

Translation as Metaphor in Hildesheimer's *Marbot Eine Biographie*

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On February 22, 1980, in the literary supplement of the Hamburg weekly *Die Zeit*, Wolfgang Hildesheimer published an article describing a character whose biography was to appear the following year. As if to prevent confusion regarding *Marbot Eine Biographie*, the article's captions give to understand that the text to be published is not a historical treatise, but rather a historical novel, a "gefälschte ... Biographie" (*Die Wahrheit* 42). Another rubric refers to Hildesheimer's proclivity for "skurrile Fiktionen" (43) and announces that here as elsewhere in his work, "Wirklichkeit ist absurd, Wahrheit ein Spiel" (43).

The subject of this falsified biography, Sir Andrew Marbot, was born in England in 1801 and committed suicide in Urbino, Italy in 1830. As a boy, he preferred the company of his refined mother and maternal grandfather over that of his father, who was interested only in hunting and sports. Though he did not kill his father, Marbot pursued a passionate affair with his mother. As an adult, his energies were channelled either into this romance or into the pursuit of his second love, the analysis of paintings. In the course of two European Grand Tours, which doubled as periods of self-imposed exile from England and his mother, he encountered such luminaries as Goethe, Byron, Turner, Delacroix and Schopenhauer. Marbot mulled over the works of these and other Romantic-era artists and intellectuals, finding in them a reflection of himself or matter for dispute. Marbot himself invented a singular method of understanding paintings. Realizing that the sublimation of his transgressive love for his mother fueled his own analytical studies, Marbot searched to understand paintings through the psychology of their creators.

While the *Zeit* article may have stimulated interest in the book to come, it also warned readers that *Marbot Eine Biographie* concerns a fictional character thrust into a historical world. It may be more suitable to speak of the character Marbot's insertion into the real world, rather than into a historical world, since the latter suggests a vision of the real world but only in a former time.

Although the elements of the text directly concerning Marbot and Marbot scholarship are apocryphal, these details are nonetheless realistic. That in the 1820s there lived an innovative art-historian like Marbot is possible. Hegel (1770-1831), Goethe (1749-1832) and Friedrich von Schlegel (1772-1829) contributed to the historicizing and theorizing of art, that is, to the creation of today's discipline of art history. All three died within two years of Andrew Marbot's own death. Furthermore, Karl Friedrich von Rumohr (1785-1843), whose *Italienische Forschungen* of 1827 was innovative for its attempt at objectivity and consistency in the analysis of paintings (Kultermann 88), appears as an influential figure to Marbot in the realm of gastronomy as well as art history. In Marbot's biography, the factual and the fictional are admixed to tease a reader's credulity and strain his erudition to the point that more than one prominent reader was deceived, for a time, into believing this novel to be a factual historical biography.

Marbot's story is related by an anonymous first-person narrator, who is also Marbot's supposed biographer. The narrator cites manuscript sources such as letters and journals, as well as another biography and various monographs on his subject. This narrator has an advantage over earlier scholars. Twentieth-century technology in the form of quartz lamps has enabled the narrator to consult Marbot's most personal journal entries: marginal notes previously inked over to avoid scandal and hitherto illegible (*Marbot* 181). This discovery is important, as Marbot wrote of his incestuous desires and his views on the idea of sin and his society's taboos only in the margins of his notebooks. The conclusions the narrator draws from these newly-deciphered sources make his study different and more accurate, he tells us, than earlier ones.

In 1982, Ina Schabert distinguished between conventional biography and the psychobiography by stating that the first "keeps... close... to aspects of factual evidence," whereas "psychohistory resembles the novel in its ability to derive long sequences of inner events from single items of biographical information" (9). The *Marbot* narrator focusses in a novelistic fashion on patterns of behavior and events which in his estimation reveal the deeper truth of his subject's life. Based on Schabert's definition, the method of the *Marbot* narrator makes his text fit the description of a psychobiography. Since *Marbot Eine Biographie* is a novel, it is more precisely described as a fictive psychobiography.

