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From Goethe to Gundolf

ESSAYS ON
GERMAN LITERATURE
AND CULTURE
15. Annette von Droste-Hülshoff

How typical are German women writers of the age in which they lived? There is Bettina von Arnim, who did not find her way to a public career as a writer until quite late, when the Romantic movement as such might be deemed to be over. With Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, chronologically at least, we find an exact fit between her times and the movement that she may be seen to represent: Biedermeier, taken roughly to refer to German literature between 1815 and 1848, between Restoration and Revolution. Her dates are 1797 to 1848. Thus she dies, perhaps symbolically, in that year of revolutions, the first ripples of which she was to feel on the Swiss shores of Lake Constance. 1848 is a difficult year for many of her contemporaries to surmount. Some, like August von Platen and Nikolaus Lenau and Eduard Mörike, are already silent; for Jeremias Gotthelf, it produces a brief burst of reaction, then death; Franz Grillparzer ceases writing altogether. These, and others, like Heinrich Heine, Georg Büchner or Friedrich Hebbel, are her contemporaries, and

1 An earlier version of this chapter was published in Landmarks in German Women’s Writing, ed. by Hilary Brown, British and Irish Studies in German Language and Literature 39 (Oxford etc.: Peter Lang, 2007), 77–90.

the test of her eminence is that her poetry and prose stands out even in that company.

Let me rehearse some of the clichés that literary history applies to the term Biedermeier: order, political reaction, regionalism, domesticity, reverence for ordered nature, a Christian outlook, but also irony, disquiet, despondency, melancholy, for which the German words Weltschmerz (‘melancholy’) and Zerrissenheit (‘conflict’) stand. It is associated with young talents swept away before full maturity (Büchner is but one), writers who display brief bursts of activity followed by silence (Lenau, Mörike), or who are troubled by physical and mental illness (Mörike, Lenau, Grillparzer, Adalbert Stifter).

In much of this we will recognise Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, except of course in one crucial feature: the names I have mentioned are all male. She is a woman writer. That does not of course, mean that we cannot align her with her male contemporaries. I wish to do this before pointing out the differences. She is aristocratic, like Lenau or Platen, and like them proud of it (it is a cachet in this period of political restoration). She is associated with rural Westphalia in the way that Mörike is with Swabia, Gotthelf with the canton of Berne, Stifter with Upper Austria, and like them, she transcends it. She is conservative, but she keeps her ear to the ground and knows what is going on, even though she may not always approve. She is physically infirm, with heart palpitations, migraines, attacks of breathlessness. Yet, in the few brief respite from this, she achieves literary recognition, and then fame, with the publication of her works by Cotta in 1844. She seems characteristically rooted in the landscape, customs and dialect of her native Westphalia. But it is journeys away from home, sojourns at Lake Constance, that provide her with the necessary creativity. She is not alone in being

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denied the object of her affections: the family puts a stop to hopes of marriage, and her love for Levin Schücking, a commoner and seventeen years her junior, is accompanied by the pain of renunciation (see the poem ‘Lebt wohl/Farewell’). Still, the relative lack of movement that her life trajectory offers, her preoccupation with country matters that seem traditional and stable, enable her a deeper reflective and dreamlike power than that afforded by the tempo of more hurried lives.

Yet compared with, say, Mörike, a veritable church mouse in an obscure village in Swabia, she is well-connected. She has links with the aristocratic Münster circle; Dülmen, where Bettina’s brother Clemens Brentano was writing down the visions of the stigmatized nun, Anna Katharina Emmerick, is close by. She corresponds with a high Catholic dignitary. She meets people from the world of letters and learning, like Adele Schopenhauer, the Grimm brothers, Ferdinand Freiligrath, Ludwig Uhland. The Schumanns in Bonn commission an opera text (it is to be on the subject of the Anabaptists in Münster, also a Westphalian theme). Her brother-in-law is Freiherr von Lassberg, the medievalist. She is, as said, published by Cotta, who has the rights to both Goethe’s and Schiller’s works. She knows foreign literature and she keeps abreast with debates on science.3

