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Unraveling *Heimat* – Recontextualizing Gertrud Kolmar’s *Das preußische Wappenbuch*

1 Introduction: difference and belonging

The call to “disseminate Jewish literatures” posits a challenge rooted in the double belonging of the matter in question. While such an attempt seeks to remedy the dearth of scholarly work on “Jewish literatures” from a separation from literary studies, it nevertheless continues to perceive them as marked by a significant difference. However, the nature of this difference varies from case to case and affects each particular attempt at dissemination—both in regard to the discussed literary text as well as its place within the wider discourse. Hence, in order to disseminate Jewish literatures, one should first carefully consider both the initial separating factors as well as the possibility of a dual belonging. This should be done while remaining aware of the presumptions in play, which often serve as the origin and perpetuating force of the ghettoization of the so-called Jewish literatures.

In the case of the German-Jewish poet Gertrud Kolmar, her decades-long exclusion from the corpus of German poetry brings together matters of historical circumstances, reception history, and literary traditions germane both to her own oeuvre as well as to the literary discourse from which it was excluded. Her life as a Jew in Germany under the Nazi regime, her deportation from Germany, and murder in Auschwitz in 1943 seemed until not too long ago to be the main lens for the interpretation of her works.¹ This biographical mode of interpretation is a direct consequence of the fact that Kolmar’s works were almost entirely posthumously published, a process that started with the first publication of her last poetry cycle *Welten* (“Worlds”) in 1947, a decade after it was written, and ended with the publication of the critical edition of her collected poetry in

¹ The first major study of Gertrud Kolmar’s work which was since often described as a dominant influence on the research dedicated to the poet written since then is Johanna Woltmann’s biographical monograph (1995; cf. Heimann 2012, 3, 10–11). A recent example to the biographical tendency is Friederike Heimann’s monography, which despite a recognition of the problematic nature of such an approach (2012, 5–31) cannot fully unchain itself from it.

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The belated publication was a result of the fact that Kolmar, whose first poems were published in 1917, did not enter her main productive writing phase until 1927. Although the official ban of publications by Jewish writers was not issued by the Reich Chamber of Literature (Reichsschrifttumskammer, RSK) until 1935 (Barbian 2013, 153–154, 194–196), the political events and atmosphere complicated the publication situation, as noted by Kolmar herself in a letter to her cousin Walter Benjamin (2014, 208/2004, 159). From 1935 onwards, the few poems published during Kolmar’s lifetime were printed only in Jewish newspapers and appeared under her birth name Gertrud Chodziesner (a paragraph in the 1935 RSK orders prohibited Jewish authors from using a penname). In the years following the war, the publication of her work was inevitably marked by this historical segregation, which further framed her work as Jewish and prevented its integration into the wider context of German poetry and prose. So influential was this initial segregation of Kolmar’s work that it was not until the late 1990’s that the predominantly German language scholarship on Kolmar’s poetry began to slowly turn away from this biographical framework in favor of a wider contextualized reading.

The contributing factors that led to the scholarly emphasis on Kolmar’s difference in the German literary landscape and consequently to her exclusion from the canon cannot be simply dismissed as irrelevant. Nevertheless, the first step in the establishment of an organic relation to the wider literary discourse should be a careful consideration and less immediate application of this difference when approaching Kolmar’s work. The following contribution suggests a reading

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1 For a detailed and most updated discussion of Kolmar’s posthumous publications see Nörtemann (2005).

2 An early example is the first publication of the 1939 written novella Susanna in an anthology of prose by Jewish writers (Otten 1959). To that kind of publications joins the later discussion of works written by German-Jewish authors under the Nazi regime, which was often founded on an implicit premise that perceived the historical circumstances as the key to the understanding and appreciation of such works. An explicit stance of such a perception that calls for a different mode of apprehension of works by German-Jewish authors that were written under the Nazi regime could be found in Henry Wassermann’s introduction to the bibliography of Jewish literature written under the third Reich: “Es [the creation under the totalitarian regime and amongst it the Jewish literature under the Nazis] kann nur gewertet werden auf dem Hintergrund der politischen, sozialen, wirtschaftlichen und religiösen Umstände in Nazi Deutschland.” (Wassermann 1989, xii, and cf. Schoor 2010, 11–36).

