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## ‘Twin Spin’. Ulrike Draesner’s Poetry of Science

Ulrike Draesner is one of several German poets who have used their work to explore contemporary science over the last three decades or so. In many ways it is not surprising. With what the British poet Lavinia Greenlaw has called the widespread ‘domestication of technology’ during the twentieth century,<sup>1</sup> it is almost inevitable that science should become an integrated part of cultural expression and challenge the notion of the ‘two cultures’. Writing about science might thus even be thought of as a necessary mark of one’s engagement in the present day: ‘a way of writing for the moment’ as the Austrian poet Raoul Schrott put it, writing about his own interest in the subject.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Peter Geist went so far as to call the ‘paradigm shift from a historical interrogation of reality to one drawing on the natural sciences’ one of the defining characteristics of German poetry in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Hermann Korte, too, saw the rapprochement between the two spheres of knowledge (poetry and science) as one of the key developments of that decade.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, the interest in science among literary practitioners has sometimes been understood as part of the modern renaissance of the ancient trope of the *poeta doctus* or ‘learned poet’ along with the concern with classical tropes.<sup>5</sup> This has also been taken up in recent research; for example, the project based in Lorraine, in conjunction with the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, and led by Sylvie Grimm-Hamen, on the ‘poeta doctus’ / ‘écrivain savant’, including study of

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1 Lavinia Greenlaw, ‘Unstable regions: poetry and science’, in *Cultural Babbage. Technology, Time and Invention*, ed. by Francis Spufford and Jenny Uglow (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp. 215–226 (p. 224).

2 Raoul Schrott, “‘Die Wahlverwandschaften’: Raoul Schrott im Gespräch”, *heureka!*, 3 (1999), 17–18, p. 17.

3 Peter Geist, “‘die ganz großen themen fühlen sich gut an’”. Die Wiederkehr des Politischen in der jüngeren Lyrik’, in *Junge Lyrik*, ed. by Heinz Ludwig Arnold (Munich: Text + Kritik, 2006), pp. 98–117 (p. 102).

4 See also: Hermann Korte, *Deutschsprachige Lyrik seit 1945*, 2nd rev. edn (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004), p. 280.

5 Karen Leeder: ‘The “poeta doctus” and the new German literature’, *Germanic Review*, 77.1 (2002), 51–67. Wilfried Barner, ‘Poeta Doctus. Über die Renaissance eines Dichterideals in der deutschen Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts’, in *Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte. Festschrift für Richard Brinkmann*, ed. by Jürgen Brummack et al. (Tübingen: de Gruyter, 1981), pp. 725–752.

Schrott.<sup>6</sup> It is striking that Draesner is not generally discussed in these terms at all – something that undoubtedly has to do with perceptions of gender and learning.<sup>7</sup>

The new interest has also been seen as contributing to a ‘scientific turn’, a ‘cognitive turn’ in modern writing engaged in a ‘poetics of understanding’. Friedrich W. Block, exploring ‘experience as experiment’ in twentieth-century German poetry, was one of one of a number of prominent writers to explore this area.<sup>8</sup> Today ‘cognitive poetics’ is a mainstay of research and this kind of approach chimes with Draesner’s own interests.<sup>9</sup>

It is worth identifying the broad mode of such poetry in order also then to distinguish Draesner’s approach. First, the ‘aesthetic of coldness’, addressed by Helmut Lethen in his *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte* [*Behaviour Theories of Coldness*] of 1994, has been taken up by several commentators to identify a dominant tone in contemporary writing.<sup>10</sup> The cool, cerebral, ironically detached view of the observing outsider that characterised German poet Gottfried Benn’s diction arguably became a hallmark of one strand of poetry of the 1990s onwards. Poetry has even been classed by Durs Grünbein as one of the ‘kalte Medien’ [cold media] in a phrase taken from one of his early sequences of ‘MonoLogische Gedichte’ [‘Mono-Logical Poems’], themselves a tribute to Benn.<sup>11</sup> Benn’s influence extends not

6 Compare: <http://cegil.univ-lorraine.fr/content/lecrivain-savant-defis-et-enjeux-dune-posture-dans-la-culture-allemande-du-xxeme-siecle>.

7 A notable exception is Anna Alissa Ertel’s book *Körper, Gehirne, Gene: Lyrik und Naturwissenschaft bei Ulrike Draesner und Durs Grünbein* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2011). The Nancy project also looks at female authors although not (yet) at Draesner. Compare also: Aura Heydenreich und Klaus Mecke, ‘Auf der Suche nach Sprache: Ulrike Draesner im Dialog zu *Mitgift* und *Vorliebe*’, in *Physik und Poetik: Produktionsästhetik und Werkgenese. Autorinnen und Autoren im Dialog*, ed. by Aura Heydenreich and Klaus Mecke (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2015), pp. 23–49.

8 The term ‘scientific turn’ comes from Swantje Lichtenstein, *Das lyrische Projekt. Rhetorik, Räumlichkeit und Wissenschaft* (Munich: Iudicium, 2004), p. 15; ‘the cognitive turn’ based on ‘a poetics of understanding’ is explored by Friedrich W. Block, “Erfahrung als Experiment”. *Poetik im Zeitalter naturwissenschaftlicher Erkenntnistheorien*, in *Lyrik des 20. Jahrhunderts. Text + Kritik Sonderband*, ed. by Hans Ludwig Arnold (Munich: Text + Kritik, 1999), pp. 248–264.

9 Peter Stockwell, *Texture: A Cognitive Aesthetics of Reading* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) and Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2019, 2nd rev. edn 2020) offer a useful introduction.

10 Helmut Lethen, *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1994). See, for example, Erk Grimm: ‘Mediamania? Contemporary German poetry in the age of new media information technologies: Thomas Kling and Durs Grünbein’, *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature*, 21.1 (1997), 275–301.

11 Durs Grünbein, *Grauzone morgens* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1988), p. 81.

only to the use of medical imagery and anatomical vocabulary, however, but also to an understanding of the place of the poet at work:

It [the modern lyric subject] enters its laboratory for words, and it is here that it models, and produces words, opens them, explodes them, destroys them, in order to load them with tension, which will in its essence perhaps last several decades.<sup>12</sup>

This approach situates the concern with science then as part of an engagement in the historical moment, but also as a withdrawal from a conventional understanding of the lyric as the province of feeling, towards something akin much more to observation and experiment. Finally, it foregrounds as integral to that approach (as here in Benn) the importance of the mode of expression available to the lyric.

