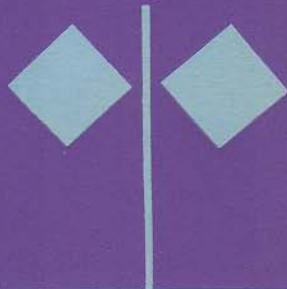


the fat abbot a literary review



*fall-
winter*

number four

one dollar

- 3 GALLOWES-SONGS CHRISTIAN MORGENSTERN
TRANSLATED BY JEROME LETTVIN
- 12 MORGENSTERN AND MYTHOPOETRY JEROME LETTVIN
- 21 TWO POEMS MARIAN PARRY
- 23 THE DESIGNER OF HEADS RUSS MADISON
- 39 FOUR POEMS WILLIAM RIVERA
- 45 POEM WILLIAM CORRINGTON
- 47 POEMS FROM THE ITALIAN
TRANSLATED BY THOMAS G. BERGIN
- 48 HOMER, THE ODYSSEY
TRANSLATED BY ROBERT FITZGERALD
REVIEWED BY ADAM PARRY
- 58 ON THE CONTENTS AND CONTRIBUTORS

THE FAT ABBOT FALL-WINTER 1962

THE FAT ABBOT is published three times a year. Editor: Samuel Jay Keyser. Graphic artist: Lou Brierley. Business Manager: Margaret Keyser. Rates: \$1.00 a copy, \$3.00 a year. © 1962 by Samuel Jay Keyser. All rights reserved. Printed in Liège, Belgium by Georges Thone, Printer.

IMPORTANT: All correspondence and subscriptions should be addressed to THE FAT ABBOT, c/o Jay Keyser, 278 Central Avenue, Needham Heights, Boston 94, Massachusetts. Manuscripts must be accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope.

GALLOWS-SONGS

Christian Morgenstern

Translated by Jerome Lettvin

PROJECT REPORT

To get this research undertook
I bought a needle and the BOOK,
and with the BOOK an old and hairy
faintly starving dromedary.

N.A.M., to help this thesis,
gave, on loan, a standard Croesus.

When the Croesus, missal-guided
went to Heaven's gate and tried it.

Peter spoke—"The Gospel proves
a camel through a needle moves

Sooner than we may admit
a Rich man." (Christ, J., opus cit).

Testing to confirm the Word,
I loosed our camel, hunger-spurred,

and motivated by a lure
of buns behind the aperture.

The subject, in a single try,
squeezed grunting through the needle's eye;—

a graceless act. The camel crammed
and Croesus muttered, "I'll be damned."

THE AESTHETE

When I sit, I sitting, tend
to sit a seat with sense so fine
that I can feel my sit-soul blend
insensibly with seat's design.

Seeking no support the while
it assesses stools for style,
leaving what the structure means
for blind behinds of Philistines.

DISINTERMENT

Once there was a picket fence
of interstitial excellence.

An architect much liked its look;—
protected by the dark he took

the interspaces from the slats
and built a set of modern flats.

The fence looked nothing as it should,
since nothing twixt its pickets stood,

This artefact soon fated it,
the senate confiscated it,

and marked the architect to go
to Arctic—or Antartico.

SOPHIE, MY HANGMAN'S TRULL

Sophie, my hangman's trull,
come, kiss my skull.
True, these lips
are blackened strips—
but yours are red and full.

Sophie, my hangman's trull,
come, stroke my skull.
True, its hair
is plucked and rare,
but yours is black and full.

Sophie, my hangman's trull,
come, see my skull.
These sunken eyes
are vulture's prize,
but yours are blue and full.

BEAT GENERATION

A bell-peal sped out through the night—
delivered by a clock—
his noise was great, his front was white
with turbulence and shock.

He sought the gentle belle-peal BING—
she drifted since she wed him.
He beat her once; she dropped her ring
and in a chase she fled him.

“Return!” he pled, “return! YOUR BANG,
however square, is true.
Forget the dissonance we rang,
the step you drove me to.”

But BING ignored his odd-toned plea;
she got her bangs from BONG,
a dominant whose fifths were free
and held her to him long.

Poor BANG in time came all unpieced,
his reason lost its hitch—
It did not phase sweet BING the least,
he'd made no proper pitch.

CASE HISTORY FROM ELEA

The Close went lonely in disgrace,
she had no intimates at all:
her differences with Time and Place
were definite, however small.