And still there is the crucial and differentiating factor. Whereas many of the men are professional writers or scholars (or both) or have another profession to fall back on, she is barred, prohibited indeed by her social status and her gender. Her position as the unmarried daughter of a widowed Freifrau (baroness) is one of obedience and deference. She is called upon to serve, to wait, to minister. She must experience constant interruptions through the calls of domesticity. Her writing is regarded as a source of suspicion or even downright scandal. She is painfully aware of the role that her particular society apportions her. She lives in an age where women often renounce their talents so as not to threaten a male-dominated culture: Bettina only ‘goes public’ after Achim’s death in 1831; Ludwig Tieck’s talented translator daughter Dorothea hides behind her father’s name; Fanny Mendelssohn’s compositions must

not overshadow those of her brother Felix or Clara Wieck’s those of her husband Robert Schumann.

She knows that women writers are typecast in their choice of subject-matter: religion, love, nature. She reflects all of this, but transcends it. She is a religious writer, but she also writes a novel, a comedy (both unfinished) and ballads. As a pious Catholic, she takes advice from the prince-bishop of Breslau, Melchior Diepenbrock, himself a minor devotional writer. Her religious poetry, however, reflects self-doubt, crises of faith, despair at the loss of grace. She expressly excludes her largest collection of poetry, Das geistliche Jahr/The Spiritual Year, poems on the church calendar, from the edition of 1844. But her religion is also a solace amid threatening nature or a disturbing physical state (think of poems like ‘Durchwachte Nacht/Sleepless Night’, ‘Im Moose/In the Moss’, ‘Mondesaufgang/Moonrise’, ‘Der Knabe im Moor/The Boy in the Moor’). Or it can provide a moral framework for a theme like that of retribution (‘Die Vergeltung/Retribution’, ‘Der Spiritus familiaris des Rosstäuschers/The Horse Dealer’s Familiar Spirit’), most famously visible in Die Judenbuch/The Jews’ Tree, where the issues are at once clear but also obscure and mystifying. For this is a poet who by her own admission has second sight, who can see beyond appearances, who has visions, often disturbing, that give intimations but intimations only, of events long since inaccessible to memory or record (as in ‘Des Arztes Vermächtnis/The Physician’s Testament’).

How does she see herself as a poet in relation to the task that she defines as the poet’s? There is nothing gratuitous, nothing lightly undertaken in her devotion to poetry. We see this in the poems, ‘Der Dichter — Dichters Glück’, which form a pair:

‘Der Dichter — Dichters Glück/The Poet — Poet’s Good Fortune’

I

Die ihr beym fetten Mahle lacht
Euch eure Blumen zieht in Scherben,
Und was an Gold Euch zugedacht
Euch wohlbehaglich laßt vererben
Ihr starrt dem Dichter ins Gesicht,

A translation of the complete poem may be found in Appendix Two at the end of this chapter.
Verwundert, daß er Rosen bricht
Von Disteln, aus dem Quell der Augen
Korall und Perle weiß zu saugen

Daß er den Blitz hernieder langt
Um seine Lampe zu entzünden
Im Wettertoben wenn Euch bangt,
Den rechten Odem weiß zu finden
Ich starrt ihn an mit halbem Neid,
Den Geistescräusus seiner Zeit
Und wißt es nicht, mit welchen Qualen
Er seine Schätze muß bezahlen!

Wißt nicht, daß ihn, Verdammten gleich,
Nur rinnend Feuer kann ernähren,
Nur der durchstürmten Wolke Reich
Den Lebensodem kann gewähren
Daß, wo das Haupt ihr sinnend hängt
Sich blutig ihm die Thräne drängt
Nur in des schärfsten Dornes Spalten
Sich seine Blume kann entfalten

Meint ihr das Wetter zünde nicht?
Meint ihr der Sturm erschüttre nicht?
Meint ihr die Thräne brenne nicht?
Meint ihr die Dornen stechen nicht?
Ja, eine Lamp' hat er entfacht,
Die nur das Mark ihm sieden macht!
Ja Perlen fischt er und Juvele
Die kosten nichts als seine Seele!

