

The Intimacy of Internationalism in the Poetry of Joachim Sartorius

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Over the last decade, during a pivotal period in German history (just before and after reunification), Joachim Sartorius (b. 1946) has been at the center of German cultural life in several capacities, as a poet, translator, editor, and administrator of cultural affairs.¹ With his prior professional training and experience in law and foreign service, Sartorius has imported into German cultural spheres, precisely during this period of national introspection, an openness to international influences that ranges from his individual poems to public policy. During the last five years in particular, since reunification, when German intellectual life has at times seemed paralyzed either by simple disorientation or rancorous debates, Sartorius has expanded the scope of his activity and developed a role for the intellectual and artist in the post-reunification era based on the mediation between public and private spheres, and between different cultures (in a single society or across national boundaries).²

Sartorius' diverse functions confound long-standing and largely exclusive categories of (professional) identity in Germany such as lawyer, poet, administrator, connoisseur, academic, editor, etc., and allow for the migration between separate realms of experience and knowledge.³ Poetry in general occupies the center of his different occupations. His own poetry, in its idiom, *Weltanschauung*, and affiliations in European traditions, defines a sensibility that extends then to other areas: his poetry and work in those other areas raises, in turn, the public profile of the genre in Germany. Yet his poetry makes few references to Germany, but on the contrary, is rife with place names and allusions to other lands

and cultures. In fact, Sartorius' work, in poetry and elsewhere, explores the relation between the object and the subject, the foreign and the familiar, and how each defines itself by an Other.

Sartorius, whether as cultural administrator, editor or poet, is a mediator, and poetry is his principal but not his only medium. Whereas for earlier generations, the term "internationalism" carried mainly a political meaning (usually, also strictly ideological, as in the Communist International or Comintern), for Sartorius internationalism would seem an ethical and aesthetic term, suggesting an attempt, not to proselytize or impose from the outside, but to understand other cultures and other individuals on their own terms, from within, as it were, through art. Sartorius' notion of poetry as a form of mediation between private and public domains conflates two dominant strains in German Modernism represented by Gottfried Benn's 'absolute' aesthetics and Brecht's social *Gebrauchslryrik*, but also distances him from the "impersonal" aspects of both. The seeming contradiction between the two terms of "intimacy" and "internationalism" in fact defines the area that Sartorius has mapped out for his work as mediator. Thus, the notion of intimacy informs directly Sartorius' internationalism and makes necessary the act of 'close' reading, an intimacy with the specific text (or other art/object), in order to elicit the voice of that other. To understand Sartorius' poetics we must first look to his own poetry, where these abstract principles are 'embodied.'

Sartorius' first volume, *Sage ich zu wem* (*Say I to Whom*, 1988), is divided into two sections, with poems from the years before 1982, and from 1983 to 1987.⁴ The first section, "Umarmung erinnert" ("Remembered Embrace") is also subdivided into four parts. Part I contains five poems that indicate in their progression the basic contours of his poetics. The first poem ("Umarmung, con affeto," "Embrace, con affeto") marks a point of departure in its striving for immediacy of sensual experience:

die Hände wie Kreisel, fühlen deine
bemalten Zehen, Brüste, Gewebespannungen
zwischen glänzenden Ameisen, fühlen:
rosa an der Spitze die Nacht, Ummantelung -
die Flöte tanzt wie eine Feder, Formentera!
auf dem Metronom, dir meine
Zunge in der Mandelkurve deiner

innersten Lippe, ja ich läge ja sehnlichst
 läge ich in dir in deines Körpers Laken-Nacht
 ein Jagen die Hügel hinauf ein Hineinsteigen
 ins Hochgrab durch das - reglos - ein Wasserfall
 fällt tief in den umpelzten Kragenmund tiefe
 Ausgrabungen unter den Brüsten Schürfungen
 zwei Erhebungen aus Wasser Milch schäumt das
 Tal

jetzt fühlst du die heißen Kiesel jetzt
 in deinen tiefen Mund zum Schlunde zielen
 Moos Gold den Schlamm saugst du hinein
 und dunkel sperrt und öffnet sich die Gracht

Hands like tops, feel your
 painted toes, your breasts, the spread
 of tissue between sparkling ants, feel:
 pink at the tip the night, draped under covers
 the flute dances like a feather, formentera!
 on the metronome, my tongue to you
 in the almondcurve of your most
 inner lip, yes, I'd most love to lie, yes,
 to lie in you in your body's sheet-night
 a chase up the hills, a climbing in
 into the high tomb through which—motionless—
 a waterfall falls deeply into the furcollared mouth
 deep dimples under the breasts, open surfaces
 two elevations of water milk froths the valley
 now you feel the hot gravel now
 into your deep mouth aimed at the depths
 moss gold mud you draw within
 and darkly opens and closes the cave. (15)

