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HANS MAGNUS ENZENSBERGER: TRANSLATING AS WRITING HOME

Becoming a Translator

Hans Magnus Enzensberger was born as the oldest of four boys on November 11, in 1929 in Kaufbeuren, a village in the south of Germany. He has shared, observed, and criticised his home country's fate and development for seventy years. During World War Two, in his puberty, he witnessed the internal and external destruction of his home country. This experience probably permanently altered his relationship to Germany. It could not remain "the home" anymore, in the sense of an implicitly safe haven; rather it became a tenuous concept. Early in his life he had become aware of the abysses, separations, and destructive forces between countries, peoples, and ideas. Although Germany was home because this is where his family lived, where he was born and spent his childhood with his three brothers, Germany could never be his only home. His numerous residential addresses show clearly that there have been other places he lived in to gain a necessary distance from Germany. The place he has fled from so often though, has also been the place he has always come back to. It has honoured him with a number of prizes, among them the Georg Büchner Prize in 1963, Germany's most prestigious literary award. Still, considering all the countries he lived in for shorter or longer periods of time, it becomes clear how transient he has been.

What made him move? And what gave him the energy to constantly open his heart and mind to new environments, to new people, new cultures, in short: to new worlds? The first question can be answered by noting what he himself once remarked: He could not call Germany home anymore after the fatal destruction German politics had spread during the Third Reich. The further away he got, the better. In an interview with Erich Kuby he said that it was anger, not disgust with his people, that made him go. The result was a nomadic restlessness which first brought him to Paris (Sorbonne) to study, then to Norway, later to Italy, back to Norway, where he has a daughter and a house, to the Soviet Union, and to South America. Then to the USA, where he held a fellowship at the Centre for Advanced Study at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. He gave up the fellowship and travelled to Japan, Cuba, Rwanda, Belgrade and Budapest, and again to the United States.

The second question is very likely related to how he became a

translator and thus an ambassador of culture. In his luggage, there always was a book from the country he had lived in. With it, by translating it into German, he wrote home to Germany about the culture he had just discovered. He translated the countries he lived and travelled in, France, Italy, Sweden, the United States, South America, and England.

Life in other Countries

Does he speak all the above mentioned languages? More or less, he himself says, others claim that Enzensberger speaks at least ten languages. This is not difficult to imagine, considering how close he apparently has come to his ever changing neighbours, while nevertheless remaining in the position of the observer, the essayist, the translator. The writer Lars Gustafson, one of the authors Enzensberger has translated, describes him as one of the few authentic Scandinavia experts, and suspects that he knows as much about the USA, Italy, or England. Mario Vargas Llosa also confirmed that he is "one of the few European intellectuals who can speak about Latin America with real assurance, without descending into stereotypes".¹ Knowing a language opens doors to understanding specific ways of a people. Especially someone like Enzensberger, for whom everything is connected to words, must consider the language as an inroad to the heart of a culture. Hans Magnus Enzensberger has always searched for that heart.

In *Ach Europa*,² a collection of essays and articles on seven European countries, he shares his European experiences with his readers, as he has so often done. While discovering the portrayed countries, their peoples, and the specific characteristics and idiosyncrasies, was he searching for another home? Reading the essays one fathoms Enzensberger's deep sympathy and understanding for each of the described countries. Though maybe eventually also his feelings of alienation and irritation. About Italy he said to his colleague Alfonso Berardinelli: "Here in Venice they treat you like a stranger, even after knowing you for years; you'll never fit in, and they'll never accept you".³ A translation also serves as a memory of a place, a transient home. Where other visitors would bring home little replicas of the Eiffeltower or the Statue of Liberty as souvenirs, Enzensberger would bring home a translation. A country's poems and novels have spoken much more honestly to him about the people and those things under the surface.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger's Intellectual and Political Space

Even though his translations are probably not what he is known for best in Germany and elsewhere, they are a symbol for his life, just as his life's story speaks of translating: other languages into his mother tongue, opinions of one group of people into a language that could be understood by others, and hidden meaning into something that made sense and was often ahead of its time.

His book length essay *Die grosse Wanderung* [The Great Migration]⁴ is probably an entailment of his own wandering and the attempt to understand migration and its continuing significance in world history. One of the main themes of his life has apparently been situated in the realm of displacement, or in that of transcending the eminent boundaries of his own national origins. His role has been that of the outsider wherever he was and at the same time that of the insider, immersing himself in the foreign culture. Someone who, wherever he was, went straight to the core of the political trouble, the heart of the cultural discourse, by getting involved while still remaining in the observer's position, writing, translating, and commenting about these heated developments.