II

Locke nicht, du Strahl aus der Höh
Denn noch lebt des Prometheus Geyer
Stille still, du buhlender See
Denn noch wachen die Ungeheuer
Neben deines Hortes kristallnem Schrein,
Senk die Hand mein fürstlicher Zecher
Dort drunten bleicht das morsche Gebein
Desh der getaucht nach dem Becher

Und du flatternder Lodenstraß,  
Du der Distel mystische Rose
Strecke nicht deine Fäden aus
This is, let us admit it from the start, hard poetry. I think it is hard because Droste wants to tell us that the métier of the poet (that is, the office, if you like), is hard, involves sacrifices and deprivations. I am reminded of Grillparzer’s poem, ‘Abschied von Gastein/Leaving Gastein’, where we have a similar set of images, including that of the pearl. One senses that this is a poem which is not making concessions to atmosphere or to nuance, but that it is coming at us with a series of seemingly unrelated images, none of which is part of one symbolic whole but is amplifying and illustrating the central idea of the poem: a fairly traditional use of image or symbol. We notice the use of a regular rhyme pattern: ‘Der Dichter’ in fact uses the traditional stanza known as *ottava rima*, much favoured by Goethe’s generation and since. ‘Dichters Glück’ also has an eight-lined stanza, but the metre has changed from iambic to trochaic, with anapaests for variation (‘du Strahl aus der Höh’). In a fairly recent volume of feminist studies on Droste, a contributor has spoken of the ‘metrischer Käfig’ (‘metrical cage’) in which Droste’s poetry is enclosed, a symbol of the constraints under which her poetry was conceived and written, indicative of the enclosure in which she found herself, socially, emotionally, in her spiritual life. The same article also quotes Droste’s letter in which she says, ‘es kümmert mich wenig, daß manche der Lieder weniger wohlklingend sind als die früheren, diese ist eine Gelegenheit wo ich der Form nicht den geringsten nützlichen Gedanken aufopfern darf’.

It is an interesting observation, as the author goes on to show that a few poems only, including the famous ‘Im Grase’ (see below), escape from that cage or confinement. Historically, the statement is problematic, as a very large part of Biedermeier lyrical poetry, indeed

5 HKA, II, i, 69f.
7 ‘Ich bin nicht allzu berührt, daß einige der Lieder nicht so gut klingen wie die früheren. Dies ist eine Gelegenheit, wo ich der Form nicht den geringsten nützlichen Gedanken aufopfern darf’. HKA, IX, i, 86.
nineteenth-century lyrical poetry in general, is rhyme-bound and rhetorical, less concerned with ‘Wohlklang’ (the musical qualities of the lyrical form) than with what is being said, the message.

Thus in technical rhetorical terms the poem opens with an apostrophe and continues with a set of sustained phrases. It then (stanza 4) introduces a rhetorical question with a fourfold anaphora, which neatly takes up the themes of the first two stanzas and gives them renewed emphasis. Image and meaning correspond exactly, provided, that is, that you recognize the image — not always an easy feat. The second part repeats the structure of the first, but in a shorter space and with greater economy and density of words, with exclamation, apostrophe and rhetorical question. Droste is here working within an accepted framework of devices and meanings. She is not trying to mystify or to create an atmosphere; she is trying to instruct, to spell out, to make clear, unmistakably clear, what poetry is for her. In that sense, it is related to that collection of her poetry that is for today’s readers least accessible, Das geistliche Jahr, with its allegorical approach, the absolute identification of image and meaning, the submission of the personal and the general.

In those terms, these two poems are stating that poetry does not have the function of exhausting its possibilities in the pursuit of beauty; it cannot lose sight of its basic moral function, which of course can be compatible with beauty. She says (stanza 1) that those who succeed in the material world, or are not in touch with nature (‘eure Blumen zieht in Scherben’8) are amazed at what the poet is able to extract from the most unpromising or uncompromising of materials: roses from thistles, pearls and coral from tears. The poet seems to be the one whose gifts are richest of all: ‘Geistescrösus seiner Zeit’, a real Croesus of the spirit. And yet they are won at a cost. The next stanza refers to the thunderbolt of Zeus, the perilous element in which the poet has to live and the sufferings that are necessary to the work of art. All this is reality (hence that fourfold anaphora reinforcing the message), but it is a reality which leads to mortal peril (‘kostet nichts als seine Seele’). ‘Dichters Glück’ expands on the enticements of poetic art (‘Locke nicht’). The images which refer to the experience of poetry are total and all-consuming: Prometheus, Goethe’s ‘Der

