



# FOR POETRY'S SAKE: RESISTANCE TO TRANSLATION IN THE GERMAN VERSIONS OF OSCAR WILDE'S *THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL*

**Amir HUSSAIN**

*Independent Scholar, U.S.A.*

## Abstract

While Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is frequently examined within the genre of prison writing, translations of the poem push one to consider the relevance of its aestheticism within the genre of poetry. This article comparatively examines three German-language versions of the poem by Emma Clausen, Wilhelm Schölermann, and Albrecht Schaeffer to show how the practice of poetry translation resists the source object, translating for poetry's sake. Key refrains reveal individual translators embracing their own artistic aims to create more poetry, even as the source poem simultaneously resists translation in its own way. Consideration of the genre of poetry, or what Walter Pater describes as its formal "width, variety, [and] delicacy," ultimately encourages one to follow an aesthetic model of translation, rather than an interpretive model such as that of Lawrence Venuti. This article also draws out the value of thinking about German translations of Wilde's prison poem, which are consistently underexamined yet prolific in number, for situating the aestheticism of one of the most widely translated literary authors in modern times.

**Keywords:** *poetry, translation, comparative studies, aestheticism, Oscar Wilde, German studies*

*The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (BRG)—first published in February 1898 by publisher Leonard Smithers in England while Oscar Wilde was in post-prison exile—was “the most successful of Wilde’s published writings in his lifetime, and [is a work that] has never been out of print since” (Frankel 182). His final work of literature is, as Isobel Murray so aptly puts it in her introduction to Wilde’s *Complete Poetry*, “perhaps the most effective, and the most dangerous, balancing act of his career” (xvi). It is a work that has not ceased to raise attention since its publication. While BRG is frequently examined within the genre of prison writing, the discussions that place Wilde and BRG within the genre of poetry remain less common. In her study *Oscar Wilde*, Ruth Robbins examines his work across the different genres of poetry, criticism, fiction, plays, and prison writing to show how he had “worked within and against the conventions of all the major forms of his period” (2). While Robbins examines his earliest poems within the genre of poetry, she examines BRG within the genre of prison writing. Even in studies where Wilde is explicitly connected with twentieth-century poets such as seen in Robert Stilling’s *Beginning at the End*, his own poetry is still typically positioned at the margins.<sup>1</sup>

Discussions of translations of his poetry are even more peripheral, despite his stature as a widely translated Anglophone writer. As Paul Barnaby notes, “Wilde is one of the world’s most translated and discussed authors. According to UNESCO’s *Index Translationum*, only Shakespeare, Conan Doyle, Stevenson and Dickens, among British or Irish literary figures, have appeared more widely in translations in the last thirty years” (xxii).<sup>2</sup> While Wilde is widely studied in the context of German translations of literary works in other genres, when it comes to German-language translations of his poem BRG, these remain largely unnoticed and unremarked in the critical literature (Evangelista 1-3; Vilain 173).<sup>3</sup> A wide-cast database search in WorldCat and The MLA International Bibliography for studies discussing German-language translations of BRG

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<sup>1</sup> Stilling considers Wilde’s poetry in very minor points: for example, in reference to his sonnet about John Keats and in reference to “The Sphinx” (18, 239-240, 256).

<sup>2</sup> Barnaby’s article appeared in 2010.

<sup>3</sup> According to Robert Vilain, “Wilde was enormously well-known in Germany and Austria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (173).

produces little results.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, an article from 2002 on “Some German Oscar Wildes” casually asserts that Wilde’s “poetry is by far the weakest part of his work” (Bridgwater 242).

This neglect and marginality can be seen in a two-fold way: it speaks to the broader fact that critics still find it challenging to conceive of Wilde’s relevance to poetry studies, and it also speaks to the peripheral position of poetry within the field of translation studies. This peripherality is, as Lawrence Venuti describes in *Translation Changes Everything*, the “first reason to move poetry closer to the center of translation studies,” together with the fact that translations of poetry may be the most “[r]eleased from the constraint to turn a profit” (173-174). The genre of poetry, that is, occupies a distinct position. If translation has been conceptualized as what Venuti describes as an attempt “to rewrite a source text in another language, imitating its specificity as much as linguistic and cultural differences permit and audiences require,” then poetry translation may also warrant recalibrating our views of translations (99).<sup>5</sup> It may also mean rethinking models of translation that are based primarily on the study of genres other than poetry. The peripheral position of poetry at the nexus points between translation studies, Oscar Wilde studies, and German studies warrants, then, close consideration as to what translations of *BRG* can divulge in all these areas.

