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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2qz052wh>

### Journal

TRANSIT, 14(2)

### Author

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### Publication Date

2024

### DOI

10.5070/T714264654

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# “Liebe zum Wort ist immer Unbescheidenheit”

## Translating Irmgard Keun’s Exile Poetry *Songs of the Refugees*

ANNA LYNN DOLMAN

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### Introduction

¶<sub>1</sub> A “forgotten writer” for most of her life, Irmgard Keun (1905-1982) is nowadays considered a feminist literary icon. Her independent, unconventional female protagonists who cheekily challenge the traditional gender roles of their time serve as role models for all women refusing to be beaten down by existential anxiety and conform to societal norms—an attitude very much *en vogue* with the unprecedented surge of fluidity in gender norms. However, Keun was (and is) primarily known for her bestselling Weimar novel *Das kunstseidene Mädchen/The Artificial Silk Girl* (1932), having her later works not only blacklisted by the Nazis, but excluded from the canon altogether. After having spent the years from 1936-1940 in exile in Belgium and the Netherlands, a feigned obituary in the British *Daily Telegraph* declared she had committed suicide in Amsterdam on August 16, 1940, so that she was generally believed to be dead while she clandestinely lived through the war years in Cologne—but did indeed remain figuratively dead to the literary industry. It was not until the late 1970s that her works experienced a renaissance in the wake of the women’s movement and the subsequent feminist turn in literary studies, with her exile works coming to the fore at last. And yet, more often than not, Keun continues to be exclusively categorized as a novelist of the Weimar period, neglecting and marginalizing her later works.

¶<sub>2</sub> When I first encountered Keun in a seminar on

exile literature, I was immediately fascinated by the intertwining of her antifascist-feminist poetics, a sarcastic, deliberately naïve narration, and the bitter reality of holding on to the scraps of her outlawed human existence as a Nazi critic in the Third Reich. However, Keun’s later works are so little-known that even most scholars of German exile literature are not aware of her poetry, which had therefore never been translated. To be fair: Keun did not consider herself a skilled poet and was reluctant to publish her poetry, which she wrote rather unsystematically and would usually embed in her. In 1934, she wrote to her friend Arnold Strauss: “Ich kann nur Romane und hab’ auch nur daran Freude.”<sup>1</sup> And as if that judgment was not enough to deter anyone from engaging with her poetry let alone translate it, Keun was profoundly pessimistic of the quality of translated literature: “Translations are just like women,” she quoted the *bonmot* playing with the metaphor of the *belles infidèles* often attributed to George Bernard Shaw—“if they are faithful, they are not beautiful, and if they are beautiful, they are not faithful.”<sup>2</sup> Be that as it may, I embarked on this

1— Keun, Irmgard. “Kommentar.” In Irmgard Keun. *Das Werk. Band 2: Texte aus NS-Deutschland. Texte aus dem Exil 1933—1940*, edited by Heinrich Detering/Beate Kennedy, Göttingen: Wallstein 2017, p. 826.

2— Keun, Irmgard. *Bilder und Gedichte aus der Emigration*. Köln 1947, p. 26.

project in an attempt to give an English voice to a forgotten cycle of poems written in the Netherlands in 1939/40 and squeezed onto the very last pages of her collected works (2017), dangerously easy to overlook as it has happened all too often. This project is part of a larger project attempting to recontextualize Keun as a prolific exile writer rather than remaining relegated to the label of Weimar women’s writing and “little-girl irony.”<sup>3</sup> Every translator of poetry—which is sometimes deemed utterly translation-resistant or even “untranslatable”—has to embrace the precarious balancing act on the border between form and content, possibly more so than the translator of prose. Therefore, the translation of exile poetry in particular has to be doubly concerned with border-crossing and in-betweenness both on an intra- and extraliterary level—be it between languages and cultures, the homeland and the foreign, or between the sound of words and their semantics.

