

Exposé: Tawada Yōko's Poetry: Voices from the in-between

1. Topic

Tawada Yōko, born in 1960 in Tōkyō, has studied literature, Russian and German studies and lives in Germany since 1982 (where she westernized her name to Yoko Tawada). Her oeuvre includes over 40 volumes in Japanese and German, as well as translations. She has won numerous acclaimed literary awards, such as the Akutagawa Prize for High Literature, the Goethe Medal, the Kleist Prize and the Zuckmaier Medal. Through the genres, she moves from poem to essay and novel and further to drama and audio play. Yet, she has received most attention from public and academia alike for her novels and essays, while her work in poetry and drama remains largely neglected.

As the analyses of Tawada's prose make clear, she often employs poetic tropes such as metaphoric expressions, homophones, personifications, visual and auditory associations. A lyrical quality affects nearly all of her work; in addition, Tawada reflects on language or uses it in a self-reflexive way. Why, then, has her poetry gained so little interest, even though these phenomena should be most prevalent there? This dissertation is the first monograph on Tawada to focus on her poetry.

Numerous issues and discourses intersect in Tawada's work. The resulting depth of layers is partly based on her position as a self-declared exophonic writer. Such a writer works in two (or more) languages and cultures simultaneously. This angle explains Tawada's interest in constructions of self and other (the relationship between the subject and the alien) and in the influence of language on the perception of the world. Cultural differences and experiences of alienation influence the political thrust of some works, and their complex navigations of gendered subjectivity and social power dynamics present opportunities for applying poststructuralist and feminist theory of language and literature, gender theory, postcolonial theory – any of which Tawada may have encountered while studying German Literature.

Despite this relevant biographical backdrop, the speaker of the poems is not clearly identifiable as a representation of Tawada. Instead, it has many shapes and variations, which this study aims to bring to light. To this end, two concepts stand as focal points for the discourses surrounding Tawada's work: Firstly, the voice, and secondly, in-between space. While the concept of voice gathers the various themes and positions appearing in Tawada's poems into a speaking subject, the concept of in-between space reaffirms the constructed nature of this subjectivity and its localization (spatial as well as theoretical) in greater (cultural, linguistic, political) contexts, or more exactly, on the fringes of them and between them, in a liminal position. The voice that speaks the poem, the speaking-writing-body, in the in-between space of cultures and languages – these fluctuating concepts and interconnected processes of construction are my research subject.

2. Literature review

Scholarship regarding Tawada comes mainly from German Studies. Suzuko Mousel Knott (2011: 2) notes in her examination of intertextuality in Tawada that early secondary literature stresses the exoticism of Tawada's works, partly via a critical link to postcolonialism and orientalism. She cites Sabine Fischer's 2003 essay "Durch die japanische Brille gesehen [Seen through Japanese glasses]" (2003) as an example. This tendency I will take into account when analysing poems from Tawada's debut volume *Nur da wo du bist da ist nichts* (*Nothing Only Where You Are*, 1987). Later, critics consider the discursive framework of Tawada's texts and examine them for references to Walter Benjamin (Ivanovic 2010: 597), Roland Barthes (Kersting 2006) or Derrida and Saussure (Grewe 2009). Usually, these studies do not consider poems; instead, Tawada's narrative and essayistic prose receives most attention, and different core texts have emerged (such as *Arufabetto no kizuguchi* for her take on translation). Even Ruth Kersting, in her monograph on Tawada, *Fremdes Schreiben* (2006), only analyses three poems, and Linda Koiran neglects poetry completely in her 2009 study on Tawada's exophonic literature in German, *Schreiben in fremder Sprache*. Among the comparatively small number of essays on Tawada's poetry, Christine Ivanovic's contribution to the collection *Die Lücke im Sinn* (2015) deserves special mention, since it deals with the performance of the voice and

the author persona in Tawada's lyric, in the context of exophony, and as such is great relevance for this study.

