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New George Eliot Letters

William Baker

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One hears such bad accounts of the shameless liberties taken with the text of English authors, by French translators especially, that I have reason to be very grateful for my lot in finding that a cultured & conscientious man has been willing to take the trouble of transferring my work into a foreign tongue. The sympathy your preface expresses is also very valuable to me.

I wish that a visit to your many friends in London might promise Mr. Lewes & myself the opportunity of making your personal acquaintance. Believe me, my dear Sir, I shall always remain

Yours, with obligation,

M E Lewes

The second letter to Lehmann probably belongs to the period in which George Eliot was working on her last completed novel, *Daniel Deronda* - February 1875. It appears as if Lehmann has heard (probably from Frederick Lehmann or Mrs. Benzon) that another novel is in the works and has written to George Eliot to try to obtain the publishing rights. George Eliot refers to the close relationship with Franz Duncker. Evidence of this may be seen in G.H. Lewes's Journal - Berlin, 26th March 1870 - during the time he and George Eliot were last in Germany. Duncker sent them 'tickets for the opening' of the German Houses of Parliament on 24th March and joined them with his wife, taking them 'into the box reserved for the diplomatic corps, whence we had good view.'³ She mentions Julius Frese who translated G.H.Lewes's *Goethe* into German (2 vols., published by Duncker in 1857), *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Silas Marner*.⁴ In fact when *Daniel Deronda* was finished it was translated not by Lehmann, but by Adolf Strodtmann and published by Pätel of Berlin in 1876. Of note in this letter are George Eliot's concerns not to mislead Lehmann or to create false hopes: 'I hate to be muddy about details where any expectations are concerned.' Also her overt reference to her dependence upon George Henry Lewes - 'I am accustomed in these business matters to rely on Mr. Lewes' - is striking.

Lehmann's dealings concerning the translation of *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* had been with Lewes and Frederick Lehmann.⁵ George Eliot's correspondence with John Blackwood after Lewes's death concerning possible translations of *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such* reveals reservations about Lehmann's and others' translations. She writes to John Blackwood, 22nd March 1879: 'There will probably, as soon as the book is advertised, be a troublesome application about translating it, from Germany.' She doesn't overtly refer to Lehmann but continues 'I say troublesome, because I have no faith in the translation of my books, and yet cannot forbid it, so that the question lies between being paid for the right and making a present of it.' She adds 'I am told that Strodtmann's translation of D.D. is better than those of Middlemarch and Felix Holt.' In other words 'better than those of' Lehmann. George Eliot tells Blackwood 'But pray allow me to refer any applicants to you. I am quite sure that on every page of Theophrastus the meaning would be mangled, and none of the story understood, by the translator of Middlemarch.'⁶ Perhaps some of her disapproval seeps through in the abruptness of tone found in her Feb. 20 [1875?] letter to Lehmann:

[Headed Stationery]

The Priory,
21 North Bank,
Regents Park.

Feb. 20 [1875?]

Dear Mr. Lehmann

Apropos of that book which is altogether problematic & may not appear till the Greek Kalends, Mr. Lewes tells me (what I had quite forgotten) that when we were in Berlin I promised Franz Duncker the publisher to let him publish the translation of my next book whenever it might be ready. Of course the choice of a translator would lie with him, & for Adam Bede &c. he employed Dr. Frehse.

Pray do not think too ill of me that I had forgotten the promise to Duncker. I am accustomed in these business matters to rely on Mr. Lewes.

The point is of no immediate importance, but I hate to be muddy about details where any expectations are concerned, so I write at once in order that if you mention the matter to your brother you may tell him that Duncker will have to arrange about the translation.

Always yours truly
M E Lewes

Unless my health gets much better,
nothing is likely to be ready till
November.

