

Georg Trakl

„Grodek“

comparison and analysis of different
translations into english

(c) Weilguny Thomas, 2000

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	2
2. The Author.....	2
3. Culture specific aspects.....	3
3.1 Landscape.....	3
3.2 Religion.....	3
4. Sentence Structure in Translation.....	4
4.1 Trakl.....	5
4.2 Hamburger.....	5
4.3 Bly.....	5
4.4 Sigler.....	6
5. Choice of Words.....	6
6. Summary of Features.....	7
6.1 Hamburger.....	7
6.2 Bly.....	7
6.3 Sigler.....	8
7. Metaphors.....	8
8. Conclusion.....	9
Appendix.....	10
Bibliography.....	11

1. Introduction

Although the poetry of Georg Trakl seems to have declined in popularity in the German speaking community, he is still read all over the world, with translations into various languages, ranging from Czech to Japanese. His poetry is very rich in images; he uses a lot of metaphors and uses the German language to the extent of its grammatical possibilities and beyond. This makes it very interesting to translate. Trakl is not only still read, but also still translated. There is even an international forum of Trakl-translators.

This paper will take a look at some of the facets of Grodek-translations, especially the differences between translations of the same language. For this purpose three translations have been selected, one by Michael Hamburger, Robert Bly and Ernst Sigler (in Finck, p.150, 151).

2. The Author

Although there it is no agreement upon whether the author's life and context should be taken into consideration when dealing with poetry it does seem important for the understanding of this poem to know about the author's life and experiences.

Georg Trakl was born in 1887, had a rather uneventful childhood and came into contact with drugs while working in a pharmacy. He started writing at an early age, and, never being able to hold a job for long, considered this his "work". After studying pharmacy he joined the army for a year, after that he had various jobs in the military. At the outbreak of the war in 1914 he was conscripted into the reserves. At the battle of Grodek (Poland) his unit saw battle for the first time. Trakl had a deeply traumatic experience having to care for the wounded, as there was no doctor present. During the retreat he attempted suicide and was subsequently hospitalised. A few weeks later he died of an overdose of cocaine (Trakl¹). It is in those weeks that he wrote "Grodek".

¹ <http://www.gymnasium-leichtingen.de/trakl.html>

3. Culture specific aspects

As this poem has a very specific cultural and historical context, it is easy to define its topic. The time frame is the beginning of mechanized warfare; from that background the poem would be meaningful to all cultures that have experienced that kind of warfare. In a more general view the poem is about war and death, so it is probable that every war-faring culture could find the poem relevant, even if the details were different. In the case of Grodek-translations it would even be possible to create a version specifically tailored to a certain culture or time frame, a medieval version would be easy to render.

Trakl is one of the European poets most often translated into Japanese; in fact Trakl seems to be very popular in Japan. The reason for this could be either that of Japan's intense ties with its warrior culture, the Samurai, or on a broader view the fact that Japan, like almost every other nation on earth has experienced mass warfare.

3.1 Landscape

Landscapes are an important feature of most of Trakl's poems (Steinkamp in Williams, p.135 ff), in "Grodek" it's the plains and forests of northern Europe. One would think that such a location-specific aspect would invariably create problems outside the language area of the region in question. However, as Europe is relatively small in regards to differences in climate and vegetation, and the predominate climate zone encompasses all the home countries of the translators mentioned here the discrepancies are negligible.

It would be interesting however to examine translations into languages that predominately occur in regions where the climate differs considerably. In the case of Grodek, areas on the southern hemisphere and desert or steppe climates would provide the most interesting basis.

3.2 Religion

The religious component has to be taken into consideration, because there is a direct reference of a god in line 8, although whether this is a specific deity remains open. This again creates a broad range of possible cultural interpretations, whether it is a single god as in Christianity or a special god of war or destruction, like Ares or Mars in Greek or Roman mythology is ultimately not important.

There are some other culturally and regionally dependent items, such as the willows, but those are exchangeable and not essential to the poem.

It is not necessary to compare the individual translations in respect to culture-specific aspects, as the variations are insignificant.

