# The Ear Playing Tricks

## Homophonic Translating and the See-sawing 'I'

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There are songs that make my brain schizophrenic; I'm thinking of the sense of a strange split that resists resolution. I do, however, register this division, and this means that I am cut into three parts by these songs, into listening now, listening at an earlier time and a third monitoring 'I' that observes the whole process with amazement and—as now for example—with an attempt at explanation.

Normally, probably just for the better, the brain of the child disappears into the brain of the adult. We remember childhood just as we remember other things: authentically from within, in other words, distorted by the broad-brush strokes of recall. Neurobiologists argue that memories are not 'put away' in the brain if by this we mean the take-up of a new item, it being stored away, then taken out and replaced yet again. It is said that memory even physiologically functions in a different way; recent research showing that what is remembered is completely broken up each time it is activated, then put back in store as a new entity. In other words, it involves not a substrate but unceasing over-writing. Moreover, it is probably this process, this constant rubbing out and reconstructing, that guarantees the reassuring impression of our being a consistent and coherent person.

For weeks everything goes well: I know who I am and who I was. So, for example, if I think of myself as an eleven-year-old I see myself straight away as 'Me-but-not-so-tall' sitting in school. As if through clear glass I remember specific favorite scenes: gymnastics on the parallel bars; singing solos in music lessons; having to speak in English in front of the class.

Everything seems to be going well, I'm sitting in the car, out of the blue "Norwegian Wood" is being played.

Immediately, my brain splits in half: 'I today', 'I earlier'. It becomes clear to me that the 'I' is only a figurine in the cage of the brain, entirely on its own. The cage is

cramped, the brain is spacious. It puts tiny pieces of reality behind the bars of the cage, the 'I' devours them dutifully, then claims "I'll do this", "I want this", "I don't want that", whereupon the brain continues to bake the yeast cake of 'the real' so that the 'I' has the impression that everything is shaping up in response to its ideas and rising nicely.

This insight is owed to my cousin M. On my eleventh birthday she gave me two cassettes by the Beatles; I had grown up with music from the Bavarian Radio; now I could listen to the tape-recorder, thank goodness. What I heard was also quite different from music lessons in grammar school with unforgotten hits such as "Der Jäger aus Kurpfalz".

Cousin M. had put together a "Best of" collection, I remember "A Hard Day's Night", "When I'm Sixty-four" or "Norwegian Wood", but in fact this statement is wrong; here the first chords should be played since they are what I remember.

At the same time, 1973 was the winter when I had begun to learn English. A line like "when I'm sixty-four", repeated numerous times, came to yield some sense even though I struggled extensively with the way the number was pronounced. The remainder was still unclear, or rather, I found the song magnificent and probably even better than if I had understood the text, dealing as it did with the remote problem of growing older.

But my special favorite was "Norwegian Wood". Unfortunately, even the title was difficult to understand. Only its last word was comprehensible: wood. Since we had learnt the word 'wood' at school long before we worked on the verb 'would', this wood of woods was as clear as daylight to me. So then: the song about wood by the Beatles, all my lost paths through the wood, the steps along the track of all my misunderstandings. For what in God's name did the beginning mean?

Now we've reached the point where my brain splits in two. When I hear "Norwegian Wood" today, there is a left and right part of me, a front or back, a brain-stem region and a thinking brain. In one part my brain is still hearing today—in radical conflict with myself and with all theories of remembering—what it heard then. And it does so exactly!

Quietschen Wood

I Wams had a göl
or schuld I say she Wams hat me?
She shovv me hör room,
Isnt it good, no quietschen wood?
She askd me to stäi and she tollmi to sit Anni her,
So I looked around anni no kissed there wasn't a chair.
I satin-in a-ruh
beiß in my time, drinking her wein
We talled into too
and then she said "It's time fa bed".
She tell me she wökt in the moning and started to love.

I tol her I didn't and crulllod to sleeping the bath.
Ann when I a home
I was alone, whispering phone
So I let a feia,
isn't it good, no quietschen wood?