While German publications often assign Tawada to the genre of migrant literature, Japanese critics consider her an Avant-garde writer. Japanese-language criticism of Tawada's work, though often more essayistic than academic, includes approaches from cultural studies, folklore studies and gender studies in addition to German studies and Linguistics. This in turn influences the approaches of japanologists working on Tawada; for instance, professor of Japanese literature Ina Hein points out that Japanese women writers like Tawada select settings and characters beyond Japan. This she attributes to their social position, liminal and marginalized in their home culture, like foreigners. In this way, Hein links cultural and gendered patterns of subject- and alterity construction in a way fitting for Tawada's poetry.

Anglophone research on Tawada is the smallest part of the scholarly literature available – one reason why I chose English as the language of this dissertation. As Tawada's texts are accessible in English through translation from either German or Japanese, those studies focus heavily on translational issues, linguistics and interculturality in her work. Doug Slaymaker's 2007 collection *Yoko Tawada: Voices from Everywhere* is most prominent among these. Yet in English secondary sources, too, poetry plays only a minor role; among the available articles and dissertations on Tawada, none focuses explicitly on poems, and none of her poetry collections has yet been translated into English.

3. Approaches for the proposed doctoral dissertation

3.1. Goals

This dissertation has various aims. Firstly, an in-depth analysis of Tawada's poetry will close a gap in the research horizon regarding her work. Secondly, I intend to check the applicability of the concepts previously developed regarding her prose to her poetry, and thus continue the work of other scholars. During this, I hope to extend the communication between German-, Japanese- and English-language research on Tawada, as I refer to both German and Japanese poems and to secondary sources in three languages. Previous scholarship has tended to exclude half of Tawada's oeuvre, limited by the language capacities of critics or expected readers. Those texts that acknowledge both languages often focus on translation.¹ Thirdly, I want to employ the concepts of voice and in-between space to establish relationships between various images, methods and discourses that recur in Tawada's work, and thus establish a network of motifs in which her fluid, transitory, transgressive work becomes graspable without conscripting it into ill-fitting, pre-existing categories.

3.2. Research Questions

Regarding language use, alterity construction, gender and embodiment in Tawada's poetry, several groups of questions emerge. A selection might include:

With which linguistic means does Tawada establish a speaking subject, the 'voice' of a poem? How and with which effect does she use or deconstruct subjectivity? Which types of speakers can be ascertained? From which context (in-between space) and into which context do they speak?

Which post-colonial aspects does Tawada's poetry have? How and with what effect does she use or deconstruct linguistic (constructions of) alterity? How does the subject turn fluid in the in-between of cultures and discourses?

How does her poetry evoke and disrupt gender assignation? In how far does she assign a gender to the voice of the poem, and to what effect? Can her writings be considered 'feminine' regardless of the speaker's gender? As Tawada includes the embodiment of narrative/lyrical voices and the writing body, can her poetry be read as *écriture féminine*?

¹ Ivanovic and Matsunaga's glossary on themes and images in Tawada's full work in the *Text + Kritik* special issue in 2011 is a solitary counter-example.

Considering the deconstruction and instability of the 'I' in Tawada's poetry – literary, grammatically, culturally, gender-related – the question finally arises: Does her poetry, despite or due to this ambiguity of the speaker, have a political voice? Which statements do the various characters make regarding the discourses to which they react? In how far can Tawada's concept of in-between space be understood as empowerment of a counter-discourse, as the creation of a space where Spivak's subaltern – woman, foreigner, queer person, animal – has a voice and can be heard?

This final dimension may be treated in the Conclusion, after analysis has provided new insights into the functioning of the poems.

