

“Dancing in Chains”**Kristof Magnusson**

I have a food-related story in order to illustrate how difficult it is to translate, especially between languages like English and German. They seem so much alike: A “house” is a “Haus”; a “street” is a “Straße”, and a “Bruder” is a “brother”. It is this similarity that can lull one into false security. A while ago I heard a German say: “I don’t like Campbell’s, because I don’t like conservatives in my soup.” Although a “house” is a “Haus”, a “Konservierungsstoff” is by far no “preservative”. The other way around it is even more treacherous if you said, “Ich esse keine Suppe mit Perservativen” since translating “preservatives” directly would lead to “Präservativ”, a German word for condom.

I am a writer who is also a translator, and I am a German who is also an Icelander. For some reason the word ‘also’ keeps coming up again when I think about translation. Since translating is always between two things, you have to think in one language and also in another; you have to be creative and also you have to be loyal to the original and many more things. But for this brief talk I’d like to focus on the first two things, my being a German-Icelandic translator who is also a writer.

Recently, I have translated the novel “Storm” by Einar Kárason and went on a reading tour with him. Critics, as well as “normal” readers, I spoke with on our reading tour through Germany found it rather significant that my father’s side of the family is from Iceland. They thought that I was sort of a born translator, and I have to admit, it does sound romantic to say that I am translating from my father-language into my mother-language. I can understand how the sentimentalist who is hidden in every reader and almost every critic enjoyed believing that that this emotional connection could make me a better translator than somebody who has “only” learned Icelandic at university.

But that’s wrong. As a matter of fact, it might even be counter-productive. When you learn a language as a student, you are much more aware of grammar, structure and syntax that is essential for a good translation. What really matters in translation is that you are proficient in the language that you translate into, in my case: German. When you get lost in Icelandic, you can always do research or ask someone in Icelandic. You only have to be perceptive and realize when things are said in an unusual way. But in German you have to be creative. You have to find equivalents. Equivalents that work in German and are still faithful to the Icelandic original. As we say in Germany:

“Translating is like dancing – in chains.”

It is always a strange situation when an author and a translator meet. The translator might be nervous. “So I am going to meet this author. Just imagine I will be his voice in an entire country. What if he doesn’t like my voice? After all he is the creator of an original work, which I can never

live up to in my translation because there are always so many things that will inevitably get lost, or, like Robert Frost said: “poetry is what gets lost in translation”.

And what if the author thinks I cannot speak his language well enough? What if he thinks that we are such different persons that he cannot imagine that I am the right one for his books?

On the other hand, I am looking forward to it. There are so many things I want to ask him. I hope he doesn't think am the boring scholarly type. Should I wear a T-Shirt?”

But the author is probably just as nervous. “So I am about to meet my translator. I feel so dependent on these people. My success in a whole country depends on him, and it is all in a language I don't understand a word of. What if the translation turns out to be complete crap? I will never find out, and probably no one ever will. Everyone in his country will think it's a bad book and blame it on me. I am always afraid of my translators. They are such meticulous and thorough readers. Nobody ever looks at a text so carefully. Translators find all those sentences in my book that I haven't thought a lot about. Sentences that everybody at my publisher's, even the critics take for granted, but the translator has to ask what they mean. And then what? Can I admit that I don't know what every single sentence in my book exactly means without coming across as a complete idiot? Maybe I'd look more sophisticated if I wore a cordory suit.

Okay, this might be a bit exaggerated, but only a little bit. Because translating is an intimate thing, no person ever is going to get as close to a writer's work as the translator. No person is ever going to spend so much time with a book as the translator. So you have a great deal of intimacy intertwined with mutual dependency: Intimacy, dependency are qualities that always remind me of family, of marriage, of relationships that can bring out the best and the worst in people.

So considering this it is almost surprising that translators and authors usually get along; sometimes they even become friends.

Sometimes people say to me: “Maybe your next novel will be a bestseller. Then you will be independently wealthy and insanely famous and you can focus on writing and stop translating. But my answer is always: I would never do that. For me writing and translating belong together:

In my point of view, translating is the perfect training, the perfect continuous education for a writer. You learn to read very carefully, to recognise structures and styles, often very foreign to your own writing. No matter how different they are from your own work, you have to imitate them in your own language, which I enjoy a lot. It leads me off the beaten track of my own writing, which is a enriching experience.

The other great thing about translating is that it never interferes with my writing. Actually it is the only thing which doesn't.

While working on a novel or a play I have tried to write magazine articles, radio features, essays and found it all equally disturbing. Translating is good because it takes the main worries of my writing away from me; the worries of how the story will continue, how the characters are coming along. When I am writing my own material, I look at the characters very skeptically: Do I really want *YOU* in my story? You Helga Schmidt better develop a life of your own very soon or I am going to delete you.

Let's face it that's what almost all writers do: They delete people. That is, of course, the freedom of a writer, which can be quite a burden at times, which in the worst case may lead to writer's block.

For me, the best way to prevent that from happening is translating. You have a text that you must be loyal to. The characters and the story are set. You accept the characters. They have been given the right to live by the author. They are not material I could delete. So while translating, I am a much nicer person.

Of course, there are different worries that come along, I don't think translating is necessarily easier, but there are different problems. It is good not to have to worry about the same things all the time. It is much more convenient to go back and forth between different kinds of worries like holding a glass of hot tea without a handle, which is only possible if you keep passing it from one hand on to the other. If you want to stick with the metaphor in the title: Translating is like dancing in chains: When you write and translate, you can dance when you feel like dancing and return to the safety of the chains of an original work whenever you want to.

Because when those chains are made well enough by the author, they can always hold you up.

© Kristof Magnusson, September 2008