Chancelation and Transincidence: How to Deal with Coincidentals in Translating *Finnegans Wake*

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Dylan Thomas once remarked that the magic in a poem is always accidental. Thomas himself, however, in his poetical works again and again found ways to increase the probability of these accidents to happen, and the same is a vital part of the task of the *Finnegans Wake* translator. Coincidence is not always something that just happens or does not happen; coincidence rather is something that can be arranged (or even forced) to happen.

Joyce himself obviously found lots of ways to arrange chance and coincidence in the process of composing *Finnegans Wake*, but he was luckier than the translator in that he as an original author could take advantage of preexististing cases of coincidence, whereas the translator—obliged to somehow imitate Joyce's original cases of coincidence in the respective target language, where the word material usually does not lend itself to exactly the same coincidental overlappings of sounds and spellings—has to continually find means to increase the probability of coincidences to happen. The most important means to do so is the increasement of plurability: the translator has to increase the totality of chances, i.e. the number of elements from which to select those that show the best possible approximation to the cases of coincidence that occur in Joyce's text.

An example of such an increasement of chances is the way I handled Joyce's neologism "cropse" (*FW* 55.08), a blending of "crop" and "corpse." The German translation of "crop" is *Feldfrucht*, the German translation of "corpse" is *Leiche*—if we had to restrict ourselves to this material, however, there would be no chance at all for the original sound coincidence to happen again in the target language. We have to multiply our chances by preparing lists of alternative German renderings of "crop" and "corpse": in addition to *Feldfrucht* possible equivalents for the former could be *Ernte* (harvest), specifications like *Kartoffeln* (potatoes), *Getreide*, *Korn* (grains) or plural forms of these like *Früchte* or *Körner*; the latter could be rendered not only as *Leiche* but also as *Leichnam*, *Kadaver*, *sterbliche Überreste* or (speaking of bodies in general, either dead or alive) *Leib* or *Körper*. In order to make the coincidence we are looking for more easily recognizable, let's arrange these alternatives of translational raw material in column form:

English:	crop	+	corpse
German:	Feldfrucht		Leiche
	Ernte		Leichnam
	Kartoffel(n)		Kadaver
	Getreide		sterbliche Überreste
	Frucht, Früchte		Leib
	Korn, **Körner**		**Körper**

At this point the coincidence of word material we are looking for is finally achieved: *Körner* and *Körper* can easily be melted into "Körnper."[1]

The increasement of the plurality of possibilities, i.e. of the variety of raw materials, is achieved by processes of transforming, transposing, transferring, etc. the first and most obvious guesses into a catalogue of alternative elements from which to choose. Almost every act designated by a "trans"-prefixed verb can help in this process. Translation of third languages, for example, proved helpful when I had to deal with "Mahazar ag Dod" (*FW* 389.32), a Joycean blending of "Mother of God" and the Armenian words for "mortal" and "dirty": by using the Italian instead of the Armenian language, I found the solution "Mortal Gottas" (*FWD* 226)[2] which blends the German *Mutter Gottes* with the Italian words for "mortal" and "the gout" (which, of course, is not dirty but shares with dirt connotations of decay). The cases of coincidence mentioned thus far are all cases of voluntary coincidence. When translating passages from the Wake, however, I inevitably also fall victim to involuntary coincidences. Ulrich Blumenbach in his M. A. thesis finds high praise for my rendering of "retempter" (*FW* 154.6) as "Redammptor" (*FWD* 126) on the grounds that this includes an allusion to the Dammtor railway station in Hamburg which, as Blumenbach has found out, was opened in 1866 on June, 16, of all dates[3]—a nice coincidence that I definitely did not dream of when working on my translation.

