrative. Each chapter of *Schwitters in the Lakes* begins with a small cluster of words designed to draw the reader's attention to Schwitters' stray thoughts and linguistic musings, clusters which often read like something out of Draesner's own poetry. They are laid out on the page as in the following example:

hallo!
sweat
schwitzen
halo of sheep
Schwitters'
(ap)posite
(positive?
Positz?)

withering weiter
(Draesner 2020f:2)

In his aforementioned paper Döring draws a distinction between Draesner's playful, polylingual *sprite* of translation, of which these clusters are an example, and the significantly more conventional *Geist der Übersetzung* or "*spirit* of translation" (2020:3). He associates the latter with Martin Luther, noting that the term is used as the subtitle for a new volume of essays on his linguistic achievements; the volume's title proper, *Denn wir haben Deutsch* ("For we have

German"), reinforces the somewhat dubious conviction that one can ever "have" a language, can ever possess it or have mastery over it. The purism of mother tongue rhetoric is a kind of linguistic tyranny. Draesner has noted elsewhere that "any 'one language' reveals itself to be much less monolithic than the concept would imply. Monolingualism is – a myth" (Draesner 2020d:13). In this pair of '~~originals'~~ she shows us that in the place of monolithic monolingualism (i.e. the opposite of polyglot poetics) it is far more rewarding to instead accept a language's vast scope, savour its weirder tastes, and play in the linguistic sandpits where English and German – and indeed other tongues – interact. That is after all where the most unusual, the most challenging, and the most enlightening juxtapositions are often found, as Schwitters himself frequently demonstrated in his collages. In the resulting (twin) products of *Schwitters* and *Schwitters in the Lakes*, we encounter what Eskin describes as a "Phänomenologie der Sprache als Übersetzung und Oszillation", a "phenomenology of language as translation and oscillation" (2019:5; translation mine).

Polyglot poetics can help us see that words, too, are essentially homeless: peregrinating, migratory things which do not belong fully to one language or another. They transgress borders, reappear in bizarre new lights, break down into constituent segments, homonyms, homophones. Looked at in this way, words and people are much the same – individual units of meaning with chequered histories and derivations which can be translated and retranslated from place to place. All life is necessarily a process of (self-)translation, let alone those fraught lives subjected to the vicissitudes of exile and migration. In such a context, the possibilities opened up by a foreign tongue become something reinvigorating: as Döring says, "the only chance to find ourselves aright must lie in facing strangeness" (2020:26).

An important aspect of this process is that we as readers are invited in and are encouraged to bring our own readings to the table. This approach was already evident in *Sieben Sprünge vom Rand der Welt*: the website that accompanied it, *www.der-siebte-sprung.de*, gathered together historical sources, essays, and reader responses to add to the conversation around migration and exile and to continue the life of the novel long after the final chapter. There, too, Draesner's multilingual tendencies are on display, with Polish appearing alongside German and other dialect terms. Her stated goal with this unusual choice was to "force the novel out of its traditional, comfortable, bookish bed into exile" (Braun 2018:126). The "seventh leap" propels the reader beyond the material and physical confines of the novel – pages, binding, dust-jacket, and so on – and into a different medium altogether, but one in which the work's primary

concerns are highlighted and reinterpreted by a myriad of voices in a way which shines a new light back onto the published text. In the very act of our participation in this seventh leap we are confronted with "questions about where the literary text begins and ends" (Braun 2018:113). Viewed through the lens of Roland Barthes' terminology, the book begins as a *texte lisible* ("readerly text", trans. Richard Miller) but reveals itself by the end to be a *texte scriptible* ("writerly text", trans. Richard Miller) (Barthes 1973:4), much as *Schwitters (in the Lakes)* is. This is another key aspect of polyglot poetics: it is not defined by the achievements of a single voice, but necessarily involves this interwoven, interactive lattice of many voices – reading authors and authoring readers.

In *Schwitters (in the Lakes)* Draesner similarly invites us into a wholly new aesthetic achievement which pushes at the boundaries of what the novel is, in what she has called "another way to force the novel into exile" (Braun 2018:126). Both the English and the German texts can, as discussed above, be read and enjoyed individually – this is essential to their functioning as texts in their own right. Neither exists wholly independently of the other, however, and the greatest rewards will surely be reaped by those bilingual readers or Germanists who are in a position to tackle both. The entire project is radically polyphonic and multilingual, the product of a pair of (self-)translated artists who have spent time living, working and immersing themselves in the two languages that make up the texts. I fervently hope that they will spark discussions about how best to identify "polyglot poetics" at work in other literary texts and that they will encourage other authors and self-translators to adopt and hone this approach in years to come. In its intersection of familiarity and strangeness, perhaps readers of various backgrounds, speakers of various tongues, will be able to find themselves aright.

References

Barthes, Roland (1973) *S/Z*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil; trans. by Richard Miller (1974) as *S/Z*, New York: Hill & Wang.

Besemeres, Mary (2002) *Translating One's Self: Language and Selfhood in Cross-Cultural Autobiography*, Oxford: Peter Lang.

