Anglistentag 2002 Bayreuth

Proceedings

edited by

Ewald Mengel
Hans-Jörg Schmid
Michael Steppat

Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Die Deutsche Bibliothek - CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

Anglistentag <2002, Bayreuth>:
Proceedings / Anglistentag 2002 Bayreuth /
ed. by Ewald Mengel, Hans-Jörg Schmid, Michael Steppat.-
Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2003
(Proceedings of the Conference of the German
Association of University Teachers of English ; Vol. 24)
ISBN 3-88476-607-4

Umschlaggestaltung: Brigitta Disseldorf

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ISBN 3-88476-607-4

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Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem
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Printed in Germany

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier
Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier
Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier
Tel.: (0651) 41503 / 9943344, Fax: 41504
Internet: http://www.wvttrier.de
e-mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

MATTHIAS BAUER (SAARBRÜCKEN)

Rose Ausländer's American Poetry

Rose Ausländer has become, especially after her death in 1988, one of the most widely read German poets of the 20th century. Helmut Braun, her literary executor, tells me that the total circulation of publications by and on Rose Ausländer has reached the figure of some 850,000 copies. But comparatively few people in the English Departments of German-speaking countries and even fewer in those of the Anglo-American world seem to be aware of the fact that Rose Ausländer wrote several hundred English poems as well, of which only 21 were published during her lifetime in American magazines and anthologies. 190 were published in Germany in 1995 under the title *The Forbidden Tree* as part of the Fischer Taschenbuch edition of her collected works in 16 volumes. Even this volume has a print-run of 4,000 copies, which is quite unusual for an English book in Germany, and a figure at which many poets in England or America would probably look with some envy. Thus, even though as yet only a handful of scholars have taken notice of Rose Ausländer's English poetry, the poems themselves seem to have found a (German) readership. The appreciation of a poet's work of course cannot simply be measured in terms of quantity. Nevertheless, my own first explorations into Ausländer's English poetry make me hope that there will be an increasing number of colleagues with whom to share the experience.

I 'found' Rose Ausländer when considering the personal or person-like quality of language experienced by modern poets.[1] This quality is characteristic of Rose Ausländer's German verse, in which words frequently appear as persons or are endowed with human qualities. Probably the best-known example is the poem "Mutterland" (Ausländer 1994, 94):

> Mutterland
>
> Mein Vaterland ist tot
> sie haben es begraben
> im Feuer
>
> Ich lebe
> in meinem Mutterland
> Wort

1 Finding, as so often, means being shown. I am grateful to Inge Leimberg for first drawing my attention to the personal encounter with language in Rose Ausländer's poetry, and for a number of suggestions. See, apart from the many examples in Ausländer's poems themselves, her essay "Alles kann Motiv sein" (Ausländer 1995b, 91-95).

I venture to say that the choice, or coinage, of this by now quite famous expression, *Mutterland Wort* (the poem was first published in the volume *Mutterland* in 1978) was influenced by Rose Ausländer's thinking, living, writing in English as well, for it seems that "Mutterland" is used in this poem as a literal translation of English *motherland* rather than in the now common German sense of the word, which is largely restricted to a colonial context (*Mutterland* as the counterpart of *Kolonie*; a sense corresponding to the English word *mother country*, whose meaning, however, is less restricted than that of *Mutterland*).[2] This familiar German sense does not, or at least not primarily, apply to Rose Ausländer's usage, for the speaker of the poem is not exiled from the word; the word is rather the only country where she feels at home.[3] Rose Ausländer's awareness of the subtleties of language, which, as the poem "Mutterland" makes clear, becomes her only true *Heimat*,[4] is not to be separated from her bilingualism (or rather multilingualism, as she grew up in Czernowitz, where four languages were spoken, German, Rumanian, Yiddish, and Ruthenian; but English is the only one besides German in which she came to write poetry). Her motherland is the word, not (or not exclusively) the German language.

The following example from *The Forbidden Tree* shows that this awareness of language as the medium or place of survival,[5] or even of existence, is characteristic of Ausländer's English poetry as well:

WHILE I AM ALIVE

While I am alive, and May is here
in tender revolution of the year,
while I am alive and still may stay
a while with you, companions of the day,
and it is May while I am still alive:
I drag a drop of honey to my hive.