As the psychobiographical approach suggests and as the narrator states several times, he seeks to present the *key* to Marbot's psychology. However, at the very end of the text, the narrator articulates, or rather finally reveals, a second purpose. In the closing chapter, the narrator repeats that Marbot's journals are about to be published in a critical edition (318), an event to which he has already alluded (259). Then, at the end of this last chapter, he further declares that the forthcoming edition will omit the intimate, subversive, marginal notes which provide the key to understanding Marbot's personality. "Die verräterischen Randnotizen bleiben in der Neuausgabe ausgespart, denn da sie scheinbar zufällig verteilt sind, hätten sie den Rhythmus der deduktiven Rede zerstört" (317-8). While earlier the notes were omitted for reasons of decency, they will be absent from the forthcoming edition in order to maintain style. The liminal notes are often written backwards or contain obscure references. To be comprehensible, they require heavy glossing and this would disrupt the linear flow of narrative. It is therefore the role of this biography, says the narrator, to instruct the future reader of the source text in the forthcoming edition, so that he will be equipped to understand it despite its incompleteness (317). The narrator offers this biography as a prophylactic, to prevent a misconception of historical truth, embodied in the primary source documents. Taken together, the two stated goals of this biography form a peculiar syllogism. The biographer claims for his work unmediated access to historical truth, that is, an originary knowledge relative to what will become known as *the* primary-source documents. At the same time, no one but the biographer has access to these documents. Therefore the biography remains the unique guarantor of its own authority. This is at best a highly suspicious, potentially self-undermining stance.

The strange logic of this proposition, like the novel's historical frame and its carefully announced publication, call attention to the constructedness of *Marbot Eine Biographie*. Taking this cue to look at the manner of telling as well as the matter of the story being told, I will turn to an analysis of one theme, the practice of translation, as a means of exploring the related notions of authority and authenticity which inform this text on many levels.

The situation pertaining to languages in *Marbot* is complex. Andrew Marbot spent his youth in the English countryside, yet

thanks to his Dutch Jesuit tutor and to his well-travelled mother, he is not provincial. Marbot speaks German, Italian and French, travels extensively and habitually corresponds in German and Italian as well as in English. He even exchanges letters in ancient Greek with Thomas de Quincey (47). One may judge of Marbot's command of Greek by de Quincey's:

...my command of that language was so great, that I not only composed Greek verses in lyric metres, but could converse in Greek fluently and without embarrassment—an accomplishment which... was owing to the practice of daily reading off the newspaper into the best Greek I could furnish *extempore*: for the necessity of ransacking my memory and invention, for all sorts and combinations of periphrastic expressions, as equivalents for modern ideas, images, relations of things, &c. gave me a compass of diction which would never have been called out by a dull translation of moral essays, &c. (Quincey 6-7)

In his journal, Marbot also makes notes in Latin. This may have been usual for a well-educated Englishman of aristocratic family in the early nineteenth century. However, polylingualism is by no means taken for granted in this twentieth-century novel.

The language situation lived by the character Marbot leads to an equally complicated narrative situation in his biography. The narrator is germanophone. However, the narrator's source materials (letters, journals, earlier scholarly work) are in several languages. Given the variety of his materials, the narrator could have rendered his text homogeneous by translating all citations into German. This choice would have been justified by the fact that German is the one language aside from English which Marbot spoke perfectly. Alternatively, given the narrator's grasp of English, he could have adopted that language for greater fidelity to his subject. English, after all, is Marbot's native language and the one which dominates his writings on art. In fact, the narrator instead has produced a heterogeneous, polyglot text. The German-language narrative is liberally peppered with words, phrases and occasionally whole sentences and paragraphs in five other languages, particularly English. These citations are often accompanied by complete or partial translations into German.

This heteroglossia has engendered criticism. The poet Helmut Heissenbüttel opines that the translations and citations in various

languages make reading tiresome. Heissenbüttel refers disparagingly to the numerous English quotations as being the result of a pedantic *Manie* on the part of the author ("Die Puppe" 305). Admittedly, for this reader as well, the language changes create a halting impression. In the following passage, for instance, the narrator cites Marbot's description of an opiated de Quincey. Within the narrator's translation of Marbot's notes, he inserts citations of the English-language source:

...Es schien mir, als begeistere er sich selbst an seinem unheimlichenSelbstgespräch (sinister soliloquy). Hin und wieder ging er zur Tür und rief "Margaret dear!" oder "My dear Peggy!," als wolle er seine Frau an diesen Monologen teilhaben lassen, aber sie kam nicht.... Es war mir nicht wohl bei diesem Schauspiel, und doch war es eine Szene, die nur ein Mann von Bildung und Geist zu spielen vermag, wenn auch dieser Geist zerrüttet (deranged) war. (66)