Boa, Elizabeth and Rachel Palfreyman (2000) *Heimat – A German Dream: Regional Loyalties and National Identity in German Culture 1890-1990*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Braun, Rebecca (2018) 'Pacing out a Polyglot Poetics: An Interview with Ulrike Draesner at the Victoria and Albert Museum', *German Life and Letters* 71(1): 111–129.

Cordingley, Antony (ed.) (2013) *Self-Translation: Brokering Originality in Hybrid Culture*, London: Bloomsbury.

Döring, Tobias (2020) 'Sprites: Draesner's English Inspirations' in Karen Leeder and Lyn Marven (eds), *Ulrike Draesner: A Companion*, Berlin: de Gruyter (forthcoming).

Draesner, Ulrike (2014), *Sieben Sprünge vom Rand der Welt* [Seven Leaps from the Edge of the World], Munich: Luchterhand Literaturverlag.

Draesner, Ulrike (2020a), private correspondence, Email (10 June 2020).

Draesner, Ulrike (2020b) 'Developing a Polyglot Poetics: The Power of Testimony and Lived Literary Experience', in Rebecca Braun and Benedict Schofield (eds), *Transnational German Studies*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 43–55.

Draesner, Ulrike (2020c) *Schwitters*, Munich: Penguin Verlag (forthcoming August 2020).

Draesner, Ulrike (2020d) 'Huhediblu', in Michael Eskin, Karen Leeder, and Marko Pajević (eds), *Paul Celan Today: A Companion*, Berlin: de Gruyter (forthcoming October 2020).

Draesner, Ulrike (2020e) 'The Indecipherable Stone: Interview with Ulrike Draesner on the Processes of Literature', in Karen Leeder and Lyn Marven (eds), *Ulrike Draesner: A Companion*, Berlin: de Gruyter (forthcoming October 2020).

Draesner, Ulrike (2020f) *Schwitters in the Lakes* (unpublished manuscript).

Duden, available online at [https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Gespinst] (accessed 8 February 2020).

Eskin, Michael (2019) 'Bemerkungen zu Ulrike Draesners Schwitters-Roman' [Remarks on Ulrike Draesner's Schwitters Novel], Email (15 June 2019).

Foucault, Michel (1977) 'What is an Author?', trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in Donald F. Bouchard (ed) *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 113–138.

Grutman, Rainier (2009) 'Self-Translation', in Mona Baker (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, 2nd edn., Abingdon: Routledge, 257–260.

Grutman, Rainier, and Trish Van Bolderen (2014) 'Self-Translation', in Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter (eds), *A Companion to Translation Studies*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 323–332.

Hokenson, Jan Walsh, and Marcella Munson (2014) *The Bilingual Text: History and Theory of Literary Self-Translation*, 2nd edn., Abingdon: Routledge.

Jung, Verena (2002) *English-German Self-Translation of Academic Texts and its Relevance for Translation Theory and Practice*, Arbeiten zur Sprachanalyse 41, Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

Knott, Marie Luise, Thomas Brovot and Ulrich Blumenbach (eds) (2015) *Denn wir haben Deutsch: Luthers Sprache aus dem Geist der Übersetzung* [For We Have German: Luther's Language out of the Spirit of Translation], Berlin: Matthes & Seitz.

Koller, Werner (1979/1992) *Einführung in die Übersetzungswissenschaft* [Introduction to Translation Studies], Uni-Taschenbücher 819, Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer.

Lefevere, André (1992) *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, London/New York: Routledge.

Montini, Chiara (2010) 'Self-translation', in Yves Gambier and Luc van Doorslaer (eds), *Handbook of Translation Studies* Volume 1, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 306–308.

Popoviĉ, Anton (1976) *A Dictionary for the Analysis of Literary Translation*, Department of Comparative Literature, Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.

Smith, Nigel (2018) 'Polyglot Poetics: Transnational Early Modern Literature', *The Collation*, available online at [https://collation.folger.edu/2018/02/polyglot-poetics/] (accessed 3 March 2020)

Stierle, Karlheinz (1996) '*Translatio Studii* and Renaissance: From Vertical to Horizontal Translation', in Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (eds), *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Spaces Between*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 55–67.

Summers, Caroline (2012) 'Translating the Author-Function: The (Re)Narration of Christa Wolf', *New Voices in Translation Studies* 8: 170–187.

Tanqueiro, Helen (2000) 'Self-Translation as an extreme Case of the Author-Translator-Dialectic', in Allison Beeby, Doris Ensinger and Marisa Presas (eds), *Investigating Translation. Selected Papers from the 4th International Congress on Translation, Barcelona, 1998*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 55–63.

Webster, Gwendolen (1997) *Kurt Merz Schwitters: A Biographical Study*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Webster, Noah (1828) *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, New York: Sherman Converse.

Weldon, Fay (1995) *Splitting*, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

Whyte, Christopher (2002) 'Against Self-Translation', *Translation and Literature* 11(1): 64–71.