

# Aras Ören, Chamisso Prize Acceptance Speech (1985)

## Abstract

Aras Ören (b. 1939, Istanbul) has lived in Berlin since 1969. In 1973, he became editor and director of the Turkish program at Sender Freies Berlin. He writes his poems and prose, including his Berlin poems “Was will Nyazi in der Naunynstrasse” (1973) and “Deutschland ein türkisches Märchen” (1978) as well as his series of six Berlin novels, “Auf der Suche der Gegenwart,” in Turkish; they were translated into German. Ören also acted in the films *Shirins Hochzeit* (1976) and *Otohüs* (1976). In his Chamisso Prize acceptance speech of February 1985, Ören describes himself as a “German poet” and sketches out a vision for a new European identity based on transnational experience and the interlacing of languages.

## Source

[...] We often complain today that we as individuals are left alone in the middle of a turbulently developing world of communication technologies but are unable to communicate ourselves, often experiencing an almost complete speechlessness. It looks as though we have come up against the limits of language, to a point that we can neither go forward nor return to the past.

However, something becomes immediately apparent when one apprehends the following dual development: the paradox of rapidly expanding communication technology, on the one hand, and the relegation of the individual to a lack of communication, on the other. It is not my intention to tackle this contradiction here, but as a writer, as one who deals with the written word, I do want to direct your attention to one thing: among changing technological and social conditions, it must be our task to consider the role of art, inasmuch as it reflects humans, objects, and reality, and to change it and to redefine its function. Otherwise, we will end up in a situation in which we must content ourselves with being mere pencil pushers for the reproduction of the most varied of iconographies. In view of this new role that literature must adopt, I belong neither to those who scorn mass media nor to those who see them as a competitor that will edge out the book over time. Although for advocates of so-called *Kommunikationsfreiheit*, or freedom of communication, the issue is nothing more than the total (or as complete as possible) engagement of minds, fantasies, and consciousnesses; it would be absurd to fight against this development like one of Don Quixote's companions.

For me, the writer's task is to draw consequences from everything, to establish the “consciousness industry,” as Enzensberger says, as the focus of public attention, and to watch for, develop, and cultivate new territory, thereby redefining the role of literature. And in the process, the creative spirit gains in importance. Simultaneously, this spirit avows tolerance and openness to others. Here, the issue is not only permanence but also an act of fundamental self-renewal. Almost all areas of art should anticipate some difficulty with this process.

The venture is not simple. I'm certain of that. However, I think that we can only build on this foundation in the future. Perhaps we will need additional infusions of energy. I am convinced that an important incentive can come from us, foreigners in German literature, and we stand by this task. If we can accomplish it and we are recognized in the process, then the words of Adelbert von Chamisso, in whose name this award was established and given to me (and I feel very honored to receive it), will have validity for me. Chamisso said, and I agree with these words, “I almost believe I am a German poet.”

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Every artist is under the influence of his contemporary historical and social conditions. That is completely natural. An important part of my experience was determined by the great migration movements from Turkey to Germany, from farm countries at the periphery to the center of Europe, from underdeveloped regions to industrial nations; it was shaped by an immigration in which I participated from the very beginning and whose witness I became. The conditions under which it took place, the many individual fates that are bound to it, have left a lasting impression on me. To remain untouched by this experience is unthinkable when you are one of those involved. To stand in the middle of it and still not take part would indicate insensitivity and indifference. This indifference certainly exists. With me, however, this was not the case because I didn't want it that way. During at least one phase of my literary creation I concentrated on this point with great persistence. This era of my literary activity is closely connected with the various immigration waves. Both ran parallel to and reflected one another.

The awareness of immigration and my literary consciousness are in constant interaction and are mutually dependent. This relationship is quite clear to me. Our awareness, shaped by immigration, disunity, the loss of our old identity, and the search for a new one are not merely characteristics of those affected by immigration – passively or actively. They are simultaneously determining factors of the new consciousness, the new identity, which Europe and all highly industrialized nations have been searching for in the past two decades of this century.

In other words, Europe is the reflection of my face, and I am the reflection of the face of Europe. My speechlessness is also Europe's. I see the phenomenon from this perspective. In my opinion, this is important, and this position distinguishes me from some Turkish colleagues and many German culture brokers who work in this field. This mutual impact signifies an expansion of my creative energies and allows them to become an integral part of the creative European zeitgeist. My search for the new language contributes to this phenomenon / movement in that it can overcome the speechlessness on the borders of language. My search for new ways of communication shows contemporaries a way out of this speechlessness. While they accompany me into the future as admonishers, my presence gives them the possibility to reconsider the repressed past. Recognition and confirmation of our literature and art can also mean the recognition and confirmation of one's own consciousness and newly created values. Only under these conditions can propositions like "The Federal Republic of Germany is a nation of culture," or "The Federal republic of Germany is connected to the cultural community of European nations" – propositions continually reinterpreted and converted into praxis by various governments according to their political position and philosophy – be scrutinized for their substance and be compelled to provide proof of their tolerance. Only then can they be taken at their word, which was probably the original intention. To put it in the briefest of terms, our new social and cultural sphere and our literature, a product of this community, will certainly contribute to the development of a new European identity. [...]

We represent the tradition of today as well as the cultural heritage of tomorrow. It is my wish that the written word become a bridge of communication above and beyond all borders, connecting fantasy with fantasy, thought with thought, language with language, and individual with individual.

Source of the original German text: Heinz Friedrich, ed., *Chamissos Enkel. Literatur von Ausländern in Deutschland*, München: dtv 1986, pp. 25–29. Reprinted in *Transit Deutschland. Debatten zu Nation und Migration*. ed. Deniz Göktürk, David Gramling, Anton Kaes and Andreas Langenohl. Munich: Konstanz University Press, 2011, pp. 574–76.

Source of English translation: Aras Ören, "Chamisso Prize Acceptance Speech," in *Germany in Transit. Nation*

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*and Migration 1955–2005*, ed. Deniz Göktürk, David Gramling and Anton Kaes. Berkeley: University of California Press: 2007, pp. 391–94.

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