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CULTURAL BORDER CROSSING: THE TRANSLATION OF GERMAN LITERATURE IN COLOMBIA

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The German essayist Ernesto Volkening arrived in Colombia in 1934 after fleeing Germany for fear of political persecution under the Nazis. He was then an unknown twenty-six-year-old law school graduate, penniless, with a lazy eye and a notorious preference for mice-grey blazers. This essay examines how Volkening, as a literary critic, humanist, and philosopher, transferred, translated, and inscribed his culture of origin into Colombia's literary landscape, and it evaluates also the ensuing hybridization of the subjects of his writing. More than making German literature "Colombian" (as has been claimed), I argue, Volkening was engaged in conceptualizing a positively framed German cultural identity in the decades after the Second World War and the Shoah.¹ This was a task intrinsically linked to his experience in exile. Living as an exiled writer in his new, adoptive home in Bogotá necessitated daily acts of cultural and linguistic self-translation and promoted a hyper-attentive attitude towards his cultural belongings. Volkening's work reflects these conditions in form of a continuous striving for what he considered the adequate representation of his culture of origin, of characteristic figures of thought, and of cultural references in a new interpretative framework and notably in a new language, in Spanish. Over the course of four decades, Volkening's essays display hybridization and acculturation processes, and suggest an incremental change in the manner in which he portrayed German literature to his audience.² Choices regarding the mode of representation, in- and exclusions of historical perspectives, the introduction of German phrases into texts written in Spanish all added new layers of meaning and bespeak the malleable and hybrid nature

of their subject. A prolific writer and astute thinker Volkening gained lasting influence as a cultural spokesperson and shaped the image of German literature held by scholars, writers, intellectuals, and other groups of Colombia's educated middle-class. His work showcases as no other the dissemination and representation of German literature in Colombia during the twentieth century.³

Let me point out key steps in Volkening's personal formation and professional career to derive from there an understanding of the scope of his work and of the nature of the image of German culture that Volkening propagated.

Born in Antwerp in 1908 as the son of German parents, Volkening spent his childhood in a vibrant cosmopolitan and multi-lingual place.⁴ Leaving Antwerp during the turmoil of the First World War, he lived from 1916 on in different German cities including Worms, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Berlin and Erlangen, which brought him into close contact with the German national narrative and shaped his view of German history and identity decisively. Volkening witnessed in these cities in the late 1920s and early 1930s rampaging anti-Semitism and street violence, Hitler's accession to power, and in 1933 public book-burnings that palpably marked the finality of the political sea change from the democracy of the Weimar Republic to a totalitarian terror regime under the Nazis. A self-identified Marxist and a prospective lawyer, he found himself soon "with one foot on the threshold of the concentration camp and the other beyond the border," as Volkening put it in hindsight.⁵ Following a penchant for South America that his father had instilled in him since his childhood, he decided in 1934 to immigrate to Colombia. There he kept his head over water with meager incomes as a private secretary, luckless business man, translator, and as editor of different magazines. Despite economic difficulties, Volkening embraced his new life and put great effort into perfecting his Spanish. Seemingly out of a desire to alleviate the disruptive impact of exile, which can be regarded an "existential caesura,"⁶ and to emphasize the continuities between his past life in Europe and his existence in Bogotá, he began to write. Since the year of his emigration, 1934, Volkening dealt in aphorisms, sketches, and essays with the literature and culture of his place of origin, and engaged in a narrative discourse about *Heimat* (home), national belonging,⁷ and cultural identity.⁸

Making inroads into the circles of Bogotá's writers and intellectuals, Volkening published in the cultural magazine *Vida* in 1947 his first Spanish-language essay on invitation of his friend Álvaro Mutis.⁹ From then on, Volkening continued publishing in local literary and cultural magazines,¹⁰ and came to host in the 1950s and '60s a weekly radio show on film at the station Radiodifusora Nacional de Colombia.¹¹

Most decisive for his unique role and widespread influence as a cultural mediator was his collaboration with the magazine *Eco: Revista de la Cultura de Occidente*, which he started in 1962.¹² Volkening published more than hundred essays and sixty-one translations of German prose and poetry in *Eco* and was the magazine's most prolific contributor throughout the twenty-four years of its existence. Another immigrant, the German art and book dealer Karl Buchholz had founded *Eco* in Bogotá in 1960.¹³ The magazine intended, in the words of the long-term editor Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda,¹⁴ "to introduce these German language writers and thinkers who could expect to be met with interest in the Spanish-speaking world and whose texts were then in [Spanish] not at all, or only under difficulties, available."¹⁵ Since a considerable part of each issue of *Eco* consisted actually of "echoes" in the form of translations of critical essays and short literary works written originally in German (i.e. of texts that editors considered, not un-problematically so, most constitutive of Western culture),¹⁶ Volkening's many original contributions are particularly significant.

