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Some German Ripples of Holden Caulfield's 'Goddam  
Autobiography': On Translating and Adapting J.D. Salinger's  
*The Catcher in the Rye*

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*Das ist echt Leute! Ich kann euch nur raten, ihn zu lesen, wenn ihr ihn irgendwo aufreißen könnt. Reißt euch das Ding unter den Nagel, wenn ihr es bei irgendwem stehen seht, und gebt es nicht wieder her! ... Laßt euch nicht etwa vom Titel täuschen. Ich gebe zu, er popt nicht besonders, vielleicht ist er schlecht übersetzt, aber egal.*<sup>1</sup>

These enthusiastic though cautionary words to the effect that the German translation of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* may be a 'bad' one are spoken by Edgar Wibeau, the protagonist of Ulrich Plenzdorf's *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* The publication of the East German Plenzdorf's book, essentially a *Werther*-paraphrase in Salinger-style, caused a literary sensation in West Germany in 1973, where its stage version became the most frequently performed play shortly thereafter. The book, which was referred to as 'roter Werther in Blue Jeans' and as 'der Fänger im DDR-Roggen',<sup>2</sup> led to critical pronouncements ranging from its being hailed as a new long-overdue beginning in the literature of the German Democratic Republic to its being placed in the company of Segal's *Love Story*.<sup>3</sup> Central to Plenzdorf's 'Catcher in the GDR Rye' is young Edgar Wibeau, a character modelled after Salinger's Holden Caulfield. The 'East German Holden' is the top apprentice of a GDR firm, who rebels against his apprenticeship and his parents, leaves both and hides in a garden-house, where he does his own thing. Thus he plays 'his kind' of music, paints 'his kind' of pictures, meditates about 'his kind' of literature (his favourite happens to be Salinger), dances alone, falls in love with the kindergarten teacher, Charlie, and finally has a fatal accident while working on his invention – a hydraulic paint spray-gun. The language of Edgar Wibeau's confessions, East German critics assure us, consists of authentic teenage jargon.<sup>4</sup> One critic even speaks of his disgusting fecal diction ('Fäkalien-Vokabular').<sup>5</sup> Yet according to Marcel

1 Ulrich Plenzdorf, *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1973) 37–8

2 Marcel Reich-Ranicki, 'Der Fänger im DDR-Roggen,' *Die Zeit* no. 19 (11 May 1973) 13

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 F. K. Kaul, cited by Wilhelm Girnus, 'Diskussion um Plenzdorf, *Die Leiden des jungen W.*' *Sinn und Form*, Hrsg. Akademie der Künste der DDR, Berlin, 25. Jahrgang, 1973, 1–3. Heft, 219

Reich-Ranicki the language is a synthesis of Böll's rendition of *The Catcher in the Rye* and authentic East German teenage jargon.<sup>6</sup> Since Böll's rendition is said to have contributed to Plenzdorf's success, it deserves some critical attention within the framework of questions pertaining to translation. The observation by Plenzdorf's Wiebeau regarding the German translation of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* cited above raises the question to what extent this new German version does convey the meaning of the original – a book which has become world literature.

Salinger's *Catcher* had a considerable record of 'catching' an ever-increasing readership. Published in 1951, lauded by some reviewers and criticized by others, especially for its excessive use of profane language, the book established its place as a bestseller and became one of the most popular and influential works in modern American literature. Within two years of publication it became a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection. Despite initial reactions against the book's blasphemy and obscenity, *The Catcher in the Rye* was equally successful abroad. The first translations began appearing two years after publication of the original. The first German translation, by Irene Muehlon, was published under the title *Der Mann im Roggen* (Zürich 1954). It received a great deal of enthusiastic and critical attention.<sup>7</sup> This German translation, however, left much to be desired, and in 1962, the book was retranslated, more precisely 'neu durchgesehen und bearbeitet' by Heinrich Böll, and published by Kiepenheuer and Witsch, Köln, and in 1966, as a paperback by Rowohlt. On its road to becoming world literature, *The Catcher in the Rye* has been accompanied by an ever-increasing volume of criticism, some rather cool, but most of it glowing adulation. While there have been references to a 'Salinger Industry' there have also been serious attempts to place Salinger's achievement into proper perspective.<sup>8</sup>

