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# THE HAPPY ADVENTURE OF TRANSLATING GERMAN HUMOROUS VERSE

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## *Der Lattenzaun*

*Es war einmal ein Lattenzaun,  
mit Zwischenraum, hindurchzuschauen.  
(There used to be a picket fence  
with space to gaze from hence to thence.)*

*Ein Architekt, der dieses sah,  
stand eines abends plötzlich da  
(An architect who saw this sight  
approached it suddenly one night,)*

*und nahm den Zwischenraum heraus  
und baute draus ein grosses Haus.  
(removed the spaces from the fence,  
and built of them a residence.)*

*Der Zaun indessen stand ganz dumm,  
mit Latten ohne was herum.  
(The picket fence stood there dumbfounded  
with pickets wholly unsurrounded,)*

*Ein Anblick grässlich und gemein.  
Drum zog ihn der Senat auch ein.  
(a view so naked and obscene,  
the sheriff had to intervene.)*

*Der Architekt jedoch entfloh  
nach Afri- od- Ameriko.  
(The architect, however, flew  
to Afri- or Americoo.)*

In German-speaking countries these verses by Christian Morgenstern are as familiar as Mother Goose here. But in the English-speaking orbit they are not — at least they were not until recently, when they were published in translation. I have been fond of them since I grew up as a boy in Austria, but when I came to this country and wanted to share this poem and the others by Morgenstern, collected in his volume *Galgenlieder*, with my American friends, I found no translation in the library. Cassell's *Encyclopedia of World Literature* and Angel Flores' *Anthology of German Poetry* declared Morgenstern as untranslatable.

But, then, what's so difficult about translating the "Picket Fence" — beyond, perhaps, rhyming? Translating this poem is indeed no more difficult than translating any rhymed poetry. The "Picket Fence" permits an almost mirror-like word-for-word rendering of the original. The unit of translation is the individual word:

*Er nahm den Zwischenraum heraus  
und baute draus ein grosses Haus.*

... removed the spaces from the fence,  
and built of them a residence.

#### UNIT IS THE IDIOM OR PUN

But the unit of translation cannot always be the word. Every language has idioms that would be meaningless if translated literally, hence the unit has to be the entire idiom. There is a German idiom for somebody giving up in disappointment; translated literally, he is said "to toss a rifle in the wheat field" — whatever the origin of that phrase might be. Now Morgenstern, taking the idiom literally, tells of a man who walks in a wheat field, finds a rifle, and mournfully reflects on the hopeless poor devil who cast away the rifle. If this poem were translated word for word into English, it would make no sense. This poem now *is* a challenge. Here the happy hunt begins for the translator to find an idiom that could convey the same idea. There is one: if you translate the German word for rifle as "towel", the meaning clicks: somebody finds a towel and is sorry for the discouraged loser who has thrown it in.

But the translation unit can be larger still. It may be the entire poem, the idea. In translating the plays of the Austrian comedy writer Johann Nestroy, I felt free to write entirely new stanzas, retaining only the chorus line in each. For example, one stanza begins, in anachronistic translation with the words:

They now have a bomb that more damage can do  
than all bombs together in World War II.

Nestroy died in 1860. Such treatment goes beyond translation. But it is an integral part of the translator's work. This kind of updating has been done by the producers of all stage productions since Nestroy's death — in fact, it was done by Nestroy himself, who wrote last-minute encore stanzas for his productions alluding to events that may have been no older than a few days, and invariably brought down the house. The translator's task here is to aim at creating a reaction in the audience similar to that produced by the original — even if the words are entirely different.

The successful literal translation, then, is a pleasure to the translator and the reader. On the other hand, the free translation has its own rewards. It allows the translator great creativeness. Although he is bound by the words and ideas of the original, his work is highly personal. He can choose from many alternatives and interpretations, which make his version as revealing as a Rorschach test. A translation, like handwriting, shows the character of the person who did it.