Eco was distributed all over Colombia as well as in most Spanish-speaking countries of South America,¹⁷ and Volkening reached a larger audience than ever before in his life. He published in *Eco* essays on canonized figures such as Hölderlin, and Goethe,¹⁸ but also on writers who were nearly unknown outside of Germany such as Karoline von Günderrode, Robert Walser, and Marie Luise Kaschnitz.¹⁹ Volkening discussed historical events, art, philosophy, and psychoanalysis as essays on Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, and Ernst Bloch, exemplify; he further demonstrated an ongoing interest in the work of other exiles, however, notably not in the work of writers who had escaped, like he did, from the Nazis.^{20 21} In the early 1970s,²² Volkening was appointed the position of editor of *Eco*, which gave him extra latitude to shape the magazine as a whole. He began to regularly accompany his essays featuring the work of a German author with translations of an excerpt of her or his writings. These samples were often his audience's only firsthand encounter with literature that was otherwise not available in translation.

Colombian audiences embraced European literature. German literature in particular had been enjoying steady interest in educated circles from about 1890 onwards.²³ And yet, when compared with the situation of German exiles and literary critics in Buenos Aires, Rio, México City or New York, Volkening worked in Bogotá in relative isolation.²⁴ He nevertheless stayed astonishingly well-informed and reacted with acute discernment to developments in the literary scene in Germany. Volkening inscribed through his work new linguistic and cultural references into the receiving literary discourse by using distinct

German expressions and figures of thought as analytical tools (an example would be using the German verb “verstehen” [to understand] to decode a text by Kafka, or to incorporate untranslated quotes by Goethe, the German “Dichturfürst”—the Prince among all Poets—into his writing).²⁵ Volkening transferred the subjects of his writing not only across linguistic, cultural, and geographic distances, but also often across considerable temporal divides. Making the exchange relevant to his audience, finding points of reference to the present and the local was imperative. Resonating with transnational trends, Volkening wrote early about authors who became cult figures of German feminism such as Ingeborg Bachmann and the rediscovered Karoline von Günderode. He also wrote about authors, for instance, after they came into the limelight for receiving a major award, or for a jubilee. However, Volkening kept a conspicuous distance from popular writers who were actively engaged in the politics of the day and in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the coming to terms with the Shoah and the Third Reich. He completely forewent, among others, Günter Grass, Peter Weiss, or Rolf Hochhuth who dealt explicitly with those most decisive events for contemporary German history, politics, and national identity,²⁶ and he did not discuss literature written in NS-exile, such as for instance influential works by Anna Seghers and Bertolt Brecht. The questions these authors pursued in their writing were not only essential to an understanding of the public discourse of these years in Germany, but their focus on social dynamics, ethics, justice, and human rights might also have resonated eerily in a society beset with civil war and brutal violence, and thus lend themselves to cutting edge critical inquiries.

Yet, Volkening did not derive the converging points between the culture of origin and the target culture from literature’s capacity to comment on specific historical events, nor from literature’s role as a means for social and political activism. Instead, he focused on literature’s capacity to serve as a carrier of knowledge about life and conviviality,²⁷ on literature as an experimental playground and means of learning about different life designs, value systems, and ways of thinking.²⁸ Many writers he featured belonged to the Romantic era, or more generally to the time before the First World War. While far from portraying them as harmonious, idealized figures, he located in them echoes of an ideal world that had become painfully inaccessible after the catastrophes of the twentieth century. Volkening used these writers to create an image of German culture in which ethics and aesthetics converged and could be used to get past a historical present that, saturated by violence and atrocities, seemingly denied any possibilities of positive identification.