Grünbein, for example, points to the influence of Zbigniew Herbert as one of those poets who had cultivated both the coolness of precisely observed reality, but also a vocabulary of science, both as a nod to the modern but also as a way of refreshing poetic diction. Alongside the concentration 'on the immediate', 'the focus on things: buttons, stools, tables, inanimate objects' comes a language which moves away from the everyday. Grünbein's example is instructive:

'While the head of the sperm sinks into the oocyte, the tail beats vigorously, so that the egg shifts in a slight rotation and the tail of the sperm slips completely into the perivitelline space. The force of the flagellum then suddenly abates.' This little gem comes from a standard medical work, a pocket atlas of embryology. A pictorial, powerful language, don't you find? Pure poetics; and there is a sense of drama there, too. Everything is so clear that one feels one is directly involved in the sacred process of fertilization.<sup>13</sup>

He continues focussing in on the phrase '*perivitelline space*':

Pure technical jargon that repels most who hear it. Nevertheless, it is this that is used to describe the origin of the human life. And now the question: what speaks against refreshing the repertoire of language from time to time, if that helps to open new perspectives? Tell me, Brother Herbert, whom I never met?

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<sup>12</sup> Gottfried Benn, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Gerhard Schuster and Holger Hof (Stuttgart: Akademie 1986–2003), 7 vols, vol. I, p. 544.

<sup>13</sup> Durs Grünbein, 'Brief an Zbigniew Herbert, Dankesrede', Warsaw, 15 September 2020. This speech, written for the award of the Zbigniew Herbert prize, was published as Durs Grünbein, 'Bei lebendiger Dichtung verschwinden: An und über Zbigniew Herbert', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 29.11.2020, and can be accessed in my English: <https://fundacijaherberta.com/en/the-herbert-prize/the-ceremony-of-presenting-the-zbigniew-herbert-prize/the-zbigniew-herbert-award-ceremony-2020/>.

For Grünbein the language of science and the formulae of poetry are discourses that are profoundly intertwined: ‘these two things belong together and depend on one another’.<sup>14</sup>

Both can be seen as allied ways of apprehending the world. Others have also supported this view. Raoul Schrott points to what he calls the ‘elective affinities’ between poetry and science in interviews and in his numerous essays on poetry and physics.<sup>15</sup> The Nobel Laureate and immunologist Miroslav Holub too posits a profound complementarity between the disciplines.<sup>16</sup> To quote Greenlaw again: ‘There is a relation between poetry and science. It is shaped by culture and history, by affinities of subject and motivation, and the influence of paradigm and epistemology on perception and response. Inspiration, discovery and connection are integral to both disciplines. As are tedious hours spent learning a craft and practising technique.’<sup>17</sup>

The two discourses can thus be said to share an economy based on perception and articulation, whether in the form of conceit or hypothesis, metaphor or proof. What is more, poetry can be used to express scientific ideas in a manner that takes them beyond the narrow realm of scientific discourse and anchors them within the broader cultural and historical context.<sup>18</sup> This focus on a shared and often reciprocal use of metaphor has been a key driving force for several writers in their interest in science and language. In his *Handbuch der Wolkenputzerei* (2005) Schrott cites this kind of analogy – the ‘Aha-Erlebnis’ [light-bulb moment] of metaphor as ‘the most elementary form of creating meaning that we have. The new only becomes comprehensible through the familiar, because we always explain things through comparison with other fields’.<sup>19</sup> It has also been the starting point for critics who have addressed the links between them and tried to develop a ‘poetics of science’.<sup>20</sup> The best of the poems written in recent years, however,

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14 Ibid.

15 Schrott, “‘Die Wahlverwandschaften’”: Raoul Schrott im Gespräch’, p. 17. See also Raoul Schrott, *Die Erde ist blau wie eine Orange. Polemisches, Poetisches, Privates* (Munich: Hanser, 1999).

16 Miroslav Holub, ‘Poetry and science: the poetry of science / the science of poetry’, in Holub, *The Dimension of the Present Moment and Other Essays* (London: Faber, 1990), pp. 122–146.

17 Greenlaw, ‘Unstable Regions’, p. 226.

18 Holub, ‘Poetry and science’, p. 135.

19 Raoul Schrott, *Handbuch der Wolkenputzerei: Gesammelte Essays* (Munich: Hanser, 2005), p. 114.

20 I go into this in greater detail in Karen Leeder, ‘Durs Grünbein and the Poetry of Science’, in *Durs Grünbein: A Companion*, ed. by Michael Eskin, Karen Leeder and Christopher Young (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2013), pp. 67–94.

go further to incorporate scientific principles into the very fabric of the poetry – raising questions about the role and position of the observer, the nature of metaphor, and the possibilities of poetic language.

Ulrike Draesner is one of the poets who navigate this fraught territory most successfully. In this next section I would like to explore how it is treated in her poetry, in the light of these reflections. But also, by focussing on examples from several collections, to show how this theme, and her engagement with it, develops over the course of her work to become a structuring principle of her thinking and her writing. Science is never merely a backdrop for her poetry, nor the lyric subject, nor a casual raid on an exotic range of vocabulary. Rather, from the beginning, her poetry claims an interest in science as a mode of apprehending and articulating the place of the subject in the world, which is fundamental to its project.

Draesner treats scientific themes in many of her works (fiction, poetry and essay). Striking in her presentation, right from the off, is the humanness of the interest. Science is not treated as a thing apart, not an attempt to grapple with the sublime as in her Austrian contemporary Raoul Schrott, for example. Nor is it characterized by a sarcastic laying bare of the stuff of the human in the anatomic flaying of another contemporary, Durs Grünbein's early poetry. It is altogether more human and more intimate. Draesner's interest is first and foremost bodily: starting with the realm of medicine and then branching into more theoretical reflections on epigenetics, brain research, and reproduction. This is unsurprising in a way since the scientific advances in genetics have had, and will continue to have, some of the most profound and immediately palpable effects on day-to-day life. But this is far from the 'cold media' adumbrated above, despite Draesner's documented interest in Benn.<sup>21</sup> Nor does she take recourse to the laboratory of words; rather the dilemmas are played out within the intimate sphere of the body itself, in the business of everyday life, in the encounter with an intimate other and in the processes of reproduction (essential in a human sense but also of course for a writer).<sup>22</sup>

A second related point should be made straight away. Perhaps because for Draesner science is so much part of human life, biological or bodily themes go hand in hand with reflections on zoology, the climate crisis, flora and fauna, language, subjectivity, etc. That is: science is not seen as a thing apart, in any sense, but part and parcel of the business of living, knowing and of writing

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<sup>21</sup> Ulrike Draesner, 'Kleines Gespenst. Gedanken zum lyrischen Ich', in *Ich bin nicht innerlich. Annäherungen an Gottfried Benn*, ed. by Jan Bürger (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2003), pp. 9–30.

