

SOME REFLECTIONS ON PROSE TRANSLATION: THE CASE OF TWO VERSIONS OF THOMAS MANN'S DEATH IN VENICE

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General Propositions on Literary Translation

1. Translation is from first to last concerned with meaning. Literary translation is primarily concerned with imaginative, affective, connotative, moral and allegorical meaning; non-literary translation is concerned with factual and denotative meaning.

2. The more serious the text, the more accurately and economically it should be translated, reflecting the thought, style, emphasis and as far as possible, particularly in poetry, the sound of the original.

3. The more important the language of a text, which is on a scale from poetry (lyrical, the most private and personal form of translation, dramatic, epical), where every feature is important, through the short story, the novel, tragedy, drama, comedy to farce (the most public form of translation, where the cooperation of the audience/readership is most important), the more closely it should be translated.

4. A deviation from normal social usage in the source text should usually be reflected in the translation.

5. Culture, humour, laughter and sound require special consideration; sound should be reflected in onomatopoea, can be compensated in assonance, but often has to be sacrificed in alliteration, unless alliteration dominates the clause or the text. If laughter is essential in the original, it takes precedence over accuracy in the translation.

6. Essentially, non-literature, *Sachbücher*, is about objects and movements — third person language; literature, *belles-lettres*, is about individuals and their actions — first and second person language. Poetry is first person language.

7. The salient features of literary texts are the human qualities expressed in adjectives, adverbs, descriptive verbs, abstract nouns, and their compounds. These are often neologisms (cool, streetwise) and difficult to translate one to one, since they are culturally tinged (*gemütlich*, cosy).

8. Sound, speech-rhythms, colloquial language, linguistic innovation, are fundamental elements in literary language from poetry through drama to fiction, and have to be recreated in the translation. Speech-rhythms run through all good

writing, even when, like the masterly opening of *Bleak House*, it is only about fog.

9. Stylistic emphasis and linguistic stress are mainly achieved by word-order, which must be regarded by the translator, sometimes at the expense of lexical and syntactic accuracy.

10. Literary language is basically about persons, subjective, warm, emotional, personal; non-literary language overlaps with and fruitfully interacts with literary language, but is objective, impersonal, factual, cool, firm.

11. Literary language is concise, allegorical, complex; non-literary language is explicit, clear, denotative.

12. A serious literary text should be retranslated into the modern language, shorn of its cultural/ephemeral idioms and slang, every thirty years.

Particular Propositions on *Death in Venice*

1. The story has three kinds of language: "the short rapid early recitative of exchanges between Aschenbach and others; a lengthened measured line, which sometimes becomes verse; the straight literary prose of the ironic comment" (Myfanwy Piper, librettist of Benjamin Britten's great opera 'Death in Venice') (Piper 1989).

2. Helen Lowe-Porter (HLP)'s translation (Mann 1929) has strange omissions, howlers, slips, mistakes, inaccuracies, and unnecessary changes of emphasis. She also has some beautiful and accurate translations.

3. David Luke (DL)'s translation (Mann 1988) is accurate and gracefully written; it tends to be smoother than the original (undertranslation).

4. Both translations are individual and conform to no particular translation norms, except, in principle, the standards of accuracy and elegance; they make no cultural concessions to the reader.

5. In assessing a translation, one must indicate virtues and not simply concentrate on defects, as D. Luke, M. Beddow, and T. Buck mainly do with the Lowe-Porter translation.

6. HLP's translation appeared in 1929 (but was perhaps written earlier), DL's in 1988. His translation was overdue. HLP's "perforce" and "heretofore" would probably not appear now, nor DL's "They're hushing it up" (HLP: 'It should not be talked about') in 1929.

7. I do not think that HLP ruined Thomas Mann for anglophone readers in the way that has been suggested. Many readers have come to love Mann's fiction through her. There is enough good and accurate translation in HLP (in his correspondence, Mann commended her "superb command of English" to outweigh her extraordinary lapses — "she must have mislaid her spectacles" [Pauline Newmark, personal communication] — and inadequate knowledge of

German. But translators, rather than present-day readers, can still learn from her work.

Some Examples

A.