Notably, Volkening created for his Colombian audience a double of the original subjects, which—within a new framework—acquired additional

meaning and served to paint a redemptive picture of a German national and cultural identity. Reminiscent of Freud's observations in "The Uncanny," Volkening's doubling acts were triggered by the traumatic experience of personal exile, and embedded in the catastrophic historical events of the Second World War and the Shoah. Further, they took place in a highly volatile period, amid and in the aftermath of *La Violencia* in Colombia.²⁹ Volkening engaged German literature in a narrative discourse that was both transformative and inherently extraterritorial. His extraterritorial writing as well as his existence as a person in exile were intricately linked to a space to which Volkening referred as an "intermediary realm" between Europe and South America; a space that "belonged to both worlds without being identical with either one."³⁰ According to Volkening, that space emerged out of the tension of him having left Europe without finding prior closure and of living in exile "without putting down roots" (as he said).³¹ It turned him into a permanent cultural *Grenzgänger* (a border crosser) who enjoyed the double perspective of exile, as Michael Lützeler called it; a perspective that enabled Volkening to engage with his own culture simultaneously as an in- and outsider.³² Volkening believed this condition to be the very cause for his lifelong "role as a mediator [and for his] literary activity."³³ Notably, he likens this ideational space in his diary to a "sixth continent," but adds a telling caveat:

[T]his immaterial thing, [this] little thing with dreamlike threads and spider webs could call itself the "sixth continent," if it would not have so [many characteristics] of an archipelago, up to the amphibian condition in which to equal parts both hemispheres participate – and the sea, friends, the sea!³⁴

The emphasis on the amphibian state highlights the transformative power of the influence of both European and South American cultures on Volkening's intellectual work, and the resulting dynamization and instability of knowledge. The firm ground for which Western thought from Aristotle over Descartes to Kant strove became uncertain with Nietzsche, whose frequently employed sea metaphors reflect the subversive power of his philosophy. Volkening, an avid reader of Friedrich Nietzsche, evokes these references and underlines their far-reaching import in his concluding proclamation. The instability of knowledge is the basic condition of living in exile.³⁵ It arises from the encounter of two cultures, from the opening up of a second perspective, and it generates skepticism towards the meaning of one's own actions. Above passage can be read as a manifestation of an underlying awareness that Volkening's writing about culture—like the delineation of the contours of an island—amounts

to nothing but a snapshot of its subject, defined by a certain angle (time and place), a lens of investigation (in Volkening's case his humanistic world view), and a specific motivation. There is an awareness of the manipulative power of cultural representations, which inevitably become artificially constructed stills.³⁶

Volkening's "sixth continent" provides the space for inter-cultural action to negotiate meaning and identity, which become only visible in the moment of enunciation. His "sixth continent" is the hybrid and hybridizing space where Volkening created the representations of German literature that conveyed to his Colombian readership a fairly homogeneous image of German literary culture (notably, under exclusion or with only minimal references to the most controversial and soaring themes of the time). Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda praised Volkening for having made writers such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal or Kleist virtually Colombian; thanks to Volkening's translations, Cobo Borda claims, those writers "now seem as if they were ours."³⁷ And Jorge Rufinelli writes in 1978 about two volumes of Volkening's collected essays,³⁸ that they allowed to "enjoy a universe that otherwise would have remained inaccessible [to most Colombian readers]."³⁹ Volkening accomplished this by focusing on certain above mentioned, qualities of literature,⁴⁰ and by writing against what he considered the capital sin of any act of cultural representation: The reduction of the subject to a phenomenon that could be deployed for nationalistic ends. For instance, he celebrated the poet Friedrich Hölderlin as one of the pillars of German cultural identity (even designing a special edition of *Eco* dedicated to Hölderlin in 1970), yet he writes that Hölderlin would have been "what Nietzsche would call a 'European incident' – albeit "without ceasing to be German" – and he goes on to decry the attempts to turn Hölderlin into a "national, not to say provincial phenomenon, of the dimensions of an arch-German poet from the garret"⁴¹ – something of which he explicitly accuses the National Socialist cultural politics and Martin Heidegger's reception of Hölderlin. Volkening disengages German writers such as Hölderlin from their national typification, and puts a resourceful twist on the concept of national belonging by using these writers—surprisingly—for a portrayal of what he understood as a genuine German cultural identity. In their hybridized form—as European figures, moreover as transnational figures transcending the confines of the Old World—Volkening uses them to depict German literary culture as cosmopolitan and inclusive; they gain their value from a hybridity that invites further intellectual engagement and contemplation of life concepts, and models of public and private interactions. In a subversive manner, Volkening redeems German culture from the harrowing shadows of the Second World War and the Shoah by returning to humanistic values and the principles of the Enlightenment.⁴²