<sup>22</sup> See also Emily Jeremiah's contribution in this volume.

and, in line with this, her engagement develops and shifts in the course of her work. This might in other hands seem instinctive or naïve, precisely unscientific. In fact, the opposite is the case. Draesner is concerned, beyond the business of scientific knowledge itself, with the poetic and ethical implications of this knowledge, that is a second order of knowledge:

the knowledge of how to know, or how to acquire knowledge and how to judge that knowledge. This last might be the most important and is influenced by emotion, by personal states, by memories, by your whole life-history.<sup>23</sup>

Vital here is that science, and knowing more generally, is not limited to the rational but is bound up with intimate life. What is more: this implies important things about how we speak about this knowledge. Draesner again:

Since my childhood I've always felt that all these realms of life are intrinsically connected. Language to me seems to penetrate all areas of what we now call science. All forms of science rely on signs and concepts that are phrased in language. There is no mathematics without a special language, for example, scientists must think in language too. And these languages rely on metaphors. A striking one, which has been used for a while now, is that of the genetic code, the genetic alphabet; but that, for example, implies all kinds of interesting questions about syntax, letters or rules. Also, as we know, metaphors tend to be helpful and illuminating, on the one hand, but they are good at hiding things as well. I feel there might be a specific competence that can be added by linguists and people who deal with languages in a real dialogue with science.<sup>24</sup>

## Draesner and the Body

I'd like to turn to some examples from her work, which make some of these observations concrete and demonstrate how such thinking is not merely about a particular vocabulary but also about a structure of being, and of writing.

Draesner's early poems have often been discussed in terms of their relation to the body.<sup>25</sup> Anna Alissa Ertel, for example, begins her chapter on Draesner's

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**23** See Karen Leeder and Lyn Marven, 'The indecipherable Stone. Interview with Ulrike Draesner on the Processes of Literature', in this volume. In English in the original.

**24** *Ibid.*

**25** Jörg Magenau, 'Der Körper als Schnittfläche. Bemerkungen zur Literatur der neuesten Neuen Innerlichkeit: Texte von Reto Hänni, Ulrike Kolb, Ulrike Draesner, Durs Grünbein, Thomas Hettche, Marcel Beyer und Michael Kleeberg', in *Baustelle Gegenwartsliteratur*, ed. by Andreas Erb (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998), pp. 107–21; Anne-Rose Meyer, 'Physiologie und Poesie. Zu Körperdarstellungen in der Lyrik von Ulrike Draesner, Durs Grünbein und Thomas Kling', *Gegenwartsliteratur. A German Studies Yearbook*, 1 (2002), 107–33; Michael Eskin, 'Body Language. Durs Grünbein's Aesthetics', *arcadia*, 37.1 (2002), 42–66; Ruth Owen,

poetry and the body with a quotation from the writer herself: 'Was sich durch mein Werk zieht, ist die Frage nach Körperlichkeit' [what runs through my work is the question of corporeality].<sup>26</sup> Ertel describes the approach of her writing, rightly I think, as 'not psychological, but rather quasi physiological'.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, essays throughout Draesner's writing life return to this most fundamental precondition and obsessive centre of her work.<sup>28</sup> As an essay from 1999 puts it, 'Das heißt nicht: nach innen vordringen, ins Seelenleben, Numinose. Sondern in den Körper. Die Sprache des Körpers destillieren/abziehen. Als Rhythmus, Bild und Wort ist das Gedicht der Extrakt eines körperlichen Zustandes.' [That does not mean: penetrating inside, into the life of the soul, the numinous. But into the body. To distil/extract the language of the body. As rhythm, image and word, the poem is the extract of a bodily condition].<sup>29</sup>

More precisely, her early poems often reflect the body as the object of medical intervention, and the work is driven by medical metaphors.<sup>30</sup> Poems chart the concrete effects of medical intervention and research on the body, especially in relation to reproductive technology. But this is always also seen in the context of the individual's struggle for identity and subjectivity in a time in which organ transplantation, artificial means of prolonging life, illness, and the possibilities of surgical intervention make the boundaries of subjecthood more permeable than ever before. But the work also pays attention to the way these things make themselves manifest in language: 'den Konnex von Sprache und Körper' [the connection between body and language].<sup>31</sup> Draesner's debut volume *gedächtnisschleifen* (1995), for example, boasts an array of body parts, often seen through the lens of medical procedures. Take as an example the poem 'sekret' ['secretion']:<sup>32</sup>

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'Bodies in Contemporary German Poetry', in *Schaltstelle: Neue deutsche Lyrik im Dialog*, *German Monitor* 69, ed. by Karen Leeder (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 269–291.

26 "'Jenseits der Norm". Ulrike Draesner im Spiegel-Interview', in *Der Spiegel*, 13/2002, p. 207.

27 Ertel, *Körper, Gehirne, Gene*, p. 85.

28 For example: Ulrike Draesner, 'Atem, Puls und Bahn. Das Denken des Körpers im Zustand der Sprache', in *Lettre Internationale*, 44 (Spring 1999), 62–67, which sets out key ideas, right through to Ulrike Draesner, *Die fünfte Dimension: Münchner Reden zur Poesie*, ed. by Holger Pils and Frieder von Ammon (Munich: Lyrik Kabinett, 2016).

29 Draesner, 'Atem, Puls und Bahn', p. 68.

30 Meyer, 'Physiologie und Poesie', p. 110.

31 Draesner, 'Atem Puls und Bahn', p. 64.

32 Ulrike Draesner, *gedächtnisschleifen* (Munich: Luchterhand, 1995), p. 19. Translation by Iain Galbraith, from Draesner, *this porous fabric*, p. 25.

Heimlich lohender hinter schwarzen Ästen  
 Wintermorgen klebte an doppelten Scheiben  
 völlig keimfrei die Ärzte sagten ›Drüsen‹  
 betasteten nacheinander den Stoffwechsel  
 kein Grund zur Sorge ein Salzeinlauf löst  
 die Verklemmung ich kam auf die Schüssel  
 im Gesicht wiederholte sich Schließmuskelglätte  
 mein stockendes Sprechen – da habe ich plötzlich  
 auf dem Pythiastuhl habe kein Wort mehr heraus-  
 bringen, plötzlich den Mund nicht mehr bewegen können,  
 mir war, ich würde nie mehr, solche Kehlenangst  
 schnürte mir den Speichel, darunter meine zuckenden,  
 rasenden Muskeln, jemand sagte: vielleicht  
 Drüsenpressen, unerklärlicher Eiweißausfluß, alle  
 Instrumente kreiseln ja, da hob ich mich schon  
 nicht mehr ab von dem Wintermorgen, dem Weiß,  
 dem Grau, hob mich nicht mehr vor dem Hintergrund  
 als Eigenfigur heraus, kleine Rauchwölkchen,  
 Körper geheime Sekrete schwebten mir aus allen  
 Schädelöffnungen, dampften zu den Ohren,  
 Nasenlöchern, Augen, den, ja, wieder geöffneten  
 Fontanellen heraus – betäubende Buchstabentiere,

vergleiche Holzschnitt, um 1450,  
 über Hautgrund abgebildetes Entweichen,  
 sogenanntes schönes Durcheinander-  
 kriechen, von Seelen.

