

J. B. LEISHMAN AND THE ART OF TRANSLATION¹

THE publication of a translation of Hölderlin by the distinguished translator of Rilke is no small event, and since this book deserves close attention I intend to compare Leishman's versions with those of Michael Hamburger (reviewed in the Spring, 1944, number of *Scrutiny*). This is bound to be unfair to Mr. Hamburger whose translations are expressly meant to fulfil the functions of a crib rather than a re-creation, and I offer my apologies now for such misuse of his book. It is Leishman's rendering that is at present under review, and since he has something of an original talent for verse, a great advantage to the translator as well as a dangerous temptation, comparison with Hamburger's plain and usually honest versions is an excellent way of emphasizing both his successes and his failures. And I think I shall save space if I dispense with the appearance of a formal essay and deal with each point in note-form under the heading of the poem in which it occurs.

Der Mensch ('Man').

When lo! on fairest isle, where untiring air
Revolved in tender stillness around the grove,
Warm night gone by, lay, grape-embowered,
Born in the glimmering hour of daybreak,
Once, Mother Earth, the fairest of all your brood . . .

As a crib this translation would be a failure of course; it is, in its own right, quite difficult verse. Compared with Hamburger's

Then on the loveliest of the islands, where the air
Was ever flowing with tender calm around the wood,
Once, born in the morning's dawning hour,
After a sultry night, there lay beneath
The vines, O Mother Earth, thy loveliest child . . .

it offers the spirit of Hölderlin rather than the letter. But not entirely the spirit, either; 'the fairest of all your brood' is *not* a good translation of 'dein schönstes Kind'. To Hölderlin, 'Mother Earth' and 'Father Ether' were genuinely felt and well-nigh original conceptions with absolutely no hint of the ludicrous about them—it is curious how pompous much of Wordsworth's philosophical reflection seems after Hölderlin—but a reader unacquainted with the German poet's work might well consider his worst suspicions confirmed by a farmyard phrase like this:

'in gloomy shafts . . . will peer' is adequate for 'späht im Schacht', but Hamburger's 'looks around the pit' is pitifully inept;

¹*Selected Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin*, translated with Introduction and Notes by J. B. Leishman (The Hogarth Press, 8/6).

no literal translation should make out that the banal phrase 'looks around' is equivalent to 'späht'.

'Und Waffen wider alle, die athmen, trägt . . . der Mensch': Hamburger is correct with 'And weapons against all who breathe Man bears with him', but Leishman has 'Arms, too, against all *breathers* will Man oppose'. This is Leishman's most serious and most frequent lapse: the arbitrary use of un-English constructions, portmanteau words and other clumsy devices. Examples are only too easy to find, often spoiling really fine passages: 'kindredly looks up' for 'sieht bekannt' (Hamburger's 'raises familiar eyes' is the obvious choice) in this same poem; 'retiringest petals', the one blot on an excellent rendering of *Hyperions Schiksaalslied*; 'dear blesser' and 'the peacefuller sun' in *My Portion*; 'the mournfullest dwelling-place' for 'das Haus der Trauernden' in *To Hope*. Similar blemishes mar his Rilke-translations—'with face that's even blissfuller' (*L'Ange du Méridien*).

Hyperions Schiksaalslied ('Hyperion's Song about Destiny').

To us though is given
 To find no place for repose.
 We fall and we vanish,
 We suffering mortals,
 Blindly from one hour
 On to another,
 As waters are hurtled
 From boulder to boulder,
 Down through the years to we know not where.

A translation could hardly approximate more nearly to the original than this. Hamburger's attempt,

But our lot it is
 To rest at no place,
 And suffering men
 Dwindle and fall . . .

is written in lines each shorter than the original by one or two syllables and hence conveys an unpleasantly abrupt and quite inaccurate impression, more like falling down stairs than hurtling headlong through time.

Mein Eigentum ('My Portion').

Zu mächtig ach! ihr himmlischen Höhen zieht
 Ihr mich empor; bei Stürmen, am heitern Tag
 Fühl ich verzehrend euch im Busen
 Wechseln, ihr wandelnden Götterkräfte.

