

Laudation

delivered by Univ. Prof. Dr. Dr. *h.c.* Andreas F. Kellertat
on the occasion of the granting of an honorary doctorate to

Univ. Prof. Dr. Hans J. Vermeer

on 17 January 2010 in Heidelberg

Translated by Marina Dudenhöfer MA

Honourable colleague, my dear Mr. Vermeer,

As the granting of your honorary doctorate is not taking place in an official ceremony, and we are not in Room 328, that old Lecture Theatre D that you got to know so well, with its beautiful view onto the park outside covered in winter snow, but rather, as we are gathered here in your Heidelberg home in the presence of your family and close friends, we must change the scale of our approach a little. We will not require a large fanfare; one trumpet will do just fine. Although we will not have to raise our voices to be heard, we hope that our hearts will nevertheless speak to you and to yours.

My role as the person delivering this laudation must also change. It is not my intention to just sing a sweet tune and praise you for your work before a gathering of illustrious academics, as the laudation genre or text type would require. In this small circle of friends, I would like to focus on other things as well. In any case, it is not my place to pass expert judgement on your work which covers so many different areas – for that we would need a whole group of very learned people. However, I would like to make a couple of comments which, as representative of the School, I am qualified to make on this occasion, that is, the granting of an honorary doctorate from the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz to you by, to put it simply, our School of Translation and Interpreting Studies, Linguistics and Cultural Studies (FTSK) in Germersheim on the River Rhine.

Because the School in Germersheim is naturally choosing to honour the academic and teacher Hans Vermeer, who was part of our School from 1971 until 1984, in the

first such ceremony in its sixty or more years of history. During his time at the School, he influenced it, sometimes against its (the school's) will, but, in the end, to its (the school's) advantage.

Both the School and the University would like to honour the teacher and researcher who vigorously renewed his ties with Germersheim, ties which were strained but never completely broken, by offering his valuable contribution as a teacher to our School over the last few semesters and touching the lives of the next generation of young academics– and this in his fourth decade as a professor. None of our students could believe that a man approaching eighty could speak to and with them in this way.

That is certainly the first and foremost reason for our School to honour you, dear colleague, in this your 80th year. An honour you have warmly agreed to accept. I was told that you were a little surprised to receive this honour. So, as a person who was present at the event, let me assure you that you were nominated to the seventeen members of the Faculty Board in late summer/early autumn 2009, that this nomination was seconded and passed with no votes against in the ballot vote – although, as befits such an occasion, there was one abstention, which I don't mind mentioning.

“Only so few left?” You may well ask yourself – although I hope that your memories from the 70s and 80s have become rather hazy with regard to best-forgotten things. Yes, so very few! Thus, a small delegation of us from the Faculty Board are here at your home in Heidelberg today to witness Michael Schreiber, our Dean, handing over an honorary doctorate to you.

But before we go any further, I would like to say a few more words. I have already mentioned the most obvious thing - your valuable contribution to our School. However, this should not be our main motivation, as the guiding principle behind honorary doctorates is to avoid internal appointments. Our main motivation was, of course, the importance of your academic studies, your teaching and your academic

contribution, a considerable amount of which took place beyond the confines of Germersheim.

After your school-leaving examination at the Märkisches Gymnasium secondary school in Iserlohn (and how I would enjoy to hear more about your school years and youth, which began in the shadow of the unspeakable), that is, after your *Abitur*, you signed up for further studies in Heidelberg in 1950 and took your exam as a certified translator just two years later – it really was that fast then! Your first working languages were English and Spanish; then you went to fair Coimbra in Portugal (I think in black and white when I think of this town) and, one year later, in 1953, you also sat the translation exam for Portuguese. One year after that, having returned to Heidelberg, you sat the interpreting exam for Portuguese and continued with your academic studies.

But, somehow, you never really got your career off the ground as a translator and interpreter on the open market, for the civil service or one of the EU bodies. Was it because of your language combination - that Spanish and Portuguese were not yet in great demand in Brussels and Strasbourg at that time?