[secretly blazing behind black branches  
 a winter's morning clung to double panes  
 wholly aseptic the doctors said "glands"  
 in succession palpating my metabolism  
 no cause for worry a saline enema will  
 undo the deadlock i was put on the pan  
 levelling of the facial sphincter recurred  
 my speech faltered – and then suddenly  
 on the seat of pythia could not speak  
 not a word could not move my mouth  
 felt i'd never again, such pharyngeal anxiety  
 choking my saliva, below which my twitching  
 raging muscles, someone said: possibly  
 glandular pressure, inexplicable protein discharge  
 all the dials were spinning, by now i no longer  
 stood out from the winter's morning white  
 and grey no longer stuck out as a separate  
 figure against the background tiny smoke-  
 clouds secret secretions fumed from my



every cranial orifice wafted from ears  
 nostrils eyes my, yes, reopened  
 fontanelles – numbing animal letters  
     compare woodcut ca. 1450  
     depicted on a skin background the escape  
     the so-called beautiful inter-  
     seething of souls]

This is a good example of the kind of poem that worries at the bodily periphery and sets medical definitions against a humorous discourse of myth. The self is identified as a suffering I in the poem; the doctors (they) define the problem with medical language and reassure that the issue can be put right. And yet even here we see the blurring of the sense of self as it becomes lost against the background and lost to speech. There is also the indicative 'betäubende Buchstabentiere' (numbing letter animals) at the end that suggest, along with the reference to an oracle, that we are also thinking about the creation of the self and more to the point, the self in poetry.

By the 2001 volume *für die nacht geheuerte zellen*, the focus on medical procedures which also provoke questions about on the nature of the self are well established. Here though they are more drastic and are also framed in terms of their scientific context: anatomy, anthropology, physiology, medical technology, neuroscience and genetics.<sup>33</sup> Again this is unsurprising, as these represent key advances in the science of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century which have impacted on society as central interpretative paradigms. Major poems like the 'autopilot I–IV' sequence from *gedächtnisschleifen* (pp. 101–105) and the 'bläuliche sphinx (metal)' cycle from the next collection, *für die nacht geheuerte zellen* (35–49) have been interpreted in detail.<sup>34</sup> Both challenge the limits of the human body; both depict the human body as the subject of medical

33 Ulrike Draesner, *für die nacht geheuerte zellen* (Munich: Luchterhand, 2001). See also 'falkisches, völk' (pp. 24–25), 'luna matutina' (p. 30), 'pissblumen' (p. 33), 'a, b, photon c' (pp. 72–73), 'oxygen' (pp. 76–77), 'zoom ins moor' (p. 115), 'post dolly' (p. 117), 'nackt ist die wahrheit' (p. 123), 'stoffen' (pp. 124–125).

34 On 'autopilot I–IV' see, for example, Bettina von Jagow, Florian Steger, 'Bilder des Menschen zwischen Selbstbestimmung und Fremdsteuerung: Ulrike Draesners autopilot-Gedichte', in *Repräsentationen. Medizin und Ethik in Literatur und Kunst der Moderne*, ed. by von Jagow and Steger (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2004), pp. 51–65; Ertel, *Körper, Gehirne, Gene*, pp. 116–139; Michael Braun, 'Gedichte wollen gedacht sein: Ulrike Draesners autopilot-Zyklus', in *Gedichte von Ulrike Draesner: Interpretationen*, ed. by Christoph Jürgensen, Erik Schilling, Rüdiger Zymmer (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020), pp. 39–48. On 'bläuliche sphinx', see Sonja Klimmek, "'fehlt das kind im bauch": Ulrike Draesners Zyklus "bläuliche sphinx (metal)"', in *Gedichte von Ulrike Draesner: Interpretationen*, pp. 67–82.

interventions (organ transplantation and a so-called ‘missed abortion’, a miscarriage, respectively). Both move beyond the medical to explore the scientific background behind the experience of medical technology, also touching on many different areas along the way. Both are strikingly marked by emotion and very far from any sense of the coldness discussed earlier. Jörg Magenau discussing ‘autopilot IV’, for example, comments:

Draesner thematises feeling. She does not move the body away from her as a thing like in Benn, she does not make the body a dead object. On the contrary, her body-nurseries remain very much alive, and marked by affect, she even cries at the grave of the dead subject (her own). In her verses there is no place for self-assurance any longer, and at the same time they are a challenge to the over-engineered dream of the reproducibility and technical feasibility of the body.<sup>35</sup>

But Magenau’s comment also highlights a further important aspect at play in both poems. They both deal centrally with the creation and potential obliteration of self both in bodily terms but also as a voice in the poem. One might even feel that the seedbed of the poem is about giving birth to a voice for poetry. Galbraith, reading ‘autopilot’, sums up the role of science in these poems well:

It is true that the sciences of the body – organ transplantation, reproductive medicine, genetics and cloning, neurobiology, psychology and other disciplines have haunted Ulrike Draesner’s poems from the start, but it is equally the case that the presence of such matter, [. . .] is not intended to further our STEM-field education.<sup>36</sup>

Instead, the poetry becomes ‘Bewegung in Sprache’ [movement in language], a ‘form of research’ into human ‘mentality’, a form of highly self-conscious language-work that attempts to investigate the ‘human tissue’ of our ‘feelings, thoughts and actions’ or, as she also describes it, ‘the way we are put together’ within contemporary reality and all the discourses available to us.<sup>37</sup>

By 2005, in an important interview Draesner describes in detail how the poem comes into being as a result of physiological processes and diverse external stimuli in the course of the writing process, revealing physiological rhythms, the heart, the pulse, as the foundation of her creations.<sup>38</sup> By now it is clear that this poetry

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<sup>35</sup> Magenau, ‘Der Körper als Schnittfläche’, p. 112.

