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Translating Contemporary Minimalist Poetry: Limitations and Complexities

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Translating Contemporary Minimalist Poetry:
Limitations and Complexities

By
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An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Fine and Performing Arts Program
Honors College
East Tennessee State University



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4/28/2020

Date

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Date

Abstract

I have written and translated a collection of poetry into German, comparing the obvious constraints of minimalist poetry to longer and prosaic forms. In addition to pertinent literature, I utilize my educational background in German as well as a recent foreign language internship to explore the limitations and complexities of translating contemporary minimalist poetry. I focus on how, because of its inherent need for syntactic brevity, minimalist poetry can often be one of the most difficult types of poetry to translate.

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Background and Introduction

I started learning German as a foreign language formally in 2014, and it has since remained my primary focus in academics. Although I have not reached fluency in all four areas of foreign language proficiency (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), I am considered proficient at the C1 level in written German, according to the self-assessment grid provided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which states that “I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length” (CEFR: Learning, Teaching, Assessment 26).

Although I can adequately express many concepts in both everyday and creative usage of written German, translating my own poetry proved more difficult than initially anticipated, perhaps because poetry in general is widely regarded as one of the most difficult forms of literature to translate. Key elements of poetry such as form, style, and figures of speech all play significant roles in the translation of poetry, and often do not move fluidly across languages because of both linguistic and cultural factors.

I use the work of renowned minimalist poets Robert Creeley and Aram Saroyan to explore the different characteristics of literary minimalism, in addition to a recent foreign language internship that, in many ways, was the catalyst for this thesis. In February 2020, as I was translating poet and philosopher Dieter Leisegang’s poetry for the East Tennessee State University Reece Museum exhibition “In Begleitung” / “In Accompaniment,” I discovered that after translating pages of his prose poetry, I could not successfully translate one four-line poem. The crux of the poem was completely lost in translation, which taught me the importance of substance in the form of absence—an intrinsic quality of the minimalist poem.

“Room 625”

We spend most of our lives in rooms—in small or confined spaces. Initially I wanted all of the poems in this collection to center around exactly that—a tiny hotel room that my fiancé and I stayed at in Singapore. The hotel was minimal, and at only 190 square feet, it was our home for twenty-two days. It was cold and cramped, but still we grew attached to it, even though I was terribly ill for two weeks after arriving and could not do many of the things I had planned for months. I resented the Sprite and Meiji saltine crackers that watched me from the nightstand as my fiancé’s hands tried to soothe my sour stomach, and since I could not do much else, I started writing about it.

Being sick in a hotel room ten-thousand miles from home was a sobering experience for me, as were experiences I had in many of the other rooms that make up this collection. Because neither of us could remember the hotel room number upon returning home—except that it started with the number ‘6’—my original concept transformed into something much more over time. I eventually scrapped my original idea of centering the collection around one room and instead created an amalgamation of different rooms I have been in throughout my life—Room 625.

Many of the poems in this collection serve as fragments of thought within specific rooms, while others serve as descriptions of the rooms themselves. However, all of the poetry in “Room 625” explores the various rooms through the people and objects within them.

Literary Minimalism

Minimalism is often considered one of “the most ascetic of all aesthetic ideals,” meaning that it often involves strict form or rules to achieve desired results (Barry 158). The process of compressing any work of literature requires compromise regarding dictional and syntactic choices. Poetry in general, and especially minimalist poetry, relies heavily upon individual words

that carry heavy semantic weight. The nature of minimalism in general, whether literary or otherwise, is to say the most with the least.

Compression

Compression also plays a significant role in both poetry and translation. In fact, many poets concur that “Compression in some form is widely felt to be a fundamental aspect of poetry...” (Barry 158). Furthermore, when working with different languages, one must choose the mode of translation, and regardless of the chosen mode—literal, semantic, or even free translation—the lexicon and syntax of a given language can make the compression of poetry into the target language difficult, because different languages often require different numbers of words to convey the same meaning.