The opening with "hands" and the repetition of the verb "feel" with a full colon dictate a tactile "reading" of the "body" of the poem, which is dense with objects, nouns of sexual suggestiveness. The nouns avoid direct description, but not by much, as earth-body allegory, and only force translation back into bodily terms, as a sort of easy intercourse between literal and metaphoric levels. The verbal conceits create an imaginative nearness, a palpable proximity that is underscored at the end of the poem by another repetition: "*now you feel the hot gravel now*" (my emphasis). Those

two controlling repetitions at the beginning and end frame a cluster of repetitions in the middle: “yes, I’d most love to lie, yes, to lie in you in your body’s sheet-night,” that constitutes the poem’s central moment of desire (“sehnlichst”), not as abstract sentiment but rather as bodily urge to spend the night, share the sheets (“Laken-Nacht”) with a lover.

The second poem that gives the cycle its title begins with the same palpable desire in a repetition of “feel,” but that urge remains suspended now by certain knowledge: “wortkrank, und / schlittrig ist das Erinnern” ‘wordsick, and / shaky is remembering’ (16). Here, language and memory create distance and, conversely, also bring near, make more intimate; the consciousness that makes the difference between “sexual” and “sensual” also interferes with the desired tactile immediacy (as expressed in the first poem). Thus, in the second strophe, the words “Ich, ich entsinne mich” ‘I, I remember’ strike a literal ambiguity between recalling former intimacies and surrendering to cognitive recollection of that sensual dimension (*ent-sinnen* - [lit.] desensualize). But the last line, “Und ich höre ihr Atmen durch die Sehnacht gehen” ‘And I hear her breath go through the see-night’ (16) recuperates that sensual moment by confounding consciousness with a neologism: the narrator hears her breathing as she walks through the “sight-night” or “night of sight,” either the oxymoron of tangible, physical nightness seen directly like Milton’s famous “Darkness visible” or the absence of such sighting (and citing) as the derangement of the physical faculty, its *Umnachtung*, as it were. Yet before the reader stumbles in the dark on that conundrum, a false compound comes to mind as a first decipherment, *Sehn-acht*, which makes no sense, but that more likely prefix to an unusual compound suggests the German word for desire, *Sehnsucht*, the momentary consideration and logical elimination of which inserts a suggestion, a *soupçon*, of desire, of longing, into the neologism. The neologism plays on the word (for desire) that is not present; invisible desire illuminates the poem and allows the lover to see in the dark.

That illumination migrates into the next poem, “Umarmung der Vögel” (“The Birds’ Embrace” 17), that concludes with a certain lightness of being: “schweben wir, reglos: ein Leichtwerden von / mir zu dir, ohne Qual, fernlos, wie Gleiten / auf Lichtkufen, und wieder sein Geheimnis neu” ‘we hover, without movement: becoming light from / me to you, without pain, without distance, like / gliding on runners of light, and again its secret anew’ (17),

whereby the play on the word “light” (*leicht* / *licht*) levitates the poem with levity, recalling the whimsicality of W. C. Williams’s un-Jamesian “Portrait of a Lady” (1920). Yet in the next poem, “Kopf an Kopf” (“Head to Head”), that felicitous proximity changes from airy sensuality to the lone act of cognition:

Alles ereignet sich nun
im Kopf

...

Es krümmt sich in der blinden
Bahn des Innenaugs
der Kopf zum Wort,
und rund die Reizhaut
glättend
tritt kein Gedanke an den Mund
vor dem der Atem steht.

Everything happens now
in the head

...

The head twists to the word
in the blind curve
of the inner eye
and around sensitive skin
smoothing
no thought comes to mouth
before which breath hovers. (18)

Only consciousness of physical perception, translated into language, creates that perception fully; otherwise “no thought comes to mouth.” Poetry hones perception. Sartorius’ first poems describe in different configurations a progression from a physical, sensual act, to consciousness, to language, then to poetry, and to perception, whereby the first step creates inevitable distance and the latter steps return consciousness to the body. The difference between language and poetry is the turning point: language separates thought and sensation, whereas poetry binds the two together. This migration of consciousness from and back to the body defines for Sartorius the function of poetry as a form of travel: “Sie erhoben sich / . . . / zum Rückflug // in welches Land in welche / Erinnerung in welch / Vergessen” “They lifted off / . . . / to fly back

// to which land to which / memory to which / forgetting' (19). The lovers seek to return (*zum Rückflug*) to unselfconscious immediacy (*Vergessen*) without surrendering "ihre Innigkeit . . . eine Wärme" 'their intimacy . . . a warmth' (19) which comes with sensual consciousness of each other, their "embrace."

