Welten / Worlds
Worlds

Gertrud Kolmar

translated by

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&
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Shearsman Books
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PROLOGUE

Regina Nörtemann

When I first heard Philip Kuhn reading some of the Gertrud Kolmar poems that he and Ruth von Zimmermann had translated into English I had a strange experience because I could hear the original German simultaneously: its melody, its rhythm and force of imagery. All these elements seemed to co-exist in the two languages at the same time.

As I understand the difficulties of translating poetry I was curious to know how Ruth and Philip had worked together on this project and managed to English Kolmar’s poetical voice without losing its uniqueness. It was, therefore, a great honour and pleasure to read their congenial translation of Welten whilst it was still in manuscript.

This book is a collaboration between an English poet, whose Jewish roots are in Bamberg and whose own poetry abounds in metaphors and alliterations, and a musician and dance-teacher whose mother-tongue is German but who has been living in England for a long time. I hope that their work receives the recognition it deserves.

Gertrud Kolmar once wrote that she knew that she was a poet. But she also loved to say that in her youth she wanted to become a dancer.

Now look at, read and listen to her suite of worlds in two languages.
SOME BRIEF COMMENTS ON
GERTRUD KOLMAR’S LIFE AND WORKS

philip kuhn

Gertrud Käthe Chodziesner was born on 10 December 1894 into an assimilated Berlin Jewish family.¹ Her father Ludwig was a successful criminal lawyer and her mother Elise (née Schönflies) was Walter Benjamin’s aunt. Gertrud had three younger siblings, Margot (b.1897), Georg (b.1900) and Hilde (b.1905). On leaving school she trained as a teacher and then worked in a nursery school. In 1915 she had an ill-fated love affair with Karl Jodl, a non-Jewish army officer, which led to an abortion and subsequent suicide attempt. Having studied Russian, English and French, she was employed, in 1917, as a letter censor in a prisoner-of-war camp near Spandau. Following the Armistice she worked in Berlin as a private tutor and governess before moving to Hamburg in 1927. In the autumn of that year she attended a vacation course at Dijon University and took the opportunity to visit Paris. Shortly after she returned to Germany, in March 1928, her mother fell ill and then following her mother’s death, in March 1930, Gertrud started working as her father’s secretary and also assumed full-time responsibilities for the family household which was now situated in Finkenkrug (Falkensee), an “idyllie” rural suburb of Berlin.

After Hitler seized power in early 1933 there followed a barrage of anti-Semitic decrees which, over the next five years, placed German Jews under ever-tightening restrictions. Unlike her siblings Gertrud chose to remain in Germany, or perhaps more specifically, she felt unable to abandon her father. Following the 1938 Novemberpogrom (the so-called Kristallnacht) Ludwig was forced to sell the family home, where he had been living since 1923, and re-locate, with his daughter, to a “Jewish” apartment in Berlin. Before long other families were billeted with them so that eventually Gertrud had to live with “strangers who have taken possession of everything that is mine … and
nothing belongs to me anymore.” Like thousands of other Jews, the Chodziesners were now trapped inside Germany, their rights systematically curtailed and their freedom of movement confined to an ever-diminishing radius. In July 1941, at the age of 47, Gertrud was conscripted to a weapons’ factory in Lichtenberg and then, some fourteen months later, re-assigned to work in a factory in Charlottenburg. In September 1942 her father was deported to Theresienstadt where he died some five months later. Then on 27 February 1943 Gertrud was arrested in the so-called Fabrikaktion and ‘deported’ to Auschwitz on the 2nd March transport. There is no record of what happened to her after she was forced onto the train but if she had survived that nightmare journey east she would have been “selected” on arrival, and murdered in the gas ovens.