Minimalist Works

A group largely associated with literary minimalism was the Black Mountain Poets of Black Mountain College in North Carolina, of which poet Robert Creeley was a member (“Black Mountain Poets” 1). My poetic style is in several ways similar to Robert Creeley’s in particular in that it contains “...few long or rare words, no regular metres and almost no metaphors” as well as “parsimonious diction, strong enjambment, two to four-line stanzas and occasional rhyme” (Burt). Most of my poetry in “Room 625” is indeed free verse and uses said poetic elements rather irregularly.

Not only is my poetry similar to Creeley’s in terms of form and style, but it also explores many of the same themes, as it is “... marked through and through by the places he has known, and also, on occasion, by the placelessness of modern travel” (Friedlander 4). As evident in “Room 625,” most of my poetry in general is centered around specific places. What I find particularly interesting about Creeley’s poetry in relation to mine is his poetry collection *Hello:*

A Journal, February 29-May 3, 1976, which is the "... record of a trip across eight countries in nine weeks" (Friedlander 4), one of which was Singapore. Upon discovering that Creeley also wrote about "hotels in particular" (Friedlander 4), and especially about hotels in Singapore, I felt that my poetry not only connected to his on a technical level but on a very personal level as well.

Hello is relevant regarding my study of minimalist poetry because it is perhaps Creeley's most minimalistic collection in that "... Creeley attempts to break down the concept of a "single poem" by offering his readers sequential, associated fragments of poems with indeterminate beginnings and endings" ("Robert Creeley" 1). For example, in "Gifts," Creeley writes:

"Giving me things,
weights accumulate.

I wish
you wouldn't –

I wish we
could eat

somewhere,
drink." (Creeley 72)

Much like with "Gifts," what makes Creeley's "Hotel Lobby" minimalistic is its form rather than its contents. Creeley writes:

"Sun out window's
a blessing, air's
warmth and wetness.

The people fade,
melt, in the mind.

No scale, no congruence,
enough.

This must be some
time-stream, persons
all the same.

How call back,
or speak forward?

Keep the physical
literal.

Play on it,
jump up.

I don't
look like
anybody
here!

Funny how
People pick
their noses.” (Creeley 45)

As previously stated, minimalist poetry can and often does contain more than just a few words, lines, or stanzas. Much of what makes a poem ‘minimal’ depends largely on rhythm as well as punctuation and formatting.

Another poet known for his minimal poetry is Aram Saroyan. Although his single-word poem “light” is perhaps his most famous, there are countless others in varying line lengths that could be considered minimalistic as well. At 15 lines, Saroyan’s “At a Bus Stop” uses concise, enjambed lines in an interesting way. He writes:

“I turned to
an accumulation of women

the instant
a break

the light was so clear
the forms

that instant
exceeded names

outsped
the words

which
follow

follow slowly
like thunder

its lights” (Saroyan 21)

Like “At a Bus Stop,” many of my poems in “Room 625” read as brief narratives.

Although not officially categorized as one of Saroyan’s “short” or “electric”¹ poems, “At a Bus Stop” reads minimal through its form, rhythm, and tone. Saroyan’s use of enjambment turns the lines into glimpses, or mere fragments of thought, which could be considered a fundamental characteristic of minimalist poetry that my poem “my face, an earth”² seems to capture well. It reads:

the sun consumes
mercury venus earth

as fatigue coaxes my eyes
shut

the video ends

silence jolts my body
awake, and

in my phone’s screen I see
eyes squinting at squinting eyes

mine,

sober and anonymous
and staring back
into the empty

I see

my face, an earth

¹ What Saroyan also called “instantaneous” poetry

² pp. 29-30

whose ground people will kiss
when I'm almost gone,

on whose surface lived every
cry-laugh, chapped lip, yawn

everything, nothing,
the only

Though my poetry in “Room 625” is more generally more narrative than the aforementioned poems by Creeley and Saroyan, it captures what writer and Professor Peter Barry describes as “...a moment of perception in which some familiar element of life is seen by the poet in a new way” (Barry 159-160), which is characteristic of my poems “Artificial Succulent,”³ “101.3°,”⁴ and “Room 625”⁵ in particular.

