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## The Plight of the Writing Profession: Heinrich Detering's *Kilchberg* – a Poem not only about Thomas Mann

### Abstract

On a first level of meaning Heinrich Detering's poem *Kilchberg* is about Thomas Mann's last years in the village of Kilchberg near Zurich in Switzerland, where the Nobel prize winner experienced the acute waning of his productive powers. Within a broader context the poem is about any writer's plight for a lasting impression upon the world. The poem argues for the continuation of the often painful process of literary creation, as words will and can explain the world.

Keywords: Thomas Mann, Heinrich Detering, "Angst", German.

There are poems or verses which, as you read or hear them, go straight to your heart or which come upon you like an epiphany, "wie eine Erscheinung", as we would say in German.

In January 2013 I had such an epiphany. In Kelheim, where Karl Heinz and I moved in 1996, I have a subscription to the regional Regensburg newspaper, the "Mittelbayerische Zeitung", for which I write articles occasionally, and I read the major German national newspapers like the "Süddeutsche Zeitung" or the "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" (FAZ) on the internet.

Until recently the FAZ had a more or less unique weekly series edited by Marcel Reich-Ranicki, called "Frankfurter Anthologie", the "Frankfurt Anthology". It contained poems, old and new, and interpretations of them by very often eminent scholars or writers.

At the beginning of January 2013 the poem published in the FAZ was Heinrich Detering's *Kilchberg*. It takes its title from the name of the village Kilchberg near Zurich in Switzerland, where Thomas Mann and several members of his family moved after their political exile in the United States during the National Socialist years in Germany and where the Nobel prize winner of 1929 died in 1955.

I read the short poem, and my first thought was: "Here comes your ghost again" – the ghost, not of Thomas Mann, but of Karl Heinz Göller.

The author of the poem, Heinrich Detering (born in 1959), is an eminent Thomas Mann scholar and teaches at Göttingen University, Chair of Modern German Literature. He also writes poems, and the poem *Kilchberg* had been published in his recent collection *Old Glory*, Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen 2012. The text appears on the back of the volume's dust cover, too – so the author and his publishing house must have thought it one of the best poems of the collection.

With Professor Detering's kind permission, I copy his poem and offer a prose translation into English:

### **Kilchberg**

von Heinrich Detering

täglich andere Ängste  
und immer dieselbe Angst  
die erste die letzte die längste:  
dass du nicht langst

dass du nie genug bist  
dass du nie genügst  
dass deine Sicherheit Lug ist  
dass du lügst

Angst vor offenen Plätzen  
Gier nach dem eigenen Platz  
nachts das alte Entsetzen  
morgens der nächste Satz<sup>1</sup>

Prose translation (J.G.):

### **Kilchberg**

by Heinrich Detering

daily other anxieties  
and always the same kind of fear  
the first the last the longest:  
that you won't last

that you are never sufficient  
that you never suffice  
that your security is pretension  
that you lie

fear of open spaces  
greed for a space of one's own  
in the night the old frights  
in the morning the next sentence

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<sup>1</sup> From: H. Detering, *Old Glory*. Gedichte, Göttingen 2012, p. 7.

First of all, as the title *Kilchberg* suggests, this is a poem about Thomas Mann, a kind of soliloquy of the aged novelist who addresses himself as “you”. Contrary to the image which the writer presented to the world during his lifetime, this is not a portrait of the acclaimed Nobel prize winner in his grand-bourgeois laurels. It is the portrait of a man whose life is governed by one emotion, the German “Angst”, which as a “foreign word” became part of the English vocabulary. The constant fear of not rising to his own high standards of living and writing seems to have prevailed in Thomas Mann’s thoughts.

“Dass du nicht langst”, the last line of the first stanza, is rather colloquial German, used mostly in the everyday phrase “es langt”, meaning “it is enough” (depending on the tone of the speaker, it can mean “I’m fed up with it”, too), but also with the connotation of “it is (barely) sufficient”. Thus you could translate the line “dass du nicht langst” with “that you don’t suffice”. Detering chooses the verbform “langst” of course, because it rhymes with “Angst”.

Heinrich Detering owes his knowledge of Thomas Mann’s anxieties not only to his co-editorship of the novelist’s works, but also to his perusal of the Mann diaries, which were published with the author’s consent, starting in 1975, twenty years after Mann’s death. It could be debated whether the diaries should have been printed at all – even among the Mann children they have caused tragic reverberations – but the author had given his permission, and thus they were published, of course.

