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Inger Christensen in Edenkoben

This article discusses the high regard for Danish poet Inger Christensen in Germany and her connection to the Künstlerhaus [Artists' Residence] in Edenkoben, located in Rhineland-Palatinate. The Künstlerhaus serves as a cultural institution where international artists from various fields can reside and collaborate. Inger Christensen had strong connections with the Künstlerhaus Edenkoben and participated in its German-Danish poetry project. During her visits to Edenkoben, she wrote several poems. In an essay, the poet described Edenkoben's landscape as paradise-like. This article, on the one hand, examines these texts in the context of Inger Christensen's stay in Edenkoben. On the other, it sheds light on "Weg der Gedichte", a project that stages Inger Christensen's poem "Erinnerung an Edenkoben" in a public space around the Künstlerhaus, showcasing the role of poetry in rural settings and its ability to enhance the experience of nature and hiking.

Keywords: Inger Christensen, Edenkoben, poetry and landscape, paradise, poetry in public spaces, rural settings and poetry

Inger Christensen (1935–2009) is held in high esteem in Germany, which certainly has to do with her status as one of the most important poets of the 20th century worldwide, whose "form-conscious poetry is among [...] the most innovative in Europe"¹. She was nonetheless very well-versed in German-language literature, as she read works by Goethe, Heine and Rilke at an early age, translated Johannes Bobrowski, Wolfgang Hildesheimer and Peter Handke as well as Kleist's "Penthesilea" and found the sound of the German language particularly

¹ Wiemers (2022). Translation: F.B.

appealing.² She emphatically states that German shaped her “angle of entry into world literature”³. Several monographs could be written about Inger Christensen’s relationship with Germany and the German language. In the following, however, I would like to concentrate on just one aspect of this broad topic and examine Inger Christensen’s connection to the Künstlerhaus Edenkoben.

The Künstlerhaus Edenkoben is a cultural institution in a rural area of Rhineland-Palatinate (figure 1) where fellows from literature (and other arts and cultural fields such as visual arts, music and translation) can work and live together for a limited period of time.



Figure 1: Künstlerhaus Edenkoben.

Especially for comparative literature, the Künstlerhaus Edenkoben is an interesting object of study, because the gatherings of the different artists are implicitly oriented towards one of Goethe’s reflections on the concept of world literature. Goethe states:

Wenn wir eine [...] allgemeine Weltliteratur zu verkündigen gewagt haben, so heißt dieses nicht, daß die verschiedenen Nationen von einander und ihren Erzeugnissen Kenntnis nehmen, denn in diesem Sinne existiert sie schon lange [...]. Nein! Hier ist vielmehr davon die Rede, daß die lebendigen und strebenden Literatoren einander kennenlernen und durch Neigung und Gemeinsinn sich veranlaßt finden, gesellschaftlich zu wirken. Dieses wird aber mehr durch Reisende als durch Korrespondenz bewirkt, indem ja *persönlicher Gegenwart* [emphasis: F.B.] ganz allein gelingt, das wahre Verhältnis unter Menschen zu bestimmen und zu befestigen.⁴

It is precisely this personal presence of writers (and other artists) of different national origins, which Goethe has in mind here, that the programme of the Künstlerhaus Edenkoben is concerned with (however—and this must be emphasized at

² Cf. *ibid.*

³ *Ibid.* Translation: F.B.

⁴ Goethe (1989: 79).

this point—, the programme is limited to the encounter of writers from European countries; thus, there can be no talk of ‘world’ literature in a fully global sense). The website of the Künstlerhaus informs us that the aspect of crossing spatial borders is supplemented by that of crossing them in terms of content, because at the same time it is decidedly about the encounter of different arts. Accordingly, the self-description of the Künstlerhaus states:

Die Vergabe von Stipendien an Künstlerinnen und Künstler verschiedener Genres und ein Veranstaltungsprogramm, das vor allem zeitgenössische Literatur und Lyrik, aber auch Musik und Bildende Kunst vorstellt, ermöglichen und fördern solche Begegnungen. “Grenzüberschreitungen”, inhaltlich wie räumlich, haben von Anfang an das Profil des Künstlerhauses geprägt. Gemeinsame Projekte mit den französischen Nachbarn, die poetische Auseinandersetzung mit europäischen Sprachen, aber auch die Beschäftigung mit gefährdeten regionalen Kulturräumen haben das Fremde näher gerückt und Edenkoben zu einem Ort für Entdeckungen gemacht.⁵