Sartorius' poetry attempts to invoke that return to an immediacy of the senses without a loss of consciousness, but rather its heightening; however, the impossibility of arrival on that return flight (*Rückflug*) intensifies desire and gives rise to a sort of metaphysical homesickness for sensual authenticity, for closeness to the world ("Ich möchte in die Nacht der Steine dringen, / meine Nägel sind ganz blutig davon" 'I would like to penetrate into the night of the stones, / my nails are very bloody from trying' (25) and to experience ("Mehr, sage ich, mehr" 'More, I say, more' (31). Poetry is a flight out of convention, an escape ("Schreiben / ist Reisen ist Reißausnehmen" 'Writing / is traveling is breaking away' 51), but that attempt to return heightens the awareness of temporality and of ultimate failure: "Alles verwandelt sich. Unsere Schrift, / unser Fleisch, auch die Liebe. Daraus, / und daß wir nie heimisch werden, / entsteht das Gedicht" 'Everything changes form. Our script, / our flesh, also love. Out of all that / and that we never feel at home / the poem emerges' (69). The poem is at once a means of traveling back to the senses, a monument to sensual desire and its losses, and a clarification of the world in its palpable physicality as a bulwark against time. The poem presents things as illuminated, not obscure, objects of desire.⁵

The poems remain porous, open to the world of things. Sartorius avoids rhyme, even rhythms and effects of musicality, in order to heighten opticality, the sense of sight as in his poem "Blicke, das ist alles" ("Glances, that's all" 76-79), and he maintains a casual, conversational tone of plain speech that nonetheless shifts between dialogue or direct address, conceptual commentary and the detached analytical gaze upon a "still life" of objects. Thus, the language of the poems reflects that philosophical process of flight or travel from carnal desire, to consciousness, to perception—a process that flees and confirms the erosions of time, that "die / Wahrheit sich heute nomadisch gibt, / in Mäandern gelegt um die Erschöpfung / des Herzens" 'the truth these days is nomadic, / layed in meanders around the / heart's exhaustion' (84). The calculated windings and peregrinations of Sartorius' poems alternately circumscribe, describe and enact a poetics of travel

between philosophical subject and object, between the senses of the conscious observer and the tactile surfaces of the world; that poetics constitutes, in effect, an erotics of time, whereby time inhabits objects (people, places, things) and is embraced there. The sense of time becomes a sort of sixth physical sense, extending in a different dimension; time is fulfilled in the play of the physical senses in relation to objects, as sensuous memory, and those objects are in turn invested with longing, for what once transpired there. With this sort of poetics—distinct in German traditions from Gottfried Benn’s ‘absolute’ poem outside of time, as well as from Rilke’s ontic auscultation of objects—Sartorius locates himself instead in an international tradition with affiliations in particular to Pierre Jean Jouve (1887-1976) in France and in America, to William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), whose complete works Sartorius has also edited.⁶ A comparison of Jouve and Williams will help to define Sartorius’ idiom and establish a triangular base for his international poetics.

William Carlos Williams is most famous for his much-anthologized short poem from *Spring and All* (1923):

So much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens (*WCW* 224)

The most startling element of the poem is its sparseness, its deadpan assertion of great unstated significance in a common object. The poem is without any afflatus-filled apostrophes, or other conventional poetic means such as rhyme, rhythm, allusion or tropes like simile. Instead, the truncation of the lines interferes even with the basic cadences of idiom in phrases (or even in compound nouns) and thereby isolates the objects and separate components of an image, which breaks into two-dimensional color fields (red, white) that evoke tactile surface (glazed with rain / water) and occupy space as objects in relation (barrow // beside) with both definite and infinite, though unknown, implications (so much

depends / upon). Williams develops a rather complicated simplicity of antipoetic diction that seeks to return thought, sight and language to primary experience. As he remarks in his later *The Descent of Winter* (1928): “poetry should strive for nothing else, this vividness alone, *per se*, for itself. The realization of this has its own internal fire that is ‘like’ nothing [else]” (302). This is home-spun American phenomenology.

In France, Pierre Jean Jouve also devoted a poem, surprisingly, to this same rustic object:

La brouette
Arrêtée sous le grand orme de vie de soleil et de
nuage
C’est le plus beau chant possible
En l’honneur de Dieu essentiel

Par un matin où l’on distingue à peine les ombres
Tant il fait clair, et les arbres géants
Suspendus à la mamelle du ciel mauve
Et la brouette
avec l’esprit naïf du bois naturel
Éclairée par le dessous et le dedans.