Generally critics react enthusiastically to the idea that serious writers devote time and attention to the somewhat ungrateful task of translation. It is beyond question that when a master in matters of style translates or adapts such a book as Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, the outcome will be a notable one. Böll's rendition has, in fact, been enthusiastically received and lauded as a great achievement; it does make an important book accessible to the German reading public. One evaluates translations with reluctance, just as in Brecht's anecdote the executioner begged King Charles' forgiveness before he lopped off his head. Like the proverbial curate's egg, which was very good in parts, every translation has its 'very good' parts. Significantly Böll does not describe his version as a translation but as an adaptation ('nach

6 Marcel Reich-Ranicki, op. cit.

7 Cf. Warren French, *J.D. Salinger* (New York: Twayne Publishers 1963) 28 ff.

8 Cf. George Steiner, 'The Salinger Industry,' in *If You Really Want to Know: A Catcher Casebook*, ed. Malcolm M. Marsden (Chicago: Foresman and Co. 1963) 62

der ersten Übersetzung (Zürich, 1954) neu durchgesehen und bearbeitet'). Hence it would be remiss to judge this rendition solely according to criteria applying to fidelity of translation and present a catalogue of good and of poorly or wrongly translated details. Rather in this case we must take into consideration that the rendition ranges from translation to adaptation. In other words, we have here a special kind of translation which reveals that the reproduction of a work in a foreign language is bound to have a subjective character.

In order to establish the special merits of Böll's rendition – how successful it is in conveying the meaning of the original text – we shall focus upon such questions as how its central idea, its atmosphere, and its style have been re-created in German with respect to detail as well as to the stylistic unity of the entire work. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is a stylistic masterpiece with regard to contextual details as well as to coherence of the whole. Central to the book is a strongly delineated protagonist who is characterized mainly through his use of language and through episodic detail. Holden tells his own story: it is a confession of a hypersensitive teenager who is alienated from his parents, his friends, and his school, and indeed from society at large. He is disgusted and 'hates' the 'phoniness' of the adult world with its social, intellectual, and emotional pretensions. Holden 'flunks out' of prep school for the third time and drifts through New York; he visits a bar, a prostitute, phony friends and acquaintances, a museum, the movies, his empty home, and the playground where he meets his sister Phoebe, the only person with whom he can communicate. His odyssey ends on a psychiatrist's couch. His inability to communicate awakens the reader's sympathy and compassion. Yet this good-for-nothing does have an ideal: he would like to be a catcher in a rye field and prevent children from falling off 'some crazy cliff.' Much of what Holden confesses in his 'goddam autobiography' is designed to present a mirror image of his phony adult world. This he achieves through language, a simple teenage jargon consisting of a mixture of slang and obscenities, sometimes trite, blasphemous, repetitious, and comic, but occasionally striking and sophisticated. Salinger is acknowledged to have transformed authentic teenage speech into a form of art.<sup>9</sup>

The reader unacquainted with Salinger's original will find the German version eminently readable, grammatically correct though somewhat formal, coherent in its entirety, and lucid in its style, the only exception being the notorious expression for which the book has become famous. Otherwise, the impression that the American atmosphere has been successfully transformed into a German one prevails. Even in details – for example the 'D plus'

