



The Mask in Verse. Imaginary Poets and Their Autobiographical Poetry (Jan Wagner, *Die Eulenhasser in den Hallenhäusern*)

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Abstract

This article examines German poet Jan Wagner's *Die Eulenhasser in den Hallenhäusern* [*The Owl Haters in the Hall Houses*] (2012) and the effects of fictional authorship with respect to autobiographical poetry. Wagner's fiction of three poets—their lives and their poems—proves to be an artfully ambivalent construction: on the one hand, the link between persona and poetic voice seems to be undeniably given, while on the other hand, the autobiographical impact of the poems appears to be an effect of the reader's desire and his or her response to the work. Wagner's text exploits, confirms and, at the same time, challenges the desire to read poetry as autobiographical expression.

Keywords: Autobiographical Poetry, Heteronyms, Jan Wagner, Fernando Pessoa

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht den Band *Die Eulenhasser in den Hallenhäusern* (2012) des deutschen Lyrikers Jan Wagner im Hinblick auf den autobiographischen Charakter fiktionaler Autorschaft. Wagners Erfindung von drei Dichtern und ihrer – offenkundig mit ihrem Leben verwobenen – Lyrik erweist sich als kunstvoll ambivalente Konstruktion: Einerseits wird die Verbindung zwischen Persona und

poetischer Stimme ausgestellt, andererseits wird die Verbindung zwischen Dichtung und Leben als Leküreeffekt gekennzeichnet. Wagners Text bestätigt und hinterfragt zugleich das Bedürfnis, Lyrik mit Bezug auf das schreibende Subjekt zu lesen.

Schlüsselwörter: Autobiographische Lyrik, Heteronyme, Jan Wagner, Fernando Pessoa

Taking Jan Wagner's *Die Eulenhasser in den Hallenhäusern* [*The Owl Haters in the Hall Houses*] as an example, my objective is to explore the effects of fictional authorship with respect to autobiographical poetry. One might assume that the subject matter of my paper is completely off topic: an author inventing imaginary figures that write poems – this seems to be a deliberately anti-autobiographical setting. We do not meet the *self in verse* but the *other in verse*; the author disappears the very moment the fictional poet is at work. However, this is exactly the starting point of my considerations. To speak about the *other in verse* actually implies that the poems of imaginary authors are essentially autobiographical (on the level of fiction). But whereas the poetry of fictional characters reflects nothing but themselves, they are still drawing on the strategies of autobiographical writing. Fictional authorship is therefore a pivotal realization, as well as a test case, in any thorough discussion of autobiographical poetry. Using the example of Jan Wagner's *Die Eulenhasser in den Hallenhäusern*, this article demonstrates that imaginary poetry created by fictional characters is relevant in exploring the relation between life and literature. To this end I will pursue two main questions in my reading of Jan Wagner's *Eulenhasser*. Firstly: What do we find in imaginary poetry if we read it from an autobiographical point of view? And secondly: What can we learn about *the self in verse* when studying it as a triad of author, imaginary poet, and poem?

Die Eulenhasser in den Hallenhäusern was published in 2012. The book pretends to be an anthology edited by someone called Jan Wagner. According to the subtitle it presents 'Drei Verborgene', three unknown poets, buried in oblivion. In the preface, the alleged editor Jan Wagner states:

Drei Dichter möchte diese Anthologie vorstellen, Anton Brant, Theodor Vischhaupt und Philip Miller, deren Werke dem Herausgeber auf unterschiedlichste Weise begegneten, mal dank seines eigenen Forscherdrangs, mal infolge der Aufmerksamkeit von Freunden und Bekannten – eigener und solcher der Autoren selbst. (Wagner 2012, 13)

[This anthology would like to present three poets, Anton Brant, Theodor Vischhaupt, and Philip Miller, whose works the editor encountered in many different ways, sometimes thanks to his own inquiring mind, sometimes as a result of the attention of friends and acquaintances - his own and those of the authors themselves.]

As the editor asserts in his preliminary remarks, it is believed that the readers do not know any of these authors – which is certainly true – because although the editor insists on the contrary, the poems by Brant, Vischhaupt, and Miller have never been published before. There is a double irony in calling these three poets ‘Verborgene’: firstly, the very moment the poems of Brant, Vischhaupt, and Miller are published by Jan Wagner, the alleged editor of the volume, they are no longer obscure and forgotten but exposed to public awareness. Secondly, the three poets are not hidden; rather, they hide something, namely Jan Wagner. They are masks, concealing the author as creator of their personas and poems.

In addition to this, there is another mask involved. From the very beginning, it becomes clear that Jan Wagner the editor is not identical with Jan Wagner the author; here, the style and way of thinking differ too significantly. Wagner the editor is an enthusiast. Writing in an old-fashioned, somewhat affected style he advocates an idealist poetics of timeless and universal creativity. The more he evokes the Romantic cliché of the undiscovered genius, the more he implicitly praises his own contribution to this world of creativity (his attitude appears to the reader as false modesty). His commentaries on the poems of Brant, Vischhaupt, and Miller prove him to be obsessed with the biography of the writers. His main job is to trace the poetic ideas, images, and formulations back to the life and the experiences of the authors. Wagner the editor is definitely not Wagner the author.