Inger Christensen was connected to the Künstlerhaus Edenkoben in many ways. This connection was not only characterised by close exchange with other artists in the sense of Goethe’s concept of world literature, as the following reading of the poem “Hvad er min døde sprukne krop?” [“Was ist mein totrissiger Körper?”] shows. Inger Christensen’s intensive encounters with the landscape also had a great influence on her work, which is why I deal with the texts “Tilfældighedens ordnede virkning” [“Die ordnende Wirkung des Zufalls”] and “Erinnerung an Edenkoben” in the second part of this article. Goethe’s concept of world literature and the personal contact between poets of different national origins projected in it would thus have to be supplemented by another moment of encounter with regard to Inger Christensen in Germany: the encounter of a Danish author with the Rhineland-Palatinate landscape around Edenkoben.

In 1988, Inger Christensen appeared at the Künstlerhaus Edenkoben for the first time as part of a Danish-German poetry meeting called “Poesie der Nachbarn. Dichter übersetzen Dichter”, which had been inviting foreign and German-speaking poets to work together on translations since 1988. Over the course of a week, “poems by authors from the host country are translated into German in a joint multilingual dialogue”⁶. The participants then present the results of the workshop in the form of a bilingual matinee reading and publish them in an anthology that is also bilingual. This anthology is edited by Gregor Laschen, the founder of the “Poesie der Nachbarn” programme, among others, in the “Edition die horen”.⁷

The poem written by Inger Christensen in this context and translated into German by Gregor Laschen reads as follows:

⁵ <https://www.kuenstlerhaus-edenkoben.de/willkommen>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cf. <https://www.kuenstlerhaus-edenkoben.de/poesie-der-nachbarn>.

INGER CHRISTENSEN

HVAD ER MIN DØDE SPRUKNE KROP?

Hvad er min døde sprukne krop?
 Myrer i sne har intet at gøre
 Nej digt digt digt er min krop
 Jeg skriver det her: hvad er min krop?
 Og myrerne flytter mig planløst,
 bort, ord efter ord, bort.

WAS IST MEIN TOTRISSIGER KÖRPER?

Was ist mein totrissiger Körper?
 Die Ameisen im Schnee haben nichts zu tun.
 Mein Gedicht Gedicht Gedicht ist mein Körper
 Dies schreibe ich hier: was ist mein Körper?
 Und die Ameisen tragen mich planlos
 fort, Wort für Wort, fort.

Gregor Laschen

Figure 2: Hvad er min døde sprukne krop? / Was ist mein totrissiger Körper?

This poem creates a horror-like scene of physical decay and coldness, exploring the intertwining of self, world and poetry, which is a recurring theme in Inger Christensen's work. The ants—with their black colour on snow, resembling letters on white paper—become something like a medium in this one-stanza poem. They transport the poet's words—also a part of her body marked by death—to another place. We will return to this close relationship between world, poetry and body later when we focus on Christensen's poem "Erinnerung an Edenkoben". What I would like to mention here is that the bilingual publication of the poem makes it possible for German readers who do not speak Danish to get as accurate an impression of Inger Christensen's Danish version as possible. On the one hand, this one-stanza poem is not so difficult for Germans to access, because Danish and

German are related and have numerous grammatical and lexical similarities. On the other, Gregor Laschen's translation makes great efforts to remain as close as possible to the original. This becomes particularly clear in the translation of the last verse, because the German version succeeds in transferring the internal rhyme from Danish into German, while losing the rhythm: "bort, ord efter ord, bort" / "fort, Wort für Wort, fort" ["away, word for word, away"]. Stronger deviations are found in verse 3, however, because the German version, unlike the Danish original, does not have "Nein" ("Nej") ["no"] at the beginning of the verse and also clarifies the polyvalent "digt, digt, digt", which in Danish can be used not only as a noun ("Gedicht") ["poem"], but also as an imperative in the sense of "dichte!" ["compose"] or "erdichte!" ["fabricate"].