### I. “Überseetzungen”: Translation as Border-Crossing

¶<sup>3</sup> The collection *Lieder der Flüchtlinge*—the only poetry ever published by Keun in her first post-war publication entitled *Bilder und Gedichte aus der Emigration* (1947)—includes thirteen poems ranging from more general contemplations of the liminal status of an abject artist in transit in a strange country to deeply personal poems such as the one mourning her close friend, lover, and well-known writer-colleague Joseph Roth. The taste of loss dominates the lines and serves as the focal point for a plethora of the tropes of exile literature as they have been postulated time and again, arguably most famously by Hannah Ar-

3— Reacting to her breakthrough novel *Gilgi, eine von uns*—and in praise of her “best little-girl irony”—Kurt Tucholsky remarked: “A woman writing with humor, imagine that!” Cited after Pfister: *Eine Lange Nacht über Irmgard Keun*.

endt: “We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings.”<sup>4</sup> This loss of language was more than just an inconvenient side effect of exile for writers whose livelihood depended on just that. Interestingly, however, it seems like Keun’s loss of language is not so much a loss as it is an intralinguistic shift *within* the German language: Granted, she was in the Netherlands, where German literature was still published, albeit cautiously, and Keun’s exile novels were indeed published in Amsterdam. But after having written three decidedly sarcastic exile novels, it seems like Keun turns to poetry to fashion a new language of her own—the tone she strikes in her poems is unusually melancholic, almost anachronistic for the otherwise rather upbeat ironic writer, and intermingled with a surprising number of poetic clichés: heartache, simple rhymes, musings on love, loss, and the everyday struggles and general sense(lessness) of life. In poetry, it seems, Keun drops the incessant masquerade that she otherwise embraced fiercely both in her fiction and her own biography. Her novel *Nach Mitternacht/After Midnight* (1936) provides a brilliant example of her witty, sometimes crude humor in prose. The protagonist Sanna visits an exhibition on venereal diseases as a consequence of racial mixing organized by the Nazis. Her Nazi-aligned Aunt Adelheid is approached by a man whose “lower lip hung down thick and red like a mattress that had been put in the window to air out” who comments on the shocking effects of the exhibition. Adelheid’s affirmative response, “It’s terrible, you have to see it, it’s a

4— Arendt, Hannah. “We Refugees.” *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*, edited by Marc Robinson. Boston/London: Faber & Faber 1994, 110—119, p. 110.

warning,” is met with a snide mental remark by Sanna: “Why did Aunt Adelheid still need a warning? She was over fifty and had no opportunity left to catch a venereal disease. At most, from eating unwashed fruit from the carts on the street.”<sup>5</sup> Unlike her tongue-in-cheek novels, Keun’s poetry is thoroughly crafted, always following a strict rhyme scheme, which is just as beautiful to read as it is challenging for a translator. Compare the nostalgic tone she strikes in the very first poem of her cycle, *Die fremde Stadt/The Strange City*: “Strange city, / It is your strangeness I adore. / You could satisfy my longing for all things I mourn, / For everything I left behind. / Let me fulfill what I once vowed in my own mind, / A child back then. / Just once, let me be as a child again, / Not yet subjected to the treading of humanity, / Strange city.” (my translation)

¶4 Since Keun is known for her unapologetic portrayal of women who refuse to be silenced, it would be a strike of cosmic irony for the German-speaking writer who had to flee Germany where her works were blacklisted and burned because of her supposedly “anti-German” attitude to have the reception of her poetry be restricted to the German-speaking world and remain mute in other languages! Therefore, my project had to take the act of border-crossing very literally as dictated by the Latin etymology of translation, meaning *to carry across*. Metaphorically, this evokes the idea of crossing physical, linguistic, and cultural borders, characterizing translation as a bridging activity that involves negotiation, adaptation, and transformation—in various ways, translation is strikingly similar to life in exile. Yoko Tawada’s famous pun on *Überseetzungen*, which is the title of her genre-blending book grappling with the complexities of translation, belonging, and transcultural encounters, captures this etymological con-

5— Keun, Irmgard. *Nach Mitternacht*. Stuttgart 2003, p. 47, my translation.

nection beautifully. By fusing “Übersee-” (*overseas*) and “Zungen” (*tongues*, denoting the physical organ as well as languages), she links translation to “crossing seas” and “tongues” and renders it a fluid, dynamic process which involves much more than just linguistic ‘fidelity’ and the mechanical substitution of words. Instead, translation is conceptualized as a journey that extends beyond borders, as indicated by the subtle difference in the German homographs “übersetzen” (*to ferry across, to cross over*) or “übersetzen” (*to translate*). One border that cannot be crossed definitively in one direction or the other in translating Keun’s poetry, however, is that between meaning and form.