The ballad has been translated into countless languages, lending to its position as a poem of world literature. The first translation, appearing in May of 1898 within a few months of its English publication, was into French as *Ballade de la Geôle de Reading* by Henry Durand-Davray. Published by the Société du Mercure de France in Paris, it is the only translation that benefitted from Wilde’s direct interest and involvement (Dierkes-Thrun 231-232). Spanish (1898), German (1900), and Russian (1904) were the next three languages of translation. Of the numerous languages into which *BRG* has been translated up to the

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<sup>4</sup> One relevant result was Otto Höschle’s short article “Translating Oscar Wilde’s *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*” (2016).

<sup>5</sup> Venuti goes on to qualify:

The translator’s intention, then, is always already collective, determined most decisively by linguistic usage, literary canons, translation traditions, and the institution where a translation is produced and where various other agents have a hand in such procedures as negotiating translation rights and commissioning the translator, editing and printing the translated text, promoting and marketing the printed book. (99)

contemporary moment, German translations provide prolific examples for comparatively thinking about poetry translation within a single language.<sup>6</sup> German has, for example, twice the number of distinct Russian translations (five) during the first three decades of the twentieth century (Kozyreva 249). In fact, German translations, which span across the territories of present-day Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, are the greatest in number of any other language into which the poem has been translated. In the twentieth century, fifteen distinct German translations (including free adaptations) were published (see Table 1). Except for the 1930s and the 1950s, a new German translation of BRG appeared in every single decade of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

Publication Year	Publisher Location	Translator	Title
1900	Vienna	Arthur Holitscher	<i>Aus der Ballade des Stockhauses zu Reading. Von C.3.3. (Zellnummer Oscar Wildes), free adaptation</i>
1902	Berlin	Emma Clausen	<i>Im Gefängnis zu Reading: Eine Ballade von C 3 3</i>
1903	Leipzig	Wilhelm Schölermann	<i>Die Ballade vom Zuchthaus in Reading</i>
1906	Vienna	Otto Hauser	<i>Die Ballade vom Zuchthaus zu Reading</i>
1906	Leipzig	O.A. Schröder	—” —
1907	Leipzig	Walther Unus	—” —
1910	Minden	Eduard Thorn	—” —
1917	Berlin	Felix Grafe	<i>Die Ballade von Reading Gaol, free adaptation</i>
1923	München	Rudolf Schlichter & Lotte Schumann	<i>Die Ballade vom Zuchthaus zu Reading</i>
1926	Leipzig	Albrecht Schaeffer	—” —

<sup>6</sup> Peripherally related, the first English publication of Wilde's prison letter *De Profundis* had also been spurred on by Max Meyerfeld's interest in translating it into German (Holland 86; Meyerfeld vii).

<sup>7</sup> The Nazi Party, which had taken power in 1933, officially banned Wilde the author. See Kohlmayer and Krämer for a discussion of Wilde's plays within this context.

1948	Zürich	Horst Schade	—” —, free adaptation
1961	Gütersloh	Ralf Rudeloff	—” —, audio recording narrated by Mathias Wieman
1970	Leipzig	Elfriede Mund	—” —
1987	Zürich	Hedda Soellner	—” —
1996	Frankfurt	Christine Hoepfener	—” —
2015	Basel	Otto Höschle	<i>Die Ballade vom Reading-Zuchthaus</i>

**Table 1.** Translations (including Free Adaptations) of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* into German<sup>8</sup>

A comparative examination of multiple versions of the poem reveals the way in which translators individually (that is also to say, not just linguistically or culturally) embrace their own sensual impressions of the source object (here, BRG) to create more poetry.<sup>9</sup> For Venuti, given the “fact that the same source-language poem can support multiple translations which are extremely different yet equally acceptable as poems or translations, we glimpse the possibility that no invariant exists, that the practice of translation is fundamentally variation” (*Translation* 174). In my view, centering the genre of poetry reveals something additional about translation that goes beyond variation as such. Variation (which is contrasted to the invariant) is crucial to understanding Venuti’s view on translation.

His recent PMLA article “On a Universal Tendency to Debase Retranslations; or, The Instrumentalism of a Translation Fixation” further explains the role of the invariant. As he writes, an “instrumental” view of translation holds that something essential or invariable exists at the “semantic” level in a source text that is subsequently translated into another language (599). For Venuti, the semantic view of translation is problematic because it leads to what he calls “fixation” on a specific translation, which is seen as the correct one (599). He argues instead for a “hermeneutic model of translation,” one in which

<sup>8</sup> Source: Publication information was located primarily through a search of WorldCat. Information on Holitscher’s translation can be found in Ivory (157). Information on Clausen’s translation can be found in Zucker (151).

<sup>9</sup> See Ayan Chakraborty on the relevance of individuality for the genre of prison literature.

“translation is understood as an interpretive act that inevitably varies the form, meaning, and effect of the source text according to changing intelligibilities and interests in the translating language and culture” (599).