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8 ‘Grow flowers in clay pots’.
Fischer/The Fisher’, Schiller’s ‘Der Taucher/The Diver’, all changed into symbols of sacrifice for art’s sake. Then the poem suddenly becomes mysterious and difficult of meaning, yet richly evocative: ‘du flatternder Lodenstrauß / Du der Distel mystische Rose’.\(^9\) It is a closely observed and highly poetic image of the thistle or teasel. Yet the word ‘mystisch’ gives it away, with its religious associations. Then comes ‘Strecke nicht deine Fäden aus / Mich umschlingend so lind und lose’.\(^10\) The ‘mystical rose’ of the thistle contains a grub or worm inside its crown, which is healing, ‘heilend’. A poem which has up to now operated mainly in a conventional level, with accessible images, now confronts us with an image that few today would understand. Droste’s interest in botany and in its application for healing purposes, in galvanism and homeopathy, in folk cures — this, too, is part of Heimat and ‘regionalism’ — comes out in this image. She is referring here to a cure known in Westphalian folk medicine: a fly that lays its eggs in the head of the thistle and whose larvae are used for various medicinal purposes. It has been a long-hallowed tradition in religious poetry and iconography to associate certain plants with spiritual qualities.\(^11\) It is still part of the world of the stigmatized nun at Dülmen, Anna Katharina Emmerick, so venerated by Clemens Brentano. It makes the link between the scientific and the mystical sides of nature. With that essentially religious association, Droste brings herself into the poem; it becomes linked with her experience. There is almost an air of resignation as she takes upon herself the function of the thistle made by poetry into a rose. She is to be consumed inwardly so that her works may be the means of salvation (‘heilend’) to others. Is that ‘worm’ her infirmity, her self-sacrifice? She leaves us to work that out for ourselves.

Note the transition from ‘dem Dichter ins Gesicht’ (‘staring at him’) of the first stanza of ‘Der Dichter’ to the personal in this last stanza of ‘Dichters Glück’. It is announced by a change of metre in the last two verses of the poem, to introduce the personal amid all the rhetoric and metaphorical apparatus.

If the recondite associations of the nature reference in ‘Dichters Glück’ may seem mystifying, they nevertheless serve as a reminder

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9 ‘And you, fluttering teasel head, / You mystical thistle rose’.
10 ‘Do not stretch out your thread / To encircle me so close’.
that this is a poet of minute observation and an almost encyclopaedic
display of knowledge about the realm of nature. It is not nature
randomly observed, but grasped in a sense of order and hierarchy,
almost in sequence. It is a reflection of Droste’s reading of one of the
nineteenth century’s most popular works on nature, Friedrich Justin
Bertuch’s Naturgeschichte/Natural History. But she is familiar also with
the writings of the nature philosopher Lorenz Oken. She knows about
the various nineteenth-century theories of the creation and origins
of the earth. Hence her vocabulary betrays more than just a passing
acquaintance with the scientific pursuits of her century, something she
shares with Goethe: ‘Den Fäden gleich, die, grünlicher Asbest, / Schaun
so behaglich aus dem Wassernest’ or ‘Gleich Bildern von Daguerre, die
Deck entlang’ describing the terrors of lying awake at night, with the
physiological detail of ‘wie mir das Blut im Hirne zuckt’. Even in Das
geistliche Jahr we find words like ‘Phosphorpflanze’, ‘elektrisch Feuer’,
‘EMBRIO’, ‘galvansche Kette’. The collection called Heidebilder/Heath
Scenes has sections where she describes every plant or stone or notes the
light reflected on the wing-cases of a beetle; indeed, there are poems
which rehearse the names of rocks in their geological formations, marl,
gneiss, flint, mica, felspar. And yet this nature observation is never
an end in itself and is often integrated into a more conventional set of
images and topoi (sea, wild animals, house and home) that bespeak
both danger and security.

