Michael Hofmann

A life spent changing what German literature becomes in English

Michael Hofmann is a German-born, English-language poet, translator and critic. Over four decades, he has made an unusually personal selection of German-language literature available in English, translating roughly a hundred books while teaching creative writing at the University of Florida. His name recurs across authors who might otherwise occupy separate shelves: Joseph Roth, Franz Kafka, Wolfgang Koeppen, Herta Müller, Peter Stamm, Jenny Erpenbeck. The cumulative achievement is larger than a succession of well-executed commissions.[1]

To understand his influence, it helps to follow the books all the way through. Someone recommends a forgotten novel; someone buys rights; Hofmann accepts or refuses it; he finds an English voice, supplies an introduction, and returns to the author years later. Sometimes the result becomes a bestseller. Sometimes an excellent translation disappears. Sometimes the English book substantially changes the author it appears to transmit. His authority lies in this accumulation of choices, relationships and sentences. It is considerable, but it is exercised alongside other people, and it remains open to argument.

The life behind those choices began with a child for whom German was the language of home, English the language of schooling, and literature already a form of family work.

[External image / 外部圖片] Portrait of Michael Hofmann
Michael Hofmann in the portrait accompanying his university biographical page. University of Florida Department of English; photographer not stated · Rights retained by the source and respective rights holders; no open license stated. · Image source

The German child and the English poet

Hofmann was born in Freiburg in 1957, to parents from Saxony. In his childhood recollections, the war survives in the household through his parents' memories of hunger and his mother's anxious attention to feeding him. His father, Gert, took a teaching job in Bristol in 1961. The family crossed the Channel when Michael was four. The adult writer remembers that crossing through an intensely pleasurable food whose identity he can no longer recover: an early memory of being between countries, preserved without a tidy explanation.[2]

The family subsequently lived in Scotland and the United States as well as England. German remained their domestic language. His mother sang German songs; his father read Kafka and Thomas Mann aloud when Michael was still a child. His maternal grandfather had

worked on the Brockhaus encyclopedia in Leipzig. This was not simply a household in which an eminent novelist instructed his son. Books, songs, reference work and an academic's itinerant employment offered different kinds of contact with language. At the same time, British classmates inhabited a culture still strongly marked by victory over Germany. English education gave Hofmann fluency without erasing the nationality it sometimes made uncomfortable.[3]

In 1971 the family dispersed. Gert went to Ljubljana for an academic post. Michael's mother and sisters moved to Klagenfurt; Michael won a scholarship to Winchester. The reasoning was practical: his schooling was already English, while the others need not learn Slovenian. The arrangement was emotionally less workable. His journeys between school and Austria took more than a day each way. At one end were school hierarchies and communal dormitories; at the other, a flat without a room of his own. He came to value the suspended interval of the train journey. Reading, wakefulness at night and solitude became parts of the same adolescent life. This is the separation behind his later accounts of having become English almost by being left behind.[4]

Literature also had an unromantic material existence. Gert wrote radio plays, Michael's mother typed them, and the children earned small payments for collating the carbon copies. Michael first tried prose, but his fragments would not grow into a novel. During Christmas 1976 in Austria, Robert Lowell's Life Studies and For the Union Dead helped show him what a poem might accommodate. He dated his first carefully preserved poem to 4 January 1977. The discovery was of a usable form: a way for charged family experience and exact language to coexist without the sustained narrative machinery that defeated him.[5]

At Magdalene College, Cambridge, he read English and completed his BA in 1979.[6]

A doctorate on Lowell remained unfinished. His friend Stephen Romer remembers Hofmann marking individual Lowell lines with ticks and crosses, a reader arguing with the smallest units of an admired work. Romer and Peter Robinson belonged to his circle, but that circle was not a unified school; Hofmann kept away from the usual poetry workshop. Romer's encouragement mattered privately, while Craig Raine and Hugo Williams helped bring the poems into publication. His formation joined solitary standards to very concrete acts of friendship and editorial recognition.[7]

Nights in the Iron Hotel appeared in 1983, followed by Acrimony in 1986.[8] The latter's father poems established a public drama that would follow him for years. Yet father and son were not simply established master and belated apprentice. Gert's first prose book appeared in 1979, when Michael was beginning to publish poems. Michael later emphasized their simultaneous beginnings and their different gifts: his father's scenes advanced through dialogue, whereas his own writing tended toward a single speaking consciousness. He recognized an intimate resemblance in humor while resisting the prospect of spending his whole life inside his father's books.[9]