Translations of passages from *Finnegans Wake* can easily be used for a kind of test case: to what extent can elements of Joyce's original text that the translator did not notice nevertheless be traced in his target language version? Not everything, of course, survives the translation process, but I have already discovered in my German versions patterns and structures of Joyce's text I am sure I did not notice until after my translation was finished. For one example, let's have a look at the very first page of the *Wake*:

> riverrun, past Even and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation **back** to Howth Castle and Environs.
>   Sir Tristram, violer d'amores, fr'over the short sea, had p**ass**encore rearrived from North **Arm**orica on this side the scraggy isthmus of Europe Minor to wielderfight his **penis**olate war: nor had topsawyer's rocks by the stream Oconee exaggerated themselse to Laurens County's gorgios while they went doublin their mumper all the time: nor avoice from afire bellowsed mishe mishe to tauftauf thuartpeatrick: not yet, though venissoon after, had a kidscad **butt**ented a bland old isaac: not yet, though all's fair in vanessy, were sosie sesthers wroth with twone nat**hand**joe. Rot a peck of pa's malt had Jhem or Shen brewed by arclight and rory end to the reggin**brow** was to be seen ringsome on the aqua**face**. (*FW* 3.1-14; bold-face type added)

I did not realize until recently that at least eight words designating parts of the body (printed in bold-face type for convenience sake in the quotation above) are more or less hidden in these lines. When translating this passage more than ten years ago, I definitely did not notice this—but still, seven German words designating parts of the body found their way into my translation:

> Flußgefließe, schleunigst Ev' und Adam passiert, vom Strandgestreun zum Buchtgebeug, führt uns im com**mund**iösen Wickelwirken des Rezirkulierens zurück zur Burg von Howth con Entourage.
>   Sir Tristram, Widerholer d'amoore, von jenseits der Kurzsee, war passimkorps aus Nord**arm**orika rückgelangt an diese Seite den rauhen Isthmus von Kleineuropa um seinen **penis**olieren Krieg zu fehderführen: noch hatten

Topfsawyers Felsen am Oconeelauf einanders aufgeworfen zu Laurensbezirks**geäu**giern während sie die ganze Zeit ihre Unzoll verdopplinten: noch neStimmede aus deFeuerne michsiemaschsie blaßgebalgt um Dubistpaetrick taufzutaufen: noch nicht, obwohl hirschnell danach, hatte ein Knirpskniff einen dünkelnobelalten Isaak butterseicht bedickerendet: noch nicht, obwohl man's ja mag vannerstdie Eiteln kleiden, zürnten sosie Schwesthern zweinem Nathaundjoe. Nücht einen Viertelscheffel von Pas Malz hatte Jhem oder Shen bis zum Boginnlicht ge**brau**t und rötaurig Ende zum Gegen**brauen** war allerherund zu sehen auf der Aqua**fratz**. (*FWD* 44; bold-face type added)

Some items (like the "face" in "aquaface," the "brow" in "regginbrow" and the "penis" in "penisolate"), of course, translate themselves when the translator handles the surface value of the source language text with care, but in my German rendering I find at least two words for parts of the body (a mouth in "com**mund**iösen" and a manneristic word for eyes in "Laurensbezirks**geäu**giern") the appearance of which is completely unplanned: these are instances of sheer coincidence.

Maybe only a texture like *Finnegans Wake* allows this to happen to such an extent, the reason being that not only the translator has to increase the plurality of possibilities for coincidences to happen but that Joyce himself during the composition of *Finnegans Wake* has already increased the totality of (possible) meanings, the probability that things "fit" or can be made to "fit" and up to a certain degree translate themselves whithout even being noticed by the translator. All the more unanswerable remains the question as to where we can draw the line between author's intentions, voluntary coincidences that the author arranged or at least approved of and involuntary coincidences that happen unnoticed.[4]

Notes

1. Friedhelm Rathjen, unpublished translation of *FW* 55, used for Anthony Burgess, *Joyce für Jedermann: Eine Einführung in das Werk von James Joyce für den einfachen Leser*, trans. Friedhelm Rathjen (Frankfurt: Frankfurter Verlagsanstalt, 1994).

2. *FWD* = translations from James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake Deutsch: Gesammelte Annäherungen*, ed. Klaus Reichert and Fritz Senn (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989).

3. See Ulrich Blumenbach, *Üb-ersetzungen aus dem Anglo-wakischen ins Germano-wakische: Untersuchungen zum Problem der Übersetzbarkeit von James Joyces* Finnegans Wake, M. A. thesis (Free University of Berlin, 1990) 49.

4. This contribution is based on a non-paper presentation given during the Zurich James Joyce Foundation's summer workshop, "Chance, Coincidence ... Meaning," on 31 July 1997. I thank Fritz Senn for urging me to participate in the workshop.