Translating the diary of Käthe Kollwitz: Translator’s Note

The diary of the German artist Käthe Kollwitz (1867 - 1945) is a fascinating and unique historical document. It sheds light on her daily life, her artistic methods and motivations, her relationships, and her political and philosophical beliefs. More broadly, reading her diary can teach us about art, society, politics, women, and the family during one of the most turbulent times in Germany’s history. The breadth and length of the diary (written between 1908 and 1943) allow us to see how the artist’s opinions developed with time and in reaction to changing personal and historical circumstances. It is an amazing resource for anyone interested in Kollwitz, her art, or German history. However, a full translation of the diary has never been published in the English language.

Kollwitz died in 1945, leaving her only living son Hans Kollwitz as her benefactor. He inherited her diary and letters, which in 1967 he entrusted to the archive of the Academy of Art in Berlin. They were complete except for several lines pertaining to still-living people which Hans had censored. From 1948 to 1981 six books of selections from Kollwitz’s diary and letters were published in German, all edited by Hans Kollwitz. The first complete German edition of her diary was published in 1988 as Käthe Kollwitz: Die Tagebücher 1908-1943. The book was published simultaneously in the GDR and DDR, and remains in print today. It was the source text for my translation.
The first English translation of Kollwitz’s diary, *The Diary and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz*, first appeared in 1955 and was reprinted in 1988. It was translated by Richard and Clara Winston and edited by Hans Kollwitz. Like the earlier German editions, this book was heavily edited by Hans himself (the English version is 272 pages long, compared to the 960 pages of the complete German edition). A comparison of the two versions shows that while some of the edits follow a clear logic, many are completely arbitrary. Passages pertaining to mundane topics such as visits with friends and family, shopping, chores and the weather were for the most part removed. Some references to sensitive or inappropriate topics - Kollwitz’s views on sex, rude comments about others, or doubts about her marriage - were also removed. Kollwitz often wrote critically about Hans himself, and these passages were suspiciously absent from the published diary. But entire paragraphs and entries in which Kollwitz wrote thoughtfully and critically about her life, her work, her relationships, and her philosophy are also missing. Hans’ edits betray a desire to show his mother and his family in the best light possible - but this gives an incomplete and overall less interesting picture of who Kollwitz was.

My desire to translate Kollwitz’s diary stemmed in part from the weaknesses of the existing English translation. Although the actual translation was well done, the edits made it so vastly different from the original as to be almost useless in comparison. I also chose to translate the diary in conjunction with my senior German Studies seminar on Kollwitz, and I hoped that the in-depth reading and analysis which translation requires would facilitate my understanding of Kollwitz and her work.

When deciding which part of the diary to translate I considered several options. The first was to translate a selection of entries which fit a certain theme in Kollwitz’s life. The second was to translate a selection of the diary in full without leaving anything out. This is
the path I eventually took. Much has already been written in English analyzing aspects of Kollwitz’s life and work, accompanied by translated passages from her diary. However, no complete English translation has yet been published. I wanted to create something which would give English readers a chance to experience what it is like to read a few pages of Kollwitz’s diary exactly as she wrote it.

I chose to translate a section written from August to October of 1914, covering the period shortly after the beginning of the first World War until right before her son Peter’s death. Both of Kollwitz’s sons fought as voluntary recruits. In these entries she writes about visiting her sons in the barracks, reports from the front, military celebrations, volunteering for the National Woman’s Service, and her work.

My purpose in translating this section was to provide insight into Kollwitz’s thoughts on the war and to challenge some assumptions and depictions of her views on the subject. Kollwitz is known as a committed pacifist; this is reflected in both her artistic works and in her political activism. During the later years of the war she spoke out against the war, for example in her famous open letter to Richard Dehmels, in which she quoted Goethe, “Saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen werden” (“Seed for planting must not be ground”). The “seeds for planting” were the remaining German men who had not yet lost their lives to the war, and whom Dehmels had openly encouraged to fight what was by then clearly a lost battle. Therefore it may surprise some readers of my translation to see Kollwitz describe her admiration of the young soldiers, her respect for her sons’ desire to go to war, and her participations in organizations to support the war effort, among other things. Kollwitz, like many other social democrats at that time, initially supported the war and hoped for a German victory. She grew up steeped in a culture of Prussian militarism and nationalism and was not immune to its effects. Her view towards the war was always conflicted: she also writes of the
pain and sadness she feels, of the lives which are needlessly wasted. But in early 1914 her writing about the war, and especially about the idealistic young soldiers who fought in it, often tended towards the sentimental.