Leishman gives

Too high, alas, Celestial Mountains, you
 Uplift my heart! In storm and in shine I feel
 Consumingly within my breast your
 Sway, you divinely-transforming forces.

But Hamburger translates 'ihr wandelnden Götterkräfte' as 'inconstant powers of gods'; since 'wandeln' can be transitive as well as reflexive, I think Leishman's is the likelier translation—Hölderlin never complained of the inconstancy of the gods ('Not all things at once does the Highest want'), and their powers of transformation is the chief subject of his verse.

I think, though, that 'holden Erinnerungen' is more aptly rendered as 'blissful memories' (Hamburger) than as Leishman's 'Kind Recollections', an expression which is somewhat reminiscent of the eighteenth-century pastoral-ruminative convention in English poetry; there is, as far as I am aware, no such suggestion about the German phrase.

An Die Hoffnung ('To Hope').

'Hope, ever-gracious, kindly-industrious': another instance of Leishman's unnecessary use of awkward constructions. 'Gütiggeschäftige' is a legitimate German word, but the English language is not suited to the invention of compound adjectives, and it is far better to translate it simply as 'kind and active' (Hamburger); 'kindly-industrious' conveys a confused, unintegrated impression instead of a meaning. Similarly 'rurally-fairest' for 'ländlich-schönste' in *Heidelberg*. On the other hand, however, Leishman's 'sacredly-sober' for 'heiligenüchterne' (*Half of Life*) is not only permissible but essential, for when Hölderlin used this compound adjective it was not as a convenience which German grammar allowed him, but because only the two adjectives thus combined could convey the one definite meaning he had in mind. 'Sacredly-sober' has the further advantage of sounding pleasant to the ear.

Die Liebe ('Love').

'... by the genial ray matured': plain 'creative ray' would be better for 'schöpfrische Stral', I think. The adjective 'genial' reminds us, again, of the genteel landscape verse of such minor eighteenth-century poets as Dyer, Akenside and Warton—a slight point, yet one cannot over-emphasize the difference of kind between Hölderlin's feeling for nature and the dilettante idyllics of these writers. What a difference, one immediately realizes on reading Leishman's admirable translation (the first I have seen) of that fine poem, *Wie wenn am Feiertag*:

And just as fire will glitter in that man's eyes
 Who has loftily conceived, so now,
 At signs and doings in the world to-day,
 Fire has been kindled anew in the souls of poets.
 And what has been before, though scarce perceived,
 Is only now revealed,
 And they who smilingly tilled our fields
 In servile garb, are known for what they are, the
 Life of all life, the gods' immortal powers.
 You ask for them? Their spirit breathes in Song,
 When from the daily sun and warming earth

It springs, and from storms, both those in the air, and those
Which, longer brewing in the depths of time,
More oracular and more apprehensible to us,
Go straying between heaven and earth and among the
peoples.

Quietly the thoughts of the general mind
Are ending in the soul of the poet:
Which, stricken of a sudden, known so long
To Infinitude, quivers with recollection,
And from it, enkindled thus by the sacred bolt,
That fruit in love begotten, that labour of gods and men,
Song, to bear lasting witness of both, will leap.

Der Abschied ('The Parting', Third Version).

The difference between a living reconstruction and a dead, if useful, translation is plain if you set the two versions of *Der Abschied* side by side. Leishman's rendering of this dramatic and unusually personal poem is as near perfect as possible; the sense is sufficiently exact, there are none of his ugly made-up words, and the verse has all the freshness and apparent spontaneity of a remarkable original composition. I should like to quote the poem in full, but one example will have to suffice:

and stealthily Custom
Can be stealing away the soul (Leishman)

and from us, day after day,
Always, usage exacts the soul (Hamburger)

Reif Sind, in Feuer Getaucht . . . ('Ripe, being plunged into fire . . .').

Leishman has a good translation of a poem which indicates the change in Hölderlin's mental and poetic processes a little later to culminate in *Patmos*.

And most perversely,
Like horses, run the captured
Elements and ancient
Laws of earth.