This poem, to me, bespeaks, in its apparent simplicity (and apparently conventional adoption of rhyme and meter) a musical mastery of the English language which is especially striking when we remember that Rose Ausländer did not learn English until she first came to America in 1921 at the age of 20 (cf. Braun 1999, 32). What I find particularly noticeable is the arrangement of patterns of letters and sounds which become expressive (or iconic) of the "tender revolution", and of the chance to "stay / a while" in spite of inescapable change and death. The rondeau-like repetition of the first

2 Billen (2000, 90) regards the word Mutterland as a neologism (which it is not, as the entry in Grimm's Deutsches Wörterbuch shows; only the sense in which Ausländer uses it is new); he does not consider any possible influence of the English expression.

3 Cf. OED "motherland": "a. A country as the mother or producer of anything; b. The country of one's origin; one's native country."

4 The relationship of language and home (Heimat) is a major theme in Ausländer criticism; see e.g. Beil (1991), especially chapter 4.2, Köhl (1994), Hilzinger (1998) and Kruse (1999); for the reflection of language in Ausländer's poetry, see e.g. Köhl (1993) and Lehmann (1999).

5 Morris (1998, 50), by contrast, sees no essential difference between the dead "Vaterland" and the "Mutterland Wort": "these ashes are the linguistic graveyard signified by the final word 'Wort'".

colon "while I am alive" (in lines 1 and 3) with its lack of upbeat and four stresses (at least when read with a certain emphasis) stands out from the more rapid flow of "and may is here / in tender revolution of the year" in lines 1 and 2, as well as "and still may stay / a while with you, companions of the day" in lines 3 and 4. This changes in line 5 when, by means of a slight alteration from "while I am alive" to "while I am still alive" and a reversal (or "tender revolution") of the order of line 1, the phrase becomes more clearly integrated into the metrical pattern. From the (rhythmically, and syntactically) divided line "While I am alive, and May is here" the poem progresses to the chiastic reordering in line 5 which forms a whole: "and it is May while I am still alive". The insertion of the word "still" thus paradoxically furthers the flow.

Language itself can be said to engender the progress of the poem. This becomes obvious when we look at the implied *figura etymologica* of "while" and "a while" at the beginning of lines 1, 3 and 4, which is, as it were, counterbalanced on the right hand side by the pseudo-etymology of "May" (month) and "may" (auxiliary verb). "May" itself, in this patterned progress, appears as an anagram or palindrome of "I am" (a "tender revolution" of sounds and letters). Similarly, the repeated "still" of lines 3 and 5 opens up its (pseudo-etymological) potential by leading up to the "drop" which is gathered in the last line, for of course *to still* (from Latin *stilla*) means "to fall or let fall in tiny drops" (Webster 1989), and the very image of the working bee implies an unspoken pun on *being* which is so insistently brought to the reader's attention by the repetition of "I am". When one reads the poem in its biographical context of Rose Ausländer's having just survived the war and the holocaust, "I am" indeed means that she "may" be, that she is experiencing a new "May". The reader of German literature is reminded of Matthias Claudius' "Ich danke Gott, und freue mich / Wie's Kind zur Weihnachtsgabe, / Daß ich bin, bin!" (Claudius 1984, 149). Furthermore, for a poet named "Rose" the identification with the bee is a very special kind of role-playing. She is, as it were, herself among those whose nectar she has to collect and work up for food before the winter comes and the working bee dies.

Language – or one might say the visible and audible aspect of language, its physicality – is also made conspicuous by the two alliterations "drag" and "drop" and "honey" and "hive" which unite similarity and difference just as the image of a harvest and impending winter goes together and is contrasted with "May" and "day" and being alive. The unusual collocation "drag a drop" indicates yet another dimension in which language is foregrounded. In English, bees are laden (as in George Herbert's "The Starre")[6] and thus carry their load rather than drag it. Ausländer's "drag" could thus well be regarded as an interlingual pun on German *tragen*. And if she thus makes her 'old' language shine through the 'new' one, "while" is resonant with German *weil* (which is, moreover, anagrammatically present in "alive"): to the speaker it is May not only while she is alive but also *because* ('weil') she is alive. The "honey" is the only word in the poem that remotely hints at an American idiom, at least when it is regarded in the context of love-making suggested by expressions like "May" and

6 See the last stanza (lines 29-32; Herbert 1974, 91): "Sure thou wilt joy, by gaining me / To flie home like a laden bee / Unto that hive of beams / And garland-streams."

