

Friedrich Hölderlin: Selected Poems. Bilingual edition. Edited and translated with a preface, introduction and notes, by Emery George, Princeton: Kylix Press 2012, lxxvi, 963 pp.

American literary critic, poet, and Professor emeritus of German (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Emery E. George, whose fascination with Hölderlin began nearly 60 years ago, and whose publications on the poet span the last four decades, offers with this hefty volume the largest collection to date of English translations of Hölderlin's poems, including 65 poems translated for the first time. The volume begins with a detailed chronology of the poet's life and works (xxiii-xxxvi), followed by a lengthy introduction, which includes a discussion of the evolution of Hölderlin's poetry, a justification for his selection, and a statement of his "philosophy of translation" (xxxvii-lxxi). Perhaps most noteworthy in the introduction is George's unquestioning restatement of Pierre Bertraux's theory, to which few Hölderlin scholars would subscribe today, that the poet "feigned mental illness to avoid arrest in connection with his friend Sinclair's trial for high treason" (lviii).

The original German texts, most of them taken from the Stuttgart Edition¹ (StA), are presented *en face* with the English translations. According to the introduction, George began translating in earnest in 2003 (xx); it is mystifying, therefore, that he did not choose to work from the most text-critically dependable Hölderlin edition available, that of Michael Knaupp² (1993), but rather followed the older, in many respects outdated StA. Thus we find, largely unaltered, Beißner's generic organization of the poems from 1800–1806: "Odes", "Elegies and Hexameters", "The Late Hymns" (roughly a combination of Beißner's "Einzelne Formen" and "Vaterländische Gesänge"; quite aside from the problematic designation of "hymn" for Hölderlin's late poems, the term certainly should not be applied to the three free verse poems – 'Hälfte

HÖLDERLIN-JAHRBUCH [HJb] 38, 2012–2013, Tübingen/Eggingen 2013, 302–307.

¹ Hölderlin. *Sämtliche Werke*. Stuttgarter Ausgabe [StA], hrsg. von Friedrich Beißner, Adolf Beck und Ute Oelmann, 8 in 15 Bdn., Stuttgart 1943–1985.

² Friedrich Hölderlin. *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* [Münchener Ausgabe = MA], hrsg. von Michael Knaupp, 3 Bde., München/Wien 1992–1993.

des Lebens', 'Lebensalter', and 'Der Winkel von Hahrdt' – which George lumps together in this group, and which unfortunately remain separated, as in the StA, from the six odes with which they were originally published³); "Hymnic Drafts and Fragments" (again replicating the StA), and "Numbered Fragments and Prose Poems", a selective reproduction of Beißner's hodgepodge "Pläne und Bruchstücke", whose numbering system George also saw fit to preserve in his edition. While in his introduction he suggests that his readers envision the Homburger Folioheft before them (liii), arguing that there is something to be learned from the manner in which Hölderlin penned his texts here, he has not provided a translation that facilitates this imaginative work, as the Knaupp edition to a considerable degree does. George's editorial decision is all the more surprising given his contribution to the facsimile edition of the Homburger Folioheft in the Frankfurt Edition.⁴

The new material George provides in this volume spans the poet's oeuvre. The juvenilia, which have been largely ignored by other English translators, are represented here with fourteen poems. George's selection from this period, which is meant to define a developmental trajectory to the poet's mature works, favors the unrhymed poems written in classical meters over the rhymed verses; none of Tübingen poems designated by the poet as "Hymnen" is included in the collection. George does, however, give a small sampling of the rhymed poems extending into the Frankfurt period, including 'Griechenland', 'Das Schicksaal', 'An die Unbekannte', and 'Diotima' (later version: 'Leuchtest du wie vormals nieder ...'), all making their first appearance in English. Another welcomed first is the verse narrative, 'Emilie vor ihrem Brauttag'. From the later work George has provided first translations of the first two drafts of 'Das Nächste Beste', as well as heretofore untranslated variants of 'Friedensfeier', 'Der Einzige', 'Kolomb', 'Dem Fürsten', and

³ George may also have had Michael Hamburger's translation in mind here; he, too, includes the three free verse poems among "The Hymns". Friedrich Hölderlin: *Poems and Fragments*, translated by Michael Hamburger. Oxford 2004, 456–461.