4. Sentence Structure in Translation

The poem consists of 19 lines in four sentences, the first being the longest with 6 lines and the last being the shortest with 3 lines. The two middle sentences are of equal length with 4 lines each. The four sentences divide the poem into four units of different topic. The first and longest sentence provides the setting and is also the only sentence which contains reference to living people (l.5, “wilde Klage”), the second gives an impression of death and decay, the third is about the dead warriors, and the fourth an outcry with a possible outlook to the future.

Interestingly the only instance that the sentence pattern was changed at all (this extends to French, Italian and Spanish translations as well) is the last line of the second sentence, which is turned into a full sentence of its own (Hamburger and Sigler). This changes the line count of the individual sentences to 6-3-1-4-3 from 6-4-4-3. About a third of the translations have changed the semicolon of line 9 to a full stop.

The reason for this appears pretty clear. The 2nd sentence is the only one that can be divided into two with a full stop at the end of a line and the last line is also not directly linked to the content of the first three, so a division by full stop would have been possible in the original.

Furthermore this sentence is the one with the highest degree of grammatical ambiguity, line 8 of the original seeming like an insertion, with the sentence that begins in line 7 continuing in line 9. In the different translations this has created wide variations in meaning. In this case it does not seem possible to render a translation that includes all the aspects of the original, the resulting creations are all limited to those three lines, so it might have seemed more reasonable to put this unit into a sentence of its own.

4.1 Trakl

*Doch stille sammelt im Weidengrund
Rotes Gewölk, darin ein zürnender Gott wohnt
Das vergoßne Blut sich, mondne Kühle;*

The most interesting feature of this segment is that “sich” can refer to “rotes Gewölk” and “das vergoßne Blut”. The second line stands apart, dividing up the core sentence “Doch stille sammelt im Weidengrund das vergoßne Blut sich”, but is also linked by the reflexive pronoun “sich” in the third line.

4.2 Hamburger

*But quietly there in the willow dell
Red clouds in which an angry god resides,
The shed blood gathers, lunar coolness.*

This translation stays very close to the original; the only change is that *gather* moves to the third line to concur with English grammar. The second line stands apart as an insertion like in the original. Here the double meaning is lost because the s-ending of “gathers” makes the only possible reference the “shed blood”.

4.3 Bly

*Yet a red cloud, in which a furious god,
The spilled blood itself, has its home, silently
Gathers, a moonlike coolness in the willow bottoms;*

Bly has rearranged the individual elements into a pattern that keeps the insertion, but in an interwoven pattern that is both vertical and horizontal. The vertical component is “Yet a red cloud, in which a furious god, ... , has its home, ...”. This pattern would be even more pronounced if the “silently” of the second line were moved to the third, thereby creating a pattern of interlocking elements. Maybe this was not done here because of the layout.

4.4 Sigler

But quietly there in the pasture-grounds

Flights of red clouds, in which an angry god lives,

Gather the blood that was shed, moon-coolness.

If viewed only superficially Sigler's version seems to be very close to the original, but one important difference makes this translation very different from the original. Sigler has eliminated all the ambiguity by linking the second line into a grammatically correct sentence; the subject is "Flights of red clouds", the object is "blood". Through this change the sentence becomes completely linear and obvious.

5. Choice of words

There are some instances in the three translations where it is unclear why a certain word was chosen instead of another more common one. This can probably be explained only by the author himself but there are some occurrences that are worth taking note of nonetheless.

Hamburgers choice of words is pretty much what one would expect, except that he translates "Verwesung" as carrion, which has the effect that the dead warriors are dehumanised, as carrion is something that serves as food for certain animals.

Bly has employed by far the most interesting vocabulary. In line 5 he uses "recruits" instead of "warrior", which is not very close to the original, but nearer to the historical side of the poem. In some places he uses verbs that imply more action than those in the original do. In line 6 he uses "burst" instead of "broken", in line 14 he uses "rises", which again is less static than the original. Also very interesting is his translation of "Verwesung", which Bly turns into "mold", which is very unusual indeed, as mold is something that one would expect to grow on old bread, and not on a battlefield. The reason for this is that there is a meaning to "mold" which means the black earth, so this translation is very fitting.