3 A first example of an attempt at a wider contextualization of Kolmar’s poetry was offered by Birgit R. Erdle’s monograph Antlitz – Mord – Gesetz: Figuren des Anderen bei Gertrud Kolmar und Emanuel Lévinas (1994). A more recent example which traces in Kolmar’s poetry a line of poetic development rather than an autobiographical mirroring sequence is Silke Nowak’s monograph Sprechende Bilder: Zur Lyrik und Poetik Gertrud Kolmars (2007).
of Gertrud Kolmar’s 1927 opening poem of the collection *Das preußische Wappenbuch* that will seek to defer this difference, thus allowing for a consideration of an active dialogue from within the wider literary discourse unrestricted to the realm of “Jewish literature.” Hence, the differentiating, utterly biographical elements will not be read as the foundation of the understanding of a text unless the reading proves them to be so. In other words, the dissemination will be prior to the separation. Such an approach enables the disclosure of mutual affinities that challenges the categorical separation of “Jewish literature” from “German literature.”

2 First hindrances on the way to an interpretation of *Das preußische Wappenbuch*

In the winter of 1927/1928, Kolmar wrote her first major poetic work, a collection of 53 poems titled *Das preußische Wappenbuch* [The Book of Prussian Coats of Arms]. Each of the poems, arranged in thirteen groups named after Prussian provinces, carries the name of a coat of arms of a Prussian city or village. Kolmar’s immediate, seemingly prosaic source of inspiration for this collection was a stamp booklet distributed as an advertisement by the German coffee brand *Kaffee Haag*, in which customers collected small stamps featuring illustrations of Prussian coats of arms drawn by the German artist Otto Hupp. One of the booklets, which were widely popular in Germany between the wars, belonged to Georg Chodziesner, Kolmar’s younger brother (Woltmann 1993, 67–78; Kolmar 2003, III. 134–136).

Each poem opens with a motto-like description of the coat of arms that appears to be a distilled version of Hupp’s own descriptions that were printed on the backside of the stamp (Woltmann 1993, 72; Sauder 1996, 45–46). Thus, Kolmar further plays off of the expectations of the reader, who, after reading the collection title, the poem title and the short description, anticipates a poem that will verbally capture the mute emblem. Such a presupposition of the poem as offering a mode of deciphering in the form of “art writing” is grounded in the widespread understanding of the reciprocal relations between picture and language, which had a deep influence on European pictorial aesthetics (Mitchell 1986, 116–121). In the words of Simonides of Ceos, “a poem is a painting that speaks, and a painting is a mute poem.” This intimate relation between word and image serves as the core of heraldic poetry (in the *Wappendichtung* and in some instances of the *Blason*) developed in medieval Europe (Fürbeth 2007). However, as was already pointed out in the few previous discussions of the collection, the poems
deviate from the heraldic literary tradition, as each of them abandons, ignores, or further develops the visual elements appearing on the coat of arms to such a degree that they no longer serve as mere poetic descriptions (Erdle 1994, 185; Sauder 1996, 53).

