criticism in translation

Chamisso, Chamisso Authors, and Globalization

HARALD WEINRICH

INTRODUCTION BY MARSHALL BROWN

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Introduction

THE MAN. HARALD WEINRICH, AN HONORARY MEMBER OF THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION SINCE 1996, MAY BE THE quintessential interdisciplinary humanist. Having mastered French as a young internee in France at the end of World War II, he began his academic career as a Romance philologist in the tradition of Erich Auerbach and Ernst Robert Curtius, with professorships successively at the universities of Kiel and Cologne. In a second career he became a professor of linguistics at the new University of Bielefeld (which he helped to found and where he served as director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research); then he established in Munich the first program for the teaching of German as a foreign language. Following his compulsory retirement, he received the honor (extraordinary for a foreigner) of an appointment as professor of Romance studies at the prestigious Collège de France, from which he is now also retired. He has published writing of great scholarly and public resonance in all these areas. Among his voluminous output (translated into many languages) are *Tempus*, a wide-ranging and meticulously nuanced study of tense use in the major literatures of Western Europe; a prizewinning short book of cultural linguistics entitled *Linguistik der Lüge* (*Linguistics of Lying*); "text grammars" of French and of German that aim to record not just morphology and syntax but also the usage problems that confront speakers and writers of all foreign languages; *Lethe: Kunst und Kritik des Vergessens* (*Lethe: The Art and Critique of Forgetting*, his first book to appear in English) and much other work on cultural topics, including memory and politeness; and dozens of essays on the teaching and learning of languages and on problems of intercultural understanding.

The occasion. The essay here translated began as a lecture Weinrich delivered in 2002 in the series Viele Kulturen—Eine Sprache ("Many Cultures—One Language"), as an honorary recipient of the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize of the Robert Bosch Foundation. The prize, established by Weinrich in 1985, honors creative writers in German who are native speakers of a different language. It has been awarded over the years to first- and second-generation economic immigrants, to political refugees, and to journalists and other international professionals; the recipients or

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their families come from First, Second, and Third World countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The prize is named for a well-known figure in German Romanticism, a refugee from the French Revolution, who (as the lecture informs us) composed different kinds of work in French, Latin, and German. Chamisso's literary work was in German and includes a large corpus of sentimental verse, the best known being the poems entitled *Frauenliebe und -leben*, which are the texts for one of Robert Schumann's most renowned song cycles. In the German sphere, however, Chamisso remains much more familiar as the author of a story still widely read, "Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte" ("Peter Schlemihl's Remarkable History"). It narrates the adventures of an unfortunate man who sells his shadow to the devil and then travels the world in the fruitless attempt to recover his lost soul. As Weinrich treats it here, the story becomes a parable of the dispossessed's troubled quest for a home.

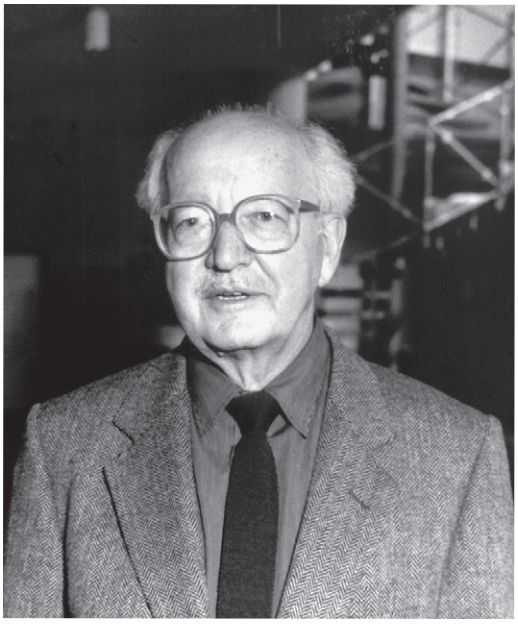
The essay. True to his mission, Weinrich imposes no conclusions on his audience. Within a small compass, he practices the slowness that he preaches. His essays characteristically accumulate observations drawn from a vast range of knowledge, patiently circumscribing a question and confronting readers with complications that challenge thought and behavior. The concern of the present essay is the complexities of multiculturalism, and it arises partly in response to a special topic collection in *PMLA*. Weinrich begins by evoking the particular circumstances of Chamisso's life and career, between countries, between cultures, between disciplines, and between languages. Chamisso serves as a model for contemporary "Chamisso authors." Yet Weinrich recognizes that a model is different from a norm. Each person faces individual situations as well as collective ones, all inflected by history and circumstance. In particular, Weinrich traces the history and the philology of the impulse toward "world literature," an ideal that in the German cultural tradition has been both promoted (especially by Goethe) and resisted.

