

Hölderlin in the Barracks

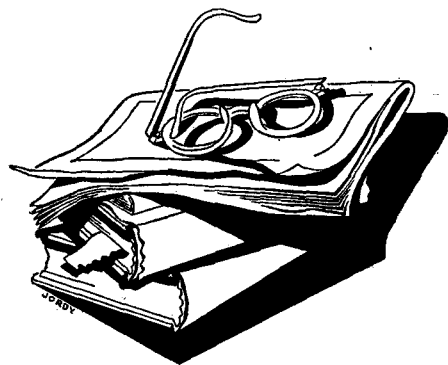
An Army Sergeant Reports on A New Translation

KLAUS MANN

TO read Hölderlin in English, in an American Army camp! To be captivated, once more, by this purest and perhaps greatest of all German poets, while we are fighting the Germans (not only the Nazis)! To be absorbed in these sublime auguries and invocations while the radio blares, "This Is the Army, Mr. Brown . . .," and my barrack-mates discuss apprehensively such ominous topics as night-guard, rifle-cleaning, and K. P. Life is amazingly rich in paradoxical, suggestive situations. . . .

The edition I read—sprawling on my bunk as comfortably as possible—is the one recently published, "Some Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin,"* translated by Frederic Prokosch. The slim booklet contains fifteen of Hölderlin's finest pieces—presented in both the English adaptation and the German original.

It is a truism that great poetry cannot be adequately translated into other idioms. If the translator—however sensitive and conscientious—is not a real poet himself, his version will inevitably be lacking in the charm and melody of the original. But if he happens to be a creative writer in his own right, he will produce a new poem by adapting the foreign text—a fine poem, perhaps, but essentially different from the work of art he ventured to reproduce in another tongue.



The job Frederic Prokosch has done seems to refute this axiom: some of his translations are indeed surprisingly successful. Of course, all conditions are particularly propitious in Prokosch's case. Here we have an American poet of Austrian descent—bilingual by nature, cosmopolitan by conviction and

*SOME POEMS OF FRIEDRICH HÖLDERLIN. Translated by Frederic Prokosch. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions. 1943. 32 pp. \$1.

disposition. His own style has a compellingly poetic cadence—and this is true, not only of his verse, but also of his winged, iridescent prose, the sensual charm of which is manifest again in his recent novel, "The Conspirators"—a book, tenuous and problematical in some respects, but enchantingly saturated with music and mystery.

Yet, it was not without slight apprehension that I began to read these foreign adaptations of masterpieces so familiar, so beloved—translations which (to quote from Prokosch's modest introductory note) "are offered, apologetically, as humble versions of a poetry which uniquely transcends translatability." Would I recognize the splendor and persuasion of the original?

At certain moments I was perturbed, disappointed. I tried "Socrates and Alcibiades"—a jewel in two short stanzas: concise, lucid, a poetic epigram of striking beauty and simplicity. No, it did not quite come off. The German text is austere, succinct, concentrated; in Prokosch's version, it becomes colloquial, almost flippant. Why does he translate the German word "*Jüngling*" with "lad"? "Adolescent" would have been more appropriate, or, if he wanted a one-syllable word, "youth," even "boy." The question with which Hölderlin's poem opens ("*Warum huldigest du, heiliger Sokrates, diesem Jünglinge stets?*") has a dignity and suggestive power in which the English translation ("Saintly Socrates, why should you incessantly praise this lad?") is definitely lacking. Socrates's answer—of the most moving grandeur in Hölderlin's formulation—sums up essential aspects of Hellenic philosophy:

Who most deeply has thought, loves
the most living. He
Only values the best who has beheld
the world,
And the wise in the end shall
Often turn to the beautiful.

Evidently, certain shades have to be sacrificed. When Hölderlin speaks of the "*heiligenüchterne Wasser*" (as he does, in one of his last and most magnificent poems, "The Half of Life"), the double epithet has to be split into two and will thus be deprived of its strangely solemn quality. Prokosch's "saintly sobering water" in which the "beautiful swans" dip their heads, is of course not quite the magic liquid Hölderlin conceived; (the water he

visualizes, incidentally, is not "sobering" but sober: its capacity of sobering the birds "drunk with your kisses" is but a secondary, accidental feature).