"tender". But if this is a love poem, the love is that of life itself; moreover, it is addressed to companions, in the plural.[7] Given the foregrounding of language, I don't think one goes too far when one suggests that, on one level of meaning, the "companions of the day" are the words of her present-day language – as distinct from speechless or unspeakable dreams of the past, or, as Rose Ausländer puts it in "Yom Kipur", from "The furies" that "wait / at the corner of each day" (Ausländer 1995a, 214-15). Language means survival and nourishment, as the honey-gathering indicates, which is a traditional image of eloquence (only think of Spenser's Belphoebe: "Sweet words, like dropping honny, she did shed").[8] It is also an image of poetic imitation and inspiration.[9] This idea of living in and by language comes to the fore more explicitly in later German poems, such as "Alice in Wonderland", in which the conversation of bees ("Bienengespräch") is called one of her mother tongues (Ausländer 1993b, 85, written between 1957 and 1963), or "Nicht vergessen I" (Ausländer 1994, 58), which begins "Heute / hat ein Gedicht / mich wieder erschaffen" or "Respekt", in which the speaker says "Ich habe keinen Respekt / vor dem Wort Gott // habe großen Respekt / vor dem Wort / das mich erschuf / damit ich Gott helfe / die Welt zu erschaffen." (Ausländer 1994, 37; both from the volume *Doppelspiel* published in 1977). But it is present already throughout Ausländer's poetry in English, such as the poem "Creation" (Ausländer 1995a, 42), in which the "fierce creation" of the speaker is related to the "curved word", or the poem "Nothing to Embellish" (Ausländer 1995a, 134), in which the speaker longs for a mythical re-creation when she desires to "go back / where the word took shape / made shape".

This reference to the beginning of the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the word", is to be found in several of her English poems, in particular in "The Word" (Ausländer 1995a, 212), but characteristically in these English poems it is part of a story, a myth, rather than an immediate account of the speaker's own relation to language.[10] "While I am alive" is exceptional in its repetition of the first person singular pronoun, which seems to be less frequent in the English poems than in the German ones, almost as if the speaker wishes to hide behind or within the new language. Thus, in what is perhaps her first poem in English (and quite certainly her

7 In a poem from her early (1927-30) New York cycle, the speaker compares herself to a (working) bee: "Wir leben streng wie Bienen – / Der rhythmisch-rasche Takt / hart ratternder Maschinen / ist unser Liebesakt" ("Das laufende Band"; Ausländer 1993a, 12). Even though in "While I am alive" the mood is quite different, the image of the fellow-workers (rather than lovers) is still implied in the "companions of the day". It is, however, possible to regard the plural of "companions" as including the speaker; "you" could then be a single addressee, such as the reader or a beloved person.

8 *The Faerie Queene* 2.3.24. The list of possible examples is endless. Cf. Francis Meres's famous dictum of "mellifluous, and honey-tongued Shakespeare".

9 Again, this defies annotation. Perhaps the most famous example is Horace's *Carmina* IV.2.27-32, "ego apis Matinae more modoque ... carmina fingo"; cf. George Herbert's "Oh Book! infinite sweetnesse! let my heart / Suck ev'ry letter and a hony gain" ("The H. Scriptures I", lines 1-2; Herbert 1974, 76).

10 Cf. the last stanza of "The Word": "Aeons dreamt. Apollo slept. / Ventures of syllables, inept, / unheard. / Chaos was lonely, longed for order, wept. / Light, shade, a shape, a sound – : Accept / the word."

first published English poem, as it was included in *The Raven Anthology* no. 82 in 1949), the incantation-like "Where shall we start?", Rose Ausländer characteristically says "we" rather than "I" (Ausländer 1995a, 205). The pronoun here indicates the survivor's attempt to stay alive with the "companions of the day". For even though Ausländer's English poetry may be considered early when compared to her later German work, this does not mean that she was a beginner when she first came to write in English.