Gertrud’s first publication, a small collection of poems, appeared in 1917 and was initiated by her father. She chose Kolmar as her nom de plume because, as she later explained, it was the name the Germans had used, in 1874, when they “re-christened” Chodziez, the Polish town in Poznán which was “the place of origin of the Chodziesner family”. It is generally accepted that Kolmar’s first book, and the subsequent poems she wrote around 1920, were nothing special. But then something happened in 1927—around the time she travelled to France—because over the next thirteen years she produced a significant body of work: two prose narratives, Die jüdische Mutter [The Jewish Mother (1931)] and Susanna (1940): the drama Cécile Renault (1935), the dramatic legend Nacht [Night (1938)], the historical study of Robespierre, Das Bildnis Robespierres (1933), and the ninety-five letters and postcards which she wrote to her sister and niece, Hilde and Sabine Wenzel, after the Wenzel family escaped into Switzerland in September 1938. But perhaps most important of all were the ten poetry cycles: Das preußische Wappenbuch [Prussian Coats of Arms Book], Weibliches Bildnis [Female Portraits], Tierträume [Animal Dreams], Mein Kind [My Child] and Bild der Rose [Image of the Rose] which were all written
between 1927 and 1932. These were followed by *Das Wort der Stummen* [The Word of the Mute (1933)], *Robespierre* (1934), *Sieben Gedichte aus “German Sea” von Helen Lodgers* (1934), *Vier religiöse Gedichte* [Four Religious Poems (1937)] and *Welten* [Worlds] which she wrote between 17 August and 20 December 1937 and which contains her last extant poems.

Kolmar’s work remained virtually unknown and largely unpublished during her life-time and has only survived because of the care and dedication of her sister and brother-in-law, Hilde and Peter Wenzel, her friend and cousin Sus(anne) Jung and Hilde Benjamin, the wife of her cousin Georg. Although Peter Wenzel persuaded *Suhrkamp* to publish *Welten* as early as 1947 and Hermann Kasack edited a collection of her *lyrische Werk* in 1955 Kolmar’s obscurity continued well into the post-war period. Interest in her life and work began to grow in the 1990s but it was not until 2003, with the publication of Regina Nörtemann’s Three Volume Critical Edition, that scholars and enthusiasts had, for the first time, a solid and reliable text of Kolmar’s entire *lyrische Werk*. Since then interest in Kolmar’s writings has spread beyond the German-speaking world and her work is now translated, or in the process of being translated, into Hungarian, Russian, Italian, Polish, French, Spanish, and Ukrainian.

If Kolmar is still a relatively esoteric figure in twentieth century German Literature she remains virtually unknown in the English speaking world. During the course of our researches we have only identified some twenty-five English language publications on Kolmar in the sixty-six year period since the end of the War. English translations have been even sparser. Two Kolmar poems, translated by Christopher Middleton, appeared in *Modern German Poetry*, the anthology which Middleton co-edited with Michael Hamburger in 1962. Eight years later Magpie Press published David Kipp’s *Selected Poems of Gertrud Kolmar* (1970), a chapbook of twenty-eight translations drawn from Friedhelm Kemp’s 1960 edition of *Das Lyrische Werk*. 
In 1975 non-German English speakers were offered their first opportunity to gain a sense of the breadth and depth of Kolmar’s poetic oeuvre with the publication of Henry Smith’s *Dark Soliloquy*. Smith’s dual text contains fifty-three translations selected from five of the ten cycles and also includes his long and informative biographical essay. Although Smith’s book received positive reviews it appears to have generated little interest because we have been unable to find any further Kolmar translations until 1995 when Millennium published Elizabeth Spencer’s *The Shimmering Crystal*, a dual text chapbook containing fourteen translations drawn from the 1955 Kasack edition. Grimm and Hunt included only one Kolmar poem in their *German 20th Century Poetry* (2001) but this turns out to be one of Smith’s 1975 translations. Eavan Boland included only one Kolmar translation in her *After Every War* (2004). As for Kolmar’s prose; her two novellas, *A Jewish Mother from Berlin* and *Susanna*, were published in America in a single-volume translation in 1997, whilst *My Gaze Is Turned Inward*, a translation of Kolmar’s letters (1934–1943) was published in 2004. This book also contains a short afterword by Johanna Woltmann, the noted Kolmar scholar, and an interesting preface including translations of seven Kolmar poems by the book’s translator Brigitte Goldstein.