Finding work, then finding an author

Book translation offered a different scale of work and payment from poems and reviews. Chatto & Windus commissioned Kurt Tucholsky's Castle Gripsholm (1985). Hofmann had imagined translating perhaps one book a year. Beat Sterchi's substantial Swiss novel Blösch, later in the decade, changed his sense of the occupation: supplementary work was becoming a profession.[10]

Roth was the most consequential instance. Hofmann first reviewed Weights and Measures for the Times Literary Supplement in 1982, then wrote an introduction to Flight without End. Reading and criticism preceded the translation commitment.[11]

After the death of Roth's translator John Hoare, Chatto offered Hofmann Right and Left. Editor Jeremy Lewis moved The Legend of the Holy Drinker ahead of it to coincide with Ermanno Olmi's film. The publisher expected a novel and received a very short work. Large type, generous space and a translator's introduction helped make it into a book. A commercial misunderstanding became the beginning of a long literary attachment. In translating Roth, Hofmann found that late, ceremonious prose wanted a more ornate English than a supposedly universal plain style could supply. French and Latinate resources could carry manners and social position; an English school background could suddenly become useful in voicing an Austrian writer's characters.[12]

His commitments then acquired their own momentum. As he later explained, translating several books by an author makes it difficult to decline the next. Becoming a writer's continuing English voice is both an achievement and a constraint. His concentration on the 1920s and 1930s attracted still more work from that period. Selection was becoming self-reinforcing: not a fixed policy dictated in advance, but a literary identity made out of previous agreements.[13]

Making a different Roth available

The scale of Hofmann's Roth work cannot be understood by counting new versions of the famous novel alone. Short fiction, journalism, travel writing and letters allowed English readers to encounter a writer with several occupations and several tones. The intervention was in the shape of an oeuvre: which Roth a reader could discover after finishing the first book, and whether that discovery could continue.

The American publisher Robert Weil describes a complementary route into that work. Literary agent Joan Daves introduced him to Roth; he bought fiction and nonfiction rights from Kiepenheuer & Witsch. Norton gave him room to build a European list. For the 2003 launch of What I Saw, his translation of Michael Bienert's selection of Roth's Berlin journalism, more than three hundred people came to New York's Goethe House, requiring an overflow room. Here the translator's work met rights acquisition, institutional hospitality and a publisher willing to invest in older European writing. These were

conditions of circulation, not decorative associations added after the books succeeded.[14]

The Hotel Years extended the journalistic Roth in 2015: sixty-four pieces from 1919–1939, newly translated into English. Hotels, small encounters and everyday observations became access points to a continent's transformations. Houman Barekat's contemporary review emphasized the historical intelligence of those apparently minor subjects. The collection enlarged the English Roth beyond imperial elegy. It made the journalist's attention to passing life available as a major part of the writer's achievement.[15]

But Hofmann's vivid English also made his authority contestable. Reviewing the collected shorter fiction in 2002, J. M. Coetzee admired his precision while objecting to compression, heightened vocabulary and shifts in implication. One objection concerned rendering a German word meaning more modern as more progressive: the political associations were not interchangeable. The dispute went beyond whether an isolated word was defensible. If a translator reduces repetitions, sharpens effects and repairs weaknesses, an English reader may come to admire a version of the author who has been made more consistently accomplished.[16]

Hofmann rejected the charge of improving Roth. In his reply, tone, context and the speaker's attitude mattered more than checking each word as if it were a digit in a number. He also resisted the reduction of Roth to one supreme achievement: themes gain force through recurrence across books. Robert Weil, he noted, already checked excessive Britishness in the American editions. The exchange exposes two interconnected powers. Hofmann argues for how a sentence should sound, and for how much of an author the English reader ought to have. Both decisions help determine the resulting reputation.[17]

Bringing the family into English

Secker editor Dan Franklin commissioned The Film Explainer after Hofmann recommended it in the TLS.[18]

The novel concerns a man who explains silent films in a provincial German cinema, a vocation threatened by technological change and entangled with the rise of Nazism. Its family history reaches back to Michael's great-grandfather. In his essay "Sharp Biscuit," Hofmann describes the peculiar satisfaction of putting that history into English. An English idiom beside a Nazi greeting can make the past less safely foreign. The translation implicates an English-speaking reader in a world that might otherwise remain somebody else's inheritance. This is also personal reconstruction: the names and voices belong to his family, but English is the language in which he can make them publicly communicable.[19]

Gert died in 1993. The Film Explainer appeared in English in 1995; Luck and Lichtenberg and the Little Flower Girl followed. The son who had resisted becoming an appendage to his father's writing became one of its principal means of survival in another language. His work did not begin from nothing: Christopher Middleton had already translated Gert, winning the 1986 Schlegel–Tieck Prize for The Spectacle at the Tower. The later father-son

association should not erase that earlier English life.[20, 21]