This amazing piece—"The Half of Life," written shortly before Hölderlin's mental collapse, in 1803—anticipates and surpasses a whole school of German poetry in the twentieth century—the expressionistic school—just as Rimbaud's "*Le Bateau Ivre*" became the model and fetish of generations of poets to come. Prokosch's version, al-



though falling inevitably short of the original, maintains at least partly its miraculous accents and images:

Laden with yellowing pears
And with wild roses filled
Lies the land in the sea:
Beautiful swans,
Drunk with your kisses you
Dip your heads in the
Saintly sobering water.

Alas, where can I find, when
Winter arrives, the flowers? Where
The light of the sun
And the shadows of the earth?
The walls arise
Speechless and cold: in the wind
Clatter the banners.

The moderate "Alas" with which Prokosch begins the second stanza is decidedly less expressive than Hölderlin's nostalgic outcry, "*Weh mir. . .*." But the translator probably meant to avoid the English "Woe is me," thinking it somewhat old-fashioned, not to say corny. And, then, why should we carp? On the whole—I repeat it—Prokosch has accomplished something very remarkable: namely, communication to his English-speaking audience of the somber and yet elating message of the German lover of Hellas, the most disciplined and most profound of all romantics.

The three concluding lines of "The Half of Life" are a fine example of the translator's admirable skill: here the image conveyed through the English words corresponds almost perfectly with the original vision. And there are more such fortunate moments when Prokosch, with truly poetic intuition, finds the precisely adequate English terms to catch the flavor and pathos of Hölderlin's German text. The poem "Der Mensch" (Man), for instance, remained almost completely intact while undergoing the precarious transmutation from one idiom into another. The last stanza—almost untranslatable, one

should think—reads beautifully in English:

Is it not he who still of the living stays
Most blissful? O, but all the more
deeply fate
Who equalizes all things also
Tears the inflammable heart of the
mighty.

Prokosch, indeed, observes religiously the metres and expressions chosen by Hölderlin. And yet he is sometimes at his best where he ventures to deviate somewhat from the original, as he does, for instance, most successfully in the famous opening lines of "Patmos": "Near, near and—Difficult to grasp is the Almighty," for the German: "*Nah ist—Und schwer zu fassen der Gott.*" The repetition of "Near"—missing in the original—is well in keeping with the sacerdotal tenor of the work and undoubtedly apt to increase its effectiveness. "Yet where the danger lies," continues the rhapsody, "Likewise lies the salvation."

Beautiful words, these—earnest, heartening words. What profound and highly welcome comfort in these splendid songs and fantasies! Are they untimely, out of place, under the circumstances? But they are timeless: their validity transcends all limits of time and space. They are encouraging, for all their tragic and nostalgic undertones; for they confirm and exalt the divine flame inherent in all human drama. Hyperion's Song is as essentially true today, in an Army camp in Missouri, as it was, 150 years ago, in the Neckar valley, or 2,000 years before, in Athens—the place and epoch for which Hölderlin was homesick, incurably, during his whole miserable, wonderful life.

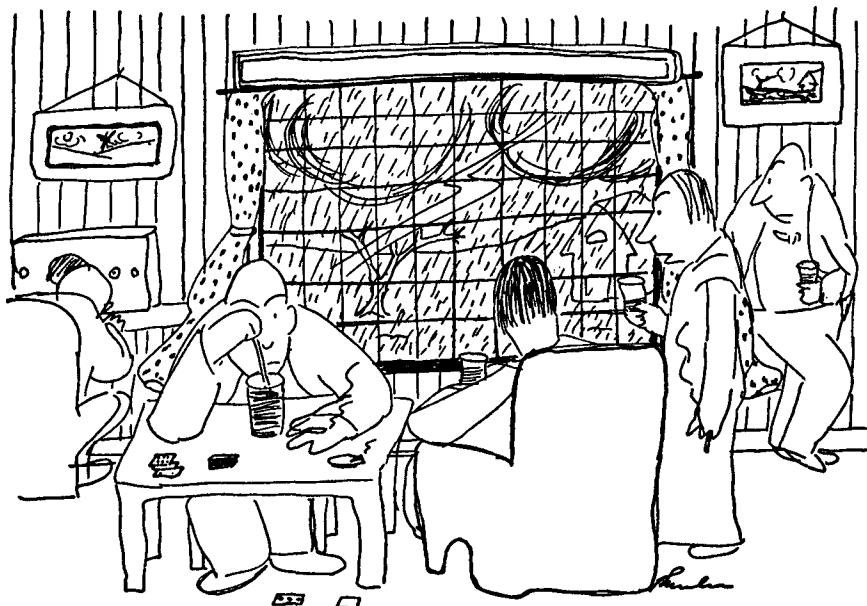
Sings Hyperion-Hölderlin—and I am moved, struck, comforted by his anguish and wisdom:

Yet we are destined
Never to come to rest;
They falter, they fall,
These suffering mortals,
In blindness from
One hour to the next
Like water hurled from
Cliff upon cliff
Down the whole year long into
The Unfathomed.

This is the truth: I know it. More essentially, more truly true it is than the tiresome vicissitudes and petty struggles of our daily life—in these barracks or outside. With infinite boredom, endless agonies we atone for our mistakes, our cowardice, our lack of imagination. All these necessary sufferings and efforts—so grimly, inescapably real now—will fade away, become chimerical. "Yet all that endures," says Hölderlin, "is given to us by the poets."

Klaus Mann is now serving overseas with the United States Army as a Staff Sergeant in the Signal Corps.

Thurber's Lowdown on Life



—From the book.

"This is like that awful afternoon we telephoned Mencken."

MEN, WOMEN AND DOGS. A Book of Drawings. By James Thurber. With a Preface by Dorothy Parker. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1943. \$3.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THE above title to my review does not indicate an *exposé* of Mr. Luce's excellent illustrated magazine, even though, according to a woman friend of mine, *Life* is frequently overweighted with "cheese-cake and corpses." Mr. Thurber has another, and withal, truer view of life. And you tell me what it is?

Only a genius could have drawn the picture of the perturbed gentleman at a party assailed by one of Mr. Thurber's absolutely straight-haired females with the frightening words, "I'm offering you sanctuary, Dr. Mason." I fear to become as fulsome as the ordinarily—or lately—subacid (I've always wanted to know what "subacid" means!) Dorothy Parker, whom a Thurber book reduces to what my parents used to call "a perfect mush of concession." And me too. And it's New Year, isn't it?

Only a genius could—I said that. Apply it to 90 per cent of the pictures in this collection and you'll be right. A good way is to close your eyes, turn the pages, and point. That will be Bangkok, the capital of Siam, or, as it is now called, with a wicked leer, Thailand.

This review, I see, is rapidly deteriorating! But Mr. Thurber never deteriorates. Anyone encountering difficulties in his lovemaking can profit

by "The Masculine Approach." It is a complete compendium. Much has been said of Mr. Thurber's dogs; but, so far, comparatively little has been said about the animal on page thirty-two—my guess is a hippopotamus—who is privy to the disappearance of a Dr. Millmoss. Also, a psychoanalyst could work out something interesting about the recurrence of *doctors* in the works of Mr. Thurber. But then, can't analysts do *anything*!

I can draw a little; I can draw as little as Mr. Thurber; but he can put a few hesitating lines on paper and give you people and animals with expressions over which you ponder for hours and from which you build in your mind whole Ibsen dramas and devastating novels. How he *always* gets exactly the *right* and convulsing expression upon their faces is his own unmilitary secret.

All intelligent people are now Thurber collectors. So, of course, you are. So why am I prattling on in this idiotic fashion? The question is rhetorical. The book costs three bucks. It's worth three thousand!

Judge Wm. Travers Jerome was a good campaigner. Some of his stories became famous, in particular one to the effect that, during the investigation of the purchase of what appeared to be an inordinate weight of sponges for a public dep't, the inspector under fire plaintively inquired: "Hell! Do you think I weigh 'em *dry*?"—From "Yankee Lawyer, the Autobiography of Ephraim Tutt."