**Translation Loss and Gain**

"Every translation entails a loss by comparison with the original" (23), states Wolf Harranth, a well-known translator of books for children and young people. And there is much talk in translation studies of "translation problems" and "malfunctions" in literary translation that no translator can avoid.1 In Erwin Koppen's opinion such "disturbance factors" (137) include, among other things, "the translation of wordplay and comparable examples of linguistic virtuosity" (138). We need not argue about losses in translation, but gains in translation are seldom mentioned. Can anything of the kind be found in an author such as Aidan Chambers, an expert in wordplay and linguistic virtuoso of the first rank? In this essay I shall argue that generally the translation of Chambers's work into German—when it is carried out by a translator with a high degree of stylistic awareness and creativity—does indeed represent a gain for that literature. On the level of individual texts and passages I would like to concentrate on the production of humor by different means and examine how it fares in translation.

Hal, the protagonist of the novel Dance on My Grave (1982), collects epitaphs, most of them funny. The wording on a postman's grave, "Not lost but gone before" (104), is rendered in German as "Unbekannt verzogen" (moved to an unknown address [the usual postal marking on mail that cannot be delivered]) (Tanz 116). Another epitaph runs:

He had his beer from year to year  
And then his bier had him (117)

In this couplet the author is playing on the homophony of beer (German Bier) and bier (German Totenbahre). The grammatical relation between man and [bi:r] changes. The man is the subject in the first line and the object in the second. In the German translation, these two lines become four:

Stets liebte er den Gerstensaft  
Bu daß er ihn dahingerafft  
Darum bedenke immerdar  
Der Weg ut kurz vom Bier zur Bahr (Tanz 117)

(He always loved barley juice [= beer, a jocular usage], until it carried him off, so be ever mindful that the way is short from beer to bier.)

This translation conveys the idea behind the joke: an unexpected link between beer and death is established. An element of homophony is also retained in the German text. It comes in the word Bahr and refers us to the similarity of sound between Bahr as in Bahre, a means of carrying the dead, and Bar, a place to drink. All the humorous aspects of the source text have thus been successfully shifted to the target text. In addition, something extra has been added. In German, the epitaph adopts the elevated style of didactic verse Darum bedenke immerdar only to render it ludicrous with the wordplay of the final line. The moral tone of the warning against death from alcoholism is held up to ridicule with the linking of Bier and Bar. This additional comic dimension in the German epitaph is a gain in translation, and the appearance of rhymes in the couplets Saft/gerajft, immerdar/zur Bahr could also be chalked up as a gain.

We are more inclined to speak of losses than gains in translation; it has something to do with the perspective of comparison. If we read a text first in its original language and then in the language of translation, we risk setting out to hunt for "errors of translation," concentrating on the passages in the translation that represent problems in the form of cultural references, wordplay, and so on. The question about the "failed" passages is then: How far is the individual translator responsible for the failure, and how far is the passage so firmly rooted in its source language and culture that an adequate translation is hardly possible? Using translations of books by Aidan Chambers as examples, I would like to ask to what extent losses in the translation of humor are inevitable and how far gains are feasible. I shall be concentrating on the production of comic effect by use of the graphic dimension of the text, by incongruity between the narrative form and the content, and by wordplay.