His essays probe a new formation of German culture after 1945 based on the convergence of ethics and aesthetics; critically engaging with literature was for Volkening a form of living and thinking ethically. Volkening ekes out a positive notion of German culture, which after its recent history of willing complicity for *völkische* and National-Socialist ends could otherwise have been considered inexpiable. Volkening's work is not a perfect mirror of the German literary landscape at the time, of the discourses that were at the center of heated public and scholarly debate, but rather, his work contests and expands the terms and territories of what "German" as a cultural denominator might be. We certainly can reproach him for avoiding the intellectual and political confrontations his time asked for and to aid and abet instead a rather conservative notion of culture. Yet, in conclusion: Volkening's relatively self-reflexive re-articulation of his culture of origin also destabilized the notion of an essentially German national culture, and presented an indirect response to those apparently neglected questions by turning to the autarchic realm of art. Moreover, Volkening's writing draws attention to the artificiality of cultural representations and bespeaks thereby not only its translator's desires such as the need for reconstructing a home in exile, or the holding on to identity-constituting values and principles, but the intrinsic malleability and hybridity of cultures. Volkening and *Eco* as representatives of German post-war culture both display thereby a most peculiar mix of progressiveness and a highly problematic attitude with regard to their political abstinence and cultural conservatism. A conservatism that strove to forge a continuation of nineteenth century German literary culture and humanistic values to portray a "better" Germany (as was not uncommon in exile communities) and to provide through literary culture a moral compass for the present and future.

NOTES

1 This may be seen not only in relation to the efforts of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) in Germany, but also with early attempts, after 1945, to radically break with the past as the concept of literature of the "Hour Zero" of German culture suggests (Hans Werner Richter; Alfred Andersch; Group 47).

2 I am using "German" in this paper to refer to literature written in the German language, not to denote national belonging.

3 Regarding Ernesto Volkening's unique role as a cultural mediator between Germany and Colombia, see Nicolás Jorge Dornheim, "Die Rezeption der deutschen Literatur in Lateinamerika," in *Deutsche in Lateinamerika – Lateinamerika in Deutschland*, ed. Karl Kohut, Dietrich Briesemeister, Gustav Siebenmann (Frankfurt a. M.: Vervuert, 1996), 139-156, here: 142; and Oscar Torres Duque, "Encuentros y tradiciones de las literaturas alemana y

colombiana," in *Kolumbien: Presencias alemanas en Colombia*, ed. Giorgio Antei (Bogotá: Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia and Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango, 1998), 101-119.

4 A nostalgic longing for Antwerp, which Volkening had to leave during the turmoil of World War I, and moreover for the era he associated with the city, the late Belle Époque, percolates much of Volkening's later writing.

5 Ernesto Volkening, *Los paseos de Lodovico* (Monterrey, México: Librería Cosmos, 1974), p. ix.

6 Erich Kleinschmidt, "'Sprache, die meine Wohnung war.' Exil und Sprachidee bei Peter Weiss," in *Exilforschung. Ein internationales Jahrbuch 3. Gedanken an Deutschland im Exil und andere Themen*, ed. Thomas Koebner, Wulf Köpke and Joachim Radkau (Munich: Edition text + kritik, 1985), 215-224, here: 222.

7 Johann Gottfried Herder has introduced the term "die Nation" in German; he conceptualized a nation as being engendered by common language and cultural traditions, not by citizenship.

8 Volkening's early writings were mostly in German and all but a couple of them remained unpublished. German magazines of the time (which often have been rather short-lived projects as Patrick von zur Mühlen has shown) are rarely available in the Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia or, e.g., in the Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango in Bogotá, which impedes a systematic tracing of Volkening's early work. Regarding the difficulties in establishing German magazines during the 1930s and 1940s in Colombia, and today's challenges in finding still existent records (due to the civil war and adverse conditions in various archives) see Patrick von zur Mühlen, "Exilpolitik in Kolumbien," in his *Fluchtziel Lateinamerika* (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1988): 272-275.

9 Volkening's first publication was a portrayal of Georg Büchner, an eminent German literary figure from the early nineteenth century (a choice in line with his strong predilection for writers from this period).

