CHAPTER 4

Bringing the Background into Focus: Reading the Linguistic and Bibliographic Codes in Yoko Tawada’s Das Bad

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The material book is not merely the vector utilized for transmitting a linguistically coded message to the literate, but rather is itself, as an object, a signifying process that needs to be recognized as part of the collaborative construction of textual meaning. The physical features of the book, para-textual elements, images and author photos, and other material and visual phenomena often overlooked as ancillary to the author’s written words are all complicit in the sum of textual meaning, and all comprise what Jerome McGann has labelled the ‘bibliographic code.’ The following article focuses on the bibliographic codings crucial to the critical reception and interpretation of Yoko Tawada’s Das Bad, which I approach in both its original and recent bi-lingual versions as an intermedial inter-text comprised of co-productive visual and linguistic photographic representations. In considering the relationship between the historical, cultural and social significance of the photographic medium and its very different deployment in the two editions of Das Bad, I aim to read how the seemingly peripheral, non-linguistic elements in this work are in fact critical to the text’s overall effect.

Introduction: Yoko Tawada and Contemporary Textual Studies

“Eine Frau sitzt vor dem Spiegel und vergleicht ihr Bild mit einem Porträtfoto. Sie steigt ins Bad, reist als Schuppenfrau durch traumartige und alltägliche Sequenzen.” This laconic, albeit telling, description of Yoko Tawada’s Das Bad can be found on the inside of the book jacket in the 2010 German-Japanese edition of the text.1 While it is extremely difficult to condense a sixty page

1 There are two versions of Tawada’s Das Bad now available. The first is Das Bad. Trans. by Peter Pörter. (3rd ed.) Tübingen: Konkursbuch Verlag Claudia Gehrke 1993, and the second is the bilingual German-Japanese edition Das Bad (U Rokko Mochi). Trans. by Peter Pörtner. Tübingen: Konkursbuch Verlag Claudia Gehrke 2010. Das Bad was originally written in Japanese but first published in German in 1989, and only since the 2010 edition was published is it now available in Japanese.
novella into a two sentence description, this particular promotional blurb touches on a few of the most critical features of the work’s content, namely: identification with the mirror and photograph; metaphors of movement, fluidity and bodily transformation; and the scales that cover the protagonist’s skin, which she at first sheds and later embraces as a badge of otherness. The problem with this description is that while it emphasizes the prominence of the photograph in the written text, the edition of Das Bad in which this quote appears in fact diminishes the cultural, historical and political significance of the photographic medium by omitting the photographic images from its pages that are present in the original edition. The following paper investigates how this revisional omission substantially affects the work’s meaning by arguing that its visual (eg. photographic images), material (eg. paper and design layout), non-linguistic (eg. pagination), components are vital to the text’s overall impact. However, by no means do I promote the original as the definitive edition, as the newer version of Das Bad generates fresh and fecund lines of investigation for this constantly evolving text, and should be viewed as an equally valid stage in its development. To proceed then, in this hybrid textual, material and literary studies analysis, I will first underscore Tawada’s use of the material medium as a poetic device by considering her artists’ book titled Ein Gedicht für ein Buch. After highlighting this text’s self-reflexivity and internal dialogue between linguistic and non-linguistic signifiers I will then transition to a comparison of the two widely diverging editions of Das Bad in order to underline it as an intermedial text and amalgam of various photographic interactions that braid together linguistic, material and visual systems of signification. These interactions have, as yet, received rather short shrift in secondary research – an oversight not uncommon to the textual background in literary studies. Bringing the background into focus makes it clear that Tawada’s texts demand not only more integrated interpretations that consider and respect their collaborative genesis, but also interpretations that do not unduly privilege the author’s contribution at the expense of the other signifying features and semantic messages present therein.

Although it may seem axiomatic to textual scholars, and especially those of medieval manuscripts, for contemporary literary studies it is by no means

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2 Because of the complex and polysemous nature of the term ‘text’, this article will clarify throughout which type of textual feature or understanding is being referenced, eg., linguistic, visual, material, or edition. When the term ‘text’ is used on its own, then I am referring to the whole of the parts.