The second, adult part of the brain melts away when the melody has scarcely started—joyfully the childhood head, my childish head, is superimposed upon it. What a state. I inhabit once more the brain of an eleven-year-old. The world IS opaque, spots of light dance upon it, within it. The ear guides me, whispers sense and sensuous details to me, leads me into a layer of the poem which, in a way that I can today see and 'read' is, even from a 'correct' semantic viewpoint, tangibly present—and this to an amazing degree. At a deeper level this layer co-resonates. What I was doing there, what my brain was doing, is called homophonic translation; this was an insight gained only later while translating for example from the Romanian which is a language I never learnt but whose vocabulary and grammar bears general traces of languages with which I am familiar. Here an opportunity sometimes opens up for translation of frequencies which leap from one word-star to the next, a translation derived from the lunar *coronae* of words, along uncertain paths and branchings. In this way the subsong, or the song that moves beneath the song, can find release in the sound of the vowels, in the rhythm. The melody that lies beneath the melody of the poem, without which it would not be a poem.

Norwegian Wood

I once had a girl,
or should I say she once had me.
She showed me her room,
isn't it good Norwegian wood?

She asked me to stay
and she told me to sit anywhere.
So I looked around
and I noticed there wasn't a chair.

I sat on the rug biding my time,
drinking her wine.
We talked until two and then she said
"it's time for bed"

She told me she worked
in the morning and started to laugh.
I told her I didn't
and crawled off to sleep in the bath.

And when I awoke I was alone,
this bird had flown.

So I lit a fire,
isn't it good Norwegian wood?

In German, the whole, with minimal stretching of the syllables and so to speak as an oblique attempt to repair the English rift that runs right through this way of listening to music, might sound as follows:

Norwegisches Holz

Einst hatt' ich ein Mädchen
oder sagte ich besser, einst hatte sie mich?
Sie zeigte mir ihr Zimmer
stolz, magst du norwegisches Holz?

Sie bat mich zu bleiben und sagte, sitz, wo du magst.
Also schaute ich mich um, aber fand keinen Platz.
Ich saß aufm Teppich,
trank ihren Wein, bestarrte ihr Bein.

Wir sprachen bis zwei,
dann meinte sie nett „Zeit fürs Bett".
Sie sagte dass sie am Morgen zur Arbeit musste, lachte.
Ich sagte „ich nicht", die Nacht wurd' solo im Bad verbracht.

Und als ich erwachte
war ich allein, ganz ohne Vöglein
So macht' ich ein Feuer,
und dachte stolz, norwegisches Holz.

But the song sounds 'right' in a translation that confirms just this rift between language and sound, and indeed extends and appreciates it. Understood as extension of the realm in which two languages meet and miss each other—both together, in one gesture, one movement. Extension of the realm in which the powers of a language make themselves felt, bind and unbind anew. 'Right' since it opens up comparison between the linguistic frames of the worlds involved and lets vistas emerge, vistas of the ear onto the way in which letters come flooding over and swamp what is called 'reality'.

Quietschen Holz

Hatt 'n Mädel am Wams,
sollt ich sagn, sie hasste mich ganz?
Schubste mich rum im Raum,
ist's nicht gut, wie's quietschen tut?

Sie bat mich zu stehln
und auf ihr, Anni, zu sitzen,

So schaute ich rund,
Anni trietzte, fort war der Stuhl.

Ich saß in Ruh, zerbiss meine Zeit
trank ihr Geheul.
Wir größten uns zu, bis sie sagte:
im Bett ist Ruh

Sie tollte den Wecker
am Morgen und liebte mich an.
Ich sagte: ich dich nicht
und kraulte schlafend das Bad.

Ann war daheim, ich war allein,
wispernd am Fon.
So ließ ich 'n Feuer,
ist's nicht gut, wie's quietschen tut? [1]

1. Draesner, Ulrike, "beatles-sub-songs", *in Subsong, Gedichte,* Munich, Luchterhand, 2014, p. 149-177, here p. 173.