It might be worth speculating why Kolmar’s writings have attracted this degree of neglect. One possible answer, hinted at by Ruth Schwertfeger, is that a series of significant manuscripts, written through “Auschwitz”, have effectively eclipsed works written in the decade that predated that “year zero”. It is quite likely, therefore, that Kolmar’s work has been obscured by that small but significant body of Jewish writers who lived through the Shoah (the Holocaust) and engraved their anguished experiences in ink. There were those who escaped Germany in time, like Nelly Sachs, or Else Lasker-Schüler. There were those who “survived”, like Rose Ausländer, Paul Celan, Piotr Rawicz and Primo Levi. And then there was Miklós Radnóti who appeared out of the ashes after a notebook of his poems was discovered in
his raincoat pocket when his body was exhumed from a mass grave one year after the end of the war. All this suggests that because Kolmar’s writings were cut short on the very eve of the Shoah they have been consigned to some preconceived cultural no-man’s land between Weimar (1919–1933) and “Auschwitz”. This fact alone may well have persuaded many potential Kolmar readers to assume that her writings offered little or nothing of consequence. We hope that this book will argue otherwise.

Once the two of us had decided upon a Kolmar poetry collaboration we instinctively favoured working with an entire cycle rather than a random selection of poems. Welten was the obvious choice because it is relatively short, at least compared to some of Kolmar’s other cycles—Weibliches Bildnis, for example, comprises seventy-five poems. This was important because it was to be our first attempt at translating German poems into English. But there was also another consideration: Welten does not have the strict meter and regular rhyme schemes that are so characteristic of Kolmar’s other cycles. This meant that we could side-step all those potentially intractable conundrums that would inevitably have arisen had we tried to twist Kolmar’s metres and rhymes into English. This is not to suggest that Welten is somehow free from technical difficulties but simply to acknowledge that neither of us felt inclined, let alone competent enough, to deal with such formal verse forms. And yet we still had our work cut-out not only trying to convey something of Kolmar’s unique lyrical style but also wondering how best to deal with her “wunderbares verbarium”—her strange, uncanny vocabulary.

Kolmar’s Worlds are inhabited by many diverse and mysterious beings that throb just “beneath the surface of things.” Some of those Worlds are populated by exotic plants, magical animals, strange “peoples”—real or imagined: some are colonised by phantoms and ghosts, or by seductive lovers, at first tender and amorous then, suddenly, menacing. Others are visited by semi-
mystical beings or perhaps by revenants returned so that they might entwine themselves around familiars or anthropomorphic shades already pulsating in sensual, semi-ritual dance.

In this translation we have striven to find consistent workable English equivalents that will not just capture the literal meanings of each poem but also suggest something of the architectonics of the cycle as a whole. To try and define the shape and timbre of Kolmar’s language without domesticating its strange and alien tone. To join together her sense, sensuousness and song and thereby re-fashion Welten so that English readers might hear Kolmar’s unique poetic voice beckoning from beyond the chasms of language and time.

Notes
3 Johanna Woltmann, in ibid, p.166.
4 These and other early poems can be found in ed. Nörtemann, op. cit., Frühe Gedichte Vol. 1.
5 Kolmar, op. cit. This volume includes several letters to miscellaneous others including Jacob Picard and her cousin Walter Benjamin.
8 Primo Levi was also a survivor of Auschwitz.
9 Miklós Radnoti was sent to a forced labour camp in occupied Serbia. He was executed on 9 November 1944 during a forced march back into Hungary.

This concept is Vera Viehöver’s, for which see her essay ‘Altfränkisch duftend wie Levkojenblüten’ in Gertrud Kolmars wunderbares Verbarium, ibid, pp. 251–263.


Our thanks to Anthony Rudolf and Richard Berengarten for their invaluable comments during the drafting of this essay.
The Mergui Islands

The Mergui Islands\(^1\) are spawn. Seeded there in front of the thigh of the frog, Which, blue Burma, yellow Siam, green Annam\(^2\) Squats and paddles, pushing the webbed foot Malacca into Chinese waters.

No. My Mergui Islands do not swim, singing in the Indian Ocean. They rise upwards silently out of night sea into steady dayless half-light, Humped, matted black-green, Ridged backs of monstrous buffaloes, which graze through the brownish seaweed in the depth of the sea. Their nostril boils foam. Their flank whooshes darkness. Pale smouldering sheet lightning Trembles out of the inflected horn. Fades away ...

Under thorny scrubs of the crest Cower flightless birds with horse hair which no researcher has yet recognised. From stony clearing Golden moon eye of motionlessly coiled slate grey serpent stares towards everlasting evening.

