



# The AALITRA Review

## A JOURNAL OF LITERARY TRANSLATION

### No. 2, November 2010

Website: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~aalitra/>

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To cite this Article:

Eduard Stoklosinski, "Hermann Lenz's novel *Der Kutscher und der Wappenmaler*: Translator's Note", *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation*, No.2 (Melbourne: Monash University, 2010), pp.42-47.

*Published by*  
MONASH UNIVERSITY

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# Hermann Lenz's novel *Der Kutscher und der Wappenmaler:* Translator's Note

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For most of his writing life Hermann Lenz remained on the side lines, an author largely unrecognised; it was not until his early sixties that Peter Handke, the much younger, rising star of the German literary establishment at that time, discovered and warmly recommended the Swabian outsider. Lenz's main body of work is, in scope and technique, a memory project in which remembering and forgetting constitute a similarly integral part. Underlying and informing his narrative are the minute documentations of a chronicler who, refraining from simply recording events, exposes them instead to the vagaries, the ingenuities of memory and imagination, the solitary scratching of a steel nib on single sheets of paper.

Born in pre-war Germany in 1913, Lenz spent his childhood years in Künzelsau, a small town in the Hohenlohe/Württemberg, before his family (his father was a visual arts teacher) moved to Stuttgart in 1924. After the *Gymnasium* he enrolled at the theological seminar in Tübingen but withdrew after four semesters and, between 1933 and 1940, studied art history, philosophy and German literature in Heidelberg and Munich, without ever completing a degree; instead he began writing poetry and short prose. From 1940 onwards he was enlisted and served as a soldier, taking part in the German invasion of France, and then, at the eastern front, in the Wehrmacht's assault on the Soviet Union. After the war he was interned as a prisoner of war, first in the USA and later in Le Havre, France, until 1946, when he returned to his family home in Stuttgart. Here, in the parental home in Birkenwaldstraße he moved into the attic room and decided to become a writer:

You want to try it differently. And after all you still have some money ... although it wasn't worth much, as good as nothing, to be precise. But the mechanism kept going, and these were lean years into which he had stumbled. It seemed to him as if he had only ever lived in meagre times (certainly not in abundance). And actually it didn't matter because for years you have lived in the woods and open fields ... now you'll make good use of what you've got here, and you'll stay upstairs in your attic ... now and for the time to come you only want to write ... As if you could only relieve the load stuck in your head through writing'.

(Lenz c, 17)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All translations in this text are mine.

In the following years Lenz led, as far as literary life in West Germany was concerned, an obscure existence as a writer and part-time secretary of the southern German writer's association, although, thanks to the support of the publisher Paul Hegemann in Cologne, he managed to publish small editions, both shorter prose (e.g. *Das stille Haus*, 1947; *Das doppelte Gesicht*, 1949; *Die Abenteurerin*, 1952) and novels (e.g. *Der russische Regenbogen*, 1959; *Die Augen eines Dieners*, 1964; *Der Kutscher und der Wappenmaler*, 1972). He even received an invitation to read at the pivotal Gruppe 47, the avant-garde of postwar literary production in West Germany, but was met with consternation and disapproval for his ambiguous, seemingly disengaged inwardness and subjectivism. Yet, he is not an apolitical writer and, throughout his work, engaged with recent German history - with a dreamy eye on the Imperial past and a critical one on the rise and the catastrophe of Nazism, but from up close and introspectively, like an attentive, though naively detached, bystander. Only after Peter Handke published his invitation to read Hermann Lenz ("Tage wie ausgeblasene Eier") in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 1973 did he gain wider recognition, a late acknowledgment, which culminated in the Georg Büchner Prize, the most prestigious German literary award, in 1978. Handke wrote:

It had been a season like on an ice floe, bottomless and dark all around, and at times I suffered panic attacks, on passing empty rooms my ears were stabbing, but as soon I read *Der Kutscher und der Wappenmaler* the objects around me stopped being precursors of the horrid and stood unshakably in the friendly electric light I was able to look at again. While reading, I got the feeling that all the missing people were home at last. When the silence at night threatened again with premonitions, I simply read more closely, word for word, and the premonitions let up; the book didn't distract me but strengthened me against them; hardly ever have I felt safer.