George Eliot's April 9th 1874 letter to her friend Mrs. Benzon takes on a fresh perspective if viewed in the light of her comments about translators and translations in her 22nd March 1879 letter to John Blackwood. George Eliot's praise of Emil Lehmann's translations, whilst not over enthusiastic, may be to spare a relative's feelings. She and Lewes were very fond of Mrs. Benzon, nee Elizabeth Lehmann, the sister of Frederick and Rudolf Lehmann and widow of the wealthy industrialist Leopold Schlesinger.⁷ Her last paragraph is certainly consistent with her earlier reservations concerning Schlegel's Shakespearian efforts. In a *Leader* piece, 'Translations and Translators,' 20th October 1855, she writes 'Sometimes the German is as good as the English - the same music played on another but as good an instrument. But more frequently the German is a feeble echo, and here and there it breaks down in a supremely fine passage.' The instance she gives is Lorenzo's speech to Jessica in Act V, scene I of *The Merchant of Venice* which reveals 'translators' fallibility in men like Schlegel and Tieck.'⁸

The Priory,
21 North Bank,
Regents Park.
Ap. 9. 74

Dear Mrs. Benzon

I have now dipped into nearly all the half-volumes of the German "Middlemarch" & have read long & short fragments of narrative, dialogue or remark. You must bear in mind that the author of a book is the very worst judge as to the merits of its translations. I have my own fastidious choice of words which seem to me the very flesh & blood of my thoughts, & I naturally find the substitution of other words a sort of flaying process followed by the application of the plaisters to serve instead of skin. That is the inherent misfortune of translating which no ability of the translator can rectify. But after reading an abundant & various selection of passages I am convinced that Dr. Emil Lehmann's translation is done with scrupulous care & conscientiousness. In a long chapter of the 2d half-volume, which must have been very difficult to render, I have found no deviation from the meaning of the original - except in *rare & slight* cases where a point of irony has been missed, or the interpretation of an obsolete English word has naturally enough not been exact.

What seems to me the most felicitously done (& I remember that I had the same impression on looking into the translation of Felix Holt) is the Dialogue. I have read much of this in various places, & I find it rendered very effectively as well as faithfully.

I have written you the plain unvarnished truth. When I tell you that I have read aloud to Mr. Lewes Schlegel's translation of Shakspear - a translation which is considered supremely good - & have thought Shakspear happy that he could not read it, you will understand my point of view. I think faithful translation a great service & am grateful for it; but the benefit of reading it is one which cannot be appreciated by the author, whose praise must therefore necessarily seem ill-proportioned to the meritorious labours of the Translator.

Always yours affectionately

M E Lewes

The fourth letter of interest at the Allison-Shelley Collection belongs to the period after George Eliot's death and again demonstrates Emil Lehmann's business initiative being somewhat rebuffed. He has heard, no doubt from the Lehmann connections in England, that John Walter Cross is at work on a book about George Eliot, and attempts to secure the German rights. Cross is writing a little over two months after George Eliot's demise and the paper he uses is edged in black used for mourning.

[Headed Stationery]

4, Cheyne Walk,
Chelsea, S.W.
26 Feby. 1881

Dear Sir,

Many thanks for your letter of 21st - I am sorry to have given you the trouble of writing a second time in English.

As I wrote you in my first letter I don't expect to publish for a long time yet and I shall probably leave all the publishing arrangements in the hands of Messr Blackwoods - But I may repeat that I feel honoured by your kind proposal and am grateful for the veneration with which you speak of George Eliot.

I remain, Dear Sir,
Yours faithfully,
J.W. Cross

Dr. Emil Lehmann

Notes

¹ I am indebted to Charles W. Mann, Chief Rare Books and Special Collections and to his colleague Christine Bailey at the Pattee Library, The Pennsylvania State University for answering a myriad of questions, for sending me much useful information, and for permission to publish materials in the Allison-Shelley collection. I must also thank Jonathan G. Ouvry, copyright holder on all unpublished George Eliot - George Henry Lewes letters, for his permission to publish these letters.

² See *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven, 1954-78), IV, 252, n 2.

³ *Ibid.*, V, 84, n 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 307, n 3.

⁵ See *Letters*, IV, 252, 257, and my forthcoming edition of the unpublished letters of G.H. Lewes.

⁶ *Letters*, VII, 119-120

⁷ See *Letters*, IV, 383, and IX, 128-9, also G.S. Haight, 'Robert Browning's Widows', *TLS* 2 July 1971, 783-784. For the Lehmann family and their connections, see Boyd Litzinger, ed., *The Letters of Robert Browning to Frederick and Nina Lehmann, 1863-1889*, Waco Texas: Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University, 1975.

⁸ 'Translations and Translators' has been reprinted in A.S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren, ed., *George Eliot: Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1990, 339-342. I have been unable to locate the copy of Schlegel's translation of Shakespeare 'read aloud to Mr. Lewes.' It is not at Dr. Williams's Library.