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The End of the World and other poems

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Gregory Divers
The End of the World

Jakob van Hoddis
Weltende

From the pointy head of the burgher flies his hat.
The air everywhere resounds with shrieks and cries.
Steeplejacks plunge from rooftops and go splat.
And on the coasts – one reads – floodwaters rise.

The storm rages on, wild seas hurl vessels
Onto land, waves threaten through dams to rip.
Most everyone has a post-nasal drip.
And trains are toppling from the trestles.

The Dreaming Man

Der Träumende

to Kay Heinrich Nebel

Blue-green night, the softly muted color glows.
Is he threatened by crude armor and a stream of spears?
Is it Satan's advancing minions that he fears?
Those yellow flecks swimming in the shadows
Are the eyes of gigantic illusory steeds.
His pale body is naked, it's protection he needs.
An insipid pink pus oozes from the furrows.

Gregory Divers
natura morta

Yaak Karsunke
natura morta

for Ingrid

three peaches & a nutmeg melon
on a white plate
with pale green trim

between the stones the grass
traces the old ground
plan: where the tower once
stood the wind now
fans a fig tree

the old end rhymes flash through my mind
“the meadow is a treasure trove
on the fringes of the olive grove”
& you break white bread for hearty red wine

Gregory Divers
dazzling deception

Yaak Karsunke
blendwerk

in the glamour of the enlightenment
dragons fairies & water nymphs grew pale
a tiny tallow candle blew
out their lifelight

in the presence of sooty
petroleum lamps
miracles lost their color
in the ever-brightening darkness

nighttime was conquered
by gaslight & incandescent mantles
& the glistening
arc lamps

progress raised
its two-faced head
& began to speak
with forked tongues

the light of the enlightenment shined
brighter than a thousand suns
in the alamogordo desert & then
over two japanese cities

later fish screamed
in the market of osaka
and the fishing boat "lucky dragon
number eight" had

run out of luck.

Commentary

Jakob van Hoddis: *Weltende / The End of the World*

German poetry was never the same after the publication of “Weltende” in 1911, and its opening line—*Dem Bürger fliegt vom spitzen Kopf der Hut*—is etched in the mind of countless readers. Jakob van Hoddis stands as one of the earliest German expressionist poets. The significance of this poem is reflected in the fact that it opens *Menschheitsdämmerung* [*The Dawn of Humanity*], the seminal anthology edited and published by Kurt Pinthus in 1919. “The End of the World” is marked by a startling clash between form and content. Its formal structure followed a long tradition in German poetry, but its ominous yet magical and at times even utterly banal tone ushered in something startling new. The title suggests an undeniable *zeitgeist* triggered not just by the approach of Halley’s Comet which, for many, meant the end of life on earth, but also by newspaper reports of other catastrophes including both storms on the coast of the North Sea and a train crash in North Carolina.

Translating rhymed, formally structured poetry presents numerous challenges. The first line adds to those challenges by beginning with the dative case; as a result, rules of German word order dictate that the subject first appears at the end of the line. I have adopted this inverted word order in both the first line and the conclusion of the sixth thereby creating friction between the pronounced formal structure and the outrageous content. The original by van Hoddis employs an *abba cdc d* rhyme scheme in the two quatrains; I have reversed the pattern with *abab cddc*. I also took a small liberty in line five. A quick internet search on the train wreck in North Carolina produced the headline “Pullmans Thrown from Trestle into Creek.” Trestles became an obvious choice for a rhyme word, especially because it evokes a scene from bygone days of the early 20th century, just as steeplejacks in line three. Therefore, I created the vessels in line five, believing such is plausible even if not explicitly stated in the original. I have, however, retained the *enjambement* employed by van Hoddis in lines five and six. I also chose the cognate “burger” in line one for its association with

bourgeoisie and to accentuate the smug class consciousness of this man with the pointy head who, by losing his hat, loses his middle-class respectability. One further note on vocabulary: “The storm” at the beginning of line five is a subtle reference to *Der Sturm*, an avant garde literary magazine published in Berlin by Herwarth Walden to which van Hoddiss regularly contributed between 1911 and 1914.

For me, the charm of this poem lies in pairing the various catastrophes with the “post-nasal drip” in the penultimate line. Once again, I had my rhyme word and then worked backwards to “rip” concluding line six. Jakob van Hoddiss packed a great deal into these eight lines of verse. Much of what followed in the next decade of German poetry would have been unthinkable without his “The End of the World.”

Jakob van Hoddiss: *Der Träumende* / *The Dreaming Man*

This poem is based on a painting by the artist Kay Heinrich Nebel, to whom the poem is dedicated. The title most likely comes from the title of the painting, which the artist had given as a present to his friend the poet. As with the majority of Nebel’s early artwork, this painting has long since gone lost.

The night is a favorite subject matter in the poetry of Jakob van Hoddiss. The dark of night offers solace, because for van Hoddiss daytime represented hours of harsh sunlight. And even though he sought refuge in the darkness, the night as portrayed here could likewise be threatening. In “The Dreaming Man” the colors of night are softly muted, yet this blue-green color is eerie. The title suggests a dreamscape, but for van Hoddiss the world of dreams was quite real. His is a world of fear, trepidation and vulnerability where the shadows of night create portentous illusions.

I altered the rhyme scheme slightly, opting for *abacca* rather than the original *abbabc*. The first two rhyme words—“glows” and “spears”—follow directly from the original. I was able to remain true to the content in the remaining lines while finding suitable phrasing and the necessary rhymes. I chose “steeds” instead of horses in line five, a rhyme word which led to “it’s protection he needs” in line six in place of the original

which literally reads “without weirs”—a low dam or dike across a river.