Often these nature reveries produce meditations, dreams or visions.
In one or two of the ‘geological’ poems, she sees the process of death
and petrification that has produced the formations — and finds herself
in the realm of forlornness and death:

12 Cf. the final stanza of ‘Die Mergelgrube’. On this, see Nettesheim, Die geistige Welt, 15–36.
13 ‘Like the threads, asbestos-green, / Gaze up from the comfort of their watery nest’. ‘Die Linde/The Linden Tree’, HKA, I, i, 44.
15 ‘Phosphorus plant’, HKA, IV, i, 81.
16 ‘Electric fire’, ibid., 92.
17 ‘EMBRIO’, ibid., 138.
18 ‘Galvanic series’, ibid., 145.
19 Translations of these stanzas are to be found in Appendix Two at the end of this chapter.
'Die Mergelgrube'

Und müde, müde sank ich an den Rand
Der staub'gen Gruft; da rieselte der Grand
Auf Haar und Kleider mir, ich ward so grau
Wie eine Leich' im Katakomben-Bau,
Und mir zu Füßen hört ich leises Knirren,
Ein Rütteln, ein Gebröckel und ein Schirren.
Es war der Totenkäfer, der im Sarg
So eben eine frische Leiche barg;20

‘Der Hünenstein’

Ich wußte gleich, es war ein Hünengrab,
Und fester drückt’ ich meine Stirn hinab,
Wollüstig saugend an des Grauens Süße,
Bis es mit eis’gen Krallen mich gepackt,
Bis wie ein Gletscher-Bronn des Blutes Takt
Aufquoll und hämmert’ unterm Mantelvließe.

Die Decke über mir, gesunken, schief,
An der so blaß gehämt das Mondlicht schließt,
Wie eine Witwe an des Gatten Grabe;
Vom Hirtenfeuer Kohlenscheite sahn
So leichenbrandig durch den Thimian,
Daß ich sie abwärts schnellte mit dem Stabe.21

Note the images of physical frailty, the disquietingly strong beat of her pulse, the realms of terror into which she has entered (‘leichenbrandig/like funeral pyres’).

In some of the longer ‘set-piece’ nature poems, like ‘Mondesaufgang’ or ‘Durchwachte Nacht’, the images of darkness and light take on their traditional allegorical significance as the realms of sin and salvation, where the moonlight or the rays of the early morning sun dispel the terrors and dangers of the night. Her almost exact English contemporary John Keble (the author of The Christian Year [1827]) writes there of the ‘Sun of my soul’ and ‘It is not night if Thou be near’.22

But Droste’s nature poems are not all visions or dreams or insomniac broodings. We see her drawing nature into her feelings of love, affection,

20 HKA, I, i, 51.
21 Ibid., 44.
charity or friendship, the other abiding themes of her poetry. We should not sentimentalize them, as these themes are also bound up with isolation, renunciation or limitation. They are in many ways the only consolation left. The following final stanzas from ‘Spätes Erwachen/ Late Awakening’ (1843–44) should be read together with the poignant ‘Lebt wohl/Farewell’:23

Wie ist das anders nun geworden,
Seit ich in’s Auge dir geblickt,
Wie ist nun jeder Welle Borden
Ein Menschenbildniß eingedrückt!

Wie fühle ich allen warmen Händen
Nun ihre leisen Pulse nach,
Und jedem Blick sein scheues Wenden
Und jeder schweren Brust ihr Ach.

Und alle Pfade möchte ich fragen:
Wo zieht ihr hin, wo ist das Haus,
In dem lebend’ge Herzen schlagen,
Lebend’ger Odem schwillt hinaus?

Entzünden möchte ich alle Kerzen
Und rufen jedem milden Seyn:
Auf ist mein Paradies im Herzen,
Zieht alle, alle nun hinein!24

With this, we lead over to Droste’s best-known and possibly best poem, ‘Im Grase/In the Grass’:25

Süße Ruh’, süßer Taumel im Gras,
Von des Krautes Arom umhaucht,
Tiefe Flut, tieflief trunkne Flut,
Wenn die Wolke am Azure verraucht,
Wenn aufs müde, schwimmende Haupt
Süßes Lachen gaukelt herab,
Liebe Stimme säuselt und träuft
Wie die Lindenblüth’ auf ein Grab.