(Handke, 36)

By the time *Der Kutscher und der Wappenmaler* was published in 1972, Lenz had written the first two instalments of his so-called "Swabian Chronicle", the *Eugen Rapp* novels, a quasi-autobiographical memory project that opens with the life of his grandparents in Künzelsau at the very beginning of the twentieth century in *Verlassene Zimmer* (Abandoned Rooms) and concludes with *Freunde* (Friends) in the early 1990s, nine books in all, published between 1966 and 1993. The opening lines of *Verlassene Zimmer* describe the grandparents' inn *Goldener Hase* with a reference to the poet Christian Wagner:

His wife fitted a new mantle in the gas lamp that hung above the oval table at which the poet from Warmbronn, a peasant, sat every once in a while. He remembered him as a small man, with white hair that fell over his neck, and with a furrowed, sharpened face.

(Lenz b, 9)

There are two other nineteenth-century German writers who have a recurring presence in Lenz's work: Eduard Mörike and Adalbert Stifter. Certain aspects of Stifter's writing, particularly the rigid panorama, the schematic, wooden descriptions and the arduous, disconcerting exactitude echo subtly in Lenz's prose. In *Der Kutscher and the Wappenmaler* imaginings and memories assemble like still life scenes, pictures pass by, illuminated by a tinge, a whiff in the air, both sound and light. As if the novel was built from a magnified relief - a series of photographs of fleeting immediacy - each frame is shifting, lingering, fading in amended, recurring versions, a gasping for air, a "displacement of events as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope" (Schlant, 126).

In the first part of the novel set in Stuttgart in the 1910s, a coachman imagines the life of a heraldic painter he fleetingly meets, and looks at his own, overshadowed, inspired by the omnipotent promise of the unfamiliar, the lure of an imagined world, reveries of an idealised Habsburg empire, of Vienna. He ponders his dreams and failings, unable to step out of his "stale destiny" (Lenz a, 11), which, in his monologues, is negotiated in alternating voices between second and third person narrative. The self-reflective, recurring "you", the most peculiar aspect in Lenz's writing, creates a personal, singular tone. It is the fault line of an inner dialogue, an inner district where reassurances are not claimed but contemplated, places not settled but approached with an eye on the light above the landscape.

To Egelhaf he said: "So long, Louis", climbed on the box seat and let the reins slap on the horse's back: "Let's go, Hansel." He turned and drove down Friedrichsstraße to Alleenstraße, where the green in the front yards and the foliage in the trees had a trace of evening. A fading twilight mingled with the almost empty street and made it appear farther than it was. This seemed impressive to Kandel, probably because it made the houses so single-layered, the way the painter of arms had looked. That's right. At forty-seven something like the twilight and the desire not to have to return to the worn and the familiar matched the cool whiff he felt behind his forehead; or on his forehead. Yes, this was more precise ... And Kandel leaned back while driving, and stretched out both legs.

(Lenz a, 14)

Lenz's outsider status, both personally and professionally, did not advance his prominence in Germany or, of course, abroad; so far, none of his books have been translated into English. The introduction to an English audience of this outstanding German author and chronicler is long overdue. His is, despite conservative affinities and musings, a concerned and original, autarkic voice. He is a writer who sees himself from a distance, a voice unencumbered by tendentiousness. Schlant (147) noted that "in this landscape of the mind and of memory, the narrated events emerge like islands in the sea of silence, but they are connected at their base by a memory adverse to surface".

Lenz's prose, particularly in the *Eugen Rapp* novels, does not work primarily through plot or structure but rather through observation, through a subtle probing

into the seemingly forgotten, the abandoned and disappearing. In an interview with Jane Fröhlich he said that "... in my prose I'm increasingly abstaining from arrangements and this is what I find so fascinating about Proust, that he manages without effects. And that way the inconstancy of life becomes evident" (88). There is silence, a breath-taking emanating from the visual surroundings in which his remembrances and imaginations are immersed.

He scribbled again into the black notebook that had a stiff cardboard binding, an octavo, handy and threadbare. He was surprised that he never took note of the stories he was imagining. It didn't belong here as it was only worthwhile to record events, how the air was, the light, and what other people had said. Life's raw material had to remain palpable. The treatment showed the grain of the timber, no more was to happen. Even the elegance of language didn't matter, it only had to be right what Eugen wrote.

