

TRANSLATING HEINRICH BÖLL'S
'ANEKDOTE ZUR SENKUNG DER ARBEITSMORAL'

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To Work or Not to Work

- 1 In a port on the western coast of Europe, a man, wearing shabby clothes, lies in his fishing boat and dozes. A smartly dressed tourist is just putting a new colour film into his camera to take a picture of the idyllic scene: blue sky, green sea with peaceful, snow-white crests of waves, black boat, the fisherman's red cap. Click. And again: click, and as all good things come in threes, and as it's better to be on the safe side, click, for the third time. The dry and almost hostile sound wakes the dozing fisherman, who sleepily sits up, sleepily reaches for his cigarette-packet; but before he finds what he is looking for, the eager tourist already holds out a packet right under his nose, putting the cigarette not exactly into his mouth but placing it into his hand, and a fourth click, that of the lighter, finishes off the zealous civility. This hardly measurable, and never verifiable, excess of rash civility produces an irritably embarrassing situation which the tourist, who speaks the language of the country, tries to bridge by starting a conversation.
- 2 'You will make a good catch, today.'
- 3 The fisherman shakes his head.
- 4 'But I was told the weather is favourable.'
- 5 The fisherman nods.
- 6 'So you won't put to sea?'
- 7 The fisherman shakes his head, the tourist gets increasingly nervous. To be sure, he is deeply concerned about the welfare of the man in shabby clothes, and sadly frets over the missed opportunity.
- 8 'Oh, you don't feel well?'
- 9 Eventually, the fisherman switches from sign language to the actually spoken word. 'I feel splendid,' he says. 'I never felt better.' He stands up, has a good stretch, as if he wanted to show off the athletic shape of his body. 'I feel great.'
- 10 The facial expression of the tourist grows more and more unhappy; no longer can he suppress the question which, as it were, threatens to burst his heart: 'But why, then, do you not put to sea?'
- 11 The answer comes promptly and briefly: 'Because I already put to sea this morning.'
- 12 'Did you make a good catch?'
- 13 'My catch was so good that I need not put to sea for a second time. I had four lobsters in my baskets, caught nearly two dozen mackerel ...'
- 14 The fisherman, finally awake, is now thawing, and slaps the tourist soothingly on the shoulder. The worried countenance of the latter seems to him an expression of inappropriate, yet touching, anxiety.
- 15 'I have enough even for tomorrow and the day after tomorrow,' he says to relieve the stranger's soul. 'Do you want a cigarette?'
- 16 'Yes, please.'
- 17 Cigarettes are being put into mouths, a fifth click; the stranger, shaking his head, sits down on the rim of the boat, and puts down the camera, for now he needs both hands to give his speech emphasis.

- 18 'I do not want to meddle in your personal affairs,' he says, 'but just imagine, you put to sea today for a second, a third, or perhaps even a fourth time, and you catch three, four, five, maybe even ten dozen mackerel. Just imagine that!'
- 19 The fisherman nods.
- 20 'You put to sea,' continues the tourist, 'not only today but tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, indeed, on every favourable day two, three, or perhaps four times - do you know what would happen?'
- 21 The fisherman shakes his head.
- 22 'In one year at the latest you would be able to buy a motor, in two years a second boat, in three or four years you may, perhaps, have a small trawler; with two boats or the trawler you would, of course, catch a lot more - one day, you would have two trawlers, you would...,' for a few moments his enthusiasm leaves him speechless, 'you would build a small cold store, perhaps a smoke-house, soon afterwards a marinating factory, fly around with your own helicopter, making out the shoals of fish and giving orders to your trawlers by radio. You could buy the fishing rights for salmon, open a fish restaurant, export lobster directly to Paris without a middleman - and then...,' once again his enthusiasm leaves the stranger speechless. Shaking his head, saddened in the depth of his heart, and almost bereft of his holiday delights, he looks on the waters rolling peacefully into the harbour, where the uncaught fish jump merrily.
- 23 'And then,' says he, but again his excitement leaves him speechless. The fisherman slaps him on the back, as one would slap a child choking over his food. 'What then?' he asks in a low voice.
- 24 'Then,' says the stranger with quiet enthusiasm, 'then you may relax here in the harbour with your mind set at ease, doze in the sunshine - and look out on the magnificent sea.'
- 25 'But that is what I am doing just now,' says the fisherman, 'I relax here in the harbour with my mind set at ease, and doze; only the clicking noise of your camera disturbed me.'
- 26 In fact, the tourist, thus put right, became thoughtful and went away, for he used to think he worked in order that, one day, he need not work any more; and there remained in him not a trace of pity for the fisherman in shabby clothes, only a little envy.

Commentary

The title of Böll's short story, 'Anekdote zur Senkung der Arbeitsmoral' (1972: 332-34), does not invite a literal translation, since its complex nominal construction is not particularly suited to the characteristics of the English language. In German, the title sounds perfect, not least because of its regular accentual lilt: it would make an ideal anapaestic tetrameter line. My translation tries to express in a typically English phrase both the semantic essence and rhythmic regularity of the original title. That a more literal rendering is not wholly inconceivable, has been demonstrated by Leila Vennewitz (in Böll 1986: 628), who translates: 'Anecdote Concerning the Lowering of Productivity'.¹

Heinrich Böll's style is characterized by a rich and varied vocabulary, and a syntax featuring complex attribution within co-ordinated clauses, occasionally *asyndeta*. Although the vocabulary of English is generally more extensive than that of German, there may well be examples in German where lexical variety is matched only with difficulty by an English equivalent. Take, for instance, the description in the first paragraph

of the fisherman and the tourist: 'ein ärmlich gekleideter Mann [...] Ein schick angezogener Tourist' (Böll 1972: 332). The semantic contrast is obvious, but it is not lexically reinforced as in the most straightforward English version: 'a shabbily dressed man [...] A smartly dressed tourist' (Böll 1986: 628). To avoid the unwarranted repetition of the past participle, I have altered both the form and position of grammatical attribution in the first noun phrase. The more varied vocabulary of this translation justifies the slight syntactic change.