Wenn im Busen die Todten dann
Jede Leiche sich streckt und regt,

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23 A translation of this poem is to be found in Appendix Two at the end of this chapter.
24 HKA, I, i, 323.
25 A translation of this poem is to be found in Appendix Two at the end of this chapter.
Leise, leise den Odem zieht,
Die geschloss’ne Wimper bewegt,
Todte Lieb, todte Lust, todte Zeit,
All die Schätze, im Schutt verwühlt,
Sich berühren mit schüchternem Klang
Gleich den Glöckchen, vom Winde umspielt.

Stunden, flücht’ger ihr als der Kuß
Eines Strahls auf den trauernden See,
Als des zieh’nden Vogels Lied,
Das mir niederperlt aus der Höh’,
Als des schillernden Käfers Blitz
Wenn den Sonnenpfad er durcheilt,
Als der flücht’ge Druck einer Hand,
Die zum letzten Male verweilt.

Dennoch, Himmel, immer mir nur
Dieses Eine nur: für das Lied
Jedes freien Vogels im Blau
Eine Seele, die mit ihm zieht,
Nur für jeden kärzlichen Strahl
Meinen farbig schillernden Saum,
Jeder warmen Hand meinen Druck
Und für jedes Glück meinen Traum.26

Some of the quotations or references from other poems will confirm that many of the individual images of this poem are already pre-formulated. Unlike the ones already cited, this poem is only partially rhymed. For the commentator quoted earlier, it represents some breaking out of the metrical ‘cage’ and a greater freedom and musicality.27 There are partial rhymes like ‘See’ / ‘Höh’, ’verwühlt’ / ‘umspielt’. The rhyme scheme does allow for some unrhymed endings, and the stress words — ‘süß’, ‘Flut’, ‘Azure’, ‘müde’, ‘säuselt’ (first stanza) — are not necessarily the rhyme words. The metre is not clearly definable, but I cannot see that it is basically anapaestic (as opposed to having some feet in this metre) nor do I feel the dancing rhythm, that the same commentator senses. In fact, it displays great subtlety in its stresses and defies exact metrical description. For instance: already the trochaic second half of the line consciously has the two strong stresses of ‘Von des Krautes

26 HKA, I, i, 328.
Arom umhaucht’ and not the anapaestic ‘Arome umhaucht’, as many editions print it. What we can say is that it has so called ‘masculine’ endings for every verse, and thus a stressed ending for every stanza, ‘Grab’, ‘umspielt’, ‘verweilt’, ‘Traum’.

Droste’s opening is a synaesthesia, a merging and blurring of sense associations. The speaker is lying in the grass, on the ground, in profound repose, producing a ‘Taumel’ ‘Taumel’ is a vertigo, a faint, a loss of control when one is standing. Here, it is in lying, as the scents of the grass crowd in and become the very air one is breathing: ‘umhaucht’. Note in the midst of this vertiginous surrender to the tang of grass how appropriate the word ‘Arom’ is instead of ‘Duft’, preparing us for the less usual ‘Azur’. The merging into the scents of the grass becomes a flood, ‘Flut’, as the speaker, from her prone position, sees the clouds dissipated above her. Note how the long and soporific sounds of ‘süß’ and ‘tief’ have contributed to this effect in their two and threefold repetition. The element of time is kept in the centre of the stanza, ‘Wenn [...] wenn’. It is hard to say whether this is a ‘when’ clause or an ‘as’ clause, whether there is a definite temporal progression of sensations, one coming after the other, or whether past and present become blurred with the blurring of vision, ‘schwimmendes Haupt’. But ‘süß’ leads through ‘tief’ to ‘müde’; and in that loss of mental control, akin to fainting, ‘süß’ is repeated. We do not have the sense of being buried in the grass and looking up into the sky, but the sensation of sounds ‘herabgaukeln’, spirited down by some sleight of hand, dropping mysteriously. A dear voice, ‘säuselt’, like a sighing or trembling of the wind; also ‘träuft’, which reminds us of water drops, or even honey. ‘Träuft’ is the first simile in the stanza: like the blossoms of the lime tree dropping on to a grave. The lime tree is of course the sentimental tree par excellence in German poetry, associated also with death and graveyards: ‘Lang sah ich, Meta, schon dein Grab / Und seine Linde wehn’, writes Klopstock in ‘Das Wiedersehn/The Reunion’. And a grave, to have a lime planted over it and in flower, would not be fresh, but old.