'Perverse' is just the word for 'unrecht' in this context; Hamburger's 'unjustly, like horses' is, even within the very free logic of the poem, clearly absurd.

Menons Klagen um Diotima ('Menon's Laments for Diotima').

For sustained excellence Leishman's translation of the two great sequences, *Menons Klagen* and *Brot und Wein*, surpasses anything in his work on Rilke. The fourth stanza shows the high standard Leishman reaches throughout:

We, contentedly partnered, we like the amorous swans, who,
When they repose on the lake, when they are rocked on the
waves,
Gaze in the water beneath where silvery clouds are reflected,
And the ethereal blue hovers below as they sail,

Wended our ways on earth. And even though Boreas threatened,
 Hater of lovers, lament ever preparing, and down
 Fluttered the leaf from the bough and rain flew wide in the
 whirlblast,

We would tranquilly smile, feeling the god that was ours
 Deep in our intimate talk, in the song of our single spirit,
 Wholly at peace with ourselves, happy, like children, alone.
 Ah, but desolate now my house! My eye they have taken
 From me, and all that I was, oh, I have lost it with her!
 Wherefore I gropingly wander, and here like the shadows in Orcus
 Linger, and all that remains long has seemed utterly vain.

It is little touches like 'Springs may flourish and fade, and season
 war upon season' in the third stanza, where Hamburger gives 'Indeed
 Springs go away, one year supplants the other' that go to make up
 Leishman's genius as a translator.

Der Rhein ('The Rhine').

An example of literal translation being less faithful than free
 translation :

But the lovers are
 What they were before; they
 Are at home where the flower is glad
 Of harmless ardour and the spirit rustles
 Around gloomy trees (Hamburger)

But lovers
 Remain what they have been—those
 Who are ever at home where the flower rejoices
 In innocent warmth and the circling spirit
 Rustles the sombre trees (Leishman)

Hamburger is literal in the common sense of the word, but here and
 elsewhere it is Leishman who is *truly* literal, taking into account the
 nuances which distinguish a word in one language from its dictionary
 equivalent in another language.

Brot und Wein ('Bread and Wine').

In his work on Rilke Leishman made far more of the shorter
 lyrical poems than of the *Duino Elegies*, but his translation of the
 solid, concentrated poems of this, possibly Hölderlin's greatest, work
 is wholly admirable.

. . . und gewohnt werden die Menschen des Glücks
 Und des Tags und zu schaun die Offenbaren, das Antlitz
 Derer, welche schon längst Eines und Alles genannt,
 Tief die verschwiegene Brust mit freier Genüge gefüllet,
 Und zuerst und allein alles Verlangen beglückt

Leishman has

. . . and in time men grow accustomed to joy,
 Light of day and the sight of gods revealed and the face of
 Those who, called hitherto merely the One and the All,

Filled the yet silent heart so deep with freest contentment,
And from the first and alone satisfied ev'ry desire

Here, as Leishman says in his note, Hölderlin is referring to primitive man's conception of a formless nameless 'One and All' as opposed to the highly developed anthropomorphic conception of God. Hamburger translates this passage as

. . . and men to fortune and day
Grow accustomed and to see them, visible now, the face
Of those who already had named One and All long ago,
With free sufficiency deeply had filled the silent breast
And at first and alone had contented all desire

which is hardly coherent. Leishman invariably exhibits a firm intellectual grasp of his material and is not afraid to depart somewhat from literalness in order to make the meaning as clear in modern English as it is in the original to one with an average idea of how the German language was used at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Several times Hamburger plainly cannot quite understand the original, gives a literal translation which scarcely makes sense, and hopes for the best.

Leishman's note on the 'Vater! heiter!' crux in the fourth stanza is very reasonable.

