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## Interpretation and Translation of Poems and Songs in Vladimir Vertlib's Play *ÜBERALL NIRGENDS lauert die Zukunft*

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The experience of being uprooted from one's homeland lies at the heart of the play *ÜBERALL NIRGENDS lauert die Zukunft* (*The Future Lurks Everywhere and Nowhere*) by the Austrian author Vladimir Vertlib. Written in 2016 and performed in several locations in Austria and Germany in the same year, this play (not yet published in German) deals with issues concerning recent migration to Germany and Austria, with past traumatic experiences of the Holocaust, and with questions of individual and collective guilt. Vertlib uses poetry and song throughout the play to emphasize two main points: 1) that all national and/or ethnic groups have suffered similar losses (this drama deals with the loss of one's home); and 2) the realization that one does not suffer alone can help to lessen the pain of loss. The translating choices I made were informed by my understanding of these points and my desire to convey the transnational tensions in the play, while retaining the lyrical form and what Boase-Beier calls the "poetic effects" (256). In this paper, I highlight the similarities between the losses and transformations that occur in the process of immigration, and those that necessarily occur when one attempts to bring a text from one language and cultural milieu into another. There is the potential in both instances to create a synthesis which is meaningful and powerful in its own right.

In reflecting on how I translated the lyrical items, two related considerations come to mind: first, because I was translating for the stage, I believed that the content of the lyrical items should be clear and accessible to an audience that would hear the poems and songs only once. Second, I was even more attentive than usual to the sound of the poems and songs in English, again because of the fact that I was translating a play, meant to be performed on stage. Interestingly, in Bly's "Eight Stages of Translation", the step describing how the translator listens to the sound of the translation comes rather late in the process, as number six (83-85), although the steps may not be discrete and may merge into one another (68). In the process of translating Vertlib's play, the sound (and accessibility) of the items went hand in hand for me with the earlier step number three, that of making the best possible English version (Bly 73-75).<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the salience of the sound of the items, Bly's step three, that is, the attempt to make the translation as good as it can be in English (73-75), was my chief concern. A best possible English version would be my notion of a "direct translation" (Gutt 254, Smith 109-110, Newton 23). Smith explains that direct translation strives for

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<sup>1</sup> Newton (25) offers the following helpful summary of Robert Bly's eight stages to translating poetry:

- (1) writing out a literal version to attend to meaning asking "What does the poem mean?"
- (2) unpacking the meaning
- (3) making the poem "the best it can be in English"
- (4) adjusting the diction to a modern spoken register (American in Bly's case)
- (5) assuring these changes fit the original "mood"
- (6) paying attention to the sound (Bly recommends learning by heart)
- (7) asking a native speaker to assess the results
- (8) drafting final adjustments.

“complete interpretive resemblance in relevant respects”, that is, all the linguistic features of the source text that make up the communicative clues have to be reproduced in the target language, as well as the context of the original item (110). A direct translation “should create the impression of reading the receptor language in the source context” (111). This is no easy task—and it rests on translators’ interpretations of the source items, that is, how they interpret the style clues given by the author.

Boase-Beier explains that translators attempt to understand the author’s “mind style”, which she defines as the linguistic style of a piece of literary writing that reveals a certain cognitive state (253). How translators read the style clues is highly individual, and when translating, they try to recreate the “state of mind from the style of the text” (255). Thus, we have to look at the individual reader/translator to evaluate the translation. First, according to Boase-Beier, the reader assumes the author had an intention in writing the piece. In the case of Vertlib’s play, I assumed the author had a message about migration and old wounds from the Holocaust he wanted to convey (after all, this is what the rest of the play is about). Thus, he chose poems with linguistic features that conveyed this message. Furthermore, two key poems chosen by Vertlib make special use of metaphor and ambiguity to emphasize the feelings of injury and loss experienced by the protagonists in the play. But Vertlib did not write the songs and poems himself, so I have the challenging task of interpreting the various authors’ intentions and Vertlib’s intention as to the function of the lyrical items in the larger context of the play. Next, the translator engages in a more intense examination of the poetic effects, such as metaphors employed and ambiguities, keeping in mind the various possibilities in meaning.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the reader/translator has to interpret these items of style used by the author(s) and reconstruct them based on this interpretation (255-257). It is easy to see that much rests on the interpretation—“the reader adapts the reconstruction to his or her own view of the world” (263). For this reason, Holmes calls poetry translation a “distortion” and translators themselves are condemned as “traitors” (9).