Gustav Aschenbach oder von Aschenbach, wie seit seinem funfzigsten Geburtstag amtlich sein Name lautete, hatte an einem Fruhlingsnachmittag des Jahres 19.. das unserem Kontinent monatelang eine so gefahdrohende Miene zeigte, von seiner Wohnung in der Prinzregentenstrasse zu Munchen aus allein einen weiteren Spaziergang unternommen. (Opening sentence of story)

Gustave Aschenbach — or von Aschenbach, as he had been known officially since his fiftieth birthday — had set out alone from his house in Prince Regent Street, Munich, for an extended walk. It was a spring afternoon in that year of grace 19—, when Europe sat upon the anxious seat beneath a menace that hung over its head for months. (HLP)

On a spring afternoon in 19—, the year in which for months on end so grave a threat seemed to hang over the peace of Europe, Gustav Aschenbach, or von Aschenbach, as he had been officially known since his fiftieth birthday, had set out from his apartment on the Prinzregentenstrasse in Munich to take a walk of some length by himself. (DL)

On a spring morning in 19.., the year which for so many months had turned a threatening mien on our continent, Gustav Aschenbach or von Aschenbach, his official title since his fiftieth birthday, had set out from his flat in the Prinzregentenstrasse in Munich to take a walk of some length on his own. (PN)

Notes:

1. Apart from the attempt to recover the grammatical metaphor, my version is merely a variation of DL's translation. HLP's version is extraordinary.
2. HLP keeps the initial emphasis but switches to an absurd image; has to split the sentence; inexplicably (perhaps to make it sound distinguished) frenchifies Aschenbach's first name, anglicizes the Munich street, and adds irony in "year of grace".
3. DL sacrifices the metaphor; adds "peace" to smooth out the sentence.
4. The 'personification' of "year" is not unusual in English ("The year saw many changes"), but may be too active here. However, the familiarization effect should tone the metaphor down; "our continent" has been restored as I see no good reason to change what Mann wrote.

B.

Standbild und Spiegel! Seine Augen umfassten die edle Gestalt dort am Rande des Blauen, und im aufschwärmenden Entzücken glaubte er mit diesem Blick das Schöne selbst zu begreifen, die Form als Gottesgedanken, die eine und reine Vollkommenheit, die im Geist lebt und von der ein menschliches Abbild und Gleichnis hier leicht und hold zur Anbetung aufgerichtet war. Da war der Rausch; und unbedenklich, ja gierig hiess der alternde Künstler ihn willkommen. Sein Geist kreiste [kreisste, 1913 S. Fischer edition], seine Bildung geriet ins Wallen, sein Gedächtnis warf uralte, seiner Jugend überlieferte und bis dahin niemals von eigenem Feuer belebte Gedanken auf (1912, Hyperion edition; 1964 Fischer edition, p. 50).

Mirror and image! His eyes took in the proud bearing of that figure there at the blue water's edge; with an outburst of rapture he told himself that what he saw was beauty's very essence; form as divine thought, the single and pure perfection which resides in the mind, of which an image and likeness, rare and holy, was here raised up for adoration. This was very frenzy -- and without a scruple, nay, eagerly, the aging artist bade it come. His mind was in travail, his whole mental background in a state of flux. Memory flung up in him the primitive thoughts which are youth's inheritance, but which with him had remained latent, never leaping up into a blaze. (HLP, p. 43)

A model and mirror! His eyes embraced that noble figure at the blue water's edge, and in rising ecstasy he felt he was gazing on Beauty itself, on Form as a thought of God, on the one and pure perfection which dwells in the spirit and of which a human image and likeness had here been lightly and graciously set up for him to worship. Such was his emotional intoxication, and the aging artist welcomed it unhesitatingly, even greedily. His mind was in labor, its store of culture was in ferment, his memory threw up thoughts from ancient tradition which he had been taught as a boy, but which had never yet come alive in his own fire. (DL, p. 237)

Statue and mirror! His eyes embraced the noble figure there at the edge of the blue sea, and with an upsurge of delight he thought that with this gaze he understood Beauty itself, Form as the concept of God, the one and pure Perfection, which lives in the spirit and of which a human image and likeness had here been lightly and graciously erected for him to worship. This was very frenzy, and without scruple, indeed avidly, the aging artist bade it welcome. His mind was in labour, his mental structures started to disintegrate, his memory cast up age-old thoughts which had been handed down from his youth, and which till then had never been quickened by his own fire. (PN)

Notes:

1. *Standbild*, 'statue', alludes to the "marble mass" of the previous sentence, and referred to as "statue".
2. *Des Blauen*. The contractive apostrophe would reduce the emphasis.
3. *Eine und reine*. The alliteration ("pure Perfection") partly compensates for the internal rhyme.
4. *Aufgerichtet*. "Erected" suggests the statue.
5. *Bildung*. Perhaps it goes back to the physical meaning of *bilden*, 'make-up', 'constitution'. I could not recreate the 'heaving' sense of disintegration, but I am surprised by both the published translations.
6. I don't understand the need for DL's elegant variations in the last sentence.
7. Although DL is as usual much closer than HLP, her "This was very frenzy, and without scruple, nay [now dated] eagerly, the aging artist bade it welcome" is excellent. Her lyrical passages are sometimes "felicitous", as DL once concedes.
8. Fischer Verlag prefer *kreisste* to *kreiste* (letter to Catherine Law of 19 November 1996), but retain *kreiste* in its 1991 and 1995 reprints!

