

Goethe

THREE TYPES OF TRANSLATION

From

*Noten und abhandlungen zu besserem
Verständnis des Westöstlichen Divan (1819)*

(Translated by Luna Wolf, 1968)



Since Germans are now coming to know the Orient through translations of every kind, there seems to be a need to repeat some facts that, though well known, cannot be sufficiently emphasized.

There are three types of translation. The first acquaints us with foreign countries from our own vantage point. A simple prose version is best for this purpose. Prose obliterates every characteristic feature of poetry and even quells poetic enthusiasm. But at first such a version is the most helpful because it unexpectedly brings superior foreign material into the closed circle of our national and everyday life and uplifts us without our being aware of it. Luther's translation of the Bible will always have such an effect.

Had the *Nibelungen* been put into sound prose from the very start and been called a popular romance, much would have been gained and the singular, grave, somber spirit of knighthood would have come through to the reader with full force. Whether this can or should still be done will best be determined by those who are more involved with these ancient subjects.

A second period follows, in which the translator supposedly wants to enter into the spirit of the foreign land, but in fact only tries to appropriate this spirit and reconstruct it in his national one. Such a period might be called *parodistic* in the purest sense of the word. As a rule intelligent people prefer this method. The French use it for translations of all poetic works; examples by the hundreds can be found in Delille's¹ renderings. The French adapt feelings, thoughts, and even objects as they do foreign words. They want substitutes grown

¹ Abbé Jacques Delille (1738-1813), French poet and translator of Virgil and Milton (1819).

in their own soil for every foreign fruit.

Wieland's² translations belong to this manner and kind. He too had particular interests and sympathies which allowed him to grasp only those aspects of an ancient or foreign work that suited him. This excellent writer may be considered a representative of his time; he was particularly effective because what appealed to him, and the way he absorbed and reconstructed it, was exactly in tune with contemporary tastes.

However, since it is not possible to long remain in either the complete or the incomplete, but one transformation must always be followed by another, the third period comes about. It may be called the highest or the last – the attempt to make the translation identical with the original so that the one is not accepted instead of but actually takes the place of the other.

This method met with the strongest opposition at first. The translator who associates himself closely with his original more or less abandons the genius of his own nation. Thus a third quality appears which popular taste must first assimilate.

The praiseworthy Voss³ could not satisfy the public until it had gradually heard and felt its way into the new manner. But those who are able to appraise the results – who can see how much was gained in versatility, how many rhetorical, rhythmic, metrical advantages were won for intelligent, talented young Germans, and the different guises in which Ariosto and Tasso, Shakespeare and Calderón can now appear to us as Germanized foreigners – hope that literary history will honor those who first ventured upon this difficult road.

Hammer's⁴ work points to a generally similar treatment of Oriental masterpieces. His ability to retain the outer form must be especially commended. Hammer's translation of passages from Ferdusi⁵ shows to particular advantage when compared to that of an adapter

² Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813), German poet and novelist; translator of Shakespeare and classical poets.

³ Johann Heinrich Voss (1751-1826), German poet and translator of Homer.

⁴ Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774-1856), Austrian orientalist and translator.

⁵ Ferdusi (939-1020/25?), Persian poet; author of *Shah Nameh* (Book of Kings).

whose work can be found in the *Treasure-Trove*.⁶ The latter's way of transforming a poet is one of the saddest blunders that a diligent, otherwise competent translator can make.

These three periods repeat themselves in every literature; the different methods can even be used simultaneously. Therefore prose translations of the *Shah Nameh*⁷ and of *Nisami*⁸ would still be appropriate. They could be used for quick reading, to get at the main ideas. The wonderful historical and ethical aspects could be enjoyed while the character and thoughts of these works grew increasingly familiar, until finally the reader would find himself in total sympathy with them.

The distinct success in Germany of a translation of *Sakontala*⁹ done in this manner must be remembered. It can be ascribed to the kind of ordinary prose in which the poetry was dissolved. But the time has come for a translation in the third manner, which renders the various dialects, the rhythmic, metrical, and prosaic individuality of the original. This would bring renewed enjoyment of this poem in a version that fully reflected the original. Since there is a manuscript of this work in Paris, a German living there could perform an incalculable service by doing such a version.

The English translator of *Megha-Dhuta*¹⁰ also deserves all praise, because the first acquaintance with a work of this magnitude is always important. But his translation actually belongs to the second period, and is paraphrastic and expansive; it is attractive to the "Northeastern" ear and mind because of the iambic pentameter. However, I was able to see

⁶ *Treasure-Trove: Fundgruben des Orients*, a collection of Oriental literature in German, ed. by Hammer, 1809.

⁷ By Ferdusi.

⁸ Nisami (1141-1203), Persian poet.

⁹ An ancient Hindu drama by Kalidasa (third cent. A.D.?), originally in Sanskrit and Prakrit of the Bengali recension.

¹⁰ A poem by Kalidasa, from the Sanskrit.

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a few verses done by Kosegarten¹¹ directly from the original, and these naturally give a totally different impression. In addition, the Englishman took the liberty of transposing the themes, something that the experienced esthetic eye immediately discerns and condemns.

A brief explanation is needed for calling the third period the last one. A translation that strives for complete identification with the original finally approaches the interlinear version and greatly facilitates our understanding of the original. The reader is led, even driven by it to the basic text, and so the circle is closed in which the foreign and indigenous, the known and unknown move.

Source : *Delos*, Austin, Texas, no. 1, 1968, p. 188-190.

¹¹ Johan Gottfried Ludwig Kosegarten (1792-1862), German scholar and translator of Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Sanskrit.