10 Volkening wrote for the cultural magazines *Crítica*, *Ahora*, *Revista de las Indias*, and *Testimonio*, which were all published in Bogotá. Throughout his career, he never published in strictly academic journals, although many academics would publish in non-academic outlets, so that we find, e.g., Volkening's work in *Eco* next to articles by Marta Traba.

11 Volkening worked at the radio station from 1954 to 1965 broadcasting weekly a 15-minute show called "Crítica del cine" (Criticism of cinema), which was renamed in 1957 to "El cine y sus problemas" (Cinema and its problems). Appointments at the Radiodifusora Nacional de Colombia turned frequently into steppingstones for young Colombian intellectuals towards a career as cultural spokespersons or well-known literary figures.

12 *Eco*'s editorial office and Karl Buchholz's bookstore, the *Librería Buchholz*, became a hub for the exchange of ideas and led to productive encounters among writers, artists, and intellectuals. It was there that Volkening first met Gabriel García Márquez, and forged lasting friendships with the writers Juan Gustavo

Cobo Borda, Nicolás Suescún, and the philosopher Nicolás Gómez Dávila.

13 Karl Buchholz (1901-1992) was a colorful character, highly esteemed, yet a controversial figure: He collaborated with the Nazi regime in Germany to some extent, was involved in selling so-called “degenerate art” for the regime’s financial gain to foreign collectors, and his business prospered during the Third Reich, while he also kept forbidden books in his German bookstores, hid many paintings and sculptors designated as degenerate art in the backroom of his store, and supported, e.g., Max Beckmann during his time in exile. Buchholz experienced the end of World War II in Franco’s Spain, and for not further disclosed reasons, was supposedly unable to return to Germany for a prolonged period afterwards. He reunited with his family several years later in Spain and decided in the early 1950s to establish a new enterprise in Colombia. See Godula Buchholz, *Karl Buchholz. Buch- und Kunsthändler im 20. Jahrhundert* (Köln: DuMont, 2005).

14 Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda was *Eco*’s main editor from 1973 until 1984 when the magazine was discontinued.

15 “Die Zeitschrift [...] sah es als eine ihrer Aufgaben, ‘jene deutschsprachigen Schriftsteller und Denker bekannt zu machen, die in der Spanisch sprechenden Welt auf Interesse stossen konnten und deren Texte zur damaligen Zeit in unserer Sprache [Spanisch] nur schwer oder gar nicht zu haben waren.’” Cobo Borda, “Eco 1960 – 1984, 272 Ausgaben,” in *Karl Buchholz. Buch- und Kunsthändler im 20. Jahrhundert*, Godula Buchholz, 210-213, here: 210-211.

16 *Eco*’s editors’ started off the enterprise of publishing “echoes of Western culture” based on a highly restricted understanding of what constituted the West. Initially, their definition of the West encompassed only Western Europe, while the magazine soon expanded its focus (and definition of what might count as “Western culture”) to include Latin America and larger parts of Europe, although Eastern (communist) countries remained mostly excluded. For a detailed discussion see Kate Jenckes’s essay “Heavy Beasts and the Garden of Culture: Remembering Eco: Revista de la cultura de occidente,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 5:2 (2005): 151-169.

17 The Instituto Colombo-Áleman in Bogotá and the West German government supported *Eco* and allowed for its widespread distribution.

18 The following essays – among many others – are exemplary of Volkening’s engagement with these writers: Volkening, “Reivindicación de Johann Peter Eckermann,” *Eco* 23:136 (Aug., 1971): 337-342 (about Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s conversations with Eckermann); and “Georg Büchner, el desconocido,” *Eco* 6:6 (Apr., 1963): 578-597. Representative of Volkening’s work and of particular import is further a special edition of *Eco* that Volkening designed in 1970 to celebrate the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin: *Eco. In Memoriam Friedrich Hölderlin. Poemas – Porsa – Ensayos* (Bogotá) 21:123-124 (Jul.-Aug., 1970).

