

Bottled Lightning and Message(s) in a Bottle

When the genius looks over your shoulder

Von *Bradley Schmidt*

Born and raised in America, then washed ashore in Leipzig fifteen years ago, I mostly translate contemporary German authors into English. I encountered students from the German Institute for Literature, Leipzig University's creative writing program, and graduates who had stayed put in the city like me. After some initial fits and starts at translation, I worked up the courage to contact Ulrike Almut Sandig, whose poems I knew from the student anthology *Tippgemeinschaft*, as well as her *Augenpost*, literally "eye-mail," poems that had been plastered onto construction fences or distributed on flyers and free postcards. Our first encounter was pleasant, eye-to-eye, and I appreciated her input and suggested edits.

Although I don't become friends with all of my authors, a personal connection often arises. Their English is generally very good. I usually offer them the chance to look over my translation before I submit it. This often results in my receiving very insightful comments and suggestions. Incidentally, the authors who try to impress me with their English skills are almost always men. All of this leads to better translations and helps everyone involved. At least I think so. And yet, quiet doubts do sometimes surface.

In connection with the discovery of his uncertainty principle, Werner Heisenberg speaks of the possible influence of the observer on the outcome of an experiment. By now, this so-called observer effect has also become established as a concept in the social sciences and humanities. Such an influence can also occur in the poetry translation 'experiment.' In part, I attribute this to the eclectic reading habits of my youth and to a cult of genius that I joined at the time and never quite abandoned. Romanticism may be long forgotten, but when translating I still have the feeling that my living authors are looking over my shoulder.

The buzzword 'genius' and its German equivalent, 'genie' unavoidably brings to mind an annoying earworm from my youth ("Genie in a Bottle"). And yet another spin of the bottle makes me think of playing with the word 'genie'. As we all know, it is almost impossible to get the genie back in the bottle ("there is a price to pay"). But what if you find a new bottle and use a different language?

In her inaugural lecture as a visiting professor at the Free University of Berlin, Olga Martynova introduced a double conceptualization of "message in a bottle," borrowing Paul Celan's statement that "the poem can be a message in a bottle," which in turn invokes an image from Mandelstam: "when I read this poem, I feel as if I have found a message in a bottle." I want to appropriate this message in a bottle for myself. Something washes up on the beach and I decide to send it on its way again.

English is the lingua franca of our time. Correspondingly, I can hope many different

readers find my message in a bottle. And because many of my authors are fluent in English, I also think of them as well, since they inevitably read along. Who can know how great an influence they have on me when I am unwittingly writing to them as well? I have largely overcome this *Berührungsangst*, but it still lurks in the background. Am I up to the task of fulfilling the wishes of a genius? Can I even (re)write poetry and prose? By reading along, thinking along, writing along, my authors – and their spirits – move into the bottle with me, go along on a journey into the unknown. Who knows who will find the bottle?



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Bradley Schmidt translates German-Language poetry and prose and lives in Leipzig, where he teaches at the university. He has translated the work of various authors, including Ulrike Almut Sandig, Kerstin Preiwuß, Lea Schneider, Steffen Popp, Maren Kames und Lutz Seiler, into English. Since 2019 he has co-edited *No Man's Land*, an online journal publishing contemporary German literature in the English language.

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