3.3. Theoretical Background and Methodology

The theoretic basis for the concept of voice stems partly from Doris Kolesch's and Sigrid Weigel's essays in the volume *Stimme. Annäherung an ein Phänomen* (2006, eds. Doris Kolesch & Sybille Krämer). Starting with the function of voice in drama (Erika Fischer-Lichte's theory of performativity), the voice in literature emerges in arguments such as Weigel's *Die Stimme der Medusa: Schreibweisen in der Gegenwartsliteratur von Frauen* (1987). For the relation of voice and identity in a specifically poetic context, Henrike Stahl's theories (see especially "Towards a Historical Typology of the Subject in Lyric Poetry", 2017) demand consideration.

Voice is sound, a transitory, once-only event, and thus linked to the musicality that lyrical texts often display (see the introduction of Perloff und Dworkin's 2009 collection *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound*). Many poems only unfold their full potential when read aloud, in a performance (for the role of the author's voice in literary readings, see Bernstein's essay in the same volume). At the same time, voice is the medium of language and thus both object and agent of the defamiliarization through translation, as Tawada herself notes in her essay "The Art of Being Nonsynchronous" (2009). Used poetologically, 'voice' refers to an author's individual style, especially their construction of prose narrators and poetic speakers, the latter of which I plan to consider in more detail. At the same time, an actual voice is produced in a living body and is thus connected to the physical world. As a result, links to eating and sexuality become possible. In Tawada's texts, this happens through metaphors of water, fish and tongues, which are often connected. In a socio-political sense, voice signifies social status and the power of participation, for representation and even voting in the literal sense in German-speaking countries. This invites consideration of feminist and postcolonial implications of speaking/writing in Tawada's work, with specific examples. When analysing voice and the right or ability to speak (especially, but not exclusively in a postcolonial context), Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) must also be taken into consideration.

The concept of in-between space plays a significant role in Tawada's poetics and her approach to foreignness and alienation. Partly, this can be extracted from Tawada's own essays (see the Japanese collection *Ekusofon I*, 2003, and various separately published texts, such as "Gengo no hasama" ("The gap of languages", 1999)). Especially relevant, in this regard, is the contrast between (multi-dimensional) in-between space and (one-dimensional) borders. Tawada states:

Die Literaturwissenschaft meint es gut, wenn sie eine mehrsprachige Autorin als „Grenzgängerin“ bezeichnet. Beim Wort „Grenze“ zucke ich aber oft zusammen. Es erinnert mich an bewaffnete Soldaten. [...] Zwischen zwei Sprachen hingegen habe ich nie eine Grenze gesehen. Jede bildet einen Zwischenraum und der Raum zwischen zwei Sprachen ist kein Zwischenraum, sondern der eigentliche Raum, in dem die Literatur geschrieben wird. ("Literary Studies mean well when they describe a multilingual author as 'border crosser'. But the word 'border' often startles me. It reminds me of armed soldiers. [...] Between two languages, by contrast, I have never seen a border. Each constitutes an in-between space and the space between languages is no in-between space but the actual space where literature is written." Tawada Yōko, „Rede zum Kleistpreis 2016“)

Consequently, one cannot binarily distinguish between two distinct areas and a connecting, hybrid in-between space. Instead, Tawada develops a multidimensional image, in which every language

already constitutes such space. Literature operates explicitly *outside* these ‘language-spaces’, but not in isolation, instead marked by intermingling and permeation. An important aspect of this is the concept of translation as a process, ‘carrying across’, rather than as a product which firmly belongs to one language.

In this context, I employ Homi Bhabha’s theories of Third Space and extend the hybridity he finds in cultures and individuals to cultural production. For a similar approach, see Tachibana’s essay (in Ivanovic’s essay collection *Poetik der Transformation*, 2011). Tawada’s idea of literature as translation can furthermore connect to Bhabha’s concept of culture being always already translated (‘cultural translation’). Thus, the concept of in-between space shall serve as methodological counterweight to that of voice and preclude an overly simplifying reading of her poems as political or poetological utterances of perhaps Tawada herself. In-between space instead draws attention to the context, the variously defined space in which the voice of the poem resounds – which may even be that which makes it audible.

