

***CROSSINGS: ESSAYS ON POETRY AND TRANSLATION FROM HÖLDERLIN TO JACCOTTET* BY CHARLIE LOUTH**

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In bringing together twenty-one essays written and published over two decades, Charlie Louth revisits not only authors long cherished and critically examined such as Goethe, Hölderlin, and Rilke, but also authors with whom his engagement has been more tangential, such as Ernst Stadler, Paul Celan, or Philippe Jaccottet. He titles the collection *Crossings*, inviting readers to perceive the “less visible connections” he himself discerned “running between them” (1). These crossings unfold gradually, chapter by chapter, drawing together recurring threads—translation, poetic form, literary motifs, history, and transmission—into a loosely assembled but admirably unified structure.

Among the various topics explored in *Crossings*, translation occupies a central and sustained focus. Essays 1, 4, and 13 through 19 engage directly with it—either by comparing versions, commenting on the role of translation theory's most canonical text, Walter Benjamin's ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’, or examining the practice of significant translators. Although the essays are arranged chronologically according to their subjects, reading them in sequence traces a path that continually returns to Louth's two guiding passions: the poetic and hermeneutic powers of translation, and Hölderlin. Given the breadth of the volume, individual commentary on each essay will not be attempted here. Instead, this review will group these chapters and consider them thematically to underscore the work's intellectual coherence and recurring motifs.

Essays 2, 3, 5, 8, 10, 11, 12, 20, and 21 offer close readings of selected poems, consistently identifying moments of connection—either within a single poem or across poems by the same or different authors. Physical motifs drawn from antiquity form the core of essays 2, 5, and 12. While the essay on Rilke and antiquity leans towards a biographically informed mapping of classical themes, it is an important one in that it extends the works of Werner Kohlschmidt and Bernhard Böschstein into the Anglophone critical landscape. His inclusion of lesser-known works of Rilke such as the French poems of the *Vergers* should also be acknowledged. Essays 2 and 5 reinterpret well-known classical figures with renewed critical focus. In the fifth essay, the birds function as hopeful figures of fluidity, bridging nature, poetry, and human community, as seen in Hölderlin's poems like ‘Stutgard’ where avian imagery blurs with civic identity. The birds' movements, rather than their song, carry poetic significance for Hölderlin, representing dynamism and the capacity for change. Drawing on classical references and natural science, the chapter examines Hölderlin's engagement with augury—not merely as bird divination, but as a poetic method of interpreting signs. Migratory birds, recurring throughout his work, reflect the inherent connections between east and west, nature and culture, modernity and myth, past and present. This metaphorical device extends to rivers like the Danube, which, like birds, crosses and unites diverse regions, mirroring Hölderlin's entwined view of natural and cultural history. In the second essay, which examines centaur figures in

Goethe's *Faust*, Hölderlin's *Nachtgesänge* and *Pindar-Fragmente*, Louth reads the centaurs as emblems of hybridity in form and content. Both Goethe and Hölderlin use the centaur to navigate the contradictions of their times, merging past and future through their dual forms of expression. Louth's interpretation offers a framework on how to read contradiction and render it possible, productive even. In showing that the centaurs represent the fluidity of the world, mirroring its realities, it makes readers question and challenge their conception of norms. One example where this framework could be applied is multilingual literature. The rest of the poems of this grouping cover various themes and formal elements in German poets, apart from two essays on the Swiss poet Philippe Jaccottet, who wrote in French. What binds all these readings together is the idea of *interconnectedness*—either through cultural reference points (such as Goethe's engagement with Hafiz in essay 8 or Stadler's with Nietzsche and Rilke in essay 11) or in the poetics articulated across these readings—for instance, in the suggestion that Eduard Mörike's lyricism lies in “a matter of catching in-betweenness” [142]).

