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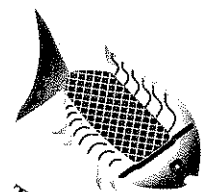
### **Paper:**

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In Other Words...

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# Shall I compare, vergleichen, recombine?

Reversioning Ulrike Draesner's 'Twin Spin'

Tom Cheesman

For Margaret and Rosa

In 1997, news broke that Scottish scientists had cloned a sheep, Dolly. Ulrike Draesner (poet, novelist and translator into German of Gertrude Stein and Hilda Doolittle, among others) responded by appropriating a selection of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* in 'radical translations' as a futuristic screenplay: 'addresses to a clone, a clone's responses, and clones' speech in a cloned world'.<sup>1</sup>

In 'Twin Spin', the Shakespearean sonnet form is clearly recognisable, but mutant, and the *Sonnets'* central themes persist, updated: procreation,<sup>2</sup> self-reproduction, survival in others' flesh, and in memories, and in immortal words. The subject is sex, love, art and posterity in the age of biotechnological replication. Draesner writes in her essay, 'Dolly und Will': 'Pitched in opposition to a sharp sense of transience, Shakespeare's poems are dreams of survival, in the flesh as well as in writing – flesh and writing being the two chief means of forging a memorial so as to reproduce oneself.' Four centuries on, the coming of the clone – the incomparable because fully identical being – threatens to annul difference, mortality, creativity. 'Twin Spin' turns on a dread that that which wills its survival in the *Sonnets*, human subjecthood, language-making mind, in its complexity and self-dividedness, might make itself extinct by letting replication take the place of

<sup>1</sup> This and the following quotes are from Ulrike Draesner's 'Dolly und Will' essay accompanying 'Twin Spin'. *Sonette von Shakespeare, Radikalübersetzungen*, in: *to change the subject*. Göttinger Sudelblätter series, edited by Heinz Ludwig Arnold (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2000). 'Dolly und Will' and three of the poems are at [www.draesner.de](http://www.draesner.de). Draesner's satirical novel *Mitgift* ('Dowry', 2005) draws repeatedly on the *Sonnets* and 'Twin Spin'.

<sup>2</sup> *Sonnets* 1 to 17 are known as the 'procreation sonnets'; five of the seventeen poems of 'Twin Spin' are based on that sequence.

recombination. 'The dream and nightmare is the clone, whose emergence basically, fundamentally changes the subject in every respect in which we have ever understood it – by making it equate with itself' (*indem er es sich gleichen lässt*). What equates (*gleich*) makes comparison (*vergleichen*) redundant. What resembles itself (*sich gleichen*) rather than being at odds with itself (*sich vergleichen*) is post-human. 'Dolly und Will' concludes: 'Ethics does not know what to do about this. It lowers its gaze. And language? It looks every which way at once. It was doing so 400 years ago. And we follow its gaze. And see what we knew already: ourselves. But we never knew ourselves this way before.'

Draesner's 'radical translation' uses full and part-rhyme, line length, metre and other sound effects for effect, refusing formal straight-jacketing. It is as if the sonnet had been spliced with free verse. An iambic pentameter of ten or eleven syllables is the norm, but 'Twin Spin' normally transgresses. In 'Dolly und Will', Draesner coins the term '*Anklanggedicht*': very roughly, 're-sound-poem' or 'hark-back-poem'. *Anklang* means literary echo, reminiscence or intertextual reference (and the phrase *Anklang finden* means to meet with approval). 'In the sonnet as a classic *Anklanggedicht* today, rhyme is only suggested or dissolves in (part-)anagrams: in the world of reproducible and hence heightened singularity (*Einzelheit*), nothing rhymes any more (*nichts reimt sich mehr*: nothing makes sense any longer). It [the poem] now consists of nothing but the same (*gleich*) letters (as do we, for geneticists?)." However, rhyme (if not full line-end rhyme) is more prominent in 'Twin Spin' than this might suggest. The principle that 'nothing rhymes' is resisted by rhyme's survival, as the enactment of comparing difference. When I began work on English 'reversions', Draesner insisted that the couplets ought to rhyme.<sup>3</sup>