While interpretation as a model of translation is appealing in its openness towards variability, it does not sufficiently account for the individual acts in which translators move from the realm of a translator and into the realm of a creative writer. Even looking at the varying titles of German versions of BRG, for example, evidences the beginning of an *aesthetic* choice and design: Arthur Holitscher calls the prison a “stock house” (“Stockhaus”), Emma Clausen a “prison” (“Gefängnis”), and many others a “penal house” (“Zuchthaus”). Poetry translation appears to fit better within an aesthetic model of translation, as the genre of poetry in particular questions and even undermines certain attributes or constancies that may be accepted in other genres. Poetry translations show that translators aesthetically express their own resistance to the authority of a source object, translating not merely as a matter of variability but rather *for the sake of poetry itself*.

According to Walter Pater, a major figure in aestheticism and one who inspired Wilde himself, poetry, given its formal variety, is the art form most able “to deal with the conditions of modern life” and the need for a “sense of freedom” (116). Poetry’s openness to words, meanings, feelings, and forms is part and parcel of the genre. Poetry translators can feel free to treat poetry, if we are to draw on Emily Apter’s words on translation, as truly “a form of creative property that belongs fully to no one” (15). Pater famously endorsed “the love of art for art’s sake” as the essence of aestheticism and its critical approach to modern standardization (121). Wilde first came under the grip of Pater’s aesthetic views as an undergraduate at the University of Oxford concentrating on the Greats curriculum, later becoming himself a leading figure of aestheticism (Ellmann, *Four Dubliners* 3, 16-17, 20). Undoubtedly, his translators would have also been familiar with the weight of this aestheticism.

With the aim of comparative analysis in mind, I have selected three translations to analyze: Emma Clausen’s 1902 *Im Gefängnis zu Reading: Eine Ballade von C 3 3*, Wilhelm Schölermann’s 1903 *Die Ballade vom Zuchthaus in Reading*, and Albrecht Schaeffer’s 1926 *Die Ballade vom Zuchthaus zu Reading*. Clausen’s version is the first German translation (that is not a free adaptation) and is also the first translation of BRG in any language done by a woman writer.

Meanwhile, Schölermann's version has the greatest number of editions of any German translation of the poem and Schaeffer's version has the second greatest number of editions while being the translation issued across the most generations of readers.<sup>10</sup> Clausen's translation was published in six parts over six consecutive weekly issues in the Berlin anarchist, exile journal, *Der arme Teufel*. Schölermann and Schaeffer's translations were published in Leipzig, by the same prominent literary publishing house, Insel-Verlag. A comparative reading of key refrains reveals that individual translators embrace their own aesthetic aims to create more poetry, even as the particularity of the source poem simultaneously resists translation in its own way.

When comparing the main refrain across these three versions, one can see that individual translators have resisted or disavowed the source object not simply as a matter of variation but more broadly for the sake of poetry. Following is the main refrain in Wilde, followed by versions by Clausen, Schölermann, and Schaeffer, with my literal back translations into English included on the right side:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,  
 By each let this be heard,  
 Some do it with a bitter look,  
 Some with a flattering word,  
 The coward does it with a kiss,  
 The brave man with a sword! (*Complete Poetry* 153)

Doch jeder tötet, was er liebt,  
 Das ist der Lauf der Welt:  
 Der thut's mit lachendem Gesicht,  
 Und der von Haß entstellt;  
 Der Feigling thut's mit einem Kuß,  
 Und mit dem Schwert der Held!  
 (Clausen 7)

*Back translation:*

But each kills what he loves,  
 That is the way of the world:  
 He does it with a laughing face,  
 And he from hate disfigured;  
 The coward does it with a kiss,  
 And with the sword the hero!

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<sup>10</sup> Schölermann's version was issued in ten editions over three decades, between 1903 and 1921 ("Schölermann, Wilhelm 1865-1923"). Schaeffer's version was issued in eight editions over five decades, between 1900 and 1950 ("Schaeffer, Albrecht 1885-1950").

So mordet jeder, was er liebt,  
 Damit ihr es nur hört,  
 Der tut es mit dem bösen Blick,  
 Der schmeichelnd es zerstört:  
 Der Feigling tötet mit dem Kuss,  
 Der Tapfre mit dem Schwert!  
 (Schölermann 781)

*Back translation:*

So murders each what he loves,  
 Thereby you only hear it,  
 He does it with the evil look,  
 He flatteringly it destroys:  
 The coward kills with the kiss,  
 The brave with the sword!

Doch jeder tötet, was er liebt  
 Das hört nur allzumal!  
 Der tuts mit einem giftigen Blick,  
 Und der mit dem Schmeichelwort schmal.  
 Der Feigling tut es mit dem Kuß,  
 Der Tapfre mit dem Stahl.  
 (Schaeffer 9)

*Back translation:*

But each kills what he loves  
 That hears one all over!  
 He does it with a poisonous look,  
 And he with flattering word small.  
 The coward does it with the kiss,  
 The brave with the steel.