19 Some representative examples of Volkening’s essays on Karoline von Günderrode, Robert Walser, and Marie Luise Kaschnitz and translations of their

work include: Volkening, "Muerte y supervivencia de Carolina," *Eco* 25:151 (1972): 68-78 (on Karoline von Günderrode); Volkening, "Robert Walser," *Eco* 19:112 (1969): 346-352; and Volkening, "Huyendo del tiempo irre recuperable: apuntes sobre la novelística de Peter Hartling [sic]," *Eco* 24:140 (1971): 54-89; Volkening, "Marie Luise Kaschnitz 1901-1974: final sin esperanza," *Eco* 28:170 (1974): 173-177. Marie Luise Kaschnitz: Some of her work was published already in the second issue of *Eco* in December of 1960 [Kaschnitz, "Un mediodía, a mediados de junio," unknown translator, *Eco* 2:2 (Dec. 1960): 149-157. This is the translation of her short story "Eines Mittags, Mitte Juni" (A midday, in mid-June) and not to be confused with her 1983 essay collection that carries the same title (published by Claassen in Düsseldorf)], followed by several other texts by her in translation until the mid-1970s. [Kaschnitz, "Genazzano," trans. Antonio de Zubiaurre, *Eco* 8:44 (1963): 178-179; —, "No dicho," trans. Rodolfo E. Modern, *Eco* 29:175 (1975): 75; —, "Prosa menuda," trans. Ernesto Volkening, *Eco* 28:170 (1974): 166-171; and her "Yo viví," trans. Antonio de Zubiaurre, *Eco* 5:25 (1962): 8-21]. Volkening translated only one of these texts, "Prosa menuda" (negligible prose), in 1974. However, he was the only *Eco*-translator who accompanied his translation also with an essay about Kaschnitz's life and work.

20 For example, Volkening wrote an elaborate critique of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*: Volkening, "Evocación de una sombra," *Eco* 6:34 (1963): 358-275. His work on Büchner and Heine are further examples of his engagement with writers who had experienced exile.

21 Besides, Volkening published in *Eco* self-reflexive, personal travel reports about his visit to Antwerp in 1968 and his search for *Heimat* (home) and during the last three years of his life (1980-1983) excerpts of his diaries written between 1953 and 1977: Volkening, "Amberes, reencuentro con una ciudad y un rostro I," *Eco* 19:110 (1969): 113-157. —, "Amberes, reencuentro con una ciudad y un rostro II," *Eco* 19:2 (1969): 234-281. Volkening, "Spengler hoy," *Eco* 36:219 (1980): 313-317. —, "De mis cuadernos I," *Eco* 36:220 (1980): 337-351. —, "De mis cuadernos II," *Eco* 36:221 (1980): 449-468. —, "Emile Verhaeren y Max Elskamp: de mis cuadernos," *Eco* 37:223 (1980): 73-82. —, "Voces alemanas," *Eco* 38:230 (1980): 113-143. —, "En causa propia I," *Eco* 38:232 (1981): 337-359. —, "Res publica," *Eco* 45:241 (1981): 61-103. —, "En causa propia II," *Eco* 48:244 (1982): 361-400. —, "Sondeos (de mis cuadernos)," *Eco* 53:262 (1983): 344-377. —, "El oficio de escribir: de mis cuadernos," *Eco* 53:264 (1983): 579-620.

22 Volkening was *Eco*'s main editor from March 1971 to December 1972.

23 From 1890 on, German literature gained in influence (substituting at the time a francophone trend in the reception of foreign literature in Colombia; see Dornheim 141. Compare also Volkening's judgment of the reception of German literature in the country (in 1966): "One may say without exaggerations, that from the existential philosophy of Heidegger's or Sartre's kind to the revival of Kafka, from the latest variations of abstract painting to the newest tendencies in cinematography, and from Ionesco's and Beckett's plays to the *roman-vérité*, there is no movement nor event in Europe's arts and literatures that had not been caught on the fly, been passionately discussed and taken apart to its pure

bones in the intellectual circles of the country.” | “[S]e puede decir sin caer en exageraciones, que de la filosofía existencialista de cuño heideggeriano o sartriano al renacimiento de Kafka, desde las últimas variantes de la pintura abstracta hasta las nuevas tendencias en la cinematografía, y desde los dramas de Ionescu [sic] y Beckett hasta el *roman-vérité*, no hubo en las artes y letras de Europa ningún movimiento ni acontecimiento alguno que no hubieran sido cogidos al vuelo, discutidos apasionadamente y desmembrados hasta los puros huesos en los círculos intelectuales del país.” Volkening, “Aspectos contradictorios de la apropiación de bienes culturales de raíz ajena,” *Eco* 13:76 (Aug., 1966): 419-438, here: 424.