The wheelbarrow
Stopped under the great elm of life of sun and of
cloud
It’s the most beautiful song possible
in honor of God essential

On a morning where one hardly distinguishes shadows
so bright is it, and the giant trees
suspended on the breast of the mauve sky
and the wheelbarrow
with the naive spirit of natural wood
illuminated from below and within. (*PJJ* 65)

Jouve, like Williams, suggests proximity to the object’s essential quiddity through naming and isolation, but also here through repetition and the illumination in the last line. Unlike Williams, Jouve presents a larger context, the big picture, with a note of grandiosity that elides the joy of pantheistic hymn into a religious invocation that equates the essence of the object with God. The object is an epiphany not only of itself, as in Williams’ poem, but

also of God. Their common focus on the same object seems to serve at first only to define utterly different sensibilities.⁷

The two poems demonstrate, in compressed form, the primary feature of each poet's work, which sets them apart, but a larger perspective on their work complicates that initial impression and shows greater affinities, with Williams at times sounding like Jouve ("The soul, my God, shall rise up / —a tree" (336) and Jouve sounding like Williams, "L'homme sauvé du soleil / Écoutait murmurer les immenses familles de choses / vertes" "The man saved from the sun / listened to the murmurs of the immense families of things / green" (49). In fact, as in these quotations, both poets write with startling frequency of trees as simple but grand objects that, like other less distinguished objects, define a world apart unto themselves, as again in Williams' *Spring and All*: "The leaves embrace / in the trees // it is a wordless / world // without personality" (228). The object-tree has its own self-contained sensuality (embrace), its quiddity that is not a projected psychological attribute (Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy"), not a "personality." Or in Williams' "Wild Orchard":

Between the Trees

stillness
and the early morning light
The apple trees
are laden down with fruit.

Among blue leaves
the apples green and red
upon one tree stand out
most enshrined.

Still, ripe, heavy,
spherical and close,
they mark the hillside.
It is a formal grandeur,

a stateliness,
a signal of finality
and perfect ease. (*WCW* 239)

Both poets evoke such sculptured plasticity of a given object with the philosophical implication that all objects share such dignity and

are alive to the senses, as in Jouve's line "La fibre verte du monde est sensible" 'the green fiber of the world is sensate' (112) or his exclamation, "Superbe nature! Un monde entier de routes / Ruisseaux et rochers / Objets volumineux" 'Superb nature! a whole world of roads / rocks and brooks / Voluminous objects' (100) or "Un monde partout luisant de grandioses rayons / Ordinaires" 'A world everywhere beaming with rays, grandiose / and ordinary' (106), where the last blunt collocation of adjectives captures the core belief of both poets. The titles of most of their poems are simple names of objects. Despite their differences, both poets evince a phenomenology rooted in the sensory apprehension of common objects; both extend and accentuate that worldview, and avoid any sort of phenomenological piety by achieving intimacy in evocations of sensuality, as in Jouve's "sa nudité était entière" 'her nudity was complete' (53), where nudity (suggesting aesthetic detachment) suddenly becomes utter nakedness (suggesting carnal desire); and both further undercut bland pantheism by broadening the range of objects to include the banal, ugly and coarse. But both poets elevate desire for experience of the world through the senses to a philosophy enacted in the poem.

Jouve retains the allegorical and hymnic apparatus of Christian devotional poetry, but undercuts that adherence to convention with an erotic pantheism that embraces objects and persons (as in his volume *Matière céleste* [*Celestial Matter*, 1937] with its beautiful cycle of poems in sensual memory of "Hélène"), even at times with a surprising bawdiness. Williams retains a streak of pantheism, but undercuts any tendency toward dilation with an "objective" imagism that compresses pantheism into phenomenological observation (of nature, people, places, and all sorts of objects), reinforced by great economy of diction, a sharp sense of society and with Cubistic experiments of formal abstraction. Both aim, in different idioms, to "fix the particular with . . . universality" (Williams 193). Both describe what one critic of Williams has called, in explaining the "Red Wheelbarrow," a "surcharge of emotion," pent up behind the details.⁸

In terms of sensibility, Sartorius draws upon and further develops aspects of both: from Jouve, the notion of desire invested in objects and persons, an undertow of longing and the sense of elegiac memory (largely absent in Williams); from Williams, the greater breadth of objects and detail, the sense of social configurations (persons in their relations to objects, especially in

the city), and his feel for specific experience and sensuous intimacy. In terms of form, Sartorius adopts from Jouve a supple long poetic line, verging on prose, a first-person narrative voice and ocularity, and a tendency to serialize apposite objects or phrases without punctuation; from Williams, the short poetic line, with line and word breaks against normal syntax and rhythms of speech, which emphasizes an analytical optics for objects in spatial relations, and the diction of plain speech. These two poets, in what they have in common and in their differences, provide a measure for Sartorius' poetry.