I don't think so. Something else kept you away from the daily routine of life as a translator and interpreter outside the university (despite the occasional interpreting assignments at that time). Perhaps it was the feeling that, up to that point in your translation and interpreting studies, you had not yet learned, or reflected on, everything that seemed worth learning, and reflecting on, as a young student. Thus, in 1955 you continued your studies in Heidelberg – whilst earning your living as a Portuguese teacher – this time in General and Comparative Linguistics for German (the most important subject in my opinion, of course) and the Romance Languages (the most important subject in the opinion of our Dean). Your teachers in Heidelberg were Professors Anton Scherer, Ulrich Schmoll, Gerhard Eis and Kurt Baldinger. On 19 January 1962, exactly 48 years ago and when Baldinger was Dean, you became a DPhil at the age of 31. Six years later, you earned the right to teach General Linguistics with your thesis on the structure of central south-east Asian languages. Whilst you were writing your post-doctoral thesis, you also worked as a lecturer at the

South Asia Institute in the University of Heidelberg – for Hindi/Urdu, Gujarati, Tamil and Indo-English.

It is no surprise that your post-graduate studies took over a decade (thirteen years from your interpreting degree to your post-doctoral qualification). This was clearly mainly due to the high demands you made of yourself, as you not only learned English, Spanish and Portuguese to translation and interpreting level, you also acquired applied and theoretical language skills in several other languages, leaving the rest of us feeling like “Ummikos” as they say in Finnish, that is, plebs with only two or three languages at best. The languages you studied were Swedish, Dutch, French, Italian, Rumanian, Latin, Irish, Classical Greek, Russian, Hindi/Urdu, Gujarati, Tamil, Santali, Sanskrit, Hebrew, Japanese, Basque, Portuguese Creole and, finally, Nheengatu, an indigenous language of the Brazilian Amazon, which belongs to the Tupi family, and which was mostly, although not completely, suppressed by the Portuguese colonialists, at least that is what my encyclopaedia tells me.

You were not only interested in the linguistic aspects of these languages, in the context of your post-doctoral thesis on common language structures, you also developed learning and teaching materials for several of these languages, for example, a Hindi reader and a guide to Hindi and Urdu phonetics. You then made the leap into lexicography – an early Wahrig review demonstrated your interest in this field. Your next step was a Hindi-German dictionary (in the 70s)...

I only mention this because many in Germersheim have a tendency to see you, my dear colleague, as just a scholar, a translation and interpreting theorist. However, your reflections on the phenomenon of translation are based on such a broad foundation that it is unlikely that any other translation and interpreting expert could match you. One possible reason for the naivety of the translation and interpreting research community, such as not understanding the importance of cultural factors, is perhaps an insistence on a comparison of individual languages with the world communication language alone – for what indeed is the culture behind this diligently researched “global English”? An academic like you would never have fallen into the

trap of monolingualism (and would never have focused solely on the linguistic aspects).

It is not just the sheer breadth of your language skills which makes you unique in the research community, but also the historical depth of your work and your extraordinary openness with respect to the cultural aspects of communication phenomena.

I can only marvel at your extensive knowledge in areas such as medieval academic literature, the Seuse quotes in the writings of the mystics, Arabic-German-Latin lists of star names from the early 16th century, a medieval treatise on rose growing, old German cryptographic medical annotations and a treatise on mistletoe and “wine spirits”.

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Publications followed on linguistics, foreign-language acquisition, medieval academic literature and the Creole phenomenon arising from migratory and power shifts. All this, especially your rootedness in history, can be seen as the foundation of your reflections on the phenomenon of translation.

I think that your appointment in the spring of 1971 to the new Chair for General Linguistics in our School must have encouraged your reflections on translation and interpreting. I was lucky enough to be able to read your trial lecture from July 1970 in the files of the German Department which a predecessor of mine set up, Professor Gerhart Mayer, the Governor of ADI (as our School was known then), who took a completely different path (through Hermann Hesse mainly) into Indian-Asian culture.

Your lecture from 1970 – which I don’t know if it was ever published – contained a comprehensive research programme for the development of translation and interpreting studies as an independent subject. It was not yet a fully developed translation and interpreting theory, but your lecture indicated a direction which, if followed, could lead to the development of such a theory. The most fascinating thing in reading this lecture from 40 years ago was the feeling of peering over the shoulder of a researcher writing down the foundations of his theory for the first time.