24 It is significant to keep in mind that the community of German exiles in Colombia – at its peak counting approximately 2.500 people – was dispersed in the coastal region and major cities like Bogotá, Barranquilla, Medellín, and Cali (compare, e.g., the above quoted chapter “Exilpolitik in Kolumbien” in Patrick von zur Mühlen’s *Fluchtziel Lateinamerika*). According to von zur Mühlen and other sources, there were German sports clubs and German schools in Colombia, and some attempts to organize exile publications of magazines as well as minor activities of the Nazi-party, however, by and large, the organizations of any cultural and political couleur were few, short-lived, and operated under the close eye of the Colombian government, which was in the 1930s and ‘40s not always welcoming of their immigrants (e.g., see Max Paul Friedman’s discussion of, among others, the detention centers for citizens of the axis powers during World War II in his *Nazis and Good Neighbors*). These circumstances closed, in my opinion, avenues of political activism for Volkening in his host country and steered him towards “apolitical” writing. The lack of interconnectedness and organization of Germans in Colombia did not change considerably in the period after World War II either. With this in mind, we may consider the scope of Volkening’s work as a cultural mediator of German literature (through which he reached over decades a large national and international audience) as exceptional, and to the best of my knowledge, as unparalleled until today. Without diminishing the significance of *Eco* and the intellectually productive encounters with mostly Colombian thinkers and writers, it may be said that Volkening never enjoyed the community of a considerable number of other German exiles engaged in political, social, cultural, and above all literary activities (contrary to the experience, e.g., of German writers in exile such as Siegfried Kracauer and Hannah Arendt in New York, Egon Erwin Kisch and Anna Seghers in Mexico City, or even Stefan Zweig in Rio de Janeiro found a network of exile presses, clubs and political associations).

25 An early example of Volkening’s use of German words as analytical tools can be found in an essay he wrote for *Vida* on Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*) where he makes the German verb “verstehen” (to understand) fruitful for an interpretation of the story: Volkening, “‘La metamorfosis’ de Kafka, preludio de una tragedia espiritual,” *Revista de las Indias* 32:102 (Mar., Apr., May, 1948): 465-475.

26 For instance, Günter Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* (1959; *The Tin Drum*), Peter Weiss's *Die Ermittlung* (1965) and also *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (1975-1981; *Aesthetics of Resistance*), or Rolf Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter* (1963; *The Deputy*) shook up the literary scene and were at the center of public discourse in Germany, but Volkening refrained from discussing these key works (and their authors).

27 Compare Ottmar Ette's concept of conviviality/ "ZusammenLebensWissen" (derived from Paul Gilroy) in his essay "Literature as Knowledge for Living, Literary Studies as Science for Living," edited, translated and with an introduction by Vera M. Kutzinski, *PMLA* 125:4 (2010): 977-993.

28 Scholars like Michaela Wolf and Georg Pichler have characterized such spaces as cultural playgrounds where exiled subjects search to position themselves anew. Michaela Wolf and Georg Pichler, "Übersetzte Fremdheit und Exil," in *Eilforschung. Ein internationales Jahrbuch* 25. *Übersetzung als transkultureller Prozess*, ed. Claus-Dieter Krohn, Erwin Rothermund, Lutz Winckler and Wulf Koepke, pp. 7-29 (Munich: edition text + kritik, 2007), p. 14: "Steht der 'Dritte Raum' jedoch für den vorliegenden Kontext des Exils heuristisch als 'kultureller Spielraum', der zwischen konkreten Exilerfahrungen und historisch-kulturellen Diskursen vermittelt, so stellt er sich als jener Bereich dar, aus dem heraus die Exilierten potenziell operieren: Lebensweltlich in einem Da-Zwischen situiert, sprachlich konfliktuellen Ambivalenzen ausgeliefert, sind viele von ihnen als hybride Subjekte auf der Suche nach Neupositionierung."

29 As Freud observes in "The 'Uncanny'" (1919), the experience of traumata and crises may bear the "doubling and splitting" of one's personality, giving rise to the figure of the "double" – a figure that Homi Bhabha also links to possible consequences of cultural crises and traumatic changes. Homi Bhabha tellingly evokes the figure of the Uncanny in the discussion of the narrative of the modern nation: "DissemiNation" in his *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 199-244 (esp. p. 241).

