

Words of thanks

on the occasion of the granting of an honorary doctorate to

Prof. Dr. Hans J. Vermeer

on 17 January 2010 in Heidelberg

delivered by Prof. Dr. Heidemarie Salevsky (Berlin)

Translated by Marina Dudenhöfer MA

My dear Hans, dear colleagues,

Are you looking for a peer in translation studies with a background in examining paradigm shifts in translation theory based on a relative approach who is capable of following and describing the many different “threads” in the history of translation, i.e. threads running alongside each other, crossing each other, twisted together or (eventually) tied together? In my opinion, there is only one in the whole wide world, Hans Vermeer. Only one who is able to lead the discussion into interesting neighbouring disciplines such as philosophy and rhetoric; only one who is able to examine equally statements from translators about their work in the past and in the present, and developments in the history of literary and biblical translation; only one who is able to discuss the dogmatisation of platonic essentialism, the misguided *imitatio* Renaissance school, the culture-sensitive approaches of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, as well as the renewed reductionism of the supposedly exact scientific procedures of the 19th century.

Through his research, of course only in his dozen or so languages, into the roots of different languages, Hans Vermeer gained insights valuable to the here-and-now by identifying the starting point for the reasons and conditions for particular approaches in theory and practice. He also critically assessed sources and described explicit and implicit theories, not to mention bringing the connections between “external” and “internal” (strategic) translation history to international attention. Hans Vermeer linked translation theory to the history of translation and discovered examples which not only supported his *skopos* theory but gave it meaning. However, he never failed to stress the dependence of any theory on time, place and situation; to quote Hamlet, “for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so”.

This was a particularly helpful attitude during the uneasy period between East and West Germany after the fall of the Berlin wall when Hans Vermeer accepted a guest professorship at Humboldt University in Berlin, even though the university only had enough money to pay for his accommodation and nothing else. Before Hans Vermeer arrived, there were some heated discussions regarding how I could even think of inviting a West German at this time; afterwards, I was asked whether he was planning to return, preferably as soon as possible.

Hans Vermeer’s open attitude was always a clear gain in the discussions during the Research Seminar on Translation Studies. When this forum for discussion was launched at Humboldt University in Berlin in March 1989, I could not have guessed that a further 76 events would follow or that Hans Vermeer would lead or take part in seven of them over the next 20 years. I always felt proud when

Vermeer's name was listed in the programme and students, in Berlin and Magdeburg, came to listen to him, meet him and talk with him.

I especially recall an event regarding the translation of the Ten Commandments in cooperation with the Theological Faculty, the interdisciplinary colloquium celebrating the 225th birthday of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, in November 1993. There was even a photograph of Hans Vermeer and an article about his lecture in the university's journal. I was also able to count on Hans Vermeer's presence at an international colloquium in 1995 in which we celebrated the centenary of the training of Russian interpreters and translators at the University of Berlin (1894-1994). He gave a lecture on "Language or Culture".

When I moved to Magdeburg in 1996, I was a little worried about whether Hans Vermeer would come to such a small town. Indeed, he did. We discussed the need to change the curriculum for translation training in 1998 with the same enthusiasm that we discussed whether to abolish translation or not and Hans Vermeer's thoughts on Jacques Derrida in 2004, during the 70th event in honour of the 15th anniversary of the Research Seminar. It is no surprise to me that, on Hans Vermeer's 75th birthday in 2005, I and many others felt a need to hold a colloquium in his honour. The response was huge: scholars came from Brazil, Finland, Great Britain, Austria, Turkey, the US and many universities in Germany to honour Hans Vermeer.

Hans Vermeer opened many doors between disciplines and universities, for example, during the conference on possible changes to the curriculum for translation and interpreting training in East and West Germany in 1991, during his time as Chair for General Translation and Interpreting Studies and Portuguese at the University of Heidelberg.

Hans Vermeer always expressed great scientific curiosity and pleasure in his work. His publications, lectures in Berlin and talks in the Research Seminar were like going on an adventure tour with him through the centuries, with the occasional side trip into interesting and sometimes very amusing territory. All this was proof of a brilliant intellect and an unparalleled cultural education. Hans, you looked at what could be, you made it possible to measure the extent of the new space opening up, where a fire burned which made other things clearer - other ways of seeing things. It helped our discipline and the people in it to change.

We thank you, my dear Hans, for your publications, which are a precious gift to our discipline, which you have influenced like no other. Thank you for your deep personal commitment and for fighting for translation studies, regardless of the personal cost to yourself. It is a great pleasure for all of us, who are not just honouring you as an academic but who also hold you in high regard and feel close to you, to witness the appreciation that decades of work in teaching and research have earned you.

Therefore, my dear Hans, I would like to warmly congratulate you on this award and I would like to thank those who made this award possible for the first time for translation studies in Germany.