When Rose Ausländer came to New York again in 1946 as a survivor of the Shoah, and began to write in English in 1948, she was no longer young (we remember she was 20 in 1921). She had returned, after her first emigration, to Czernowitz in 1926, went back to New York in 1928 (with the graphologist Helios Hecht, her great love), published articles and poems in German papers there, and again returned to Czernowitz and later Bucharest in 1931 because of her mother's failing health. In May 1934 she is back in New York (to keep her citizenship) but returns to Bucharest in the same year, where life becomes increasingly difficult for her. American friends realize the danger in which she is now as a Jew and once more succeed in getting her to New York in 1939 by sending her an invitation to give lectures and readings. Before she leaves, her first book of poems, *Der Regenbogen*, is published in Czernowitz. In September she is in New York and in apparent safety when the war begins but a few weeks later her mother again calls for help. Rose Ausländer returns to Czernowitz to nurse her and experiences first Soviet and then German occupation and the ghetto. The suffering defies description but Rose Ausländer and her mother escape deportation and survive. After the war, when the northern Bucovina becomes part of the USSR, she first leaves for Rumania and then, alone, for New York. Her mother dies when she is away, in 1947. For two years (1946-47) Rose Ausländer does not write any poetry, and from 1948 to 1956 all her poems are in English.

Helmut Braun in his biography of Rose Ausländer holds that to Rose Ausländer it was not impossible to write poems after Auschwitz but impossible to write in the language of the murderers, which was also the language of the home she had irrevocably lost (Braun 1999, 85). This is quite plausible but was never, as it seems, explicitly confirmed by Rose Ausländer herself (and indeed the opposite reaction might have been possible, too: to write in German in order to keep alive the past). All she says herself about the matter can be found in an unpublished paper entitled "The Poet in Two Worlds",[11] which was probably written in preparation for a radio interview which took place in 1959 in New York (WEVD): "Suddenly and unexpectedly, about 10 years ago, I had the irresistible urge to write an English poem, and did so." This statement, however unspecific, does not indicate a predominantly negative reason for choosing the English language. A little later, in the same text, she says,

> (If you ask me whether my German or English writing satisfies me more, I must honestly say that the German language – and consequently German poetry – is closer to my emotional world; but all I do is follow my poetic (instinct) impulse that tells me when to write English and when German. I let the language chose [sic] me rather than chosing the language.)

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11 I am grateful to Helmut Braun for providing me with a copy of Ausländer's typescript.

This should not be dismissed as mere mystification; I rather think it is to be taken at least as seriously as those explanations which are based on the experience of the burnt *Vaterland*. It indicates an idealistic and fundamentally communicative concept of existence in which she recognizes herself as being created by the word just as much as it is created by herself (she does not hesitate, for example, to use coinages of her own such as the verb *to overmore* in the Poem "overmore"; cf. Candida 2000, 101). *To be* means to listen and speak, and in post-war New York this meant being, existing in an English rather than German-speaking world. When she calls, in a later German poem, the poem a room[12] in which to breathe ("Raum II": "Noch ist Raum / für ein Gedicht // Noch ist das Gedicht / ein Raum // wo man atmen kann"; from *Noch ist Raum*, 1977; Ausländer 1992, 213) the concept of the *Sprachraum* (inadequately translated by 'speech area') comes to the fore. Just as the word is a country or 'motherland', a country or space exists 'for' the word. If the poet wants to *be* she has, in the words of Wallace Stevens, "to learn the speech of the place" ("Of Modern Poetry", 1940, Stevens 1972, 174). To Rose Ausländer, this means, as she says in her unpublished essay, not just to use English for her "every day affairs, in [her] business and social life" but rather, while remaining "deeply rooted in [her] original language," to have "also absorbed the new language, English, its ideomatic [sic] flavor, rhythms, imagery, word-magic to the extent of identifying [herself] with this language-world." In Rose Ausländer's case this meant to be re-created as a poet by listening – and speaking – to the American poets of her time (who also belong to the "companions of the day"), as can be seen and heard in the poem "Miracle" (Ausländer 1995a, 105):

> A miracle, a Kingdom for a
> miracle!
> I would even welcome
> a minor miracle:
> a Greek smile
> on a movie-face – a movie-face
> not a smile arranged in Hollywood style
> but inspiration manifest in a smile.
>
> One hour may change the world
> (it happened many times before)
> backward forward inward
> or toward
> Marianne's minute humor
> or Wallace's metaphysical magic.
>
> Sounds phantastic?
> But fairytales
> are our experiences
> the world we really live in.
>
> I am an ear
> and must record

12 Cf. Eleanor Cook's observation (re Wallace Stevens) on "the old pun on the Italian stanza" (Cook 1992, 39).

the dreams I hear:
A rainbow word
a genuine smile?
the wonder of star
Wallace Stevens
Marianne Moore
and so forth.