Concerned, a goad of Kantians sat,
conceived some real merit if
they sent that analyst, the Cat—
egorical Comparative.

Improvement by degree was crisp—
she found what symbols to disclose;
but fooled to substance through his lisp,
she closer couched, and Clothier rose.

In apt salons her form is seen,
uncertain, but without regress—
she functions as a go-between
and takes the limit in her dress.

THE SHARK

When Anthony addressed the fishes
a simple shark became religious,
adored the Host, denounced the Aryan,
and turned, save Fridays, vegetarian.

Seeds and weeds he bolted whole
with faith as firm as amphibole,
till vitals issued, overloaded,
lapsed Pelagian and exploded.

So littoral this revelation
fish schools died of inspiration—
The Saint, recalled to bless the lowly,
said only: "Holy! Holy! Holy!"

Σ X MAN MET A Π MAN

After many "if"s and "but"s,
emendations, notes, and cuts,

they bring their theory, complete,
to lay, for Science, at his feet.

But Science, sad to say it, he
seldom heeds the laity—

abstractedly he flips his hand,
mutters "metaphysic" and

bends himself again to start
another curve on another chart.

"Come," says Pitts, "his line is laid;
the only points he'll miss, we've made."

THE ART OF DRESS

A Word, itself not much at all,
prepared to show at Carnival.

Pronounced in length, but thin as air,
it wore a Cap to prove it there.

Its ancient stems, now grown infirm,
were wrapped in fustian got on term.

And all the ball was deeply stirred;
the King himself remarked, "My word!"

They used it well, its reason fled;
a string of nothings crawled to bed.

THE DAYNIGHTLAMP

Pitts invented once a daynight lamp
which, no sooner one did twist
the switch, the brightest day
to darkness turned.

When he showed this on the ramp
at a Physics congress, it lay
to none (and each a specialist)
to see that here they were concerned—

(Darkness fell the brightest time of day.
Thunders of applause can but persist
so long—the crowd began to stamp,
crying "Lights!") that here they were concerned

with the fact that this very lamp,
in fact, no sooner one did twist
the switch, the brightest day
to darkness turned.

THE MOONSHEEP

The Moonsheep cropped the Furthest Clearing,
Awaiting patiently the Shearing.
The Moonsheep.

The Moonsheep munched some grass and then
Turned leisurely back to its Pen.
The Moonsheep.

Asleep, the Moonsheep dreamt he was
The Universal Final Cause.
The Moonsheep.

Morning came. The sheep was dead.
His Corpse was white, the Sun was red.
The Moonsheep.

ONTOLOGY RECAPITULATES PHILOLOGY

One night, a werewolf, having dined,
left his wife to clean the cave
and visited a scholar's grave—
asking, "How am I declined?"

Whatever way the case was pressed
the ghost could not decline his guest,
but told the wolf (who'd been well-bred
and crossed his paws before the dead).

"The *Iswolf*, so we may commence,
the *Waswolf*, simple past in tense,
the *Beenwolf*, perfect; so construed,
the *Werewolf* is subjunctive mood."

The werewolf's teeth with thanks were bright,
but, mitigating his delight,
there rose the thought, how could one be
hypostasized contingency?

The ghost observed that few could live,
if *werewolves* were indicative;
whereat his guest perceived the role
of Individual in the Whole.

Condition contrary to fact,
a single werewolf Being lacked—
but in his conjugation showed
the full existence, a la mode.

Jerome Lettvin

Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914) holds the same place in German that Lewis Carroll does in English. His *Galgenlieder* (Gallows-songs) are quoted with the sort of delight we take in *Jubberwocky*. Attempts to put him in English fail to please any but German ears, just as

Es billig war, die schlichten Toven
gyrten und gimmelten im Waben;
und alle mümsigen Borogroven
die mömen Rath' ausgraben.

would be funny only to an Englishman who knew the original well; the word-play is transposed into nonsense and loses its charm. That is what seems to have happened in two translations of Morgenstern. Both have dealt with him as a comic poet who is more concerned with image than language. (Try thinking of "Mock Turtle" without it coming from "mock turtle soup"). But it is odd that even German commentators are not sensitive to the linguistic nature of the *Galgenlieder*. Except for Leo Spitzer, whose treatment underlies this essay, they consider these poems as a display of grotesque imagery.