From the outside it seems that politically Hans Magnus Enzensberger has often situated himself in the space in between more radical groups. In the sixties, revolutionary students called him "the running dog of the capitalists" while retrospectively he can be called more of an ally than of an enemy to the student revolts. His attempt to organise a student trip to Cuba with student leader Rudi Dutschke failed because Fidel Castro's authorities had second thoughts about these unproductive German students. Especially Enzensberger must have seemed suspicious, since he had already been reporting on Cuba in Germany for a while.

Enzensberger went there anyway, stuck his nose in all over the place, and brought home the (translated) stories of the people and the political situation. These revelations changed the opinions of many European intellectuals about the island's political course.

For Germans, Hans Magnus Enzensberger is a man of many strong opinions, sometimes referred to as chameleon, others might call him a political nonconformist. There is a certain tendency in Germany to suspect playfulness when combined with intellect, elegance when it attempts to make a statement other than one related to fashion, and virtuosity that leaves the ones less flexible behind. Enzensberger has been suspected of superficiality, there were doubts about his depth. For some he has been too nimble and agile. Someone who knows him, though, his friend György Konrad, describes him as a correspondent from revolutionary regions of whatever kind, sometimes biased, but never irreversibly so because of what Konrad calls Enzensberger's

"writer's tools", that is his ability to distance himself.

Overcoming Traditions

Hans Magnus Enzensberger has definitely not stagnated, and yet a few things have remained consistent. Even if the notion of this consistency does probably not take the wind out of the sails of his critics, they should slow down and reconsider. Throughout his life Hans Magnus Enzensberger has always been impatient with well-worn jargons and ideas, banalities, and the predictable. Enlightenment has been his leitmotif. He has distanced himself from everything that threatened to become totalitarian, or doctrinal. This not only applies to politics and everyone who is involved, but also to literature and blind devotion to the "great masters". In a conversation with film director Alexander Kluge, he said: "I think we should deal with tradition like this: pick out what we can use and throw away the rest. To carry something with us just because of a famous name attached is useless."⁵

This fearlessness in the face of tradition and fame also shows in his experimentations with poetic forms; among them the invention of what he named "paradrama". In *Titanic*,⁶ created in 1980, he mixed musical, comedy, cabaret, and put all that in a poetical form. Ovid next to his own works in a collection of poetry does not show irreverence but rather a direct approach to that which others' see fit to put in dusty bookshelves. He has brought Germans closer to authors otherwise forgotten by putting a little light next to their names.

Necessary Translations

Hans Magnus Enzensberger's taste for the international, for that which goes beyond the direct understanding, was first put to use in his working as a translator and interpreter for his local city hall in Nuremberg. According to his brother, Hans Magnus took this job to outdo the younger sibling who helped the family during the occupation by working in a kitchen, for which the English occupants payed him with food. Today this brother, Christian, is considered one of the best and most interesting translators of English into German. His other brother, Ulrich, is also a translator, among other careers.

Translation as a necessity appeared early in Magnus and his three younger brothers' lives: Their late father, Andreas Enzensberger, translated English books into German right after the war. At that time it was difficult to get German books, and in need of reading, Andreas filled the time by translating, the results of which he read to his wife, Lori. He never thought of publishing any of these works, though.

Instead, he earned the family's living in the position of director of the telephone exchange in Nuremberg. With this, he was not too far removed from translation, since he helped to facilitate the exchange of signs on just another level. The urge to translate in this family is clearly hereditary, perhaps sparked by the feeling that something was missing, that something needed to be brought in, imported, that 'the other' is an enrichment for one's self.

Writing and Translating

It might have become clear that Hans Magnus Enzensberger's personality is not easy to capture. One of the reasons for this is, that content, form, and sheer size of his work are so extensive. If one says he is a writer it has to be further defined that he is a poet, a novelist, a playwright, and an essayist, and that he has written children's books, radio reports and radio plays. One must say that he is also familiar with libretto and music. He has appeared in numerous talk shows on radio and TV, and has attended important political meetings. (Having no swim suit in Crimea once Krushchev lent him one). He has discussed and has been discussed in literary circles. He is an editor and a publisher, who has certainly changed Germany's literary landscape, by both his own work and by what he has published and edited. He has often crossed boundaries. Recently he was invited to a world convention of mathematicians because of his book about a young boy's journey into the realm of numbers.