Brant, Vischhaupt, Miller, and Wagner (the editor) are examples of what the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa called a ‘heteronym’. In the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, the literary concept of heteronym is defined as follows:

HETERONYM. This concept enters poetry primarily through the work of the Port. modernist Fernando Pessoa. Pessoa composed verse under his own name (*orthonym*) as well as heteronyms or discrete personalities, each with his own biography, poetic voice, and engagement with the traditional genres of the Western literary trad. The main heteronyms are Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, and Álvaro de Campos. Pessoa’s fictitious but independent poets emerge from the

depersonalization of mod. consciousness, self-estrangement, and the dismantling of romanticism's 'I.' In effect different lyric subjects, the heteronyms are autonomous of Pessoa's own poetic identity. As one among many poets, Pessoa himself may be yet another heteronym. The multifaceted, centerless poetic project reveals a crisis or emptiness of being, a negation of a coherent literary selfhood. Pessoa encapsulates the essence of heteronymy with his injunction 'Be plural like the universe'. (Blackmore⁴ 2012, 627)

All of this does not make us think of autobiography. A multitude of personalities, alternative identities, depersonalization, self-estrangement, deconstruction of the 'I' – this actually sounds like the diametric opposite of self-expressive poetry. But maybe it is misleading to link heteronymic authorship exclusively and inextricably to the modernist and postmodernist deconstruction of the self?

If we take a closer look at the *Eulenhasser*, we see that the book consists of three parts framed by a preface and acknowledgements. Each of the three parts is devoted to one poet and starts with an introduction to the life and works, supplemented with a bibliography that pretends to list all of the existing research literature concerning the respective poet. It begins with Anton Brant for whom the editor has compiled a dialectal glossary because Brant, who was born and spent his entire life in Schleswig-Holstein, prefers to write in his local idiom, or, to be more exact, to integrate dialectal expressions into his otherwise standard language poetry.

In fact, it is not difficult to hear a note of parody in the presentation of Anton Brant (as well as in that of the other hidden ones). Following hagiographic traditions, the short biography begins with the wondrous circumstances of his birth:

Der sechste Sohn einer holsteinischen Bauernfamilie erblickt das Licht der Welt dort, wo es fast genau auf Höhe des Meeresspiegels auf die nahrhafte Erde der Marsch trifft, nur wenige Zentimeter über Normalnull also – sofern nicht dichte Sturmwolken über das ebene Land jagen oder ein schier nicht enden wollender Nieselregen den Tag verdunkelt. Anwesend sind an diesem denkwürdigen Septembermorgen des Jahres 1932 neben der erschöpft in die bestickten Kissen zurücksinkenden Mutter Josephine, geborene Wurzmann, Anton Brants Vater Sebastian und der bereits über siebzig Jahre zählende Großvater Johann Nepomuk, die ihrerseits ein ganzes Leben auf diesem Hof hoch im Norden verbracht haben – so wie der einäugige Tierarzt aus der Umgebung und eine eigens aus der Stadt angereiste Hebamme, die sich mehr aufs Weben als auf Wehen versteht und in ihren freien Minuten Französisch lernt. Es ist kurz nach

neun, und alle Kühe, so erzählt man sich später, beginnen gleichzeitig und wie auf ein geheimes Signal hin zu brüllen, während der Hahn von den herb duftenden Zinnen seines Misthaufens fünfmal kräht und eines der Hühner im Stall ein golden schimmerndes Ei legt. (Wagner 2012, 17)

[The sixth son of a Holstein farming family sees the light of day where it meets the nutritious earth of the marsh almost exactly at sea level, only a few centimeters above sea level – unless thick storm clouds chase over the flat land or a never-ending drizzle darkens the day. Present on this memorable September morning in 1932 are, in addition to mother Josephine, née Wurzmann, who sinks exhausted into the embroidered cushions, Anton Brant's father Sebastian and grandfather Johann Nepomuk, who is already over seventy years old, who, for their part, have spent a whole life on this farm high in the north – like the one-eyed vet from the surrounding area and a midwife who has travelled from the city especially for this purpose, who knows more about weaving than about labour and who learns French in her free minutes. It is shortly after nine, and all the cows, they later tell us, start roaring simultaneously and as if at a secret signal, while the cock crows five times from the bitter-smelling merlons of its dunghill and one of the hens in the barn lays a golden, shimmering egg.]

Without any doubt, this midwife specialized in 'weaving' assists the birth of an author. And to be even more explicit about the fact that Anton Brant is part of a fictional world, the story of his life momentarily transforms into a fairy tale.