Through the diaries Thomas Mann’s homoerotic inclination, his hidden homo- or bisexuality became widely known. It is, of course, sublimated in works like *Death in Venice*, but “the secret” was never openly discussed during Mann’s lifetime, although three of his six children, Erika, Klaus and Golo Mann, seem to have followed in their same-sex orientation. This is probably what Heinrich Detering calls Mann’s fear of “lying” in the poem and that the security outwardly displayed is “pretension” (“Lug”, an oldfashioned German word for “lie”, mostly used in the phrase “Lug und Trug” – “lying and cheating”). Recently, Thomas Mann’s homosexuality became the plot of a widely acclaimed German novel, Hans Pleschinski’s *Königsallee*.<sup>2</sup>

The third stanza states that Thomas Mann apparently also suffered from agoraphobia. But the writer’s triumph is that he simply goes on writing, that he plods along, despite all nightly terrors, despite all anxieties.

Let’s consider the formal aspects of the poem:

It is a very short poem, and, remarkably, it is a poem which rhymes. During the twentieth century rhymes went “out of fashion”, so to speak, in English and in German modern poetry. Rhymes are still used for humorous or “occasional verses” (“Gelegenheitsgedichte”), for trivial love poetry, but very seldom for “serious verse” or nature poetry. Why does Heinrich Detering use rhymes? First of all, this shows his mastery of the language, and then, I would say, his rhymes “drive home” the essential meaning of the poem, namely that Thomas Mann’s life was constrained by “Angst” and anxieties.

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<sup>2</sup> H. Pleschinski, *Königsallee*, München 2013.

The poem's language is everyday German, with the exception perhaps of the old-fashioned word for lying, "Lug". There is, however, subtle wordplay, e.g. in the poem's last two lines. The noun "Entsetzen" means "fright, terror, horror, dismay, panic". But in the context of the poem's last word "Satz" ("sentence"), there could be an allusion to the verb "setzen" in the sense of the activity of a printer who "sets" types (at least during Mann's lifetime), so that they form words. Thus the nightly horror distroys and disarrays ("ent-setzt") the order of things, the meaningful lettering, but in the morning the writer goes to his desk and writes a new meaningful sentence.

The fear of open spaces ("Angst vor offenen Plätzen") could be generalised in this context as the fear in front of an empty page, the dread of a writer's block.

The poem's language is also very "elliptic": There are no complete sentences – just half clauses, like incomplete thoughts. There is only one punctuation mark, namely the colon after the third line. After the colon the speaker's main fear is verbalised: "dass du nicht langst" ("that you will not last").

This is also a "metrical poem" in the sense that there is a certain metrical rhythm in the lines. It is a falling rhythm with mostly three "beats" to each line, but there are also lines with four or two beats. The rhythm has a trochaic or dactylic character ("täglich andere Ängste"), giving the lines a "fateful" or fatalistic sound.

Is it a good poem? Were it "only" a poem about Thomas Mann it would be of limited value, I should think. Even in Germany the knowledge that the novelist spent his last years in Kilchberg in Switzerland, and thus the identification of the poem's speaker, is limited to a select audience. But I think that the poem is excellent because it expresses feelings or thoughts which pertain to a much wider audience, namely that of the profession of writers. Any poet or writer or scholar or journalist or even blogger who is intelligent and self-critical will have his/her doubts about the value of his/her writing, will have nightly fears about whether the poems, novels, plays, scholarly books, articles, conference papers will "last", will stand the test of time.

It is a great poem, because it integrates the private sensitivity of Thomas Mann into a tradition larger than any individual suffering. Even the accusation of lying, which is anxiously voiced in the poem's second stanza, has a long tradition. It was Plato who wanted to banish artists and poets from his ideal state, because in his eyes they were liars and their fictions consisted of lies (Plato was an early Puritan, it seems). In English and in German the words "fiction" or "Fiktion" have always had the double meaning of literary works invented by the imagination or an invented lie. Plato's disciple Aristotle, however, redeemed the writers of fiction in his *Poetics* (unfortunately we have only his theory of tragedy, the theory of comedy having been lost in the course of centuries). And the making of words, of writing them down, was more or less sanctified in the New Testament, at the beginning of the Gospel according to St. John, the most intellectual of the Evangelists: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God".

So, after nightly doubts, let us write down our new words, our new sentences. By the way, "Satz", the poem's last word, not only means "sentence" in German,

it also means “jump, leap”. “Einen Satz Machen” means “to take a leap forward” in German. So, let us cross borders, let us take our next leaps.

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