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Donald P. Costello, 'The Language of *The Catcher in the Rye*,' in *A Catcher Casebook*

and the 'F' of the American marking system becomes 'eine Vier' and 'eine Sechs' – the rendition strives for meaningfulness and clarity. The German Holden makes extensive use of teenage jargon. German expressions equivalent to those of the original English version, such as 'blödes Kamel,' 'Hund,' 'Schweinehund,' 'blöde Gans,' 'dickarschiger Heuchler' (p. 101),<sup>10</sup> idioms such as 'Ich bekomme Bauchkrämpfe' (p. 98), 'Ich war ganz hin' (p. 56), 'verflucht glücklich' (p. 156), 'Ich hätte beinahe geheult' (p. 156), the colloquial use of 'umbringen,' as, for example, 'Frauen bringen mich um' (p. 42), exclamations such as 'bei meinem Arsch!' (p. 92), 'Herrgottnochmal!' (p. 144), descriptive epithets such as 'blöde,' 'verdammmt,' 'verflucht,' 'gottverdammmt,' 'verrückt,' and many more help to characterize Holden's vocabulary as teenage jargon. Böll seems to have translated in the spirit of Luther's famous dictum 'dem Volke aufs Maul schauen.' From this general impression of stylistic coherence of the whole let us now focus on some selected details in order to establish to what degree the translation bears the marks of its translator. From the very opening paragraph the tone of Salinger's *Catcher* is set, as we see by comparing two sample texts:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them. They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father. They are nice and all – I'm not saying that – but they are also touchy as hell. Besides I'm not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened

Falls Sie wirklich meine Geschichte hören wollen, so möchten Sie wahrscheinlich vor allem wissen, wo ich geboren wurde und wie ich meine verflixte Kindheit verbrachte und was meine Eltern taten, bevor sie mit mir beschäftigt waren, und was es sonst noch an David-Copperfield-Zeug zu erzählen gäbe, aber ich habe keine Lust, das alles zu erzählen. Erstens langweilt mich das alles, und zweitens bekämen meine Eltern pro Nase je zwei Schlaganfälle, wenn ich so persönliche Auskünfte über sie geben würde. Sie sind in der Hinsicht sehr empfindlich, besonders mein Vater. Sie sind sehr nette Leute und so – ich sagte nichts gegen sie –, aber höllisch empfindlich. Außerdem will ich nicht meine ganze verfluchte Autobiographie

10 All German quotations from Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* are given with page references in the text; edition used: J.D. Salinger, *Der Fänger im Roggen*, Roman, neu durchgesehen und bearbeitet von Heinrich Böll (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt 1966)

to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run down and had to come out here and take it easy ... (p. 1)<sup>11</sup>

oder etwas Ähnliches schreiben. Ich will aber nur die verrückten Sachen erzählen, die sich letzte Weihnachten abspielten, bevor ich vollkommen zusammenklappte und hierher gebracht wurde, um mich zu erholen ... (p. 5)

A close comparison reveals rather significant differences. Whereas Salinger's style consists of informal, colloquial, loosely flowing prose designed to characterize the teenager Holden Caulfield, Böll has chosen a more elevated stylistic level. Donald Costello in his excellent study about 'The Language of *The Catcher in the Rye*' points out that Holden repeats phrases to the extent that they become an essential part of his character; his often repeated expression 'and all,' his insistent 'I really did,' or 'it really was,' his use of 'something' and 'anything' give 'a sense of looseness of expression and looseness of thought.'<sup>12</sup> The numerous contractions in the teenage vernacular of the original text, essential style-markers of colloquial speech, are difficult to render into German. Their omission, however, inevitably contributes to greater formality in style. From the very opening sentence ('If you really want to hear about it ...'), which has been rendered by 'Falls Sie wirklich meine Geschichte hören wollen,' we note a significant intrusion, a kind of filtering-process on the part of the translator. The substitution of 'meine Geschichte' for 'it,' the use of the formal pronoun 'Sie,' the omission in German of the over-used, yet for Holden typical, style-markers 'and all' or 'if you really want to know the truth,' the use of the subjunctive forms and of the formal imperfect tense in this rather colloquial, effortlessly and freely given confession all contribute to elevating the level of Salinger's authentic teenage vernacular in the translation. 'Crap' and 'stuff' have been translated by 'Zeug,' as if their connotation were the same. The phrase 'Meine ganze verfluchte Autobiographie oder etwas Ähnliches,' although correct in meaning and without flaws in style, is not quite equivalent in nuance to 'my whole goddam autobiography or anything'; the same applies to the expressions 'madman stuff' and 'verrückte Sachen.' At times the translator's concern for meaning and clarity results in commentaries: the expression 'Just before I got pretty run down,' translated by 'bevor ich vollkommen zusammenklappte,' is, to be sure, a correct rendering of the meaning if considered within the context of the whole story, for Holden does end up on the psychiatrist's couch. However, the German explanatory comment has no trace of the understatement of the original text. The remarkable consistency

