

*Berlin Fresco*

*Also by Norbert Hummelt*

***Poetry***

knackige codes (1991)

singtrieb (1997)

Zeichen im Schnee (2001)

Stille Quellen (2004)

Totentanz (2007)

***Prose***

Wie Gedichte entstehen (with Klaus Siblewski, 2009)

***Translations***

T.S. Eliot: Das öde Land / The Waste Land

***as Editor***

W.B. Yeats: Die Gedichte (2005)

Quellenkunde: Gedichte

**NORBERT HUMMELT**

**Berlin Fresco**  
*Selected Poems*

*Translated and introduced by*  
Catherine Hales

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## **Berlin Fresco**





## **An Introduction to the Selected Poems of Norbert Hummelt**

Norbert Hummelt's poems engage with the present—a present that is so deeply immersed and rooted in the past as to be almost indistinguishable from it. They are permeated with the memory of places and spaces once inhabited, dense with the remembered landscapes of his childhood, even when the specific landscape in which the poems take place are those of the present. Past and present landscapes blend and merge, the one is inextricably part of the other.

Hummelt was born in 1962 in Neuss in the Rhineland and lived there and in Cologne until moving to Berlin in 2006. Distance in space and time allows him to stand back and see better. Distinctively Rhineland landscapes are overlaid in part by those of the rural Brandenburg that has become a vital part of his life in Berlin; though the latter is not dissimilar to that of the Lower Rhineland, albeit less populated, and can call up layers of memory from that other world of his childhood and merge with them; as he writes in the poem 'ferns': ". . . images from earlier blended in I do not know what / level of memory engendered them . . ." Again, in the same poem, electricity pylons straddle the Brandenburg landscape as they did in the remembered Rhineland one, and seem like part of the landscape because of that association, seem to be a fact of nature, with no apparent connection to the light that comes on at the touch of a switch.

As the title of one of his collections, *Silent Sources*, hints, sources are important to the poet, in two main areas: his own life, and written texts that are available as sources. "What direction is poetry going in today?" he has asked, and supplied the answer, "To the sources!" Sources as origin, but also, as for the salmon, as the place to which we need to return to get new life.

Thus, the myths and legends associated with the Rhineland landscape, too, provide material, in a manner reminiscent of Stefan George, as in 'legend'. The external facts of landscapes and their objects and legends are transformed by the musicality and rhythm of his lines into internal landscapes with their overlapping strata of time, thus making the poems into places of introspection as well as looking outwards; and it is this very internalisation, and this strong sense of place, that make Norbert Hummelt's poems instantly recognisable and make him almost unique in contemporary German poetry.

Inseparable from the landscape of the Lower Rhine around Neuss as a fixed point in and source of Hummelt's poetry is his family. The Lower Rhineland is the place where he learned to speak and see, and so it has left the mark of the mother tongue on him, the language which is vital for a poet. His father died when he was young, so his defining memories of him are also childhood memories, such as that recounted in 'movie', of walks through that Rhineland landscape, of places seen with his father, such as we see in the poem 'crossing', and for ever intimately connected in those memory levels with him. Since his mother's death recently, as he has said in a radio talk, he no longer has anyone he can ask to check the veracity of his memories; thus, poetry is a way of retrieving and ordering memory, but, at the same time the poems are a way of bringing his parents within calling distance. The poem is unthinkable without the fact of mortality, without their living and dying.

Another early childhood and early language experience which is important for an understanding of Hummelt's poetry is the mystery of the ritual of the Latin Mass, which has become part of the structure of his language: "It was I think in the long silences during the Mass that I found the correlation between elevated form and interruptive sounds as a pattern that is fundamental to my poems, for these silences were broken by sounds made by my mother, which she was unable to suppress, and which I would now recognise anywhere."

The poems, then, are often strongly autobiographical, and the first-person narrator is Hummelt himself; dispensing with any post-modern games, this is an imaginative recreation of memory. Often, it is art that enables him to access those memories; sometimes, as in 'dürer's young venetian girl', the picture itself is evoked as a memory, that used to hang on the wall in the living room of his childhood home and, similarly to Proust's madeleine cake, allows him to recreate the discomfort of a tumescent boy amid the claustrophobia of "schnapps and sandwiches" and neighbourhood gossip; or, as in 'memling's madonna', finding a cheap print of the painting of the title by the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Flemish artist Hans Memling while clearing out his cellar permits him to demystify that past. Then again, memory of parties and dancing can be triggered by the fall of light through windows of empty rooms about to be deserted ('blues') or driving along the autobahn past the turn-off to a barn where there were once all-night parties to keep the fear of the

dark at bay ('dance of death'); elsewhere a moment of regret for a lost past can be inferred between the lines from the derelict state of a house in the present ('rooms').