While Edenkoben as a place is not yet explored in "Hvad er min døde sprukne krop?" but only represents the place where the poem was composed and translated, Edenkoben makes explicit appearance in Inger Christensen's highly associative essay "Tilfældighedens ordnede virkning" ["Die ordnende Wirkung des Zufalls"], first published in 1994. Under the subheading "Edenkoben", Inger Christensen reflects on paradise, which is not surprising with the name Edenkoben. While paradise is usually associated in a topical way with exoticized warmer regions ("Det første paradis, Edens have, er altid subtropisk. Et havelandskab med palmer, vindruer o.s.v."⁸ ["The first paradise, the Garden of Eden, is always subtropical. A garden landscape with palms, grapes, and so on."]), for Inger Christensen this small town in a wine-growing region of Rhineland-Palatinate represents a kind of northern paradise. Here no palm trees grow, but wine is nevertheless omnipresent ("Overalt vinbjerger. Overalt denne nøjagtige forberedelse af rusen."⁹ ["Vineyards everywhere. Everywhere this meticulous preparation for intoxication."]). However, Edenkoben is now only a fading form or a modern image¹⁰ of the biblical paradise—too many irritating things are mixed into the image of the actual paradise here.

This includes work, which is alluded to by "denne nøjagtige forberedelse af rusen" ["this meticulous preparation for intoxication"], it also includes factories, which, along with nature, shape the landscape of Edenkoben and "sikkert forurener og ødelægger alt i miles omkreds"¹¹ ["surely contaminate and destroy everything within the radius of miles"], and it includes the birds, which are supposed to be "paradisfugle"¹² ["birds of paradise"], but which can only be identified as starlings or redwings. These birds fly so close together in flocks that they encapsulate "hele

⁸ Christensen (2019: 24). Translations of "Tilfældighedens ordnede virkning": F.B.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26.

landskabet [...] i en slags sky [...], [...] en slags ursuppe”¹³ [“the entire landscape [...] into a black cloud [...], [...] a kind of primordial soup”].

Not least because of the second part of its name, Edenkoben is not an exemplary Garden of Eden. Koben, as a barkeeper explains to the Danish poet in an inn, is “det gamle ord for stald”¹⁴ [“the old word for stable”]:

[M]en Eden betyder Eden ligesom i Edens have, og Koben er det gamle ord for stald. Stald, gentager han [kroejeren, F.B.]. Sådan som denne vinstue er en stald. Folk, der kommer her, er som heste; de kan ikke gå videre uden mad og drikke. Men hvorfor i det hele taget gå videre, tilføjer han. Og ser ud, som om han har fundet sin egen måde at indrette sig på i en mangelfuld verden. En verden altså, hvor paradiset mangler, men hvor der af og til findes en stald, der får os til at huske på det manglende. Et sted, hvor vi er fremmede og alligevel hjemme.¹⁵

[B]ut Eden means Eden, as in the garden of Eden, and Koben is the old word for stable. Stable, he [the innkeeper] repeats. Like the way in which this inn is a stable. The people who come here are like horses; they can’t go on without food and drink. But why go on at all, he adds. And it seems as if he had found his own way of arranging himself in a deficient world. A world, that is, which lacks paradise, but where there’s sometimes a stable that makes us remember the lack. A place where we are strangers but still at home.

The Edenkoben landscape with its clouds of birds appears again as a motif in a poem that Inger Christensen wrote and published in German in 2007, called “Erinnerung an Edenkoben”:

Inger Christensen, Erinnerung an Edenkoben

Grün in Grün und später Blau in Blau
Regen stürzt schon aus den Vogelwolken
Edenkoben überschwemmt von Zwitschern
Gelb in Gelb dann plötzlich Rot in Rot
Oder später dann der reine Purpur
Regenbogen zweimal Regenbogen

Landschaft also draußen vor dem Fenster
Aber Landschaft auch schon eingedrungen
Schon durch meine Augen eingedrungen
Chaotisch wo der Weg zu meiner fernen
Hand gesucht wird, die als Teil der Landschaft
Edenkoben schreiben kann, ganz Wort, ganz
Name, dennoch Landschaft zweimal Landschaft¹⁶

Formally, the poem is an acrostic. The acrostic (Greek: verse tip) is a play of letters in written poetry that is already used in the Old Testament,¹⁷ among other

¹³ Ibid., 25.

¹⁴ Ibid., 26.

¹⁵ Ibid., 26-27.