Last but not least, he is a translator. He has translated from English, Spanish, Swedish, and Italian. Sometimes, he has co-translated his own work, once for example with Jerome Rothenberg, into English. The plain title of the collection, even though written and translated very early in his life: "Poems for People Who Don't Read Poems", reveals one of the fundamental corner posts of his writer's and translator's philosophy: to open up cultures and realities, not to an elite, but to whomever he can reach. In 1960 he published a collection of poetry which Alexander Kluge called Hans Magnus Enzensberger's private "Arche Noah". With this publication Enzensberger started something that has since become popular. Together with the translation, he gave the source text, which then was uncommon practice in Germany.⁷ Enzensberger had collected poems from different countries, covering the time between 1910 and 1945. This was, he said, also an attempt to show that time was over, that it was not worth being repeated.⁸

Hans Magnus Enzensberger's translations are always good for a surprise. His German version of Shakespeare's sonnets gives Shakespeare the generous chance to speak in the language of the 20

century. The form of the sonnet, though, remains perfectly intact. His translation of Sonnet XC is only one example:

[...]
jetzt, wo die Welt mich fertig macht,
schlag zu (denn selber schuld ist, wer sich widersetzt)!,
bis ich am Boden bin, gib keine Ruh!

[...]
Now while the world is bent my deeds to cross
Join with the spite of fortune, make me bow,
And do not drop in for an after-loss⁹

Hans Magnus Enzensberger adorned his version of the sonnet with exclamation and question marks, and added brackets. The poor speaker who uses these theatrical exaggerations (for, reading or hearing it in Enzensberger's German, one can imagine this complainer standing between some curious onlookers in a big city's pedestrian zone) is ironic and laconic, yet also somehow violent towards himself. The elegance that prevails in the original despite the expressed pains is replaced with the pouring out of a person's sorrows who knows and indulges in what a spectacle he is. This happens on an open-set stage as opposed to the Shakespeare quietly read in school. Enzensberger's Shakespeare is for today, and it is not difficult to imagine that he himself would have spoken like the voice Enzensberger lent him in these free renderings.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger's mixture of fidelity and infidelity to the source text, of bringing the author to the reader and yet asking the reader to enter the forms and structures of the poetic architecture of the original, is common in his other translations, too. When he translated Williams, Eliot, Neruda, Vallejo, Simic, and many other (generally male) authors, he gave these authors voices that sometimes sound like those of contemporary Germany. They come alive between the Turkish stores of Kreuzberg, and the low hills between little South German villages. For his imitations he has used German canvas, and paints which are mixed from the pigments of the two cultures, languages, and people who encounter in these poetic exchanges.

In his writings and translations Enzensberger has always played with the concepts of imitation, fake, role-play, and the challenging of the original. In his short story "Voltaire's nephew",¹⁰ the protagonists agree in the end that almost everything has only been a game, and then the nephew races back to his life as a social butterfly, always moving, never standing still. This notion of 'game', of an experimentation with

boundaries and limits, also explains Hans Magnus Enzensberger's trials with his translations.

German theatre director Peter Zadek asked him once to translate Molière's *Misanthrope* for him. Enzensberger agreed and first of all gave up the Alexandrine, a rhyme form that is very tiring in German. Then he "translated" the costumes and the stage settings into our time. The party in the court in 17- century- Paris was transformed into a party of the upper-middle- class today. What he kept was the end rhyme and Moliere's comedy structure. The result is a palimpsest, an inclusive transformation that has an enriching effect on the text and on us, the audience.

In another translation, Charles Samic, the "most American poet one can imagine", as Hans Magnus Enzensberger once said,¹¹ comes to life in Kreuzberg in Enzensberger's translation. How can the fragrances and sounds and colours of Louisiana be translated, imported into a more or less grey German city, where the thirst for life is rarely sexualized? In his translation of *Crazy about her shrimp*, Hans Magnus Enzensberger created an anarchic place for the two lovers in a Berlin apartment. Instead of shrimps, he feeds the protagonists a certain kind of German buns, "Schrippen", thus keeping the initial sound. For the Berlin working class those white and crispy Schrippen are as commonplace as shrimps in Louisiana. The writer Raoul Schrott remarked about this transformation: "It can not be expressed any sexier in German. Shrimps would only be associated with Yuppies at the Sushi bar",¹² not with two naked lovers preparing food together.

Keeping things simple and unpretentious is one of Enzensberger's guidelines for poetry: To say the same, always the same, with different words. To say something completely different with the same words, or to say the same in a very different way. Many things should not be said; or, say many things with meaningless words. Or remain significantly silent.¹³

It is a pleasure to be drawn into the physicalness of that Samic / Enzensberger text, and despite the relative distance that is created in the translated text to its protagonists, one can still smell the roasting Schrippen, the bodies' odours, and Berlin. Just as alive as Louisiana is in Samic's text. Like this one, Enzensberger's translations are extreme statements. They almost cover over the traces of the source text's author, but never erase them all. They reinvent a setting, a time, a people, but remember all that of the source text, too. They question the supremacy of the original text. At the same time, though, they are an expression of the admiration for that original.