A generic feature of poetry, refrains are often repeated (at times with slight variations) and make up key stanzas or moments in a poem. For Jonathan Culler in *Theory of the Lyric*, refrains are “an instance of the repetition that Roman Jakobson famously took to define the poetic function of language” (24). In the context of ballads, David Buchan writes, “The most striking trait of ballad language is the frequent recurrence of certain phrases, lines, stanzas, and even clusters of stanzas that lend to the ballad a highly stylized air” (145). In other words, formal aspects such as stanza lengths, meter/rhythm, rhyme scheme, and so on are present more in the sub-genre of ballad poetry than of lyric poetry. What can appear as a straightforward variation in translated words within other genres (such as a letter, a novella, or perhaps even a prose poem) may appear differently in form-based poetry such as ballads.

The refrain’s stanza length and meter (i.e., six-line stanzas alternating between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter) means that translators have to engage far more with poetry itself, than if they were translating words in prose. Referring to working on his own German translation of *BRG*, Otto Höschle writes that the “traditional ballad form – that allows a certain mix of iambus and anapaest – facilitates the German translator’s job, unlike the strict verses of other

classical forms" (64).<sup>11</sup> It helps then in the translation of poetry that German, like English, has both stressed and unstressed syllables, as not all languages have stressed syllables (e.g., Japanese). All three versions retain Wilde's meter, but far less evident is a small variation in meter in one of these versions: Clausen does not retain the one extra stressed syllable present in the fourth line. Moreover, the end words in Wilde's refrain are all single-syllable words: loves, heard, look, word, kiss, sword. In consideration of a sub-genre based on meter (i.e., count of stressed and unstressed syllables), it is difficult to say whether the meter has been translated and simply varied or whether it has been recreated. While all three versions use standard German translations for some of the end-words such as "loves" and "kiss," different words with different syllabic counts are used for others such as "word": Clausen writes "entstellt" ("disfigured"), Schölermann "zerstört" ("destroys"), and Schaeffer "schmal" ("small").

While words can be translated in variables ways that nonetheless carry a similar meaning, words within the genre of poetry can often carry allusions to other poems—thus creating referentiality or a kind of insider language to poetry itself. Such an instance can be found in the very first line of the main refrain: "Yet each man kills the thing he loves." This line alludes to the English language's most canonical poet, Shakespeare. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio and Shylock quarrel and respectively question each other, "Do all men kill the things they do not love?" and "Hates any man the thing he would not kill?" (*The Merchant of Venice* Act 4, scene 1, lines 61-62).<sup>12</sup> Wilde's line, one can say, subverts the Shakespearean line in such a way as to question the relation between killing and loving. The translation of the verb "kills" here is constrained neither by language nor culture. As one can see, Clausen and Schaeffer have both used the verb "tötet" ("kill") connected to the Shakespearean allusion, whereas Schölermann has written the word "mordet" ("murder") and also added the word "tötet" ("kill") to the fourth line. No longer foregrounding an allusion to poetry, Schölermann's "mordet" alludes rather to history: the biographical 30-year-old Charles Thomas Wooldridge, a soldier with the British army sentenced to death-by-hanging for

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<sup>11</sup> See Bill Gahan's "Ballad Measure in Print" for a discussion on the variability of meter in ballad form.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of Wilde's essay on Shakespeare, "Shakespeare and Stage Costume," which was later revised into "The Truth of Masks," see Lawrence Danson's *Wilde's Intentions* (60-69).

the murder of his wife Lauren Ellen Wooldridge, who was brought to Reading Gaol to be executed, and who is the poem's main subject (Sturgis 608; Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* 503-504).<sup>13</sup>

Schölermann, that is to say, has not just varied words that otherwise carry an essentially interchangeable meaning in language and culture (i.e., “kill” and “murder”). This deployment of a near synonym has fundamentally weakened the allusion to Shakespearian verse. Moreover, in light of the sub-genre of ballads, this leads to a repeatedly different emphasis in the first line of the main refrain, plausibly the most memorable line within ballad form. The second line of the refrain in Clausen's version provides additional evidence of translators individually resisting the translation of a particular source object and creating poetry. Unlike Schölermann and Schaeffer's variation of words here, she instead takes a leap of poetry to create an original line: “Das ist der Lauf der Welt” (“That is the way of the world”). Following a kind of anarchist-inspired aestheticism, she interjects her own authority to create poetry and, like Schölermann, to create new allusions for her readers.