In the last sentence of the first paragraph, the question is whether to imitate the syntax of the original, or whether to opt for a more fluent variant. Böll (1972: 332) writes: 'Durch jenes kaum meßbare, nie nachweisbare Zuviel ein flinker Höflichkeit ist eine gereizte Verlegenheit entstanden, die der Tourist - der Landessprache mächtig - durch ein Gespräch zu überbrücken versucht.' Vennewitz (in Böll 1986: 628) translates: 'As a result of that excess of nimble courtesy - scarcely measurable, never verifiable - a certain awkwardness has arisen that the tourist, who speaks the language of the country, tries to bridge by striking up a conversation.' This translation largely preserves the German syntax, yet, the English construction of the main clause - 'a certain awkwardness has arisen' - is somewhat clumsy. Therefore, my rendering chooses a different predicator ('produce') to integrate the prepositional phrase at the beginning of the sentence into a straightforward SVO sentence structure.

A similar case is Böll's account of the tourist's thoughts in paragraph 7: 'Gewiß liegt ihm das Wohl des ärmlich gekleideten Menschen am Herzen, nagt an ihm die Trauer über die verpaßte Gelegenheit' (1972: 332). Again Vennewitz (in Böll 1986: 628) provides a fairly literal rendering: 'It is clear that he has the welfare of the shabbily dressed man at heart and that disappointment over the lost opportunity is gnawing at him.' Note that, in the original, the description of the fisherman is lexically identical to the description given at the beginning of the story. Thus, if this repetitive pattern is preserved in translation by using the prepositional postmodifier 'in shabby clothes', the possible rendering of 'liegt [...] am Herzen' as 'has [...] at heart' should be abandoned in favour of an alternative expression ('is deeply concerned about'). For the grammatical object that would fill out the syntactic construction of 'has [...] at heart' is too complex to be stylistically appropriate. And instead of elaborately translating the second part of the above sentence: 'disappointment over the lost opportunity is gnawing at him,' I propose a rendering which reflects the succinct style of the original without neglecting the meaning.

Regarding the translation of single words and phrases, the following are of particular interest. In paragraph 13, the fisherman describes his success: "ich habe vier Hummer in meinen Körben gehabt" (Böll 1972: 333). Although it is most likely that he refers to that specific gear with which he caught the lobster, the noun ('Körben') might also refer to some other kind of wicker-made receptacle in which he afterwards kept the animals. The German word 'Hummerreuse' would clearly denote the former device, a lobster-pot. It seems, then, safest to employ a similarly unspecific expression in the English version by translating literally 'baskets' rather than using a more defining term such as 'traps' (Böll 1986: 629).

One of the most interesting translational problems in Böll's short story is represented by the German word 'Kutter' in paragraph 22. Albeit semantically variable, the term denotes, in the above context, a motor-driven fishing-boat. The etymological sense

of a small fast sailing ship cutting through the waters of the sea is relatively uncommon in German compared to its English cognate, 'cutter', used in the translation by Leila Vennewitz (in Böll 1986: 629). Regarding the question whether 'cutter' can mean a motor-driven fishing-boat, only a few bilingual dictionaries suggest an affirmative answer when they render 'Fischkutter' as '(fishing) cutter'. Yet, this answer becomes highly uncertain as we search monolingual dictionaries, including the OED, for any definitions or quotations that would confirm the possibility of a cutter used as fishing vessel. All results are negative. Among the words that would signify some kind of fishing-boat can be found 'smack', 'jigger', 'drifter', and 'trawler': while the first two clearly denote a single-masted sailing-boat, the second and third refer to particular fishing techniques. The terms 'drifter' and 'trawler' also exist in the German language; yet, they tend to be restricted to technical usage (especially, 'drifter'), whereas 'Fischkutter' or simply 'Kutter' are common words of little specification. In English, the distinction between a drifter and trawler cannot be resolved into a more neutral expression other than a 'fishing-boat' noun phrase - which is, however, a stylistically unsatisfactory solution. Thus, in Böll's short story, the word 'Kutter' should be translated as either 'drifter' or 'trawler'.

To conclude this commentary, let us look at the clause '[...] blickt er auf die friedlich hereinrollende Flut' (Böll 1972: 334) towards the end of paragraph 22. Here, the combination of present participle and noun suggests two different, yet related, meanings: on the one hand, it depicts the rolling of waves, on the other, it indicates the incoming tide. Although the grammatical singular of the German noun 'Flut' usually refers to the latter phenomenon, its semantic context urges it to convey the former meaning. Not only the present participle, but also the preceding verb plus preposition points to an object rather than an event. In her translation - 'he looks out onto the peacefully advancing tide' - Leila Vennewitz (in Böll 1986: 629) opts for the grammatically more likely interpretation of the noun and, in the light of this analysis, adjusts both verb and participle. My rendering exploits the semantic potential of the noun to capture the more concrete aspects of Böll's description.

Note

¹ Having first translated Heinrich Böll's short story independently of any other rendering, I later changed a small number of words or phrases. These alterations are largely based on the translation by Leila Vennewitz (in Böll 1986: 628-30).

Bibliography

Böll, Heinrich, *Erzählungen 1950-1970* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1972).