### **Summary of Vertlib’s play**

In the play, one of the main protagonists, David, a Holocaust survivor currently living in Israel, returns to an unnamed city in Germany or Austria, with the intention of finding the displaced persons’ camp where, after the Second World War, his lover Hanna had died of starvation. He had promised her that he would bring her bones home to Palestine when peace is restored there, and he comes back to the city as a very old man to fulfill this promise. When David arrives, he is confused because he finds refugee settlement quarters at the site where he and Hanna had waited for placement after the war. He encounters refugees from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan and begins to talk with them about their similar situations, and we hear the voice of Hanna reciting lyrical lines at various points throughout David’s interactions with the refugees. To elaborate and summarize, we see three main transnational situations in Vertlib’s drama:

- 1) David, a Jew, currently living in Israel, is a Holocaust survivor and must interact with descendants of the people who persecuted him and tortured and killed Jews, his first love Hanna being among the victims.

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<sup>2</sup> Holmes emphasizes that the form of the poem itself is already a signal of the ambiguities to come: “when we read verse...the form itself serves as a signal to us that our minds should remain open to ambiguities at every rank” (9).

- 2) David also encounters the newly arrived refugees from the Middle East, and he feels he must defend Israel's treatment of Arabs, and his own actions, in this context.
- 3) The refugees must deal with the hatred and aggression of the Germans and/or Austrians they now live with, as they struggle to rebuild their lives in a foreign country.

### Two key poems of the play

Two poems used in the play were written by Ina Ricarda Kolck-Thudt, a participant in a writing seminar Vertlib conducted at the University of Vienna in 2014.<sup>3</sup> At the end of Scene 3, "Group Image", we find the first of these poems, called "Abschweifen". In the left column are the original lines in German, and in the right I give possible literal translations (Vertlib capitalized all letters of the poems in his play, as did Kolck-Thudt in her original versions):

ABSCHWEIFEN	to lose one's tail/digress/wander
OHNE TIER	without animal
ZU SEIN	to be
ABER WIE	but like
DIE EIDECHSEN	the lizards
HINTER SICH LASSEN	leave behind
KÖNNEN WAS	what (they) can
LEICHT WIRD	(do) easily becomes
ZUM VERHÄNGNIS	the downfall
IM HINTERKOPF	in the back of the mind

My final translation:

TO LOSE A TAIL  
 BUT NOT BE  
 AN ANIMAL

BUT LIKE  
 LIZARDS CAN  
 LEAVE BEHIND  
 WHAT'S EASILY DONE  
 BECOMES THE UNDOING  
 IN THE BACK OF THE MIND

In a moment of sadness and reflection, the Holocaust survivor David recites the first lines of this poem to himself, and later the complete poem is recited by the voice of Hanna. In the transnational context of the play, the meaning of the difficult lines becomes clearer. David returns to the country that victimized him to try to find Hanna's remains. The time he spent in the concentration camps, and in the displaced persons camp, forms the central trauma in his life. The interconnectedness of the characters is addressed with this poem as well. Both David and the refugees have painful traumas—

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<sup>3</sup> Both poems were published in *Zwischenwelt*, pp. 37-38.

the agonizing experience of being torn from their homes and the lives they had—that they would like to be able to shed, or transcend, as easily as the lizard sheds its tail. This poem conveys the idea that leaving behind, or shedding, a part of one’s life, a haunting traumatic event, in order to start over, is a difficult process. Unfortunately, humans who try to leave part of themselves, their experience, their history, behind, are not able to simply do this and move on because the traumatic event remains stuck in the back of their minds and always holds them back in some way.