In four instances Sigler uses hyphens (lines 2,7,9,13), which seems out of place, as there is no real need for that. It also seems that the image he deduced from the original was quite different from those of the other translators, because the references to landscape

are changed. In line 2 he uses “meadow-plains”, which is something much brighter than that which is implied in the original. In line seven the “Weidengrund” is changed into “pasture-grounds”, an obvious translation error. Sigler has probably read “Weidegrund” and has therefore chosen the wrong word.

6. Summary of Features

6.1 Hamburger

Hamburger stays reasonably close to the original in most respects but has changed the meaning in some areas by changing or adding words. One of the most striking differences occurs in the last line, which Hamburger translates into “the grandsons yet unborn”, which is not quite correct semantically. The original line says “die ungeborenen Enkel” which contains less temporal information than Hamburgers version. Trakl leaves all possibilities open; the grandchildren could be not yet born, still not born, or not to be born. The last seems the most likely, as the poem deals with the death of soldiers who, if they were about Trakl’s age, might not have had children at the time of their death. By fixing one meaning Hamburger gives the ending a positive twist, the reason for the change are most likely rhythmical ones (Wetzel, in Finck, p84). The other three changed words are in lines 3: “more” is inserted; 10: “darkest”, has been changed to superlative and line 12: “now”, also inserted. All four instances of change result in the insertion of an extra syllable, which points to rhythmical reasons.

There are also some changes that make the whole poem seem more dynamic. In the first line “the woods cry out”. This personification serves to lessen the static impression that the poem as a whole generates.

6.2 Bly

This translation allows for the most varied interpretation, as the relatively loose grammatical structure of the original is recreated. This can best be observed in lines 7-9 as already mentioned. The choice of words sometimes appears somewhat strange but does not impair the poem as a whole.

6.3 Sigler

The most striking quality of this translation is the translator's obvious affinity for definite articles, which occur far more often than in the other translations. This might be because the translator is a German native speaker, and thereby would tend to over-use articles, especially if he intended to stay as close to the original as possible. It is also the semantically clearest, if not most accurate translation. He has avoided loose sentence fragments wherever possible, for example in line 13 he translates “die blutenden Häupter” into “their blood-covered heads”, thereby linking it to the “spirits of the heroes”. These changes make the poem easier to read and understand, but one has to bear in mind that this has little to do with the original, as Sigler's translation might be described as almost obvious and bland.

7. Metaphors

Trakl's poetry is in general very rich in images. The key metaphor of this poem is probably “the dark flutes of fall”. The image created by the 14th line is that of a quiet landscape, a lake, and the muffled sound of gunfire in the distance. The “dark flutes” represent guns, the time of year is autumn (also in the first line: “the autumn woods”) because the battle of Grodek took place from 8. - 14. October.

Another interesting metaphor are “eherne Altäre”, which might be understood as an altar upon which a sacrifice takes place. In this case the sacrifice would be the lives of the soldiers, or, if one looks ahead at the last line, the futures of their bloodlines, the following generations that will not be. The altar itself could be “eherne” because it represents mechanisation or mass warfare in general, it is also possible that it relates more specifically to the metal of the weapons itself ; after all in those times soldiers still carried sabres.

8. Conclusion

It seems that in some cases it is not possible to translate without losing something, in that case the translator's view on the original has to fill the gap. It has been said that poetry is that which is lost in translation but, even though in some cases that may be true, in each translation new poetry is created.

So it is the translator's choice whether to prioritize meaning and lose the original form or to keep the form, the patterns, ranging from metre to sentence structure at the cost of changing or constricting the original meaning.

And lastly, the content of a poem is always subject to the reader's, and ultimately the translator's interpretation, which invariably plays a large role in any translation.

Appendix:

Georg Trakl

GRODEK

2. Fassung

Am Abend tönen die herbstlichen Wälder
Von tödlichen Waffen, die goldnen Ebenen
Und blauen Seen, darüber die Sonne
Düstrer hinrollt; umfängt die Nacht
Sterbende Krieger, die wilde Klage
Ihrer zerbrochenen Mänder.
Doch stille sammelt im Weidengrund
Rotes Gewölk, darin ein zürnender Gott wohnt
Das vergoßne Blut sich, mondne Kühle;
Alle Straßen münden in schwarze Verwesung.
Unter goldnem Gezweig der Nacht und Sternen
Es schwankt der Schwester Schatten durch den schweigenden Hain,
Zu grüßen die Geister der Helden, die blutenden Häupter;
Und leise tönen im Rohr die dunklen Flöten des Herbstes.
O stolzere Trauer! ihr ehernen Altäre
Die heiße Flamme des Geistes nährt heute ein gewaltiger Schmerz,
Die ungeborenen Enkel.