Despite the final fictionalizing point of this imaginary biography, it still emphasizes the close relationship between life and literature. Indeed, Brant remains true to his poetic subject and style, which are absolutely dominated by his life as a farmer.¹ Using free verse, he portrays various situations of his rural life following the seasonal cycle: field work, animal farming, the rare pleasures of a busy country life. Brant's version of nature writing is focused on the concrete details and essential routines of everyday life. There is no space for sentimentality or idealization; there is no transcendental dimension, only ironic leftovers like in Brant's poem 'Das Sauen'. Here, the religious perspective is delegated to newborn piglets:

Das Sauen

Drei Monate, drei Wochen und drei Tage,
Dann rollt die Wutz sich zur Seite

Wie ein besoffener Offizier,
Die Beine ausgestreckt und nur noch
Zusammengehalten vom Doppelreihler
Der Zitzen, eine seufzende Masse Fleisch.

[...]

Nach Stunden sind alle versammelt,
Knubbeln als Knaul ums Gesäuge – jedes
Vollkommen, jedes alert, und schuppt
Um eine Dutte, die nur ihm gehört,
Nuddelt, schnuffelt, schnullt: Fanatische
Süffler, rosige Pilger – sie glauben
An nichts als Milch, bevor man sie spänt,
Das Glockenspiel von Zitzen über sich.

Zwölf Lebende waren darunter,
Zwei Tote auch. Die Nachgeburt fraß die Sau.
(Wagner 2012, 46 f.)

[The Sowing

Three months, three weeks and three days,
Then the sow rolls to the side
Like a drunken officer,
Legs stretched out and only
Held together by the double-breasted
Teats, a sighing mass of meat.

[...]

After hours everyone is assembled,
Crowding as a clew around the teats – each
Absolute, each alert, and pushing
Around a teat that belongs only to it,
Sucking, sniffing, suckling: Fanatical
Guzzlers, rosy pilgrims – they believe

In nothing but milk before they are weaned,
The chimes of teats above them.

Twelve alive were among them,
Two dead, too. The sow ate the afterbirth.]

The annotations to this passage direct our attention to the circumstances of farming life and to Brant's family history:

Drei Monate, drei Wochen und drei Tage: Tatsächlich ist dies die unter Borstenviehhaltern bekannte Faustregel. | **Offizier:** Anna Brant zufolge hat es einen Offizier in der langen Geschichte der Familie Brant nie gegeben. Möglicherweise geht dieses Bild auf eine Begegnung zurück, die irgendwann in Jens Jensens Dorfschenke 'Zur goldenen Ähre' stattfand. | **warme Fabrik:** Sieht man von dem kleinen Molkereibetrieb in unmittelbarer Nähe der Brantschen Ländereien einmal ab, so gab es in der gesamten Region keine Fabrik, keinerlei nennenswerte Industrie. | **Knubbeln als Knaul ... schuppt ... Dutte ... Nudelt, schnuffelt, schnullt:** Dieser Passage mit ihren zahlreichen Alliterationen und Assonanzen widmet Professor Eimsbüttler einen langen und durchaus erhellenden Absatz (siehe Eimsbüttler, Prof. Dr. Hugo: 'Binnenreim und Bauernraum. Die Klangstruktur in den Gedichten Anton Brants'. In: *Komparatistik heute*. Göttingen 2007). | **Pilger:** Siehe hierzu auch Bäumler, Prof. Dr. Miriam: 'Marmor, kostbarer als Marmor. Kulturelle und agrikulturelle Anspielungen und Verweise bei Anton Brant'. In: *Schnitte. Zeitschrift für angewandte Kulturwissenschaft*. Berlin 2010. (Wagner 2012, 49)

[**Three months, three weeks and three days:** In fact, this is the rule of thumb known among bristle farmers. | **officer:** According to Anna Brant, there has never been an officer in the long history of the Brant family. Perhaps this picture goes back to an encounter that took place sometime in Jens Jensen's village tavern 'To the Golden Spike'. | **warm factory:** Apart from the small dairy business in the immediate vicinity of the Brant's estates, there was no factory, no industry worth mentioning in the entire region. | **Crowding as a clew ... pushing ... teat ... Sucking, sniffing, suckling:** Professor Eimsbüttler dedicates a long and thoroughly illuminating paragraph to this passage with its numerous alliterations and assonances (see Eimsbüttler, Prof. Dr. Hugo: 'Internal Rhyme and Farmer's Room. The Sound Structure in the Poems of Anton Brant'. In: *Comparative*

Literature Today. Göttingen 2007). | **Pilgrim**: See also Bäumlér, Prof. Dr. Miriam: 'Marble, More Precious than Marble. Cultural and Agricultural Allusions and References in Anton Brant's Poems'. In: *Cuts. Journal for Applied Cultural Studies*. Berlin 2010.]

Wagner (the editor) also highlights the formal qualities of Brant's poem: the alliterations and assonances that evoke a vivid impression of the blind activities of the piglets driven by the will to live. In addition to this, he refers to an article by Prof. Dr. Hugo Eimsbüttler: 'Binnenreim und Bauernraum. Die Klangstruktur in den Gedichten Anton Brants'. In: *Komparatistik heute*. Göttingen 2007 (cf. translation above). With the critical apparatus, the annotations and list of secondary literature on Anton Brant's life and works, the satirical dimension of the book reaches a climax:

Bäumlér, Prof. Dr. Miriam: 'Marmor, kostbarer als Marmor. Kulturelle und agrökulturelle Anspielungen und Verweise bei Anton Brant'. In: *Schnitte. Zeitschrift für angewandte Kulturwissenschaft*. Berlin 2010.