Clausen's position as a poet, translator of poetry, anarchist, doctor, and immigrant was inherently encumbered by authority in various forms, including state and patriarchal authority. Of the little that appears to be discussed of her, we know that she was born in 1867 in Husum, Germany, studied in Hamburg, immigrated to North America (first to Canada then to the United States) at eighteen years old, and was later based in Detroit, Michigan (“Clausen, Emma”; Falk 515). Unlike Schölermann and Schaeffer, she also has no Wikipedia page, leading her to digital erasure in an era in which scholars and readers utilize the ever-growing resources provided by the digital sphere.<sup>14</sup> In Detroit, she was involved in the “anarchist circle that also included Robert Reitzel,” the German-American founder and editor of the journal *Der arme Teufel* where Clausen would publish her version of BRG (Falk 515). The journal was originally based in Detroit,

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<sup>13</sup> Seamus Heaney observes that “the condemned man is [Wilde's] double” since “[b]oth had committed crimes of passion and so, for both, their sexuality and their offence were intimately allied” (89). Similarly, Ellmann says Wilde “make[s] clear that his own case and Wooldridge's were parallel” (*Oscar Wilde* 532).

<sup>14</sup> See Melanie Conroy for a critical analysis of the underrepresentation of female writers on Wikipedia.

and then following the death of Reitzel in 1898 (coincidentally, the same year *BRG* was first published), published in Berlin from 1900 until 1904.

In selecting the prison ballad, Clausen appears to have embraced Wilde's aestheticism as much as his anarchism. Mark Antliff writes, "Wilde himself [...] announced his dual status as an artist and anarchist—'je suis artiste et anarchiste'—in the French journal *L'Ermitage* and in the English press in 1893-1894" (40).<sup>15</sup> The internationally known anarchist figure Emma Goldman, who was friends with Reitzel, had herself treated *BRG* as a poem representative of the imprisonment of anarchists (Antliff 59). Clausen's version can be seen as an allusion to the hanging of the eight imprisoned anarchists who were charged with murder during the infamous Haymarket Affair of 1886 in Chicago. The Haymarket prisoners and their eventual state-sanctioned execution was referenced and discussed regularly in *Der arme Teufel*, the issue having deeply affected Reitzel personally as well as politically (Erhardt 84-85). The Haymarket Affair also led to xenophobic nationalism and to the persecution of radicals of immigrant descent, including German-Americans, who were seen to be spreading anti-American views and threatening the order of American commerce.

According to Antliff, "The anarchists' status as marginalized radicals repeatedly subject to police surveillance, forced exile and imprisonment [...], made them ideal candidates for inclusion in that group of mourning 'outcast men' honored in Wilde's poem [*BRG*]" (53). The lines Antliff refers to are those also memorialized on Wilde's grave at the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris: "And alien tears will fill for him / Pity's long-broken urn, / For his mourners will be outcast men, / And outcasts always mourn" (*De Profundis and Other Prison Writings* 228). Clausen's line "Das ist der Lauf der Welt," which appears once in the beginning of her version and once in its final stanza, is perhaps also her way of extending the ballad's circle of outcast mourners to include not only anarchists like Wilde and Reitzel, but also women and immigrants like Goldman and herself. Reading such a line of hers through the lens of an interpretive model of translation has its limits as it does not provide sufficient room to account for the

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<sup>15</sup> Leela Gandhi writes in her study *Affective Communities*, which examines Wilde among other figures, that art has "a strongly anarchist strain emerging, in this case, from a poetic view of the world in which the artist voices her refusal of external authority" (174).

personal and artistic maneuvers of individual translators and how these may express resistance to the source object in favor of poetry.

These individual aspects of translation can become more perceptible through the aid of an aesthetic model. When delineating the influence of aesthetic objects (such as poetry and literature) on individual impressions, Pater asks in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, “What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presenting in life or in a book, to me?” (3). Wilde too writes in his prison letter that “in Art one is only concerned with what a particular thing is at a particular moment to oneself” (*De Profundis and Other Prison Writings* 104).<sup>16</sup> In his long dialogic essay “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde also adopts Pater’s aesthetic views when he writes, “The longer one studies life and literature, the more strongly one feels that behind everything that is wonderful stands the individual, and that it is not the moment that makes the man, but the man who creates the age” (123). When seen from an aestheticist perspective, then, moments when translators resist a source object are simultaneously those where translators embrace an orientation to art by centering themselves.

The following versions of another key stanza in *BRG* provide additional support for the ways in which translation yields itself to poetry:

And all the woe that moved him so  
     That he gave that bitter cry,  
 And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats,  
     None knew so well as I:  
 For he who lives more lives than one  
     More deaths than one must die. (*Complete Poetry* 164)

*Back translation:*

Ich kenne den Schmerz, der ihm rührte das Herz,	I know the pain that touched his heart,
Und den bitteren Schrei der Not,	And the bitter cry of need,
Die Reue heiß und den falten Schweiß,	The remorse hot and the wrinkled sweat,
Und die Tränen, blutigrot:	And the tears, blood-red:
Wer mehr durchlebt als ein Geschick,	He who lives through more than one fate,
Stirbt mehr als einen Tod.	Dies more than one death.