<sup>36</sup> Iain Galbraith, ‘from possible closeness: a translator’s preface’, in Ulrike Draesner, *this porous fabric*, trans. by Iain Galbraith (Bristol: Shearsman, 2022), pp. 9–18 (p. 16).

<sup>37</sup> Ulrike Draesner, ‘Bewegung in Sprache. Ulrike Draesner im Gespräch mit Rolf Bernhard Essig’, *neue deutsche literatur* 51.6 (2003), pp. 42–61, (p. 52).

<sup>38</sup> ‘Ulrike Draesner im Gespräch mit Christian Schlösser’, *Deutsche Bücher. Forum für Literatur* 35.4 (2005), pp. 269–271. Galbraith, ‘from possible closeness’, p. 14.

is not simply focussed on a scientific, anatomical examination of the body *per se*, but uses it as a stepping-stone to generate a poetic programme of sorts.

## Reading the Genetic Code

Draesner's sequence of 'radical translations' of Shakespeare's sonnets, published in the volume *:to change the subject* of 2002 takes this further. The cycle moves inside the body to interrogate genetic manipulation, and read the genetic code, again in the context of an explicitly literary concern.<sup>39</sup> The translations are accompanied by an essay 'Dolly und Will' ['Dolly and Will'] in which what Draesner calls her 'wilful misunderstanding' of Shakespeare is brought to bear on the revolutionary cloning of Dolly the sheep.<sup>40</sup> Draesner explains in her essay that she chanced on the *Sonnets* on her shelf after news of the successful cloning, and realised with a kind of epiphany that the semantic structure of the poems could be reproduced in the same way: '[d]ie Gedichte [. . .] sprachen von Klonen' [the poems [. . .] were speaking about cloning].<sup>41</sup> Her choice of the seventeen sonnets for translation is already indicative, in that she chooses those that deal with reproduction, which she then shifts into the present of gene technology. Sonnets 1–17 are known as the 'Procreation Sonnets'; or as Don Paterson, in his commentary on the Shakespeare puts it, 'Multiplication. That's the name of the game'.<sup>42</sup> This chimes with Draesner's reading entirely: "zeugen, zeugen, sich selbst reproduzieren" – nur das flüstert ihr obsessiver Traum' [procreation, procreation, reproducing themselves, – that's all their obsessive dream whispers].<sup>43</sup> Five of the so-called procreation sonnets are included in Draesner's selection. Manfred Pfister concludes: 'Shakespeare's neo-platonic discourse of idea and image, original and copy, love and

<sup>39</sup> Ulrike Draesner, 'Twin Spin', in Peter Waterhouse, Ulrike Draesner, Barbara Köhler, *:to change the subject* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2000), pp. 11–29 and the accompanying essay 'Dolly und Will', pp. 30–33. A couple of earlier poems also make this leap: compare 'post Dolly' and 'kaspar hausers unterhose', in *für de nacht geheuerte zellen*, p. 17 and p. 96.

<sup>40</sup> I deal with Draesner's poems in terms of their response to Shakespeare in Karen Leeder, "'A second Life": Shakespeare-Übersetzungen in der Gegenwartsliteratur', in *From the Enlightenment to Modernism: Three Centuries of German Literature. Essays for Ritchie Robertson*, ed. by Carolin Duttlinger, Kevin Hilliard and Charlie Louth (Cambridge: Legenda, 2021), pp. 348–362.

<sup>41</sup> 'Dolly und Will', p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Crosman, 'Making Love Out of Nothing At All: The Issue of Story in Shakespeare's Procreation Sonnets', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 41.4 (Winter 1990), 470–488; Don Paterson, *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets: A New Commentary* (London: Faber, 2010), p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> Draesner, 'Dolly und Will', p. 31.

procreation is translated into the current lingo of informatics and bio-technology, proclaiming Love in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.<sup>44</sup> However, one can be more precise; this is in fact rather a kind of 'Fear in the Age of Bio-technical-Reproduction'. Shakespeare's sonnets are dogged by the obsessive desire for continuity, reproduction and self-reproduction in the flesh and in words: 'Träume des Überlebens' [dreams of survival]. But Draesner's view is ambivalent: 'Traum und Alptraum ist der Klon, dessen Erscheinen das Subjekt grundlegend, fundamental, in allem, wie wir es je verstanden haben, ändert – indem es sich gleichen läßt.' [The clone is at once dream and nightmare. Its appearance changes the subject essentially, fundamentally in all that we have ever understood – in that it allows itself to be copied.]<sup>45</sup>

Draesner is centrally concerned here with the nature of the self and how it can be expressed in poetry but also changed.

Das Ich-Subjekt der Rede wechselt ständig, ohne jemals das Thema zu wechseln (wie krieg ich dich und wie überleben wir, was ein Teil dessen ist, wie ich dich kriege). Als Spirale gesagt: in der Unwechselbarkeit des Themas wird das Subjekt dann allerdings seinerseits unverwechselbar und somit zu einem Subjekt, das sich nicht unterwirft, indem es sich dem Rondo der Rollen stets unterwirft, um am Ende dadurch, daß es nicht mehr wechselt, sondern sich als Wechselndes fixiert, dem Thema eine weitere Spiraldrehung zuzufügen im Bäumchen-wechsel-dich-Spiel der Rede.<sup>46</sup>

[The I subject of the speech changes constantly without ever changing the subject (how do I win you and how do we survive, which is part of how I win you). To put it as a spiral: in the unchangeability of the theme, however, the subject then becomes unmistakable in turn and thus a subject who does not submit, by dint of constantly submitting itself to the rondo of roles, only, in the end, to add another spiral rotation to the theme, by no longer changing, rather fixing itself as something changeable in the game of tag [swapping] that is speech.]

Here Draesner is talking about the 'ich' of Shakespeare's sonnets and the way she reads it as a presentiment of cloning (hence the reference to the DNA helix). More important, the radical translations at once reconfigure and reconceptualise the Shakespeare, containing a temporal horizon of the present and the diverse technologies that it brings with it, but also an interpretation, which allows for local misunderstandings and misinterpretations.<sup>47</sup> Several of the

<sup>44</sup> Pfister, 'Made in Germany: Shakespeare's Sonnets', *ANGERMION: Yearbook for Anglo-German Literary Criticism, Intellectual History and Cultural Transfers*, 5.1 (2012), 29–57 (p. 42).

<sup>45</sup> Draesner, 'Dolly und Will', p. 33.

<sup>46</sup> Draesner, 'Dolly und Will', p. 32.

<sup>47</sup> Draesner, 'Dolly und Will', p. 31.