Her radical translation's lexical principle is 'Will-ful misunderstanding'. More than mimicking Will Shakespeare's word-play, she reconfigures and recontextualizes the material of his text. Mere referential updating is the least of it, though her poems involve organ transplants, data retrieval, digital imaging, science fiction characters such as Laura Croft and the neologisms of post-humanist

<sup>3</sup> Ulrike Draesner gave much valuable advice as I worked on the reversions; as did John Goodby; my thanks to both. Four appear, with 'Twin Spin' originals and Dutch versions of them by Inge Arteel, in *Yang* (Ghent) 2 (July 2007), pp. 243-251. A self-published edition is available at [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com).

philosophers such as Peter Sloterdijk. Draesner 'combs' Shakespearean polysemes for 'non-canonical' interpretations, pulling up words by the 'wrong' root in order to create a new metaphorical order.

Crucially, Shakespeare's 'fair' becomes *hell* (bright, shining; also: clever) throughout. Overtones of 'hellish' are intended: Draesner's implied reader is as thoroughly bilingual, as constantly comparing as she is. (Sonnet 147: 'For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, and dark as night'.) In a cloned world, beauty is suspect from the start, a manipulated and manipulating product: *gekrümmt* (bent, crooked), as 'Twin Spin' 1 puts it. A harsh, sterile, aggressive brightness floods the poems' scenes: operating theatres, research laboratories, cyber-industrial 'cleanrooms', cryogenic storage vaults and tv studios.

Sonnet 1 opens: 'From fairest creatures we desire increase'. Draesner interprets 'increase' not as multiplication, procreation, progeny, but as augmentation of value: '*von hellsten kreaturen begehren wir anstieg*' (the poems refuse capitalisation, invoking an 'equalized' world). The context is the industrial-commercial exploitation of laboratory creatures; 'we' who speak are investors and inventors. Hence: 'From brightness's creations we desire returns'. I chose 'creations' for the rhythm, while 'returns' ties in with Draesner's dominant metaphors of spin, twist, coil, whorl, helix, and twin, pair, copy, double, revenant. But 'returns' loses one of her internal puns. The third quatrain of 'Twin Spin' 1 (where Draesner departs as far from her source text as anywhere in the sequence) uses *steigen*: to rise, climb; the same root as *anstieg*. Amid multiple alliterations, a sly syntactic doubling, which verbally mimics a double helix, turning on *auf* (upward), entwines a DNA sample filling a test-tube with the advancing mapping of the human genome; by extension, the imagery plots the fearsome triumph of genetic engineering in our brave new world. (The first word in this passage, an adjective, is ubiquitous in German lists of ingredients on food and medicine packaging, but has no English equivalent.)

*naturident  
blühh im kasten die karten deines kontinents  
auf, durch deinen glasstabkörper, steigt sie längst  
im spendesaal, die zarte locke dna.*

(synthetic nature-equivalent  
blossom in the box [photographic apparatus] the maps of  
your continent  
upward, through your glass-rod-body, long since  
it climbs  
in the donor-ward, the tender lock, the DNA)

second natured, on the slide  
arrays your continental charts are sprouting  
upward through your glass-rod-body climbs already,  
donor-spent, the tender lock, the dna.

Will's poetics of punmanship lives on in lines and sentences driven by a rhythmic pulse, demanding double and treble reading. 'Twin Spin' is more faithful to his text than any standard attempt at faithful 'equivalence'. The result is an eerie mix of angst-ridden, Heideggerian anticipation of technology's imminent replacement of nature by the '*naturident*', and parodic sci-fi comedy. My 'reversion' is more directly faithful to her than she is to Will, but still I add new twists to hers and his. The aim is of course not to supplant the *Sonnets*; rather, our successive appropriations might stimulate new readings of them. 'Twin Spin' 18 says as much, as we will see shortly.

The *Sonnets* are very familiar to German readers. The abundance of would-be 'faithful' translations frees Draesner to do the opposite of cloning them. Aside from the Bible, no work has been translated into German more often, claims Wikipedia. Over seventy complete sequences have been published, the earliest by Dorothea Tieck in 1826. Two of the sonnets are said to have been translated about 160 times: 66 ('Tired of all this'), which is perhaps better known as a political protest poem in Germany than anywhere else,<sup>4</sup> and 18, one of the world's most famous love poems.