Nor was translation a simple reconciliation that cancelled the poems. In Approximately Nowhere (1999), mourning, damaged relationships and unsettled geography remain formally abrasive. Tony Williams' s study of Hofmann' s poetry shows how untranslated German can preserve the pressure of a family voice inside an English poem. A fragment may suggest that conversation with the dead is continuing, then interrupt that possibility. The translator who makes other writers readable also writes poems in which some things resist being brought fully across.[22]

His impact could, however, travel beyond the readership of translated books. The American novelist Adam Ehrlich Sachs explicitly credits Gert' s work, encountered through Michael' s English, among the presences behind The Organs of Sense. That is a particularly tangible kind of influence. Translation has furnished another writer with an artistic ancestor who was not available through a shared language.[23]

The books a good translation cannot carry alone

Sterchi' s Blösch supplies an important counterhistory to successful recovery. Published as Cow in America, the book had demanded that Hofmann sustain a long, linguistically difficult narrative of farm and slaughterhouse life. Decades later the publisher Neil Belton attributed its American failure partly to upheaval at Pantheon: the publisher was dismissed, staff departed, and the book lost its internal advocates. In 2018 Belton brought Hofmann' s existing translation back through Head of Zeus. The English words could be used again; the publishing circumstances had to be remade.[24]

A translator can produce the necessary text without securing its durable presence. Someone must keep it in print, place it with booksellers, explain its interest and remain answerable for it when early sales disappoint. Sterchi himself welcomed renewed attention while wishing readers would also notice his later work. Recovery can create a new confinement: one rediscovered book comes to stand for a writer who continued living and making things.[25]

Herta Müller' s The Land of Green Plums offers a different route. Hofmann' s translation won the 1998 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award with Müller, after nomination by the University Library of Bern. A German-language novelist from Romania entered an English-language prize through a Swiss library and an American edition. The institutional geography was already wider than a transaction between Germany and Britain.[26]

The award did not merely celebrate an established British success. Contemporary reporting described Granta preparing a British edition after the win, when the translation had previously been available in the United States. Hofmann' s text was essential, but library nomination, judging and a publisher' s response helped it reach another readership. The case makes the difference between having translated a book and having made it available in a particular market unusually visible.[27]

Fallada: the breakthrough and the people behind it

The most dramatic commercial example is Hans Fallada's Every Man Dies Alone, published in Britain as Alone in Berlin. Its eventual success can make the preceding decades disappear. Nicholas Jacobs's Libris had reissued The Drinker in 1989 in Charlotte and A. L. Lloyd's translation, and published Susan Bennett's new Little Man—What Now? in 1996. Jacobs recalls twelve unsuccessful attempts to secure paperback partnerships in Britain and America. The books had readers and advocates; the obstacle was also publishers' willingness to maintain access. English would become the eighteenth language into which the later bestseller was translated.[28]

Melville House changed the conditions. Before the 2009 publication, Dennis Johnson had commissioned Hofmann and invested in rights to several other Fallada books. The plan joined the new translation to reissues, documentary material from the underlying resistance case, a move to Random House distribution and a thousand advance reading copies. Independent booksellers prepared displays; Penguin would publish in Britain. These decisions helped a long German novel become a visible proposition in an English-language market.[29]

The recommendation itself crossed another language first. Penguin's Adam Freudenheim heard about the novel from his Paris colleague Abel Gerschenfeld, who knew the French edition. Freudenheim and Hofmann read it and worked with Melville House. Hofmann was absorbed by its pace, dialogue and suspense. By September 2016, New Books in German reported sales of about half a million copies for the English editions, with renewed interest also reaching Germany. The novel had remained available in East Germany; English success helped alter its position elsewhere. What is called rediscovery here was a geographically uneven return.[30]

The British paperback alone sold more than a hundred thousand copies in its first three months in 2010, according to contemporary reporting. This was an audience on a different scale from the small readership usually imagined for literary translation.[31]

Hofmann's part was therefore both indispensable and bounded. The English readers encountered his handling of a book that had gripped him. They encountered it because several publishers, translators, booksellers and earlier advocates had made overlapping commitments. The result cannot be explained as a lone translator discovering a neglected masterpiece, or as marketing succeeding independently of the translated prose.