This poem clearly documents her "learning the speech of the place", as can be seen, for example, in the colloquially interjected "Sounds phantastic?" She has been listening closely to the conversational style of, for example, Robert Frost and Marianne Moore. The rhyme has gone – and I don't think the reason, or the immediate reason, is here the one Rose Ausländer gives in a much later (1971) German prose essay ("Alles kann Motiv sein"; Ausländer 1995b, 93), namely that the loss of rhyme is a result of the shock of war and the holocaust. In "Miracle", Rose Ausländer is so independent of any rhyming convention that she can play with it again (just as she makes the very fact of the rhyme part of the message in "While I am alive"). Examples are the identical rhymes in lines 2 and 4 ("miracle"), and 5 and 8 ("smile") – which in this case goes together with a rhyming couplet ("style" and "smile") –, later on the half-rhymes "world" and "inward", followed by "toward", and in the last section "ear" and "hear". The sequence "backward forward inward / or toward" stands out because of its combination of internal rhyme and eye rhyme (or half-rhyme); it presents American pronunciation (the almost obtrusively audible [r]) as heard by the ear which "must record". At the same time these words literally create a *Sprachraum*, a space of language in the form of enumerating compounds of *ward* and different spatial propositions. What reads like a language learner's exercise (exploring a semantic field), not entirely unlike Pip's famous "I look, you look, he looks ..." in Melville's *Moby Dick*[13] is the attempt to find room for the "miracle", the transformation of the world in which the poet finds herself and in which insincerity looms large (cf. the smile "arranged in the Hollywood style"). The word *ward* in itself, apart from being a near-homonym of *word*, of course points to space (as in *hospital ward*), to defence (*to ward off*) and to the orphan who is a *ward*. Rose Ausländer, orphaned and alone in New York, exposes herself to the modern American world, epitomized by the movies in which she longs to see reincarnated the wonders of the very oldest visual representation in Western art, the inspired smile of the ephebe in archaic Greek sculpture:[14] there might be actors more or less sleekly looking like Greek gods but "a Greek smile / on a movie-face" would actually be an "inspiration manifest in a smile".

13 To this could be added Wallace Stevens's "Rationalists, wearing square hats, / Think, in square rooms, / Looking at the floor, / Looking at the ceiling" in "Six Significant Landscapes" (Stevens 1972, 17); cf. Cook (1992, 39-40) on the conceptual analogy of space and language (lines of the poem).

14 Examples from New York collections are to be found in Buschor (1950), illustrations 15-21 and especially 64-65. For Rose Ausländer's associating the smile with ancient times (and the sacred groves of Greek mythology), see her poem "Ein Lächeln" (Ausländer 1993a, 158; written between 1942 and 1944).

Characteristically, however, this transformative wonder, "the wonder of star" is not, or not primarily, ascribed to the movies. Of course there is clearly the association of "movie star" in this passage, but this is not the only one. The reference itself is quite revealing in the light of her statement made in 1971 in which she says (in German) that the old vocabulary had to be exchanged: "Die Sterne – ich konnte sie auch aus meiner Nachkriegslyrik nicht entfernen – erschienen in anderer Konstellation" (Ausländer 1995b, 93). The 'new' stars to her are epitomized in "Marianne's minute humor / or Wallace's metaphysical magic". Rose Ausländer knew both poets personally and especially the exchange with Marianne Moore, which has recently begun to find critical appreciation (Candida 2000, Morris 2001), seems to have been a poetically fruitful one.

But a certain ironical distance makes itself felt with regard to the poets as well. This is, for example, noticeable in the somewhat excessive alliteration ("Marianne's minute humor / or Wallace's metaphysical magic").[15] The very use of the poet's first names implies a certain ironic distance, for the poet who grew up in what was then still part of the Austrian monarchy ("a Kingdom for a miracle") in her letters to Marianne Moore always used old-worldish, polite forms of address such as "Dearest, most gracious Miss Moore" (who called her "Dear Rose").[16] Moreover, the questions inserted in the poem ("Who knows?" "Sounds phantastic?" "A rainbow word / a genuine smile?") indicate a certain amount of doubt or ironic detachment concerning the American dreams she hears and records. The obsolete Greek spelling of the word "phantastic" similarly creates a tension with the modern colloquialism of the phrase itself and links up with the archaic "Greek smile" desired on a modern movie-face.[17]

