THE TRANSLATOR AND THE FORM-CONTENT DILEMMA IN LITERARY TRANSLATION

BY JAMES A. HAYES

Many critics have attempted to suggest a system of universally valid criteria for carrying out the translating process: but for every individual proposal, it seems that a second can be formulated, from a differing point of view, to contradict the first.[1] Therefore, it is my belief that it will always remain an impossibility to establish any one set of principles that can be made to fit all translating situations. Even if we limit the discussion to the translation of literary prose, that one category still encompasses a virtually infinite range of types and styles. Thus, the nature of the text itself is the first of several major variables to be considered in preparing to translate any work.[2] Another is the audience for whom the translation is intended.

A third important variable, often overlooked, is the translator himself. It is reasonable to speculate that he is likely to produce a better translation of a work for which he feels some special affinity than of a random work for which he he happens to be commissioned. Moreover, just as accomplished actors portray Hamlet differently and concert musicians give different renditions of the same Bach fugue, skilled translators will also interpret a literary work in various ways; for every translator has his own unique personality, his own special understanding of the source and target languages, and his own individual method of performing the translating function. Therefore, no matter how strong a desire may exist to preserve and transmit the character of the original author's writing, the critic must remain aware that the translator's Self is also present in any translation. After all, he exercises a great deal of interpretive judgment at each step of the translating process. First, he reads the original work in order to understand it thoroughly; next, he identifies the devices through which his author has achieved any special effects; third, he decides which lexical and syntactical adjustments will best reproduce

[1] For a list of contrasting suggestions see Theodore Savory, *The Art of Translation,* 1st American ed. rev. (Boston: The Writer, Inc., 1968), p. 50.

[2] For an informative discussion of different types of texts see Katharina Reiß, "Der Texttyp als Ansatzpunkt für die Lösung von Übersetzungsproblemen," *Linguistica Antverpiensia,* VII (1973), pp. 111-27.

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those effects in the target language; and fourth, he produces a literary work in his own idiom. The translator himself is thus a working critic; and anyone who undertakes to examine a translation from a critical point of view should make it his business to scrutinize the translator's *interpretation* and his success in carrying out the four essential functions. However, he should avoid making harsh judgments unless the translation is demonstrably incorrect or inept.

It is the translator's central task to achieve equivalence; and ideally he will strive toward equivalence both of content and of form, but inevitably he will encounter situations in which the one must be relinquished in order that the other may be preserved. The result is almost always a loss. However, when Nida asserts, "Only rarely can one reproduce both form and content in a translation, and hence in general form is usually sacrificed for the sake of the content," he is begging the question from a point of view that regards all translating as a primarily linguistic function.[3] On the other hand, there is the conflicting view that considers translation—especially literary translation—to be primarily a literary activity; but when Jiří Levý demands that the original sentence structure be preserved in the final translation, he is in effect suggesting that in some cases form be retained at the expense of content.[4] With the words "in general. . . usually" Nida appears intuitively less certain of his position than Levý, whose dictum is simply presented as a code letter in a tabular listing of variable and non-variable elements in different types of translations.

Finding a satisfactory solution to the form-content dilemma becomes more and more difficult as the formal aspects of a work expand and grow in complexity. One of the most elusive features of literary prose, and certainly one of the most difficult to preserve in translation, is its cadence. Thomas Mann once commented:

> In writing, I can assure you, an idea is quite often merely the product of a rhythmic demand: it is put in for the sake of the cadence, and not for its own sake, although it may seem so. I am convinced that the most mystical and powerful attraction of prose lies in its rhythm, the canons of which are so much more delicate than those of obvious versification.[5]

[3] Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), p. 157.

[4] Jiří Levy, *Dze literarische Übersetzung: Theorie einer Kunstgattung,* trans. from Czech into German by Walter Schamschula (Frankfurt am Main and Bonn: Athenaum Verlag, 1969), p. 19.

[5] Thomas Mann, "An Bruno Walter zum siebzigsten Geburtstag," in *Altes und Neues* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1961), p. 738. The translation is mine.

Mann was of course an intensely self-conscious stylist, and rhythmic elements are probably more readily identifiable in his prose than in the writing of other authors. Of the nine paragraphs that make up the first chapter of his "Der Tod in Venedig," for example, all but two are composed of three sentences; and the impression of control made by the style is increased still more by the occurrence of many three-part parallelisms and other rhetorical figures.

