
POETRY

Quoting Shakespeare—in German

On the Splendours and Miseries of Translation (I)

IN ACT II, Scene 2, of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Enobarbus attempts at once to extol and to explain the essence of Cleopatra, the secret both of her sensuous and of her spiritual beauty, with the following lines:

*Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety*

I did not live in England for long without having had this quotation strike me from all sides. It was "a familiar saying," perhaps the most familiar saying of all, whenever the subject turned on the brilliancy and power of women, on female beauty and wisdom.

What I must try to explain is why the quotation would be completely unknown to someone coming from Germany, even though, once heard, it made an immediate and lasting impression. Consider the passage in the celebrated Schlegel-Tieck translation. There it runs:

*Nicht kann sie Alter
Hinwelken, täglicher Genuss nicht stumpfen
Die immer neue Reizung*

A single reading or hearing of the words is enough to show clearly why this, unlike so many other Shakespearean lines, has failed to become proverbial in German. The initial negative, that "*Nicht*," gives it a clumsy and disjointed rhythm, whereas in the original it is the word "Age," the subject both in the grammatical and the poetic sense, which not only gives the English a precise and majestic emphasis, but at the same time places the poetic idea to the very forefront.

If one looks closer still, one will surely also find that in this context it is almost contrary to the sense to translate "custom" by "*täglicher Genuss*" (daily enjoyment). More important still, the expression "*infinite variety*" does not even correspond to "*immer neue Reizung*" (con-

tinually fresh charm), quite apart from whether the German offers a proper poetic equivalent.

Consider another example. This is an instance of the reverse, namely where the translation is, I believe, happier than the original. At any rate, the German has become proverbial.

One autumn some years ago I was walking over the Yorkshire Moors with an English friend. I was suddenly struck with sadness at the sight of the bare, windswept northern heathland, and I quoted to him those lines from *As You Like It* which are spoken by the melancholy nobleman Jacques in the Forest of Arden.

*Und so von Stund' zu Stunde reifen wir,
Und so von Stund' zu Stunde faulen wir.*

"Very beautiful," said my friend. "From whom is it? Goethe? Schiller?"

Now my companion knew his Shakespeare as well as any. Why were these particular lines completely unknown to him? It struck me that in England, with a few exceptions, those Shakespeare passages which have become an overwhelmingly powerful and effective part of English vocabulary and usage are utterly different from those which—thanks to our incomparable good fortune in having the classical Tieck and Schlegel rendering—have become quotations and "household words" in Germany. My young English friend was unfamiliar with the lines from *As You Like It* and took them for a quotation from Goethe or Schiller. (What higher compliment could be paid to the Schlegel-Tieck translation?) I myself in similar fashion have met in English books, lectures, newspaper articles and conversations with countless sayings and expressions that struck me either by their beauty or truth (usually both); on closer acquaintance I found them to be Shakespeare quotations which were completely new to me (despite an exposure to the Bard

since early youth) because in Germany they were simply unknown, or rather "unfamiliar."

So it is that I came to occupy myself with the question of how it is that our linguistic consciousness could be fed by two different streams from the same source. If this is not to be accounted for by mere accident but is governed by some deeper causes or laws, then doubtless these are to be sought for in the difference between the two languages themselves, and in the variation in mode of thought which is closely bound up with that difference. The conclusions that one reaches by comparing the original with the translation are certainly not always completely valid, but at least they are fruitful enough to justify closer examination.

On returning from our walk that autumn, we promptly looked up the passage

*Und so von Stund' zu Stunde reifen wir,
Und so von Stund' zu Stunde faulen wir*

to see how it went in the English edition. We found:

*And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe
And so from hour to hour we rot and rot.*

But surely the idea of ripening and decay is much more forcibly expressed by the Shakespearean repetition with its double "ripe and ripe, rot and rot"? Is not the English monosyllabic verb "rot" (related to the German "verrotten") stronger and more original than the two-syllable German word "faulen"? Has it not altogether more "pith and moment," to use an expression of Hamlet's (this time one that has become proverbial both in English and in German, "Und Unternehmungen voll Mark und Nachdruck," III, ii, 86)? And yet—in English the lines have not become "a quotation," while in German they have. Is it that the Schlegel-Tieck version is more concise, and by abandoning the repetition impresses itself more forcibly on the memory? Or is it in fact this repetition, this determined insistent hammering home of the idea, that has prevented it from becoming a well-known and favourite passage in England? It is difficult, if not impossible, to say; we are in that uncertain realm of conjecture on matters of linguistic and national psychology.