This can also be seen at the very end of the poem when the names of the two poets, Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore, are, as it were, slightly deprived of their magic by the anticlimactic "and so forth". Rose Ausländer's mastery of the English language and easy familiarity with its contemporary American masters becomes visible here. For by means of "and so forth" she subtly adds another name to her new constellation, a poet who was, I should like to suggest, at least as influential for her own development in English as well as German as Moore and Stevens. "And so forth" is a quotation from one of E. E. Cummings's best known poems which begins "next to of course god america i / love you land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh / say ..." The allusion, or allusive quotation serves to introduce into her own poem the very spirit of

15 Morris (1995, 224) seems to regard assonance and alliteration as characteristic of "The Door" and "Overmore"; but Ausländer uses these devices throughout, sometimes (for example) suggesting irony by exaggerating them, sometimes making them contribute the musical effect of the poem. See above, the examples from "While I am alive". The subject deserves further exploration.

16 For Moore, see e.g. the postcard reproduced in Braun (1999, 91); for Ausländer, see the letters of October 4, 1956 ("Dearest, adored Miss Marianne Moore"), October 5, 1956 ("Most gracious and adored Miss Moore"), and February 16, 1963 ("Dearest, most gracious Miss Moore"). I am grateful to Helmut Braun for providing me with copies of Ausländer's and Moore's letters.

17 See OED "fantastic": "The form phantastic is no longer generally current, but has been casually used by a few writers of the 19th c., to suggest associations connected with the Gr. Etymology".

admiration coupled with critical distance towards God's own country, which is to be found in Cummings's poem (with its "heroic happy dead"; Cummings 1994, 267).

Rose Ausländer continued her poetic conversation with Cummings throughout her English period and even later when she had chosen the German *Sprachraum* again. There is "E. E. Cummings – The Bad Boy", a German poem from *Blinder Sommer* (Ausländer 1993c, 39) published in 1965, her first book of poems after *Regenbogen*. An English example is "Variation on a Theme by E. E. Cummings" (Ausländer 1995a, 192), in which, again showing musical mastery, she playfully, alliteratively admits "I shall never understand your land and liquid language",[18] while at the same time she realizes in and by means of Cummings's poetry "how sweet and free / an ear can open *roads* to voices in the *roots*" (my emphasis), which are of course also, or even primarily, the roots of words.[19] In another poem dedicated to Cummings, "There are People" (Ausländer 1995a, 182), she actually discovers a voice in the roots by deriving the participle "cummingsed" from the poet's name. What Rose Ausländer primarily discovers, or what her immersion in the American idiom as transformed into poetry by Cummings helped her discover, is *the word*, irrespective of the language to which it belongs (cf. the German "Glockenspiel" at the end). The word, during this time, becomes to her the epitome of language. An indication of this are the many one-word lines not to be found in her pre-war poetry. And in her 1971 statement her first answer to the question why she writes is, *Alice in Wonderland*-like, "Because words dictate to me: write us".[20]

Rose Ausländer's "There are People" strives towards the "YES" which is the beginning of Cummings' poem from which she takes her motto: "Yes is a pleasant country" (Cummings 1994, 578). This implies the idea, congenial to Rose Ausländer, of a word as a space or country, for in this poem the word is not simply used but reflected upon, defined in terms of space ("yes" as a country) and climate ("both is the very weather") and time or season ("love is a deeper season"). Rose Ausländer's "irresistible urge" towards the English language thus led her to discover, in her conversation with American poetry, her *Mutterland Wort*; it is, paradoxically, the specific sound and vocabulary of the foreign tongue that made her live in and with and by words, by language, and not just the German ones.[21] Rose Ausländer, as her "Miracle" poem makes clear, was quite confident about her very own hive built among the mansions of the foremost American poets of the 20th century.

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18 On the "liquid language" in this poem, see Morris (2000, 210-11).

19 On the function of etymology in modern poetry, see Ruthven (1969), Cook (1992). White (1999, 495) cites Marianne Moore's praise of a style "suggesting conversation and strengthened by etymology".

20 This is the first answer to the question why she writes ("Warum ich schreibe"): "Weil Worte mir diktieren: schreib uns" (Ausländer 1995b, 91); compare Dylan Thomas's "Poetic Manifesto", in which he says "I am at the mercy of words" (Thomas 1975, 229).

21 Morris (1998, 52) points out that Ausländer's "crossing of linguistic and poetic borders suggests a far more complex relationship to language and to 'home' than it does a pure, nostalgic 'Heimkehr in die Muttersprache'".

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