I have chosen to base this disucssion on a special feature of "Der Tod in Venedig," first, because the story is comparatively well known in the English-speaking world, and second, because form and content play such strikingly interdependent parts in transmitting its total message. Further, having recently completed a detailed stylistic examination of the two translations of the story that exist in English, I believe that I have gained some insight into the nature of the problems confronting the translator who must deal with the intricacies of such a work.

In the excerpts that follow it will no doubt become apparent that both translations exhibit several lexical and stylistic variations with regard to the original text. Many of these variations are radical changes which would need close critical inspection in a more extensive study. However, for the present I am setting aside the discussion of such matters in order to direct attention to Mann's philosophical comment about form early in the novella and then to the rhetorical "proof' of the idea by means of a particular stylistic device. My purpose here is to explore the treatment of that device in the two translations, one by Kenneth Burke, the other by H. T. Lowe-Porter.

Mann's narrator makes the following observation in the second chapter of "Der Tod in Venedig":

> Und hat nicht Form zweierlei Gesicht? Ist sie nicht sittlich und unsittlich zugleich,—sittlich als Ergebnis und Ausdruck der Zucht, unsittlich aber und selbst widersittlich, sofern sie von Natur eine moralische Gleichgiiltigkeit in sich schließt, ja wesentlich bestrebt ist, das Moralische unter ihr stolzes und unumschranktes Szepter zu beugen? (455)[6]

(MT: And does not form have two (kinds of) face[s]? Is it not

[6] All quotations from "Der Tod in Venedig" in this discussion are followed by a page number in parentheses; this number refers to the 1966 edition of *Die Erzählungen* (Stockholmer Ausgabe; Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag).

> moral and unmoral at the same time,—moral as [a] product and expression of [good] breeding, but unmoral and even countermoral insofar as by nature it embodies moral indifference, essentially strives in fact to humble moral [substance] before its proud and arbitrary scepter?)'

The relationship of this concept to the structure of Aschenbach's life as a whole seems clear enough as to need no additional explanation here. I believe it is somewhat less immediately apparent, however, that there is also a thematic connection between these words and the occurrence of certain metric patterns later in the story. Bearing in mind Mann's statement that an idea is often the product of a rhythmic demand, I suggest that this particular passage may be an example of that contingency. Taken from a stylistic point of view, it comes almost as an afterthought appended to a discussion of the moral-ethical growth revealed in Aschenbach's writings. Further, it provides the only explicit suggestion in the narrative to account for the appearance of classical hexameters in the prose.

In the breakfast scene, when Aschenbach sees the beautiful Tadzio for the second time, he is reminded of a verse from the *Odyssey:* "Oft veranderten Schmuck und warme Bader und Ruhe" (473) (MT: Often-changed adornment and warm baths and rest). At this moment a metrical dimension is added to the prose rhythm of the narrative. That this quotation is itself a translation into German is a less significant circumstance than might be the case if the meaning of the words contributed more toward developing the plot. As it is, however, the line is quite innocuous as far as its content is concerned; its main importance is its form, the classical hexameter. Its significance is its formal connection with the change beginning to take place in Aschenbach; for when the same form recurs almost immediately in the text, it is a thematic extension of the philosophical observation in Chapter Two. Moments after Aschenbach recalls the *Odyssey* verse, his thoughts about Tadzio take this shape:

> Auf diesem Kragen aber, der nicht einmal sonderlich elegant zum Charakter des Anzugs passen wollte, *ruhte die Blüte des Hauptes in unvergleichlichem Liebreiz,*—das *Haupt des Eros, vom gelblichen Schmelze parischen Marmors* [italics mine, here and in all other passages quoted in this discussion]. (p. 474)

[7] "Minimal transfer" (MT) is Nida's convenient term to describe a translation in which only those adjustments are made that are necessary to make the text understandable in the target language. Additions to the original are indicated by brackets, and elements to be omitted in the final version are enclosed in parentheses.

(MT: On this collar, however, which did not even make any claim to being especially elegantly appropriate to the character of his suit, rested the flower of his head in incomparable charm, — the head of Eros, with the yellowish glaze of Parian marble.)