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<sup>16</sup> Ellmann reminds us that in his prison letter Wilde refers to Pater’s book as having had a “strange influence” on him (*Four Dubliners* 11-13).

(Clausen 31)

Und alle Not, die ihm gebot  
Zu schreien den letzten Schrei,  
Die Reue heiß und der blutige Schweiß,  
Meine Seele war mit dabei;  
Denn wer mehr als ein Leben lebt,  
Der leidet und stirbt für drei.

(Schölermann 792)

*Back translation:*

And all the need that commanded him  
To cry the last cry,  
The remorse hot and the bloody sweat,  
My soul was there with him;  
Because he who more than one life lives  
He suffers and dies for three.

Und von der Pein, die zu solchem Schrei'n  
Die Seele da verdarb—  
Von der Reue heiß und vom blutigen Schweiß—  
Ich bins, der das Wissen erwarb!  
Denn wer mehr Leben als eins gelebt,  
Mehr Tode als einen starb.

(Schaeffer 30)

*Back translation:*

And from the pain that leads to such cries  
The soul there perished—  
From remorse hot and from bloody sweat—  
It is I who acquired the knowledge!  
Because he who more life than one lived,  
More deaths than one died.

This stanza, appearing at the end of the third (and longest) section, presents the meaning of Wooldridge's death to Wilde as the poem's speaker. Notice that the first couplet is descriptive and concrete, the next couplet becomes slightly more abstract, and the final couplet reaches a poetic pitch. What Wilde means by dying more than one death is ambiguous; its referential meaning is associative and open. The three versions run with the stanza's progressive ambiguity in their own ways. Following Venuti's model, one could suggest that the translators are interpreting Wilde's stanza in a way that "inevitably varies the form, meaning, and effect of the source text according to changing intelligibilities and interests in the translating language and culture" ("On a Universal Tendency" 599). But this leaves out aesthetic considerations, which also involves the issue of where interpretation of a source object ends and where poetry writing begins.

Individual translators, that is to say, are inspired by the variety and openness of the genre of poetry in such a way as to add their own lines and ideas to the stanza. Clausen begins her stanza with the first-person "I", altering the order of lines, making the sentence active rather than passive, and explicitly

centering pain as the *experiential knowledge* held by the speaker: “Ich kenne den Schmerz, der ihm rührte das Herz.” In her final couplet, she continues with this emphasis by using the separable verb “durchlebt” (“lives through” or “experiences something”) rather than just “lebt” (“lives”). She further takes inspiration from the ambiguity of Wilde’s final couplet to use the noun “Geschick” (rather than “Leben”), which can mean not only “fate” but also “art.” Clausen seems to be saying that she too knows from firsthand experience the pain that comes from both fate and art.

In comparing her version with Schölermann’s, he centers *spiritual knowledge*. He describes the painful cry as “gebot” (“commanded”) and in the fourth line he adds the noun “Seele” (“soul”): “Meine Seele war mit dabei.” This prepares one for the poetic leap in the final couplet: “Denn wer mehr als ein Leben lebt, / Der leidet und stirbt für drei.” Schölermann could have interpreted Wilde’s line to mean any number of deaths greater than one, but this does not clarify why Schölermann chose to write a precise numerical figure of three. The referent or symbol of three pertains to Schölermann’s own senses, in connection with other word choices like “gebot” and “Seele.” Like Wilde’s ambiguous couplet, Schölermann’s version too remains associative. The figure of three may be a spiritual reference: it is closely associated with Christianity’s Trinity doctrine, which proposes that God appears as three distinct figures. Guy Willoughby, in a position that differs from the general scholarly consensus surrounding Wilde’s non-religious treatment of Christ, has argued that the speaker in BRG “identifi[es] with Jesus Christ, who is presented in a series of evocative reflections as the great historical model and inspiration of the writer’s reformulated aestheticism” (103). But the figure of three may also be a reference to the martyrdom of dying for one’s nationality. Schölermann enthusiastically supported German nationalism (Grünzweig 47). Walter Grünzweig argues that, for example, in his German translation of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, Schölermann constructs a nationalist-oriented version of the poem (47-48, 167).<sup>17</sup>

Schaeffer’s version, meanwhile, appears to center *intellectual knowledge*. In contrast to Schölermann, Schaeffer writes that the soul “verdarb” (“perished”) from the painful cry. Through the process, however, something else has been

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<sup>17</sup> Schölermann was a prolific translator of Emerson, Pater, Ruskin, Whitman, and Wilde’s other works, in addition to being an art critic.

acquired: “Wissen” (“knowledge”). Whereas Clausen transforms Wilde’s verb “knew” into “kennen” (“to experientially know”), Schaeffer nominalizes the verb “wissen” (“to intellectually know”). His use of an exclamation mark—“Ich bins, der das Wissen erwarb!”—further suggests that the trade-off has been positive or redemptive. The context of Schaeffer’s translation, specifically new the literary, cultural, and political avant-garde of *Neue Sachlichkeit* that sought to deal with real facts of daily life, was also filled with the optimism that came from the new democratic Weimar Republic (Kolb 86-97).<sup>18</sup> Schaeffer, that is, moves away from the translation of “a source text in another language” and into the arena of poetry writing by adding his own line to the stanza (Venuti, *Translation* 99).