Shakespeare texts are deliberately reproduced with errors and thus changed. What is more, Draesner has 'triangulated' existing translations of the sonnets (including some of the most radical by Stefan George and Paul Celan), creating a kind of echo-chamber in which issues of authorship, originally and reproduction intertwine.<sup>48</sup> But on top of this, in her own 'wilful misunderstandings', Draesner also follows obscure etymologies, combs Shakespearian polysemes for non-canonical interpretations, lifting words up by their roots and transplanting them, works with homophony, homonymy, or shifts into other languages, to create new meanings – a process that Tobias Döring has dubbed a 'polyglot poetics'.<sup>49</sup> Her radical translation, with the conscious inclusion of typographical errors, misunderstandings, mis-translations, mis-fits and linguistic games, all work to make legible what for Draesner is the basic fluidity of all texts. But, of course, this has particular significance when considering the genetic code, the misreading of which allows variability in the populations and evolution. Replication is never perfect; instead, DNA recombines to create new meaning and new forms. For Draesner, this is not just a theme – it is translated into her linguistic approach. Almost any poem from the sequence could stand as an example of the way in which language is stretched or split to produce surprising metaphors or sequences which run along lines of sound or association alone, or borrow from the English, or in which myth and modernity, slang and the archaic, the poetic and the scientific are set off against one another.<sup>50</sup> As an example: Sonnet 18.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
 Rough winds do change the darling buds of May,  
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
 And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
 And every fair from fair sometimes declines,  
 By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimm'd;  
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;  
 Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
 When in eternal lines to time thou growest;  
 So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

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<sup>48</sup> Personal conversation with Ulrike Draesner.

<sup>49</sup> See Tobias Döring's contribution in this volume.

<sup>50</sup> Draesner, 'Twin Spin', p. 18.

einem sommertag vergleichen, dich?  
 gesünder bist du, besser temperiert:  
 stickstoffwinde nagen die teuren maiknospen an,  
 geleaste sommerzeit fault dattelbraun, zu schnell:  
 zu viel UV strahlt durchs ozonloch ab und brennt,  
 oft ist der sonne teint von smog verhängt;  
 alles helle beugt periodisch helles in den fall,  
 chaotisch ist zufall, genetisch unser roulette;  
 doch in deinem zeitimmunen sommer tanzt keine zelle den fado,  
 keine verliert, dem du dich verdankst, ihr DNA-eldorado;  
 noch wird der tod prahlen, in seinem schatten wandre deine pracht,  
 wenn als buchstabenhelix du der zeit entwächst;  
     solange einer atmen kann, solange augen sehn,  
     solange lohnt auch dies und klont dir leben ein.

A radical re-translation is offered by Tom Cheesman:<sup>51</sup>

a summer day and you and recombine?  
 you're better for you, quality controlled:  
 rough nitrous gusts aggress the precious may-buds,  
 and summers time-share option's all too short-date:  
 too much uv glows through the ozone hole and burns,  
 and sol's complexion's tanned by frequent smog;  
 periodically, in the case of brightness bright declines,  
 chance-entrammelled chaos is our gene roulette;  
 time-immunized, your summer cells, though, dance no fado,  
 none loses its, what you owe you to, el-dna-dorado;  
 nor'll loud-mouth death proclaim your glory straggles in his gloom  
 when as double-stranded letter-vines you outclimb time;  
     so long as breath is drawn as eyes have sight  
     so long this loan replays its own and clones you life.

In Draesner's version the nature that in Shakespeare becomes a benign, if fleeting, comparison for the beloved, is a nature blighted by choking winds, UV rays, smog, and a hole in the ozone layer. The Shakespearian sense of inevitable decline in nature is picked up by Draesner and dramatized as ecological catastrophe. But the poem pivots on 'Zerfall' [decline], 'fall' [fall or case] and 'Zufall' [chance] to shift from external change to internal

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**51** Tom Cheesman, 'Shall I Compare, Vergleichen, Recombine? Reversioning Ulrike Draesner's "Twin Spin"', *In Other Words*, 30 (2007), 6–15 (p. 10). See also: *Twin Spin: 17 Shakespeare Sonnets radically translated by Ulrike Draesner and radically back-translated by Tom Cheesman; with an Exhibition Catalogue for 'Shall I Compare thee: Shakespeare in Translation'* (Oxford: Taylor Institution Library, 2016).

alles helle beugt periodisch helles in den fall,  
chaotisch ist zufall, genetisch unser roulette;

[Literally:  
all bright/fair things are bent by brightness into fall  
chaotic is chance, genetically our roulette.]

The focus now is inside on the processes of cellular change; the cloned Dolly is 'immune to time', since the cells do not enter upon a process of recombination with all its attendant flaws and opportunities – boldly caught in the image of the dance, the fado. We move now into the realm of the 'DNA-eldorado' leading to the key line 12: 'wenn als buchstabenhelix du der zeit entwächst' [when you grow out of time as a letter-helix]. Reduced to the letters of the DNA-molecules of the genetic code, the creature leaves time behind and becomes what Shakespeare's own sonnets always aspire to: immortal. But it is a curious immortality, of the self-same and self-sufficient, with codes that will be handed down with no exposure to the random nature of difference. And, in the reference to the 'letter helix', Draesner is playing at once on the metaphor of letters in our conventional alphabet, but also that which governs genetic science with its powerful abbreviations, A, T, C and G, for the textual building blocks of DNA. Indeed, the poem works throughout by running the metaphor of reading DNA and reading literature alongside one another, leading to the ambiguity of the final couplet. Here it is left unspecified what the 'dies' [this] refers to: the process of cloning and genetic manipulation or the business of poetry writing? Both, it seems, can offer a new life.<sup>52</sup> But, of course, precisely the form and project of the work answer the question, in that it precisely does not pass down the self-same, the achieved, but opens it to a radical polyvalency born of the encounter of the original text with Draesner's response in a specific historical moment.

The essay coins the term 'Anklangsgedicht' [re-sound poem or hark back poem] to describe its processes.

Im Sonett als klassisches Anklangsgedicht klingt heute der Reim selbst nurmehr an bzw. wird in (Teil-)Anagramme aufgelöst: in der Welt der reproduzierbaren und damit gesteigerten Einzelheit reimt sich nichts mehr. Es besteht nur mehr aus den gleichen Buchstaben (wie für die Genetiker, wir).<sup>53</sup>

[In the sonnet as a classic Anklangsgedicht today, rhyme is only suggested or dissolves in (part-)anagrams. In the world of reproducible and hence heightened singularity, nothing

<sup>52</sup> See Ertel, *Körper, Gehirne, Gene*, pp. 271–283.