The one- and two-word lines and the confusing syntax make the poem ambiguous and convey alienation. Boase-Beier stresses that “ambiguity in the text may demand that the reader keep two possible interpretations in mind” (256). There are two main ambiguities we must deal with in this poem: that of the meaning of the first word and the problem of the ontological nature of the poem. By this I mean that “wird” in the seventh line can go in either an upward or downward direction, the result being that we think of both “was leicht wird” [what is easily done/becomes easy] and “wird zum Verhängnis” [becomes the downfall]. Finally, there is a flow in the poem we do not want to miss—while the lines do not rhyme, there is assonance (the *ei* sound in “abschweifen”, “sein”, “Eidechsen”, and “leicht”). This assonance and the structure of the poem create the overall sound and rhythm that I wanted to recreate in the English version.

The first word of the poem is crucial because the poem’s meaning and relevance to the transnational context rest on this word. “Abschweifen” means to digress from a topic, or to wander or stray. “Ab” in German means “off” and “schweifen” means “wander”, “ramble”, “curve”, or “roam”. My first instinct was to use the sense of digress from a topic, but I could immediately see that this wouldn’t work because the next lines (“ohne Tier/zu sein”) don’t make sense in this context. The second stanza then reinforces the position that “abschweifen” here must have another meaning. The root word of the compound is “schweif”, which means “tail”, as in the tail of an animal, and it comes from Old High German “sweifen”, meaning to swing or go in a wide curve. “Sweifen” as a verb describes the movement of an animal’s tail and also the metaphorical sense of digressing, curving away, from a topic. In this poem, however, we must stick with the sense of an animal’s “tail” because the lines express a desire to be able to lose one’s tail like lizards do when they are threatened or in danger, a phenomenon known as “tail dropping”. A native speaker of German, however, would also get the sense of straying from a topic when seeing or hearing this word, and the moment of confusion or ambiguity would be unsettling.

David’s and the refugees’ “tale”, i.e. their own individual story (t-a-l-e), is radically disrupted. Some people can reconstruct a personal narrative that restores their sense of identity in a new culture, others have more difficulty. They grieve that loss so intensely that they can’t find a new “tale” to psychologically re-integrate. By going with a literal translation, i.e. “To lose a *tail*”, I stayed true to the German line, and when I realized that *tail* and *tale* are homophones, and remembered that the audience would hear, not see, the word, I knew that I had managed to retain some of the sense of alienation and ambiguity of the original. The poem is a metaphor for the process of reintegrating one’s personality in a foreign culture, and for the work of the translator, who must maintain the essence of the original but also leave some part of it behind in the process of creating a new whole in English.

It is possible that I did not find such an elegant solution to the problem of the “wird” described above. I chose to make both meanings explicit in the poem, thus erasing some of the ambiguity. This was justified, I believed, because the audience

would be able to quickly grasp poem's meaning. I also liked the rhythm and repetition my lines produced: "what's easily done/becomes the undoing". A possible revision of the poem might be as follows:

TO LOSE A TAIL  
AND NOT BE  
AN ANIMAL

BUT LIKE  
LIZARDS  
LEAVING BEHIND  
EASILY CAN  
BECOME THE UNDOING  
IN THE BACK OF THE MIND

I changed the "but" in the second line to "and" to avoid repetition with the opening "but" in the first line of the second stanza, and I moved the "can" in the second line of the second stanza to the fourth line, pairing it with "easily" and perhaps retaining more of the openness of meaning of the original poem. I do like this new version in that it feels and sounds smoother and somewhat less explicit than my first version. This more economical version also strikes me as putting the assonance of the *l* sound ("lose", "like", "lizards", "leaving") front and center, which I find pleasing and in line with the vowel assonance of the original.

