

ARKTOKOSMOS – FRAGMENTE. Stefan Holitschke. 2011. Sprakensehl: Asaro Verlag. 93 p. soft cover. ISBN 978-3-941930-63-6. € 9.90

Stefan Holitschke's slim volume adds to the vast amount of Arctic and Antarctic lyric responses to the extreme environments of the polar regions.

Published by Asaro Verlag 2011, its cover shows an ice carving of a polar bear whose head seems to have suffered from melting. *Arktokosmos* is a curious edition which does not give any information about the author: one must google his biographical details to find out that his 'lyrical fragments' were written as a result of wintering on Spitsbergen. According to his own web site he is a 'dedicated IT specialist with additional skills in circumpolar studies, law, economy and energy business'. *Arktokosmos* seems to be Holitschke's first foray into poetry.

The preamble to the collection prepares the reader for Holitschke's response to the interaction between him and the landscape. The Arctic landscape images, it seems, provoke mystical, if not religious thoughts and feelings. Indeed, the following conglomerate of poems with the Arctic as a backdrop lends itself superbly to a meditative inquiry of time, for space and time seem to merge in the vastness of the Arctic. The theme of isolation represented by the silence of the Arctic also causes the author to ponder about human existence *per se*. The majority of the poems reflect his ambiguity about human powerlessness in an extreme environment on the one hand and a feeling of pantheism on the other.

All of the titled poems and untitled fragments are written in free verse. Unidentified photos taken by Holitschke, presumably from Spitsbergen, complement the volume. Some of the images, such as the one on page 35 are of evocative beauty; others are of lesser quality, which however may be due to the way in which they were reproduced. To the photo on page 45 a symbol is added, perhaps an oversight by the editor.

The poem 'Schneesonne' ['Snowsun'] on page 11 sends the protagonist observer into the icy desert so that his meditative journey can begin. The 'verschneite Wald' ['snowbound forest'] still offers shelter from the elements, but the traveller must give up these confines and pit himself against the vastness of space/time that awaits him in the 'endlose Wüste aus Eis' ['the endless desert of ice']. In the following poem 'Ein Traum vom Licht' ['A dream of light'], page 13, man is seen as part of nature and the observer's positive response evokes a feeling of wholeness and belonging in the reader. This affirmative interaction between the observing protagonist and the landscape is also expressed with picturesque language in the poem 'Das Eine' ['The one'] on page 38:

Durch alles Erschaute
in dieser kleinen Welt
weht dieser Gedanke:
Es ist alles eins.

[Through all that is perceived in this world this one thought waves: all is one.]

Some of the nature poems in this volume of work are written in beautiful suggestive language, none better than 'Der Morgentau' ['The morning dew'] on page 37. Here Holitschke proves his mastery of lyrical language. The imagery is moving

and the metaphors he uses transport the reader into the situation he describes. For me the most pertinent poem in *Arktokosmos* is an untitled one on page 51. It is an observation that holds true not only for extreme environments, but should be the maxim of all scientists who claim to create knowledge. According to Holitschke, they have to their one and only question many explanations, lots of examples, but no answer:

Die das Wissen zu erschaffen suchen,
sie haben nur eine einzige Frage,
abertausende mögliche Erklärungen,
hunderte von Beispielen zur Verdeutlichung. . .
und keine einzige Antwort.

[Those who seek to create knowledge only have a single question, thousands of possible explanations, hundreds of examples, yet not a single answer.]

In many poems in Holitschke's volume, in his attempt to comprehend the arctic environment, he tends to imagine man as an intruder. Pitted against nature, man is the outsider who must succumb. The poem 'Der Hohe Norden' ['The high north'] on page 30 sees man as a guest of the environment. Nature seems to be something that excludes human existence while elements like water and storms are part of it. Indeed, as in the poem 'Der Sturm' ['The storm'] on page 15), it is a storm that is capable of revealing the secrets of nature to man:

Du wirst Geheimnisse
in dein Ohr geschrien
bekommen,
die aus dem dunkelsten Herzen
der Natur entstammen.

[You will get secrets screamed into your ears, which stem from the darkest heart of nature.]

The poem 'Die Gebeugten' ['The bent'] on page 26 suggests some sort of symbiosis with nature, but according to Holitschke only very few can achieve this symbiosis. It is unclear if he counts himself as one of the lucky ones, or if he sees himself as Sisyphus who toils in vain. The existential fear that permeates some of Holitschke's poems culminates in the last three lines of the poem 'Der Zweifel' ['The doubt'] on page 59:

Was aber,
wenn zuletzt doch alles nur das Werk
einer blind waltenden, zufälligen Sinnlosigkeit ist?

[But what if in the end all is the creation of a blindly ruling, incidental senselessness?]

While I discovered some true gems of poems in *Arktokosmos* many are rather repetitive in proposition, metaphor and choice of words. Sometimes complete lines are repeated, for example on pages 69 and 75 and it is unclear if this is an editorial oversight, or deliberate didacticism. In either case, I found it irritating.

The collection is concluded by an epilogue by Holitschke, a prose account of his impressions of the Arctic. In my opinion, it offers no new insights and adds nothing to the main body of work. The fragments in *Arktokosmos* are very subjective impressions, some of which may inspire some readers. Several poems are beautiful descriptions of an extreme environment and a few of these are exquisite. (Eva Meidl, University of Tasmania, Private Bag 82, Hobart, Tasmania 7001, Australia, (E.Meidl@utas.edu.au)).