Nida suggests that classical Greek rhythms may best be rendered in iambic form in English, because our ear is unaccustomed to the extended beat of the dactyls.[8] Since Levý's table of characteristics also indicates that a change of rhythmic patterns is permissible in literary prose, it appears that a kind of run-on blank verse would provide one alternative to the problem of reproducing the effect of the original here. Thus, in the passage above, the translator has a choice between preserving the exact form used by Mann or making some adjustment that will transmit a similar effect, in terms perhaps more appropriate to the target language. If he decides that the effect of the passage can most successfully be reproduced through iambic rhythms, it seems to me that he should also translate the *Odyssey* quotation as an iambic verse, as Burke has done: "A frequent change of dress; warm baths, and rest" (p. 42.).[9] Burke, however, apparently unaware of all the implications of his decision, fails to remain consistent with his own interpretation. He translates the subsequent passage:

This collar lacked the distinctiveness of the blouse, but above it the flowering head was poised with an incomparable seductiveness — the head of an Eros, in blended yellows of Parian marble. (p. 43)

The dactylic rhythms of the two phrases following the dash are almost certain to pass unnoticed here — first, because Burke does not reproduce the form of the hexameter preceding the dash, and second, because he has changed the form of the *Odyssey* quotation.

Electing a different approach, Lowe-Porter simply quotes the *Odyssey* verse in German in her version, not bothering to give it in English. Then later she translates:

The lad had. . . a simple white standing collar round the neck — a not very elegant effect — yet above this collar the head was poised

[8] Nida, p. 170.

[9] The page numbers following quotations from Burke's version refer to *Death in Venice,* trans. *by* Kenneth Burke (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1965).

like a flower in incomparable loveliness. It was the head of Eros, with the yellowish bloom of Parian marble. (p. 399)[10]

She does preserve some of the dactylic rhythms; but the phrase "in incomparable loveliness" is so retardant that it interrupts any possible rhythmic flow. In addition, the last sentence has eight accents instead of six; and it is separated from the preceding thought, rather than added to it, by the change in punctuation.

Apparently neither translator fully recognized the importance of the relationship between the classical verse and the recurrence of the same form in Aschenbach's thoughts." The oversight is especially unfortunate, because toward the end of "Der Tod in Venedig" the dactylic passages become a stylistic framework for the content of the narrative; and the final translations would be a great deal more successful if each of the translators had not chosen a course that directly conflicts with the approach implied by their treatment of the first hexameter. The fact is that Burke continues in the last two chapters to try to preserve the dactyls, while Lowe-Porter tends toward iambic combinations.

Following are the opening lines of Chapter Four of "Der Tod in Venedig"; and if the translator is to transmit them successfully, he must have a clear understanding of their function in the story as a unified work of art.

Nun Tag fur Tag lenkte der Gott mit den hitzigen Wangen nackend sein gluthauchendes Viergespann durch die Raume des Himmels, und sein gelbes Gelock flatterte im zugleich ausstürmenden Ostwind. Weißlich seidiger Glanz lag auf den Weiten des trage wallenden Pontos. (p. 486)

(MT: Now day by day the naked god with the hot cheeks steered his fire-breathing team-of-four through the spaces of the heaven[s], and his yellow locks streamed in the east wind [that was] storming forth at the same time. White silken shimmer lay on

[10] The page numbers for the Lowe-Porter quotations refer to her version of the story as it appears in Mann's *Stories of Three Decades*, trans. by H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1936).

[11] The difficulty of producing some sort of passable hexameter does not seem overwhelming; for example, the final translation might be "poised like a flower, his head was crowned with unmatchable charm—the head of an Eros, with yellowish lustre of Parian marble." My own preference, however, would be blank verse: "his head, held poised—the flower's crowning charm—was Eros' head, in yellowed Paros marble."

the expanses of the languidly undulating ponto.)[12]

The atmosphere of classical antiquity established by the mythological allusions and dactylic rhythms appears to be the most important feature of this passage. Nevertheless, the basic information must also be transmitted: Time is passing; it is sunny, hot, and windy. The sluggishly moving sea is reflecting light.

This passage appears to present a situation that confirms the opinion that no single set of principles can solve all the problems of translating. For example, Levý's table of translation characteristics declares that the denotative meaning of words in the translation of literary prose is a non-variable element. However, in this case to insist upon precise lexical faithfulness (not to mention sentence structure), while demanding competent versification at the same time, would be to place the translator under an absurd and arbitrary restriction. If he finds it necessary for the sake of his meter to speak of the god's "blazing gaze" instead of his "hot cheeks," he must be free to do so in a passage of this kind. The important thing here is that he transmit the information in rhythmic, Hellenistic terms in the target language; and if in doing so he is also successful in suggesting the effects of the original, he will produce a *reliable* literary translation.