Brant, Anna: *Ich, Muse und Melkerin. Mein Leben zwischen Versen und Färsen*. Neuer Landwirtschaftlicher Verlag, Husum 2000.

Brant, Ferdinand: *Mein Vater Anton Brant. Erinnerungen*. Neuer Landwirtschaftlicher Verlag, Husum 2006.

Eimsbüttler, Prof. Dr. Hugo: 'Binnenreim und Bauernraum. Die Klangstruktur in den Gedichten Anton Brants'. In: *Komparatistik heute*. Göttingen 2007.

Schmitz, Peter: 'Von Dups und Dalle, Hippe und Hude – Regionalismen und landschaftliches Vokabular in den Gedichten Anton Brants'. In: *Lingua*. Tübingen 2008.

Schütte, Dr. Veronika: 'Brant: Naturbursche und Naturtalent'. In: *Neue Kritik*. Jena 2009.

(Wagner 2012, 22)

[Bäumlér, Prof. Dr. Miriam: 'Marble, More Precious than Marble. Cultural and Agricultural Allusions and References in Anton Brant's Poems'. In: *Cuts. Journal for Applied Cultural Studies*. Berlin 2010.

Brant, Anna: *I, Muse and Milker. My Life Between Iambs and Lambs*. New Agricultural Publishing House, Husum 2000.

Brant, Ferdinand: *My Father Anton Brant. Memories*. New Agricultural Publishing house, Husum 2006.

Eimsbüttler, Prof. Dr. Hugo: 'Internal Rhyme and Farmer's Room. The Sound Structure in the Poems of Anton Brant'. In: *Comparative Literature Today*. Göttingen 2007.

Schmitz, Peter: 'On Dups and Dalle, Hippe and Hude – Regionalisms and Landscape Vocabulary in the Poems of Anton Brant'. In: *Lingua*. Tübingen 2008.

Schütte, Dr. Veronika: 'Brant: Nature Boy and Natural Talent'. In: *New Critique*. Jena 2009.]

The list is a combination of (fictional) academic literature and biographic or autobiographic testimonies. In some of Brant's poems, his family appears on the scene, in his childhood memories, or when addressing his wife, Anna. Anna has also published an autobiographic essay that is quoted here: 'Brant, Anna: *Ich, Muse und Melkerin. Mein Leben zwischen Versen und Färsen*. Neuer Landwirtschaftlicher Verlag, Husum 2000.' (cf. translation above) The title shows that Anna, like her husband Anton, is a naturally gifted poet.

To summarize thus far: it is easy to see that the imaginary biography is tailor-made for the poet, as he only exists in his poetry. His persona and verbal embodiment correspond perfectly to the poetic voice; and the poetic style is, in turn, the expression of the imagined personality. I would generalize that the poetry of heteronyms is intimately linked with the personal. In fact, there seems to be no gap: the poetry necessarily dovetails with the life and the experiences of the imagined poet. What is the reason for assuming a new poet-persona? Why create an imaginary character if his supposed biography is irrelevant? There is no reason to invent a fictional poet if his poems do not match with the experiences, characteristic features, and life data ascribed to him. In this sense, poetry written by heteronymic poets is necessarily autobiographical poetry. I would maintain that the quintessence of autobiographical poetry is poetry written by imaginary figures.

Let us see if this assumption proves itself in the reading of the rest of the book. As for the other two poets, I will restrict myself to short commentaries. In general, the imaginary personalities become more impalpable throughout the book: Vischhaupt and Miller are more 'hidden' than Brant and less information about them is provided. Theodor Vischhaupt is an odd character, a freak living almost completely isolated in Berlin, where he works in a lost-and-found office. His passions are knitting and constructing anagrams. One day before his fiftieth birthday, Vischhaupt commits suicide. That is roughly what we are told about him (cf. Wagner 2012, 57 ff.). After having summarized the few biographical details, the editor adds a chapter on the technique and tradition of the anagram (cf. Wagner 2012, 62 ff.). The reader

learns that the verses of an anagram are formed from an initially given verse by rearranging its letters. Although the material of anagrams is not life but letters, Wagner the editor constantly tries to link the anagrammatic phrases to biographical details. This is absurd but, in a way, also correct: Vischhaupt's life is empty and corresponds to his poetry – devoid of life. In this sense, it completely works, and one could say that he has to pay for his poetic separation from life with his own life.

In addition to this, an astonishing analogy comes to light between the melancholy of the poet and the atmosphere of the anagrams. There is a pessimistic tone and a dark side to these poems giving the reader the impression that even in constructing anagrams the personality of Vischhaupt expresses itself.

