

Klaus-Jürgen Liedtke

Die Ostsee. A process

Dear colleagues and friends, ladies and gentlemen,

The Baltic Sea has been late in finding its place in European consciousness. Today we are approaching the Baltic Sea in a peaceful time, with largely open borders. The voices we have just heard come from another project, *At the water's edge*, which collects and shares memories from the Baltic Sea region during the Cold War. The Cold War period saw a number of projects designed to promote knowledge of the Baltic Sea region's different literatures. *Trajekt*, a series of books and annuals which existed from 1981-1986, was designed to contribute to Finnish, Finland Swedish, Lappish, Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian literature and cultivated a very specific North-Eastern European network – an avant-garde of literary topography. As an editor for this project I remain grateful to the poet and chief editor Manfred Peter Hein for all I learned from him. The editorial team also included Professori emeriti Hans Peter Neureuter and Clas Zilliacus, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their continued support for and collaboration in the constantly growing virtual Baltic Sea Library, which was founded 10 years ago.

There was also a book series called *Trajekt* featuring Nordic literature that was published in the Hanseatic town of Rostock by the GDR publishing house Hinstorff. Rostock was also the venue for the international Baltic Sea Week festival, which was held annually up until the GDR gained international recognition under the motto of a "sea of peace". This was a phrase the chairmen of the writers' associations of Sweden and St. Petersburg took up after the opening of the borders when organising a two-week Baltic Sea cruise attended by nearly 400 writers and translators in February 1992 on a ship called *Konstantin Simonov*, which the unforgettable Estonian author Ain Kaalep on board renamed "The Ship of Fools" as he spoke with a certain bitterness about how East and West – or as he called it: kindergarten and concentration camp – finally had come to meet. The two weeks that we shared on the ship (with literary evenings and

performances from the different literatures) also conveyed the desire and the need for closer collaboration and understanding.

One step led to another: one year later the Baltic Centre for Writers and Translators was established in Visby on Gotland, and greater collaboration between writers' and translators' associations in the Baltic Writers' Council led to annual personal meetings and several conferences – *Littera Baltica* in Turku, several *Baltic Meetings* for writers (as in Kaliningrad, Visby and Narva) to name a few – and gradually to the foundation of the virtual Baltic Sea Library – with an editorial board from Reykjavik to St. Petersburg – accessible on the Internet since the beginning of 2010.

Many of the editors are here again today, as they were in autumn 2008 at the International House of Writers and Translators in Ventspils, Latvia. I tried hard to make someone join us here today, but their International Secretary Ieva Balode has a good excuse: she now has twins who are just starting school, while her husband, like our Latvian editor Ingmara, is involved in the International Poetry Festival in Latvia.

Ten years is a long time for a digital project. In 2011 we had our last meeting in Berlin in the state representation of Schleswig-Holstein. This year also saw the first contact with publisher Wolfgang Hörner. I remember that around Christmas 2011 I created the table of contents for the text collection called *Die Ostsee*, the premiere of which we want to celebrate here in Rostock tonight. What followed were seven meagre years, arduous but futile attempts to finance the project and win publishers for the other languages of the Baltic Sea region by trying to implement the idea in other countries.

But can one read reality as a book, as Walter Benjamin stated in his *Passagen-Werk*? What picture will arise from testimonies from past times, travel reports, letters, diaries and narrative fiction? Paradigmatic texts that relate to each other associatively have been brought into dialogue with one another and, in interaction with history, form an essence. Some facts come to the fore in a new way, while others are taken into consideration for the very first time, as the focus is on the sea as an unbounded space, by crossing borders, a kaleidoscope, or a

tectonic landscape, where plates can shift against one another.

What hopefully has been achieved: a new overall picture of this whole region - by reassembling these texts, grouping them, bringing them into a flow. At the beginning everything was easy: you simply put together texts that you like personally, that you remember from earlier readings and that are suitable for such a composition. Afterwards, concerns arise: what is missing? Is there not too little Russian in it? And where are the Åland Islands? (Fortunately, we have included the island of Kökar! And we also invited the author Ulla-Lena Lundberg to attend this meeting of minds, unfortunately in vain).

This common sea can only be thought of in the plural, as *Baltics*, as Tomas Tranströmer put it with clear autobiographical justification - his grandfather was a pilot in the "marvellous labyrinth of islands and waters" off Stockholm, on the archipelago island of Runmarö. From the great cycle of poems by the Swedish Nobel Prize winner the anthology spins away with stories by Jaan Kross or Per Olov Enquist, back and forth across the Baltic Sea with its different ports, through times and languages: Marie Cresspahl in Uwe Johnson's *Anniversaries* would have loved to have "discussed with a gentleman, currently unavailable on the Bothnian Baltic", but this gentleman, her mother Gesine's fiancé, had already crashed at the Finland's Helsinki-Vantaa airport.

