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The Proud Fabric? A Translator's Perspective on *Waffen für Amerika* in English Translation

Summary

Waffen für Amerika, Lion Feuchtwanger's only major novel to address American themes, contains a colourful lesson about shared ideological roots—a lesson Feuchtwanger was eager to deliver to readers on both sides of the Atlantic. Preparing an English translation proved more arduous than expected, however, as evidenced by Feuchtwanger's correspondence with his translator William Rose. Feuchtwanger found Rose's translation contained significant shortcomings, which were evidently tiresome to the author in the run-up to publication but provide valuable insight into the mechanics of his writing.

Principal elements of the novel

In the heated post-war ideological climate in which *Waffen für Amerika* was published, some critics perhaps understandably viewed the novel as a divisive polemic.¹ In today's calmer circumstances, however, it can be read as a colourful educational work in which key Revolutionary-period players are set in the broader context of world history:

"Ich wollte amerikanische Geschichte geben im Rahmen der Weltgeschichte,"

as the author put it in his postscript 'Mir fehlte Franklin'.²

As the nuclear age dawned, Feuchtwanger's additional goal was to speak out for interventionism over isolationism, and he therefore set out to educate his readers in America, Britain and divided Germany about their shared ideological roots.

¹ For a full account of how the novel was construed as a polemic by opposing sides in the Cold War, see Pól O'Dochartaigh, 'The Present Sense of an Historical Novel: Feuchtwanger's *Waffen für Amerika*' in: *Refuge and Reality, Feuchtwanger and the European Émigrés in California*, ed. Pól O'Dochartaigh and Alexander Stephan, Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York 2005, pp. 31-39.

² 'Mir fehlte Franklin' (1947), in Lion Feuchtwanger, *Waffen für Amerika*, Band 2, Büchergilde Gutenberg, Frankfurt am Main 1986, p. 448.

"Unter diesen Umständen war ich doppelt erstaunt, wahrzunehmen, wie wenig man auf der westlichen Seite des Ozeans wusste von der Beteiligung Frankreichs an der amerikanischen Revolution. Ebenso wenig wusste man in Europa, welcher ausserordentlichen Einfluss das praktische Vorbild der amerikanischen Revolution auf die Vorbereiter der französischen hatte,"³

he continued in the postscript.

The shared ideological roots—the arsenal of ideas to which, at the figurative level, the novel's German title refers—were republicanism, the belief in man's capacity to cope with political and social problems, and the view that improvement and reform were real possibilities.

Feuchtwanger's lesson in history did not fall on deaf ears, in America at any rate: *Proud Destiny* immediately sold half a million copies via the Literary Guild book club and reached thirteenth position on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Author's expectations concerning translation in general

Feuchtwanger's main expectation was that the target text should be a workable simulacrum of the source text, retaining as much of its clarity and atmosphere as possible. As he explained to Ben Huebsch, his publisher at the Viking Press in New York, in a May 26th 1945 letter⁴:

"Es kommt bei einer Übersetzung doch wohl sehr viel mehr darauf an, daß der Übersetzer ein gutes, klares, sehr persönliches Englisch schreibt, als daß er den Text bis in die letzte Nuance versteht. Die höchste Korrektheit der Übertragung vermag nicht, den Mangel an persönlicher Atmosphäre zu ersetzen, den jedes nur korrekte Englisch notwendig aufweist. Da bei der Übertragung sowieso unter allen Umständen sehr viel vom Atmosphärischen des Originals verloren geht, muß ein Ersatz geschaffen werden durch den persönlichen Stil des fremden Autors, mit andern Worten, wesentlich ist, daß der Übersetzer ein guter Schriftsteller ist, und erst in zweiter Linie, daß er Deutsch bis ins letzte versteht."⁵

In addition, he was keenly aware of the issue of American versus British English, as noted in a letter July 2nd 1945 letter to Huebsch:

³ Ibid, p. 450-1.

⁴ Unpublished letter, Feuchtwanger Memorial Library, USC. See Jeffrey B. Berlin, "[...] *permit me to say that you are an ideal publisher*. Ben W. Huebsch of the Viking Press (New York) — Unpublished Correspondence with European Authors in Exile, with special attention to Feuchtwanger, in: *Refuge and Reality*, pp. 109-129.