Morgenstern is almost unknown in America. He was a too serious mystic poet, oozing *Sehnsucht* (longing) and a vague sort

of pantheism. I confess I find him treacly in his deeper writings and tiresome in his letters. The religious ideas of Lagarde and the Anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner are reflected in him and not made the least bit more interesting. His only clever things, the *Galgenlieder*, far outsold the rest of his work—to his disappointment. He writes, long after the success of *Palmström*: "It is enough if these two or three small books, which are only by-products and secondary matters for me, spread some spiritual lightness, arouse the fantasy, and thaw but a little the music frozen in the posthorn of the soul." But by then he had stopped writing such poems.

The first of the *Galgenlieder* was composed in 1890, when he was nineteen. The last was done in 1912, according to his wife, but the greater part of them when he was younger. Probably the only major influence they reflect, aside from Nietzsche, is that of Fritz Mauthner. This is Spitzer's thesis. Morgenstern himself had mixed feelings about Mauthner. In the posthumously published *Stufen* (1918) he calls Mauthner a typical "Jewish destroyer." I mention this because various people, mistakenly, I think, have taken that one comment to mean Morgenstern was anti-semitic. Elsewhere he confesses great interest in Mauthner's views on language and myth, and many of the *Galgenlieder* seem to come explicitly from Mauthner's ideas.

Morgenstern tells in a letter (1911) how the *Galgenlieder* started: "Why shouldn't a youth, rich in fantasy, conceive a red Indian tribe, complete with all accessories, even language and national anthem? And why shouldn't the drive to artistic play repeat the matter once, for a joke? When I was in school I 'found language,' was one of the most enthusiastic Volapükites. [Volapük was an artificial universal language.] So what more than I should write a recitation piece in private Volapük for particularly gifted confederates? For all these things were presented aloud as words and music (indeed only to five or ten people, and privately) without any thought to publish then or later. Thus you will see no sort of refinement in this humor, but, on the other hand, neither can you find the completely irresponsibly con-

ceived and naive caprices of the young artists. You will have to admit that behind it there is the lively general notion that no witticism can be made but presents a situation or develops a process which, where it is based on word-play, incarnates itself into the living world."

In fact there was a group of Galgenbrüder (gallows brothers) who foregathered with joking ritual. Georg Hirschfeld describes it in Bauer's biography of Morgenstern (p. 181). Hirschfeld's brother, Julius, wrote the music for Morgenstern's poems, but, unfortunately, it is now lost. These Galgenbrüder had by-laws writ on parchment in imitation blood, and lodge names such as Schuhu, Verreckerle, Gurgeljochem, Unselm, etc. Some of the little German theatre started among them.

Roughly the same sort of problems that interest Carroll also interest Morgenstern, but are handled more self-consciously. There is, for example, the relation of the name to the thing that is named (like the White Knight's song). In the Galgenlieder, "The flittermouse / hears itself by Strauss," and the idea of a dog looks like a dog. A whole zoology of animals, related to the bread-and-butterfly or the Mock Turtle, appears in the *Auftakteule* (up-beat-owl) or the Nasobēm, an animal that walks on its noses. (Some good comes from carrying a joke too far. Morgenstern wrote of the Nasobēm, "Es steht noch nicht im Meyer / Und auch im Brockhaus nicht." Whereupon a later edition of Brockhaus' Conversation Lexicon had for 'Nasobēm,' "an animal said not to exist in Brockhaus." And, last year, Gerolf Steiner issued an overworked parody of systematics, "Bau und Leben der Rhinogradentia"; the Nasobēm is one species.) Arrangement, considered independent of what is arranged, gives us on the one hand the smile of the Cheshire Cat and on the other the Picket Fence whose interstices have been stolen. ("The fence looked nothing as it should / since nothing twixt its pickets stood.") There are many portmanteau words like those in Jabberwocky, e.g. Odeladelise. There is a poem which has the same physical outline as its subject, like the Mouse's Tale in 'Alice'; in Morgenstern it's

Zwei Trichter wandeln durch die Nacht.
 Durch ihres Rumpfs verengten Schacht
 fließt weißes Mondlicht
 still und heiter
 auf ihren
 Waldeg
 u. s.
 w.

Through darkest night two funnels go;
 and in their narrow necks below
 moonbeams gather to cast
 the better a
 light upon
 their
 path
 et
 c.

In short, all the sorts of word-play that occur in the one can be found in the other. There are some personal differences. Carroll is less grisly than Morgenstern who really has a hangman's hills and a gallows. (The music for "Sophie, My Hangman's Trull" still exists. A copy is in the N.Y. public library.)

