

Valediction for Hans J. Vermeer

delivered by Andreas F. Kelletat
on the occasion of the urn interment
on 20 February 2010 at the Bergfriedhof cemetery, Heidelberg

Translated by Marina Dudenhöfer M.A.

Dear members of the family,

Dear friends and colleagues of Professor Hans Vermeer,

It was only five weeks ago, on 17 January 2010, that Michael Schreiber, the Dean of our School of Translation and Interpreting Studies, Linguistics and Cultural Studies (FTSK) in Germersheim, handed over an honorary doctorate from our university to Hans Vermeer for his dedication to the establishment of a discipline in Translation Studies in a small ceremony at his house. The first steps for this award were taken in early 2009 before Hans Vermeer's illness, and before he even knew he was ill. There was an official ceremony planned for autumn 2010 to coincide with Hans Vermeer's 80th birthday on 24 September 2010, but it did not take place. Instead of celebrating a joyful birthday and award ceremony amongst students, friends and colleagues, we are gathered in this cemetery today to inter the ashes of the dearly departed.

The family of my dear colleague Vermeer asked me to speak to you on this solemn occasion and it is my honour to remember with you today an extraordinary researcher, academic and teacher. Many of you gathered here do not need my help to remember him, as you were part of his life as a researcher and teacher, colleague and friend. Several of you knew him for much longer and were closer to him than I myself.

In the laudation I delivered five weeks ago, on the occasion of the honorary doctorate award ceremony, I gladly admitted that we would need a whole group of very learned people to even begin to do justice to Hans Vermeer's academic achievements, as his work covered so many different areas.

His first publication fifty-one years ago concerned Portuguese, which this talented polyglot probably mastered the best, **out of** and **into** which he interpreted, and out of which he translated a great deal, including literary texts, both alone and working together with Helga Ahrens and Margret Ammann.

The **second** main area in which Hans Vermeer carried out research and published work was German language and literature studies. His first publication in this area also dates back fifty years: an article in a monthly journal for German and Romance languages on the Seuse quotes in a recently discovered manuscript from the mystics. He wrote many more essays on medieval German academic literature in the 1960s. He also wrote articles on the way India was portrayed in the German academic literature of the 16th century and, later, several reviews on subjects such as the German spoken by Jewish people in Prague, dictionaries like the *Wahrig* published in 1966 (a milestone in modern German lexicography), Drosdowski's universal dictionary published by the Duden editorial department in Mannheim and the grammar books of Harald Weinrich and Ulrich Engel.

His **third** area of expertise encompassed linguistics and Indology. This would include his dissertation from 1962 in Heidelberg on the use of adjectival and verbal expressions in Indo-Germanic languages and whether these can be translated or not. We should also not forget his post-doctoral thesis from 1968 on the structure of central south-east Asian languages, where Vermeer discussed a possible *Sprachbund* (language crossroads). I have not read his work in this area, nor have I ever spoken with anyone who has read it or read any reviews about it. Did this academic spend five years in an ivory tower? Did his carefully researched and presented work on this subject disappear without causing a ripple? Were the only people to read and approve of Vermeer's *opus magnum* his thesis directors in Heidelberg? Was that really the case? Does everything we do end in this way?

But I do not think he lived in an ivory tower at all. In the fourteen years between obtaining his degree in interpreting for Portuguese and his post-doctoral degree, Hans Vermeer, in addition to his extensive research, took on teaching posts: first as a lecturer for Portuguese at the Institute for Translation and Interpreting in the University of Heidelberg from 1954 until 1962, then as lecturer and tutor for south-Asian languages (such as Hindi and Urdu) at the South Asia Institute in the University of Heidelberg from 1962 until 1971. In the 1960s, his

study trips took him further afield to India, Ceylon and Pakistan, but also closer to home to Portugal and Austria, where he analysed documents regarding Portuguese Creole in Asia and some of the oldest linguistic works by European authors on modern Indian languages.

Hans Vermeer remained true to his passion for history throughout his life. This was easily overlooked in the flurry surrounding this very modern translation theorist in the 1980s. No one has examined in depth what, for example, *skopos* theory owes to Vermeer the comparative linguist and cultural historian.

If you were to count all of Professor Vermeer's publications, you would reach the three hundred mark. And that would be without including his activities as editor for the TEXTconTEXT journal. Out of his three hundred or so publications, more than half fall under Hans Vermeer's **fourth** area of expertise, translation studies. It is here that he has had the most impact on developments in academic thought. Vermeer's foundational work on the development of a general theory of translation can be traced, in my opinion, back to his trial lecture when he applied to Germersheim in July 1970.