In addition to translating the words, a translator has to recreate the meter and rhyme schemes, and it is there where his creativeness has an opportunity. A business letter can be translated by a businessman. A poem has to be translated by a poet.

Over the centuries and in all languages, keen observations have been made about the art of translating — applying to both prose and verse.

A Hebrew teacher of the first century, Jehuda ben Ilai, talking about translating the Bible, said that literal translating means lying, and free translating means blaspheming.

There is the much-quoted French saying: "If they are beautiful, they are not faithful, and if they are faithful, they are not beautiful", matched by the equally well-known Spanish saying (credited to Cervantes) that "translating from one language to another is like gazing at a Flemish tapestry with the wrong side out".

There is, of course, the classic Italian verdict, unbearable in its succinctness: "*Traduttore, traditore*" — translator, traitor — a pun in itself untranslatable with equal pungency. And to include an American quotation in this United Nations of condemnation: John Ciardi in the *Saturday Review of Literature* has called translation flatly "the art of failure".

But this is not the last word. The worm can turn. There may be instances when a good translation, far from being inferior to the original, may be superior to it. A provocative statement. But a translator works in a double capacity: as a translator *and* as an editor. He looks at the original with more searching eyes than many readers. He has to plumb the depth of the meaning of every word. But how about words that are casually ambiguous, hastily chosen, or even inaccurate? The translator needs clear meanings. As he translates he also edits and interprets and clarifies. We are talking here about inadvertent ambiguity, not intentional fuzziness in the original, which is a different matter altogether, especially in poetry. The translator-editor-interpreter does not impose himself on the author's work, but sensitively, respectfully, self-effacingly, does some gentle, silent touching up.

Karl Kraus wrote a poem about a park surrounding a Bohemian castle. It seemed a rather formal park, perhaps somewhat like Versailles, with a pond and swan, with flowerbeds, and possibly statuary — the latter because one line says: "*Wie lange steht er schon auf diesem Stein, der Admiral*", literally: "How long has the admiral been standing on this stone". Apparently there was a statue of a navy warrior in that park. I translated accordingly — but it didn't seem quite right. It occurred to me that there is a butterfly called admiral. On a hunch I did some research, wrote to Czechoslovakia, and learned there is no statuary in that park and never was. So Kraus must indeed have meant the butterfly. (The preceding line actually speaks about flowers.) Since intended ambiguity for the benefit of the reader's imagination could not have been assumed in this context, I changed my translation of the word "admiral" from "admiral" to "butterfly" and of the word "standing" (which Kraus evidently used in poetic license to indicate the folded vertical wings) as "sitting": "Upon the rock is sitting the butterfly". Such interpretive translating I hope would make the poem more understandable to foreign readers not familiar with that park. Because of this "posthumous", as it were, cleaning up of overlooked flaws, Roda Roda, the Austro-Hungarian writer of the First World War, in direct opposition to John Ciardi, said: "A translation is good only when it is better than the original". Paul Valéry, Roda's French contemporary, made a similar statement.

Ordinarily, though, the chicken will not try to be wiser than the hen. The translator will make the best effort, and aiming at excellence is the joy of the happy adventure of translating. The aim is two-pronged. The one end is devoted identification with the original author — the translator is the alter ego of the author. The other end is the creativeness that is the translator's own, highly individual expression. The synthesis of these two divergent aims makes for the finest translation.

In my own work, I thought that at least on one occasion I was close to that synthesis — an occasion where I felt the author was smiling down from the heavens when he saw what was being done to his work, as I was sailing precariously between Ciardi and Roda Roda. Trans-lating, translated literally, means "carrying across" — you carry the text from one side of the linguistic border to the other, visually expressed perhaps by turning over the palm of your hand.

Morgenstern's most celebrated, indeed most eloquent, poem permits that synthesis, but modesty prevents me from reciting it. So, here is the original of *Fish's Nightsong* :

*Fisches Nachtgesang*

And here is the translation :

Fish's Night Song