Furthermore it is unlikely that Carroll would ever have supposed so deep and metaphysical an animal as the Moonsheep. (Many Morgenstern addicts consider this poem one of his best. It is as simple in German as in English. He also did it in an elegant dog Latin wherein it gallops along like "Stabat Mater.")

But I feel there is an even greater difference between the two writers. Carroll was a mathematician and logician, and his word-play illustrates antinomies and other formal diseases of language. Bertrand Russell has used *Alice* very prettily as a textbook. But Morgenstern is a poetic linguist with a great bias against mathematics and logic, and his interest is in what one might call the spiritual diseases of language. Geraths puts it, "He yearned to become one with Nature, but language appeared to stand forbiddingly between." It is only natural that such a man would play with a world where "to be" might be confused with "to mean"

and the people are words rather than things. Witness, for example, "The Art of Dress," a poem he dedicated to Fritz Mauthner.

It is a sad thing to measure the light touch, but I will give a few examples of Morgenstern's technique and comment on them. In the *Anto-logie* he considers what happens if Elefant becomes Elef-ant (elef = eleven). There is also another German word, Gigant (Giant). Very well, let us set up a developmental series from prehistoric time. "Gig" is a number that became so large that it doesn't exist any more ('es nicht mehr gibt' means 'doesn't exist any more,' but also, literally, 'there gives no more,' and both meanings are used). The Gig-ant is extinct, but, given enough time and numbers, eventually there occurred a Zwölf-ant (zwölf = twelve), now also gone, but the immediate precursor of the Elef-ant. The trouble is that Elefants are being shot down before they have time to change to Ten'ants. One really ought to protect these animals until their descend-ants become nulul-ants and disappear with a soundless wail. This is one of Morgenstern's favorite tricks, to take a part of a word, ordinarily not separable, find several words sharing that part and devise a way to bind them all together.

The most impressive piece of that technique is utterly untranslatable because of the contextual richness. It is very short. Suppose we annotate it as if to put it in English.

- 1 Der Vergeß
- 2 Er war voll Bildungshung, indes
- 3 soviel er las
- 4 und Wissen aß,
- 5 er bleib zugleich ein Unverbeß,
- 6 ein Unver, sag ich, als Vergeß;
- 7 ein Sieb aus Glas,
- 8 ein Netz aus Gras,
- 9 ein Vielfreß—
- 10 doch kein Haltefraß.

1 *Der Vergeß*

A nonce word, correctly *Der Vergesser*, the forgetter. Coined on model of German *Vielfraß* (below), like

English *The Forget* on model of *The cook* rather than *The driver*. Truncation connotes bad memory.

- 2 He was full of *Bildungshung*, nevertheless, *Bildungshunger*, desire for knowledge, shortened to support parallelism with *Der Vergeß*.
- 3 however much he read
- 4 and ate of knowledge,
- 5 he remained an *Unverbeß*
Unverbesserlicher, an incorrigible. *Unverbeß* like *vergeß* to *vergesser*, only more so.
- 6 an *Unver*, I say, as a Forget;
See how easy it is to make a noun in German? Just give it an article and capitalize it. *Un-* has the same negative meaning as in English. But *-ver-* is an inseparable prefix conferring on verbs the qualities of
 - a. exhaustion (*verbacken*—to use up in baking)
 - b. error (*verdrehen*—to turn the wrong way)
 - c. obscuration (*verbergen*—to hide)
 - d. cessation (*verbrausen*—to stop fermenting)
 - e. dying (*verdursten*—to die of thirst)
 - f. negation (*verachten*—to despise)
 - g. strengthening (*vermehrten*—to multiply)
 or else it turns an adjective into a verb to show process (e.g. *vergrößern*—to make greater), etc. However, the "ver" in "vergessen" is not an affix—there is no verb "gessen."

- 7 a sieve of glass,
- 8 a net of grass,
- 9 a glutton

Nonce word, suggests present tense. In German *Vielfraß*, glutton, implies the past.

10 but not *Haltefraß*

Portmanteau—There is the past coming in. *Haltefraß*—that which holds what it has eaten, that which has stopped eating.

