

Donne Done Into German

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John Donne. *Zwar ist auch Dichtung Sunde. Gedichte englisch und deutsch*. Nachdichtungen von Maik Hamburger und Christa Schuenke. Zweite rev. und erw. Ausgabe. Reclams Universal-Bibliothek, Band 944. Leipzig: Philipp Reclam jun., 1985. Pp. 162.

Reading these wonderfully fresh and accurate translations of Donne's poems by two gifted East German translators takes me back some twenty-odd years to when I (McLean) sat in on a John Donne seminar at the University of Munich taught by the late Ernst Schanzer. I was curious about how Donne would be taught in a German university, and I was interested in how German students would react to Donne. Would they have the same difficulties in reading Donne that I had encountered only a few years earlier? And surely they would have to be extremely proficient in English to deal with the subtleties and nuances of Donne's language. Obviously, I thought, they would use a German translation or crib—some German version of *Cliff Notes*—in order to get through the seminar.

At each seminar meeting Professor Schanzer would enter with an armful of books which he would place on his desk, located at the end of the horseshoe-shaped arrangement of seminar tables. Discussion of the text would be prefaced by student reports on secondary source reading (often augmented by a quoted passage read by the professor from one of the books piled high on his desk), and often in an attempt to get at the complexity of Donne's poetry, students would attempt rough translations of passages, words, or specific lines. I found it interesting that the "trouble spots" in Donne's text for German students often reflected the same kinds of difficulties I also had encountered with word play, wit, and the interaction and interconnection of image and meaning.

I was surprised to learn that there was no German crib on Donne and virtually no translations of Donne available for student use. There were some xeroxed translations circulating in class, but I do not remember any text per se circulating. At least those students who asked me to

explain or to translate parts of the text were unaware of translations we could use for comparison. And I, as a novice student of German, certainly was in no position to translate Donne's poetry! While I was confronting Donne in the German seminar, Guntner was learning about Donne quite differently from A. B. Chambers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. These youthful experiences together with our more seasoned understanding of Donne, have prepared us, perhaps, to appreciate more fully the artful translations of Donne presently under review.

Hamburger and Schuenke's poetic renderings (*Nachdichtungen*) of Donne will appeal to the scholar and to the lover of poetry with no special knowledge of metaphysical wit or seventeenth-century English literature. Hamburger's succinct introduction bridges the historical and cultural distance between seventeenth-century England and late twentieth-century Germany, documenting how Donne's life and verse reflect the socio-political upheavals of the time. This was the period of the early bourgeois revolutions which began in northern Germany and radically altered the face of feudal northern Europe. Hamburger sees Donne struggling with the personal agony of the uprooted human (*der losgeloste Mensch*) who is detached from the spiritual and social values which, in an earlier age, would have provided harmony and meaning in life. It is the intense personal relationship that Donne seeks and finds, Hamburger argues, that transcends old hierarchies, resolves the contradictions, and creates for him and his beloved a new universe of meaning: the ecstasy of love, at once physical, emotional and spiritual, becomes Donne's poetic subject and a mirror of his own consciousness.

Hamburger, following Christopher Hill, aligns the contradictions and paradoxes in Donne's life (Jack Donne/Dean Donne) with his poetic forms, especially the conscious neglect of perfect rhyme and meter for the sake of meaning. This technique gives Donne's verse its "dramatic" or "spoken" quality and makes him seem so contemporary. Just how contemporary Donne might be for a modern audience is reflected in the judicious selection of poems translated from A. J. Smith's edition (Penguin, 1971). Hamburger and Schuenke have divided the "Songs and Sonnets" fairly evenly between them, Hamburger translated two of the three "Satires" and all six "Divine Poems" while Schuenke has translated nine of the twelve "Elegies" and six of the eight "Letters in Verse." The English text is printed on the left with the German translation facing on the right; a selective commentary on individual poems follows at the end.

Hamburger's translations are amazing! They recreate Donne's dialectical complexity and his intellectual energy. They also capture the

dramatic quality of his speaking voice and verse forms and in a German verse accessible to the modern reader. Hamburger is especially successful in approximating Donne's biting cynicism about the proclaimed chastity and fidelity of the opposite sex. Where Donne's English may leave room for ambiguity, Hamburger's German is explicit. Donne's lines in "Go, catch a falling star / Geh, und fange einen Stern," leave some room for interpretation:

And last, till you write your letter,
 Yet she
 Will be
 False, ere I come, to two, or three.