The method that you chose to adopt then and thereafter was to use logical reduction to obtain generally applicable but clearly defined initial models of transposition. Thus, before looking at interlingual translation, you first looked at extralingual perception, at how different aspects of a situation are perceived. With hindsight, I can see that you invented a new way of talking about the core fundamental issues of hermeneutics which was probably alien to your listeners at that time. Which factor determines our perception of what we perceive? Is it 1) The particular situation, 2) the particular subject doing the perceiving or 3) the particular wider community to which the subject doing the perceiving belongs? By wider community, we mean a cultural community which, in turn, gives rise to a linguistic community.

Your reductive method showed just how complex the translation process actually is, whilst building on Schleiermacher's reflections in 1813, well before Humboldt's time. Through this method, you carefully considered and formulated a complex theory which took on board cultural and social issues, at a time when the would-be avant-garde thinkers in linguistics were calling themselves linguists and were under the influence of Chomsky's very different reductive method, where they laboured under the delusion that translation was merely the constant and simple exchange of labels or signs.

Your ideas went not just against the fashionable theories of the time, but also against the expectations of your translation students, who only wanted their new professor to quickly give them a few tips on how best to use and re-use their terminology index cards in the future job market. "Removed from reality" – these words were used like a club to cudgel your foundational theory. The other club, which I once swung about with great gusto, was the question – when will this man talk about what I really want to know? When will he tell me how I can translate a Finnish poem into German right now so that it sounds like Hans Magnus Enzensbeger wrote it?

It was bewildering how Hans Vermeer took various different transposition phenomena (ranging from interpreting at international conferences, to the linguistic and cultural characteristics of how indigenous peoples, whose names we had never heard of, perceived an object, and the intersemiotic phenomena behind the medieval

depiction of the birth of Christ) and brought them, all these already highly complex phenomena from diverse disciplines, at the same time and with equal weight, into the discussion of the development of a theory! This is because Vermeer wants to go beyond the here and now of the run-of-the-mill translation between two languages and cultures and look at the real fundamentals.

When I read your trial lecture from 40 years ago, I could see dozens of subjects about which MA theses or dissertations could be and should be written! However, they were not considered relevant in your days in Germersheim, and that is another reason behind this honorary doctorate. It was in Lecture Theatre D that you effectively fully developed your theory in 1979, a decade after you first outlined its possibilities. And we would have had the opportunity then to turn our School into a world leading research centre for translation and interpreting studies, in their very broadest sense, by actively pooling our resources. But the time was not yet ripe for it, neither in Germersheim nor elsewhere, apart from Tampere perhaps.

In 1983, you went back to Heidelberg. In your negotiations with Germersheim, you outlined again, in a paper, a comprehensive research model for investigating all issues relating to the phenomenon of translation and interpreting. It was simply added to your file. Translation and interpreting were not seen as the central research area by our School in Germersheim, not as you and Heinz Göhring (who is also in our thoughts today) saw it. We did not establish the independent and research-oriented MA of your and Göhring's vision; it was blocked at every turn by power squabbles and red tape. Germersheim continued with the old degree programme and lacked a general direction, swinging between a fixation on practical application and a focus on ultra-specific philological research.

Between 1986 and 1994, you used your *textcontext* journal to breathe life into your theory, which you developed in and for Germersheim, but outside the confines of the university. You wrote your greatest works on translation and interpreting theory, and translation historiography, which I do not have to describe in detail today, as they are well known along with your name.

Vermeer never completely lost contact with Germersheim and it simply would not have been possible! Lecturers such as Hans Hönig, Paul Kussmaul, Sigrid Kupsch-Losereit, Peter Axel Schmitt and many others, researched specific issues and tried to use the theoretical foundations laid down by Vermeer for the benefit of specialised translation training. With all due respect, however, what is missing from this research is an innovative foundational theory, a reductive method which leads us into the complexity of the issues at stake. Although Germersheim witnessed considerable achievements outside this “functionalist approach”, not surprisingly with its many professors in so many subjects, the chance to follow a clear direction was lost for a while in 1984.

But you also did not fit the profile required in the 80s and 90s at our School in another way. My dear colleague, you were not a manager, a political animal or a scrounger for funds. When we finally make it as professors, many of us are forced (whether we want to or not!) to get involved in politics, sit on committees, scuffle around for funds for telephone lines, new shelves, paying student assistants and setting up special grants for this or that. Not to mention the arguing about who can park where, when, and who is responsible for watering the plants in the hallway. A professor’s life can be full of such things.