This is the point at which a German intervention may be resonant for North American scholars. Identity and communication are at odds for all of us, though not always as they were for Chamisso. In the contemporary world, the problem has been complicated (even for speakers of a major cultural language like German) by the dominance of English as the sole remaining world language. Weinrich honors the spirit of participation, but, like numerous others (e.g., Arac; Damrosch 285; Shell), he raises his voice against the globalized dominance of English. He evokes the peculiar situation of authors from abroad writing in German, estranged equally from their native roots and from the global culture. Franco Moretti has evoked the tensions between world literature and "local materials" as "*a law of literary evolution*" (58), without specifying just how high up the scale of cultural or economic privilege the law extends. But Jacques Derrida (who writes in his native language but not in the place he was born and reared) portrays the situation as, indeed, a human universal when he writes of "an essential alienation in language" whose principle is this: "*I have only one language, yet it is not mine*" (58, 2). With the concept of subglobal languages, Weinrich introduces a novel and productive tool for encountering and reckoning with the complexity of multicultural existence in the twenty-first century. As Gayatri Spivak has said in a thoughtful new collection edited by Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb, "it is useful to be far from the triumphant culture with its sense of manifest destiny" (191). Just how far is subject to negotiation. Judith Butler finds a contingent ethical and political value in affiliating with multilingualism: "although some may think that doing away with common sense and a common language is the sure road toward divisiveness, it seems to me that accepting the heterogeneity of language is a necessary point of departure for any left politics that does not seek to reestablish the terms of cultural dominance . . ." (205); Weinrich, however, shows us how we all struggle to communicate beyond ourselves yet always remain short of universalisms, even universalisms of the left. He remains

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closest perhaps to Bruce Robbins's criticism of the romance of localism (43) in favor of the "(often unrecognized) advantages" of the "mid-distance" (47). Though Robbins barely touches on language issues, he might almost be pleading in favor of the identity tensions celebrated by Weinrich when he writes, "All universalisms are dirty. And it is only dirty universalisms that will help us against the powers and agents of still dirtier ones" (75).

The style. Weinrich's writing is always easy, yet never simple. (For the distinction, see Valenza and Bender.) The essay was written for oral delivery, and in translating we had to adjust the speech patterns to retain its constituent informality in English. For the style is performative and language-dependent. It mirrors the distance of subglobal linguistic culture and of the Chamisso authors from global cultures and United States multiculturalism. Like United States society (at least in some accounts), English is a mongrel language, with words adopted freely from countless sources and often fully merged into English sound patterns. At the other extreme are languages like French, whose phonetics leave them unreceptive to linguistic integration, whatever the prevailing cultural norms. German is an intermediate case; it is a layered language that is phonetically as well as culturally subglobal. It adopts foreign words readily, yet to a much greater extent than English it leaves them recognizably foreign. The reader of Weinrich's German text encounters a discourse that commences in pure German (even featuring the colloquial and emotive "fremdeln" instead of the more learned and cognitive "Alienation"), opens itself to technical jargon such as "ostranenie" and "Poetizität," becomes increasingly language-conscious through its philological excurses, begins to accumulate Latin phrases, French and English names, and foreign-sounding terms associated with globalization, and by the end has encompassed a hodgepodge of learned, popular, political, and technological vocabularies from English and other languages and in various degrees of assimilation into German. In the third paragraph from the end Weinrich writes of "das *label* Weltliteratur" and in the second from the end of "Globalisten und Hyper-Globalisten"; in the last, in a wonderful fusion of contemporary English, recognizably French-derived German, and ancient Latin, he says, "Alle Arten von globaler Pluralität scheinen mir jedenfalls auf diesem Globus . . . die bessere Literaturwelt herzustellen. . . ." He makes his better, more pluralistic literature world even as he advocates it. Slow down, he says, and listen to others in order to listen to yourself. English cannot re-create the impedance that allows German to incorporate linguistic otherness without totally assimilating it. We can only signal here how much is lost in our translation of a subglobal text into a global language capable of swallowing up all differences.



Harald Weinrich. Photo © Pressestelle Universität Bielefeld.

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THE TERM *CHAMISSO AUTHORS* IN WHAT follows means writers—like Adelbert von Chamisso—who wrote their literary works in German even though it was not their native language. This situation can be regarded from various perspectives. First, even though their reasons for choosing German as their literary language vary greatly, all Chamisso authors have renounced the convenience of writing in their mother tongue and shouldered the burdens of an acquired second or even third language. They have chosen thereby a more laborious path that must always slow the creative process.

Adelbert von Chamisso's life history shows as much.[1] Son of a count and born in his ancestors' castle in Champagne, Charles Louis Adelaïde Chamisso de Boncourt began life without any literary expectations. The French Revolution drove him in early youth to Germany, where, after initial poetic efforts in French, he soon took German as his literary language. So, with "Peter Schlemihl" and his poems, he became a German poet, indeed a classic of German literature.

But just a moment. This author's literary life did not run altogether smoothly and effortlessly. Did he really achieve the total linguistic competence in his chosen literary language one might expect from a classic author? Not entirely. We know, for example, from numerous contemporary sources that he spoke German throughout his life with a distinct French accent. He never learned to count and calculate correctly in German. And stylistic studies have indicated that Chamisso not infrequently subjected his German prose to the stricter rules of French syntax, a phenomenon unusual in a German classic.

Since Chamisso was a German author of foreign origin—let us say, a Chamisso author—his bilingualism exposed him to constant attack and challenge. A certain "foreignness" must always have been mixed into his linguistic routine; indeed, that is surely the source of the peculiar linguistic charm that constitutes the aesthetic distinction of his writing. In this context I need make only the briefest reminder that some literary critics, particularly the Russian formalists, included a certain degree of alienation (*ostranenie*) among the elementary requirements of "poeticity." That principle has its simple basis in the laws of language acquisition. In contrast to the first language, which, as we often say, "is absorbed with one's mother's milk," each additional language we learn as a

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