The reversion of 'Twin Spin' obeys two principles: first, to convey what the original is and does, 'carrying over' as completely as possible the original sense, implications and verbal patternings, rather than using the poems as 'pre-texts' for my own poetry; and

<sup>4</sup> Ulrich Erckenbrecht's *Shakespeare Sechshundsechzig* (Kassel: Muriverlag, 1996) reprints 88 German versions of 66, with a comprehensive essay. The revised edition (2001) contains 44 more. A further 22 were added in a supplement in 2004. That makes 154. At this rate, by 2016 there will be 250+.

second, to create poems which read well as poems, without regard to their original, hence freely interpreting, altering, recombining for effects which are true to it. In this case, the original original is inescapable: readers are bound to compare. I therefore had to apply Draesner's 'radical translation' principles to her text, in order to minimise the risk that the English poems seem mere pastiche. So when, in 'Twin Spin' 1, 'heir' becomes '*kopierer*' ('copier', meaning both what or who makes copies, and what or who is a copy), in my sequence, this becomes 'sequencer'.

Substitution is the rule of poetry translation, as well as being another word for metaphor – both also being kinds of comparison. Sonnet 147 voices a lover's despair; in the eighth line, repetition of words with substituted vowels suggests alphabetic arbitrariness as a symptom of the loss of sense and reason.

Past cure I am, now reason is past care.

Lettering is a key trope in 'Twin Spin'. In 6, genetic material needs 'alphabetizing' (to be taught to read [itself]). In 60, the shortly obsolescent '*natefakt*' (a word invented by Ludger Lütkehaus in 1999, to contrast with 'artefact') is seductively summoned '*ab in meinen letterntrakt*', 'down into my compositor's tray'. In 65, 'How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea'; '*kriecht schönheit gegen diese wut ins glas des vier-buchstaben-worts*'; 'beauty crawls against this wrath inside the four-letter word's retort' – a reference to the DNA-bases, A, C, G and T.

'Twin Spin' 147 closes Draesner's sequence. It is a maddened clone's cri-de-coeur. The eighth line plays on *machen* (to make, to do), as the clone rocks between object and subject positions, being-able-to-be-made and being-unable-to-unmake.

*bin, als machbares, jenseits der möglichkeit, einen schritt zurückzumachen*  
 ([I] am, as something which can be made/done, beyond the possibility of [making] taking a step back)

This anticipates the resounding closing word of the poem and the sequence: '*macht*' (power, might). That pun was lost in translation. But it proved possible to convey Draesner's sense, while reinstating

Shakespeare's resonant 'past' and taking even further his letter-switching. (The use of 'art' to mean technological finesse, in cloners' and clones' discourse, is established earlier in the sequence.)

I'm, as art's doable, past stopping to double back

Comparison as metaphor or simile is the stuff of all poetry. The *Sonnets* are forever comparing and contrasting, and tying comparison and contrast to the themes of reproduction and survival, mortality and posterity. Sonnet 18's first line famously epitomises poetry per se, in the post-Romantic vernacular, as it offers to compare the addressee with pleasant nature. Google gives 665,000 hits for the line, without apostrophe; 83,000 with it.<sup>5</sup> Compare another Will's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud': 488,000 hits. 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds' (Sonnet 116) is clearly far ahead, with 2,570,000 hits, but this is not in Draesner's sequence.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
 And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
 By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimm'd;  
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;  
 Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st;  
 So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

<sup>5</sup> Accessed September 11, 2007. The phrase 'Shall I compare' has 206,000 hits. One example: Meghan O'Rourke, 'Shall I Compare Thee To An Evil Tyrant? The Poetry of Guantanamo', *Slate* online (August 20, 2007), reviewing *Poems From Guantanamo: The Detainees Speak*, edited by Marc Falkoff (Iowa UP).