Käthe’s son Peter volunteered to fight in September of 1914 at age 18 and died in Belgium in October 1914. He was among the first soldiers to die on the eastern front and was followed by almost every single one of his friends. Only one, Hans Koch, survived. Peter’s death irrevocably changed Kollwitz, and set her on a lifelong struggle with the meaning of war, death, life, and motherhood. Her views on the war and on Peter’s death evolved almost constantly, and this is reflected in her diary entries and in her work. Eventually she came to realize how deeply both she and Peter had been imbued with the values of militarism and patriotism, and how these values had lead them to idealize war and sacrifice. She came to see war only as destruction and loss, and Peter’s sacrifice as ultimately meaningless. This fascinating personal journey is not reflected in my translation, which only covers the short period from the start of the war until Peter’s death.

My approach to translation was influenced by readings and discussions in my translation seminar as well as by two talks I attended by the translators Boris Dralyuk and Bill Porter. Both Dralyuk and Porter emphasized that they considered their goals as translators to be to maintain the “essence” of a text, even if they have to stray from the original in terms of vocabulary and exact meaning. Dralyuk said that as a translator one must always reconcile oneself to failure, and do away with the hope to communicate everything in the original text. Rather, he sees his job as writing a work in English which creates a similar emotional and aesthetic realm to the original. Ideally, his readers should react to the translation as they would if they could read the original. This approach raises an obvious problem for my translation: as a non-native speaker, I do not know what it is like to read the
original text as a native German speaker. I only know what it feels like to read the text as a mostly fluent non-native speaker, to whom any German text will always feel “foreign”.

Foreignizing approaches to translation aim to recreate this feeling for the English-speaking reader by transposing words or grammatical structures from the original text into the translation. This can either recreate the feeling of reading a foreign text, or just come across as a bad translation job. But I decided not to include foreignizing elements and instead to try my best to create a fluent and readable English version of the text. There is no getting around the central paradox of translation, which is, according to Ricoeur, that “a good translation can aim only at a supposed equivalence that is not founded on a demonstrable identity of meaning”. There is no exact “pure essence” of a text which can be separated from language. I find this freeing instead of discouraging, and it encouraged me to be creative and open with my translation.

Translating the diary posed several technical and artistic challenges. The most difficult aspect of my work was interpreting and translating the specific historical context of Germany during the First World War. Kollwitz often mentions historical figures and events which would have been understood at that time, but which require more explanation for today’s readers. I decided that adding footnotes would distract too much from the text; instead I made sure to use the standard English terms for any figures or events so that readers can research them on their own. Yet another difficult aspect was translating the many military terms that appear in the diary, as I am completely unfamiliar with both military history and the military today. Furthermore, Kollwitz uses words and phrases which have since gone out of use or even have completely different meanings today. To decode these passages I relied on multiple German/English and German/German dictionaries, as well as the help of my language mentor, who is more familiar with the German of Kollwitz’s time.
Kollwitz’s writing style was deceptively easy to read and understand, which unfortunately did not mean it was easy to translate. Her writing is best described as telegraphic; she is fond of ellipses and frequently leaves out words and punctuation. But she also veers into more difficult poetic writing, and likes to include Geflügelte Wörter, well-known literary quotations which she usually leaves unattributed. Furthermore, many of the grammatical conventions favored by casual writing in German - for example, passive voice and nominalizations - seem overly formal and stiff in English. I had to take special care when translating certain passages because I did not want my English version to be influenced by German grammar.

One example of a difficult translation problem was the word “feldgrau” or “field gray [uniform]”, referring to the gray uniforms which soldiers wore on the front. In the sentence “Am Bahnhof erwartet uns Peter feldgrau” (October 4, 1914) the word is used as an adverb meaning “in his field gray uniform”. This word does not exist in English, and I considered a number of possibilities: “in his field gray uniform”, “in his gray field uniform”, “in his gray fighting uniform”, etc. None of these options had the simplicity of the German original. Finally I decided for the shortened term “in his field grays”. While this term is not standard in English, it is easily understood to refer to a uniform.

Another difficulty was the word “Coupe”, which according to every dictionary referred to a car. But Kollwitz most certainly did not have a coupe, and in multiple passages she refers to multiple strangers being present in the coupe at once. From context I was able to infer that the word actually referred to a train compartment.

As satisfying as it is to solve such translation problems, I don’t think that I will ever feel that my translation is finished. But I am happy with what I have accomplished. As an educational exercise this project has been very valuable in helping me to think and reason
like a translator. It has given me much insight into both the practical and theoretical aspects of translation. After finishing this translation I am definitely interested in translating more in the future. I also hope that my work will be useful to those English readers who are interested in Kollwitz, at least until a full translation of the diary is published.

Works Cited