The latitude of the genre gives translators the chance to push their work further into the realm of poetry writing than is arguably given to translators working in other genres. To mention another example, the Turkish poet and translator Özdemir Asaf, who translated *BRG* into Turkish as *Reading Zindanı Balladı* in 1968, did not approach translation as textual or linguistic faithfulness (Özmen 154, 158). Ceyda Özmen explains that Asaf was “deeply influenced by Oscar Wilde and his poetry” for his own poetry writing, and that he “ignores some rules in Turkish and he creates new words while translating the ballad” (154, 158). That is to say, Asaf treated the task of translating the source poem as an opportunity to be inspired by the genre of poetry and its endorsement of what Pater calls a “sense of freedom” (116). As Maria Kozyreva writes in her analysis of Russian translators of *BRG* who were frequently poets themselves, “This kind of a literary situation – when a poet translates a poet – complicates and enriches the process and the resultant translation, in some ways widening, in other ways reducing its impact. [...] Two national systems and two individual poetical systems interact in such a translation” (251).<sup>19</sup> While the German-language translators examined here have not necessarily created news words as Asaf did, they have created new lines of poetry within key stanzas of the poem.

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<sup>18</sup> This optimism, however, was short-lived. Schaeffer voluntarily left Germany in 1939 to seek exile in the United States after the nationalist Third Reich took power (Faletti 409, 414).

<sup>19</sup> See also Nathalie Bouzaglo for a comparative discussion of two Spanish-language translations of *BRG*. She examines the “literary duel” between Guillermo Valencia and Bernardo Arias Trujillo, discussing how their very different political orientations partly influenced their different version of *BRG* and led to a real contention between the two translators in early twentieth-century Columbia (341-342, 348).

The form of poetry presents additional avenues of resistance to translation: more than a textual object alone, it is also a visual and aural one. The units of a poem are stanzas and lines within a vertical arrangement, giving poetry a particular visual dimension that prose-based genres such as letters and novels do not have. Meanwhile, end words that break lines receive additional emphasis and can be part of a rhyme scheme (within rhyming forms such as the ballad). Returning to the same stanza discussed above, Wilde's end words create a particular visual and aural pattern. All three translators keep to the same ABCBDB rhyme scheme, but they typically use very different end words, which create their own patterns of poetry (see Table 2). In contrast to Wilde's very simple end words, Clausen's end words are more complicated. Note, too, that the capitalization of the German nouns, standard in the German language, also adds extra visual emphasis to the line endings.

Wilde	Clausen	Schölermann	Schaeffer	Rhyme Scheme
so	<b>Herz</b> (heart)	<b>gebot</b> (commanded)	<b>Schrei'n</b> (cry)	A
cry	<b>Not</b> (need)	<b>Schrei</b> (cry)	<b>verdarb</b> (perished)	B
sweats	<b>Schweiß</b> (sweat)	<b>Schweiß</b> (sweat)	<b>Schweiß</b> (sweat)	C
I	<b>blutigrot</b> (bloodred)	<b>dabei</b> (thereby)	<b>erwarb</b> (acquired)	B
one	<b>Geschick</b> (fate/art)	<b>lebt</b> (lives)	<b>gelebt</b> (lived)	D
die	<b>Tod</b> (death)	<b>drei</b> (three)	<b>starb</b> (died)	B

Table 2. End Words and Rhyme Scheme of Key Stanza<sup>20</sup>

Given its layering of textual, visual, and aural particularities, the genre of poetry can resist a translational intention to imitate a source object. A poem can obscure miniscule, but significant, details in such layering—details which may not always be readily perceived in order to be subsequently interpreted through translation. The formal positioning of the word “wild” in the third line

<sup>20</sup> Source: *Complete Poetry* 164; Clausen 31; Schölermann 792; Schaeffer 30.

of the same key stanza provides such an example: “And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats.” The adjective “wild” exists as the same word with the same meaning in German, only pronounced differently.<sup>21</sup> Yet the three versions do *not* include “wild” in the third line or anywhere else in this stanza. In its place, they write the adjective “heiß” (“hot”). It is possible that Clausen, Schölermann, and Schaeffer may have sought to retain the internal rhyme that appears in Wilde’s third line (“regrets”/“sweats”) and thus wrote “heiß”/“Schweiß.” As one of the translators of *BRG* observes, “Considering the ballad form (which, of course, may vary from ballad to ballad), the rhymes, though only occurring in every second line, are much less flexible than the rhythm” (Höschle 64).