His father is a strong presence in the poems by his absence. Not only his father, but also other family members form points of reference and grounding for the imaginative world of the poems. In 'dimmed light', the darkened room is remembered where his grandmother lay with festering bedsores; in 'silent sources', his uncle hovers between life and death while Hummelt seeks solace in the "silent sources" of memories of times shared with him, of water, bars and the Catholic mass. In 'crossing' Hummelt remembers walks with his father in the area near their home, and the small stream marking the boundary between Aachen and Cologne becomes a kind of Styx without the ferryman; you can cross it in a single step—death is that close.

The section titles of the volumes *Silent Sources* ('silent sources', 'rhine province', 'legends', and 'distant thunder') and *Dance of Death* ('the silent house', 'dream novella', 'berlin fresco' and 'world news') are eloquent guides to Hummelt's exploration of his main themes and concerns.

More recently the landscape has widened to include (and transform!) other places—Ireland, New York, London. In 'tobernalt', visiting the Holy Well in the place of that name in Sligo, Ireland, leads into an almost mystic vision of the scene during the Penal Times in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries, which becomes entwined with the present; while 'primrose street' evokes a feeling of dislocation in a strange place with strange people who speak a strange tongue that "must be irish", and the poet is trapped in a cave in a "mountain of dull sound"; Manhattan's Fifth avenue and the pillars of the Brooklyn Bridge are steep gullies ('valleys'); while going down into the London Underground evokes a vision of people sheltering there during the Blitz of World War II and of caves with mystic spiral carvings and the building of Stonehenge, with allusions to Eliot's 'Four Quartets' ('underground'). Berlin gets a mention as well, with the discovery of a medieval frieze in the Marienkirche near Alexanderplatz in 'berlin fresco' and a contemplation of the distant past of the last ice age, when Greifswalder Strasse, where Hummelt lives, was a melt-water gully feeding the Urstromtal ('meander'). The present feels like no more than a thin layer of dust covering an overpowering past. Journeys can be dislocations ('codes') between past and present lives and landscapes of childhood and adulthood tenuously connected by

the telephone ('calendar'). The night is a site of potential terror ('night', 'night song') while dreams take over consciousness ('trance') or become mystical visions as in 'antiphon' or 'exit', or, as in 'from the depths', fragments emerge into—and merge with—daytime experience. Just as art is often the trigger for memory, so too is it often a point of access to those dream or trance-like states; in 'etching', the narrator falls asleep over an etching by the Dutch artist Hercules Seghers and is drawn into the landscape depicted there, waking up just as it is becoming all too real.

Interestingly, the art referenced is mostly German or Flemish/Dutch work from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, as well as English landscape painters, especially Constable and Turner. The effect of this is to contribute to a feeling of pre-modern, or at least pre-20<sup>th</sup> Century, stasis in the poems. This complements the language of the poems, which is redolent with frequent allusions to and echoes of such classic German writers as Adalbert Stifter, Stefan George and Friedrich Hölderlin, whose cadences are unmistakable and layered into the poems, frequently by way of quotations.

Hummelt's way of working within and out of the tradition is quite different from, for example, that of Thomas Kling, another Rhinelander. Kling is more like an archaeologist, excavating and refashioning language; he has been very influential for the younger generation of poets in Germany. Hummelt has taken a different path, so it is interesting that it is precisely Norbert Hummelt who has edited Kling's *Selected Poems*. One is also reminded of that great, and sadly late, writer W.G. Sebald, who deliberately used a more classical frame of language, frequently echoing Stifter and others, in rejection of the language and culture of the post-war Germany he despised. For Hummelt, however, the past is ever present in the present which is unthinkable without it and his language reflects this. In Hummelt's poem 'indian summer', both poem and title recall Stifter's novel of the same name (in German, *Nachsommer*); the poem describes a retreat, albeit temporary, from the modern day by avoiding a traffic jam to set off across country to a place remembered from an earlier summer; while the section title 'dream novella' from *Dance of Death* is taken straight from the Arthur Schnitzler novella *Traumnovelle* (which was also the basis of Kubrick's film, *Eyes Wide Shut*). Hummelt, does, however, also take on board—and is influenced by—such classic Modernists as Gottfried Benn and T.S. Eliot.

As well as six collections of poetry, including three from Luchterhand, part of Random House (*Signs in the Snow*, 2001, *Silent Sources*, 2004, and *Dance of Death*, 2007), Norbert Hummelt has also published new translations into German of Eliot's 'Four Quartets' and 'The Waste Land' and edited and co-translated an anthology of translations of W.B. Yeats. As has been noted, there are allusions to Eliot throughout the poems, and a passage from 'Four Quartets' provides the epigraph to the volume *Dance of Death*. However, the presence of such writers as Stefan George, Adalbert Stifter, Gottfried Benn, Friedrich Hölderlin, and others, reveal a durable and deep rooting in the traditions of German literature beyond contemporary fashion that we also glimpse in Kling's work. Indeed, some poems work mainly through such allusions and cannot really be translated, since they rely so heavily on knowledge of the poems being alluded to for their effect; while, on the other hand, an earlier poem (in Kling mode), 'oh, that sickly picture' (from the early collection '*knackige codes*' (*crispy codes*, 1993), does not necessarily need us to know the Benn original ('Oh, that Distant Land') it parodies for us to enjoy it.