In Constant Motion

Nothing in Enzensberger's world seems to be fixed or static. Likewise, the text is in constant motion, changing, going through a metamorphosis from one language into another, from one time to another, from one culture to another. Just as one of Enzensberger's favourite motives, that of the "Flying Robert",¹⁴ a children's book character from the 19th century, who is uplifted by the wind under his umbrella and flies away, texts also have the ability to fly, across borders, time, and other barriers - taking the translator with them.

His translations of poetry also usually show scepticism and a critical view on the "how" and the "what": He does not struggle to stand in Rilke's or Pound's enormous shoes but rather questions the ground on which they tried to stand in those shoes. For this reason, his translations are a dialogue with the dead poets, he asks them to please step down from their pedestal and to talk to us, here.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger is a striking example of a man of letters who has remained in touch with the world's political and cultural developments. Recently he seems to have withdrawn a little, but he might just take a rest more frequently these days.

Notes

1. Vargas Llosa, Mario (1999) "Ein Lateinamerikaner" [A Latinamerican] in *du*. No 699, Sept. 1999, p.16. Media AG: Zürich. *du* No 699 is a special edition of the Swiss Magazin for culture on Hans Magnus Enzensberger and his complex involvement in the German speaking cultural and political life. Several writers, who are also friends of Enzensberger, give their view of Enzensberger's literary and political work and his relationship to their home countries.

2. Enzensberger, Hans Magnus (1978). *Ach Europa. Wahrnehmungen aus sieben Ländern. Mit einem Epilog aus dem Jahre 2006* [Alas Europe. Observations of seven countries. With an epilogue from the year 2006] Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M.

3. Berardinelli, Alfonso (1999) "Ein Italiener"[An Italian] in *du*, No699, Sept. 1999, p.10.

4. Enzensberger, Hans Magnus (1992) *Die grosse Wanderung* [The Great Migration] Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M.

5. Kluge, Alexander & Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1999)

"Spaziergang durch die Zeit II".
in *du*. No 699, Sept. 1999, p. 25. Conversation between the well-known
German film director Kluge and Enzensberger.

6. Enzensberger, Hans Magnus (1996 [2]). *Der Untergang der Titanic*
(World Premiere 8.5.1980: Munich Theater, director: George Tabori)
Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M.

7. Enzensberger himself has published a number of these bilingual
editions (see Bibliography).

8. Kluge, A.& Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1999). "Spaziergang durch
die Zeit I"[A walk through time] in *du*, No Sapid. 1999, p. 3.

9. Blakemore-Evans, G. (ed.) (1996). *The Sonnets*. Cambridge
University Press: Cambridge.

10. Enzensberger, Hans Magnus (1996) *Voltaire's Neffe. Eine Fälschung
in Diderots Manier*. [Voltaire's Nephew. A forgery in Diderot's style]
Suhrkamp Verlag: Frankfurt a.M.

11. Schenk, Denis (1999). "About Charles Samic".
<http://www.dradio.de/cgi-bin/user/> in:
"Medicos Groschengrab" ; Sept. 27, 1999.

12. Schrott, Raoul (1999). "Der Übersetzer"[The translator] in *du*,
No.699, Sept. 1999,p.45.

13. Schrott, R. (1999). "Der Übersetzer" in *du*, No. 699, Sept. 1999, p.
45.

14. Enzensberger, Hans Magnus (1998). *Wo warst Du, Robert?* Hauser:
Munich, Vienna. *Der Fliegende Robert*. (1989) Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.
M. The Flying Robert is a figure well known in the history of that kind
of German children's literature that was supposedly meant to influence
children's behavior, i.e. scare them so that they were "good". Robert was
a naughty boy who did not listen to his parents and as a "punishment"
was swept away by the wind. Enzensberger sees Robert in a positive
light as someone who experiences the world away from home.

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Enzensberger's collection of poetry from the years 1910 to 1940.

Enzensberger, Hans Magnus (1987) *Ach Europa! Wahrnehmungen aus sieben Ländern. Mit einem Epilog aus dem Jahre 2006*. [Alas Europe. Observations of seven countries. With an epilogue from the year 2006] Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

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Fortini, Franco: Poesie [Poetry] [Italian and German]. Translated by Hans Magnus Enzensberger. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp. (1963)

Enzensberger, Hans Magnus *Karl Venneberg: Poesie*. [Poetry] [Swedish and German] Translated by Nelly Sachs and Hans Magnus Enzensberger. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.(1965)

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Edward Lear: Edward Lear's kompletter Nonsens. Ins Deutsche geschmuggelt von H.M Enzensberger [Edward Lear's complete nonsense. Smuggled into German by H.M. Enzensberger] Frankfurt a. M.: Insel Verlag (1977).

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Charles Samic: Ein Buch von Göttern und Teufeln. Gedichte [A book of gods and devils. Poems] Translated by H.M. Enzensberger. München, Wien: Hanser (1993)

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