But I do not feel that Leishman's attitude to the Christian element in Hölderlin's poetry is altogether justified. On the lines in the eighth stanza

When, to conclude, there appeared a tranquil Genius, bearing
Heavenly cheer, who announced Day at an end and withdrew

Leishman has this note: 'This "Genius" has been commonly identified with Christ—why, I do not know. Is it really necessary to assume that he is any more than what he appears to be—one of many genii, spirits, or messengers, who, in rather Rococo fashion, perhaps, and a little operatically, comes to announce the fact that the gods have really departed, and, as it were, draws the curtain?' The figure of Christ certainly fits the picture, and, as more cogent evidence, there is what I should have thought an indisputable fact that Hölderlin did not employ 'genii, spirits, or messengers' in a 'rather Rococo fashion'. Each such figure that appears in Hölderlin's work has much more than a merely decorative purpose—and though Hölderlin habitually interpreted mythological incidents to suit his own intentions, he never invented them, and we may be reasonably sure that something definite is implied by this 'stiller Genius'. On the other hand, by quoting Hölderlin's first fair copy of the final stanza, Leishman shows that one should not be too hasty in assuming that the lines 'Meanwhile, waving his wakening torch, the son of the Highest, He, the Syrian, comes down to these lingering shades' are an allusion to Christ. Certainly it is true that the Christian element is not predominant or even important in *this poem*, and Hamburger's statement that 'Bread and wine reconcile the divine with the earthly, and Christ with Dionysus' is a little dogmatic.

But, rather like Professor Brückner complaining that Dostoyevsky spoilt *Crime and Punishment* by hanging on to it 'a goody-goody wish-wash about "resurrection through love",' Leishman goes too far in his distaste for this Christianization of Hölderlin. In his introductory essay, after describing the morbid repulsion with which orthodox piety affected Hölderlin and his continual fear of being forced into a curacy (having been trained in Württemberg at the State's expense, he was legally obliged to enter the Church), Leishman goes on to say 'The immediate, the efficient, cause [of his *dementia praecox*] was certainly *la religion*, a fact which makes all the more pathetic his attempts to find a place for it in some of his later and only partially-coherent verse, and all the more exasperating the attempts of many critics to magnify the importance of this verse, and to discover in it something which they seem to prefer to poetry, and which they call *Tiefe*, or Depth'. Since Leishman neither translates nor even mentions by name the famous *Patmos* ode, we may assume that it is this poem to which he is here alluding. It is a great pity that the surrealistically-inclined and the otherwise ill-informed have seized on *Patmos* because of its wrenched syntax and apocalyptic nature; a serious critic like Leishman, intimate with the superb, impeccably sane poetry of Hölderlin's best years may well tend to resent the craze for *Patmos*, and even the very existence of the poem.

But there is nothing of *la religion*, at least the religion of the kept curate in a smug merchant's household, about *Patmos*. Nor is the poem merely a product of madness.

I believe that Christianity did come to have a great, positive, significance for the poet in his last years of sanity. Judging by the element of insecurity and self-consciousness in *Der Einzige*—

. . . And now
Full of sadness is my soul,
As though you heavenly yourselves
Cried out that if I serve one
I lack the other.

But I know, it is my
Fault. For too greatly
O Christ, I am attached to you,
Though to Heracles' brother¹

he at first experienced some difficulty in reconciling Hellas and the Gods with Christ. His failing mind still feared insincerity more than anything else. But in *Patmos* Christ took his place in the world of *Götter*, neither rejected by them nor dwarfing them. The ode is a *tribute* to Christ, not an expression of orthodox Christianity:

. . . for almost they must guide
Our fingers and shamefully
From us a force wrests our hearts.
For all the heavenly want sacrifice,
But when one was omitted,
Good never came of it.¹

So much for the content of the poem; as to the style, the free metre, the grammatical irregularities and the violent spasmodic movement of the thought—these are to be found, in a lesser degree, in all of Hölderlin's best poetry. Though the poem may at times be obscure, it is, I should have thought, far too rational for the surrealist's taste; especially that uncompromising conclusion:

We have served Mother Earth
And lately have served the sunlight,
Unknowingly, but the Father
Who reigns over all loves most that
The solid letter be cared for and the existing be well
Construed. German song follows this.¹

Yes, *Patmos* is the product of a troubled mind; but it has the last strange insight of a mind desperately balancing on the edge of the abyss, not the banal blankness of real madness. It is significant that the verse Hölderlin wrote from time to time during the forty years of his insanity consists of trite reflections in regular conventional forms, the very opposite of *Patmos*.