Norbert Hummelt's use of rhyme and assonance is a conspicuous feature of his poetry. However, he sees these 'internal rhymes' (often slant rhymes) as end rhymes that just don't happen to be at the end of lines, rather at the end of (irregular) rhythmic and syntactic units that run freely beyond line-breaks. This is what gives the poems much of their individual musicality and heightens the effect of internal landscaping. More important for him than line breaks is the form of the poem on the page, lines of more or less equal length appearing as a block. The translations follow this principle, so that the lines and line breaks of the German and English texts do not often correspond. The 'internal rhymes' and assonances of the English versions are not those of the original. The aim has been to create poems that work in English and give an English-speaking reader a feel for the musicality of the original, but on their own terms. Likewise, Hummelt's trademark use of the abbreviated form "u." instead of "und" cannot be reproduced by "a." for "and", since the abbreviation, while common in German usage, would be exotic in English, as would the ampersand, which, though often used in poetry, is not in common usage; "and" is used throughout.

But perhaps it would be better to use the word *adaptation* rather than *translation*; since, as Robert Frost observed, the first thing that gets

lost in translation is the poetry, it is incumbent upon the “translator” to “adapt” the poem into the medium of a different language and, of course, make it function there, with all its “strangeness”, while keeping as much as possible of the feel of the original. At the same time, translation is also a collaboration—between the original author and the translator, or should we say: adaptor, since the original will always be a part of and a frame of reference for the adaptation that results. It is a lucky adaptor who has the enthusiastic, active and positive cooperation of the original poet, as this adaptor has had with Norbert Hummelt, and she wishes to thank him for this collaboration.

Catherine Hales  
Berlin, July 2009

**dimmed light**





## dimmed light

pavement already shut down  
disconcerted in the mist of a  
winter evening, one more time  
around the same block with  
its blacked-out thickly-curtained  
facades; where you are heading  
dimmed light, calendar pages  
long since no longer torn off *give*  
*the lad some cherry juice* in  
a simple glass, slopped and  
bunkered the things we're  
conscious of *and give him*  
*something from the sweet tin*  
*too* some of those chocolate  
twists two wrapped in gold paper  
as were the open legs, raw with  
bedsores in this room here brace  
yourself as the images come to you

## **trip**

somewhere between drifting and  
dreaming my hand in your hair  
stroking mechanically now  
what images are with you as you slip  
into sleep . . . nothing  
taken not on a trip  
just pin-pricks surrounding  
your iris perhaps a bit  
like the way a bird in flight  
is no longer able to alight  
on a branch that's been sawn off  
my arm beneath you is getting  
heavy my hand  
is numb and in my head  
the pirate copies in the other eye  
are more fleeting still than photography

## cut

with the discrete images in the room  
from a dream he'll never tell  
he moves into the dull  
hallway light the silent object wrapped  
in parchment  
and with the transient idea of blood  
on his chin concealed with a little  
printer's ink he kicks numbly into  
the too-bright morning far below  
foam rubber *when I'm dead*  
*and gone* to his friend in a shoebox  
small roses going cold.  
the small pit beneath the balcony

## **haze**

you seek the nearness of what's  
outlived and why ever not? no-one's  
looking after all as you press down the  
handle on the door and even the man  
eating green beans from a flask is hardly  
taking any notice you've taken down a slim  
volume from the shelf: the letters clinging  
still to words the dedication gone, the  
language's fruit pulp smelling so sweetly  
of decay your jacket's elbows worn to holes  
and the man who wore it before you not long  
passed away. it's all the same. sometimes  
though you'd go although still young and  
take refuge in your local pub with its tinted  
windows blocking any view of impending  
dusk smoky air and lips hidden in the haze  
of someone else's words that don't mean you.  
is the century not over yet? you sit with a  
plate of egg and chips reading t.s. eliot  
in one of those old faber paperbacks

## portrait

ash-blond wind-blown and ousted  
from the world  
what's left of things already just  
forgetting, rote reciting  
sitting eating the last of gherkins  
flickering, eye almost fluttering even  
a tic perhaps too much alone  
in her caravette / in rhyming speech  
to herself and for the  
rest of the trip  
hear her song drift from a fastened  
sphere, to nobody visibly  
who was supposed to hear  
the dialogue of dress and stitch.

## dead things

in the sleepy wake of a  
day in april  
there's the same tormented pigeon  
the empty drink can shoved  
into a bush, the yoghurt tub  
between branch and twig  
which itself is stuck and that  
since last winter things seemingly  
left unchanged as though  
they'd merely been photographed  
*thus flees the precisely-found* image  
into memory, *where otherwise safe*  
*in the dark* of evening at the edge  
of the road in low grass steeped  
in long-distance light terrified  
the rabbit *my eye the thorn* fro-  
zen in its movement in the mo-  
ment its vulnerable body / the  
shadow of a blackbird flits  
silently overhead and van-  
ishes into a wall of forsythias