Others will consider that it all began with his essay from 1978 with the title "*Ein Rahmen für eine allgemeine Translationstheorie*" ("A Framework for a General Theory of Translation") published in the journal *Lebende Sprachen*. Or even in 1982, when he published his article "*Translation als 'Informationsangebot'*" ("Translation as an 'Offer of Information'"), again in *Lebende Sprachen*. Of course, we should not forget the book published in 1984 in collaboration with Katharina Reiss, *Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Translationstheorie (Translation Theory Fundamentals)*, which is probably his most quoted work, although the quotes tend to focus on one of the central concepts, that of *skopos*.

Hans Vermeer triggered heated discussions in the 1980s with his *skopos* theory, discussions which have not yet died down. It was "a spectacular entrance" Erich Prunc tells us in *Einführung in die Translationswissenschaft (An Introduction to Translation Studies)*. Vermeer did indeed stir up the translation-and-interpreting-phenomenon hornet's nest because it was much more than just an academic issue, much more than just terminology and a theoretical concept developed in an ivory tower. It was about the identity of a whole generation of academics: their understanding of their work and of entire disciplines. It was also about the

problems that young people should be aware of before attempting to make a living from translation or interpreting.

The effects of this could be felt even in practical educational concerns, for example, what should be considered a mistake or a particularly successful translation in an exam situation. In this not unimportant matter, we focused in those days mostly on the words and sentences of the source text, perhaps even going as far as looking at its style, and we entertained the notion that these words and sentences should be reproduced as “faithfully” as possible in the target text. All our research revolved around the issue of how we could remain most “faithful” in each translation and interpreting job.

Some of us even hoped that, one day, a magic machine would be developed, in which all possible words in all languages could be stored, as well as all the rules allowing us to put them together into complete and correct sentences. All it would take would be to press just one button and, hey presto, we would have the perfect translation.

Hans Vermeer brought an end to this recent but limited view of linguistic translation and interpreting. With a background in comparative linguistics and with a knowledge of various languages that was more extensive than most of us could ever dream of, he was able to recognise that his own discipline did not have the right tools and methods to be able to analyse how translation and interpreting work. To be able to properly analyse this, we, in his opinion, needed a new discipline amongst the others, a discipline which has now become known as translation studies. Vermeer was firmly convinced that this new discipline should draw its inspiration from other disciplines, such as philosophy, ethnology, literature studies, cultural studies in all its forms, physics and neurobiology. In a deliberately provocative fashion, Vermeer was prone to saying that only linguistics had nothing new to offer foundational research in translation studies. Only time will tell whether such provocative and combative statements were necessary or inevitable, whether they were clever or constructive; we ourselves are still too involved in the fray to be able to judge this.

Thus, the search for a general translation theory led to a process of emancipation within institutions and disciplines; a process which is still in full swing. It has affected not just German research and education centres for aspiring translators and interpreters, but also those

in many other countries. Hans Vermeer was an active participant in this restructuring process but he was not a promoter, manipulator, political animal, party leader or smooth lobbyist.

He simply was not interested in all that. In the summer of 1976, Professor Vermeer informed the Dean in just four lines that he would like to be released from attending departmental meetings and discussions, as he wished to focus completely on his research and teaching. In his time at Germersheim, the number of registered students rose from 700 to well over 2,000. Our department became a mass production line, with students who mostly were not really interested in learning to question, for example, what we mean by “understanding”.

Mass universities which churned out unreflecting units of production were not Hans Vermeer’s favourite place. In discussions towards the end of his life, at times, I had the impression that what he envisioned a university should be was closer to what Socrates and Plato set up in those halcyon days in Athens: a place which was like a continuous symposium, where no one person ruled the discussions, where free thought was encouraged, as well as lively debate, and a place where friendship flourished; a place which did not have to function along the lines of quantifiable utility and efficiency.

Moreover, Hans Vermeer was very interested in how curricula should be structured in translation studies; for example, in 1985, he worked with Justa Holz-Mänttari to publish an article in the journal of the Finnish association for translators *Kääntäjä*, “*Entwurf für einen Studiengang Translatork und einen Promotionsstudiengang Translatologie*” (“Outline for Courses in Translation Studies and for Doctoral Studies in Translatology”). There was a rumour in Finland at the time, which was greeted with astonishment, that degree certificates for Tampere graduates would no longer show students’ working languages, as translation skills were to be treated as completely separate from their language and philological skills. Of course, when it is a question of introducing a new paradigm for research, teaching and professional practice, some exaggeration and dispute is to be expected at the beginning. Today, in our German and Intercultural Studies Department here in Germersheim and elsewhere, it seems self-evident that we should offer some translation classes not linked to a particular language pair and which focus on gaining and developing other skills required by the translator.

Vermeer himself was very active for several years in helping to steer translation teaching into a new direction through trips and lectures. He held lectures in Copenhagen, Tampere, Joensuu, Porto, Lisbon, Coimbra, Tokyo, Porto Alegre, Caracas, Jakarta, Stockholm, Reykjavik, Ljubljana, Maribor and, on various occasions, in Istanbul, which along with Heidelberg and Portugal became a third home for him. In Istanbul, he discovered two young and very promising researchers and, in the mid-1990s, he brought them to Germany and encouraged and challenged them in their research until the end of his life. This alone would have been a great service to the development of translation studies in Germany.

