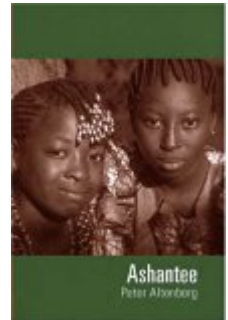


**Peter Altenberg.** *Ashantee*. Translated by Katharina von Hammerstein. Introduction by Wolfgang Nehring. Afterword by Katharina von Hammerstein. Riverside: Ariadne Press, 2007. 128 pp. \$15.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-57241-155-5.



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Peter Altenberg's *Ashantee* (1897) is a curious text that, thanks to Katharina von Hammerstein's careful and sophisticated translation, is now available for the first time to an English-speaking readership, more than one hundred years after its original publication. Peter Altenberg (born Richard Engländer [1859-1919]), sought to capture "extracts of life,"[1] a term that he used to characterize his own compositions, with a fine sensibility to his surroundings. Had Altenberg lived in the twenty-first century, his innovative collection of short narratives of such books as *Wie ich es sehe* (1896), *Ashantee*, or *Was der Tag mir zuträgt* (1901), might have found their medium in blogs.

Altenberg was a contemporary of fellow Austrians Sigmund Freud, Gustav Klimt, Gustav Mahler, Otto Wagner, Karl Kraus, Arthur Schnitzler, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Although he did not belong to the group now known as Young Vienna, he was admired and respected by its writers for his ability to capture everyday observations in brief literary sketches that escaped common literary forms such as the short story, essay,

or novella. Hofmannsthal wrote a glowing review of *Wie ich es sehe* (1896), and Schnitzler praised the writer in his diary. Even the famous cultural critic Karl Kraus made a rare exception for Altenberg by exempting him from his usual scathing critiques of writers, artists, and politicians. Despite the renown he enjoyed during his lifetime, the once popular writer was nearly forgotten after his death and, to this day, is known mostly among academics. The current translation may help remedy this situation.

*Ashantee* is Altenberg's second book and as all of his other works, it is a collection of observations, sketches, letters, prose poems, and anecdotes. *Ashantee* focuses on an event that occurred as part of the World Exhibition in 1896 in Vienna. A group of Ashanti from Ghana had lived for a short while in Vienna's Prater in a small "village" set up next to the exhibition of "exotic" animals. The narrator of the book, the Viennese P. A. (or "Sir Peter," as the Ashanti call him), guides the reader around the Ashanti village as an "insider," but also breaks boundaries by taking some of the

Ashanti into the city of Vienna. Initially, P. A. must overcome some prejudices toward the foreigners, but soon learns to appreciate their company, spending his days with them, admiring the beauty of the naked girls, and presenting himself as a protector figure. P. A. escorts some of the girls into Viennese houses, attends lessons at the school that the Ashanti have set up for their children, wonders whether black women can blush, and what they eat for dinner. The admiration is returned by the Ashanti women, who are portrayed as equally fascinated by him. They believe him to be enchanted by the Ashanti woman Tíoko, but he falls for Nah-Badû, who loves him so much that she asks him to return to Africa with her when the exhibition ends. He rejects her offer, however, because of his poverty. Perhaps the oddest vignette occurs when Tíoko is presented to the zoo director as a farewell gift, who refuses to accept her. Tíoko is then replaced with a bird rifle, which the Austrian does not regard as an inappropriate gift.

The problems with exhibiting African people in Vienna's Zoological Garden next to cages with lions and tigers are readily apparent in the work. Numerous scholars have discussed how Altenberg's book both undermines and represents a Eurocentric view, resisting any poetological analysis while simultaneously staging linguistic and racial *Grenzverletzungen*. While these are valid points, this first translation emphasizes the text's play with language(s) and cultures.

Translations, Umberto Eco reminds us, represent "a shift, not between two languages, but between two cultures." [2] Hammerstein carefully acknowledges the cultural and chronological gap that separates her rendering from Altenberg's original and succeeds in providing a text that is very readable for a twenty-first-century audience. An academic translation, it includes numerous notes that provide context and, sometimes, translations of French terms and phrases from the original. Hammerstein addresses some of the larg-

er contradictions of the text by explicitly justifying decisions she made for her translation. For example, her first note refers to the first word of the text, "Negro," which incidentally is a quote itself, namely from Meyer's Encyclopedia. Hammerstein justifies her translation, explaining: "While the terms Negro or Negro woman may offend present day readers and would today be replaced by 'African' or 'Black African,' they are used here because they reflect the German-language original and late nineteenth-century Austrian and German discourse" (p. 28). Her explanation emphasizes that some things that are now regarded as culturally inappropriate were not so at the time and, hence, need to be translated accordingly. Simultaneously, Hammerstein manages to keep the text as readable as the original and illustrates why Altenberg's "extracts" or prose poems found so much admiration at his time. They are concise, witty, critical, ironic, and ambivalent--and therefore still worth reading today.

This first translation of Altenberg's *Ashantee* into English makes a valuable addition to the body of Austrian texts in English translation, as it provides additional insights into fin-de-siècle Austria and, in particular, into colonial thought and discourse. Hammerstein's translation of a text by a writer by and large unknown to the English-speaking world reveals his talent as an artist as well as cultural mediator. While the text seems at times quite inappropriate today, Altenberg's encounter with the Ashanti, his negotiation between the foreign and his home culture, and his attraction to the other make this a fascinating read. The translation not only masters the linguistic and poetic difficulties of the original, it also presents these "extracts of life" in a style that is very enjoyable to read.

#### Notes

[1]. Peter Altenberg, *Was der Tag mir zuträgt* (Berlin: Fischer Verlag, 1901), 2.

[2]. Umberto Eco, *Experiences in Translation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 17.

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