Ulrich Weisstein asserts that the parenthetical citations of an original text, however bulky and repetitive, function to acknowledge the problem of rendering nuances of expression accurately. Thus the original-language citations authenticate the fictive biography, making it scholarly (25). The degree of attention paid to the question of translation and its overt acknowledgement in the text are indeed important components of the historical frame in *Marbot*. To cite but one example, the biographer uses the term "eligible," in English, then notes that "hier fehlt ein deutsches Wort" (35): he knows no satisfactorily equivalent term in German. This remark belies the narrator's search for accuracy in the description and exploitation of his source material, which, because foreign, he acknowledges as by definition unfamiliar. Marbot was of another time, another place and another language than the narrator. Therefore, by inserting bits of Marbot's English text into his German translations, the narrator restores to Marbot at least some of his true voice. However, the presence of translation as a theme and as a narrative activity is too preoccupying merely to fulfill an authenticating function. The frequent recourse to English and occasionally to other languages foreign to German, while it reveals a positive concern with accuracy, also conveys a distrust that the act of translation is sufficient to render the nuances of two different languages.

A concern for accuracy in translation distinguishes Marbot as much as his biographer. As the narrator points out, Marbot's diaries contain phrases in other languages than his native English, as well as queries regarding the lack of precise equivalents between languages. Marbot notes in describing Mantegna's *La famiglia del Marchese Ludovico* that

...Der einzige Mann in Bewegung ist der heraneilende Sekretär, zu dem sich der Herzog zurückneigt, um ihm etwas ins Ohr zu schweigen.

Der letzte Nebensatz ist deutsch geschrieben, und unten auf der Seite steht als Seitengedanke die rhetorische Frage: "Why do we not have a word for the verb 'Schweigen?'" (224-5)

The import of this passage is that the Duke beckoned the secretary to him in order to *whisper* something in the secretary's ear. However, *whisper* more precisely corresponds to the verbs *flüstern* or *wispeln*. The term *schweigen* literally means to fall silent, making the Duke's projected action complex. The Duke will intone without noise, or speak without speaking, as it were; perhaps he may do so with stealth or secrecy. As Marbot notes, causing the narrator and thus the reader to do the same, it is difficult to translate the verb *schweigen*, as it is poetically used here, into English without affectation or circumlocution. This passage demonstrates that it is Marbot's polylingualism which allows him to consider questions relating to translation. At the same time, during his travels in France, Germany and Italy, his ability to speak several languages obviates the need for translation. Marbot switches language modes according to location and company, circumventing translation and avoiding imprecise linguistic equivalency. This implies that polylingualism allows Marbot an authentic, complete contact.

The question of translation, brought to the fore by the protagonist's polylingualism and by the practice of the ever-cautious narrator, is also significant on the level of reception, which in the case of *Marbot* includes real-world translation. The polylingual aspects of *Marbot* multiply the hurdles which any translator must overcome, since the meaning of passages on the subject of language in English, French or Greek depends on their being set off by the German narrative. These juxtapositions are literally lost in translation, as is, therefore, much of a thematic stratum. For instance, in Patricia Crampton's English-language

translation, when the narrator describes Andrew's father as eligible to be married (cited above), his further observation that "hier fehlt ein deutsches Wort" necessarily has been edited out. Also logically missing from Crampton's translation are the numerous citations of Marbot's English notes, inserted by the narrator into his germanized text. The following passage illustrates this reduction. It is from a letter Marbot wrote to his mother, describing a visit with Goethe:

Er bat mich, ihm vorzulesen. Ich tat es und fühlte mich dabei beobachtet von einem Richter, unfehlbar wie Gott und ebenso unmenschlich (...felt myself observed by a judge as infallible as God, and as inhuman). (13)

In the English-language translation, this is stripped down:

[H]e asked me to read aloud to him. I did so and felt myself observed by a judge as infallible as God, and as inhuman. (6)

In the German text, every juxtaposition of languages created by the parenthetical insertions reminds the reader that he is removed from the documents in question. In the English-language translation, the diminution of this passage and of countless others like it weakens the anglophone reader's awareness of translation as a task performed by the narrator and as a force which shapes the narrative. These reductions gradually efface the consciousness of version as a theme. Given the references in *Marbot* to western-European "high" culture, as lived by an Englishman, in particular, it is not surprising that the only translations of the book to date are in English and in French. It is ironic that the non-germanophone reader most attuned to the historical and cultural references in the text, possibly an anglophone reader educated within the tradition to which *Marbot* refers, will, if he must read or chooses to read only in English, unknowingly confront a version of the text in which the theme of translation has been rendered imperceptible.