¹⁶ <https://www.kuenstlerhaus-edenkoben.de/weg-der-gedichte/autoren-2>.

¹⁷ Cf. Ernst (1991: 23).

places, and in which the initial letters of the verses – read vertically from top to bottom –, form a word, a sentence or some other kind of regularity. In “Erinnerung an Edenkoben”, the form of the acrostic allows Inger Christensen to inscribe herself in the tradition of the dedicatory poem.¹⁸ The first letters of the verses form the name of Gregor Laschen, the fellow poet who initiated the programme “Poesie der Nachbarn. Dichter übersetzen Dichter” and translated Inger Christensen’s “Hvad er min døde sprukne krop?” into German.

The biblical reference, which is already implied in the formal design of “Erinnerung an Edenkoben” as an acrostic, is also present in the poem’s content, because for Inger Christensen Edenkoben does indeed bear features of the Garden of Eden—as explained above—and the poem evokes the beauty of the landscape around the Künstlerhaus in a sensorily impressive way. The landscape is dominated here by strong colours (Grün, Blau, Gelb, Rot, Purpur, Regenbogen) [green, blue, yellow, red, purple, rainbow] and acoustically salient flocks of birds, which in the speaker’s perception appear as rain clouds and seem to flood the landscape with their sonic quality, i.e., their twittering. In terms of landscape representation, “Hvad er min døde sprukne krop?” and “Erinnerung an Edenkoben” could not be more different: While “Hvad er min døde sprukne krop?” creates a nauseating horror scenario, the landscape in Edenkoben is characterised by exuberant vitality and apparently universal harmony. The poems are similar, however, in that they both establish a close connection between the speaker’s body, her poetry and nature. In this context, the principle of doubling in “Erinnerung an Edenkoben” is particularly significant, and immediately noticeable in the first verse, where we read “Grün in Grün” and “Blau in Blau”. Further doublings are found in verse 4 with “Gelb in Gelb” and “Rot in Rot”, in verse 5 with the colour noun “Purpur” which doubles the syllable “pur”, in verse 6 “Regenbogen zweimal Regenbogen” [“rainbow twice rainbow”], with the repetition of “Landschaft” [“landscape”] in verses 7 and 8, the identical last word “eingedrungen” [“penetrated”] in verses 8 and 9, and the final verse with “Landschaft zweimal Landschaft”. This principle of doubling points to the double existence of the Edenkoben landscape: on the one hand, it is the landscape perceived outside the window that penetrates the speaker’s body through her eyes, and there, on the other, it is transformed into an imagined landscape. The speaker’s hand, which is explicitly identified as a part of the external landscape, then translates the landscape into language by writing the word or name Edenkoben. Accordingly, “Erinnerung an Edenkoben” postulates an all-encompassing interweaving of the subject of perception, the object of perception and the writing of poetry, whereby poetry is the medium by means of which the object of perception can create a poetically formed expression in language after the perceived landscape has found its way through the eyes into the hand of the speaker.

¹⁸ Cf. Burdorf (2015: 53).

It is noteworthy that the principle of the doubled landscape is also implemented by the Künstlerhaus Edenkoben in a project that began in 2007, called “Weg der Gedichte”, which undertakes an interesting staging of Inger Christensen’s “Erinnerung an Edenkoben” in public space. On the website of the Künstlerhaus Edenkoben you can find an aerial view of the “Weg der Gedichte” (figure 3). Poems by artists who were guests of Edenkoben are printed on the boards at each of the numbered markers. Inger Christensen’s poem “Erinnerung an Edenkoben” can be found at waymarker number 14.



WEGFÜHRUNG 2

Autoren 2

11 Ralph Dutli

12 Ralf Thenior

13 Arnfried Astel

14 Inger Christensen

15 Wolfgang Hilbig

16 Baldur Óskarsson

17 Jan Wagner

18 Annukka Peura

19 Jan Koneffke

20 Ernest Wichner

Figure 3: Weg der Gedichte.