His later version of Little Man, What Now?, published by Penguin in 2019, also shows that an expanded readership does not settle translation permanently. A writer can return through a new book, an old translation reissued, and then another translation of an already familiar work. Those are different changes to what flows into English.[32]

A personal map of the twentieth century

The concentration on interwar writing creates a recognizable English-language neighbourhood. It contains displaced people, hotel rooms, unstable livelihoods, compromised institutions and the encroachment of political catastrophe. Yet the perspective changes according to the writer. Irmgard Keun's Child of All Nations, first published in English in Hofmann's translation in 2008, follows exile through a child's knowledge of unpaid bills, passports and adults' unreliable promises. Eileen Battersby praised the translation's liveliness while finding the novel's American sequence less successful. Keun could enter English as a specific, uneven and funny novelist, rather than merely an important historical victim or Roth's companion.[33]

Hofmann could also initiate a publication rather than accept an editor's choice. He persuaded Penguin and New York Review Books to publish Jakob Wassermann's account of a disastrous marriage.[34]

The resulting My First Wife appeared in Britain in 2012 and as My Marriage in America in 2016. English readers were offered a freestanding narrative extracted from a much larger trilogy. Here the intervention reached the unit of publication itself: readers were offered a concentrated work, detached from the larger structure that could have kept it forbiddingly remote.[35]

A new version can change the historical text being read as well as its language. Hofmann's Storm of Steel replaced the long-standing English dependence on Basil Creighton's 1929 translation with a version based on Jünger's later revisions. Henning Hoff's 2003 review admired the new English but thought some chilling effects had softened. The difference between editions matters politically: changes in Jünger's own presentation of war cannot all be credited or charged to Hofmann's style. Retranslation is also a decision about which version of an author becomes current.[36]

The same distinction applies to recovery. Ernst Haffner's Blood Brothers, which Hofmann translated after its successful German reissue, had not been wholly unknown: historians had continued to use it. Its return as a trade book was nonetheless consequential. Jan Mieszkowski welcomed the English prose while challenging a publicity frame that treated the author's obscure fate and the homeless characters' lives as one story of impending Nazi catastrophe. Translation and packaging can cooperate in making a book visible without making the same argument about it.[37]

The poet choosing the poems

Poetry made that selective power especially visible. Hofmann had long kept his own poems apart from the prose he translated. Editing the German anthology published by Faber in 2005 and in America the following year broke down that division. He translated just over a third of its contents, both to fill gaps and to replace versions he disliked. The work helped make larger engagements with Benn and Günter Eich imaginable. Durs Grünbein's continuing confidence in him was another source of encouragement. Translation

developed through what he had tried, what a book required, and what another poet believed he could do.[38]

An anthology exercises influence through proportions as well as inclusion. In Twentieth-Century German Poetry, Brecht receives nineteen poems and Enzensberger fourteen; nineteen poets are represented by one poem each. The American edition places German beside English. Its brief introduction and chronological ordering make a selection into a navigable literary century. These arrangements do not neutrally reproduce the size of reputations in Germany. They invite English readers to spend more time with some poets, and provide enough work for an unfamiliar name to become a distinctive voice.[39]

Nor was it a collection only of Hofmann's English. Jan Wagner's closing poem, "frogs," appeared in Georgina Paul's translation, originally made for a 2002 Goethe-Institut reading in London. Wagner remembered shared readings with Hofmann but could not say exactly where the editor had found it. He was equally cautious about claiming a measurable career effect from inclusion. The episode shows an editor drawing on a living network of readings and other translators, while the author himself resists turning a prestigious appearance into an invented story of consequence.[40]

With Angina Days in 2010, Hofmann gave English readers eighty poems by Günter Eich, many from the later work and most appearing in English for the first time. Princeton's facing-page format let the new English coexist visibly with the source. This was expansion into a relatively thinly translated body of poetry, rather than simply another contest over a universally familiar classic.[41]

Benn was different again. Hofmann had reviewed his collected poems in 1986; by 2011 he described changes in his own syntax, diction and musicality as a long preparation for translating him. The translator had already been altered by the poet he was bringing across. What sounds like Hofmann in the English can sometimes be Hofmann's own writing having learned from Benn first.[42]

Yet affinity also narrows. Comparing Hofmann's Impromptus with David Paisey's Benn for Carcanet, Henry King found strikingly different authors. Hofmann strongly favoured the early expressionist and later free-verse work; relatively little represented the intervening decades. Paisey gave readers more of the rhymed and metrical middle. King admired Hofmann's English effects but questioned the omission and alteration of formal features. The more famous translator, with a prominent publisher, might become the default Benn even when the alternative disclosed parts of the career his version left indistinct.[43]