While such a deviation appears to be a conspicuous dimension of the collection, it would be wrong to reduce Kolmar’s interest in the coats of arms to a mere aesthetic fascination (Sauder 1996, 52). Such a claim empties the Wappenbuch of its historical, local, and traditional meanings, reducing Kolmar’s notion of the coat of arms to a reference to her brother’s booklet, devoid of any connection to the heraldic tradition. Yet, it is Kolmar’s words themselves that contradict this position. In a letter written in December 1940 to her sister Hilde Wenzel, who since 1938 had lived in exile in Switzerland, Kolmar refers directly to her own idea of the coat of arms by quoting a letter of Rainer Maria Rilke.⁵ In a letter to Baron Rolf von Ungern-Sternberg written in 1922 at the Château de Muzot,⁶ Rilke admires the Baron’s family coat of arms appearing on the seal of the letter he received from him, remarking that “mir sagen Wappen außerordentlich viel, es ließe sich aus ihnen viel mehr schließen und wahr-sagen, als je versucht wor- den ist” [coats of arms are extraordinarily expressive to me, one could draw much from them and tell the truth much better than has been attempted] (Rilke 2002, 96; Kolmar 2004, 64). To this, Kolmar adds “Ich hab’ es versucht und diese Worte gar nicht gekannt “[I have tried it without even knowing these words] (2014, 102/2004, 64). Her notion of the coat of arms is by no means purely technical or simply aesthetic. Rather, it stands in a close affinity to Rilke’s image of coat of arms,⁷ while continuously alluding to the old tradition of heraldic poetry. Thus, a new relation between the pictorial source and the poem is created.

An additional noteworthy obstacle for the reception and interpretation of the collection has to do with its relation to the German regional traditions of Heimat-kunst and Heimatlyrik, which are often associated with jingoistic, nationalist,

⁵ Although Kolmar’s poetry was often compared to Rilke’s (Kolmar 2003, III. 346; Nowak 2007, 279), the affinity to Rilke was not the result of influence. As she herself declared, she came to know his poetry “too late” and only after her own poetic voice was already formed (2014, 88/2004, 53).

⁶ In a letter from July 1940 Kolmar shares with Hilde her fascination from Rilke’s Briefe aus Muzot which she came to know through an acquaintance. In this later letter from 15th December 1940, five days after her 46th birthday, Kolmar tells her sister that she asked and received a copy of Rilke’s Briefe aus Muzot as a birthday present from her father and that she finds it to be “eine wahre Schatzkammer” [a true treasure] (2014, 77–78, 87/2004, 64).

⁷ Rilke poetically expressed this idea earlier in his 1907 poem “Das Wappen” (2006, 533).
and anti-Semitic elements. Studies of the collection tend to avoid addressing the relation between the *preußisches Wappenbuch* and the tradition of *Heimatliteratur*, assuming the collection could not be connected to a literary movement that expresses a sense of rootedness and belonging. This exclusion stems from the positioning of Kolmar’s work within the context of German-Jewish literature, a perception that does not allow a German-Jewish poet to speak of a German *Heimat*.

It is again Kolmar’s own words that render the dismissal of the role of this tradition in *das preußische Wappenbuch* impossible. In 1934, shortly after the publication of a selection of twenty poems from the collection, Kolmar stated in the aforementioned letter to Walter Benjamin that she had insisted on including the date of origin on one of the first pages of the book and explains: “I wanted to make clear that I composed the ‘Wappen’ at a time when regional poetry [*Heimathlyrik*] was not yet all the rage” (2014, 208/ 2004, 153). This comment, which was previously dismissed by scholars as an expression of involuntary sarcasm (Erdle 1994, 185) or as a reference to the historical expulsion of Kolmar and her father from the family house deserves closer attention. By suspending this biographical covering-law and instead reading Kolmar’s poems in a wider literary context, the following discussion of the opening poem of the collection will uncover a less unequivocal idea of *Heimat* in Kolmar’s *Das preußische Wappenbuch*.

### 3 Heimat reconsidered

**Wappen von Allenburg**

*Ein rotes Elchhaupt auf Silbergrund, aus grünem Röhricht steigend.*

Ich geh’ durch Erde, die schon nicht mehr ist; Denn meine Erde ist nur Teil von mir, Wie ich mit Schaufel, Haupt und Widerrist Ein blödes, grauses, ungeschlachtetes Tier.

**[Coat of Arms of] Allenburg**

*On a silver ground, a red elk’s head emerges from green reeds.*

I tread forgotten earth now long deceased; For this lost land is but a part of me, With haunches, head, and shovel-antlered tree.

