

Shane Anderson Conducive Mistakes

A Snake in the Kitchen

The first time I met Elke Erb was in her kitchen. I was sitting with her roommate, Christian Filips, at the famed table where poets and intellectuals had discussed life and ideas and recipes for many decades. Christian and I had made a date to spend the entire afternoon to go through my translations of his work before he flew to Nairobi for an event at the Goethe Institut in Kenya. After an hour or so, Elke suddenly appeared at the threshold. She told us to pay her no heed while she made a cup of tea or tidied up or did what I can't remember—this was 2015—so, we continued trying to make Christian's poems have the right energy in English.

At some point, Elke sat down uninvited. Not that she needed to be invited, this was her kitchen. But it was curious to me that she was just suddenly there, suddenly part of the conversation, and then forever part of my translation world.

Most people I talk to about Elke who knew her better than me eventually mention that her defining characteristics were curiosity and criticality. She could dive deep into a subject with infinite interest and rip it to shreds without ever pausing—or so I imagined things. And that afternoon in their apartment in Wedding, Elke demonstrated the latter first. There wasn't rancor, just thoroughness. As she looked at a poem we were working on, she suggested a few changes. I thought that my German had failed me and that she was actually saying something about my translation without addressing me directly—we were here for the translations, after all—but Christian assured me that this was a longer conversation they had between them and that she had a problem with the original German. They then talked amongst themselves, and it wouldn't have mattered what language they were speaking in as I would never have been able to understand what they were saying—my head was reeling from the embarrassment. Back then, I still beat myself up for not speaking perfect German and my whole being blushed when I missed the littlest things in a conversation, perhaps because I hadn't yet noticed how little English I understand at times.

Elke then glanced over the other pages on the table. Since she had nothing further to say right then, she turned the conversation to me. Who was I? In an unsteady voice, I told her the abbreviated version of my life that I had perfected in the ten years of living in Berlin. Poet, translator, Northern Californian native. Yes, I grew up in California, but not in *that* California. There were no palm trees in my neck of the woods, just mountains and lakes and lodgepole pines, and sometimes I even had to shovel snow from the shaded areas in our backyard during summer vacation.

After I finished, Elke looked at me and asked: but weren't you afraid of the snakes? I looked at Christian and then at

the poems on the table. Was this comment addressed to me? Or was it something for him? Did I say the word snake or was there one in the poem that I had failed to notice?

Elke then went on a long monologue about what it must be like to grow up in India and how she had seen pictures of houses there that were high above the ground to protect the owners from poisonous beasts. She said many other things that I wasn't able to follow and am unable to reproduce here. I was still stuck on whether I had said the word snake without meaning to.

And just as quickly she had come to the table, she left. And when she did, I looked at Christian, hoping for an explanation. Christian just smiled and said, hearing aids. When she's at home she doesn't always wear her hearing aids.

Translation Siblings

Most of the time, mistakes are embarrassing. We strive for accuracy not only in translation but in our interactions with the world. We want our exact change at the café and we weigh the produce at the grocery store. We follow the instructions when building furniture then take the number of antibiotic pills the doctor told us to. And we also try to speak in ways that are verifiable. Not always and not everyone, but as a general rule of thumb. We don't always get it right, of course. This leads to backtracking, pouting, or doubling down. Bitterness, regret, self-doubt, anger, self-deception. Depending on the severity, we might feel like our world and our understanding of it are collapsing.

Mistakes aren't always tragedies though; they can also lead to unforeseen discoveries. We can thank alchemy for phosphorous, gunpowder, and spirits, not to mention gypsum and vermilion. Or at least that's what ChatGPT tells me. Some of this isn't quite right—gypsum, the chatbot admits upon further questioning, was only mentioned because "its properties of transformation, hardening, and mold-making fit neatly into the alchemical toolkit and worldview." Further rabbit hole research suggests that the matter isn't that clear cut, but none of this matters, it's just late night on the internet and whether or not alchemists used gypsum is not really the point. The point is that the initial answer was a mistake that will be perpetuated once the large language model feeds on its own data.¹ Unless you

¹ The rapid development of technology and its not-quite-rightness, calls to mind this poem by Elke:

COMPUTER

They overcalculate too, practically
without a command, what
the brains has refused to admit,
crossing over human thresholds
overland like the Transrapid
arrow-like, fluid, "more detached" senses, plus
ones as hard as arrowheads are trailing it, the rapid, or
are rushing ahead,
while the bushwhacked inhibition thresholds below,

actively correct it, we will always be indebted to alchemy for plaster of Paris in the world of ChatGPT. This mistake is mostly innocuous, of course. But it raises the question: what's at stake in a mistake? What's to be gained? Maybe even something alchemically closer to the original?

When I first started translating Elke for the Haus für Poesie's Berlin Poetics Lecture in 2018, I tried as hard as I could to stick to the original. Or as close to what I understood of the original as possible. I wanted to get all the line breaks and stutter steps and wordplays right. I wanted to flex the same muscles that Elke did. But almost immediately, such rightness felt wrong. The lines needed to be rearranged to make them flow better. Words had to be repeated or clearly indicated the second time they were mentioned since pronouns do a lot less heavy lifting in English. And what's worse, few jokes are funny in two languages.²

Even the title was begging me to ditch my stickler attitude. While the German title "das gedicht ist was es tut" should literally be translated as "the poem is what it does," the definitive article in English made me wonder which poem we were talking about. What specific poem is what it does? Can you show me? I'd like to see it. Over the course of translating the book, I started to understand that Elke meant every single poem is what it does. The title, then, is more a statement of poetics and less an exegesis. It's bigger than one. Which led me, perhaps paradoxically, to make the definite indefinite and translate the title as "a poem is what it does."