4. Choice of material, structure of the book and chapter previews

The body of potential primary literature is extensive, even when I limit myself to poetry published in collections. The volumes *Nur da wo du bist da ist nichts/Anata no iru tokoro dake nanimo nai* (1987), *Wo Europa anfängt* (1991) and *Aber die Mandarinen müssen heute Abend noch geraubt werden* (1997) were published in Germany, but they contain many (in the case of *Nur*, all) poems as Japanese originals, with a German translation by Peter Pörtner. The Japanese collection *Kitsunetsuki* (1998) includes some texts in poetic prose, which may be considered prose poems, but most of them are Tawada’s own translations and transformations of texts previously published in German (as prose, essay, or poem). Both *Kasa no shitai to watashi no tsuma* (2006) and *Ein Balkonplatz für flüchtige Abende* (2016) may count as verse novels, whereas *Abenteuer der deutschen Grammatik* (2010) and *Shutaine* (2017) are (on the surface) monolingual poetry collections.

Analysing every single poem is thus not feasible. Instead, I consider a specific complex of themes (related research questions) in each chapter, and examine the most relevant poems. In some cases, these are taken from various stages in Tawada’s career, while in others, I might extensively analyse the poems of a specific collection. Thus, the main body of the book will be structured thematically, despite the interconnectedness of the topics, which resists linear chapter assignment. Some amount of repetition and reference to other chapters will therefore be unavoidable; however, I believe a chronological discussion of works would increase this problem massively.

For the topic of alterity construction and foreignness, the poems “Osoroshii chiwa to kakumei” and “Nippon kan-dsume kōjō no shukujitsu” from Tawada’s debut collection demand attention for their reflection on Japan’s colonial past, whereas “Vreemd in New Amsterdam” in *Abenteuer der deutschen Grammatik* (2010) connects alienation and identity when the airport becomes the birthplace of the lyrical voice. Here, a discussion of Marc Augés Non-places would be possible, since the poem’s stance exemplifies Tawada’s contrary evaluation of places of transit. In this thematic field, Jeremy Redlich’s dissertation “The ethnographic politics and poetics of photography, skin and race in the works of Yoko Tawada” (2012) may offer valuable insights, since he understands ‘skin’ as symbol, metaphor and medium, and I intend to use voice similarly. He does not analyse any of the poems I have chosen, but other lyrical work. Therefore, his conclusions regarding the fluidity of identity, the similarity of inside and outside, or skin as “physical connection between language and one’s sense of identity” (Redlich 2012:163) can be related to the function of voice in other poems. As mentioned above, the concept of in-between space and its parallels to Bhabha’s and Spivak’s theories will also influence the analysis.

Another intersection of voice and in-between space is the topic of identity construction. In *Nur*, “Yōkame” reflects on the speech and writing of an I-voice, and the third person protagonist of “Tsuraku to saisei” experiences the in-between of languages as a trauma. By contrast, the approach of *Abenteuer* is more playful; Personal pronouns become an explicit topic and the gap (or in-between space) between languages and lived realities emerges, for example in “Die zweite Person Ich”, which

rests upon the multiple I-pronouns available in Japanese. The lyrical relationship chronicle *Kasa no shitai to watashi no tsuma* (2006) has a consistent narrative development, but the voices of several characters melt into and emerge out of the main speaker's stream of associations. The numbered poem cycle *Shutaine* with its metatextual references and hints at a German setting seems to present the impressions of a poet-self and thus encourages identification of speaker and author. However, the Japanese voice of the poems also occupies a liminal observer's position in its German surroundings. As Gelzer (2000:84) has noted, this is no longer autobiographical reflection, since Tawada's German publications attest to her proficiency in German and her knowledge of German society. Instead, she constructs an alienated self – this links back to the chapter on foreignness.