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8 On *Heimatkunst* and the anti-Semitic context see Kilcher (2012), XI-XIII, for the recent discussion on *Heimatliteratur* in Europe based on a comparatist approach see Van Uffelen (2009).

9 Sauder draws a connection between the absence of home in the collection and the historical homelessness Kolmar and her father were forced into in 1938 (“Sie waren mitten in Berlin schon heimatlos”), thus imposing later biographical facts on previously written works (1996, 52).
Sie klatscht um meine Knie als ein Sumpf,
Hängt von der trägen Lippe als ein Schlamm,
Hockt, Nebelschlange, feucht am roten
Rumpf,
Schiebt unters Maul den flechtenblassen
Stamm.

Ich bin, die war, die ferngestorbne Zeit,
Die wüst im großen Waldmoor gehaust,
In tiefe Flocken Wölfe hingeschneit,
Mit dunklem Sturm den Uhu herbraust.

Ich bin das Wilde, Dumpy, das man schlug,
Das man erschlagen, weil es fremd und stumm;
Was schlau und müde Karren schlepp t und Pflug,
Dem legt der Mörder bunten Halsschmuck um.

Mir ward, die ihre Öde klagt und schnarrt,
Die Nacht des Raben freundlich zugesellt,
Die im Geröhre ächzt, in Birken knarrt
Und vor dem Licht der warmen Dörfer hält.

Mir ward ein Regenhimmel, graulich schwer,
Der zäh und stickig niederplump t ins Luch,
Das Fell am Leib, an meinem Hirn die Wehr,
Nicht Hand noch Peitsche, Stall und Trog und Tuch.

Das tierisch Mächtige hat sie entsetzt,
Das arglos Fromme meuchelt ihre List:
Daß es verende, wund und tot geteget,
Die Erdenkindheit. Die doch nicht mehr ist.

(2003, II. 9 – 10)

It laps about my knees, a murky swamp,
Hangs from my sluggish lips like dripping phlegm,
Wraps ’round red flanks a snake of fog and damp,
And feeds my mouth the lichen crusted stem

I am what was, the far departed age
That, wild, in giant wooded moors once housed,
That blew the wolves along when blizzards raged,
And, dark with storms, the sleeping owls once roused.

I am the dumb, the wild, the things now dead
That men have killed for being mute and strange,
That dragged the heavy plough and spurred the sled,
Adorned by murderers with charming chains.

And when the barren darkness wailed and moaned,
I was the friend of ravens in the night,
Who rasped in reeds and in the birches groaned,
And halted at the villages’ warm light.

For me the rainy sky, whose heavy gray
Fell thick and stifling down upon the fen,
Became my fur, my antlers’ stiff array –
Not hand, not whip, nor stall, nor trough, nor pen.

The mighty beasts struck terror into man.
With cunning tricks he hunted innocence,
And wounded it, and slew it as it ran:
In earthly childhood. That has passed long since.
(1975, 168 – 171)
With the opening pronoun, the subject of the poem becomes the speaker. The elk, bursting out of the coat of arms, negates its very existence as it describes itself walking through a land that has ceased to exist (“die schon nicht mehr ist”). Time and space, which are frozen together in the two-dimensional coat of arms, are torn apart in the poem, whose mixture of past and present sets the image in motion. The harmonious, almost organic relation to the land captured in the coat of arms and its opening description (“Ein rotes Elchhaupt auf Silbergrund, aus grünem Röhricht steigend”) is undermined as the speaker declares the land to be a part of its body while at the same time recognizing it as contributing to its designation as “blödes, graues, ungeschlachtetes Tier” [A shy and clumsy, terrifying beast]. As in many of Kolmar’s poems written in first person, it is unclear whether the elk describes his own self-perception or whether it observes itself from the outside. This divergent perception is further deepened in the fourth stanza, which shifts from the “ich”[I] to the self-description from the outside as “es” [it]—“Ich bin das Wilde, Dumpfe, das man schlug, Das man erschalgen, weil es fremd und stumm.”