The intricate patterning of this single word by the author of the source poem, however, has resisted translation. The poem was first published pseudo-anonymously with only Wilde’s prison cell number C.3.3., partly to appease the British publisher’s “fears of a possible libel action by prison officials” (Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* 559).<sup>22</sup> In this stanza, then, Wilde subversively names himself within a broader context of prison and post-prison censorship and exile. Wilde’s prison sentencing had immediate effects on the Victorian reception of his work: “Within days of his conviction, two of his plays running in the West End ceased production, his books disappeared from stores, and no publisher would touch his work” (Gillespie 13). Readers and critics may assume that “Wilde has become nothing in his prison guise except a prisoner [...] with no name except his number, C.3.3.” (Robbins 170). But this act of self-naming is by itself a kind of aesthetic rebuttal to others reading or defining him solely as a prisoner.

Indeed, the very positioning of his name, as the third word in the third line of the third section’s last stanza, is highly relevant. The pattern comes out to 333, which not only relates to his cell number C.3.3. (with “C” being the third letter of the alphabet) but is also a Biblical symbol for upheaval and new beginnings.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Given that English belongs to the Germanic language family, the two languages share many words in common.

<sup>22</sup> From the seventh edition in 1899, Wilde’s name was featured in place of C.3.3. (Bristow 31).

<sup>23</sup> Wilde would have known the symbolism of 333, having been raised Christian by a mother who was particularly dedicated to Catholicism and to its foundational Trinity doctrine. He further developed an interest in Catholicism during his years at Oxford, even becoming acquainted with “a local group of Jesuits” (Sturgis 52-53). In his prison cell at Reading, too, he regularly read the

To be sure, Clausen does add the word “wild” to a different line that appears a couple stanzas earlier:

	<i>Back translation:</i>
Mit einem Mal durch's Haus der Qual	At once through the house of torment
Die Blode bebend klang	The stupid trembling sound
Und ein Schrei, so wild und gramerfüllt	And a cry, so wild and grief-stricken
Uns jeder Zelle drang,	To each cell penetrated,
Wie von eines Lepers Lagerhaft,	Like from a leper's camp,
Ein Schrei verzweiflungsbang. (31)	A cry of despair.

But since it is not just a matter of what word is included but also where and how, the source poem has still resisted translation formally. While in this unique example “wild” is the same in both languages *and* is the homonym of the source author's name, one can imagine a multitude of other scenarios in which a word of significance bound up with the form of poetry aesthetically resists translation.

Given its “width, variety, [and] delicacy,” it is the propensity of poetry as a form, according to Pater, to embrace a “sense of freedom” within the otherwise confining strictures of modernity (116). Just how complicated this latitude given by poetry can become is evident when one also considers translations done as free adaptations, which is where a poem may begin with a standard word-for-word translation only to veer off into a new territory or where a poem may be only loosely inspired by the poem which it adapts. For Venuti, poets who do these free adaptations, which he calls versions, may be crossing borders between authorhood and plagiarism (*Translation* 175). So while Venuti insists translation entail a wide range of plausible interpretations of a source text, he still wants to hold onto the textual integrity of a source object.

Willean—by way of Paterian—aestheticism, however, encroaches on the integrity of a source object further, and poetry as a genre appears to particularly invite such aestheticism. Comparative examination of different German translations of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* has shown that versions are more than suitable variations of a source object. They contain key moments which can be seen as individually wrought creations: their own lines of poetry.

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Greek Bible (Frankel 65). And on his death-bed, he was baptized into the Catholic Church (Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* 583-584; Sturgis 713-714).

And if “verse will be read a hundred times where the prose is read once,” as William Wordsworth phrases it in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, then lines belonging to them as poets will also be read multiple times as part of the refrain or stanza’s repeatability (111-112).<sup>24</sup> Further comparative study and analysis of translations of poetry, including the several free adaptations of BRG in German done by poets, are needed to better understand the aesthetic permissibility of poetry as a genre of translation.

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<sup>24</sup> Alan Bold writes that the ballads’ “metrical structure conforms to the exigencies of memorability [...] [T]o survive they had to be unforgettable” (14).

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## BIONOTE

**Amir HUSSAIN** holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from Emory University, where his dissertation, *The Ballad of Oscar Wilde*, argued for the relevance of Wilde's prison poetry. His other interdisciplinary graduate training includes foreign exchange fellowships in literature and language studies in Germany, as well as an MFA in Creative Writing with related cultural studies coursework from the University of Minnesota. His critical and creative writings have appeared in various journals, including most recently in the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*. He is a long-time resident of Pennsylvania, United States.

**E-mail:** [husso200@umn.edu](mailto:husso200@umn.edu)