Nida speaks of "dynamic" as opposed to "formal" equivalence. I avoid using these terms in the same way; for I believe the word "dynamic" to be appropriate in describing any reliable translation, either of form or of content. More specifically, I reject any implication that formal equivalence is somehow undynamic.

Burke and Lowe-Porter both manage to transmit some of the rhythms in their translations of the passage above. If we make allowance for a few slight irregularities that correspond with similar irregularities in the rhythm of the original, it can be said that both translations are reliable at this point in the narrative. Burke, for example, does preserve a number of the dactylic rhythms:

> *Day after day now the naked god with the hot cheeks* drove his fire-breathing quadriga across the expanses of the sky, *and his yellow locks fluttered in the assault of the east wind. A* white silk sheen stretched *over the slowly simmering Ponto.* (p. *61)*

[12] The word "ponto" is Italian, a poetic word for the sea. I chose not to translate or italicize it here; naturally, other interpretations are possible.

Also, some iambic combinations are evident in Lowe-Porter's translation:

> Now daily *the naked god with cheeks aflame* drove his four fire-breathing steeds *through heaven's spaces; and with him streamed the strong east wind thatfluttered his yellow locks. A sheen,* like white satin, *lay over all the idly rolling sea's expanse.* (p. 409)

One early critic, Josef Hofmiller, wrote that he considered Mann the most musically sophisticated *(musikalisch feinster)* author of his time. He points out that Aschenbach's nightmare in the fifth chapter begins with dactylic combinations and builds to the point where one perfect hexameter after another can be identified.[13] Here is a short sample:

> Lockte er nicht auch ihn, den widerstrebend Erlebenden, schamlos beharrlich zum Fest und Unmaß des äußersten Opfers? Groß war sein Abscheu, groß seine Furcht, redlich sein Wille, bis zuletzt das Seine zu schiitzen gegen den Fremden, den Feind des gefaßten und wiirdigen Geistes. (p. 517)
>
> (MT: Was he not luring him, too, the reluctant learner, in a brazenly stubborn [way] to the celebration and excess of the ultimate sacrifice? Great was his loathing, great his fear, honest his will, to protect to the end [what was] his against the stranger, the enemy of the calm and dignified mind.)

Burke's translation includes enough phrases with a distinct rhythmic structure to make it apparent that he is trying to approximate the forms of the original:

> *He who was fighting against this experience—did it not coax him too,* with its shameless penetration, *into the feast and the excesses* of the extreme sacrifice? *His repuganance, his fear, were keen—he was honorably set on defending himself* to the very last against the barbarian, the foe to intellectual poise and dignity. (p. 102)

Likewise, allowing for some slight irregularities, Lowe-Porter's version includes several extended iambic combinations:

> *Beguiling too it was to him who struggled in the grip* of these sights and sounds, shamelessly awaiting *the coming feast and uttermost surren-*

[13] Josef Hofmiller, "Thomas Manns 'Der Tod in Venedig,' " in *Interpretationen: Deutsche Erzählungen von Wieland bis Kafka,* ed. by Jost Schillemeit ("Fischer Biicherei des Wissens," 721: Frankfurt am Main and Hamburg: Fischer Biicherei KG., 1966), p. 312; originally in *Siiddeutsche Monatshefte,* X (1913).

> *der. He trembled, he shrank, his will was steadfast to preserve* and uphold his own god against this stranger who was sworn *enemy to dignity and self control.* (p. 431)

However, although both translators have made an attempt at suggesting the rhythms of this passage, neither has succeeded in reproducing the full impact of the original at this crucial moment in the narrative.

