

Hans-Christian Oeser:

Dankesrede zur Verleihung des Rowohlt-Preises

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Members of the Jury, dear Thomas Plaul, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends!

„I have fallen in love.“ What does it mean, this phrase first attested in the year 1423? Did I stumble, tumble, plummet or plunge into a sea of emotion? Is it a fall from grace, the original Fall of Man, a sinful lapse? „Ich habe mich verliebt.“ What does that mean? The German prefix *ver-* implies complete annihilation: *verheeren*, *verwüsten*, *vernichten*, or it indicates a sense of disorientation: *sich vertun*, *sich verrennen*, *sich verirren*. Indeed, the verb *sich vergucken* contains both meanings: to fall for someone as well as not to see properly, thus encapsulating what Wilhelm Genazino calls „Liebesblödigkeit“.

„We made love.“ What does that mean? Do we make love as we make bread, as we make wine, as we make a baby? Is love the product of a corporeal activity? „Wir liebten uns.“ What does that mean? Does not the verb *lieben* denote a mental state, an affair of the heart? Where does that leave the physical aspect, the sexual dimension, the unutterable?

Why do I mention these intimate phrases on the festive occasion of a prize-giving ceremony when what I should be doing is express my gratitude to the Rowohlt Foundation and its Jury and to my laudator? Everything that can be said about the exact art of translation has been said time and again. I haven't got an ounce of wisdom to add to the profound insights gained

by theorists and practitioners alike. The only thing I can do is draw your attention to the fact that all languages, when under close scrutiny, seem very weird indeed. No language is superior or inferior to any other, they all can signify, express and communicate the same things – and they all fail to do so. In the above instances, neither language makes explicit what it wants to talk about, each is deficient, the linguistic subconscious does not come to the surface in either, something remains suppressed.

This is why Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt in his lucid essays on Sigmund Freud and the German language can categorically state: „Languages are languages because they do not say it all; their defectiveness and inadequacy are their innermost essence [...]“ „One would never know what a language misses out on, what it turns away from, what it refuses to say, what has drained away from it little by little, if it weren't for the other languages that do speak of it.”

It might be a *déformation professionnelle* that we translators, suffering from a linguistic inferiority complex, are prone to question the capacity and efficiency of our own language. How often do we bemoan the perceived fact that German cannot capture, or not with the same elegance, what English appears to be able to express so effortlessly? For that reason it helps to call to mind that every language, including that of our original text, is in itself insufficient, that every language has gaps and breaches into which steps another language. We must abandon the erroneous belief that it is the target language alone that is insufficient and that every translation is *per se* inadequate, a meagre *ersatz*. Robert Frost's well-known definition, „poetry is what gets lost in translation”, is as spurious as it is flippant.

One need not cite Walter Benjamin's metaphysical idea of a „pure language“ to which all translation aspires, his emphatic notion that the insufficiency of the original requires a „ripening“, an „afterlife“ in translation. Yet it is certainly true that an original, while by definition antecedent (*vorgängig*), is not necessarily superior (*vorrangig*) to its translation, just as a translation, while invariably derived from a pre-existing entity, always constitutes an original work in terms of the language employed. Goldschmidt sums it up with an aphorism which itself appears to be untranslatable: „Das anders Gesagte ist die Hoffnung des Sagens.“ Hence the indispensable dialogue between languages – translation. As Edith Grossman says: “Where literature exists, translation exists. Joined at the hip, they are absolutely inseparable.”

As translators we combine a philologist's scholarly rigour and scrupulous attention to detail with a writer's literary sensibility and creative skill. I refute the maxim that we ought to translate the original as the author would have written it if he had been writing in German. This is idle speculation. There is no way of knowing what any author would have done if he were not defined, and confined, by his own language, culture, social environment and so forth. The opposite is true. I must translate the book as I would write it if I myself were its original author. But at the same time I must translate it according to the only way in which it is accessible to me: through the prism of my own reading, understanding, interpretation and exegesis. As my rendition is but one of an indefinite number of many possible versions, translation remains “an infinite task of approximation” (August Böckh).

We struggle with the insufficiency of the source language and the imperfection of the original work just as much as we struggle with the deficits of the target language. No lazy phrase escapes our probing, no infelicities are overlooked. But when it comes to recreating diction, style, tone of voice, sound and rhythm, we tend to be tame and timid where we ought to be astute, audacious and adventurous. We must train our eye by reading, our ear by listening to German poetry and prose, must avoid the scourge of translationese, which consists of either servile literalism or a glib smoothing of rough edges, a tidying up of loose ends. Our German shouldn't be servile or smooth, it should be supple. And we should feel inspired by German writers, old and new. Why not even borrow from them? Why not, for instance, stealthily incorporate Kant's "interesseloses Wohlgefallen", Schillers "Rennen, Retten, Flüchten", Hölderlin's "das Rettende auch", Thomas Mann's „Wonnen der Gewöhnlichkeit“ into an imported piece of literature, where these expressions are at one and the same time foreign and indigenous?

German is, both syntactically and semantically, a rich language, combining an astonishing degree of flexibility with an equally astonishing degree of rigidity – flexibility in that we can shift around almost at will the constituent parts of speech, rigidity in that the verb must always be in second or, more importantly, in final position. German sentence structure is a peculiar one, possibly unique among European languages. Every sentence is full of suspense as the reader or listener has to wait for the second shoe to drop, for the intended meaning to finally reveal itself, the privileged verb or even an unprepossessing prefix split off the stem of the verb being the arbiter of sense.

“Ich habe mich gestern sehr über dich ...” Geärgert? Gewundert? Gefreut? Empört? As the linguist Judith Macheiner convincingly argued, a German sentence, however grammatically correct, is beautifully shaped only if the informational weight is placed at the end of the overall construction. The implication for the translator? Freedom is insight into necessity, even in the domain of syntax.

As for semantics, German vocabulary tends to be transparent, recognizable, concrete, visual, physical and spatial, open to constant invention or reinvention. We have such wonderful words: *mutterseelenallein* (in fact a corruption of *moi tout seul allein*), *Habseligkeiten* (in fact a derivation of *Habsel*), *Herbstzeitlose*, *Knabenmorgenblüenträume* and so forth. Someone made them up. We all can make them up, like children playing with building bricks. Thomas Bernhard gave us *Hochgebirgshabseligkeiten*. However, Goldschmidt is right to warn us: „Due to the simplicity of German composite nouns and their easy readability there arises a particular form of banality: Der *Preisträger* ist einer, der den Preis trägt [...]” Meine Damen und Herren, ich trage den Preis mit Freuden.

And now is the time to express my heart-felt gratitude to the Rowohlt Foundation and to Hoffmann und Campe for its generosity, to the Jury for its decision, to Thomas Plaul for his praise. Heinrich Heine, himself a great author, frankly admitted: „Every author, no matter how great, seeks praise for his work.“ So much the more every translator, however humble. But my special thanks go to my editors, two of whom shall be named tonight: Claudia Glenewinkel of Steidl Verlag and Angela Volknant of Hoffmann und Campe, without whose patience, diligence and competence I would not be able to strike a

balance, to steer the course between fidelity and liberty. Thank you to all!

Hans-Christian Oeser