In the second stanza, the extinct land is evoked through the bodily presence of the subject. The depiction of earth, the supposed Heimat, merges with the negative self-image of the elk in the closing lines of the first stanza and turns into a “Sumpf”, a swamp that strangles its inhabitant, and “Schlamm” [sludge]. Though it is negatively expressed, the interdependence between the elk and the land is deepened; it is not only the elk who emerges from the green reeds, but also the earth that grips its body.

The belonging of the elk to the land in the form of a Heimat is further complicated by its forced domestication, described in the first stanza and carried out by new inhabitants who no longer speak the language of “die ferngestorbne Zeit” [the far departed age]. The image of the unified unanimous men who exploit the elk challenges the relation between the symbolic elk on the coat of arms and the people who use it as their identifying mark. The rupture between the lyrical I and the crowd is thematized, as in other works by Kolmar, by the impossibility of communication, which renders the elk, the carrier of the poetic voice, mute and strange in the eyes of the others.

Only in the fifth and sixth stanzas does the elk find rest, as sky falls and mixes with earth in the form of a storm that transforms the land back into the primal world before God separated earth from sky as in Genesis 1,1. This is a...

11 As for example in the poem *Die Kröte* from the year 1933 (2003, II. 358–359).
12 This theme serves as the core of Kolmar’s late work with the prominent example of the 1937 poem *Kunst* that seals the cycle *Welten* (2003, II. 545) and the 1939 novella *Susanna* (1993).
world untouched by the men who appeared in the last stanza and whose absence is encapsulated here by the lack of their means of control over the land (the hand, the whip, the stall, the trough, and the pen). Only then do sky and land merge into the elk’s own body and shelter him as a true Heimat (“Mir ward ein Regenhimmel [...] Das Fell am Leib, an meinem Hirn die Wehr”).

The struggle ends with the disappearance of the speaker in the last stanza and the description of its death in the third person. The closing line (“Die Erdenkindheit. Die doch nicht mehr ist”) undermines the existence of the elk and the poem itself, while at the same time evoking it once again. The Heimat, then, is present and absent at the same time, while being experienced by the speaker as well as by the voice of the others who wish to house it and consequently disinherit it. Thus, the Heimat turns from a stable image in the form of the coats of arms into a relative term. So are also foreignness and belonging, two poles which throughout Kolmar’s work are constantly challenged.

The opening poem of Kolmar’s collection reveals the Wappenbuch as a proof of the belonging of the depicted and as a remainder from times long gone that challenges the present. Just like the figure of loyal Mortimer in Friedrich Schiller’s drama Maria Stuart, who seeks proof of the identity of the true queen by consulting many old heraldry books (“Viel alte Wappenbücher schlug ich nach”; Schiller 2008, 27), here as well the poet turns to the Wappenbuch as a source establishing identity, belonging, and proof of origin from ancient times. These, as it becomes clear in the opening poem, are never absolute and get refracted through the voices claiming them as their own.

Perplexed by Kolmar’s choice of title and source of inspiration which did not seem to befit the grand narrative of the connection between Kolmar’s work and life, previous interpretations tried to sand down the contradiction between Das preußische Wappenbuch and the European and German tradition of Heimatkunst in different ways. Some interpretations have offered a compromise by focusing on the Zivilisations- and Modernekritik expressed in some of the collection’s poems, a critical view that served as one of the foundations of the literary instantiations of Heimatkunst (Erdle 1994, 185; Schumann 2002, 21; Hausmann 2012, 248). This critical standpoint towards modernity appears in Wappen von Allenburg in the form of the struggle between mankind and nature, yet it does not seem to replace the dimension of Heimat and belonging as its core. Other readings tend to solve what they recognize as a conflict between Jewish and German literatures, defining Kolmar’s poems as a “countermovement to the logic of the national-anti-Semitic construction of identity” (Nowak 2007, 30, my translation). An additional interpretation of the poem suggests that the “elk” is “the Jew,” thus defining it as the ultimate representative of the Other and overlooking
the interrelation of otherness and belonging within the poem (Schumann 2002, 184–193).\textsuperscript{13}