The second poem, called "Vom Schweigen sprechen" is in Scene 10, "Hanna's Wish":

DAS SCHWEIGE SPRECHEN	the silent speaking/speech
IST NICHT IMMER EINES	is not always one (thing)
DAS SICH NICHT TRAUT	that does not trust itself/dare
MIT EINSPRUCH	with objection/protest
DEM KEINEN SPRECHEN	to no speech
ZUM TROTZ	despite
ES STIMMT OFT SEHR	it often agrees/makes itself heard
strongly	
ABER SELTEN ZU	but seldom
DEN ANDEREN STIMMEN	to/with the other voices
DIE LAUTEN : <sup>4</sup>	that sound

My final translation:

SILENT SPEAKING  
IS NOT ALWAYS SOMETHING  
THAT DOES NOT DARE  
TO OBJECT  
DESPITE  
NOT TALKING  
IT OFTEN STRONGLY

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<sup>4</sup> The original poem that appeared in *Zwischenwelt* ends with a colon.

BUT SELDOM AGREES  
WITH THE OTHER VOICES  
THAT SOUND:

The voice of Hanna recites these lines at the beginning of Scene 10 where David begins to dig in the area that was to be a garden to find her bones. Ibrahim and other refugees join him and ask what he is looking for. He explains that he wants to take Hanna's bones to Palestine, although he admits that the condition, that there be peace in the land, has not been fulfilled. He realizes he is mainly doing this for himself, as he is quite old and knows he does not have a lot of time left to live. David also appears to come to an understanding of his own guilt in the lack of peace between Jews and Arabs; up to this point, he saw himself as a victim and not an aggressor. He says of his guilt (addressing Ibrahim in Scene 10):

DAVID. But when I arrived in Israel ... I fought and killed, drove Arabs out of their homes and villages and towns. I did not want to be killed a THIRD time. They would have killed us. YOU all would have killed us! But there is no right in wrong, no forgetting, and guilt cannot be shared. Maybe it's my punishment that I'm still alive.

Ibrahim and other refugees offer to help David find the bones, as a gift from the current generation of refugees to the older one. A symbolic reconciliation takes place between enemies with this gesture of help. Hanna encourages David to let go of his desire to atone and to only be responsible for his own guilt, not that of all the people.

In this context, the poem can be viewed as applicable to ethnic groups that have long been enemies (they are silent victims), but that share the experience of loss of home and of part of themselves; the last four lines indicate a passive acceptance of one's personal guilt in their long-standing adversarial interaction. A kind of unity can emerge when individuals come to the quiet realization of what they have contributed to the battle. Yet the poem can also be interpreted as strongly advocating silent resistance in general as a way to bring about change. The loudly protesting far right characters in the play form a contrast then to this sort of quiet, passive protest against the ongoing animosities held by the native inhabitants against the newcomers.

We can connect this interpretation to Vertlib's desire to have antagonistic groups come together through individual awareness (Fiero 4; Assmann 151-52). That is, individuals must come to an understanding of their own roles in the battle and must let go of past grievances and resentments. Through this gradual process, the collective memory gradually changes, and reconciliation can take place.

As in the first poem, I had to shed something of the original in order to create an effective, workable whole in English, and again, there are ambiguities that are challenging to bring over into the English version. The main ambiguity is the line "es stimmt oft sehr" that can either mean "it often agrees strongly" or "it makes itself heard strongly". If it is the former, there is a riddle: how can something often strongly but then (in the next line) seldom agree with the other voices? If we change this line to "it often makes itself heard strongly", then we might understand that silent speech still makes itself heard, although it does not agree with the other voices. This does indeed make more sense, but does it clarify the poem too much, thus closing off the ambiguity that is so compelling in the original? The last line ("die lauten") must also be mentioned here because it has two possible interpretations: it could be a relative clause, meaning

“that sound”, and referring back to the other voices. Or it could mean that silent speech makes itself heard but rarely agrees with the other voices, “the loud ones” (an adjectival phrase). However, if the latter were true, we would expect to see the dative case (after “agree with”), and the final line would be “den lauten”. The colon at the very end of the poem suggests that something is to come, which I believe lends weight to translating this phrase as a relative clause (“the voices that sound or say the following”). Still, I am not completely satisfied with my translation; were the play to be republished in English, I would consider revising it.