The approach follows the principle of the "strandhugg", short landings and raids by the Vikings on different shores, where they moored and swarmed from their ships. The places promised mostly rich booty. Despite all the zigzag courses, a Baltic itinerary is necessary as an initial means of orientation in the form of literary texts from all the different national languages (128 in number, by one hundred and one authors), independent of linguistic or historical borders. The focus is on the individual, luminous text splinter and the overall composition as a string of pearls, rather than on the canonical meaning of the selected authors. Of course, a tiny text fragment from Carl Linnæus' *Nemesis Divina* can only touch on the character of the entire work, but at least some of the fury and power of this work, edited from his estate in 1968, can flash up.

The Baltic Sea as a common cultural space seems difficult to fix in terms of its transnationality and extent, especially at its edges. And these edges, which

are synonymous with tributaries, extending in my view as far as Karelia and Lake Ladoga, and the mountain areas of Lapland with their former silver treasures, thus form a chapter in the exploitation of the original Sami population.

Nevertheless, over the last ten years we have shaped a Baltic Sea Library. We look at the same sea, but from different angles, and I doubt if there is a unified canon to be defined. A common library for all of us can only consist of different libraries with different weights. Our experiences of this common ground have been so very different historically

And yet this does not mean that we should not seek to look beyond these histories to some extent by choosing texts that are as transnational as possible – never forgetting that the reader is also co-shaping and co-creating the image of such a book - or in the digital realm: a web, a common transnational, trans-lingual, trans-cultural platform that can unite our different perceptions. To borrow from and slightly alter the Romanian writer Ana Blandiana:

The Baltic only exists
as long as you are reading it:
The next time we read it
It will be another,
Because you also have become another,
and it will of course be
something else,
when another one reads it.

This conference here in Rostock gives us a unique opportunity to exchange views in an ongoing dialogue in order to render an image of this common cultural sphere and to build further on what might one day become a common identity.

We can look back and take the liberty of taking stock, while remaining open to the future – and also open to Kurt Tucholsky's dream of a villa in the countryside, with a large terrace and the Baltic Sea in front, and Berlin's Friedrichstraße behind.

Which place could be better suited for such a reading exercise than the ancestral seat of the oldest university in the Baltic region: the University of Rostock founded in 1419, which was temporarily moved to Lübeck, Wismar and Greifswald, but which is older than the Universities of Pomerania (Greifswald) founded in 1456, Uppsala founded in 1477 and Copenhagen founded in 1479. Before 1500, book production in the Baltic Sea region was concentrated in the German-speaking cities of Lübeck, Rostock, Danzig and Riga, while Polish book production, for example, was concentrated in Cracow. And book production was essential to the implementation of the European Reformation.

Today, in times of digital literary production, we have a double-track approach: with a virtual library and a printed book - and with both forms we see new possibilities for communication across borders. The Baltic Sea region is a new space in consciousness, new since the early nineties. Twenty-five years is a rather short period, as is evident in the case of the two Germanies, where the former split has still not healed.

How can we read the Baltic then? Is it possible to shape a common image of the Baltic without having a common history? A sea is one and indivisible.

What we can offer during over the next days in Rostock are close readings of different places and literary texts from the Baltic region: Jomsborg/Wolin in The Saga of the Jomsvikings, Adam Olearius shipwrecked on the island of Hochland/Hogland/Suursaari/Gogland (the names hint at all the historical changes this island has seen), and the Finnish-Swedish poet Henry Parland in Kaunas, at that time the capital of Lithuania. All these are classical texts, so to speak, from a region that is not very well known, shaping an intercultural echo starting from the particular, from all that is distinct and different. Moreover, the act of translation cannot be seen as merely transporting the original; it maintains a difference between the languages and adds something to the original by conveying it into new settings.

New connections will arise and become visible, as well as the recognition of the necessity of "new narratives that pay their tribute to the cracks and catastrophes of the 20th century", to quote Karl Schlögel. We are all travellers in

time and space, reading and interpreting time in space, as Schlögel said. So let me give you some glimpses of my own Baltic, different parts and aspects which I have experienced at different times in my life. It was in fact relatively recently that I heard my mother's account of her first concrete experience of this sea, which she remembered as imbued with a light that was totally different from the light she knew from her home in the inland village of Kermuschienen in East Prussia, a country that was cut off from its homeland after World War I, divided and eroded after World War II. The year was 1932.

There were two young teachers, Bagusat from Stobrigkehlen and Paslat from Broszaitzen, and they had colleagues, friends in Samland. They organised a truck, which they loaded with chairs and benches. And the children sat up in the open air; Waltraud Steinke was not yet ten. They set off with two classes, without adults, only with her older sister Elfriede and Lisa Kaschewski and Martha Poschwatta as supervisors, a whole lot of kids, and they drove hour after hour through the hilly country. They drove through Königsberg. On the Galtgarben hill, a hundred and ten meters high, they were overwhelmed by the sight of the towers of the royal city sparkling in the distance. At the coast in Rauschen they looked down across the steep shore and for the first time saw the sea, with whitecaps: it was very green, the sun supernaturally bright. So different the sky was in Kermuschienen, clearer, and the clouds full of dragging white islands. They went swimming in black leotards. And didn't come home that day. In Dugehnen they stayed overnight with the other teachers in the hayloft, slept in all the hay; it pricked and tickled their skin, their eyes, with everything they would still experience.