## II. “Liebe zum Wort ist immer Unbescheidenheit”: Translating Poetry

¶5 Poetry is an implicit comment on the idiosyncratic intricacies of a language, and translating it is inevitably an assimilation, a feeble attempt at capturing the images conjured up, at catching the sounds it evokes, and at least touching on the emotional strings it pulls. Roman Jakobson puts it drastically: “[P]oetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible.”<sup>6</sup> Others are adamant in claiming that poetry can only be translated by a poet—ideally one who can intimately relate to the writer’s lived experience, as the debate surrounding the translation of Amanda Gorman’s *The Hill We Climb* has demonstrated. Undoubtedly, poetry captures a sentiment, a moment, a picture, and it is essential that this content come across. Then again: What is poetry—which is derived from an oral tradition of singing and memorization techniques—if not language at its most superbly musical? If a poet assembled rhymes in a particular order, who am I to rearrange let alone discard them? In his lecture

6— Jakobson, Roman. “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation.” In *The Translation Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, 126—131. 2nd ed. New York/London: Routledge 2012, p. 131.

*Poetry and Abstract Thought*, Paul Valéry defined prose as walking, whereas poetry is described as a dance—and what is a dance without accompanying music?<sup>7</sup> According to Valéry, the meaning and form of a poem are so neatly intertwined that one cannot be conceptualized without the other: “You will find that at each line the meaning produced within you, far from destroying the musical form communicated to you, recalls it.”<sup>8</sup> Translating poetry is a notoriously delicate balancing act on the border between form and content—either faithful or beautiful, but never both? In the long-standing sense-for-sense vs. word-for-word debate in translation studies and the tension between fidelity to the source text’s form and its communicative effectiveness in the target language, there is no single right answer, and the search for one can be utterly frustrating. In the Keun translations, trying to make “Hände/Wände” (*hands/walls*), “reisen/Kreisen” (*travel/circles*) or “Zu mir? / Zu dir?” (*To me? / To you?*) rhyme in English requires a fair amount of moving things around creatively, back and forth, forth and back, in *Kreisen*: Creative transposition, if you will. Needless to say, it takes significant stamina to not get lost in translation and to escape the fate creeping up on the speaker of Keun’s poem *Wahnsinn* (*Insanity/Madness*), which features a highly language-specific pun: “Langsam kommt der Wahnsinn angekrochen, / Und er sagt, er sei nicht Wahn, nur Sinn.” Literally, that translates to: “Slowly, madness comes creeping in, / And it claims to be not mania but sense.” Note how the German noun *Wahnsinn* is a somewhat paradoxical compound containing the nouns *der Wahn*, meaning *madness* or *mania*, and

*der Sinn*, meaning *sense* or *reason*. The best I could do was substitute this pun for another one playing with the prefix *in-* of *insanity* and the phrasal verb *to creep in*: “Slowly comes creeping *insanity*, / Claiming to be sane as it creeps in.”

¶6 Poems don’t just demand to be understood, they desire to be imagined, visualized, and felt. That is the noblest task of a poem, and it is the task of the translator to *carry that across* into another language. While Benjamin claims that a translation is first and foremost an artistic achievement which can be divorced from its pragmatic function, I cannot help but conceive of a poem and its translation as both: A communicative act *and* a work of art, a means to an end and that very end in and of itself.<sup>9</sup> However, striking a balance between content and form was far from easy in the project at hand: The laconic simplicity and the seemingly easy-going rhymes were incredibly difficult to render, and sometimes I had to admit defeat. The translator’s quest for the perfect word is futile, because the perfect word never exists. Rather, one has to settle for coming at least closer to what one means and finding *a*—as opposed to *the*—contextually and lexically appropriate word,<sup>10</sup> while mediating the context re-

9— Benjamin, Walter. “The Task of the Translator.” *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 69—82. Schocken Books, 1968.