### **Songs in the play**

Scene 7, “Songs, Pictures, Band Brothers”, contains several songs that underscore the transnational character of the work. In this scene, the refugees assemble in front of their quarters, getting ready for a political event. The mayor will address the refugees and the native population about a recent attack on the refugee home, and dignitaries are also expected to be present. Viktor, the social worker in charge of this group of refugees, wants to use the occasion to make himself and the refugees look good. Viktor, always aware of the politics of the situation, instructs the refugees not to recite the poem they originally chose by the famous Persian poet Rumi, “Song of the Reed”, but to instead sing a German folk song. The song the refugees choose has a strongly nationalistic theme, and Viktor quickly rejects that song as well and suggests a kitschy hit that begins “Boy, come home soon...” It’s a comical scene, yet one that reflects political sensitivities and realities. It would not do for the refugees to recite one of *their* poets—they must instead choose a *German* theme, yet not one that is *too* German.

The German translation of Rumi’s “The Song of the Reed” that the refugees first choose to sing is metrical and rhymed, whereas many English translations I consulted are in free verse. I do not know Persian and did not want to appropriate one of the English versions, factors which led me to do a free English translation of the German lines. I used the numerous English translations to make sure I didn’t stray too far from the original meaning of the poem (Gamard), although I do not claim to present an accurate rendering. I decided that sacrificing complete fidelity and accuracy to Rumi was allowed in this situation because the audience would most likely not be able to pick up on many of the original qualities of the poem. The main thing is for them to understand that the refugees are reciting a revered Persian poet and to get a sense of the pain Rumi describes, a pain of separation also felt by the refugees upon leaving their homes:

Listen to the reed flute, how it tells its tale,  
Laments the pain of separation:  
“Ever since I was cut from my native cane thicket,  
Men and women cry to my wails.  
I look for hearts, shattered by separation,  
To sing of the suffering of being apart.”

In translating from German, rather from Persian, I am carrying out a form of relay translation, a practice often looked down upon or even considered taboo, yet one that is quite common (Washbourne 608-09). The topic of relay translation is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth noting that the function of the poems and songs in Vertlib’s play, and the fact that the lines would be spoken from a stage, gave me the freedom to make translating decisions I might otherwise not have normally made.



Turning to the other songs in this scene, I decided to leave the first one in German, that is, the one the refugees attempt to sing before Viktor rejects it for being too nationalistic. I felt that leaving it in German most effectively conveys its *German* folk song quality. It is sung slowly, and the word “Land” meaning one’s “native land” or “country” is emphasized and should be clear in English. By leaving it in German, the lines suffer no loss, but interestingly, there may be some loss experienced by the English-speaking audience. However, it does not go on very long as Viktor quickly cuts the refugees off: “Kein schöner Land in dieser Zeit, als hier das unsre weit und breit, wo wir uns finden wohl unter Linden zur Abendzeit. . .” Viktor rejects this song and tells the refugees to sing something more politically neutral, and he chooses a folk song about a wandering young man. I decided that this one should be translated into English to make it clear that the lyrics are not political, and the point would not be lost that this is a harmless song. Still, I wanted the *German* character of the song to come through and thus left the word for “boy” as “Junge” in the first two lines:

Junge, come back home soon, come again back home.  
Junge, do not go forth, never forth to roam.  
I’m sick with worry, worry for you.  
Think of tomorrow, think of me too.  
Come home soon, boy. . .