Both an oral tale and a literary tale from the Baltic, from a lost Baltic I explored in my own book, *The Sunken World*, which focussed on my mother's village in East Prussia before the Second World War. As I see it, a writer is, among other things, a collector of the lost past - one recalls Olavi Paavolainen's collection of images from a lost Karelia, *Muistojen maa* (Land of Memories).

Even before the First World War, the Baltic proved a magnet for artists. It was around Nidden (today's Nida in Lithuania) that painters like Max Pechstein started to paint *plein air* in 1908, an approach also taken by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner at the same time on the island of Fehmarn in Holstein. On the peninsula of the Darß not too far from Rostock there was a painters' school for women, founded by Paul Müller-Kempf. Later his house, known as the Künstlerhaus Lukas, became a retreat for artists from different fields. And Akseli Gallén-Kallela travelled to Karelia and painted the black woodpecker in the green wilderness of the Kainuu province.

One of the writers I met at the Baltic Centre in Visby, a young Norwegian by the name of Tor Eystein Øverås, spent eight months travelling around the entire Baltic. As he wrote of his experiences: "I grew up during the Cold War. The Baltic Sea was a sea that separated. The Baltic Sea was a sea where airplanes were shut down and a sea where submarines from one land ran aground in the archipelago of another. Underwater I cannot see any border." His Baltic experience has no borders; it is language that puts up borders. He also speaks of tales that interconnect to form a collective memory. ("Fortellinger som sammen danner et kollektivt minne.") And he discovers that landscape does not stop at national borders. It is not possible to understand the context of the whole if you don't leave national borders behind.

It is important to tell diverse stories of a sea we all share in order to dismantle one-sided memories by means of the memories of the other. ("die jeweils einseitigen Erinnerungen an den Erinnerungen der anderen zu brechen", as Götz Aly puts it). "Mapping the region" also means regaining a lost Europe with all its historical interconnections – in Austrian writer Karl-Michael Gauß's phrase, "Rückgewinnung des verlorenen Europa". Although we do not have a common identity – referring finally to Finnish historian Matti Klinge – the sea unites us more than it has divided us. By gathering a corpus of texts from the Baltic region, will we just shape a collection of texts, connected by their relationship to the sea, or does so-called "Balticness" mean something more, in the sense of constituting fragments of a collective memory and consciousness?

The question is: what does the view of the other tell me about my own country, reality, notion or experience? What kind of knowledge does literature convey to us? The knowledge of the other may be rather restricted and our curiosity limited, but what the other thinks and writes about us is of undeniable interest. The saying that characterizes the Finns as a people who are silent in two languages – where does it stem from? Let me finally give you Bertolt Brecht's example, talking as an exiled writer about the Finnish landscape and a society during wartime with a sense of pathos highly unusual for his poetry:

Fischreiche Wässer! Schönbaumige Wälder!
Birken- und Beerenduft!
Vieltöniger Wind, durchschaukelnd eine Luft
So mild, als stünden jene eisernen Milchbehälter
Die dort vom weißen Gute rollen, offen!
Geruch und Ton und Bild und Sinn verschwimmt.
Der Flüchtling sitzt im Erlengrund und nimmt
Sein schwieriges Handwerk wieder auf: das Hoffen.

Er achtet gut der schöngehäuften Ähre
Und starker Kreatur, die sich zum Wasser neigt
Doch derer auch, die Korn und Milch nicht nährt.
Er fragt die Fähre, die mit Stämmen fährt:
Ist dies das Holz, ohn das kein Holzbein wäre?
Und sieht ein Volk, das in zwei Sprachen schweigt.

In John Willett's translation from 1976:

Finnish Landscape

Those fish-stocked waters! Lovely trees as well!
Such scents of berries and of birches there!
Thick-chorded winds that softly cradle air

As mild as though the clanking iron churns
Trundled from the white farmhouse were all left open!
Dizzy with sight and sound and thought and smell
The refugee beneath the alders turns
To his laborious job: continued hoping.

He notes the corn stooks, spots which beasts have strayed
Towards the lake, hears moos from their strong lungs
But also sees who's short of milk and corn.
He asks the boat that takes logs to be sawn:
Is that the way that wooden legs are made?
And sees a people silent in two tongues.

Today's experience is of course quite different from the refugee's experience during the World War: once I travelled by train from the Finnish lake district back to Helsinki – and already before lunch the passengers were sitting in the smokers' saloon (those were the days!), drinking and chatting, so full of joy that you might doubt why on earth Finland needed Nokia to connect people. In this sense I hope this conference will connect us all with each other – all around and across the Baltic!

Welcome Speech held in Rostock, Town Hall, on 14th September, 2018