This seems to be borne out by the threefold repetition in the next stanza of ‘Todte Lieb, todte Lust, todte Zeit’. But the speaker is now, as it were, in the grave, surrounded by the dead — in her mind (‘im Busen’). As in the first stanza, repetition of associative words — ‘Leise, leise’, ‘todt’, ‘todt’, ‘todt’ brings out the awareness of the dead, each one coming to life in her mind’s eye, each one drawing breath, opening
its eyes, a kind of general resurrection of that which is nevertheless irrevocably dead, is part of the debris and detritus of the past — until that last image of sound, another synaesthesia, brings in sense reactions that are feeling and haunting and lyrically associative.

Here, as I see it, the poem divides into a second half. The sense of loss and transitoriness in a state of ‘Taumel’ and semi-dream, is balanced by very precise, if fugitive, nature images. This is what those departed hours were like, that are apostrophized at the beginning of the stanza: ‘Stunden, flücht’ger ihr’. They are a set of sustained but unrelated images, merging only in the fact that they represent a variety of sense impressions: the flash of light on the dark water, sensuously expressed by a kiss, ‘Kuß’; the song of the bird, with ‘niederperlen’, which suggests dew dropping (akin to ‘säuselt’ and ‘träuft’); the sparkling wing-cases of the beetle in a beam of sunlight; the clasp of a hand for the last time, ‘zum letzten Male’, underlining the fleeting nature of the other images and reminding us of the brevity of human contacts.

Stanza four is difficult. On the one hand, it is terse and laconic, on the other insistent and repetitive (‘immer mir nur / Dieses Eine nur’). It is an address to heaven that looks away from the fleeting and fugitive, a prayer that for every transitory impression or experience the poet may be granted an accompanying gift as an enrichment. For birdsong there is a soul. Does that mean that she will invest each song with a soul, with something that will give it life? Or does she think of a soul each time she hears a bird sing? For every meagre ray of light she will give, as it says, the full iridescence of her shot-silk hem. What can that mean? How are we to read ‘Saum’? For feminist commentators, it means ‘Grenze’, ‘edge’, denoting the limitations of her art, thus far and thus far only. Yet ‘Saum’ also means ‘hem’, familiar to German Bible readers from Isaiah 6:1 (AV, ‘train’). Is it, pars pro toto, her art? Is it God’s garment? Is it herself and all she can offer? The text offers no clear answer, nor do I believe that it should. But I am reminded of the analogy of two other women poets of the nineteenth century who employ a similar image. Christina Rossetti in ‘A Birthday’ speaks of a ‘rainbow shell’, ‘peacocks with a hundred eyes’, drawing on nature to describe her

31 ‘Hours, you more fleeting’.
32 ‘Grant only this, / But only this’.
Emily Dickinson, describing crocuses, is bolder, with ‘Rainbow’, ‘World Cashmere’, ‘Peacock’s purple Train’, but she outlines a similar process where nature and human artifice are merged. Nature becomes more accessible to our affections as we personify it. Our affections are enhanced by reference to the beauties of the natural world. Droste’s poem still defies precise analysis, although the ‘World Cashmere’ may well be part of it.

For every warm hand, hers pressed into it: an affirmation of every human response to friendship or affection. And — she is a poet — her dream, her vision to accompany every happiness. Droste is shifting the emphasis away from ‘flüchtig’ to an affirmation of human activity for good and right and virtue, finding a blessing in every kind of human doing, discovering true humanity in the face of the very shortness and insecurity and limitation of our existence. The poem makes no direct appeal to our senses or our intellect. It is full of associations, snatches of meaning and mergers of images. And yet it is a reflective poem, where symbols are taken and presented to us without explanation, indirectly, for us to ponder the relation between nature and human experience.