The third figure, Philip Miller, is a peculiar case. The editor tells us that there is nothing known about him besides the poems he left at the Pasquino (cf. Wagner 2012, 91). The Pasquino is a statue in Rome that is famous for being the first of the talking statues to which anonymous criticisms concerning the church were attached. Philip Miller composes elegies; actually, he refers to the classic tradition in a formal sense, by writing in distichs. However, there is an unmistakably ironic use of the classic tradition, as the most striking feature of Miller's poems is the obvious and intended tension between the elegical form and the everyday subject of the poems. Mostly, they record fleeting impressions of Roman street life.²

What the case of Philip Miller means – where the name comes from, what the Pasquino is, who in literary history wrote 'Roman Elegies' – we learn from a short article by Roberto Zapperi that follows the editor's introduction: 'Anmerkungen zu Philip Miller' ['Notes on Philip Miller'] (Wagner 2012, 96 f.). Unlike Prof. Dr. Hugo Eimsbüttler and the other critics quoted by the editor, Roberto Zapperi really exists. He is a renowned historian who in 1999 published the book *Das Inkognito. Goethes ganz andere Existenz in Rom* [*The Incognito. Goethe's Quite Different Existence in Rome*]. In the *Eulenhasser* Zapperi teaches us that Filippo Miller was Goethe's Italian pseudonym and that this pseudonym now is adopted by an unknown German poet who writes Roman elegies. At this point we are confronted with an insoluble mixture of fact and fiction, and we realize that truth or sense or meaning is not a question of names or facts. The constellation is as follows: Wagner (the author) hides behind an imaginary figure that hides behind the pseudonym that Goethe used in Italy when he wanted to go unrecognised. Roberto Zapperi, who did research about Goethe's incognito, now comments on the imaginary poet as successor to Goethe. Therefore, we are dealing with a series of masks that differ in their relation to reality. At one point in this fictional-non-fictional nexus, we find Jan Wagner (the author) during his stay at the Villa Massimo in Rome trying to cope with the overwhelming tradition of

Germans in Rome. In these historical surroundings and highly charged literary atmosphere, you probably have to fictionalize yourself to become real and to feel real; and that is what Jan Wagner is doing—fictionalising himself, making himself imaginative.

Thus the ‘unholy’ trinity of author, imagined poet, and poem shows the entanglements of life and literature. In a way, this composition levels out the difference between author and invented character, between imaginary poetry and ‘real’ poetry. The imaginary poet does exactly the same as his creator: namely hide behind a fake name. So the circle is complete and, in a way, Wagner and Miller can be equated. It is comical enough that at this point, for the first time, the editor questions an autobiographic reading. He does so in his commentary on the beginning of the first elegy:

Erste Elegie

Heute in aller Frühe kamen die römischen Gärtner,
Stutzten vorm Haus die Kakteen, schnitten die Enden ab,
Denen zu helfen nicht war, und retteten so das Ganze.
Livia, dieses Bild ging mir die ganze Zeit
Nicht aus dem Sinn, und auch der heisere Klang der Sägen
Hing mir noch lange im Ohr. An diesem ersten Tag
Sah ich die Frau des Schlachters in rosa Häschenpantoffeln
Rauchend vor ihrem Geschäft, wo sie den Absatz wusch,
Wohnanlagen wie Flugschiffe, prachtvoll von lauter Laken;
Sah im Café den Wirt, wie er das heiße Geschirr
Aus der Maschine nahm, dampfende weiße Marmorbrocken,
All den verwaschenen Putz, Ocker, Zimt und Rot,
Palmen vor den Fassaden, ausgefranst als Pinsel,
Und den Maronenmann an seinem Märtyrerrost;
Schließlich bei Sankt Paul vor den Mauern die beiden Jungen
Linker Hand vom Portal: Während die Messe begann
Und man von drinnen das Singen und Beten der Gläubigen hörte,
Schossen sie ihren Ball gegen die Kirchenwand,
Unermüdlich und ohne dafür getadelt zu werden,
Gegens gemauerte Grau, gegen den alten Stein,
Wieder und wieder, und so, wie das Leder getreten wurde,
Sprang es zu ihnen zurück. ...

(Wagner 2012, 98)

[First Elegy

Today, very early in the morning, the Roman gardeners came,
 Trimmed the cactuses in front of the house, cut off the ends,
 That could not be saved, and thus saved the whole.
 Livia, this image for the whole time has gone
 Not out of my mind, and also the hoarse sound of the saws
 Hung in my ear still for a long time. On this first day
 I saw the butcher's wife in pink bunny slippers
 Smoking in front of her shop where she washed the heels,
 Residential complexes like flagships, splendid of all the sheets;
 Saw the bartender at the café, how he took the hot dishes
 Out of the machine, steaming white chunks of marble,
 All that washed-out plaster, ochre, cinnamon and red,
 Palm trees in front of the facades, more frayed than brushes,
 And the chestnut man on his martyr rust;
 Finally, at St. Paul's in front of the wall the two boys
 Left hand from the portal: While the mass began
 And one heard the singing and praying of the believers from inside,
 They shot their ball against the church wall,
 Tirelessly and without being admonished for it,
 Against the masoned grey, against the old stone,
 Again and again, and the way the leather was kicked,
 It sprang back to them. ...]