His second volume, *Der Tisch wird kalt* (*The Table Turns Cold*, 1992), stands out against that background.⁹ The cosmopolitan Sartorius adopts from Williams his sense of particular locality, but in contrast to the assertively nativist Williams, elevates the foreign to the familiar in "exotic" Mediterranean locales. An expansive desire for experience, a Jouvean embrace of the world, gives way to a melancholic jadedness that strips away sentiment and concentrates the poetic intellect upon its immediate object. From Jouve to Williams to Sartorius, the tension of emotional restraint behind the given particulars of poetic description becomes more severe, more cerebral.¹⁰ In comparison to his first volume, *Say I to Whom*, most of the poems here are short and taut, sometimes even severe in their abruptness, stopping short and avoiding flowing rhythms or fullness of phrase in favor of precision in understatement.

Yet that truncation bespeaks a fullness of emotion (as in Jouve), though held in check or subdued to apathy. The poems remain descriptive, not associative or abstract. The effect is optical and even analytical, like an etching or a painting by Morandi, portraying an object or location (or person or situation defined by objects and place). The poetic subject emerges discreetly from the concrete details of its world. The opening cycle invokes Cavafy's Alexandria, crushed by its past and its climate ("Vom dynastischen Durcheinander / noch ganz benommen, die Luft glühende Wolle" 'Still numb from dynastic disorder, the air redhot wool' 11) into a weary sensuality in the present, a "Gefühl der allergrößten Erschöpfung" 'feeling of greatest exhaustion' (10). The cerebral hedonism of Sartorius' first volume ripens here into apathy; the ecstasy of time fulfilled fades into an awareness of time passing ("des Jahrbeils pfeifen" 'the whistle of the guillotine' [sic] [56]).

The long title poem translates that sense of oppression into a

familiar present: “Wir sitzen am steinernen Tisch, / in der Würde zahlloser Müdigkeiten” ‘We sit at the stone table / in the dignity of innumerable exhaustions’ (15). Our experience of the world slips into the past, but gathers in and around simple objects that endure against time. That past might weigh upon us with deadening monumentality, as in Alexandria, if not recovered for the present: “Wir sprechen / über die hinter uns liegende Zeit, die wir / bereits als große, vergangene empfinden, / die jetzt zu sammeln ist, zu befreien ist / aus der Zeit” ‘We speak / about the time that lies behind us, that we / already feel is great, long gone / that is now to collect, to liberate / from time’ (18). The table is such an object, a stable reminder of times of fullness, the objects once upon it and the people once around it. Ultimately even such objects crumble, as in “Der Sphinx” (The Sphinx, 44), and turn cold, as in the volume’s title.

In effect, each object is a fragment and a monument that speaks to the attuned observer (“Der Innenraum spricht zu uns” ‘Its inner sanctum speaks to us’ 45), who completes the past in the present as memory. That recovery requires a sharp optics in the poem, like the knife in “Ratschlag zum Verzehr der Auster” (“Advice on Eating Oysters” 54-55) for prying open the closed object to release its store of experience into the sensuous present: “Mit dem Wasser trinkst du / die Schreie der Krabben / den Schatten der Wellen / und den Strudel am Grund // Mit dem Fleisch kaust du / auf der Liebe Sie läßt / nicht mehr los . . . und ein Kummer wächst in dir / der dein Leben begleitet” ‘With its water you drink / the cries of the crabs / the shadows of the waves / the whirl at the bottom // with its meat you chew / on love it won’t / let you go . . . and a sorrow grows in you / that’s with you for life’ (54-55). The sensuous, almost sensual, act of eating an oyster is imbued with oceanic memory turning to sorrow that can drag one under. Each object is a vessel for lost experience that the poet redeems, brings to the surface and back to life as new experience, conscious of its precarious moment between future and past. In the poem “Am Arno bei Arezzo” (“On the Arno at Arezzo” 42), the narrator fixes his gaze on the trash flowing down the river: “Das ist das Spiel: Zukunft / unter Vergangenes zu spülen, / oder das Vergangene so in die Zukunft / zu reißen, daß dort / die Toten auf uns warten” ‘That’s the game: to flush / the future into the past / or to wrench what’s past / into the future so that / the dead wait for us’ (42). With a hint of pathos, of emotional force held in check, Sartorius tries to arrest that moment, balanced in plenitude of

felicity and sorrow, in the poem, understood as an enduring verbal artifact.