I have only given a little of the connotative richness of this poem. There is enough, however, to show where Carroll and Morgenstern diverge. Carroll's word-play tends to stay local;

the artefact, whether pun or paradox, does not spread and generalize itself throughout the language. Rather it concerns particular things acting in a particular way without suggesting that other things may also do the same. Words come round to Humpty-Dumpty on Saturday night to be paid and that's the end of it. This very discreteness of operation is Carroll's charm, the words are always denotatively used. Morgenstern is different. I feel sure that Spitzer is right in holding him to have been much influenced by Mauthner. Both were much troubled that their perceptions lay between them and the Ding-an-sich, and even more bothered by the further interposition of language. That one should have a name earlier than the object which is named, or a non-substantive noun at all, seemed grotesque. Morgenstern has a poem about a cannonball poured around its cavity, another about a street which is going to be built, etc. Mauthner felt that all myths arise from such language artefacts as the connotations increase with time while the exact meanings get blurred.

Carroll doesn't really care about meaning; he amuses himself by playing with the form of language. But both men are concerned in their very lives with the meaning embodied in that form. They cannot conceive of an axiomatic approach to language where symbols, drained of meaning, are arranged according to laws having nothing to do with meaning. For them, as for other schools of linguistics at the turn of the century, words are more intimately related to experience than a logician would like.

On a very simple level Morgenstern writes a long poem, not very good, about a group of nuns receiving packages from all over the world. The packages are marked EXPEDITE! Whereupon one sister has a vision of the good man who has sent these gifts, and finally St. Expeditus is canonized. This is straight out of Mauthner in fact. But Morgenstern experimented with the mythopoetic on more complex planes, as shown in two of the poems above. The reason for his success lies, to some extent, in the nature of the German language itself.

We may suppose that in a language where many words are closely related by their known parts, a pun or other word-play

involving one part radiates from the special case to the cloud of relatives sharing that part. Consider this weak example. I remark to someone that I wait for the "Straßenbahnwagen" (tram) at the "Bahnhof" (station). It occurs to me to replace "bahn" (track) with "baum" (tree). Thus I now wait for the "Straßenbaumwagen" at the "Baumhof" (at the tree-station for the street-tree-wagon), so that clearly I ought watch the "Baumwärter" (tree watchman) in his "Baumwärterhauschen" (tree watchman's hut) for the signal that the "Baumzug" (tree-train) is coming. Thereupon all the words that share "bahn" change to another set that share "baum," and I have a strange new world in which all the reasonable and common sentences containing "bahn" words set up the relations for "baum" words. If I pick the parts more carefully, the induced image from one or two puns is very rich. This is what Morgenstern does and what Carroll cannot do because of the difference in their respective languages. It is just because no word part goes unrecognized in German that an abstraction such as "ein Unver" acquires a wealth of connotation permitting it to stand by itself incarnated and with character. You do not have to be a philologist to recognize and appreciate it as myth, embodying a host of complex relations in a single noun.

That is, I think, what Morgenstern meant both by his letter and the actual Galgenlieder; that is, good word-play is naturally mythopoetic. It is so. But in German—not in English.

* * *

In the translations here given I have indulged in too many private jokes which the editor feels I ought explain.

In German *werewolf* is "der Werwolf" and "wer" is a pronoun in the nominative case. Morgenstern's first draft of this poem has the wolf confronted by the Nominative (der Werfall) who points out he cannot occupy any other case. The final version has *der Werwolf* properly declined as *des Weswolfs*, *dem Wemwolf*, *den Wenwolf*, but only in the singular since "wer" has no plural form. Since the werewolf has a family, he is very unhappy. Thus the

intention of the poem is clearly to have the wolf embroiled in grammatical artefact, and I felt justified in treating the prefix as a verb, using double meanings for "decline" and "conjugate" and "mode," and making the whole affair an ontological problem. (I trust there are enough readers who remember the old war cry of embryology, "Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.")

The trouble is that once you've begun transposing language artefact it is hard to know when to stop. "The Shark," for example, is overdone, for it is much simpler in the original. *Amphibole* is a kind of rock, but also an ambiguity; *Pelagian* means belonging to the deep sea, but also is the name of the heresy that denies the Original Sin.

I am most proud of "The Close" as a translation of "Die Nähe" for it is a proper statement of how one considers the infinitesimal. In "apt salons" you may see "epsilons." I think it a fine thing so to mix psycho- and mathematical analysis. In German, too, "die Nähe" becomes "die Näherin" to preserve gender, i.e. turns into a seamstress.

In "Beat Generation," the translation of "BIM BAM BUM," the front, or first wave of sound from a large bell, is a shock wave—is turbulent. "Beat" is meant in the auditory sense, as well as in any other.

Morgenstern, according to his widow, was never coarse. I apologize to his ghost for "The Aesthete," but plead the irresistible urge.