It is obvious that these verses are imbued with experiences of everyday-life in Rome, even though they present powerful audio-visual images that can take on symbolic meaning, like the literal clash of two rituals – prayer and football – at the wall of the church.³

Now, in his commentary on the beginning of the first elegy, the editor says:

Heute in aller Frühe: Ob es sich bei dem beschriebenen Tag tatsächlich um den ersten Tag handelt, den Philip Miller – oder jener Autor, der sich hinter dem Namen Philip Miller verbirgt – in Rom verbrachte, wie er selbst in dieser Elegie behauptet ('An diesem ersten Tag ...'), läßt sich verständlicherweise nicht sagen.

Viel grundsätzlicher läßt sich vielmehr die Frage stellen, inwiefern die zwölf uns erhaltenen Elegien Millers überhaupt seine eigenen Erfahrungen widerspiegeln – die Frage also, altmodisch gesprochen, wie groß der Anteil des Lebens und der Anteil der Kunst in den Elegien jeweils ist. In der Miller-Forschung, die sich, so kurz nach Entstehen der Gedichte, noch im Anfangsstadium befindet (so sehr, daß das Wort Forschung etwas zu hoch gegriffen erscheint), haben beide Positionen bereits vehemente Verfechter gefunden (vgl. hierzu die Aufsätze von Jennewein und Schuhmann). | (Wagner 2012, 99)

[**Early this morning:** Whether the day described is really the first day that Philip Miller – or the author who hides behind the name Philip Miller – spent in Rome, as he himself claims in this elegy ('On this first day ...'), cannot be said, understandably enough. Much more fundamentally, the question can be asked to what extent Miller's twelve surviving elegies reflect his own experiences – the question, then, of how much of his life and much of his art is represented in each of the elegies. In Miller research, which, so soon after the poems were written, is still in its infancy (so much so that the word research seems a little too lofty), both positions have already found vehement advocates (cf. the essays by Jennewein and Schuhmann). |]

The editor's annotation makes clear that the whole project intends to problematize the relation between life and literature. Following the composition, it becomes apparent that imaginary poetry written by independent imaginary figures with distinct lives, specific poetic idioms, literary influences and so on is about the autobiographical character of poetry. In addition, the use of Goethe's Italian pseudonym makes us think of his autobiographical works, among them the *Italienische Reise [Italian Journey]* and *Dichtung und Wahrheit [Poetry and Truth]*, published under the main title *Aus meinem Leben [From My Life]*. *Poetry and Truth*, in particular, played a pivotal role in the history of autobiography and autobiographical scholarship, serving as a model for the organic unity of the self and the totality of its *Bildungsgeschichte*. Wagner counteracts such readings by referring to Goethe's plural existences and by integrating them into his meta-autobiographical play.⁴

There are two contradictory tendencies concerning the autobiographic impact of poetry in the book: On the one hand, there is the seamless fit between the imaginary personalities and their poetic voice. Brant is the peasant who digests his rural life in his poems; Vischhaupt works in the lost and found office, and in his poetry he deals with lost and newfound words and verses; Miller's identity is that of a pseudonym,

namely Goethe's Italian *nom de plume*, (that is his identity) and consequently Miller follows Goethe in writing Roman Elegies.

On the other hand, there is the philological practice of the editor who obsesses over biographical details. Following the editor's annotations, the reader must realize that authenticity and autobiographical significance is not an inherent characteristic of poetry but a way of reading it.

So we are dealing with a fundamentally ambivalent construction here: on the one hand, the link between persona and poetic voice seems to be undeniably given, while on the other hand, it appears to be an effect of the reader's desire and his or her response to the work. Wagner's text exploits and, at the same time, challenges the desire to read poetry as confession, as autobiographically determined.

All this relates to the fictional setting of Wagner's text, to fictional autobiographic poetry. What about Jan Wagner himself? What about the autobiographical dimension of the imaginary portraits – are they a hidden self-portrait? Yes and no.

Initially, we are met by three 'Verborgene' or 'hidden' fictional writers carrying a reference to the triad of Pessoa's main heteronyms; additionally, Wagner's imaginary poets are furnished with individual stylistic features that remind us of Pessoa's heteronyms. Brant, for example, is comparable to Alberto Caeiro, Pessoa's first major heteronym, in the sense that they are both anti-intellectual and anti-metaphysical. They are concentrating on the visible world and the immediate surrounding. Like Caeiro, Brant attempts to describe natural objects, human beings, and animals as simply and vividly as possible. Theodor Vischhaupt, the composer of anagrams, corresponds to the modernist poet Álvaro de Campos. And Miller, the creator of elegies, bears a resemblance to Ricardo Reis, a classicist poet who prefers writing perfectly structured odes.