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It is to be hoped that Mr. Leishman will on some later occasion give us a translation of *Der Archipelagus*, the long paean for the departed glory of Greece. It is to be regretted, too, that neither Leishman nor Hamburger have included *An der Äther*, an early poem which received rather shabby treatment from Schiller and Goethe—we are conscious of a deep irony when we read Schiller's words of advice to the poetic novice: 'flee, where possible, from philosophical subjects, they are the most ungrateful, and in fruitless struggle with them the best power is often wasted; keep closer to the world of the senses, then you will be less in danger of losing sobriety in your enthusiasm, or of straying into an artificial mode of expression'. It is sensible advice; but we are in a position to note that it was Schiller who should have heeded it, not Hölderlin, whose genius was sincerely and profoundly philosophical. I am ending these notes with a fairly accurate translation of this poem, *An der Äther*, partly to remedy the deficiency, partly because it is characteristic of Hölderlin's earlier work and offers an opportunity for some elucidation of what may seem a thorn in the flesh to readers of Hamburger's and Leishman's books—Hölderlin's several conceptions, Nature, Earth, Ether, Light.

'The Ether' has a wide and not too precise significance; if one bears in mind the importance, the *spiritual* importance, Hölderlin attached to the climate of a country, the quality of its light, the nature of its atmosphere, these conceptions become more or less self-explanatory:

The natural scenery of home moves me more powerfully the more I study it. The thunderstorm, not only in its highest mani-

¹*Poems of Hölderlin*, translated by Michael Hamburger.

festation, but precisely from this other aspect, as a power and as a configuration, and, in the other forms of the sky, light and its influence, giving shape nationally and as a principle and way of fate, so that something is holy to us, its course in coming and going, what is characteristic in forests and the convergence in one region of various kinds of nature, that all the holy places of the earth are grouped together around one place, and the philosophic light around my window, are now my joy . . .²

The Gods are manifest as natural powers; thus 'Nature' is the collective term for distinct deities, but Ether is the father of them, Zeus in fact. Hope, however, is 'daughter of the Ether', so do not hope for merely meteorological relationships; Ether is 'du stiller Äther', not the raging swift Helios ('Licht' is a part of Äther, but not synonymous); in *Der Wanderer* it is 'Vater des Vaterlands, mächtige Äther'; but most revealing is this passage from *Der Archipelagus*:

For the heavenly like to rest
On a feeling heart, as always, the enrapturing powers,
Still like to escort the aspiring man, and above
The mountains of home the ubiquitous ether reposes
And reigns and loves¹

and the day of salvation is when 'our Father Ether belongs to each and all' (*Bread and Wine*). The Ether is, in brief, comparable with Wordsworth's Nature, the Greek Zeus, the Christian God the Father. One is easily confused by the number of closely-related phenomenal deities in Hölderlin's work: the elements and the planets affected him so keenly as divine influences in their own right, with even personal attributes, that what is actually an individual form of pantheism seems to be an involved and complex polytheism.

TO THE ETHER.

As faithfully and kindly as you, O Father Ether,
Neither god nor man reared me; before even my mother
Took me into her arms and her breasts nourished me
Tenderly you lifted me up, poured divine drink for me,
And first of all urged holy breath through my growing frame.

The living do not thrive merely on earthly victuals,
You nourish them all with your nectar, O Father!
And the inspiring air from your eternal fullness,
Thrusting its way, flows through all the channels of life.
And so all creatures love you, and aspire and strive
Incessantly upwards to you in joyful growth.

²Letter to Böhlendorf, December, 1802. Hölderlin says truly in this letter, 'as one relates of heroes, I can well say that Apollo has vanquished me', but though in style rather involved and obscure, it is a very interesting document (see Hamburger's introduction).