Translation Process

As an intern at East Tennessee State University Reece Museum, I transcribed as well as translated several of author and philosopher Dieter Leisegang’s poems for the exhibition “In Begleitung” / “In Accompaniment.” Leisegang’s poetry and miniature illustrations were displayed alongside the work of Swiss artist Claire-Lise Holy, whose selected drawings largely explore the juxtaposition of freedom and constraint.

Many of Leisegang’s poems that I transcribed and/or translated for the exhibition could be considered minimalistic, though the poem “Unterschied”—a poem that Leisegang wrote about the Apartheid, a “policy that governed relations between South Africa’s white minority and nonwhite majority and sanctioned racial segregation and political and economic discrimination against nonwhites” (“Apartheid” 1) is perhaps the most minimal in terms of both style and form.

³ pp. 23-24

⁴ pp. 31-32

⁵ pp. 37-38

The poem itself consists of only four lines that proved especially difficult for me to translate.

Leisegang writes:

„Wir in Südafrika, beuten
Nur weiße aus

Die schwarzen müssen's
Erst lernen“

1972

My initial translation reads as follows:

“We in South Africa exploit
Only whites

The blacks must
Learn it first”

1972

The original poem is broken up into two separate stanzas, representative of the Apartheid itself. Though meaning and emotion certainly come through in my translation of “Unterschied,” it was agreed upon that the translation was not—and perhaps could not be—as potent as the original. Dr. Katherine Weiss, niece of Dieter Leisegang and Chair of East Tennessee State University’s Department of Literature and Language, agreed that “the irony and bitterness as to the Apartheid [Leisegang] hated is lost in the [translation] of the poem” (Weiss). Therefore, we omitted “Unterschied” from the exhibition entirely.

Initially I considered that the English translation was not as potent as the original because I am neither a native nor fluent speaker of German, in addition to the fact that I may have not had enough background knowledge or context to translate the poem. However, given Dr. Weiss’s recommendation, I learned again—and this time from someone else’s minimalist poetry—that

when given such limited diction and syntax within a poem, it is sometimes impossible to effectively translate it.

Because of the nature of both poetry and translation in general, many of the translations of the minimalist poems in “Room 625” lack in ‘potency’ as well. I noticed that the only prose poem in the collection—“Durian”⁶—was the easiest to translate, perhaps because I was not concerned with the form or ‘shape’ of the poem, therefore allowing myself more freedom in terms of both diction and syntax. It ultimately did not lose noticeable meaning or efficacy in its translated counterpart, and I faced a similar experience in translating both “A Picture of My Mother”⁷ and “Housekeeper,”⁸ as well, which are two of the longer poems in the collection. In my three most compressed poems, however—“Betelgeuse,”⁹ “101.3°,” and “Room 625”—the differences between the originals and translations were more apparent, whether in form, rhythm, or tone. This, however, might have more to do with the way we read prose versus poetry in general. Although poetry can be as well, prose is typically more tangential and informative, connected by few pauses or ‘line breaks.’

Significant grammatical differences between English and German had to be considered in translating my poems as well. For example, in German, all nouns are capitalized. This is because, “Given the great flexibility of word order in German, it was proposed that this convention might help readers specify the structure of the sentence” (Müsseler, et al. 1). Therefore, in translating prose into German, one must be aware of this to achieve grammatical accuracy.

Considering that many of the poems in “Room 625” are meant to be read as a single sentence, such as the title poem “Room 625,” deciding whether or not to capitalize the nouns in

⁶ pp. 25-26

⁷ pp. 21-22

⁸ pp. 35-36

⁹ pp. 27-28

the German translations proved difficult. I initially wanted every poem in the collection to be consistent in that if I capitalized the nouns in the German translation of one poem, I wanted every German translation to have capitalized nouns. However, I realized upon finishing the translations that it did not make sense for me to do this only for the sake of consistency, and therefore gave each poem its own rules. I chose the same approach regarding punctuation, as poetry is versatile in that it often works well with or without proper syntax. For example, much contemporary poetry—and especially minimalist poetry—discards capitalization and punctuation altogether, often because of stylistic preference, which is also true regarding contemporary German poetry. Former Arizona inaugural Poet Laureate Alberto Ríos states that “American poets often stopped capitalizing their lines beginning loosely with the second half of the 20th Century, a period generally associated with free verse” (Ríos 1). Much of the poetry in “Room 625” is indeed free verse and only contains punctuation when it contributes to the poems to a large degree. In my free verse poem “Endocarditis,”¹⁰ for example, I discarded capitalization altogether.