But this is not the whole picture. Besides many references to other poets (to Goethe, Heym, Zürn or Brodsky, for example) the heteronyms still share some biographical details with Jan Wagner, making him a constant reference for his imaginary figures. At the end of his lecture *Der Poet als Maskenball. Über imaginäre Dichter* [*The Poet as a Masquerade Ball. About Imaginary Poets*], Wagner indicates that there are some biographical and stylistic similarities to each of his heteronyms in the *Eulenhasser*:

Wie Brant stamme ich aus Norddeutschland, dessen Landschaft mir vertraut ist, wie er schätze ich eine sinnliche, welthaltige Lyrik, die auf die Kraft der Metapher vertraut; wie Vischhaupt bin ich seit langem Wahlberliner und kenne die Versuchung, im Korsett aus strengen Regeln möglichst schwerelos tanzen zu

wollen; wie Miller habe ich in Rom gelebt und bin der Verwendung, der Unterwanderung alter Formen wie der Elegie nicht abgeneigt. Alle drei sind mir zugleich so fremd, daß ich ihre Werke unter eigenem Namen keinesfalls hätte publizieren wollen. (Wagner 2014, 20)

[Like Brant, I come from Northern Germany, whose landscape is familiar to me; like him, I appreciate a sensual, worldly lyricism that trusts in the power of metaphor; like Vischhaupt, I have long been a Berliner-by-choice and know the temptation of wanting to dance as weightlessly as possible in a corset of strict rules; like Miller, I lived in Rome and am not averse to the use, the infiltration of old forms such as elegy. All three are so foreign to me that I would never have wanted to publish their works under my own name.]

There is still a referential relationship between the author and his personas; nevertheless, Wagner does not want to be identified as the author of these poems or be made responsible for them. In a way, it is impossible to write elegies today, but it is even more impossible to write German elegies in Rome. Still, the ironic disguise provides the freedom to transgress the boundaries of modernist and postmodernist aesthetics.

None of the imaginary figures can be equated with Jan Wagner, but altogether they may serve as an apt, but not exhaustive expression of the author's personality. He disguises himself to become visible by means of an ironic use of autobiographical poetry. Wagner's position is beyond the postmodern deconstruction of the self; it implies holding on to the personal character of poetry against a naive understanding of poetry as confession or straight self-expression. In his poem 'selbstporträt mit bienenschwarm' – 'self-portrait with a swarm of bees', translated by Iain Galbraith – the last line expresses the paradoxical status of the author in relation to his creation: 'und wirklich sichtbar erst mit dem verschwinden' – 'and only vanishing becomes distinct' in the English translation (Wagner 2015, 126 f.). This line could serve as a motto summing up the paradoxical poetics of Jan Wagner: the program of a transformed personal and expressive reading that is opposed to the simple-minded way of linking poetry to life; a concept that insists on the fact that visibility is only achieved by disappearance.

Wagner's poetics of autobiographical masquerade thus correspond to current conceptualizations of autofiction, as they have developed after decades of debates about the referentiality of autobiographical texts and the boundaries of literary self-presentation. 'Autofiction' is no longer focused on the fictional aspects of self-

writing, as Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf points out: ‘It is well within the development of literary theory in general that, after the era of poststructuralist criticism of essentialism and its productive awareness of the linguistic mediality of meaning, literary studies is again interested in the “real-life” motives and effects of literary production’ (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2019, 4). Autofictional writing ‘becomes an integral part of existence, a never-ending process of producing subjectivity through language’ (Gronemann 2019, 245). It is this interdependence of referential self, language, and fiction that Wagner exposes through his heteronymic poetics of the self.

In the *Eulenhasser* the dialectic of disappearance and visibility is not only indicated by the ironic naming of the poets as ‘Verborgene’ but also in the final remarks of the preface, where Wagner, the editor, refers to Walt Whitman:

Der Herausgeber seinerseits würde sich schon glücklich schätzen, wenn es ihm mit diesem Buch gelänge, Brant, Vischhaupt und Miller zumindest für die Dauer der Lektüre dem Vergessen, der ewigen Abwesenheit zu entreißen, durch die Präsentation ihrer Leben und ihrer Werke dafür zu sorgen, daß sie einen Augenblick lang vortreten – nur um dann, wie Walt Whitman einmal schrieb, sich ‘umzudrehen und zurück ins Dunkel zu eilen’. (Wagner 2012, 13)

[The editor, for his part, would consider himself lucky if, with this book, Brant, Vischhaupt, and Miller would succeed, at least for the duration of the reading, in wresting themselves from oblivion, from eternal absence, in ensuring, by presenting their lives and their works, that they come forward for a moment – only to then, as Walt Whitman once wrote, ‘turn around and hurry back into the dark’.]

The quotation links the project of the *Eulenhasser* to Walt Whitman and his conception of his role as a poet. Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855) is known for its radical subjectivity, which includes the opposite, namely the devotion to everyday reality and to cosmic nature. Especially in his ‘Song of Myself’ there is a strong emphasis on the ‘I’, yet Whitman does not talk about himself as an empirical person but creates a figure ‘Walt Whitman’ who is at the same time individual and collective, singular and universal, human and cosmic, Walt Whitman and everybody or everything else. ‘I am large, I contain multitudes.’ (Whitman 2007, 67) as Whitman puts it. ‘It is you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue of you’ (Whitman 2007, 64).