While research on poetry has so far concentrated on urban areas with regard to the staging of poetry in public space,¹⁹ the “Weg der Gedichte” project at the same time calls for a closer look at the presentation of poetry in rural areas. This should be productive insofar as there are many examples and traditions for the staging of poetry in non-urban spaces or in natural surroundings. Examples include haiku boards in Japanese gardens and parks, the Katikati Haiku Pathway in New Zealand,²⁰ the Haiku Trail between Bad Bayersoien and Bad Kohlgrub,²¹ or the Ludwig Uhland Liederweg on a forest trail between Tübingen and Wümlingen.²² In urban space, poetry inter alia draws attention to the tension between sensory overload and strategies of inner distancing to which the subject is exposed in the big city. As Claudia Benthien shows, poetry in an urban environment can for example create moments of irritation by unexpectedly addressing the distanced persona in a publicly presented text as “Du” [“informal you”], thus suspending the feeling of anonymity.²³

Poetry in rural areas, however, is predominantly staged in areas that serve recreation and are considered pleasant and idyllic. Most of the poems there deal with

¹⁹ Cf. the project *Public Poetry: Lyrik im urbanen Raum* by Claudia Benthien, which is currently being researched and for which there is, among other things, this publication: Benthien (2019).

²⁰ Cf. <https://poetrysociety.org.nz/affiliates/haiku-nz/nz-haiku-showcase/katikati-haiku-pathway/>.

²¹ Cf. <https://www.ammergau-alpen.de/tour/themenweg-der-haiku-weg-bad-bayersoien-bad-kohlgrub>.

²² Cf. <https://www.tuepedia.de/wiki/Ludwig-Uhland-Liederweg>.

²³ Cf. Benthien (2019).

the beauty of nature itself and thus function less as a means of irritation than of contemplation by expressing the atmosphere of the landscape in an aesthetically condensed way. Edenkoben's "Weg der Gedichte" is a collection of such poems, which, according to the project description on the website of the Künstlerhaus, speak "von der Weinlese, von der frühen Mandelblüte, vom Blick über das Edenkobener Tal, von der Hagebutte, [oder] von den 'Honigvögeln', die die Wörter von den Tischen im Garten Eden picken"²⁴ ["of the grape harvest, of the early almond blossoms, of the view over the Edenkoben Valley, of the rose hip, [or] of the 'honey birds' that pick the words from the tables in the Garden of Eden"]. At the same time, the selected poems reflect on their production-aesthetic conditions by dealing concretely as well as metaphorically "[mit] der Tätigkeit des Übertragens, der Spracharbeit" und dem "Nachdichten"²⁵ ["the activity of transfer, of language work and paraphrasing"] of the perceived landscape.

Inger Christensen's "Erinnerung an Edenkoben" thus fits into the programme of the "Weg der Gedichte" with its emphasis on the doubled landscape, describing the process of how the intersubjectively perceivable external landscape becomes a lyrically formed one in the poem via the path of the speaker's imagination. The signboard with Inger Christensen's poem at the side of the path allows hikers to adopt this subjectively coloured view of the speaker on the Edenkoben landscape and thereby also gain a doubled perspective in the sense of the last verse, which concludes with "Landschaft zweimal Landschaft"²⁶.

Conclusion

This article examined Inger Christensen's poetic work during her stay at the Künstlerhaus Edenkoben in Rhineland-Palatinate and her engagement with this place. In the sense of Goethe's concept of world literature, the Künstlerhaus sees itself as a place where poets from different countries get into close contact with each other and become artistically productive together. It was demonstrated that for Inger Christensen the Künstlerhaus not only became a place of intensive encounter with other poets (especially with her colleague and translator Gregor Laschen), as the poems "Hvad er min døde sprukne krop?" and "Erinnerung an Edenkoben" show.

At the same time, the intensive encounter with the landscape of Edenkoben became formative for Inger Christensen, insofar as "Erinnerung an Edenkoben" and "Die ordnende Wirkung des Zufalls" take up the place name Edenkoben associatively and deal with paradise-like landscapes. This close relationship

²⁴ <https://www.kuenstlerhaus-edenkoben.de/weg-der-gedichte>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ <https://www.kuenstlerhaus-edenkoben.de/weg-der-gedichte/autoren-2>.

between the poet and the landscape surrounding her during her time at the Künstlerhaus, which is also marked as physical, is ultimately also acknowledged in the project “Weg der Gedichte”, in which the poem “Erinnerung an Edenkoben”, printed on a board, offers hikers the possibility of retracing Inger Christensen’s poetic experience of landscape by reading it on a path in Edenkoben.

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