The Table Turns Cold concludes with two long poems, the first of which, "Erinnerungen des Nervensystems" ("Memories of the Nervous System" 61-70), ends with a strophe that captures the coincidence of intimacy and internationalism in Sartorius' work: "ein letztes vergnügtes Atmen / so laut als atme das ganze Zimmer mit dir / so klar / ein Atemzug als fahre er / rund um die Welt" 'a last contented breathing / as loud as if the whole room breathed with you / so clear / a draw of breath as if he were traveling / all around the world' (70). The privacy and intimacy in a room somewhere implicates the world; Sartorius views the poem as extending in two directions, into the self through sensuous memory and into the world at large. That motif surfaces again in his next collection of poems, *VAKAT* (*Vacat*, 1993), an artbook in collaboration with the photographer Nan Goldin.¹¹ Though the title in Latin gives the volume a certain catholicity, it could have been called "Empty Beds" (the caption of one of the photographs).¹² The images depict, with lavish detail, the tacky opulence and domestic touches of vacant hotel rooms and bordello chambers, from Berlin and Hamburg to New York and Boston, to Mexico and Thailand: the *monde* as *demimonde* of unsatisfied longing of both parties for authenticity of consciousness and the senses. Here, the palpable intensity of desire of Sartorius' first poem, "Embrace, con affeto" in his first volume, the desire to share "your body's sheet-night," is spent. Here, the camera shows the sheets.

Sartorius' collaboration with visual artists is a natural development of, intrinsically, the optics of his poetry and, extrinsically, his work as director of the Berlin Artists Program of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). Goldin's photographs in this volume develop themes already articulated in his poetry by depicting the evacuated sites of carnal pleasure, hence the transitoriness of all sensuous experience, the monumentality of absence in our lives, and the significance of objects as repositories of experience. Like the poetry of the first two volumes, the photographs are both analytical and elegiac, almost funerary. Travel appears here in an international context as decamped love, certainly physical, perhaps emotional, which has left a void and a vacancy.

The sculpted emptiness in the bedsheets becomes a physical memorial of loss, as in the empty mirrors on both book covers, or in the poem, "Was ist mit uns" ("What's with Us"):

Im Spiegel kein Gesicht
Du bist dahinter
noch im Schlaf gesprochen.
“Verwechsele nicht die Dämmerung
mit dem guten Willen der Zeit.”

...

Der Abend ist noch jung.
Geld von der Schönheit
klimpert in den Taschen.
Jedes Herz, das nicht spricht,
käme jetzt zu spät.
Wir werden unten erwartet,
zwischen Schatten und Asche:
klein, kräftig und kostbar.

No face in the mirror.
You are behind it,
uttered while still asleep.
“Don’t mistake the twilight
for the good will of time.”

...

The evening is young.
Money from beauty
jingles in the pockets.
Each heart that doesn’t speak,
would come too late.
We’re awaited down below,
between shadow and ashes:
small, robust and precious. (pages unnumbered)

The poems read like baroque inscriptions, *memento mori* or *memento amoris*. Time, whether as physical beauty or as an evening, seems “young” and full of possibilities, like money in the pocket after a trick. But for prostitute and client, there’s “no face in the mirror” for the “heart that doesn’t speak.” What appears as the “twilight” (*Dämmerung*) of a dawn might be the “twilight” (*Dämmerung*) of dusk. The intense but fleeting and anonymous encounter negotiates most immediately and intimately the threshold between desire and loss, between future and past, “between shadow and ash.”¹³

Unlike in the previous volume, *The Table Turns Cold*, or in "Advice on Eating Oysters," here the real object is that absence, the space between. The philosophical content of both poems and photos is, so to speak, embedded in the sheets, between the "covers" of the bed and the book. Whereas post-Kantian and post-Nietzschean revelations of a subjective world without deity (*deus absconditus*) gave rise to materialism and nihilism, Sartorius and Goldin document in this album an inverted dilemma (*coitus absconditus?*) in a world where sensualism promises no redemption, and the bare bed only limns an articulate absence, an almost physical longing for a spiritual *Heim* (home), which is at the core of the poem's *Geheimnis* (secret).¹⁴

The exploration of that relation between poem and home, on all levels, physical and metaphysical, national and international, becomes a matter of translation. In 1995 Sartorius brought out two anthologies of international poetry in German translation.¹⁵ The *Atlas der neuen Poesie* (*Atlas of the New Poetry*) positions itself in a post-World War II tradition in Germany of great anthologies, from the translations appended to Hugo Friedrich's *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik* (*The Structure of Modern Poetry*, 1956), to Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *Museum der modernen Poesie* (*Museum of Modern Poetry*, 1960), to Harald Hartung's *Luftfracht: Internationale Poesie, 1940-1990* (*Air-Freight: International Poetry, 1940-1990*, 1991).¹⁶ But whereas grand traditions usually tend to restrict entry and establish an exclusive canon, this tradition moves toward greater breadth of inclusion. Sartorius' *Atlas* introduces 65 poets from 36 countries and 21 languages, and offers a broad affirmation of poetry's vitality and diversity around the world as a means of capturing "the realm of the intimate—the blind spot of all positivistic discourses" (8). For Sartorius, the defining moment of intimacy in all poetry links poets internationally across formal and cultural bounds, and he has supplanted Enzensberger's museum with a map in order to guide readers into the wide world of poetry and goad them to their own further explorations of those realms.