Leaving just one word in German might not be an effective tactic because it could confuse an audience with no knowledge of German. The song would be played as it is in German, and it could be easily recognizable as folksy and somewhat kitschy, and thus no other cues would be necessary. However, “Junge”, with two syllables, allows the song to be sung with the German melody, and I am inclined to retain it.

The scene then continues with serious themes: David, the Holocaust survivor, and Ibrahim and his daughter Samar reveal parts of their stories about being expelled from their homelands and also touch on the violence in Palestine between Arabs and Jews. Their stories are remarkably similar to David’s and demonstrate the extreme persecution that all the characters have endured. At the end of this scene, the voice of Hanna recites lines that continue the Rumi poem at the beginning; thus, the fates of the groups are connected in this poem that describes the pain of separation from one’s home and loved ones. Having Hanna pick up on the theme of sorrow caused by loss of homeland, so poignantly expressed here, connects the older and younger generations of refugees, the Jew with the Arab, the European and the Middle Eastern:

In misery our days have flown,  
Accompanied by pangs of grief.  
But as the days go by, let them go in peace,  
Only you should stay,<sup>5</sup> you who are so pure!  
The sea never sates the fish alone,<sup>6</sup>  
The day is long when you have no bread.  
The raw cannot understand the ripe,  
And so my word must come to an end.

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<sup>5</sup> This line reflects the English translations I consulted more closely than it does the German version in the play.

<sup>6</sup> “Alone” should come after “sea,” but I left it at the end to retain the rhyme with “flown.” Moving it would make the line read: “The sea alone never sates the fish.”

Framing Scene 7 with a Rumi verse at the beginning and at the end highlights and reinforces Vertlib's themes of universal loss and suffering among peoples.

### **Conclusion**

The poems and songs Vertlib included in *ÜBERALL NIRGENDS lauert die Zukunft* underscore the author's central message of loss and transformation in the immigrant experience, and each item has unique features and/or ambiguities that I wanted to convey. The tail shedding metaphor in the first poem—used to illustrate the loss immigrants experience and also their ability to put this behind them and start a new life—applies as well to the translation process: it is impossible for everything to be brought along; some things must always be left behind in order to give life to the work in another language. Simon Patton perceptively describes the difficulty of capturing all the nuances of poetry in a translation and notes that “there are no clear-cut guidelines about how poetry is being made in a particular poem, and it is up to the translator to discover as many of them as possible, with the understanding that there will be elements that defy either detection or translation” (139). Translators who enjoy the challenge of translating poetry will continue to attempt to create a new form, one that can survive—and even thrive—on its own in a new setting.

### ***Lines from Rumi as they appear in Vertlib's play***

Hör auf der Flöte Rohr – wie es erzählt,  
Und wie es klagt vom Trennungsschmerz gequält.  
Seit man mich aus der Heimat Röhricht schnitt,  
Weint alle Welt bei meinen Tönen mit.  
Ich such ein Herz, vom Trennungsleid zerschlagen,  
Um von der Trennung Leiden ihm zu sagen.

In Leid sind unsr'e Tage hingeflogen,  
Und mit den Tagen Klagen mitgezogen.  
Doch zieh'n die Tage, lass sie zieh'n in Ruh, Wenn Du nur bleibst, der  
Einen reinster Du!

Der Fisch nur wird vom Meere niemals satt, Lang wird der Tag dem, der  
kein Tagbrot hat. Der Rohe kann den Reifen nicht versteh'n,  
So soll mein Wort denn kurz zu Ende geh'n.

### ***Folk Song from Scene 7***

Junge, komm bald wieder, bald wieder nach Haus'.  
Junge, fahr nie wieder, nie wieder hinaus.  
Ich mach mir Sorgen, Sorgen um dich.  
Denk auch an morgen, denk auch an mich.  
Junge, komm bald wieder...

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