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Hölderlin in the Barracks

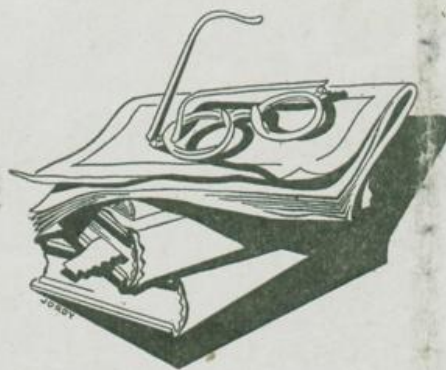
An Army Sergeant Reports on A New Translation

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 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

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.

Was, 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

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



official looking envelope from the U. S. Navy Department, containing the following terse message, written on an interoffice memo blank:

Headquarters U. S. Naval Shore Activities.
From—Officer-in-charge, Capt. L. B. Queene
To—LDR
Re—An unborn moron

Definition: Just a little inside dope. I'll tell you what you do. You sit right down and write Captain Queene (not his name, as how do I know he's supposed to write to strange women on the Navy's paper) the one you just received from that Canadian bombardier about—But maybe we'd better not go into that.

THEN there are the dozens of letters from women all over the country—just plain ordinary women like me—who say, "Is your book really true? Are you really poor and do you really have to work hard? Don't you really mind? Do you really have as much fun as you say you do? Please tell me the truth, because we're poor, too, and have to work hard, and it would help so much to know—" I don't call those "fan letters." I don't like to call any of my mail "fan mail." It makes the writers sound silly, and they aren't silly. They're swell people, real people. So how can I help writing back to say, "If my book has nothing else to recommend it, at least it is true. We've been poor and we've had fun. Being poor isn't so bad, nor is working hard, unless you make it bad by being ashamed of it."

And here's something else that's driving me nuts. I've received letters from people saying that the Book-of-the-Month Club and the reviewers may think I'm good, but as for them, they

think that I and all my works are an offense under Heaven. My book's no good and I personally am obnoxious, conceited, opinionated, probably a liar and beyond question completely impossible. But that's not what makes me mad. Lord love a duck, I've been found impossible before. What makes me mad is the fact that these letters are always anonymous. This, on the one hand, gives me the perfect retort, ready made: to wit, "Impossible as I am, I have never sunk so low as to write anonymous abusive letters, like some I could mention." On the other hand, it puts me in the simply infuriating position of having the demolishing come-back and no one to whom to make it. (I hereby place in the Public Domain this diabolical means of hectoring writers who have incurred anyone's displeasure. I guarantee it as 100 per cent efficient.) So I go around all day seething with righteous rage over this dirty in-fighting and getting what poor satisfaction I can out of picturing the writers of these letters as being much fatter than I am, with round, white, blank faces, and insufferable smug expressions. Probably they have white eyelashes, too; and maybe even they whine when they talk and everybody hides from them.

So—The baby's hair still grows every-which-way and we had canned peaches this noon. Larry Parsons, the mail carrier, begins to look defeated and the Postmaster out at Andover grows restive. My publishers write me tactful letters about "What next?" and my agent, who knows me better, writes less tactful letters about "For crying out loud, when are you going to do a little work for a change?" And the mail still rolls in.

And to say the truth, I'll probably feel hurt when it stops rolling.

back, special delivery air mail, "Hey, for Pete's sake, sister, take it easy! Let's talk this over!"

What do you do when you get a magnum of champagne from a reader? Champagne may fall like rain into some lives, but mine is not among them. An event like that deserves a "thank you" at least, seems so. So do the pecans from New Orleans, and the Camembert from Chicago, and the sherbet, packed in dry ice, from Somerville, Mass.

What do you do when a whole squadron of the Air Force writes you a joint letter telling you they liked your book and after the war may the survivors come and visit you and here's an Air Force pin for Rufus from the boys with wings? You go up into the attic, obviously, count the spare cots, figure out how many you can squeeze onto the front porch, write them that it's a date, and pray to God that every mother's son of them will be around to keep it.

Nor can you just toss into the canned milk case where you keep such letters the epistle from the gentleman who at the age of thirteen earned his way through school by playing the piano in Aunt Hat's House. (He says the whole atmosphere was genteel to the point of prudery and probably harmed him less than the modern equivalent of selling magazines from door to door would have done.) Nor the letter from the reformed roué who dates his regeneration from the night he got chucked out of Aunt Hat's without his pants because he couldn't pay the charge. Nor the report from one of her old girls that the Madame, softened by age, gave up the business and turned the house over to the Salvation Army.

What do you do when an old lumberjack, confined to a wheelchair in a State institution, writes almost illegibly in pencil that he helped put the Alligator into the Pond-in-the-River twenty-five years ago and that your book is the only book about the woods that he ever read that didn't have some damn-fool statements in it? He knows what he's talking about and you don't ignore a tribute like that!

What do you do when you get an



"I don't believe I can quite stomach Hemingway's books since he raised a moustache."

Mass. Tr. St. ...
Arthur U. ...

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.