<sup>53</sup> Draesner, 'Dolly und Will', p. 32. That the letters A, C, G und T represent the 'four-letter word' [das vier-buchstaben-wort] (Sonnet 65, 'Twin Spin', p. 27) of genetics is a constant theme in Draesner's cycle.

rhymes any more [or nothing makes sense anymore]. The poem consists of nothing but the same letters (as do we for geneticists).

In fact, despite its characteristic shifts – the translation of ‘date’ in a temporal sense with ‘dattel’ [date – the fruit] and the multiple games with ‘hell’ as bright, fair and genetically favoured – the poem is remarkably true to Shakespeare’s original. And rhymes (and makes sense) more than one might originally think. It is an attempt in the very process of creation to playfully misconstrue meaning, recombine letters and thus to mimic genetic translation/transcription errors. That is to enact the playful discontinuity in continuity of genetic reproduction in the very form of the poem.

## Twin Spin: Science as Form

In her essay ‘Dolly und Will’, Draesner makes it clear that ‘Twin Spin’ turns on the anxiety that the human subjecthood, the language-making mind in all its complexity and self-dividedness, that dreams of survival in the sonnets, might make itself extinct by letting replication take the place of recombination. The quotation from Shakespeare’s 15th sonnet – ‘And, all in war with Time, for love of you, / As he takes from you, I engraft you new’ – appears in Draesner’s version as: ‘und, ganz und gar überworfen mit zeit aus liebe zu dir, / während sie an dir frißt, dreh ich dich neu, die retorte von mir’ [literally: ‘and totally at war with time for love of you, / as it feeds off you i spin you, retort/ text tube mine, anew’].<sup>54</sup> The word ‘retorte’ is a noteworthy mutant intervention which operates on a number of levels. At one level it plays on the English ‘retort’; and, as in the Shakespeare, a response is being offered in the face of time and its destruction of the beloved other. However, it also encompasses the sense of a ‘turning back to its originator’: the German version of the sonnet is turned back to the English writer and the English text. It is noteworthy in this context that Draesner ‘turns’ the English so that the ‘you’ – in the original indicating the lover – also becomes the verse. Poetry is turned and re-turned, as a response to time. The English is also reinvented in the German version (‘dreh ich dich neu’ [turn/spin you anew]) to take account of the interventions which have occurred since Shakespeare’s time. However, the word ‘retorte’ also gestures to the realm of science as ‘test tube’. Of course, the original English itself (‘engraft’) is already oddly suggestive to an ear alive to the processes of genetic manipulation. But Draesner shines the

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<sup>54</sup> ‘Twin Spin’, p. 17.



light of her polyglot poetics on the word so as to refract several new aspects. We see quite clearly the familiar image of test tubes being spun in a centrifuge, as part of the chemical process. But in the word 'drehen' [turn] there are two further references. At one level there is the spiral form of the genome referred to earlier in the accompanying essay, which draws Draesner back to the question of gene manipulation. But, from the beginning, of Draesner has conjured a 'twin spin' (her title, after all); and it is here that the other level is made explicit. The turn/spin is also that of the poem. This is made clear in a short poetic essay 'Dreh Gedanken zum Gedicht' ['Turn thoughts about the poem'] published by Draesner on the web in 2003.<sup>55</sup> This essay begins:

Vielleicht ist alles in der Welt gedreht? Atome, Moleküle, Kristalle, ebenso wie Schneckenhäuser oder Zweige in ihrem Ansatz am Baum. In Spiralen wickeln sich die aus den Wirbeln kommenden Nerven zu Arm und Bein. Das Spermium dreht sich durch den Eileiter, von Augenblick der Zeugung wachsen wir in Symmetrien und Spins. Planeten, Sterne und Galaxien: sie drehen. Die Stimme: Luft wird eingesogen, ausgestoßen, dringt in den Raum, baut Wellen, dreht sich an Luftschwaden hinauf, herab, nach vorn. Schraubt sich in den Raum, ins Ohr.

[Maybe everything in the world is turned? Atoms, molecules, crystals, as well as snail shells or branches in their attachment to the tree. In spirals, the nerves coming out of the vertebrae curl to form the arm and leg. The sperm rotates through the fallopian tube, from the moment of conception we grow in symmetries and spins. Planets, stars and galaxies: they rotate. The voice: air is sucked in, expelled, moves out into space, creates waves, turns on air currents, up, down, forward. Spirals its way into the room, into the ear.]

Draesner points out that everything turns, from spinal nerves to sperm, planets and galaxies. The recognition that patterns are repeated on the micro- and macro-levels is an insight familiar from contemporary science and from a body of early twentieth-century poetry that founded an aesthetic upon such correspondences. And indeed, Draesner follows suit: 'Wenn die lebendige Welt Gedrehtes ist, dann wird, was später "Gedicht" sein will, draus übersetzt' [if the living world is created of turning, that which later desires to become a 'poem' is translated from it]. The transformation or translation is here accomplished by what Draesner calls an 'algorithm', in line with her argument. But tellingly she also uses a number of other phrases: 'Er ist die kleine Maschine des Gedichts' [The algorithm is the little machine of the poem]; or finally:

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<sup>55</sup> See Draesner, 'Dreh Gedanken zum Gedicht: Eine Poetik', on *Metropolet Blog* (<http://www.metropolet.net/wordpress/index.php>).

Bei Gedichten: erscheint er als Dreh (oder Spin) des sinnlichen Verarbeitungsapparates in den Sprachapparat. Er 'geht über' und informiert das Gedicht; drückt es in seine Form, die zugleich eine Nachricht ist.

[In poems it appears as the turn or spin of the sensual mechanism of processing into the process of language. It 'goes across' and informs the poem; expresses it in its form, which is also a message.]

The poem functions as a retort in all senses; that is, it works at the interface between I and you, experience and time, and operates its own spin. It is at once a process and an experimental instrument: 'Maschine' [machine], 'Verarbeitungsapparat' [processing mechanism] or, as Nico Bleutge terms it in a review, 'Erkenntniswerkzeuge' [the tools of knowledge].<sup>56</sup> This understanding of the aesthetic processes of poetry brings Draesner into line with other poets working through the knowledge of modern science, like Durs Grünbein or Raoul Schrott, for whom: 'das Gedicht [ist] die präziseste erkenntnistheoretische Maschine, die es überhaupt gibt' [the poem is the most precise epistemological machine that exists].<sup>57</sup> But it is Draesner's verbs that are particularly interesting: 'übersetzt' [translates, lit. carries over, 'geht über' [crosses over]. Draesner has returned to a notion of translation between realms, correspondence in its broadest sense, the 'Stoffwechsel' [exchange of material; metabolism] mentioned before that makes of the poem a body, a living thing.