My impression is that Hans Vermeer was not at all attracted by this side of being a professor, that he saw it as wearing him down and wasting his energy. You were simply not interested in becoming a dean, vice president or *Geheimrat*. That was not your chosen path or ultimate goal. And you most certainly were not interested in swapping your hard Chair for a comfortable armchair, as some people are. You wanted to research, reflect on, and encourage young people to reflect on, the fascinating phenomenon of translation and interpreting. Our School eats away at our time so that we have less and less time for reflection and encouraging the independent thought that made our university into what it is and always should be. It is a crying shame.

And this leads me to the third and final reason, perhaps not for the board who decided to grant an honorary doctorate to you, but for the one who nominated you.

And here, I mean your *habitus* and your resolutely independent thought. It is no mean feat to set up a grant for students in dire straits. It is no mean feat to guide the next generation of researchers through world history, and even take them to conferences and meetings in the unholy land and its oppressed neighbouring regions. It is no mean feat to encourage and support the next generation of researchers over many years, to read their texts, always with fresh eyes, and to comment on them.

Yet you did all this, and in so doing, you gave Germersheim the young researchers it needs to finally put into motion what should have been put into motion in 1983-84: to give our School a clear direction in translation and interpreting, to turn it into an internationally renowned research centre, a sort of relay station for the next generation of researchers and budding translation and interpreting teachers from all over the world. A place where the fundamental issues of translation and interpreting will be investigated further, in the manner you showed us. By that, I don't mean that we will be setting up a global Vermeer sect here in Germersheim. Rather, that we will encourage young people to take pleasure in thinking for themselves, thinking laterally, daring to be different or wanting to be different and being dedicated – qualities you demonstrate so clearly in your way of doing things and which I have found in so few academics. I personally feel that I have learned so much from witnessing your resolutely independent thought first-hand over the last few semesters in our German and Intercultural Studies Department, and I am delighted to be able to thank you for this here today.

And because I am a scholar of German studies and man of letters, I would like to thank you as a friend through a few verses from a poem. These verses were written by Ingeborg Bachmann and talk about borders. As you will undoubtedly see, they speak of borders in the spirit of Walter Benjamin, who was so important for “you” (with or without a capital letter!). The last four stanzas of this poem from Bachmann are:

*Wenn sich in Babel auch die Welt verwirrte,
man deine Zunge dehnte, meine bog –
die Hauch- und Lippenlaute, die uns narren,
sprach auch der Geist, der durch Judäa zog.*

*Seit uns die Namen in die Dinge wiegen,
wir Zeichen geben, uns ein Zeichen kommt,
ist Schnee nicht nur die weiße Fracht von oben,
ist Schnee auch Stille, die uns überkommt.*

*Daß uns nichts trennt, muß jeder Trennung fühlen;
in gleicher Luft spürt er den gleichen Schnitt.
Nur grüne Grenzen und der Lüfte Grenzen
vernarben unter jedem Nachwindschritt.*

*Wir aber wollen über Grenzen sprechen,
und gehn auch Grenzen noch durch jedes Wort:
wir werden sie vor Heimweh überschreiten
und dann im Einklang stehn mit jedem Ort.*

Since names have cradled us to the nature of things,
since we've posited signs, and to us signs have come;
snow not only means the white weight falling,
snow means the silence by which we are overcome.

To stay together, each must feel separation;
within the same air, he feels the same split within.
Only the borders of air and the borders of green
can be healed at night by each step of the wind.

And yet we are determined to speak across borders,
even if borders pass through every word:
in longing still for home, we will cross over,
and again with every place stand in accord.

[*Songs in Flight, the Collected Poems of Ingeborg Bachman*, translated by Peter Filkins. Marsilio: New York, 1994, p. 124-5]

I would like to finish by recalling when, in the Middle Ages, the giving of the title of Doctor became more than just the title for a teacher, it became popular to give famous lawyers and theologians a special epithet, such as *Doctor angelicus* for Saint Thomas, *Doctor seraphicus* for Bonaventura, *Doctor subtilis, irrefragibilis, mirabilis*, and so on. If I had to find such an epithet for you, my dear colleague, then I would have to choose *Doctor translatus*. Because it encapsulates you and your work! The honorary doctorate which the Dean will hand over to you now was preceded by a *viva*

voce examination made up of an entire life in research, which has enriched others and will act as a benchmark for the next generation of researchers to strive for in Germersheim and elsewhere. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts!