A few lines about the political in Lew Oborin’s poetry (in German translation)

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It seems to me that political lyric poetry, in German, politische Lyrik, is not at the forefront in contemporary German poetry. The term itself seems to recall earlier times, the time of the 1968 revolts, the cold war, to speak of the youngest instances of German political poetry. There was an effort of the German weekly, *Die Zeit* in 2011 to publish a poem about politics every week, but I do not know what has become of this initiative (see here: <https://www.zeit.de/serie/politik-und-lyrik?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>).

In his 2017 essay on “Ways of Constructing the Subject in the Political Poetry

of the 2010s,” Korchagin uses Rancière’s concept of the political in order to analyze Russian poetry of the 2010, with a focus on the concept of subjectivity. The political, in Korchagin’s summary of Rancière’s concept, is the “encounter” between policy and emancipatory politics. The “first process is that of governing, and it entails creating community consent, which relies on the distribution of shares and the hierarchy of places and functions.”[[1]](#footnote-2) Politics is the “process […] of equality. It consists of a set of practices guided by the supposition that everyone is equal and by the attempt to verify this supposition.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Korchagin analyzes poetry, which, in his view, is able to express such an encounter, which allows for a political, unified subject to emerge. I assume, he means that a political subject is one that is both able to function in the institutions of policy and who has a vision of political emancipation—a subject that has some notion of how to turn the idea of emancipatory politics into policy. Korchagin identifies numerous ways of achieving this subjectivity, what I remember most clearly is his claim that the political subject emerges from conflicting subject positions. I am reminded of the notion of dialectics in the 18th century, where dialogue was seen as crucial for the emergence of the bourgeois subject—an idea or ideal, that also underlies Habermas’ notion of the bourgeois public sphere, bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit. I am, however, also reminded of Eisenstein’s cinematic dialectic theory of montage, which assumes—to be sure, I am simplifying is ideas—that contrasting images can lead to a third, higher unity, which is also a simplified notion of Hegelian dialectic.

Without seeking to confirm or critique Rancière’s notion of the political and its application by Korchagin, I will seek to use Korchagin’s notion of political poetry to explore a few poems by Lew Oborin, and to thereby test this theory and its appliction to poetry. Among the poets we were assigned for our workshop with Korchagin, Oborin’s poems (from the Versschmuggel collection 2015) seemed to me the most overtly political (I also found politics in Alexej Parschtschikow’s [born 1954] works on lyrikline), in the sense of explicitly mentioning and critiquing policy, first and foremost.[[3]](#footnote-4) I will explore how this presentation of policy is related to emancipation/politics in three of Oborin’s poems.

**1. [Am Ende warden Erdspalten die Rettungs sein]**

It may be far-fetched, but in the context of current ecopoetry, the poem seems to talk about the end of nature as we know it. The savior are “steep walls, abrasions, breaks in rock” (steile Wände, Abrasionen, Brücke im Stein). For those walls will provide space for creeks (Bäche bleiben), which are compared to Snow White’s dwarfs (the comparison might also refer to the frogs and the butterflies mentioned right after). The following stanza mentions passing the “guards” (Wachen) at a “counter” or “gate at the entrance” (Schalter am Eingang). It mentions a laughter that ceases in sounds of nature that do not seem to be part of this world. What seems political to me about this poem is the mentioning of control, of guards, and a gate. (I have not seen such a constellation of power and nature in ecopoetry that I know—but my knowledge is limited.) I think we take the concept of control and guarding as political in the sense that a political system has to be in place for such guards and gates to emerge—whether the gates are part of the state apparatus or part of institutions made possible by the state, or safeguarded by it, be those administrative, or religious, or economic institutions. I see in the poem the idea that human concepts and practices of eminently political power cease with the end of nature, and that that is no laughing matter—that we cannot even laugh ourselves out of that apocalyptic scenario.

What is the subject position in this poem? It appears that the speaker has the ability to look beyond the end of human society, of himself. That does not seem to be a political position in the sense that Korchagin would embrace it? There is no more mention of politics or emancipation. Are notions of environmental apocalypse that characterize much of ecopoetry necessarily a- or post-political? And if so, is that a problem for the possibility of addressing the threat to nature inside of our political systems? (Do we not need politics badly to address environmental degradation?)

**2. [Lass stecken, du, ich will für dich / kein Staubkorn und kein Rädchen sein]**

This poem is clearly and openly critical of capitalism and since capitalism needs a state to safeguard its foundation, private property, freedom of monetary exchange, etc., the poem is critical of the political system(s) that safeguards capitalism as well. It appears to be a monologue addressed by one sibling to another (the final stanza suggests that the speaker and the addressee are siblings, by speaking of “our parents”). The addressee apparently has offered the speaker to become a partner in his lucrative enterprises (a position on a committee, a villa in exile). The speaker rejects those offers in metaphors that characterize them as negative. He does not want to be a cog in the wheel, calls his offer that of a dance on the edge of a knife. The speaker contrasts his humanity (could it be a she?) with the view of the brother who couches everything in monetary values. The speaker speaks purely from the position of (political?) emancipation, from someone who wants to be free from automatism, from the economy. The addressee is a part of that machinery and sees nothing else. Could this dialogue be an encounter between policy and politics? The speaker presents a sharp, irreconcilable contrast between the two positions. The commonality is only found in the books in the parents’ library, that both “stole” from the library when they were children. The act of stealing is a further commonality: it is a subversive act, directed against the institutional power of parents in a family. The books may allude to political emancipatory ideas. Perhaps the memory of stealing books together is a memory of the political that has disappeared in the present contrast between politics (speaker) and policy (addressee). If that is so, the speaker is perhaps not quite as self-assured as he seems? Is his position more political than it seems, and not merely a representation of politics/ideology of political emancipation?

3. Übertragungen, erste Annnäherung (Teil 4)

This poem seems to be part of a series, but the other “Annäherungen” approaches were not included in our samples. It is the most overtly political, addressing “Herr President” – though it not clear whether it is the same president. It seems more likely that presidents of numerous states are being addressed, from Brasil to Russia, to a future earth government/state. In this poem, it also seems that the speaker is the I of politics, speaking from the position of longing for human emancipation, while the president stands for various forms of oppression and alienation, from war to computers. That interpretation is complicated when the speaker takes on the position of two beautiful girls who jokingly ask the president to marry them, or the position of aliens who warn the president to abandon atomic weapons and psychological manipulation, or the position of a person who speaks about another speaker as having said only “shit” to the president. Do we have two sides in this poem, policy and the political? It seems to me that the subject positions are more varied and include positions beyond politics, like, arguably, the women who speak from the position of aesthetics, wanting or pretending to want children from the president who look like him. Then again, the speaker complains about not having sufficient freedom of speech, and who asks the president where he was when he was tortured, during the war, or under the president’s own regime. – At the end, the speaker asks the President a knowledge question: whether he knows if his (probably a he) dream of the world being empty could be made eternal. – Similar to the previous poem, this poem ends with a vision of an apocalypse, and end to the world of politics and policy, but the ending appears ironic, or sarcastic.

This poem seems closer to what Korchagin praised in poems that stage and encounter between policy and politics, but I am not sure. It may also be seen as imagining, in the end, only an escape from politics. However, the speaker seems to do so from a position that contains at least an awareness of political emancipation. As just mentioned, the imagination or request for a dream of an empty earth can be seen as deeply ironic and bitter as well. It may even imply that the President is seen as able of bringing about the end of the political.

I also to what extent a poem can be political in today’s Russia. It seems that complaining to an unnamed president about not having enough freedom of speech is possible.

Another question concerns the poetic dimension of Oborin’s poetry. They are, compared to much of contemporary poetry, easy to understand, syntactically and semantically. There are few metaphors, few if any surreal images. How does this approach relate to his political stance/political writing?

1. Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization” (1992), 58. See Korchagin, “The Mask Is Ripped Off along with the Skin” (2017), 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. I also found policy and politics in Alexej Parschtschikow’s [born 1954] works on Lyrikline. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)