The final example comes from her most recent collection of poetry to date *subsong* (2014) and demonstrates that twin spin at work in the body of the poem.<sup>58</sup> The volume takes its cue from research on bird song and the notion of subsong, which is understood as a kind of practising of vocabulary, a kind of training, without regard to territory or mating, akin ultimately, Draesner implies, to poetry. Beyond this broad scientific backdrop, this collection is in a sense furthest from the core scientific material that marks earlier work, although essays from around the same time and since indicate that scientific preoccupations (especially with reproduction and genetics) continue.<sup>59</sup> What is striking about this volume, however, is that these preoccupations are not treated as themes simply; they are taken up into the very forms of the poems: whether those poems that themselves attempt to transliterate the sounds of bird song, for

<sup>56</sup> Nico Bleutge, 'Sinnverschiebungen in Versen "kugelblitz": Gedichte von Ulrike Draesner', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 28 July 2005; see: <http://www.lyrikkritik.de/bleutge-draesner.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Raoul Schrott, 'Die Mitte zurückgewinnen', p. 151.

<sup>58</sup> Ulrike Draesner, *subsong* (Munich: Luchterhand, 2014).

<sup>59</sup> Ulrike Draesner, *Grammatik der Gespenster. Frankfurter Vorlesungen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2018).

example, the concrete poems in the shape of trees, or those that transliterate the auditory slippages of listening to Beatles records. One poem also picks up the 'theme' of spin and embodies it in the form of the poem 'taumel der trennung' ['separation spin'].<sup>60</sup>

morgens vor dem spiegel **ich**  
träumend denk und **dreh**  
um dich **da** wird die kehle  
mir **noch** eng denn du sagst  
**durch** welches öhr willst du  
dass ich schlüpf um dich **da**  
rauszudrehen sage **ich** hat  
mir gerade **noch** gefehlt  
dass **durch** zu vieler spiegel  
**dreh** ich dich nirgends mehr  
versteh der an der gläser **dreh**  
glaubt er sah wie **ich** mir uns  
als wir gedacht **darin** ein du das  
drückt und **noch** mit schaum  
**durch** die zähne zu mir spricht  
was musst du wütend sein **dabei**  
obwohl, welch blitz, du **durch** den  
spiegel lachst als **drehte** mich  
um dich **noch** immer munter  
**ich** und schaute nie an dir  
vorbei

[in the morning at the mirror **i'm**  
in dreams thinking and **going**  
breathless twirling **around**  
you whisper **the** spell you think will  
**bend** my ear to tell which needle's  
eye to pass to get **round** me  
to winkle me out **the** hell with  
that light **bends** and i  
can see **i'm** only flailing  
**going** nowhere just a blur  
a spiral where you see **the**  
face as mine at every **bend**  
at every whirl think **i'm** a  
you that's **going** to hurt and  
spin **around** to spit your rage  
through the mirror i **round**

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60 Draesner, *subsong*, p. 13.

on this laughing you **i'm** sure  
thought i was **going** to blithely  
orbit like **the** circling moon  
and **bend** to please not turn  
away]<sup>61</sup>

This is a difficult poem to interpret, indeed read, partly because of the density of the word play and partly because the form, with its lack of punctuation, encourages sematic instability and multiple possible readings. It feels unaccountably claustrophobic, always turning in on itself. Indeed, the word ‘Taumel’ invokes turning, spinning and potentially dizziness. At first glance the poem seems to stage the painful end of a relationship (‘Trennung’ [separation]) between an I and an intimate you [du] projected into the bathroom mirror. One could be forgiven for reading it as a mini-drama of sorts: one can discern a kind of setting, stage directions (‘da wird die kehle /mir nocheng’ [then my throat constricts]) and a sequence of dialogue that implies tetchy or bitter reproach: ‘du sagst / durch welches öhr willst du/ dass ich schlüpf’ [you say / which needle’s eye do you want / me to pass through]; ‘sage ich hat / mir gerade noch gefehlt [I say that’s the last thing I need]; ‘was musst du wütend sein’ [how angry you must be]. The poem seems to end with the potential of escape in seeing past: ‘und schaute nie an dir vorbei’ [and never looked past you]). Though even this is uncertain and could be read in different ways.

However, the fact that this is staged in front of a mirror also implies that we might here be dealing with multiple versions of self, either as a straightforward reflection or even one of those winged mirrors that offer multiple reflections. Even the 'er' [he] that appears could, at a pinch, reflect the fact that mirror ('der Spiegel') is masculine in German. This makes of the poem a struggle in a sense to find a way out of an uncomfortable matrix of versions of self, that issue eventually into a speculative seeing past the you. That the poem riffs on, and makes manifest, the turn, the 'spin' of the poem is evidenced in two things: the word 'dreh' [turn, spin, bend] appears five times in the German as a kind of spine to the poem; but it is also refracted through a variety of idioms that use the word 'drehen', which culminate in the phrase 'ich drehe durch', roughly equivalent to 'I'm going round the bend'. These appear in a kind of spiral through the poem, caught brilliantly in Iain Galbraith's translation. One starts, then, by reading this as a poem about a painful altercation conducted in the mirror,

<sup>61</sup> Translation by Iain Galbraith from *this porous fabric*, p. 183. The translation follows the spirit of the poem to catch the spin; in the following discussion I shall refer to the literal meaning of individual lines.

during the habitual bathroom routines. It then offers itself as an internal dialogue of sorts with I and you as figures in the mirror testing out battling versions of self. In any case, it is a meditation on the identities that I, you and we play out in a rondo of roles: 'glaubt er säh wie ich mir uns' [believes he looks like I me us]. In this sense it is like many of Draesner's 'mirror' poems that highlight the possibilities of speaking likenesses to alter our sense of self.<sup>62</sup>

The twist of the poem, however, comes in the 'Dreh' [the knack, the spin, the turn]. This ties in with Draesner's comments on the turn of poetry and links back to the title of her Shakespeare translations which give their title to this chapter too. But more important, of course, is the fact that the poem makes visible through the vagaries of shifting identity that can be read, misread and read anew, the helix shape that runs through it, demonstrating how we and it are constructed. The phrase is constantly reconstituted, shifting its meaning as it turns and recombines, through the poem. The integrity of the subject and poetry is interrogated at the same time – even constituted before our eyes. Its twin spin seeks to change the poetry but also to change the subject.

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<sup>62</sup> I discuss this aspect of Draesner's work in "'Übungen der Zugewandtheit": Ulrike Draesner's Poetics of Correspondence', in *Schaltstelle*, ed. by Leeder, pp. 231–262.