11 All English quotations, given with page references, refer to the edition J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Toronto, N. Y., London: Bantam Books 1964)

12 Donald P. Costello, op. cit., 88

of Böll's elevated stylistic level is evident in the second and third paragraphs of the book: Holden refers to his brother's high-powered Jaguar as 'one of those little English jobs' (p. 1), one that cost him, 'damn near four thousand bucks' (p. 1). The Jaguar in the German version is 'so ein kleiner englischer Wagen' for which he paid 'an die viertausend Dollar' (p. 5). In referring to the movies Holden says: 'If there is one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me' (p. 2). The German version 'Ich will überhaupt nichts damit zu tun haben' (p. 5) is again correct in its meaning, but hardly equivalent to such choices available from among the German colloquial speech level as 'Hört mir doch auf damit!' or 'Geht mir doch los damit!' The third paragraph contains similar differences: 'Pency Prep is *this school that's*<sup>13</sup> in Agerstown, Pennsylvania. You probably heard of it. You've probably *seen the ads, anyway.*' (p. 2) – 'Pency Prep befindet sich in Agerstown in Pennsylvanien. *Wahrscheinlich hat jeder schon davon gehört oder mindestens die Inserate gelesen.*' (p. 5) – The ads always show 'some hotshot guy on a horse jumping over a fence' (p. 2) – 'einen schneidigen Jüngling, der hoch zu Ross ein Hindernis nimmt' (p. 5). About Pency's claim that the school has since 1888 'been molding boys into splendid, clear thinking young men' (p. 2), Holden blurts out 'strictly for the birds. They don't do any damn more *molding* at Pency than they do at any other school' (p. 2), whereas the German Holden comments in language befitting a well-behaved, prim and proper young lad: 'Reines Geschwätz. In Pency wird ebensowenig "geformt" wie in jeder anderen Schule' (p. 6).

Repetition of simple, unsophisticated vocabulary is a predominant stylistic feature of Holden's expression; he repeatedly describes his speech as consisting of 'lousy vocabulary.' His generously used expletive epithets 'damn' or 'goddam' are rendered in German by 'verdamm't,' more often by such synonyms as 'verflucht,' 'verflixt,' 'blöd,' 'doof,' as nuances may require. Again, by the use of synonyms for the ubiquitous 'damn' and 'goddam' the German style becomes much more varied than the deliberately 'lousy vocabulary' of the original. This stylistic variety becomes more evident in Holden's use of common adjectives or adverbs as the following example illustrates. Holden's roommate Ackley is described as having a habit of '*always* ... cleaning his goddam fingernails,' his teeth appear as '*always* mossy-looking,' his ears as '*always* dirty as hell' (p. 22). Whereas the word 'always' is repeated four times in six lines of prose, the German version is a stylistically varied and sophisticated description: 'Er putzte sich *fortwährend* die Nägel ... Seine Zähne sahen *immer* ganz bemoost aus, und seine Ohren waren *widerwärtig* schmutzig' (p. 20). Words such as 'fortwährend,' 'widerwärtig,' 'ausreichend' hardly belong to the typical repertoire of a teenage