IN THIS connection I am also reminded of the last words of the dying Romeo: "O true apothecary! Thy drugs are quick." In the German this is rendered: "O wackrer Apotheker! Dein Trank wirkt rasch!" In Schlegel and Tieck's translation the words have become proverbial in Germany. I cannot remember ever having heard or read them quoted in England; even the Oxford *Dictionary of Quotations* does

not list the passage. Why is it that these words have not become a part of the English "treasury of quotations"? They are preceded by the incomparably beautiful passage:

*O, here
Will I set up my everlasting rest;
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh.*

The translators were unable to do justice to it.

*O, hier bau'ich die ew'ge Ruhstatt mir,
Und schüttle von dem lebensmüden Leibe
Das Joch feindseliger Gestirne...*

is only a faint reflection of the original. The short line which follows only gives the effect of a feeble after-thought, an anti-climax (and perhaps for this reason has not become proverbial in English). But of this Schlegel and Tieck have given an especially happy rendering. In translating "true" by "wacker" (good, honest) they have indeed remained completely faithful to the English sense, but they have also given it an ironic undertone: for, in German, one often uses the word "wacker" when one wants (always somewhat ironically) to express the idea of "tüchtig" (efficient). The change from "drugs" to "Trank" (potion), with its suggestion both of a love-potion and of something alcoholic, gives the German word here too a subtle accompanying note. Shakespeare wrote: "Thy drugs are quick"; in the translation we get, not "Dein Trank ist rasch," but "wirkt rasch," which is so much better suited to the German language, and so very much more correct. In addition, too, it offers a particularly clear example of the way in which (when required by differences in the style and spirit of two different languages) it may be permissible, and indeed necessary, to render qualities of "to be" (*sein*) by its effects, without violence or injustice. Whether the ironic tinge of the whole passage, clearly discernible in the translation, was intended by Shakespeare (or whether it can also be sensed in the original by English readers and listeners) is something which I would find difficult to say. But be this as it may, it is undoubtedly the touch of irony which has not only made the passage proverbial in German; it has been converted into a popular phrase which Germans like to use in the most diverse situations, tragic as well as comic, seriously or flippantly.

I should like now to take an example of a passage where the unique beauty of the original is, I think, quite matched and reproduced by the splendid translation. The lines in question have become proverbial in both languages. They occur in *The Merchant of Venice* at the beginning of Act V, where Lorenzo speaks of the

magical powers and moral effects of music, and then goes on:

*The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus:
Let no such man be trusted.*

*Der Mann, der nicht Musik hat in sich selbst,
Den nicht die Eintracht süßere Töne rührt,
Taugt zu Verrat, zu Räuberei und Tücken;
Die Regung seines Sinns ist dumpf wie Nacht,
Sein Trachten düster wie der Erebus.
Trau keinen solchen!*

A word-for-word comparison of the two passages does, I suggest, reveal the full extent of the beauty, the freedom, and yet at the same time the exactitude, that characterise their uniquely harmonious relationship. What a happy insight of Schlegel and Tieck to refuse to translate “the motions of his spirit” quite literally by “die Regung seines Geistes” (the motions of his mind); for the man “that hath no music in himself” cannot, for that very reason, be said to possess a mind (*Geist*). Whatever other connotations might be attributed to this (perhaps all too suggestive) German word, the German language has, at least, given it one definite denotation, once very beautifully expressed by Thomas Mann with his phrase “*Adel des Geistes*” (nobility of mind). But surely this nobility must be lacking in the man “that hath no music in himself”; accordingly, Schlegel and Tieck make use here of the expression “*Regung seines Sinns*,” an expression which suggests his “*Gesinnung*” (disposition) and “*Gemütslage*” (frame of mind), two ideas that are also contained in the English word “*spirit*” and therefore fit the Shakespearean intention.

Similarly, if the translators had rendered “*affection*” literally as “*Zuneigung*,” if they had introduced a note of tenderness, how unsuitable it would have sounded in the context. The verb “*Trachten*” (striving) used as a noun, rare and poetic though it is, does conjure up a world of base impulsive craving and desire, welling out of the “*affections*” of “*Erebus*,” out of nocturnal underworld depths.

Apart from these organically necessary linguistic divergences (or perhaps, in fact, by the very aid of them) the translators have succeeded in a curious way that defies analysis or explanation. The translated words recapture that harmonious poetic music of words with, as Goethe noted, scarcely less “*strength and tenderness*” than in Shakespeare’s own *Himmelstönen*.