10— This is a quest for “near-equivalents.” Real equivalents are often an illusion, as has been amply demonstrated: “Of course, the content of a message can never be completely abstracted from the form, and form is nothing apart from content; but in some messages the content is of primary consideration, and in others the form must be given a higher priority. [...] In poetry there is obviously a greater focus of attention upon formal elements than one normally finds in prose. Not that content is necessarily sacrificed in translation of a poem, but the content is necessarily constricted into certain formal molds. Only rarely can one reproduce both content and form in a translation, and hence in general the form is usually sacrificed for the sake of the content. On the other hand, a lyric poem translated as prose is not an adequate equiv-

7— Valéry, Paul. “Poetry and Abstract Thought.” *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry, Volume 7: The Art of Poetry*. Edited by Jackson Mathews, translated by Denise Folliot, Princeton University Press, 1958, 53-64.  
8— <https://greg-gerke.medium.com/on-a-passage-of-paul-valérys-poetry-and-abstract-thought-09366259ff7b>.



verberating in a simple yet loaded word like “heimatlos” which encapsulates so much more than “homeless.”<sup>11</sup> This is a bold act which requires the translator to take a poetic license here and there, which Keun seems to condone: “Liebe zum Wort ist immer Unbescheidenheit” (“Immodest is the love of words invariably,” my translation) reads a line in the plainly titled poem *Das Wort* (*The Word*). For one such license I took, compare the first stanza of the poem “Abendstimmung in Scheveningen,” which features the simple rhymes “Hände/Wände,” “wacht/Nacht”: “Das Salz des Abends sinkt mir in die Hände, / Es riecht nach Meer, und jedes Sandkorn wacht, / Rot und verwildert schenkt die Sonne sich der Nacht, / Und baut, noch untergehend, künftger Tage Wände.” Arguably, the rhymes set the harmonious tone and have to be maintained in order to do justice to this eponymous “evening atmosphere”—except that those words don’t rhyme in English, so I replaced a noun with a verb and a verb with an adjective: “The salt of evening sinks into my hands, / It smells like sea, every grain of sand wakens wide, / Red and ragged, the sun bestows itself to night, / And, setting still, builds walls on which the future stands.”

### III. “The Human Touch”—A Machine’s Shortcomings

¶7 A translation project in 2024 cannot do without a brief comment on the astonishing yet somewhat

alent of the original. Though it may reproduce the conceptual content, it falls far short of reproducing the emotional intensity and flavor.” See Nida, Eugene. “Principles of Correspondence.” *The Translation Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, 2nd ed. New York/London: Routledge 2012, 141–155, p. 142.  
11— While the German noun “Heimat” can be translated into English as “home,” “homeland,” or “place of origin,” it also bears connotations of an emotional sense of belonging, familiarity, and cultural identity associated with one’s home or homeland, which the English ‘equivalents’ do not quite capture.

terrifying advancement of machine translation tools which have long surpassed the basic state of Google Translate. Hannes Bajohr, among numerous other media theorists, mentions a widespread ‘Promethean uneasiness’ that fears the replacement of man by machine.<sup>12</sup> If AI is perceived as an attack on humanity, it is a downright threat to human translators: These days, the dire forecast for our craft seems to be that creative jobs might soon become obsolete. Since attack is the best defense, I decided to consult our artificial competitor by trying to use ChatGPT for the translation of Keun’s poetry. While its speed and lexical accuracy are admittedly impressive, its poetic skills have significant room for improvement: It moves lines around, misses subtle nuances and clever puns, and omits almost all the rhymes which I explicitly instructed it to maintain. This is one of the poems I ran through the machine:

#### Liebe

Oft war ich böse, manchmal war ich gut  
Zu dir?  
Zu mir?  
Ich kann uns nicht mehr auseinander halten.  
Des hellsten Sterns lebendige Gewalten  
Verzaubern mich.  
In deinen Adern fließt mein Blut  
Von dir  
Zu mir—  
Ich liebe dich.

Ich war sehr krank.  
Durch meine Adern floss der Tod  
So schwer und tief,  
Dass ich im Schlaf ertrank.

Als ich erwachend nur nach Güte rief,

12— Cf. Bajohr, Hannes. “On Artificial and Post-artificial Texts: Machine Learning and the Reader’s Expectations of Literary and Non-literary Writing.” *Poetics Today* (2024) 45 (2), 331–361.