13 The italics are mine.

boy who is further described in that particular paragraph as thinking that the cleaning of his fingernails 'made him a very neat guy.' In German, however, he is described with the words 'Wahrscheinlich hielt er es für ausreichend, um äußerst gepflegt zu wirken' (p. 20). The vocabulary of the German Holden is anything but 'lousy.' In fact, the vocabulary has been consistently, carefully, and deliberately elevated and screened by the translator. In some instances limits in translatability dictate the screening process. However, nuances are almost invariably lost. As Holden walks through the streets of New York, for example, he sees two men unloading a Christmas tree from a truck. One man shouts to the other, 'Hold the *sonuvabitch* up! Hold it up, for Chrissake!' (p. 196). The expression 'for Chrissake' can be translated by 'Um Himmels willen' or by 'Hergottnochmal,' to be sure, but to render the significance of the change from 'for Christ's sake' to 'For Chrissake' is (perhaps) impossible in a translation. In the German version 'Heb den verdammten Hund doch höher! Halt ihn doch höher, Hergottnochmal!' (p. 144), the communicative value obtained from the juxtaposition of 'for Chrissake,' 'sonuvabitch,' Christmas, and the birth of the Son of God, the association of the blessing of Christmas and the curse, is lost. Yet Holden ironically characterizes it as a 'gorgeous way to talk about a Christmas tree ... sort of funny, though in an awful way' (p. 196) – a very important social comment, striking at the very heart of the 'phoniness' of Holden's adult world.

An essential and not just incidental stylistic feature of the original text is its shock value, for it is designed to show the mirror image of the 'phoniness' of Holden's world. The reception of *The Catcher in the Rye* tells its story. Once a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, later removed as 'pornographic trash' by the Detroit Police Department and banned by the Chicago Department of Education, it finally became a standard text on every freshman English course. Yet even today a young instructor who puts the book on a high-school reading list runs the serious risk of upsetting the local parent-teacher association which takes up the cudgels for morality. Invariably the four-letter word – although an indisputable part of American linguistic repertoire – tends to get some moms and dads upset. The German rendition remains completely enigmatic with respect to the notorious expression which Holden finds written on the wall as he goes to meet his sister Phoebe at her school. Whereas Salinger's text leaves nothing to guesswork, the German version contains a stylistic fig-leaf: 'Jemand hatte "dich ..." an die Wand geschrieben' (p. 147). The reader is left wondering why Holden reacts at great length and with such concern. ('It drove me damn near crazy. I thought how Phoebe and all the other kids would see it, and how they'd wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them – all cockeyed naturally – what it meant, and how they'd all *think* about it and may be even *worry* about it for a couple of days' (p. 201). All this

for 'dich ...' The reader of the first German translation is bound to be puzzled when the reason for Holden's excessive worries turns out to be '—.' A significant sin of omission, we may ask? Would it not have been preferable to paraphrase, or even to translate according to Luther's dictum, or perhaps to use the 'nasty' expression of the original? Evidently the criterion for omitting the expression must have been a concession to the public taste of 1954 and 1962; today's reader would hardly be shocked, were the expression included in the translation. Only one important criterion can be used to determine the decision for or against inclusion, and that is the question whether the meaning of the original text is influenced. In this respect it is important to focus on the meaning of the title, which happens to contain Holden Caulfield's vision; he confesses it to his sister: he would like to be 'a catcher in the rye' who would stand on 'some crazy cliff' and catch little kids 'if they start to go over' (p. 173). It is significant that Holden wants to erase the expression in question in a place where small children are; it is in fact, as Warren French points out, an expression of Holden's catcher-on-the-crazy-cliff-ideal.<sup>14</sup> Avoiding the translation of certain words by excision, abbreviation, and faint allusion, all of which avoid the 'shocking' expression, not only contributes significantly to a loss of the actual meaning in this instance, but underscores what Holden rebels against: the phoniness of the adult world which here resorts to a stylistic fig-leaf.

Another example in which omission, stylistic elevation, or purification results in significant changes in the meaning of the original text is the one in which Holden talks with the prostitute:

She came over to me, with this funny look on her face, like as if she didn't believe me. 'What 'sa matter?' she said.

'Nothing's the matter.' Boy, was I getting nervous. 'The thing is, I had an operation very recently.'

'Yeah? Where?'

'In my wuddayacallit – my clavichord.'

'Yeah? Where the hell's that?'