Hamburger's translation is more direct:

Bis du deinen Brief geschrieben,
 Sie hätt
 Ich wett,
 Eh ich Kam, zwei, drei im Bett.
 ("By the time you wrote your letter, / She had had, /
 I wager / Before I arrived, two three, in bed.")

Donne's "marriage bed and marriage temple" in "The Flea/Der Floh" becomes "unser Tempel, Bett und Lustrevier." "Lustrevier" ("pleasure patch") rimes with "hier" in the preceding line but also underlines the explicit sexuality of the relationship. Here is how Hamburger translates the second stanza of Donne's famous poem:

O halt! Drei Leben schone, Kind.
 In Floh, in dem wir längst Vermählte sind.
 Der Floh is du und ich, und hiér
 Ist unser Tempel, Bett und Lustrevier:
 Wenn auch die Eltern grolen, wir sind
 Vereint in dieser Kammer schwarz wie Tint.
 Mich töten war dir einerlei,
 Doch füge nicht noch einen Selbstmord bei,
 Und Sakrileg: Drei Morde--Sünden drei.

Christa Schuenke's translations may seem softer in tone, but she, too, is masterful in recreating Donne's metaphysical style in German. "Der Koder/The Bait," for example, makes extensive use of voiceless fricatives

to recapture the liquid sensuality evoked by Donne's use of liquids, vowels and fricatives:

Donne:

There will the river whispering run
 Warmed by thy eyes, more than the sun.
 And there th' enamoured fish will stay,
 Begging themselves they may betray.

Schuenke:

Schau, wispernd fließt der Fluss dahin
 Dein Blick wärmt mehr als Sonne ihn.
 Verliebte Fische spielen auf dem Grund,
 Und schlüpfen selbst im Reusenschlund.

In the German translation we can almost hear the whispering river and its fish. Schuenke's imagery and metaphors in "19. Elegie: Auf das Zuabettgehen seiner Dame/To His Mistress Going to Bed," echo Donne's sensual exuberance:

Oh, mein Amerika, mein neues Land,
 Mein Staat, von *einem* Mann genug bemannt.
 Mein Kaiserreich, mein Berg von Edelstein,
 Dich zu entdecken, nenn ich glücklich sein.
 In dein Verliess mich senken, macht mich frei.
 Der Abdruck meiner Hand mein Siegel sei!

The difference between the poetic voices of each translator becomes evident when each provides a rendering of "Elegy 18: Love's Progress." The couplets in Hamburger's "Progress der Liebe" ring like staccato epigrams, direct and almost aggressively impatient to get on with the speaker's "journey" down and up the mistress's body to his goal between her legs. Schuenke's couplets in "Fortschreitende Liebe" ("To Make progress in love"), however, are more intimately fluid with the lover patiently and lovingly lingering in his exploration, his "progress," of his mistress's soft anatomy. A brief example:

Donne:

All these in women we might think upon
 (If women had them) and yet love but one.
 Can men more injure women than to say
 They love them for that by which they are not they?

Makes virtue woman? must I cool my blood
Till I both be, and find one, wise and good?

Schuenke:

Mag sein, die Frauen sind dem Golde ähnlich.
Auch sie liebt man für eines nur, gewöhnlich.
Was ist es, das die Frau zutiefst verletzt?
Wenn man grad, was sie nicht ist, an ihr schätzt.
Ist Unschuld weiblich? Soll ich mich bezähmen,
Bis ich gereift bin, und 'ne Reife nehmen?

Hamburger:

All diese Attribute (oder Keins)
Schatzt man bei Frauen, doch man liebt nur eins.
Ist nicht die schlimmste Kränkung, die es gibt,
Wenn man die Frau nicht für ihr Frausein liebt?
Ist Frau Gleich Tugend? Muss ich kühlen mein Blut
Bis ich selbst bin, und finde eine--weise, gut?

These splendid translations are accompanied by nine pen and ink drawings by Ingo Kraft which visually complement the poems. The second revised edition has corrected the many translation and printing errors of the first (1982) edition and is the only one to use. This successful cooperation of two gifted translators certainly sets a high standard for any future translators of Donne to follow, and it has provided the German reading public with an accurate, exciting, and inexpensive edition of John Donne.

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