Essays 4, 6, 7, and 9 share a literary-historical perspective. Departing from his usual close-reading technique, Louth adopts a broader lens, engaging with paratextual material to build his arguments. In essay 4, he draws on the correspondence between Hölderlin and Schiller, his mentor, to argue that the former's decision to translate Pindar served as a way to distance himself from the overbearing influence of the latter on his work, which prevented him from blooming as a poet and a translator. Hölderlin writes in a letter to Schiller that he is “like a seedling that has just been planted out [and] needs to be protected from the midday sun” (51). Louth reminds us that Schiller is the sun that Hölderlin needs to shield himself from. Choosing the Greek Pindar, however “frankly anti-Schillerian” (59), remains for Louth a negotiation of proximity and distance between Hölderlin and his mentor. Translation, in this case, becomes a mirror of this process. Hölderlin's intensive dealing with Pindar is analysed more fully in essay 2. Essays 6 and 7 examine, respectively, the editorial history of Hölderlin's works and Goethe's use of the sonnet. Louth's case for the Frankfurt Edition of Hölderlin's Hymns by D. E. Sattler states that receiving a “new arrangement” of the texts, flawed as it may be, “makes you see and think again” (90). This aligns with one of the book's recurring arguments: as shown in essay 1 on Johann Jacob Junckherrott's 1732 translation of the New Testament, access to multiple editions or translations enables a more holistic reading of the text, highlighting different aspects of the original version. Of both ‘Hölderlin's Pindar versions’ and Junckherrott's New Testament, he writes that they share “the process of altering our sense of the source through radically literal rendition and the implicit critique of received versions.” (29). Essay 9 brings together a constellation of central and peripheral figures in German Romanticism. The discussions of Goethe and Hölderlin are convincing, as is the engagement with Keats's concept of “negative capability” (118), while the treatment of Karoline von Günderrode would have benefitted from a lens not limited to opposition, mental illness, and suffering. The assembling of previously published essays in this volume might have provided an opportunity to revise this point and diversify the gender scope of the “romantic lyric”.

As already noted, translation remains a central thread throughout the book. Even essays focused primarily on poetic analysis or literary history are attentive to the dynamics of linguistic and cultural transfer, revealing translation as a persistent, if sometimes implicit, concern. The second half of the book brings renewed attention to the often-overlooked figure of the translator. Particularly admirable is Louth's emphasis on specific translators' versions of poems he values,

rather than engaging in the persistent discourse of “unfaithfulness” that continues to shape translation studies. In essay 13, for instance, his discussion of Don Paterson’s English versions of Rilke reveals a definite admiration, which makes his preference evident without diminishing the work of others. Essays 15 through 19 follow the same spirit, and it is in the same voice—never sententious, always clear, and appreciative of the way translators’ work opens space for critical reflection—that Louth repeatedly affirms the importance of comparison in translation. His contribution to the critical reception of Benjamin’s ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’ is particularly felicitous in this regard: a text often read in isolation, Louth approaches it comparatively, alongside Benjamin’s dissertation on the concept of *Kunstkritik* in the German Romantics and his translations of Charles Baudelaire, which the essay originally prefaced. In proposing such crossings, Louth finds Hölderlin to be a connection point between these texts, an “iceberg-like presence” (214) whose work as a translator inspired Benjamin in his conception of language.

What emerges from this book is a distinctive way of reading that integrates translation in an almost systematic and intuitive way. Louth’s focus on translators and on the hermeneutical value of comparing editions or translations has been previously discussed. However, in the third essay, Louth undertakes a close reading of Goethe’s ‘Auf dem See’ and Hölderlin’s ‘Hälfte des Lebens’ in which the topic of translation is not mentioned. What connects these poems is the way they call for non-linear readings, having a “preoccupation with reflection which is manifest in both content and form.” (40) Although framing translation simply as a mirror or a replica is conceptually reductive, it is significant that Louth selects poems governed by these precise motifs of reflection and mirroring structure. Similarly, when discussing some of Jaccottet’s poems, Louth notices a ‘resonance’ (274) with Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, which the Swiss poet had previously translated. These essays have been shaped by decades of close engagement, and are grounded in a belief that literary meaning often resides in movement across languages, traditions, and poetic forms. They resist closure and do not attempt to deliver a unified theory. *Crossings*, in its quest to make sense of the complexity of the corpus without ever surrendering clarity or the integrity of the text, reaffirms the relevance of hermeneutical methods for literary studies.