Hans Vermeer's dedication to issues such as translation didactics, curriculum design and course content then took more of a back seat. Other academics, who became known as "functionalists" and who were also involved in laying down the theoretical foundations, continued Vermeer's work in this area. Sigrid Kupsch and Paul Kussmaul told me years ago about your now legendary set of lectures in Lecture Theatre D in Germersheim at which, in the Summer Semester of 1977, you unfolded what later became your *skopos* theory. Hans Höning was also said to have been present. After having vigorously shaken established ideas on curriculum design and course content, Vermeer turned his focus back to the development of a translation theory. He analysed Walter Benjamin and Saussure again in depth, and even theorists like Derrida and Spivak, probably at the urging of his Turkish students.

After giving up his professorship in Heidelberg in 1992 at the age of 62, and theoretically going into retirement, he spent years in libraries and archives thoroughly researching his seven-volume work on the history of translation, translation in the Middle Ages, in the Renaissance period and with the advent of humanism. At the same time, he also accepted guest professorships in places where discussion was welcome: in Graz, Prague, Mexico City, Innsbruck and Istanbul. He never lost sight of developments in "his" discipline and he discussed the work of his colleagues and students, including Gauti Kristmannsson's *Translation without an Original*.

Professor Vermeer taught right up until the end of his life. In the winter semester of 2008-2009, he worked on developing his last major set of lectures for his students and the next generation of researchers in Germersheim. The lectures were entitled *Translationen. Grenzen abschreiten* (Translations: Sounding Out the Borders). At the request of his students,

he wrote his lectures down in detail, including comments and a bibliography. He posted the resulting 650-page lecture notes on the [internet](#). In the following two semesters, he held seminars, discussed students' work with them, took part in PhD student meetings and set up the Heinz Göhring Colloquium again with friends from Heidelberg and Germersheim. The third of these colloquiums was held on the day Hans Vermeer died, on 4 February 2010.

Even when he knew that he did not have much longer left to live, he continued to teach regardless. In mid-November 2009, he travelled to a conference in Nablus in Palestine, where he went exploring with our friend Mutasem Alashhab, and bid farewell to Gideon Toury in Israel. He travelled once more to his beloved Istanbul and, in December 2009, he held his last lecture on *Vom Altern der Texte* (How Texts Age) at the Humboldt University in Berlin, where he was a regular and welcome guest lecturer after the reunification of Germany.

The last entry in his bibliography is an interview for *trapriori* vol. 1, 2009, pages 75-80. Under the heading of *trapriori*, there is a subheading which reads *Student Journal for Translation Studies*. The three editors of this journal (Julian Bisping, Alexandra Dudzik and Tomasz Rozmyslowicz) are now where Hans Vermeer was 55 years ago, at the end of their studies in translation and interpreting. These young people know that they have Vermeer to thank, amongst others, for the recent fundamental changes to the foundations of translation studies and to academic thought on translation and interpreting; changes which are still taking place. In his interview with the *trapriori* team, Hans Vermeer was asked how he became interested in the phenomenon of translation, what the origins of developing a theory of translation were, how translation studies established themselves as an independent discipline, what issues *skopos* theory aimed to resolve, what a theory should aim to do and which direction future research should take.

You can read his answers to the questions asked by his students and decide for yourself if you agree with him or not, for example, with regard to his belief that neurobiological and cultural approaches are also relevant. Beyond his actual words, what really comes across in this interview from 2009 is the humane and unique *habitus* of Hans Vermeer, the researcher and teacher.

Five weeks ago, a few of us had the honour of being guests in Hans Vermeer's home. The family was present, as were some friends and students, to celebrate with joy his honorary doctorate. My impression was that it was a good day for us all and for Hans Vermeer. It was a fitting end. We were able to show him our appreciation and he thanked us all in person.

Before going our separate ways that evening, we stood at the large window in the living room which looks out west onto the Rhine valley, right up to the forested Palatinate hills. The remains of snow lay on the terrace below the window, but the trees were bare so that you could see right down into the valley. The day was drawing to a close. The sky was overcast but the setting sun pierced the clouds with a streak of bright light. Hans Vermeer told me that he often, or almost always, saw this long, horizontal streak of light piercing the clouds, running from north to south. He would have liked to know what caused it. I did not know either, but we stood there and looked out at the streak of light for a while.

We did not discuss any other metaphysical matters. We stood briefly at the front door and Hans told me of his walks outside on the slope. How beautiful it was. He wanted to tell me the name of the place you get to when you follow the slope, through the woods, going south, but its name had simply escaped him.