(Lenz d, 41)

Writing so distinctly and personally accentuated demands to be rendered like an artefact, with minimal imprint and impositions on the part of the translator. It is essential to settle into the text's rhythm and tempo, its narrative threading, to follow and to make transparent, if only fragmentarily and provisionally, the original's representation, its undertone, its force and effect. A close proximity to the original text foregrounds a formal mutuality between both texts, German and English, which is accomplished at times, visually at least, when the original and a translation are juxtaposed – documenting, supplementing the original.

Wie ihm alles zusammenfloss in dieser Nacht; es wurde hergeschwemmt und er konnte sich nicht dagegen wehren. Der Zug flog an einer Station vorbei, und auf dem Schild stand Cincinnati; der Urwald rückte an die Fenster, und er sah den Mississippi, als ob ein Arm des Meeres durch die Bäume stiesse. Der Mississippi war auf einmal nahe da. Er ging der Heidehofstraße entgegen und dachte, dass sei ein sonderbarer Name. Vielleicht war hier mal ein heidnischer Hof gestanden, ein Gutshof wie draußen in Heimerdingen, wo sie jetzt wieder gegraben hatten; nicht weit vom Römerstein ist es gewesen, und du hast's aus der "Schwäbischen Chronik", denn dumm bist du nicht.

How it all flowed together that night; it was swept along and he could not fend it off. The train flew past a station and on the sign he read Cincinnati; the primeval forest moved closer to the windows and he saw the Mississippi, as if an arm of the sea was pushing through the trees. Suddenly, the Mississippi was close by. He walked towards Heidehof Straße and thought that it was a peculiar name. Perhaps a heathen homestead had stood here in the past, a farmstead like over there at Heimerdingen, where they started digging again; not far from the Römerstein it had been, you've read about it in the "Schwäbische Chronik", you're not stupid after all. Or did you hear it from the poet

Oder hast du's von dem Dichter der  
in Warmbronn Bauer ist und der es  
dir am runden Tisch unter der  
Gaslampe erzählt hat? Und wie der  
schmunzelt und wie ihm verästelte  
Falten auf den Backen zucken, wie  
sie auseinander fahren, wenn er lacht

who's a peasant in Warmbronn and  
who told you about it at the round  
table under the gas lamp? The way he  
smiles and knotted wrinkles twitch  
on his cheeks, how they scatter when  
he laughs ...

(Lenz b, 12)

There is a space between two languages, an interstice, where translation pauses, where elusiveness and incompatibility, a momentary volatility of imagery and texture lie bare; it is an instant of “insignificance”, of indecision, a fixture not quite released and not yet reassembled, an uncertainty. This is the place where the text is set, the original constituted as an original in a sense, created vis-a-vis the translation. Translation is about this space, it is the text and also the manifestation of the text, its documentation.

Antoine Berman claimed that “translation is a trial of the foreign ... by aiming to open up the foreign work to us in its utter foreignness”, and that “translation is a trial for the foreign as well, since the foreign work is uprooted from its own *language-ground*” (284). This uprootedness manifests itself most distinctly and transparently in translating from the first language, a mode of translating with its own propositions and tendencies. The “foreign” translator is by necessity closer to the original and therefore less inclined to employ normalising or interpretative strategies, less tempted to clarify and embellish. The ubiquitous notion of “good style” and “fluidity” so prevalent in contemporary translation practice is based on the directionality maxim – translators are to work into their first (better?) language, its ambition being to dress up the original text in an equivalent adaptation, an exercise in puzzling together pieces or filling apparent gaps, of re-dressing and over-writing.

In contrast, the foreign translator is perhaps not as constricted or bound by the scaffolds of language conventions that constitute “good style” or other established aesthetic principles. Working from the first language seems to facilitate a pausing in the space of insignificance, an awareness of the text's instability and potential. In the interstice of languages the foreign translator tends to drift back towards the source; the translating language does not as easily develop its own momentum, that is, its own banalities, for the sake of fluency.

On the intricacies of writing in a foreign language, Libuse Monikova, a Czech author who wrote in German, commented:

Thanks to my preoccupation with Kafka I came to realise that a lack of language can possibly turn to strength, a strength of expression, because no word is taken for granted or appears secure in its significance, each word is new, and the author carries the responsibility, I write, by feeling through language, approaching meanings sometimes that remain subconscious until

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they are written down: this search originates in the foreignness of language,  
now it identifies me as an author.

(In Alms, 138-151)

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An excerpt from *Der Kutscher und der Wappenmaler* in translation will be published in our next issue.