The significance and the pervasiveness of Mann's metrical framework becomes more obvious when we discover that it occurs not only in such clearly poetic passages as those already cited, but also in situations like this:

> *Er war fruh auf, wie sonst wohl bei pochendem Arbeitsdrange, und vor den meisten am Strand, wenn die Sonne noch milde* war und das Meer weiß blendend in Morgentraumen lag. *Er grüßte menschenfreundlich den Wachter der Sperre, grüßte auch vertraulich den barfüßigen Weißbart, der ihm die Statte bereitet,* das braune Schattentuch ausgespannt, die *Möbel der Hutte hinaus auf die Plattform geruckt hatte, und lies sich nieder.* (p. 455)
>
> (MT: He was up early, as [he was] otherwise under the crushing pressure of work, and on the beach before most, when the sun was still mild and the sea lay blinding white in morning dreams. [With] human friendliness he greeted the guard of the enclosure, also familiarly greeted the barefoot graybeard, who had prepared his place for him, spread the brown awning, pulled the furniture out of the cabin onto the platform; and [then he] settled himself.)

The italicized phrases here are hexameter beginnings and endings, not perfect hexameters; but, coming so closely crowded together in a short passage such as this, they create nearly the same effect. Apparently — and this would bear out the assertion that the Anglo-Saxon ear is not attuned to the rhythms of the classical hexameter — neither translator sensed all of the metric qualities of the passage. Burke translates:

> *He was up as early as he used to be when under the driving pressure of work,* and he was on the beach before most people, when the sun was still mild and the sea lay blinding white in the dreaminess of morning. He spoke amiably to the guard of the private beach, and also spoke familiarly to the barefoot, white-bearded old man who had prepared his place for him, stretching the brown canopy and bringing the furniture of the cabin out on the platform. Then he took his seat (pp. 63-64).

The opening clause here can, it is true, be read in such a way as to produce a rhythmic effect; but the translation is quite close to the minimal transfer, and since the rhythms are not sustained throughout the rest of the passage, it seems unlikely that the effect is intentional. Similarly, although a few combinations in Lowe-Porter's version can be read rhythmically, there are too few of them to suggest anything more than coincidence:

> He rose early—as *though he had a panting press of work—and was among the first* on the beach, *when the sun was still benign* and *the sea lay dazzling white* in its morning slumber. He gave the watchman a friendly good-morning and chatted with the barefoot, white-haired old man who prepared his place, spread the awning, trundled out the chair and table onto the little platform. Then he settled down. (p. 410).

Apart from both translators' failure to be consistent with themselves in repeating the form of the *Odyssey* verse, I believe that their renderings have another, more serious weakness. Even though both have managed occasionally to convey some sense of the rhythmic effects of the original text, neither has done enough to make meter a unifying thematic framework, not only in the dream, but throughout the whole of the final two chapters of the story. Whether or not Burke's dactyls are as successful as Lowe-Porter's iambic combinations in transmitting certain isolated effects is a question that only the individual reader can answer, but it seems likely that a reader who needs an English translation in the first place will be more responsive to the regular rhythm of blank verse.

I wish to emphasize that my purpose in this discussion has not been to belittle the efforts of either translator. Instead, I have tried to show how each of them attempted to solve just one of the innumerable problems that confront anyone who undertakes to translate a work as complex as "Der Tod in Venedig." At the time when these two translations were made, little scholarly attention had yet been devoted to the translating process. The critical commentary available fifty years ago was largely unorganized and essayistic. Only in recent years has there been any attempt to bring order to the study; and progress toward establishing a workable, generally accepted theory of translation is still in an embryonic stage today.

Until recently much of what passed for literary-translation criticism was little more than a sneering exposure of a handful of relatively inconsequential lexical errors in a lengthy novel. Today,

however, we have at our disposal a considerable volume of research by scholars who regard translation as a discipline in its own right, one that applies linguistic procedures in another area of learning such as medicine, law, technology, and many others. In the light of what we have learned, I believe that it is the critic's obligation to help the translator understand the nature of the problems to be solved, not to demand rigid adherence to any system of preconceived solutions. With regard to literature, the critic's function should consist chiefly of examining the translation of any given work and suggesting possible alternative methods of dealing with the difficulties inherent in the original. If a program could be established to carry out this work, the result would be a collection of enormously useful technical information, valuable to other critics and translators alike.

The translator can make a contribution toward the goal of excellence by refusing to allow any systems or decisions to be imposed upon him. Assuming that he has taught himself the fundamental techniques and procedures of his art, his skills plus his integrity are ample assurance that he will attempt to make intelligent decisions with an awareness of his responsibilities to his author and his readers; for a sense of dedication is almost certainly prerequisite to any genuine achievement in translating.[14]

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[14] Some of the material in this paper was presented at a "Forum on Translation and Literary Criticism" at SUNY Binghamton, June 7, 1975.