⁵ Umberto Eco writes in a similar vein in his seminal work of translation theory *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London 2003, p. 56): "... the aim of translation, more than producing any 'literal equivalence', is to create the same effect in the mind of the reader (obviously according to the translator's interpretation) as the original text wanted to create. Instead of speaking of equivalence of meaning, we can speak of *functional equivalence*: a good translation must generate the same effect aimed at by the original. Obviously this means that translators have to make an interpretative hypothesis about the effect programmed by the original text, or, to use a concept I like, to remain faithful to the *intention of the text*. Many hypotheses can be made about the intention of a text, so that the decision about what a translation should reproduce becomes *negotiable*."

"Im übrigen beschwört mich Neumann,⁶ keinen amerikanischen Übersetzer für den *American Envoy* [the novel's working title] zu wählen. Er [Neumann] schreibt: 'You can't imagine the foolish scorn English readers and critics have for a book tainted with American ways of speech (while on the other hand Americans have no objections to English translations). I shall be very glad to try and find a first-rate translator for you; though most of them are old or ill or dead in the wars.'"

On July 16th 1945 Huebsch responded:

"Neumann becomes more English than the English in his strictness on American translations. What he says has been uttered for a generation or more by the English critics and, unhappily, much of it is only too true. He is ignorant, however, of the other side of the picture which all of us including yourself have learned from bitter experience. Most American translations are bad, but in large part the English translations are bad too."

Shortcomings in the William Rose translation

Rose's translation certainly was not the disaster one might have expected after reading this indiscreet exchange of views. Nevertheless, it did fail in a number of key areas. On March 21st 1947 Feuchtwanger wrote to him:

"Manchmal schien Ihnen meine Diktion sichtlich überfärbt, und Sie nahmen dann Farbe weg, Sie gaben etwa von drei Attributen, die ich einem Menschen oder einer Sache mitgebe, nur zwei oder nur eines, oder auch gar keines. Das muß manchmal zum Vorteil des Satzes sein; andernteils prüfe ich meine Seiten sehr scharf nach, um ausfindig zu machen, ob ich ein Adjektiv oder eine Wendung streichen kann, und was stehen bleibt, ist nur das, was mir unentbehrlich scheint. Natürlich kommt es vor, daß ich Adjektiva wiederhole, dann aber geschieht es mit Absicht, weil ich sie dem Menschen oder der Situation als Leitmotiv mitgeben möchte."⁷

In a second, more pointedly worded letter dated September 21st 1947, he complained:

"Wenn Sie Adjectiva weggelassen haben, dann waren es häufig solche, welche Beaumarchais sympathisch erscheinen lassen. Das verschiebt den Charakter Beaumarchais' zuweilen ins Ungünstige. Die Weglassungen im englischen Text in den Beaumarchais-Kapiteln machen diesen Mann zweifellos kleiner, als ich ihn erscheinen lassen wollte. Es geschah nicht ohne Absicht, daß ich das von Beaumarchais Errungene immer wieder aufzählte. Da ich seine Schwächen stark beleuchtete, schien es mir nötig, auf der andern Seite seine Verdienste zu unterstreichen."⁸

An example of this omission of attributes can be found in the passage where Beaumarchais first encounters his antagonist Dr. Barbeu Dubourg. In the source text, Beaumarchais assesses Dubourg in three dimensions: "Da sass er, der behagliche, bürgerlich fette Herr..."⁹ Viewed through Beaumarchais' eyes, Dubourg is a *dramatis persona*, an aspiring political player, and a physical specimen, all rolled up into a ball of pompous complacency. In the target text, only two

⁶Robert Neumann, head of the international authors department at Hutchinson, publishers of the British edition.

⁷ Unpublished letter, Feuchtwanger Memorial Library, USC.

⁸ Unpublished letter, Feuchtwanger Memorial Library, USC.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

of the dimensions are present: Dubourg is merely "stout and smug".¹⁰ The loss of meaning is especially significant in a novel about revolution, in which 'bourgeois' is self-evidently a loaded term.

Another problem Feuchtwanger identified was overall wordiness. The standard expansion rate when translating from German to English is 10%, *inter alia* due to German's compound nouns. In a July 9th 1947 letter to Arnold Zweig, Feuchtwanger bemoaned Rose's 20% expansion rate:¹¹

"Das Buch hat über 300,000 Worte, die englischen Galleys hatten 360,000 Worte."¹²

The Literary Guild book club therefore insisted that 30,000 words be cut (which accounts for the differences between the American and British editions). The cuts included, for example, the removal of a touching scene in which Franklin admits self-doubt to his grandson William.¹³ As described in the postscript, Feuchtwanger had already struggled to capture the statesman's human side, and that doubtless made cuts such as this one doubly irksome.