The alienated self may be the ideal inhabitant of the creative in-between space of cultures, where literature emerges. Furthermore, with reference to Roland Barthes this may empower the recipient; after the author has transcended her foreignness, creative alienation now emerges from the reader's conscious. This process is especially noticeable in the *Shutaine* poems "Guryūbirune" and "Ūbān", which estrange the Japanese language from its readers by alluding to the German homonym pear/lightbulb, or by representing German metro announcements in the Japanese phonetic alphabet.

Another topic is gender, which of course cannot be considered in isolation from other power dynamics in society, and therefore plays a role in the postcolonial/cultural and linguistic questions already discussed. The most overtly feminist poem in Tawada's debut collection might be "Keikaku" (1987), which entails a rebellion against traditional femininity, symbolized by a wiping cloth handed down through the female line. One day the speaker "throws away" this object and the gender role it represents. The poem's reference through laughter may be a critical allusion to Hélène Cixous' "Laugh of the Medusa", but it remains ambiguous whether the laughter is the liberating or belittling. Gender-ambiguous speakers appear in other poems as well, although lesbian content is mostly restricted to her fiction. An important commentary on Tawada's treatment of gender is Myung-Hwa Cho-Sobotka's dissertation "Auf der Suche nach dem weiblichen Subjekt", as well as Keith Vincent's essay "Kuia sakka toshite no Tawada Yōko" (2004).

One example of gender-bending speakers is "Chigarette" (*Shutaine*, 2017), which evokes a binary world, where smoking men flee the smell of salty diapers in their homes and hang around on the platform. Femininity is associated with water and the body whereas masculinity associates dryness, fire and smoke. However, the speaking voice desires the men's company without being part of their group, and it is therefore a voice from the in-between.

In the main body of the chapter, I plan to analyse Tawada's verse novels, *Kasa no shitai to watashi no tsuma* (2006) and *Ein Balkonplatz für flüchtige Abende* (2016) where she depicts scenes of lesbian relationships, describes sexual encounters, and codes both the speaker and her life partner as female. In addition, the speaker of *Balkonplatz* is clearly positioned as genderqueer. Among the scant secondary literature on these two books (perhaps they are too poetic for the prose-focused mainstream of Tawada-scholarship?), Arai Toyomi's "Gēmu-ka sareta (shin) kazoku monogatari" (2007) and Emanuela Costa's „The place where words are born': word plays, humour, and queer relationships in Yoko Tawada's *The corpse of the umbrella and my wife*" (2016) stand out. In my analysis, I want to discuss the gender and sexuality depicted in the texts and discuss in how far they can be considered *écriture féminine*.

To this end, I will finally consider the position and use of the body in Tawada's poetry. Using the symbol of the tongue, Tawada links speech, sexuality and eating, making language something that is bodily expressed and experienced. In *Abenteuer*, she reflects on the gendered body implied in the pronouns "he" and "she" (which are also used for objects in German). Nudity, blood and flesh already featured in *Nur* but have special relevance in *Kasa's* treatment of sex during menstruation, the climacteric, and artificial insemination. The bodies of women, animals and plants touch and transform into one another. A relevant secondary text in this regard is Robin Leah Tierney's dissertation on "visceral engagement in the writings of Tawada Yoko and Shono Yoriko" (2010), which examines the relationship of body and language in Tawada and even explicitly discusses

depictions of pregnancy. However, like so many other studies of Tawada's work, she does not consider poetry, despite the obvious thematic connection to *Kasa*. Yet, Tierney's use of Irigaray's concepts of liminality and embodied feminine subjectivity can be transferred to poetry. In addition, I want to use Cixous' concept of embodied female writing to describe Tawada's style in this particular work.

The conclusion will summarize the main arguments, emphasizing the connection, which the itemized treatment in discrete chapters may have obscured. It will also re-examine the connection of the methodological concepts of voice and in-between space, and provide a broader perspective on this and potential future studies.

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