Michael Hamburger

GRODEK

At nightfall the autumn woods cry out
With deadly weapons and the golden plains,
The deep blue lakes, above which more darkly
Rolls the sun; the night embraces
Dying warriors, the wild lament
Of their broken mouths.
But quietly there in the willow dell
Red clouds in which an angry god resides,
The shed blood gathers, lunar coolness.
All the roads lead to blackest carrion.
Under golden twigs of the night and stars
The sister's shade now sways through the silent copse
To greet the ghosts of heroes, the bleeding heads;
And softly the dark flutes of autumn sound in the reeds.
O prouder grief! You brazen altars,
Today a great pain feeds the hot flame of the spirit,
The grandsons yet unborn.

Robert Bly

GRODEK

At evening the woods of autumn are full of the sound
Of the weapons of death, golden fields
And blue lakes, over which the darkening sun
Rolls down; night gathers in
Dying recruits, the animal cries
Of their burst mouths.
Yet a red cloud, in which a furious god,
The spilled blood itself, has its home, silently
Gathers, a moonlike coolness in the willow bottoms;
All the roads spread out into the black mold.
Under the gold branches of the night and stars
The sister's shadow falters through the diminishing grove,
To greet the ghosts of the heroes, bleeding heads;
And from the reeds the sound of the dark flutes of autumn rises.
O prouder grief! You bronze altars,
The hot flame of the spirit is fed today by a more monstrous pain,
The unborn grandchildren.

Ernst Sigler

GRODEK

When evening comes resound the autumnal woods
With deadly weapons, the golden meadow-plains
And the blue lakes, above them the sun
Darkly rolls on; there the night enfolds
Dying warriors, the furious lament
Of their utterly broken mouths.
But quietly there in the pasture-grounds
Flights of red clouds, in which an angry god lives,
Gather the blood that was shed, moon-coolness.
All roads are ending into black decay.
Under the golden branches of night and of stars
Wavers the shadow of the sister through the silent grove
To greet the spirits of the heroes, their blood-covered heads;
And gently resound in the reeds the dark flutes of the autumn;
O prouder affliction! O you brazen altars,
The burning flame of the spirit today is fed by tremendous pain,
The unborn grandsons.

Thomas Weilguny

GRODEK

In the evening the autumn woods sound
Of deadly weapons, the golden plains
And blue lakes, and the sun above
Rolls dismally, embraces the night,
Dying warriors, the fierce wail
Of their broken mouths.
But silently under the willows gather
Crimson clouds, within an angry god resides
The spilt blood, the coldness of the moon;
All roads end in black decay.
Under the golden branches of night and stars
The sister's shadow wanders through the silent grove
To greet the spirits of the heroes, the bleeding heads
And the dark flutes of fall sound quietly through the reeds
Oh prouder sorrow! You iron altars
Today the hot flame of human minds feeds on a great pain
The unborn grandchildren.

Bibliography

Basil, Otto. *Trakl*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rohwolt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, 1965.

Calbert, Joseph. *Dimensions of Style and Meaning in the Language of Trakl and Rilke*.
Tübingen: Max Niemeier Verlag, 1974.

Finck, Adrien (a.o). *Trakl in fremden Sprachen*. Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1991.

Diez, Ludwig. *Die lyrische Form Georg Trakls*. Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1959.

Williams, Eric (ed.). *The dark flutes of fall*. Columbia: Camden House, Inc., 1991.

Internet Resources

Trakl. 18.12.00

<http://www.gymnasium-leichtingen.de/trakl.html>

Kranzinger, Elisabeth (1999). *Auf Georg Trakl's Spuren*. 18.12.00

<http://land.salzburg.at/schule/europaservice/polen/010-Trakl.html>