The book is divided into nine files or portfolios (the German *Mappe* alludes to the English "map" and Elizabeth Bishop's poem of that title) that proceed longitudinally from Australasia westward across the Near East, Europe and Africa to the Americas. Whereas his own poetry cites foreign places but draws the reader into the philosophical relations of a subject remembering itself and others in

and around objects, his two anthologies, but especially the *Atlas*, draw the reader into the relations between translation and original (the beautifully produced *Atlas* provides both in juxtaposition), between the poetics of different poets, between poets chosen and not chosen from a particular region or culture (the selection favors lesser-known poets of stature, Edward Brathwaite instead of Derek Walcott, Tchiya U Tam'si instead of Wole Soyinka, etc.), between the different literary and cultural traditions absorbed by a given poet, and between the socio-historical circumstances out of which each poet writes. Whereas the individual poem is, to Sartorius, the encapsulated form where a subject reflects upon itself, the anthology is the form where an international community of poets and cultures reflect upon and appreciate the differences that bind them together around the common core of intimacy that comprises the dignity of human activity in the world. In the *Atlas*, translation becomes an act of cultural mediation and diplomacy, grounded in the idiom and experience of the individual poet.

After the peregrinations of his *Atlas* (and related translation and editing projects), Sartorius returns, comes home, as it were, to private and subjective poems of nature in his *Was im Turm begann* (*What Began in the Tower*, 1995), a cycle of seventeen poems with images by the Hungarian painter Laszlo Lakner. Here, details of nature in summer give rise to memories of childhood, or simply reside in a sensuous self-sufficiency. The last poem picks up the tree motif from Jouve and Williams (alluding directly, I believe, to Williams' poem "The Botticellian Trees"):

Wenn der Wind von ihm läßt,
steht in jedem Baum die Schrift,
die wir suchen,
schwarz gegen den Abendhimmel.
Gegen den versagten Himmel
falten wir unsere Geschichte übers Eck
und dichten aus,
was im Turm begann,
im papierenen Versteck.

When the wind dies away,
there stands in each tree the script
that we seek,
black against the evening sky.
Against the sky denied to us

we fold our story around the corner
and finish off the poem
that began in the tower
in our secret hideout of paper. (*KJA* 29)

The pantheistic pathos that, to my mind, links Sartorius with Jouve and Williams, and which was held in check in *The Table Turned Cold*, peers out of this poetological poem. The world of objects, of nature, is a script that reminds us of our ultimate inability to unite subject and object, consciousness with the senses, “the sky [*Himmel*=sky, heaven] that’s denied us,” and turns us back in upon ourselves, “our story.” But the poem allows us to escape solipsism and to redeem and dignify solitude, so we “seal off the poem,” whereby the unusual German phrase “*dichten aus*” suggests a contrary, internal-external motion, in line with Sartorius’ poetics, of (primarily), compression inward (*dichten*=tighten, seal, make poetry) and (secondarily), extension outward *aus* (out). Poetry encapsulates and protects subjectivity but also, as form, moves it out into the world. The poem is a prominent and visible object, monumental like a tower, but also an ontological home to subjectivity, a secret hideout (a *Ge[heim]nis*). Aptly, in the middle of the poem, the fifth line (“*Gegen den versagten Himmel*” ‘Against the sky denied to us’) and in the tenth and last line (“*im papierenen Versteck*” ‘in the secret hideout of paper’), two words appear (*versagt*, to fail or deny, and *Versteck*, a hiding place) that carry within, secretly, the word for verse (*Vers*) and suggest further (perhaps as *vers-sagen*, to utter verses, and *Vers-stecken*, to hide verses) the peculiar position of poetry in contemporary culture: as an open form of intimacy, poetry hides out in public. As a public official and a poet, Sartorius exemplifies that situation in his life and work.

Notes

1. See Seidl. From 1972 to 1986, Sartorius was ‘stationed’ in the German Foreign Service in New York, Istanbul and Cypress. For eight years, from 1986 to 1994, Sartorius directed the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) “Berlin Visiting Artist Program” and then had the position of Director of Division II (Museums, Memorials and Literature) in the Berlin Senate. Since September, 1996, Sartorius is the the new General Secretary of the Goethe Institute. See Leitgeb.

2. See Andreas Huyssen's essay.

3. His particular blend of literary achievement and public service in diplomacy is more characteristic of French than German traditions, with figures such as André Malraux and St. John Perse.