*einem sommertag vergleichen, dich?  
 gesünder bist du, besser temperiert:  
 stickstoffwinde nagen die teuren maiknopsen an,  
 geleaste sommerzeit fault dattelbraun, zu schnell:  
 zu viel UV strahlt durchs ozonloch ab und brennt,  
 oft ist der sonne teint von smog verhängt;  
 alles helle beugt periodisch helles in den fall,  
 chaotisch ist zufall, genetisch unser roulette;  
 doch in deinem zeitimmunen sommer tanzt keine zelle  
 den fado,  
 keine verliert, dem du dich verdankst, ihr dna-eldorado;  
 noch wird der tod prahlen, in seinem schatten wandre  
 deine pracht,  
 wenn als buchstabenhelix du der zeit entwächst;  
 solange einer atmen kann, solange augen sehn,  
 solange lohnt auch dies und klont dir leben ein.*

a summer day and you and recombine?  
 you're better for you, quality controlled:  
 rough nitrous gusts aggress the precious may-buds,  
 and summer's time-share option's all too short-date:  
 too much uv glows through the ozone hole and burns,  
 and sol's complexion's tanned by frequent smog;  
 periodically in the case of brightness bright declines,  
 chance-entrapped chaos is our gene-roulette;  
 time-immunized, your summer cells, though, dance  
 no fado,  
 none loses its, what you owe you to, el-dna-dorado;  
 nor 'll loud-mouth death proclaim your glory straggles  
 in his gloom,  
 when as double-stranded letter-vines you out-climb  
 time;  
 so long as breath is drawn, so long as eyes have sight,  
 so long this loan repays its own and clones you life.

Draesner's first line is very close to a literal translation, but the tone, conveyed by the syntax, is one of exasperated incredulity: 'Compare a summer day to you?!' The voice is that of a 'weisskittel': one of the 'white-coats' (I use 'lab-men') who feature throughout the

sequence. The clone ('you') embodies the victory of design over natural randomness, and so is beyond comparison with nature – all the more as nature has long since been degraded by technology's pollutants.

The first line of the reversion is among the least faithful I thought of. The technical term 'recombine' demanded to be used in the sequence, though Draesner did not use the equivalent. 'Recombination' means 'the formation, by the processes of crossing-over and independent assortment, of new combinations of genes in progeny that did not occur in the parents'.<sup>6</sup> This precisely defines sexual reproduction as distinct from cloning's reiteration, replication of the identical same. So the sense is altered here: 'Could there be progeny of you and a summer day?' But the underlying idea (beyond compare) still resonates. Meanwhile the doubled 'and' serves more than one purpose. It mimics Draesner's vernacular style and incredulous tone at this point, suggesting (I hope) an unspoken, climactic 'as if?!' It also underlines 'and' as an anagram of 'dna'.

Elsewhere, this reversion often differs from Draesner, where she differs from Shakespeare, by way of a return to Shakespeare, with a different difference – like the expression of a recessive grandparental gene. In the third line, Draesner 'Will-fully misunderstands' 'too short a date'. Literally: 'leased summertime rots, date-brown, too quickly' ('Dattel' is the fruit). The reversion elaborates 'lease' but returns to Shakespeare's wording in the second half of the line. His 'all too' returns to arrest the regular rhythmic flow. The new twist involves food industry jargon: 'short-date' produce has its 'best before' or 'sell by' date almost upon it. Similarly, in the eighth line, 'entrapped' echoes 'un-trimmed', sacrificing Draesner's balance of clauses for the sake of a creative recombination of both originals, meant to prompt readers to compare and compare.

As line 2 suggests, for clones and cloners reproduction involves comparison only as a quality control procedure. (This is not *only* post hoc rationalization, although the phrase 'quality controlled' came to me after prolonged struggle with unsatisfying alternatives such as 'better regulated', 'better adjusted', 'temperature controlled', and was selected as much for its sound as for its sense.) The point of cloning is to negate chance, to avoid bringing into the world

<sup>6</sup> Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary online, punctuation added.

difference, the unforeseen, the never-before-known, and instead to multiply and perpetuate the achieved. Draesner's speaker vaunts the clone as *gestünder*, healthier (for 'more lovely'). 'More wholesome' would be apt. But crossing the basic sense with the clone's self-sufficiency (1: *bist dir mit dir genug*; 'suffice for you as you') produced 'you're better for you' – better for you, that is, than anything but you yourself. This is what Draesner's poem argues: in the last quatrain, the Shakespearean claim that these 'eternal lines' save the addressee from transience becomes the claim that the clone's perfectly engineered chromosomes ('what you owe you to' – the sound of the phrase reiterates the idea of alphabetic or alphanumeric codes, just as each doubling of 'you' is a figure of a cloning) are to be perpetuated down innumerable generations.