'The clavichord?' I said. 'Well, actually, it's in the spinal canal. I mean it's quite a ways down in the spinal canal.' (p. 96)

Sie kam mit einem komischen Gesicht auf mich zu, so als ob sie mir nicht glaubte. 'Was ist mit Ihnen los?' fragte sie.

'Nichts.' Herr im Himmel, ich wurde immer nervöser. 'Ich habe nur kürzlich eine Operation gehabt.'

'So? Wo?'

'An meinem Klavichord.'

'Wirklich? Wo zum Teufel ist denn das?'

'Das Klavichord? Ach ziemlich weit unten.' (p. 72)<sup>15</sup>

In the German version no attempt has been made to render the prostitute's use of dialect. Furthermore, the rendition of 'In my wuddayacallit – my

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Warren French, op. cit., 121

<sup>15</sup> The italics are mine.

clavichord' by 'An meinem Klavichord,' the response characterized by Holden's hesitation and embarrassment, has become direct, brief, factual, hardly comic. Similarly Holden's lengthy evasive answer cited above rendered with such terseness lacks the tragicomic effect of the original, an essential aspect of Salinger's portrayal of Holden.

These selected examples from Böll's version of Salinger's novel lead to some significant general conclusions about translation and adaptation. Böll has transformed Salinger's informal and colloquial style with a remarkable consistency into a more formal stylistic level commensurate with his and the German public's taste at the time at which he translated it. He maintained stylistic unity and avoided a great deal of the obscenity and blasphemy for which the book was originally criticized. Under Böll's hand the process of translation and/or adaptation has become a process of rendering the original in the translator's own image depending on such aspects as his interpretation, his background of experience, his perception of nuances as well as his judgment in matters pertaining to public taste, and, perhaps, his adherence to guidelines from the publisher.

What is true of Böll's translation and adaptation applies to a great extent to the process of translation in general. Since it can be shown that in any translation a considerable number of subjective elements are at work – in varying degrees to be sure – all translation may be considered as a process of re-creating an original text in the translator's image. Ideally translation presupposes a faithful rendition of all features of the original text on the same stylistic level while observing aspects of overall unity. In reality translation always nearly falls short of this ideal by causing inevitable changes in the communicative value of the translation, and thereby corroborating George Steiner's claim that 'all translation' is a 'taking away' from the original text.<sup>16</sup> If we accept this tenet, and nevertheless strive for the best translation possible, the necessity for ever new translations of literary works follows. As Richard Friedenthal observes: 'Das Übersetzen ist eine ständige, nie aufhörende Aufgabe. Sie wird immer wieder gestellt ... Auch gute Übersetzungen müssen durch neue Fassungen ersetzt werden, die dem veränderten Sprachgebrauch Rechnung tragen und der inzwischen sehr viel weiter fortgeschrittenen Kenntnis des Originals.'<sup>17</sup> Judging from the recent success of Plenzdorf's Salinger-adaptation, especially with regard to his effective use of

16 Cf. George Steiner, *After Babel* (New York: Oxford University Press 1975); particularly the chapter 'The Hermeneutic Motion,' pp. 296 ff. Professor Steiner also elaborated on this point in a paper delivered to the Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association in Budapest (August 1976).

17 Richard Friedenthal, 'Übersetzte Werke repräsentieren die Weltliteratur,' in Rolf Italiaander, Hrsg., *Übersetzen: Vorträge und Beiträge vom Internationalen Kongreß literarischer Übersetzer in Hamburg, 1965* (Kronberg: Athenäum Verlag 1965) 25–6

informal and colloquial teenage jargon in contemporary idiom, a case can be made for the need of an updated German version of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* for which Plenzdorf's German hero seems to plead:

Trotzdem werd ich jetzt noch blaß, wenn ich denke, ich hätte dieses Buch vielleicht nie in die Finger gekriegt. Dieser Salinger ist ein edler Kerl ...<sup>18</sup>

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18 Ulrich Plenzdorf, op. cit., 33