Ward mir ein Morgen ohne Morgenrot,  
So grau und bang.

- ¶8 When I asked ChatGPT to “Translate this poem from German into English while maintaining the rhyme scheme!” it created a poem which does rhyme (albeit in different lines than the original) but seems awkward, and adds rather archaic elements, such as “my blood doth flow”:

### Love

At times I was bad, sometimes I was good,  
To you?  
To me?  
I can't seem to tell, though I wish I could.  
The forces of the brightest star that stood  
Entrance me.  
In your veins, my blood doth flow,  
From you  
To me—  
Love grows.

I was so sick, and in my veins,  
Death flowed so deep it nearly maimed  
And in my sleep,  
I drowned in pains.

But as I woke and called for grace,  
No morning sun did show its face,  
Instead, a gray and fearful space.

- ¶9 Much to my dismay, the intricate rhyme scheme of the original is simplified drastically, whereas both the content and the rhythm are overcomplicated. Finally, compare the version I landed on, in which I aimed to maintain both the tone and the rhyme scheme (apart from the personal pronouns “dir” and “mir,” which I couldn't just change to something else in good conscience—this is where the content should take priority over the form):

### Love

Often I was mean, sometimes I was good  
To you?  
To me?  
I can no longer tell us apart.  
The living forces of the brightest star  
Enchant me so.  
Flowing in your veins, my blood,  
From you  
To me —  
I love you.

I was very ill.  
Death was flowing through my veins,  
So heavy and deep,  
That I drowned, sleeping still.

Calling for kindness while shedding sleep,  
A dawnless morning put me in its chains,  
So gray and chill.

- ¶10 It seems that there are a lot of shortcomings in the machine translation of poetry, and I don't think the emotional component which is an indispensable ‘ingredient’ of poetry, be it in its original or as a translation, can be replicated let alone replaced that easily.<sup>13</sup> In that vein, Tawada rightly asserts that technical advances do not accelerate the process of translating a poem: “Wie lange braucht ein Gedicht, bis es das Ufer einer anderen Sprache erreicht? Die Geschwindigkeit bei einer literarischen Übersetzung ist trotz der technischen Entwicklung gleich geblieben.”<sup>14</sup> In fact—and on a more personal note—slowing down the speed of a translation can certainly have its perks. Translating from my first language German into my second language English which

13— Wordsworth once famously defined poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.” Cited after <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth>.

14— Tawada, Yoko: *Überseetzungen. Konkursbuch* Verlag Claudia Gehrke. 6th ed. Tübingen 2021, p. 42.

I did not truly acquire until middle school was a particular challenge—and one which I embraced. While idiomatic expressions that come to me with a naturally internalized ease in German do the same thing in English most of the time, I find myself to be chronically distrustful of them and double-, triple- and quadruple-check everything simply because I do not have the “authorization” of the native speaker, *no questions asked*. I do have to ask questions, over and over again, I do have to consult online dictionaries and real-life native speakers, and I find this to be the most rewarding takeaway of my self-assigned task as a translator: Not only does it lead me down paths a native speaker may not necessarily have taken, but it also enables me to refine my own language skills as the project takes shape before my eyes. There is a crucial difference between translating and transposing *creatively*, after all, which the translation of poetry should strive to reconcile, and ChatGPT is only convincingly adept at the former (and much more so in purely practical rather than aesthetically pleasing texts)—but at least it has the self-awareness to admit to its shortcomings in a comment that came with the translation: “*It can be challenging for a machine to translate poetry because poetry is not just about translating words or phrases. [...] [P]oetry can be very subjective [...]. Machine translation, on the other hand, tends to be more objective and may not always capture the intended emotional or artistic impact of the original poem. Overall, while machine translation technology has advanced significantly in recent years, translating poetry remains a difficult task that often requires a human touch.*” On that note, I sincerely hope my “human touch” did justice to the spirit of the *Songs of the Refugees*—and I hope it has become abundantly clear that I was by no means trying to reinvent the wheel but merely to make it spin in similar *Kreisen* as Keun’s exile poetry.