30 "[...] y pertenece a ambos [el Viejo Mundo de donde vine y el llamado Nuevo Mundo a donde fui] sin ser idéntico con ninguno de los dos." Volkening, "De mis cuadernos II," *Eco* 36:221 (1980): 449-468, here: 465.

31 "[...] partí de Europa sin haber terminado con ella"] ni echado raíces en América." Volkening, "De mis cuadernos II," 466.

32 "Doppelperspektive der Innen- und Außensicht." Paul Michael Lützel, "Exilforschung: Interdisziplinäre und interkulturelle Aspekte," in *Kulturelle Wechselbeziehungen im Exil – Exile across Cultures*, ed. Helmut F. Pfanner (Bonn: Bouvier, 1986), p. 363.

33 "[M]i propio papel de mediator, mi actividad literaria." Volkening, "De mis cuadernos II," 467-468.

34 "En la terminología de mi "sico-geografía" particular, esa cosa inmaterial, cosida [sic] con hilos de ensueño y telarañas podría llamarse el "sexto continente," si no tuviera tanto de archipiélago, hasta de condición anfibia

[sic] en la que por partes iguales participan ambos hemisferios — [i]y el mar, amigos, el mar!" Volkening, "De mis cuadernos II," 467-468.

35 Disorientation and uncertainty can be regarded key characteristics of life in exile; a person in exile would thus – unable to rely, as Vilém Flusser has it, on the "fluffy blanket of habit" – be forced to establish the meaning of cultural events and interpersonal encounters on a case by case basis and therefore develop unique approaches to interpret events, whose seemingly pre-established meaning the locals would never consider to question (which requires creativity and leads to new discoveries, but also indicates the relativity of knowledge). Vilém Flusser, "Exile and Creativity," in his *The Freedom of the Migrant*, trans. Kenneth Kronenberg, ed. and with an introduction by Anke K. Finger (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 81-87, here: 82.

36 "'Cultures' do not hold still for their portraits" – as James Clifford most memorably subsumed a concept of culture (that also informs this paper); it implies that cultures do not exist as closed systems. James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in: *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds. (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London): University of California Press, 1-26, here: 10.

37 "I do not know German, and for that reason, I cannot talk about Hugo von Hofmannsthal; but I can say with certainty that "Die Wege und die Begegnungen" [Paths and encounters] or his "Brief des Lord Chandos" ["The Letter of Lord Chandos"] are capital pieces, because of, also, the translation that Volkening made of them. Or Kleist, or Büchner...: It seems as if they were now ours." | "No sé alemán, y por lo tanto no puedo referirme a Hugo von Hofmannsthal; pero sí puedo afirmar, con certeza, que "Los caminos y el encuentro" o su "Carta a Lord Chandos" son piezas capitales, debido, además, a la traducción que hizo Volkening de ellas. O Kleist, o Büchner...: parcelas que ya son nuestras." Cobo Borda, "Del Anacronismo considerado como una de las bellas artes," in *Ensayos I: Destellos criollos*, by Ernesto Volkening (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1975), 323-326, here: 326.

38 Volkening, *Ensayos I: Destellos criollos* (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1975); and —, *Ensayos II: Atardecer europeo* (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1976).

39 Jorge Ruffinelli, "Ensayos I y II de Ernesto Volkening," *Eco: Revista de la Cultura de Occidente* (Bogotá) 33: 204 (Oct. 1978): 1217-1221, here: 1221.

40 Literature as a carrier of knowledge about life and conviviality, and the possibility of experiencing and assessing through literature different life designs, value systems, ways of thinking.

41 "[Hölderlin, empero, fue] sin dejar alemán, lo que llamara Nietzsche un 'acontecimiento europeo.'" And, "[convertir al hombre y su obra] en un fenómeno nacional, por no decir provinciano, de las dimensiones de un archigermano poeta de buhardilla." Volkening, "Friedrich Hölderlin, 1770-1843," *Eco* 21:123-124 (Jul.-Aug., 1970): 225-242, here: 239.

42 I am noting this point explicitly without forgetting the implications this highly problematic step has. The observation that Volkening accomplishes to paint an image of German culture in the middle of the twentieth century in which the Shoah and the Second World War are reduced to marginal appearances could be taken as the starting point for a very different inquiry about considering these events within the context of Volkening's work as *lieux de oubli* (after Pierre Nora's national *lieux de memoires*), which would be a worthwhile task yet does exceed the scope of this present essay.