Appendix Two

Translation of Droste, ‘Der Dichter — Dichters Glück/The Poet — Poet’s Fortune’

I

You who banquet at your ease
And grow flowers in pots of clay,
And enjoy your gold’s increase
Inherited along the way;
Into the poet’s face you look,
And wonder at the rose he took
From thistles, from the eye’s deep well
Can suck pearls and red of coral.


Lightning seizes with his hand
To set his lamp aflame;
While you are cowering from the storm
He finds the breath he needs, to draw.
You stare at him, half full of spite,
A Croesus, but one of the mind,
Unheeding of the pain it brings
For the treasures that he sings.

You know not: he is like the damned,
Living fire in his hand,
Lives in tempest and storm-cloud,
Breathes only in that sphere,
And where you hang your pensive heads
From blood he presses tears,
Where thorns press, nowhere else,
Is where his flower appears.

Does the bolt not kindle?
Does the storm not shake?
Does the tear not burn?
Do the thorns not prick?
Yes, he has lit a lamp
That sears his blood.
He fishes for pearls and jewels
At no cost - but his life.

II

Beckon not, bolt from on high,
Prometheus’ vulture lives still.
Peace, peace, luring lake,
The monsters keep yet their watch
Over your crystal casket’s hoard.
Carousing king, drink no more up,
Below are the blanching bones
Of the man who dived for the cup.

And you, fluttering teasle head,
You mystic thistle rose,
Do not stretch out your thread
To encircle me so close.
The worm whispers in my ear.
Hidden inward, healing,
I the cankered rose once fair
Health to others bringing?
Translation of Droste, ‘Die Mergelgrube/The Marl Pit’

Weary, weary, kneeling on the edge
In sand, a shower of gravel covered me,
Hair and clothes, I was a mass of grey,
A corpse entombed in stone, perhaps,
And at my feet I heard a rustling sound,
A shaking, yielding, the buzz of wings:
The death beetle in the coffin’s waste
Had found a fresh corpse on which to feast.

Translation of Droste, ‘Der Hünenstein/The Barrow Grave’

I knew at once it was a barrow-hill.
And pressing down my forehead harder still,
Sweet horror mixed with lust seized hold of me,
Till icy claws held me tenaciously,
Till, like a glacier stream my beating pulse,
Swelled and hammered under my coat’s sheet.

The ceiling over me, sunk and out of true
With moonlight casting down its ghastly hue,
A widow at the grave, her husband dead:
The herdsman’s fire of coals seemed to shine
Like flickering funeral pyres amid the thyme;
I took a stick and pushed them to one side.

Translation of Droste, ‘Spätes Erwachen/Late Awakening’

What change came over me since then,
When I first gazed into your eye,
For every wave within my ken
Bears on it your face stamped like a die.

And how I feel those hands that stay
Their warmth, their pulse’s easy strain,
The shy regards once turned away
And every breast racked in pain.

And all the paths this question set:
Where goes the way and whence the dwelling
Where living hearts are beating yet
And living breath the breast is swelling?
Light up the lamps on every side
And call to every weary heart:
My paradise is open wide,
All come in: never let us part!

Translation of Droste, ‘Im Grase/In the Grass’

Sweet repose, sweet faint in the grass,
The herb’s aroma my breath.
Deep flood, deep, deep drunken flood
When the cloud in the azure dissolves,
When on my weary swimming head
Sweet laughter comes dancing down,
Dear voice purls down from on high
Like the linden flower on a grave.

When in my bosom then the dead,
Each body stretches and strains,
Gently, gently draws in breath,
The eyelid flickers, once closed,
Dead love, dead desire, dead time,
The stony ground reveals its store,
Shy at first, mingle their sounds
Like the tinkling of bells in the wind.

Hours! you, more fleeting than the kiss
Of a ray on the doleful lake,
Than the song of the passing bird,
A pearly sound from the height,
Than the beetle’s lightning flash
As it catches the path of the sun,
Than the fleeting grasp of a hand
Held firm that one last time.

Yet still: heaven, grant only this,
But only this: for the song
Of each bird in the vault
A soul that shares its way.
For a ray, however dim,
The shot-silk hues of my hem,
For each warm hand my clasp,
And for every fortune my dream.