
Published in the German original in 2005, Krechel’s sustained and structured meditation on the trans-historical voices that speak of and from the experience of war has been described as nothing less than epic, though the poet herself exhibits some restraint, referencing her own work as a “long poem.” In her crisp and evocative translation, Strawser captures the cadences of each line with acuity and, to borrow her neologism, “clairaudience” (253), returning to the audible root of *hören* (to hear) in *Hellhörigkeit*. Krechel, a prolific author known mostly for her poetry, has also gained acclaim for the novel *Shanghai fern von wo* (*Shanghai, Far From Everywhere*, 2008), and received numerous prestigious literary prizes. Strawser entitles her brief introductory essay, “Letting the Complicit Speak: Ursula Krechel’s *Voices from the Bitter Core*” (i–ii). In this long poem, the first book to appear in English translation, the poet projects her voice into the psyches of the complicit; the translator renders those voices compelling in English.

In this volume, we find ourselves among the men who follow orders. In a note to the reader, Krechel herself identifies the “speakers”: “invaders, colonizers, marauding troops and their victims, collectively the rubbed-bloody reverse side of the consciously articulate world, which retreats in reticence” (v). The discipline of the long-poem form lends a sense of urgency to the voices, which speak in idioms across national, linguistic, and historical boundaries. Krechel incorporates some found material (3) into the poem, but her goal is explicit: “I am interested in writing, thinking about the
formidable continuum of the imperial, about the armament and disarmament [building up and tearing down] of a battery of words, about its amalgamation in economic processes” (v). Specifically historical and generically allegorical voices inhabit the twelve poetic pieces of the twelve-sectioned poem; they combine to indict the military masculinity we conventionally associate with the inaugural, Homeric moment from which epic poetry and bellicosity emerged. In language that alternates abruptly between the elegiac and the banal, the epic and the vernacular, Krechel inscribes her poem into bellicose histories, from the Peloponnesian War to WW II. The illuminating translation conveys the shifts in diction with precision and eloquence.

Krechel’s intervention into the unspeakable minds of the complicit situates her work in the genres of anti-war poetry and art in the German cultural tradition, with names like Käthe Kollwitz and Inge Müller are at the forefront. More particular to the long poem, Krechel names Anna Akhmatova, T. S. Eliot, and Hart Crane, as predecessors and poetic precursors who shaped the form, which “creates its own subject matter” (v). It would be difficult to specify a singular subject matter in Krechel’s demanding work. The section titles include: I Motivation / Interpretation of the Oracle, II Concentration / Advancing, III Fascination / Blockbuster Byron, IV Operation / Knocking, V Calculation / Avalanche Rescue Device, VI Russian Autopsy / Puddles, VII Emotion / Hiking up the Skirt, VIII Occupation / Competing Interference, IX Wild Speculation / the other side, X Coalition / so spooky these late days are, XI Self-stimulation / Philoctetes in twelve hobbling steps, and XII Simulation / Homecoming Conversion. Lord Byron and Philoctetes stand out from the majority of unattributed lyrical personas. Rather, Krechel creates composites of interior citations from her mostly unidentified voices and
judiciously rations references to time and place, leaving it to the reader to construct a plausible scenario for what is said. There is guilt in the omniscience of the poet and the reader. The real achievement of this work, and by extension, the translation, is the insistence on poetic language as both culpable and redemptive, both banal and transcendent, in the production of epic.

One example from the first section illustrates my point. In the voice of a foot soldier, Krechel writes:

Ich war ein Zeichen, nur ein Ornament des Aufgebrochenwerdens
Des Gehens, Gegangenwerdens und Gegängeltwerdens, ich war

Ein weisses Blatt, herausgewaschen aus dem Blätterwald, segelte
Wohin was wuβte ich was weiß der Wind, ich wartete auf mich

Nicht. (24)

Strawser’s translation of these two stanzas captures as much of the syntactical oddness and striking (also decidedly un-colloquial) use of past participles as substantives:

I was a sign, merely an ornament of being decamped
Of going, having gone and being led by the nose, I was

A blank page, washed out of the forest of
leaves, sailed
Where to what did I know what does the wind know, I waited

Not for myself. (25)

The voice or voices in this section open with the flat statement about who did not begin the Peloponnesian War, the burning of Troy, and the description of a shield. Krechel continues a genealogy of poetic critique leveled at the coincidence of war stories and histories with the dominant mode of Western literature, which advances an intimate relationship between violence and beauty we have come to view differently since the publication of Jonathan Shay’s *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1995) and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (2003). It has become increasingly problematic to speak of a “national literature,” but in the context of a discussion about language and war, it remains imperative to protest poetically or otherwise the mentality of war, occupation, and militarized obedience. In the stanza quoted above, Krechel inhabits the subjectivity of the soldier, deployed to follow orders “literally”—a refrain throughout section one—but also poetically mobilized to overcome the silence of average military masculinity, the inadvertently un-heroic, the predictability of the unthinking mind.

In her rendition of this persona, Krechel imbues the soldier with an uncanny self-awareness of his status as a gerund, a part of speech in which he becomes an agent for the verb of a higher military authority. Here Strawser’s translation reproduces the accessibility of the original, but also its tortured syntax, the etymology of which connects it to tactics, especially in the arrangement of words, but also
of armies. One product of translation can be the loss of meaning, and it is desirable yet frustrating to insist on the signifiers. The *Blatt* (leaf and/or page) that defines the soldier as a sign, an ornament, a white page, is also among the fallen leaves of the *Blätterwald* (forest of leaves). Krechel counts his voice among the forest of pages. Here the translation does its best at restoring the identity of writing and loss in the context of war.