Poetry plays with the instability of meanings. Triumphant affirmations are ironically shadowed. The 'life' which 'this' (the sonnet, in its couplet) gives, for ever, to 'thee', is metaphorical. Notoriously, it remains unclear whether the addressee (here and elsewhere) is even male or female, let alone who it was, if it ever was a particular person. The indeterminacy of the *Sonnets* regarding genders and sexualities remains scandalous, as Draesner notes in 'Dolly und Will', and this ambiguity makes them all the more productive for her project, as the existing ambiguities make room for more: recombinant/replicant; human/non-human/post-human; natural/artificial; evolved/synthetic. The only immortal life a poetic artifice ever really achieves (with spectacular success in the case of Sonnet 18) is its own.

All translations of the *Sonnets* seek to imbibe some of their enviable immortality. So the last line of Draesner's poem implicitly compares her poem with Sonnet 18. Her line can be glossed as follows: 'So long is this, too (*auch*), worthwhile, and clones life into you.' That phrase '*auch dies*' ('this too') implicitly pays rivalrous homage to Sonnet 18, one of the supremely canonical poems: that *that* poem 'is worthwhile', that is beyond question. At least, it is otherwise not at all clear to what the '*auch*' refers. But if this reading is correct, then the pronoun in the phrase 'clones life into you' refers to Sonnet 18, too.

The suggestion is of a kind of transfusion between poems. A self-transfusion image is in Sonnet 11:

And that fresh blood which youngly thou bestow'st,  
Thou mayst call thine, when thou from youth convertest

*wenn deine zellen auf age konvertieren, nennst frisches  
blut dein, in das du jung dich schmuggelst ein*  
(when your cells convert to age, you call fresh  
blood yours, into which you young[ly] smuggle  
yourself)

when your cells convert to age, you claim as yours  
fresh blood you trojan horse yourself youngingly through.

But at the close of 'Twin Spin' 18, 'this' ('*auch dies*') is a poem, not a medical-technical procedure. If the pronoun 'you' is slipping, here, from the clone to the poetic pre-text, then the poem is almost as self-glorifying as Sonnet 18: it claims to transfuse life into the *Sonnets*.

Faced with the marvellous simplicity of Shakespeare's final couplet, with its staggeringly apt self-assurance, neither Draesner nor I make a full rhyme – and at least in her case, this is intentional: 'this over-quoted poem needs injuring at the end'.<sup>7</sup> The sense of 'Twin Spin' 18's final line is a little obscure: *einklonen* is found only in scientific documents and in the logs of German Trekkies. My reversion's last line is much less clear again. The verb (*sich*) *lohn* primarily means 'to be worthwhile'. It recalls the noun *Lohn* (wage or pay), and also (for bilingual readers) 'loan'. And it means 'to repay, reward' in ethical and religious contexts. Mobilising all these terms, the reversion's last line can be read in terms of clones' self-referentiality, but it also intends to pay a translation's homage, as recombined progeny, to its grandparental and parental source texts. The translator's 'own' is always something 'loaned' and 'owed' – as in 'that fair thou ow'st'.<sup>8</sup>

So long as minds enjoy the illimitable (and ill imitable) play of language and languages, then (fingers crossed) fears of the triumph of the lab-men remain exaggerated, and comparison thrives in reading and writing, sex and love, for nobody is anybody but themselves.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> 'dieses über-zitierte gedicht braucht eine verletzung am ende.' Email, September 2007.

<sup>8</sup> 'ow'st' is glossed by Katherine Duncan-Jones as: 'own, possess; but with a subsidiary implication of owe = are obliged to pay, as in the concept of death as a debt to nature'. *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (The Arden Shakespeare) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), p. 146. (I avoided consulting Shakespeare scholarship until I had finished the reversions.)

<sup>9</sup> I would be very interested to hear of other 'reversions' of 'free' or 'strong' translations back into their source language; perhaps for a multilingual anthology?