In citing Whitman, Wagner refers to his concept of the self – the concept of being

present and absent at the same time. It applies ironically to the imaginary poets – their existence is limited to the fictional space – and non-ironically to Wagner the author who becomes visible through the masks of the imaginary poets. As Jan Wagner remarked in a lecture he delivered in Oxford in February 2017:

It would be possible, of course, to ponder whether it is not the very disguise of the impersonal, its mask, which allows us to truly and genuinely reveal ourselves. A special sort of disguise, then, would be the allegedly autobiographical poem whose characters, however, are without exception fictional. (Wagner 2017, n. pag.)

A version of this talking or revealing disguise is the heteronymic work: to invent fictional characters and have them write poems can be a mask, which allows the author to truly and genuinely reveal himself.

Thus Wagner's composition is not about self-estrangement or the depersonalization of modern consciousness; it does not reveal the emptiness of being. Instead, it suggests the idea that the author has to disappear as a private individual to become visible in literature. This is also the reason why Wagner, unlike Pessoa, does not make a fundamental distinction between 'fake poetry' and 'real' or 'authentic poetry', between author and character, between heteronym, pseudonym, and real name.

Pessoa differentiates between his heteronyms and the simpler form of pseudonym. For him, in the case of a pseudonymic work, the author writes as himself, except for the name with which the work is signed, whereas 'a heteronymic work is by an author writing outside his own personality: it is the work of a complete individuality made up by him, just as the utterances of some character in a drama would be.'⁵ The dramatic character that Pessoa attributes to heteronymic authorship is for Jan Wagner more or less part of every kind of poetic production. As he puts it in his lecture *Der Poet als Maskenball [The Poet as a Masquerade Ball]*:

Nun steht es außer Frage, daß kein Gedicht ohne die Erfahrungen, die Wahrnehmungen und Gefühle seines Autors entstehen könnte, ohne sein Wissen über die Welt und seine Sicht auf die Dinge in ihr. Aber die privaten Empfindungen, das Glück und das Leiden des Autors, interessieren ja nicht; nur, ob er sie mittels aller ihm zur Verfügung stehenden sprachlichen Mittel, Metapher, Klang, Rhythmus, in ein Kunstwerk aus Worten zu überführen vermag, das seine individuellen Befindlichkeiten übersteigt und von allgemeinem ästhetischen Interesse ist, das der lyrischen Effektivität mehr Gewicht beimißt als

der emotionalen Aufrichtigkeit. So wird das Ich des Gedichts rasch ein sehr wandelbares, der Poet sein eigener Maskenball. Von hier ist es ein kleiner Schritt zum dramatischen Verständnis von Dichtung, wie Pessoa es beschrieben hat. Und gerade angesichts seiner Gedichte darf man fragen, ob nicht die unauthentischsten Gedichte dem Persönlichen am nächsten kommen können, ob nicht erst das Versteck, die Maskerade, es erlaubt, ans Innerste zu rühren. Eine Geschichte der Täuschungen, fürwahr; als eines der Wunder der Dichtung aber muß gelten, daß sie zwar mit Authentizität nichts zu schaffen hat, deshalb aber noch lange nicht unwahr ist. (Wagner 2014, 17 f.)

[Now there is no question that no poem could be written without the experiences, perceptions and feelings of its author, without his knowledge of the world and his view of the things in it. But the private sensations, the happiness and suffering of the author are of no interest; only whether he is able, by means of all the linguistic means at his disposal, metaphor, sound, rhythm, to transform them into a work of art made of words, which transcends his individual sensitivities and is of general aesthetic interest, which attaches more importance to lyrical effectiveness than to emotional sincerity. Thus the ego of the poem quickly becomes a very changeable one, the poet his own masquerade ball. From here it is a small step to the dramatic understanding of poetry as Pessoa described it. And it is precisely in view of his poems that one may ask whether the most inauthentic poems cannot come closest to the personal, whether it is not only the hiding place, the masquerade, that allows one to touch the innermost. A story of deception, indeed; but one of the miracles of poetry must be that, although it has nothing to do with authenticity, it is by no means untrue.]

Heteronymic poetry – as Jan Wagner realizes it – is something like second order autobiographical poetry foregrounding that selfhood is always (partly) imaginary. Wagner's *Eulenhasser* can be understood as a poetic demonstration that personal and impersonal theories of art are but two sides of the same coin: the opposition of expressive poetics and deconstruction of the self proves fallacious. The display of inauthentic truth and false authenticity pushes us to transcend the boundaries of romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism.

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Notes

¹ See Klimek 2017, esp. 187.

² See Osterkamp 2016, who describes the poems as timeless genre-painting.

³ More about the 'Erste Elegie' in Lampart 2017.

⁴ For traditional and new readings of Goethe's autobiography see Walter 2012, Brown 2019.

⁵ Fernando Pessoa (1928), as quoted by Saunders 2010, 303.