But in limestone caverns, Whose walls are eaten through by wave-mouths, gnawed through by teeth drips,

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1 The Mergui or Myeik islands are a group of hundreds or thousands of smaller and bigger green jewels in the Andaman Sea, located at the southern most part of Myanmar, formerly Burma.
2 A French protectorate encompassing the central region of Vietnam.
Ocean lizards in malachite-green bridal ornaments
celebrate lustful marriages,
Black vulture with bald blue-red countenance gorges
scarlet finned fish,
Dark swallows dart out of cavities, earth brown winged,
with dusky violet breasts,
Carnation and saffron coloured animal flowers blossom, already
breathing their prey, fanning with tentacles,
A great snail rolls itself into the panther spotted
porcelain cloak.
And slumbers.

Ships were blown away.
Blown away ... torn ... Planks drift, scraps of the world,
Which carries the chisel of the worker and the crayon of the writer
and the plough, and the weight and scales of the merchant,
A thousand rushing wheels, a thousand spluttering words
And the money. —Here mute twilight
Cowers in the starless space,
Far from gentle moon lament, from glowing, flashing sun songs.
Land dreams surrounded by the murmur of the salty
dripping jowls of ancient wet-nurse.
Muffled white-ish glint muses.
Only animal and plant.
Strange grotto rat which incubates grey speckled
turquoise-coloured egg,
Sleeping shrub, whose inky berries
Lull the eater into a doze for the passing of a year—
but nobody plucks them busily ...
Silence.
Being yet without doing.

Where vines, clinging with emaciated arms, throttle flaking
dwarf stems,
Under acacia plumage,
From the deep green leaf-sheath, a solitary fruit bursts forth
Long and rounded, upright swelling in naked
fleshy redness.
It waits,
Till the lips of a faint, more sultry breeze
Whispering through the thicket, feel, stir, shudder,
    shroud:
It quivers,
And skeins concealed in the flesh of the fruit pour out
    fertilising seed.
Yearning

I think of you,
I think of you always.
People spoke to me, but I didn’t take heed.
I looked into the deep Chinese blue of the evening sky from which
    the moon hung as a round yellow lantern,
And mused upon another moon, yours,
Which became for you the dazzling shield of an Ionian hero, maybe,
    or the soft golden discus of an exalted thrower.
In the corner of the room I sat then without lamplight,
    day weary, veiled, given entirely to the darkness,
The hands lay in the lap, my eyes fell shut.
But onto the inner septum of the eyelids was painted your picture
    small and blurred.
Under stars I strode past quieter gardens, the
    silhouettes of pine trees, shallow silenced
    houses, steep gables,
Under soft dusky cloak, which was only occasionally
    seized by wheel grinding, tugged by owl screech,
And I talked silently of you, beloved, to the noiseless,
    to the white almond-eyed dog, which I led.

Engulfed nights, drowned in everlasting seas!
When my hand bedded itself in the down of your chest to
    slumber,
When our breaths blended into an exquisite wine, which
    we offered to our Goddess, Love, in a rose quartz bowl,
When in the mountains of darkness the druse grew and ripened
    for us, hollow fruit of rock crystals and lilac amethysts,
When the tenderness of our arms called fiery tulips and
    porcelain blue hyacinths from wide undulating earth
    reaching into dawn,
When, playing on twisted stem, the half opened
    bud of the poppy, like a viper, flicked blood-red over us,
When balsa and cinnamon trees of the east lifted themselves
around our bed with quivering leaves
And crimson weaver finches intertwined our mouth’s breath into
floating nests. —
When will we flee again into the forests of the secret,
which, impenetrable, shelter hind and deer from the
pursuer?
When will my body be again white fragrant bread
for your hungry beseeching hands, the split fruit of my mouth
be sweet to your thirsting lips?
When will we meet each other again?
Strew heartfelt words like seeds of aromatic herbs and
summer flowers
And fall silent, happier, so as to hear only the singing sources
of our blood?
(Beloved, do you feel my small listening ear
resting on your heart?)
When will we glide again in the barque under
lemon coloured sail,
Rocked blissfully by silver foamed dancing wave,
Past palms adorned by a green turban, like
the scion of the prophet,
Towards the fringe reefs of distant islands, coral reefs,
on which you want to founder?
When again, beloved, ... when again ...?...

Now my path sinters
Through wasteland. Thorn scratches the foot.
Streams, cool, refreshing waters, murmur; but I don’t find
them.
Dates swell, which I don’t taste. My
starving soul
Mutters one word only, this one:
“Come ...”
Oh come ...