THE idea that our life is only a kind of universal theatre, and that we ourselves are caught up in it, participating only with unreal

and shadowy actions, was a favourite conception of Shakespeare’s (as indeed it was for the whole baroque theatre). It may be that some three hundred years later, at the time of the Schlegel-Tieck translation, this idea had already lost much of its originality; at any rate, it is expressed by Macbeth shortly before his downfall in the following lines:

*Leben ist nur ein wandelnd Schattenbild;
Ein armer Komödiant, der spreizt und knirscht
Sein Stündchen auf der Bühn’ und dann nicht
mehr
Vernommen wird; ein Märchen ist’s, erzählt
Von einem Dummkopf, voller Klang und Wild-
heit,
Das nichts bedeutet!*

Consider the same passage as it is in the original:

*Life’s but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

One only has to listen to these two versions: the one passage, not only as a whole but even in each of its separate phrases, has acquired a proverbial character in the English language; the translation has not succeeded in doing the same in my own tongue. It is the peculiarly English but, at the same time, perfectly natural mingling of Latin and Greek with Germanic words which gives it its character, its special colour; no translator, however ingenious, could possibly conjure out of it such a beguiling verbal music and composition of sounds, for he was working in and with linguistic material that was quite differently constituted. The close juxtaposition, the familiar linking of a word such as “*tale*” (*Märchen*), in which one discerns the Low German “*vertellen*” and the High German “*erzählen*,” with words of Latin origin such as “*sound*” (*Klang*) and “*fury*” (*Wildheit*) is not only fluent and intelligible in English but earmarks at once both the music of the language and the rational sense of the passage. In German, on the other hand, words from other and more ancient languages, always identified as *Fremdworte* or “*alien*” words, have seldom or never become assimilated as something natural. One has only to picture to oneself how impossible it would be in German to use the word “*idiot*” in such a highly poetical context as this from *Macbeth*.

Consider one more example of this natural mingling of two linguistic worlds, the Classical and the Germanic, which is so much at the essence of the English language, but which appears especially striking and beautiful in Shakespeare. Again from *Macbeth* (a play,

moreover, which seems to us, both by reason of its atmosphere and its history, one of the most "northern"), Macbeth is speaking of the blood-guilt which he has incurred by his murders and says that not even an entire ocean would be sufficient to cleanse the stain from his hands. "Weit eher," he says,

*Weit eh'r kann diese meine Hand mit Purpur
Die unermesslichen Gewässer färben
Und Grün in Rot verwandeln*

In Shakespeare's own words the passage reads:

*This my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine
Making the green one red.*

"Die unermesslichen Gewässer färben"—"The multitudinous seas incarnadine": here the terse Anglo-Saxon monosyllable "seas" (cf. the German "See") stands between two splendidly polysyllabic Latin words: "multitudinous," which is very finely rendered "unermesslich" by Schlegel and Tieck, and the archaic verb "incarnadine." In the latter word one may easily discern a trace of "carne," the Latin word for flesh, so that Shakespeare is really also using it to suggest "blood-red." But in spite of the use of these two unusual words with their strangely magnificent iridescence, in spite of the contrast they strike with the homely word "seas"—or rather precisely because of that—this line has become a "familiar saying."

PERHAPS this takes one to the very heart of the question of why Shakespeare in the original has had such a completely different effect on English ears and sensibilities from that which Schlegel and Tieck's translation has had on worshipful German readers and listeners. Shakespeare wrote in the luxuriant, passionate, and exuberant baroque language of the 16th century. Schlegel and Tieck translated his work into the more classically moderate language of the 18th century. Their achievement, masterly and representative as it is, was nevertheless bound to be accompanied by a certain process of "rationalisation." (In the German theatre

every scene, every line strikes the audience as being "clear" and "understandable.") For this reason Germans have often connected Shakespeare with their idea of a *Dichter* who (like the German classicists of the 18th century) was also at the same time a *Denker* and, like them, evoked by means of his world of characters another world of ideas, full of intellectual and spiritual problems. In England, on the contrary, Shakespeare is less the philosopher than the poet, the man of words, magic, and music. So it is that every German visitor tends at first to be taken sharply aback at English performances of Shakespeare. He finds that the declamation is too violent, and that there is too much activity on the stage. But the declamation enhances the effect of the pure language, and the activity that of the spare action.

I would suggest that whenever the magic of the words becomes completely one with the sense of the speech, as for example in Hamlet's monologue "To be or not to be," then both in English and in German almost every line of this monologue attains the ranks of "quotation" in both languages—something which might indeed be attributed to the fact that Hamlet's "problematical nature" belongs as much to the German Classicists and Romantics as to the English Baroque period, and so in this instance Schlegel and Tieck felt completely at home.