C.

Der Schauende dort sass, wie er einst gesessen, als zuerst, von jener Schwelle zurückgesandt, dieser dämmergraue Blick dem seinen begegnet war. Sein Haupt war an der Lehne des Stuhles langsam der Bewegung des draussen Schreitenden gefolgt; nun hob es sich, gleichsam den Blicke entgegen, und sank auf die Brust, so dass seine Augen von unten sahen, indes sein Antlitz den schlaffen, innig versunkenen Ausdruck tiefen Schlummers zeigte. Ihm war aber, als ob der bleiche und liebliche Psychagog dort draussen ihm lächle, ihm winke; als ob er, die Hand aus der Hüfte lösend, hinausdeutete, voranschwebe ins Verheissungsvoll-Ungeheure. Und wie so oft, machte er sich auf, ihm zu folgen.

Minuten vergingen, bis man dem seitlich im Stuhle Hinabgesunkenen zu Hilfe eilte. Man brachte ihn auf sein Zimmer. Und noch desselben Tages empfing eine respektvoll erschütterte Welt die Nachricht von seinem Tode. (Close of story)

The watcher sat just as he had sat that time in the lobby of the hotel when first the twilight grey eyes had met his own. He rested his head against the chair-back and followed the movements of the figure out there, then lifted it, as it were in answer to Tadzio's gaze. It sank on his breast, the eyes looked out beneath their lids, while his whole face took on the relaxed and brooding expression of deep slumber. It seemed to him the pale and lovely Summoner out there smiled at him and beckoned; as though, with the hand he lifted from his hip he pointed outward as he hovered on before an immensity of richest

expectation. [Sentence omitted. Restored in Everyman 1991 edition: And as so often before, he rose to follow.]

Some minute passed before anyone hastened to the aid of the elderly man sitting there collapsed in his chair. They bore him to his room. And before nightfall a shocked and respectful world received the news of his decease. (HLP)

There the watcher sat, as he had sat once before when those twilight-grey eyes, looking back at him from that other threshold, had for the first time met his. Resting his head on the back of the chair, he had slowly turned it to follow the movements of the walking figure in the distance; now he lifted it towards this last look, then it sank down on his breast, so that his eyes stared up from below, while his head wore the inert, deep-sunken expression of profound slumber. But to him it was as if the pale and lovely soul-summoner out there were smiling to him, beckoning to him; as if he loosed his hand from his hip and pointed outwards, hovering ahead and onwards, into an immensity rich with unutterable expectation. And as so often, he set out to follow him.

Minutes passed, after he had collapsed sideways in his chair, before anyone hurried to his assistance. He was carried to his room. And later that same day the world was respectfully shocked to receive the news of his death. (DL)

There the watcher sat, as he had sat once before, when for the first time those twilight-grey eyes, turned back towards him from that other threshold, had met his own. His head, resting on the back of the chair had slowly followed the movements of the figure striding outside in the open air; now it rose, as though to meet those eyes, and then sank down on his breast, so that his eyes looked up from below, while his face had the slack, deep-sunken expression of profound slumber. But to him it was as though the pale and lovely soul-summoner over there were smiling to him, beckoning to him; as though, loosening his hand from his hip, he were pointing outwards, were hovering ahead into an immensity that was full of promise. And, as so often, he set out to follow him.

Minutes passed before anyone hurried to the assistance of the man who had slumped sideways in his chair. He was carried to his room. And later on the same day a shocked and respectful world received the news of his death. (PN)

Notes:

1. DL's translation is masterly. I have plainly followed him in some places, and have tried to avoid mere variations on his version.
2. Why did HLP here, as too often, omit words and/or sentences? Can she have mislaid her glasses?
3. "Slumped" is as though created for *hinabgesunkenen* here.
4. HLP's last sentence is closer and more dramatic than DL's.

References

- Mann T. (1929): *'Death in Venice' and Other Stories*. Transl. by H. Lowe-Porter. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books.
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- Piper M. (1989): "Writing for Britten", *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*. Ed. by D. Herbert. Herbert Press, pp. 8-12.