4. All translations from Sartorius are my own (see note 9 also).

5. In his essay "Trotz allem Splitter von Sinn" ("In Spite of it all, Shards of Sense"), Sartorius remarks along these lines that "For me, the poet is a rememberer, and a poem [is] a documentation, which, if it has achieved form, will last like a stele [Gr. pillar, pylon]" (203). That is, as an object that wears the mark of time, but endures.

6. Sartorius includes an epigram from Jouve in *Say I to Whom*. In addition to the works of William Carlos Williams, Sartorius has also edited the works of Malcolm Lowry; translated the poetry of numerous American poets, foremost among them John Ashbery, and written many articles on twentieth-century American authors. He is a leading commentator on American letters in the German press and in non-academic intellectual reviews.

7. Although Williams, despite his outspoken Americanism, also spoke French and spent substantial time in France as a child and as an adult, any influence from one to the other of these contemporaries is unlikely (but not impossible). Williams did, however, translate a Philippe Soupault novel from French with his mother in 1929.

8. See also Carl Rapp's discussion of the poem (89-90).

9. See my review of this volume. My discussion here is adapted from that review, with the permission of the editors. Six poems from this volume have recently been translated by R. Waldrop et al. in *Conjunctions*, and additional poems by Sartorius (also translated by Waldrop) have appeared in *The Exact Change Yearbook*.

10. In "Trotz allem Splitter von Sinn," Sartorius remarks upon this groundswell of emotion in his poetry: "My actual problem is with romanticism, an overheatedness, a tendency to bombast," and upon the cure in his poems: "to chill [*kaltmachen*] one's self, which works from emotions: the development of images through coldness" (203). The impulse to poetry emerges at a fever pitch of pathos and demands the intellectual restraint or compression thereof in form, in order to preserve that emotion.

11. Goldin shares with Sartorius a conception of her art, her photographs as "agents of memory" (Hilton Als, 58), and her interest in realms of intimacy and otherness.

12. In the context I describe, the title *VAKAT* refers perhaps to Horace's use of the word *vacuum* in his ode (I, 5) addressing the woman Pyrrha

(*simplex munditiis*), probably a courtesan, who is always, the lover hopes, *vacuam* ("available" or "empty" of commitment to anyone) and always *amabilem* (ready to love). The title can thus mean either empty or free and available. The allusion to this poem would reinforce ambiguities in the sexual context of the volume.

13. That preoccupation with time figures prominently, or rather exclusively, in Sartorius' subsequent collaboration, *Einszueins (OnetoOne)*, with the painter Horst Antes: a conceptual artbook of serially painted dates (from 12/19/92 to 1/31/93) in broad, heavy brushstrokes with corresponding journal entries by Sartorius. The journal entries reflect on the passing of time, and repeat and then overlap in print, in differently shaded fonts. The painted dates also overlap, until both genres begin to represent or enact the "palimpsestuous" texture of time, between the layers of our conscious, recorded experience of it.

Sartorius has also collaborated with James Lee Byars on *Der goldene Turm (The Golden Tower)*, another conceptual artbook wholly on heavy black paper with the text, a haiku-like distillation of poetic lines "printed" in performances, a sort of negative space dot matrix, that can only be read against the light, and he has also completed a monograph on Byars (forthcoming).

14. In "Trotz allem Splitter von Sinn," Sartorius defines the poem, citing W. C. Williams, as a capsule for a secret (*Geheimnis*).

15. Sartorius has also edited a series introducing German and international poets in translation in *Lettre Internationale*. In these several ways he has increased the visibility of and interest in poetry, in a (German) book market that has not been receptive to poetry (see Linithicum).

16. See my review of Sartorius' *Atlas*. My comments here derive from that review, with permission of the editors. Friedrich's study opened up the international field of modern poetry in postwar Germany, with its acute and eloquent generalizations, its specific interpretations, and the appended translations. Friedrich deals, however, solely with German and Romance-language (mainly French and Spanish) poets. John McCormick's critical introduction to American poetry, *Amerikanische Lyrik (American Poetry)*, also with appended translations into German, served a similar function in a field that Friedrich did not touch and which subsequently exerted great influence in Germany; For example, Karl Krolow draws heavily on McCormick's presentation of American poetry in developing the central concept of his own development in the 1960s and 1970s (the "laconic" poem, see Krolow 89-91), and refers frequently to the translations in McCormick's volume. Sartorius cites Friedrich often in his *Lyrik Jahrbuch (Poetry Yearbook)*, but McCormick's volume is also particularly important in light of Sartorius' diverse activities as Americanist. Also, McCormick's *The Middle Distance* treats W. C. Williams, among others,

in a comparative context. In the 1950s, McCormick was Dean of the famous Salzburg Seminar of American Studies, and then Dean of the Institute of American Studies at the Free University in Berlin, and his work (as critic and teacher) has had a broad influence on German Americanists.

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