

Cultural/Literary Translators
Selected Irish-German Biographies II

Sabine Egger (ed.)

IRISH-GERMAN STUDIES
DEUTSCH-IRISCHE STUDIEN
LÉANN NA GEARMÁINE AGUS NA HÉIREANN

9

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Sabine Egger

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Introduction: On Cultural and Literary Translators

Sabine Egger

Harry Rowohlt, who was highly praised by the then Irish Ambassador to Germany in 2006 for his service to Irish culture by introducing German-speaking readers to Irish authors such as Flann O'Brien, might be seen as something of an exception to the rule. It is not so much the great service he has given by negotiating between cultures through his impressive output of literary translations that gives Rowohlt his exceptional status – the same could be said about several of the translators included in this volume – but his high level of public visibility in doing so. Harry Rowohlt is one of the best known translators in the German-speaking countries of Central Europe, not least because of his ability as a journalist, actor and performer in the cultural life and media landscape.¹ His public profile sets him apart from most of the other translators in this volume whose work has had a substantial impact on Irish-German cultural relations in the 20th and 21st century, but has generally not received the same level of public attention. Literary translators have been seen as the “underpaid and unsung heroes behind the global success of many writers”², but this could also be extended to their role as unsung heroes in the process of creating and negotiating links between cultures. Translation has never been only a linguistic activity; translators negotiate between two cultures, they create new pathways for meaning, “and they find themselves intimately engaged – ethically, politically, creatively – with distant and different worlds and lives”.³ Part II of this volume highlights the lives and work of professional translators of the 20th and 21st century, such as Annemarie Böll, Elisabeth Schnack, Hans-Christian Oeser, Gabriel Rosenstock or Gabriele Haefs, who have made Irish and German literary texts accessible to a wider readership beyond the linguistic and cultural realm of the original. The understanding of their work as a form of cultural mediation links them to the authors, dancers and artists whose biographies are included in part I and who have acted as “cultural translators” in a broader sense. The biographies in each of the two parts are ordered chronologically, according to the individual dates of birth.

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- 1 See Sabine Strümper-Krobb’s contribution on Harry Rowohlt in this volume.
 - 2 *Guardian*; <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/apr/25/book-translators-deserve-credit> (accessed 16 October 2014).
 - 3 From the introduction to the “Master of Arts in Cultural Translation” offered by the American University of Paris; www.aup.edu/academics/graduate/cultural-translation (accessed 2 October 2014).

Drawing on “cultural translation”, a term increasingly used in a range of disciplines both inside and outside translation studies itself, raises a number of questions.⁴ While the precise use of cultural translation in different disciplines remains controversial,⁵ and it is not the aim of this volume to participate in such a discussion on a theoretical level, the term is useful when looking at the different biographies collected here. It offers valuable insights into cultural practices of transfer and negotiation which link the lives and work of those included in this volume, and highlights often unexpected links between the lives of a number of individuals. What they all share, also with those included in the first volume of *Irish-German Biographies*, published in 2009 under the title *Creative Influences*, is that their encounter with the other culture has been a crucial and seminal event or factor in their professional or artistic life and work, and in turn they themselves have had an impact on the course of Irish-German intercultural relations. However, a perspective on cultural encounters or movement which is informed by the concept of translation – and I am drawing on Homi Bhabha’s idea of cultural translation here⁶ – can, in addition, bring to light specific structures of difference in these encounters on an individual and collective level, it can show heterogeneous discursive spaces which cannot simply be localized either between or within cultures but transcend set boundaries on various levels, as well as internal counter-discourses.⁷

In their introduction to a special issue of the journal *Translation Studies* on “cultural translation” Boris Buden et al. point out that “[i]t is thanks to the German Romantics that translation came to be conceived of in Europe as an essentially cultural task.”⁸ For Wilhelm von Humboldt or Johann Gottfried Herder, faithfulness to the foreign source text in the act of translation lead to the cultivation of one’s own language which was enriched through the contact with the foreign (‘das Fremde’), and through this helped to build the spirit of the nation. Welcoming the foreign in translation for the Romantics meant preferring fidelity to licence in translation. The ideal translator, according to German Romantic translation theory, must sacrifice a part of his or her freedom;

4 Boris Buden, Stefan Nowotny, Sherry Simon, Ashok Bery and Michael Cronin, Cultural Translation: An Introduction to the Problem, and Responses. In: *Translation Studies* 2/2 (2009), pp. 196-219; here p. 196.

5 See, for example, Birgit Wagner, Kulturelle Übersetzung: Erkundungen über ein wanderndes Konzept. In: *Kakanien revisited*, 23 July 2009; <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/postcol/BWagner2/> (accessed 2 November 2014).

6 Bhabha refers to translation as a “staging of cultural difference” in *The Location of Culture*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2004, p. 325.

7 See Doris Bachmann-Medick, Introduction: The Translational Turn. In: *Translation Studies* 2/1 (2006), pp. 2-16; here pp. 7-9.

8 Buden et al., Cultural Translation, p. 199.