This poem was first published in the Berlin literary magazine *Die Aktion* in 1911 and is also included in *Weltende* (1918), the only book-length collection published during the lifetime of Jakob van Hoddis. Perhaps most significantly, “Der Träumende” was reprinted in both the original and a French translation by Hans Arp in André Breton’s *Anthologie de l’Humeur noir* [*Anthology of Black Humor*] in 1939, a fact which underscores how even though van Hoddis is primarily seen as an early expressionist poet, he is also considered a forerunner of surrealism. One can easily imagine how Breton would have been intrigued by the “insipid pink pus” in the final line.

Due to the allusion to Satan’s minions in line three, one could argue that this poem anticipates a fascination with Biblical and especially Christian themes that surfaced later in the poetry of van Hoddis. In fact, during 1912 he even briefly converted to Christianity. Born as Hans Davidsohn to Jewish parents in 1887, his pseudonym is an anagram of the family name. In 1942 Jakob van Hoddis was deported to Poland and killed in an extermination camp, most likely Sobibór.

Yaak Karsunke: *natura morta / natura morta*

The title, from the Italian, means still life, and the opening stanza reads as a straightforward description of fruit on a plate, a common theme for a still life painting. The second stanza, however, shifts the focus to an outdoor scene and a place with visible traces of where an old, perhaps even ancient edifice once stood; in fact, the allusion to a tower possibly suggests a castle. The third and final stanza introduces both the lyrical persona and the addressee, Ingrid Karsunke, the wife of the poet to whom the poem is dedicated. In its entirety, then, the poem presents a still life within an outdoor scene where a picnic takes place. Hence, with the title and the opening stanza, one could read the entire poem as a still life within a still life. An unmistakable stillness permeates the first two stanzas with movement limited to a light wind fanning the leaves of a fig tree. The only true action is saved until the final line when the poem’s addressee

literally breaks bread, an act that serves as a prelude to what is left unstated: the raising of two glasses of robust red wine in a toast.

While the opening stanza was a straightforward translation from German to English, the second stanza raised a few questions with word choice and line breaks. I chose “ground/plan” over the alternatives layout or plot not only for its connotations but also because the line break allowed a more strategic placement of the colon in the third line. The final stanza, however, was quite unique in that the rhymed couplet in the middle of the quatrain presented its own special challenges. In the original, the two lines literally read “a meadow’s edge/ borders the olive grove” with the German verb *säumen* denoting not only border, but also the hem or seam of an article of clothing. I took the liberty of adding “treasure trove” to rhyme with “olive grove” and changed the verb to the noun “fringes” to enhance associations with a garment. My changes and additions do not deviate from the sense of the original and create an appropriate rhythmic flow to the couplet. Instead of “the old end rhymes occur to me” or “come to mind” I chose “flash through my mind” to create a sudden, lightning-like thought. Furthermore, “mind” provides a near rhyme with “wine” and brackets the rhymed couplet. Thus, even though not identical to that of the original, I am able to provide a rhyme scheme for the entire final stanza.

All my translations of the poetry of Yaak Karsunke are done in consultation with the poet. And in this case, Herr Karsunke heartily endorsed the liberties I took in the final stanza.

Yaak Karsunke: *blendwerk / dazzling deception*

The poem “*dazzling deception*” is noteworthy for two features commonly found in the poetry of Yaak Karsunke. First and foremost, this is a political poem and reflects the poet’s opposition to nuclear weapons (as well as nuclear power), a position he has held for well over a half century. Secondly, this poem can be read as a commentary on history, specifically, a wry assessment of what is perceived as progress. The first line notwithstanding, the prevailing theme of this poem is not the Enlightenment, but

instead light itself. Even though the poem in its entirety reads as an historical overview, the text seems to move from quatrain to quatrain making an historical hop, skip and jump from the late seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century. Moreover, we as readers slowly realize a sense of loss for humankind with each level of invasion of light into our lives. Throughout the poem I tried, where possible, to make vocabulary choices that reflect the historical era depicted, for instance the “tiny tallow candle” in the first stanza (with tiny instead of small for the added alliterative effect). The prepositional phrase “in the presence” opening stanza two adds a spiritual element (see Psalm 16:11) associated with miracles. Likewise, the vocabulary in stanza three signals that we have reached the nineteenth century.

As to the message of this poem, the fourth stanza is the fulcrum, and the word “progress” takes on new meaning with its “two-faced head” and “forked tongues.” Stanza five, then, reads as an explication of the end-effect of progress brought about by the Enlightenment. The italicized “brighter than a thousand suns” is, of course, not only a reference to a verse from the *Bhagavad Gita* (XI, 12) but also a quote of what J. Robert Oppenheimer recalled while witnessing the fireball at the Trinity nuclear test in 1945. Although light is the dominant theme through the first three stanzas, Karsunke employs synesthesia in the penultimate stanza as the screaming fish add an acoustic component with reference to the catch of a Japanese fishing boat contaminated by fallout from the Castle Bravo thermonuclear test at the Bikini Atoll in March of 1954.

Source texts:

Hoddis, Jakob van. “Weltende” and “Der Träumende.” *Dichtungen und Briefe*, edited by Regina Nörtemann, Arche, 1987, pp. 15, 27.

Karsunke, Yaak. “natura morta.” *gespräch mit dem stein*, Rotbuch, 1992, p. 28.

——— “blendwerk.” *RHEIN! Zeitschrift für Worte, Bilder, Klang*, Nr. 2, Oktober 2011, S. 52.