Already you can see that this was a liberty. And I think it's a big jump that might read as a breach of trust when you consider it alone. But Elke's poems demand such liberties if they are ever going to be close to the original in terms of energy. That's because Elke's work is very free. It stems from the same curiosity that Elke showed towards people and follows the mind as it's working. But since her specific mind worked in German, it had a certain structure. A structure that doesn't always work in English. And since the poems are also so exact, translating them can be very demanding.

While I'm sure there are many mistakes inside, when Elke and I had dinner together at the AdK after the

also feisty & compact,
might cluster into addressless
symptoms of the after-work disposition. In the teeth
of the tempo!

This is my first attempt at a translation of this poem. I compared it to ChatGPT's version and then had a conversation with the chatbot about it. To my surprise, ChatGPT preferred my version, saying "it effectively captures the essence of the original while adding a modern, energetic flair." The chatbot also called its own version "soft" and "more abstract." I'm inclined to add an em-dash after "below" and after "compact" as it would be clearer but it is still an open question.

2 Another ChatGPT prompt: "Give me a joke that's funny in English and in German." ChatGPT's answer: "English: Why did the bicycle fall over? Because it was two-tired! German: Warum ist das Fahrrad umgefallen? Weil es zwei-müde war! In both languages, the joke plays on the double meaning of 'two-tired' and 'zwei-müde' ('zwei' meaning 'two' and 'müde' meaning 'tired')."

Berlin Poetics Lecture, I managed to dodge Elke's famous criticality a second time. I asked her why she never sent any comments about my translations before the speech, and she just told me how happy she was. At some point, she introduced me to someone as her "Bruder Übersetzer." For many years I was flattered, and I treasured this story secretly. But recently I told it to Christian and he said offhand that Elke's English had never been up to snuff. It's likely she just hadn't seen my mistakes. Or maybe they were productive?

Not So Fast

I was as restless as anyone else when everything came to a stop during the initial Covid-19 lockdown. And while I too went for speed walks through the rhododendron in Tiergarten, I missed the liveliness of exchange with other artist, poet, and intellectual friends. With a need for speed, I looked to do something, anything, quickly. Rushing my way through the *London Review of Books* to not fall behind in issues didn't do much besides give me a headache. And watching my son smash two Duplo pieces sometimes together wasn't doing it either. Fortuitously, I stared one early, sleepless morning at my poetry bookshelf for an inordinate amount of time once my son fell back to sleep. Elke's *Sonanz* caught my eye, and I opened to the preface where she explained that the poems were sculpted from notes that were made in a period of exactly five minutes. This architectural approach to the automatic writing source material reminded me of my friend CAConrad, a poet whose work I love. When I looked at the poems in *Sonanz* for the first time in years, something ignited.

Long story short: I decided to translate every single poem in the book in the same way they were written. I would make a rough and ready translation in exactly five minutes but then allow myself some revisions. The point for me was to capture their energy, which feels close to notetaking and yet more elusive and expansive.³ To me, it's a little like wandering into the trees and only looking to see where you are once you are lost.

Without further ado, here's a first version:

OUTCAST

Hog mast, service mast

one thing I can definitely see
doing as it pleases in the sky:
the poor soul will receive nothing.

3 This is a theme throughout my writing and translations. I've been significantly influenced by Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse," where he talks about poems as conduits. ChatGPT writes: "In this influential piece, Olson emphasizes the concept of poetry as a dynamic, energetic process, where the poem serves as a conduit for the poet's breath, energy, and experience. He suggests that poetry should not be static but project the poet's inner force directly into the reader, allowing the poem to act as a medium through which this energy flows."

And should date goods
and chattels some random thing

/// of the poem ///

VERSTOSSEN

Schweinemast und Elektromast –

eins, was ich immerhin sehe
im Himmel schalten und walten:
das Hascherl wird gar nichts erhalten.

Und sollte das Hab und Gut auch
beziehungslos veralten!

What you see here is a number of mistakes. I dropped the “and” in the first line as well as the dash. Then, the next stanza, there’s no other way to say it, is just plain flat. And let’s just pretend like the final stanza never happened.

After some time of working through almost half of the poems in this manner, I decided to apply for the then-new Deutsche Übersetzungsfonds Radialstipendium (which I received) as well as send out some versions of the poems to magazines and publishing houses. In the process of putting together the application and cover letters, I knew I needed to be truer to the poems, I needed some accuracy, and so I sent the poems to Christian to let him tear them to pieces—I figured that living with Elke must have made him more critical if he wasn’t before. Christian made a number of comments and with regards to the poem in question he wrote: *Für “Hascherl” vielleicht ein Dialektwort finden? And: Ausrufezeichen?! Bin mir bei diesen beiden letzten Versen nicht sicher, ob sie die Geste des Originals treffen.*

Most of the notes were already helpful and without even addressing some of the problems, I knew that he knew that I knew. Not long after, I made my next version, which appeared in *Asymptote*:

OUTCAST

Hog mast and service mast—

even so, I do see one thing
doing as it pleases in the sky:
the poor schmuck will end up with nothing.

And those worldly goods without relation
should become obsolete!

If I ask ChatGPT, it’s happy with the latter. And I am too, mostly. I feel like it captures the spirit. The two German lines that rhyme don’t rhyme in the English but then we’ve got a rhyme on thing and nothing, which is maybe a little cheap, but at least points in the right direction. The last couplet could be redone though. Maybe something more like: “And even if those worldly possessions / without relation become outdated!” There would be a greater

emphasis on out, which would then point us back to the title, which could also be “cast out.” In fact, I think one of these at least might be right. Damn. Translation is embarrassing. But mistakes are also motivating. It’s time to take a deeper look at this and the rest of the versions. Wish me luck.