⁴ Friedrich Hölderlin. *Sämtliche Werke*, Frankfurter Ausgabe [FHA]. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe, hrsg. von Dietrich E. Sattler, 20 Bde. und 3 Supplemente, Frankfurt a. M./Basel 1975–2008; here Suppl. III. Homburger Folioheft, Faksimile-Edition, ed. by D. E. Sattler and Emery E. George, 1986; George does refer his readers to this edition in his introduction (liii).

a number of late fragments. The new material also includes fourteen previously untranslated tower poems.

George's roughly 100 pages of critical notes on the poems also distinguish his volume from other English translations, none of which with the exception of Nick Hoff's 'Odes and Elegies',⁵ offers commentaries this rich in detail. He provides information on the date, place, and circumstances of composition, and limited clarifications of allusions to persons and events, and of textual ambiguities and problems of interpretation.

My discussion of George's translations must be selective; it would be impossible to examine thoroughly the 400 pages of English text in this volume. His stated aim is to provide an "idiomatically American" translation (lxvii), and while he acknowledges that his work would be "unthinkable" without that of Michael Hamburger (xix), to whose memory the volume is dedicated, it is meant to stand alongside Hamburger's work. And here George's exertions fall short on a number of levels.

First, the translations are peppered with irritating stylistic infelicities, of which I can give only a small selection here. Sometimes it is a matter of failing to approximate Hölderlin's tone. In 'An die Ruhe' "wandelt" (l. 21) is rendered far too casually as "saunters", and "harret er [...] des längern Schlummers" (l. 27f.) as "waits out [...] a decent night's rest." (31) One must question both "waits out", which means to endure something unpleasant ("we waited out the storm"), rather than the intended expectation of desired slumber; as well as the pedestrian formulation, "a decent night's rest", which misses Hölderlin's elevated diction. In 'Diotima' (later version) he translates "Götterbotin" (l. 46) as "Postal lady of gods" (105). Christ "traveled" to heaven in 'Der Einzige' (first version, 519, l. 103); here Hölderlin is citing Luther's German Bible (I Peter 3:22), on which a similar formulation in the Apostolicum is based, and so the English counterpart in both texts, "ascended", must be used. In the third and fourth drafts of 'Der Einzige' George renders "begehrt" (l. 80 in third, l. 13 in fourth) as "hankers after" (533, 535), a verb that sounds right in the mouth of Huckleberry Finn, but must cause raised eyebrows when ascribed to Hölderlin. I would also take umbrage with

⁵ Friedrich Hölderlin: Odes and Elegies, translated and edited by Nick Hoff, Middleton, CT 2008.

George's translation of "heiliggesetztes" as "sacredly / Handed down" ('Der Einzige', second version, 525, l. 71); the formulation is awkward and fails to show the etymological connection between what is "set" (gesetzt) and "law" (Gesetz); Hamburger's "divinely ordained", with its relation to "ordinance", is better.⁶ A few lines later George translates "Ungebundenen" (l. 75) as "what lacks control" (525) thereby introducing an entirely foreign concept ("control") into the poem. Again, Hamburger's "unbound" is vastly preferable.⁷ We find "control" again out of place in the fourth version of the same poem: "Without control, God is incomprehending" (535; "Ohne Halt verstandlos Gott ist", l. 5). A better solution would be "hold" or "support": the "Halt" is not what offers control, but rather what makes mediation between God and humans possible ("Mittelbar / In heiligen Schriften", l. 9 f.).

Hölderlin's compound words present particular difficulties for the translator. A well-known example appears in 'Hälfte des Lebens': "Ins heilignüchterne Wasser" (l. 7). Hamburger renders this as: "Into water, the holy-and-sober"⁸; Richard Sieburth as "In the sobering holy water"⁹ – both limply adequate solutions. George's rendition, however: "Into the sacred, clearheaded water" (441) must be discarded; by anthropomorphizing water in this manner, the line becomes unintentionally comical.

George also does not always take care to translate consistently within a single poem. Admittedly, this can be a challenge, especially when attempting to reproduce Hölderlin's meters, as George does in this volume. For example, he translates the title of the early alcaic ode, 'An die Ruhe', as 'To Tranquility'. The poem is addressed to a personified "Ruhe", who appears repeatedly throughout the poem. An adequate translation must reflect this. But the four-syllabled "tranquility" presents insurmountable problems for the strictures of the alcaics, and so the titular goddess does not reappear a single time in George's translation. Rather we find in the body of the poem instead of "Ruhe": "rest" (l. 9), "peace" (l. 17), "quiet" (31, l. 26). Even more puzzling are

⁶ Hamburger, 547.