It is again Kolmar’s words that turn us in a different direction and lead us back to the poem itself. In a second letter to Walter Benjamin Kolmar reveals the source of inspiration for the poetic figure of the elk as “a natural offspring of Leconote de Lisle’s mighty bird in ‘Le Sommeil du Condor’” (2014, 210/2004, 155; 2003, II. 138; Sauder 1996, 50). In de Lisle’s poem, the great bird is depicted soaring above the south American continent in a grand gesture that allows the bird to grasp it in its whole (“Le vaste Oiseau... Regarde l’Amérique et l’espace en silence.” 1976, 166–167). Like de Lisle’s condor, Kolmar’s elk is part of the landscape in a way that makes it irreducible to a mere oppressed Other. Kolmar’s notion of land and Heimat is a broad and nonlocal one; thus, her collection gathering together all the Prussian provinces and cities is an attempt to look upon the Prussian landscape and more broadly on the idea of Heimat from above, as one turning pages in a Wappenbuch or as Lencote de Lisle’s condor. Kolmar’s Heimatlyrik is indeed not the traditional Heimatlyrik to which Robert Musil refers as “local” and recognizes its blossom as symptomatic of the decay of literature (1974, 133). Kolmar’s poetry, which emphasizes the fragility and ephemerality of Heimat both as an idea and a state of mind, suggests a Heimatliteratur of a different kind. A reading of Kolmar’s Wappenbuch based on her later biographical homelessness, or, more generally, on the premise of the lack of belonging as characteristic of “Jewish literatures” will not be able to uncover Kolmar’s unique approach to this themes and results in a simplistic, inflexible understating of Heimat that the collection itself negates.

\textsuperscript{13} Schuman concludes her reading proclaiming that: “Durch die Austauschbarkeit von Elch und Jude impliziert das Gedicht Wappen von Allenburg einen Zusammenhang zwischen der Jahrhunderte währenden Geschichte der Verfolgung (und Vernichtung) der Juden und einer Zivilisation, die auf dem gewalttätigen Ausschluß des fremden basiert.” The poem’s retrospective understanding, which is symptomatic of the research on Kolmar until recently (see fn. 1 and 9), is marked by the shade of the Holocaust which leads Schumann to her problematic interpretation of a poem, written on 1927, as one that deals with the extermination of the Jews, an event Kolmar could not possibly imagine at the time. A similar, albeit more carefully formulated stance, appears in Erdle’s interpretation of the poem as centered around the oppression and murder of the elk, which is finally connected by Erdle to the persecution of the Jews (1994, 192–193), cf. Sauder’s rejection of Erdle’s position (1996, 52).
4 Conclusion

In the case of the poetic work of the German-Jewish poet Gertrud Kolmar, the act of dissemination turns out to be a recontextualization back into the wider discourse her work originates from. Such an approach not only renders a more comprehensive understanding of the poetic text but also provides a wider definition of the literary sources that influence it. By considering the Wappenbuch in light of the tradition of Heimatliteratur and in the broader context of German and European literary traditions, as suggested by Kolmar herself, rather than thinking of such attribution as a conflict that should be resolved, both sides of the equation – the idea of “Jewish” literature and the wider literary discourse of Heimat – are unraveled. Kolmar’s relativized yet overarching notion of Heimat embodied in the poem Wappen von Allenburg gives rise to a less rigid idea of Heimat and consequently a less conservative and naïve definition of Heimatkunst than the one Robert Musil encapsulates in the term Lokaldichtung. As a result, the effort towards dissemination takes shape as a double-ended process that finally turns the initial separating discursive difference into a reciprocal connecting force.

Bibliography