Marbot's references to the lack of precise equivalents between languages, the narrator's refusal to sacrifice the possibility of referring to sources in their many original languages and the resultant difficulty this polylingualism creates for a real translation of the novel suggest that the act of translation inevitably betrays meaning. Marbot's and the narrator's fastidiousness in

changing languages in order to preserve disjunctions, as opposed to de-articulating them through translation, suggests that they value what they consider to be immutable. According to this logic of immutability, communication ideally would take place without the need of translation and the fracturing and betrayal it entails. Yet the cosmopolitan culture which the character Marbot exemplifies has already surpassed the stage of monolingualism, represented by Marbot's narrow-minded father. To achieve a perfect comprehension of the immutable, polylingualism *ad infinitum* is the other logical extreme. If one could switch at will from language to language, one could appreciate every subtle nuance with the understanding that comes of cultural and linguistic familiarity.

However, infinite heteroglossia can only be an ideal. Polylingualism, as practiced by Marbot, represents a compromise. Marbot's community of understanding is enlarged at least through the knowledge of a few languages, since it cannot be enlarged infinitely. Knowing a few languages is sufficient to give him a sense of the immutable. The text of *Marbot* reflects this compromise which, in another sense, is also a refusal to compromise. As an agglomerate of languages, the text preserves that which is distinct or idiosyncratic to each one. But the agglomerate text is of necessity somewhat clumsy, disenfranchised from that right of a good narrative to flow seamlessly. Similarly, insofar as Marbot is a cosmopolite, it is notable that he has achieved cultural flexibility at a price. By virtue of his linguistic ability, i.e., his capacity to translate himself across borders at least within the confines of Western Europe, Marbot, like most of the artistic and intellectual company he keeps, can make himself "at home" in many places. He is an intrepid traveler with a sense of the larger world, and a sophistication that transcends national perspective. Any hints of cultural relativism are absent from Marbot's writings. At the same time, Marbot is in exile from his native England. Given his cosmopolitan sophistication as much as his transgressive secret, he is also excommunicated from belonging anywhere in a local fashion.

Hildesheimer's *Marbot Eine Biographie* participates in the tradition of the literary mystification, in that it deceptively imitates that which inspires it, then laughingly draws notice to itself as being in the act of imitation. The literary mystification thus questions what is specific to the work being imitated as opposed to its imitation, and, through demystification, didactically involves the reader in

this query. In this case, we are asked what distinguishes scholarship from learned fancy. As it appears in *Marbot*, the act of translation may be understood as the attempt to render one voice in another without betrayal. Thus described, translation is a metaphor for historiography, of which biography is one instance: historiography seeks to unearth voices of the past, but also to make them intelligible in the present time. In *Marbot*, translation is ubiquitous through the narrator's inclusion of parenthetical citations of source. These same citations are constantly shown to be less desirable than letting the historical voice speak for itself. This tension points to the fallibility in the enterprise of understanding the past. The narrator's superior knowledge, relative to his scholarly predecessors, results from the contingency of living in the twentieth century and being able to use a quartz lamp to reveal his sources, plainly indicating the provisional nature of what is referred to as knowledge.

Within the body of Hildesheimer's writing, this literary mystification is not without precedent. For example, Hildesheimer's first novel, *Paradies der falschen Vögel*, concerns an obscure Balkan nation, recently ravaged by a great war, which uses its newly-recovered economic prosperity to restore its cultural identity as well. In *Paradies*, a painter is hired by the government to create a number of old works—to expeditiously forge a cultural patrimony for the nation. In the process, the painter must first disguise, then actually loses his identity. This short novel may be read as a fable about post-World War II Germany during the *Wirtschaftswunder*, or Economic Miracle. In *Marbot*, the historical setting, and the emphasis on translation, in particular the germanophone, anglophone and francophone triangle, evoke the memory of a community in which the esthetic and the intellectual have a living force and provide a standard for living and dying. This particular cultural confluence may also suggest another community, the enforced internationalism of the triple occupation of West Berlin during the Cold War era, toward the end of which this book was written. As an instance of fiction written at the end of the present century, what does *Marbot* portend? Though its narrative limps at times, this novel finds liberation through its exploration of the cumulus of history. Liberation for this fictive psychobiography is to be found neither in the crossing of generic boundaries, given the idea of transgression connoted in that phrase, nor in an escapist

nostalgia for the past. Rather, the life of this work resides in its subtle, even sly, mode of generic innovation and, thanks to the self-consciousness of its evocation of the past, in its reflective acknowledgement of the present.