In the July 9th 1947 letter to Zweig, Feuchtwanger voiced an additional concern about the translation:

"Ich prüfte mittlerweile die englische Übersetzung durch [...]. [...], alles Wichtige war in die Nebensätze verbannt [...]."

While Feuchtwanger was obviously exaggerating—bantering with a fellow novelist—it is easy to find instances of the sentence structure issues to which he was referring, for example in the encounter between the Marquis de Vaudreuil and Marie-Antoinette and her companion Gabrielle de Polignac at Versailles.

"Einen Augenblick dachte er daran, den beiden Damen, wie sie langsam und anmutig, umschlungen, durch den grossen Raum gingen, ein freundlich ironisches Scherzwort zuzurufen; aber es wäre geschmacklos gewesen. Er unterliess es und begnügte sich, ihnen mit den Augen zu folgen, begehrllich, mit einem kleinen, spöttischen Lächeln."¹⁴

In the source text, the most important word—'begehrllich'—appears in a separate adverbial clause. This emphasis prompts the reader to question the nature of Vaudreuil's complex internal response to the situation. In the target text, the key information appears in a much

¹⁰ *Proud Destiny*, Viking Press, New York 1947, p. 33.

¹¹ Feuchtwanger also made this complaint, as well as various others, in his correspondence with Neumann. See *Lion Feuchtwanger, Briefwechsel mit Freunden, 1933-1958*, Vol. II, ed. Harold von Hofe and Sigrid Washburn, Aufbau Verlag, Berlin 1991, pp. 297-302.

¹² *Lion Feuchtwanger-Arnold Zweig Briefwechsel 1933-1958*, Vol. I, Aufbau Verlag, Berlin 1984, pp.442-6.

¹³ *Proud Destiny*, Hutchinson International Authors, London 1948, p.105.

¹⁴ Büchergilde Gutenberg edition, p. 168.

longer clause, which is not necessarily a shortcoming in itself, but nonetheless fails to elevate Vaudreuil's internal dynamic beyond the clichéd:

For a moment he thought of calling out some jesting remark to the two ladies as they slowly walked across the large room with their arms gracefully entwined round one another, but he decided that it would be in bad taste and refrained, resting content to follow them with his eyes, that were lit by a desire not belied by his slightly mocking smile.¹⁵

One point on which Rose did win Feuchtwanger's wholehearted approval was with his suggestion for the title. The author welcomed the proposal to entitle the English edition 'The Proud Fabric'. This phrase was a reference to Edward Gibbon's acerbic warning to his aristocrat friend Lord Sheffield: "Do not suffer yourselves to be lulled into a false security. Remember the proud fabric of the French monarchy. Not four years ago it stood founded, as it might seem, on the rock of time, force, and opinion; supported by the triple aristocracy of the Church, the nobility, and the Parliaments. They are crumbled into dust; they are vanished from the earth."¹⁶ It is a pity this title was not used, since by comparison the title 'Proud Destiny' is bereft of biting irony or intertextuality. The title 'Proud Destiny' is also surprisingly humourless compared with the source text's alternative title *Die Füchse im Weinberg*.

Implications and suggestions for further research

Feuchtwanger's criticisms evidently took their toll on Rose (a respected Reader in German literature at the London School of Economics), who after receiving Feuchtwanger's September 21st 1947 letter took umbrage and severed the relationship. For his next novel, *Goya* (1951), Feuchtwanger turned to the translator team consisting of Frances Fawcett and her mother—H.T. Lowe-Porter.¹⁷ That is a topic for a separate paper, but clearly Feuchtwanger was destined never to find a fully satisfactory English translator. In a March 10th 1955 letter to his nephew Edgar Feuchtwanger he grumbled:

"Mein neuer Roman [*Die Jüdin von Toledo*] erscheint in deutscher Ausgabe im August. Vermutlich wird dann auch die Londoner und die New Yorker Ausgabe erscheinen; doch gibt es die üblichen Schwierigkeiten mit der Übersetzung."¹⁸

¹⁵ Viking edition, p. 109.

¹⁶ *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, 3 vols., ed. J.E. Norton, Cassell & Co., London 1956.

¹⁷ In recent years, Lowe-Porter's well-known translations of Thomas Mann have remained popular with some for capturing Mann's irony and stylistic pyrotechnics, while lambasted by others for their sheer inaccuracy. See 'Thomas Mann', in *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation Into English*, ed. Olive Classe, Routledge, London 2000, pp. 901-4.

¹⁸ Letter in possession of Edgar Feuchtwanger.