

Between Hammer and Anvil
or
About the Intricate Pleasure of Being a
Translator From Arabic Into German

Hartmut Fähndrich

Everybody can talk about translation and contribute profound insights into the process of rendering a text from one language (known as the source language) into another (the target language). Such contributions are, for preference, presented in the literary genre of the play on words. In German, the favorite one focusses on the difference between *übersetzen* and *übersetzen*, the former verb meaning in fact "to translate", the latter "to ferry over to the other bank of a river", the only distinction between the two being the location of the stress. The other pun, as popular as it is sophisticated, is that on the *traduttore* (translator) being a *traditore* (traitor), meaning that the translator will, by necessity, betray the sublime original literary work as intended by the master, the author, the betrayal being necessitated by that transfer of the work from one language into another, which is, after all, the translator's task.

Leaving this kind of worn-out punnery and descending or rising to the level of a translator's everyday work, how can one describe his or her situation most suitably? Maybe the most appropriate metaphor to be found for such a description is that of the hammer and the anvil, between which the translator spends his/her translating career. This career appears to take different shapes between the two tools used for forging hard metal. A closer look at some of them may elucidate the translator's precarious existence.

Hammer and anvil could be taken to embody **author and publisher**, leaving undefined which tool symbolizes the one or the other. For both are intent on forging the translator, glowing with enthusiasm or the need for some income to feed the children, into a useful serviceable device.

All authors want their works to be translated. This desire they divulge with varying degrees of discretion. They dream of renown and/or a handful of dollars. At times it is difficult to endure their looks charged with anticipation to hear the translator's "I will!".

Then there is the publisher, interested in obtaining books for publication, clean and well prepared manuscripts (of course, too, on diskette) of excellent works beautifully translated - and not too expensive. Certain organizational procedures run smoothly as far as translations between Western literatures are concerned. The same is not true when it comes to Arabic literature. There are hardly any literary agencies; thus, personal contacts are obligatory. These personal relationships between author and translator are, to be sure, something beautiful and useful, but they can also be costly in terms of time, energy, and even travel expenses. They are, from an economic point of view, unpaid extra work, something that has to be "added" to the generally miserable financial remuneration for the translator's art. There are hardly any translators, no matter from or into which language they translate and no matter how hard they work, who are able to even a decent living from translating literature alone.

Hammer and anvil may symbolize another couple of potentially conflicting elements between whom the translator has to manoeuvre, that of the *source and the target language*, sandwiched between whom the translator may in fact become a traditore. It is here that the actual challenge for the translator is to be located, where he has to find his ways, and often they are narrow roads or even a multitude of difficult paths out of which the translator has to choose. It is, therefore, at this point that some people insist that translation is an impossible mission, since the signifier may, to be sure, usually have equivalents in other languages (house-Haus-maison-*bayt* or liberty-Freiheit-liberté-*hurriyya*), yet the signified never has an exact correspondence; here, however, other people will just roll up their sleeves and set to work pragmatically. However, what is to be done if the source language has six, seven, eight words for "desert", impossible to render adequately into European target languages? A desert is a desert is a desert. Not in Arabic. There, a desert may be with sand or with stones, without vegetation or without paths to follow; or a desert may simply be a wide and open space, limitless, endless, reminiscent of a world beyond. The same thing about missing equivalents could easily be said concerning many sorts of nourishments, clothing and furniture. Not that translation is impossible. It is not, but it requires many a trick and a well thought-out concept of what one is doing.

This applies even more when it comes to images, metaphors, symbols or, in particular, recourse to medieval Arabic writing, that rich source tapped by not a few contemporary Arabic authors in the literary game of intertextuality. Here, hammers and anvils multiply. What is one to make of the owl, the Middle Eastern herald of misfortune, in German, where this role is attributed to the raven, while the owl is the embodiment of sagacity? And ought one to render a quotation from a 10th century chronicle (comprehensible to an Arab readership) in an early version of modern German, even if the emotional and cultural relationship to the "classical" stages of the language is different in the two linguistic areas?

To complete a triptych, one may mention a third hammer and anvil constellation framing the life of a translator from Arabic - the relationship *West-East, North-South, or Europe-Muslim World*. The different expressions used indicate the variety of this constellation. It is the realm ruled by dreams, ignorance, prejudice, and misunderstanding, all interfering with, or disfiguring the reception of Arabic literature in Europe. To give just one example, even in the eighties there were numerous bookshop owners who, refused to display Palestinian literature visibly on their shelves. "Terrorist" literature, no way!

Many things have changed since, not least thanks to some translators' unflagging efforts to "propel" Arabic literature to where it belongs - alongside other parts of world literature. In many different ways, it is the literary translators who make literature into world literature; this is the role for which they are forged by - or despite - their experience between hammer and anvil.