Notes

¹ Wolfgang Hildesheimer, "Die Wahrheit der Unwahrheit," *Die Zeit* Feuilleton 9 (22 February 1980): 42-3. The first edition of *Marbot Eine Biographie* followed in 1981 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag).

² Dorrit Cohn and Theodore Ziolkowski point out that this feature makes *Marbot* unique among historical or biographical novels. Cohn, "Breaking the Code of Fictional Biography" in *Traditions of Experiment from the Enlightenment to the Present*, eds. Nancy Kaiser and David Wellbery (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992): 303; and Ziolkowski, *Varieties of Literary Thematics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 137.

³ During the preparation of his novel, Hildesheimer occasionally cited Sir Andrew Marbot in radio addresses and essays, thus working him into the consciousness of the present time. See, for example, the epigraph to Hanjo Kesting's "Das Ende der Fiktion: Gespräch mit Wolfgang Hildesheimer," transcribed in *Dichter ohne Vaterland* (Berlin/Bonn: Verlag J.H.W. Dietz, 1982): 52. This interview was first aired on Norddeutsche Rundfunk, 3. Programm (5 April 1977).

⁴ This is noted as well by Ulrich Weisstein, who writes that on the whole, "the difference between real and imaginary characters is made transparent insofar as it can be gauged from their presence in or absence from the *index nominum*." From Weisstein's "Wolfgang Hildesheimer's *Marbot*: Fictional Biography and Treatise on Comparative Literature," *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 32 (1983): 24. The names of members of Marbot's family, as well as those of other Marbot scholars, are conspicuously absent from the index of names at the end of *Marbot Eine Biographie*.

⁵ See Patricia Stanley, *The Realm of Possibilities* (Maryland: University Press of America, 1988), xiv note 7.

⁶ Here I use the term narrator to indicate the anonymous though highly opinionated character imputed behind the first-person narrative voice. I use this term with the understanding that the narrator is the *character* responsible for the research and the inclusion of detail, within the novel called *Marbot Eine Biographie*. As *Marbot* is a fictive biography, I shall also use the term biographer to mean the character of the biographer, i.e. the narrator.

⁷ See pages 10, 19, 99 and 259 for specific references.

⁸ In *W.H. and His Critics*, Stanley employs this phrase in her call for poststructuralist and postmodernist, rather than biographical, studies of Hildesheimer's work, advocating a new emphasis on "manner" as well as "matter." The present study claims no affiliation with a theory of the postmodern, though its focus on "manner" as well as "matter" bespeaks its poststructuralist perspective. Matter and manner are also discussed in Cohn, Dorrit. "Breaking the Code of Fictional Biography." *Traditions of Experiment from the Enlightenment to the Present*. Eds. Nancy Kaiser and David Wellbery. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

⁹ This passage would have appeared on page 21 of Patricia Crampton's translation, *Marbot A Biography* (New York: George Braziller, 1983). A British translation was published in the same year: *Marbot*, trans. Marion Faber (London: Dent, 1983).

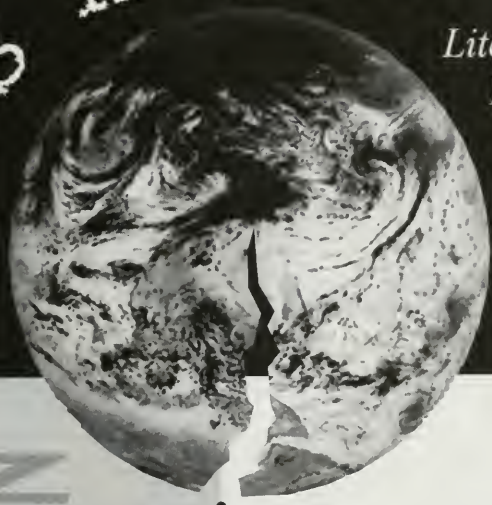
¹⁰ *Sir Andrew Marbot*, trans. Martin Kaltenecker (Paris: J. C. Lattès, 1984). Ironically, *Sir Andrew Marbot* is also the title borne by the 1888 biography of Marbot written by Frederic Hadley-Chase, and to which the *Marbot* narrator refers. The narrator points out on several occasions that the 1888 biography was gravely flawed!

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