Another important factor that I had to consider in translating my poetry was that, unlike English, German has no present continuous tense form. For example, in English, one might say: “I am writing a poem,” whereas in German, one would instead say: “Ich schreibe ein Gedicht,” which means the same thing semantically but literally means: “I write a poem.” Of course, the literal translation does not sound correct in English, and perhaps rather awkward, but this is most likely because I am not fluent in German. Because a native or fluent German speaker reading the above sentence—“Ich schreibe ein Gedicht”—would likely extract the same meaning that those in English would from “I am writing a poem,” the literal translation does not take away meaning

¹⁰ pp. 29-30

from the original sentence. Therefore, the fact that I am not yet fluent in the target language created obvious limitations regarding the translation process overall.

The poem “Room 625” is one of the most compressed in the collection and was undoubtedly one of the most difficult to translate. This is largely because the poem, including its title, is meant to be read as a single sentence. The original poem reads as follows:

Room 625

still has
orange walls
wrapped around
a thin comforter
and fragments
of two people
laughing into
mugs of tea.

The main issue arose from the last two lines, which primarily involved differences in grammatical tense between English and German. As mentioned above, because German does not have a present continuous form, one would also use the present tense in translating these lines from English to German. For example, the phrase “laughing into mugs of tea” would normally be written in the present tense in German “in tassen tee lachen,” which would be semantically equivalent to the English present continuous. Because of this, I initially wanted to use the following translation:

Raum 625

hat immer noch
orangene wände,
die um eine dünne
decke gewickelt sind,
und fragmente
von zwei personen,
die in tassen tee lachen.

In this translation, the original form of the poem is noticeably altered and does not read or ‘flow’ as smoothly as it does in English, which has much to do with how relative clauses function in German. For example, instead of simply writing “of two people / laughing into mugs of tea” my translation of the last two lines literally means “of two people / **who** laugh into mugs of tea.”

At first I thought that the following translation did not work as well as the above translation, with “lachend” being a participial adjective that is not used as often as the German present tense when conveying the English present continuous. However, after discussing it with my thesis mentor Dr. Jan Jost-Fritz, we decided that using the “lachend” works better in the poem, not only because it can semantically mean “laughing” as well, but also because it reads better in terms of overall rhythm. Hence, my final translation reads as follows:

Raum 625

hat noch
orange wände
um eine dünne
decke gewickelt
und fragmente
von zwei leuten
in tassen tee
lachend.

Furthermore, I encountered issues regarding German’s lack of present continuous tense when translating the poem “101.3°” as well, as the last stanza shifts from past tense to past continuous. The poem reads:

Sprite and Meiji crackers
watched from the other side
of the floor

as you cuddled up
to my too-warm body,
catching all of me.

In English, it is clear that every action in this poem takes place in past tense, even the “catching.” In German, however, using the present tense “mich ganz fangen” (literally: “catch all of me”) seemed to read confusing in this poem, so I decided to use the past tense “und mich ganz erwischt hast” (and caught all of me) instead, as I wanted the fact that the “catching” took place in the past to be obvious.

Hence, my final translation of “101.3^o” reads:

Sprite und Meiji cracker haben
von der anderen Seite
des bodens gesehen

wie du dich an meinen zu-
warmen körper gekuschelt hast,
und mich ganz erwischt hast.

“Betelgeuse” was a difficult poem to translate as well because of the rhyme present in the original, which is ultimately lost in translation. The original reads as follows:

When gravity loses its grasp,
Orion’s shoulder will collapse,
his broken bones plummeting
through the Milky Way’s expanse.

The translation reads:

Wenn die schwerkraft den halt verliert,
wird Orions schulter kollabieren,
seine gebrochenen knochen stürzen
durch die weite der Milchstraße.

Because the rhyme as well as the rhythm of the original is lost, the translated poem does not read as eloquently as the original. In addition, given that I wanted to keep the original form of “Betelgeuse,” there was little I could do to make the translation sound as it does in English.

Lastly, another poem that proved difficult to translate was “Endocarditis.” In the original poem, the last two lines read as: “your fading in / your fading out,” in which “fading” functions as a gerund, or, a verb used as a noun. In my translation of “Endocarditis,” however, I instead used the lines: “du blendest ein / du blendest aus,” simply because I preferred the rhythm and tone over “dein Einblenden / dein Ausblenden,” which would have been the closest to the original, effectively turning the verbs “einblenden” and “ausblenden” into gerunds as well.

In being unable to translate the majority of my minimalist poetry verbatim, I noticed something interesting: that the translations seemed to turn the rooms into something else completely, in a sense, something that both literally and figuratively felt foreign to me. Although largely dependent on the original poems, the translations are, in many ways, entirely separate from them. I ultimately embraced the changes in my translations and not only found another voice within them, but different perspectives regarding my poetry overall.

Conclusion

Literary minimalism is often associated with simplicity as well as accessibility, and although those are common characteristics of minimalist poetry, much thought goes into the making of it behind the scenes, such as compression and strict limitations regarding both dictional and syntactic choices. What fascinates me most about minimalist poetry is that it seems to unravel in one’s mind *after* reading it rather than on the page itself.

Translating my poetry in “Room 625” had its own set of complexities, and most of my issues stemmed from syntactic differences between English and German that contributed to the changes in overall form or ‘flow’ of the original poems during translation. Of course, I had to take the fact that I am not yet fluent in the target language into consideration as well, which presented obvious limitations throughout the translation process.

The creation and translation of “Room 625” has been a rewarding experience in terms of both academic and personal growth as a poet. I have learned, and in terms of minimalist poetry especially, that the limitation or absence of words, punctuation, or formatting does not equal the absence of substance or ‘meaning,’ and that this very notion can make translating minimalist works all the more difficult.

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Poems and Translations

A Picture of My Mother

Indigo shines through
the diamond-shaped
backdoor window,
revealing

a white scrunchie
bunched up
around her wrist,

desperate for her
auburn hair
that two shoulder
blades caress

from underneath
a too-big, tie-dyed shirt
that covers the both of us.

Ein Bild meiner Mutter

Indigo scheint durch
das diamantenförmige
fenster der hintertür
enthüllt

ein weißen haargummi
um ihr handgelenk
geschlungen,

verzweifelt nach ihren
rotbraunen haaren,
die zwei schulterblätter
streicheln

darunter ein zu großes,
batik-hemd,
das uns beide bedeckt.

Artificial Succulent

Sour leaves stand
on plastic stems

and peek out of the
wide-rimmed teacup,

smothered by the stale
apartment air

that they want so badly
to breathe.

Künstlicher Sukkulent

Saure blätter stehen
auf plastikstielen

und gucken aus der
breit-umrandeten teetasse,

die von der abgestandenen
wohnungsluft erstickt,

sie wollen so unbedingt
atmen.

Durian

The humid air in Outram was becoming heavier
as we approached Chinatown, our bodies
stumbling into an alleyway lined with crates
of spiky fruit that looked like dryer balls,

and whose aroma steered our noses in the
opposite direction as our sweaty hands
clung to each other, our hot feet fast-walking
through a durian labyrinth, slowing down

every now and then so we could almost buy
99 cent trinkets, and then speeding back up
to make it across the street to the metro station
where a large sign read: No Durians. Fine \$500

Durian

Die feuchte luft in Outram wurde schwerer
als wir uns Chinatown näherten,
unsere körper stolperten in eine gasse,
die von kisten mit stacheligen früchten
gesäumt war, die an trocknerbälle erinnerten,

und deren aroma unsere nase in die
entgegengesetzte richtung lenkte als unsere
verschwitzten hände sich aneinander klammerten,
liefen unsere heißen füße schnell durch ein
durian babyrinth und wurden von zeit zu zeit

langsamer, sodass wir fast schmuckstücke für je 99
cent kaufen konnten, und dann beschleunigen, um
über die straße zum metro station zu gelangen, wo
ein großes schild stand: Keine Durians. Strafe \$500

Betelgeuse

When gravity loses its grasp,
Orion's shoulder will collapse,
his broken bones plummeting
through the Milky Way's expanse.