Heavenly One! does not the plant seek you with its eyes,
And the lowly shrub stretch its shy arms towards you?
That it may find you, the imprisoned seed shatters the husk;
That, animated by you, it may bathe in your waves,
The forest shakes off the snow like an importunate garment.
The fishes, even, leap and dart longingly
Over the glittering surface of the stream, as if they too
Wished to desert their cradle for you; and the earth-bound pace
Of noble animals turns often to flight, when the mighty longing,
Their secret love for you, seizes them, uplifts them.

The haughty steed despises the ground, like a bent sword
His neck strains skyward, his hoof scarcely disturbs the sand.
As if in jest, the stag stirs the grass-blade with his foot,
Then springs, like a zephyr, across the brook which foams
Rapaciously hither and thither and rambles hardly visible
through the brushwood.

But the Ether's darlings, they, the fortunate birds,
Live and disport themselves joyously in the eternal Hall of the
Father.

There is room for all. None are excluded from these ways,
And great and small move fearlessly in their element.
Above my head they are rejoicing and my heart yearns
Wonderfully for them; like a friendly homeland, the Ether
Beckons from above, and I would I might wander
On the Alpine heights and call to the hurrying eagle,
That, as once it bore the holy youth into the arms of Zeus,
It might carry me out of captivity into the Ether's Hall.

Foolishly we surge this way and that: like the erring vine
When the stake has broken whereon it climbed towards Heaven,
We straggle across the earth, searching, wandering
Through all the world's zones, O Father Ether, in vain—
For the desire ever impels us to walk in your gardens.

We hurl ourselves in the sea-flood, to satiate ourselves
In those boundless plains, while the endless wave plays
Round our keel and the heart rejoices at the Sea God's might.
Yet are we never satisfied, for that deeper ocean calls us,
Where the lighter billow stirs—O who is able
To steer the drifting ship towards those golden shores!

But while I gaze longingly into the darkening distance,
Where you embrace the strange coast with a bluish wave,
You come murmuring down from the fruit tree's blossoming
branches,
You yourself, O Father Ether! soothe my struggling heart
And now, as before, I am glad to be living with the flowers of
earth.

D. J. ENRIGHT.

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

CATHOLICITY OR NARROWNESS ?

A CRITICAL HISTORY OF ENGLISH POETRY, by Herbert J. C. Grierson and J. C. Smith (Chatto and Windus, 21/-).

Any history of English poetry deserving the name must be a work of criticism (a point I made in an exchange with Mr. F. W. Bateson in these pages some years ago). But if so, what history can we point to? The appearance of the adjective in the title of the book under review suggests a recognition, on the part of the authors, of the depressing force of this question. The 'critical' along with Sir Herbert Grierson's name (of his collaborator one knows less—his having been, as the dust-jacket tells us, a founder of the English Association establishes nothing conclusively against him) makes it not altogether naïve to have expected something different from the ordinary literary history.

I wish to stress Sir Herbert Grierson's distinction. He is an academic eminence in the field of literary studies, and he is regarded with genuine respect by people genuinely interested in literature. It is a rare distinction, and it points the moral of my review—for a moral is what I am primarily concerned with. In what follows I shall be understood to intend no disrespect towards the authors; my attention is upon the state of affairs their book represents.

The distinction referred to makes it representative in a very forcible way, for in spite of the reasons intimated for hoping, it doesn't differ notably from the other literary histories. I hadn't supposed that the 'perspective of English poetry' (see the back outside dust-jacket) given by the authors would coincide with mine, but I had expected to find some stimulus to testing, verifying and readjusting this. Actually they offer no perspective at all—nothing that I should call a perspective—'Most of the newcomers were true poets' (p. 495). It is the Georgian or Marsh poets who are in question, and the judgment represents fairly the kind of catholicity that marks the book.

Discrimination is life, indiscriminatio is death: I offer this as obviously a very suitable maxim for a university school of English, and it seems to me very plain that a critical habit tending to carry severity even towards 'narrowness' constitutes, for the student, a more healthy climate than Sir Herbert Grierson's and Dr. Smith's kind of catholicity—which is the kind fostered almost universally in the academic world. I put 'narrowness' in inverted commas