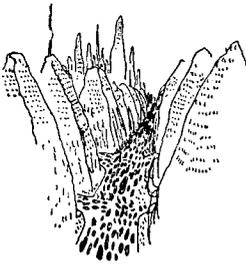
But the real and final reason why (apart from *Hamlet*) the passages quoted from Shakespeare in England and Germany are so entirely different, lies, I am convinced, in the fact that the same words in the different languages never truly coincide. They correspond in meaning, but always deviate in sense. Different associations are called up in the two languages, echoed by profoundly different emotional values. It was Maugham who once noted that the English word "Home" and the German "Heimat," although so closely related, nevertheless aroused entirely distinct feelings. I suspect that even the happiest translations never can show more than the reverse side of a fine and noble tapestry. But, of course, they often make it possible to discern the beauty and genuineness of the original fabric with especial clarity.

Friedrich Walter

NOTES & TOPICS

Letter from New York

Of G.E., T.V., J.F.K. and U.S.A.



FOR ALMOST three decades now, the American Customs authorities have valiantly—and by no means ineffectually—struggled to prevent Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* from penetrating our virgin American soil.

It was, officially, an “obscene and pornographic” book. Nevertheless, Grove Press, its lust quickened by its success with *Lady Chatterley*, recently published an American and unexpurgated edition. The Post Office first banned it from the mails. Then, with no stomach for another court fight, it lifted the ban. But the Customs have not budged. So it is now possible to publish the *Tropic of Cancer* in this country, to advertise it, to purchase it in any bookshop—but if you're reading it on board ship, you may as well throw it over the side upon sight of the Statue of Liberty.

This crazy little situation somehow strikes me as symbolic of the way we live now. I have just spent a week in Washington, D.C., seeing old friends and new frontiersmen, and I have come to the conclusion that (a) this is the most intelligent and enlightened Administration in my lifetime, and (b) it is also in some ways one of the foggiest. When a Senator complains that the Kennedy Administration has been “switching its emphasis from one imaginary emergency to another with such rapidity that not even the Congress can make head or tail of the true needs of the nation,” he expresses a sentiment that is by no means limited to the Republican opposition.

There was Cuba, of course. But that was so egregious a blunder, so impossible of explanation even by those who helped make it, that one hesitates to read a larger meaning into it. It could have been simply a *lapsus calami*. More symptomatic and revealing are those little

disturbances of government which are our newspapers' daily bread, though I'm not sure of the extent to which they are reported abroad.

HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES:

1. I suppose you have read about those officials of General Electric and other prominent firms in the industry who went to jail for having, in secret and premeditated collusion, fixed prices and allocated orders in what was supposed to be competitive bidding for government and public utility contracts. Oh, what an orgy of criticism and self-criticism this evoked! Any business leader who did not have his say on the need for a profound re-examination of corporation ethics, any cleric who did not fulminate against the corroding materialism of modern life, any politician or leader-writer who did not preen himself as a willing St. George against this dead dragon—well, there just weren't any. And yet the whole business is really a farce. Only a couple of weeks after the executives were put away, the anti-trust division of the Justice Department announced that, as a condition for settling its civil suit against General Electric, it would demand that G.E. agree *not to sell its products at unreasonably low prices*.

The plain truth of the matter is that if G.E. acted according to the pure principles of *laissez-faire*, it would long ago have driven most of its competitors out of business—and would then have been liable to prosecution under the anti-trust laws. The main reason G.E. entered into the recent conspiracy was not to gouge the government or the public, but to enable its competitors and itself to lead an orderly co-existence. In the American economy to-day, a firm as gigantic as G.E. *must* establish prices and, to some extent, allocate markets. To be sure, the Government could do it—but that would be “socialism.” The Kennedy Administration, in the great tradition of Jeffersonian radicalism, sees its mission as harassing the “trusts” rather than sensibly regulating them. And the ironic aspect of this affair is that the managers of G.E. must also cry *mea culpa* and solemnly pretend that what happened was a wicked deviation from the true way—for they too are committed to the absurd dogma that America is a land of free enterprise and free competition.

2. This example again involves “competitive bidding.” In every session of Congress, including the present one, a Congressional committee or sub-committee gets quite a bit of publicity by “exposing” the fact that the Pentagon's procurement policies violate the principles of the market-place. Deep in the Congressional mind, and in the American public mind, is the notion that the Pentagon is a “consumer” that ought to acquire its *matériel* by strolling