Betelgeuse

Wenn die schwerkraft den halt verliert,
wird Orions schulter kollabieren,
seine gebrochenen knochen stürzen
durch die weite der Milchstraße.

Endocarditis

i walk into the beige box
filled with you

the IV drips
salt into your veins

beeping monitors wrap around
your body like vines

dyed black hair hugs a jaundiced
face that I still recognize

your tattoo of a cross peeks
from the puke-green gown,

watching me
watch

your fading in,
your fading out

Endokarditis

ich gehe in die beige kiste,
die gefüllt ist mit dir

die infusion tropft
salz in deine venen

piepende monitore wickeln dich wie
reben um deinen körper

gefärbtes schwarzes haar umarmt ein
gelbsuchtiges gesicht, das ich immer noch erkenne

deine tattoo eines kreuzes späht
aus dem kotzengrünen krankenhauskleid

beobachtet mich
beobachte

du blendest ein,
du blendest aus

101.3°

Sprite and Meiji crackers
watched from the other side
of the floor

as you cuddled up
to my too-warm body,
catching all of me.

101.3°

Sprite und Meiji cracker haben
von der anderen seite
des bodens gesehen

wie du dich an meinen zu-
warmen körper gekuschelt hast,
und mich ganz erwischt hast.

my face, an earth

the sun consumes
mercury venus earth

as fatigue coaxes my eyes
shut

the video ends

silence jolts my body
awake, and

in my phone's screen I see
eyes squinting at squinting eyes

mine,

sober and anonymous
and staring back
into the empty

I see

my face, an earth

whose ground people will kiss
when I'm almost gone,

on whose surface lived every
cry-laugh, chapped lip, yawn

everything, nothing,
the only

mein gesicht, eine erde

die sonne verbraucht
merkur venus erde

während müdigkeit meine augen
zum schweigen bringt

das video endet

die stille rüttelt meinen körper
wach und

auf dem bildschirm meines handy sehe ich
augen schielen an schielend augen

meine,

nüchtern und anonym
und starren zurück ins leere

ich sehe

mein gesicht, eine erde

deren oberfläche menschen küssen
werden wenn ich fast weg bin,

auf deren oberfläche lebte jedes
weinen-lachen, rissige lippe, gähnen

alles, nichts,
das einzige

Housekeeper

Her gentle hands
pull parts of me
off the bed
as blood runs
off the linen sheets

into my cheeks,
red at the contrast
of patience and shame
in the room,

at her kind eyes
not judging my
clumsy,
out of control body
that's transparent against the white.

She lays the tainted sheets
into the cart
as my see-sawing feet
turn to thank her.

"Konnichiwa,"
she smiles,
handing me tea
that I did not ask for
but want.

Haushälterin

Ihre sanften hände ziehen teile von mir
vom brett, während blut von den
leinenblätter in meine wangen,
fließt, rot auf dem kontrast von
geduld und scham im raum,

bei ihren freundlichen augen,
meinen ungeschickten,
außer kontrolle geratenen körper
nicht beurteilend der transparent ist
gegen das weiß.

Sie legt die verdorbenen laken
in den wagen, als sich meine
schaukelnden füße drehen,
um sich bei ihr zu bedanken.

„Konnichiwa“ lächelt sie,
und gibt mir tee, den ich
nicht verlangt habe
aber will.

Room 625

still has
orange walls
wrapped around
a thin comforter
and fragments
of two people
laughing into
mugs of tea.

Raum 625

hat noch
orange wände
um eine dünne
decke gewickelt
und fragmente
von zwei leuten
in tassen tee
lachend.