⁷ Ibid., 547.

⁸ Ibid., 461.

⁹ Friedrich Hölderlin, Hymns and Fragments. Translated and introduced by Richard Sieburth, Princeton, NJ 1984, 47.

instances when George opts for inconsistency even when he gains no metrical advantage, as in the elegy 'Heimkunft', where he translates "zu lieb dem Vaterlande" (l. 39) as "for the sake of the homeland", and two lines later "die im Vaterlande besorgt sind" incomprehensibly as "who are deeply concerned on the home grounds" (411).

A persistent problem for translators in general arises from the imperfect correspondence between lexical ambiguities of given words in two languages; Hölderlin's artful exploitation of these ambiguities in his poetry presents particular challenges. A relatively simple example appears in 'Der Winkel von Hahrdr'. George translates "Nicht gar unmündig" (l. 5) as "Not by any means voiceless" (439), supplying also the note: "The place has acquired historic significance, and as a consequence a <voice>; it can < speak > of what took place." (881) But here is an instance where, if the translation does not reflect the ambiguity of the word, the note must do so: in normal parlance "unmündig" means "not of age", "not having reached one's majority". It derives from "mouth"; he who is "unmündig" may not use his own "mouth" before a court, but requires the voice of a legal representative. A preferable alternative to the endnote, of course, would be to capture both meanings in the translation, which Hamburger skillfully accomplishes with: "Quite able to speak for itself".¹⁰

The line between what is stylistically wanting and what constitutes an incorrect translation is often unclear or open to debate, but at times there can be no doubt that George has mistranslated Hölderlin's texts. Occasionally these errors arise from his failure to understand the poet's albeit complicated syntax, as in the first version of 'Der Einzige': "Ein Gott weiß aber / Wenn kommet, was ich wünsche das Beste" (l. 90 f.), which he translates as: "A god, though, knows / When he comes, what I wish, the best." (519) Here he mistakenly supplies "he" as the subject of "kommet"¹¹. But the subject of "kommet" is "das Beste"; and this "coming of what is best" is also what the lyrical "I" wishes. This is not an allusion to "der kommende Gott". And the point being made here is

¹⁰ Hamburger, 459.

¹¹ In his monograph on 'Der Einzige' George claims that in this clause the subject is missing. Emery E. George: Hölderlin's Hymn 'Der Einzige'. Sources, Language, Context, Form, Bonn 1999, 123.

not that the god knows *what* is best, but rather that the god knows the appointed time *when it will come*.

Finally a number of semantic errors: In 'An die Ruhe' George mistakes "heimisch" for "heimlich": "Enlivening as – secret – a bench to rest" (31; "Erquicklich, wie die heimische Ruhebänk", l. 5). At times he seems unaware that the English "pull" does not have the semantic possibilities that "ziehen" does:

"Und zieh' ich einst um Ruhmsgewinn / [...] aus" ('Schwabens Mägdelein', l. 29 f.): "And, seeking fame, should I pull out" (23); "set out" would be the correct translation;

"Lächelnd über uns hin zögen die Herrscher der Welt" ('An einen Baum', l. 2): "Lords of the cosmos would pull past us" (97); here "move" would be preferable;

"Wie Vögel langsam ziehn" (l. 1, fragment without title): "As birds slowly pull past" (585); Hamburger's "migrate" is a far more sensible choice.¹²

"Ach! immer immer ziehest du doch uns nach" ('Frühlingsanfang', l. 5): "Ah! always, always you will pull after us" (707); here "follow" is meant.

George's volume must be criticized on many levels. But when one considers the loss any translation inflicts on a poetic text, insofar as it inevitably must disambiguate now and again what was meant to be ambiguous, and disrupt the perfect union of form and tone, one cannot but acknowledge the wisdom of the equation "traduttore – traditore". The task of translating Hölderlin's poetry is an impossible one. Despite its many shortcomings George's volume is not without merit and offers a useful complement to other available English translations of Hölderlin's works.

Priscilla A. Hayden-Roy

¹² Hamburger, 603.