Adam Thirlwell made the aesthetic cost particularly clear: without enough of the earlier music, an English reader cannot fully hear what the late poems have lost. He found Hofmann's versions compelling while questioning touches of added cosmopolitan sophistication. This is a deeper limitation than the complaint that a translation contains liberties. A selection can change an author's development, making an eventual style seem like the writer's essential nature all along.[44]

What happens at the desk

These large effects are made through repetitive, small-scale labour. Hofmann drafts quickly, puts the manuscript away for three to six months, then revises it repeatedly, sometimes twenty times. The break lets him encounter English as writing rather than remembered German. He had watched his father let manuscripts rest. Obscure usages could send him to his German partner, an experienced copyeditor.[45]

By 2025 he worked on a laptop, after years of longhand and typewriter. He still made an English draft promptly, leaving gaps for words requiring further attention, then put the German aside to work on the English. That later phase gives him room to move sentences and hear their independence. The published book, after all, must sustain a reader who cannot continually consult the original.[46]

The procedure does not prescribe one sound. In Kafka, Hofmann has to resist habits that serve other writers. Discussing the houses in “The Judgment,” he considered livelier English equivalents for leicht gebaut but held back: a more colourful choice would insert an attitude the German did not supply. Kafka’s clauses need to move within their own logic, without an interpreter repeatedly stepping outside to explain them. The translator known for verbal personality can also work by suppressing it.[47]

Peter Stamm presents a different discipline. His spare writing leaves nowhere for Hofmann’s own elaborateness to hide. In The Sweet Indifference of the World, small changes make English sound like a person recalling a life rather than like elementary prose: reviewers “seemed to sit up,” for example, instead of merely paying attention. Hofmann wants enough tonal complexity for simplicity to remain credible. He speaks of trusting Stamm’s direction, not of adding a competing thematic programme; he also acknowledges a slightly warmer, more vocal English. The point is proportion, not maximum ornament.[48]

His sense of English has itself become transatlantic. British and American expressions coexist in his working vocabulary, and publishers on both sides of the Atlantic exert pressure on it. “Sharp Biscuit” defends that mixed language rather than a purified national idiom.[49] Such mixtures can expand English’s resources. They can also create social voices that no actual speaker would use.

The disagreement over Berlin Alexanderplatz turns on precisely that danger. Hofmann’s 2018 translation succeeded Eugene Jolas’s 1931 version. Sophie Duvernoy valued its roughness and discontinuity, hearing a renewed capacity for the city novel’s critical energy. Her comparison treated Jolas as a serious predecessor, while finding that his smoother American idiom could mute the source’s jarring collisions.[50]

Thirlwell was less persuaded by the new mixture of dialects. Old London and contemporary American slang could make the characters sound like literary constructions. He still admired passages of extraordinary force. The two responses expose the translator’s difficult wager: invent an English capable of the original’s estrangement without inventing a social world that distracts from it. No declaration of fidelity resolves that

problem in advance.[51]

Criticism as another route across

Hofmann's criticism gives him a second opportunity to affect what readers encounter. A translation offers the text; a review or introduction supplies reasons to care, connections to other writers, and sometimes permission to dismiss a prevailing reputation. His judgments circulate in institutions such as the London Review of Books, where he has published poems since 1980 as well as essays on German and other literatures. His subjects range well beyond the authors he translates, and recent work includes Gabriele Tergit's The Effingers in Sophie Duvernoy's English.[52]

His ideal reader is not someone consuming every new book. He has argued for returning deeply to a few writers and for bringing prose, biography, painting and film into the life of poetry. The essays collected in Where Have You Been? build connections among their subjects rather than offering a neutral survey. The severe exclusions and the infectious recommendations come from the same portable set of preferences. They are part of how he writes, not merely a selection service performed before the real work.[53]

His attack on Stefan Zweig in 2010 is the notorious negative instance. Reviewing Anthea Bell's translation of The World of Yesterday, he disputed the literary seriousness of the revival, set Zweig against Roth, and attacked the memoir's self-presentation. His praise for Bell did not soften the assault on the author, which extended to a cruel treatment of Zweig's suicide note. Letters challenged both his judgment and the proportion of his rhetoric. The critic was trying to alter the terms on which an already successful import was valued.[54]

Translator Will Stone's reply accepted that renewed popularity need not prove modernist greatness, while rejecting Hofmann's chosen measure. Zweig's psychological gifts and nineteenth-century affinities could be judged on their own terms; neglected essays and a substantial European readership deserved attention. This was a competing literary argument from another mediator. Hofmann's visibility did not give him final authority over the traffic. Other translators and publishers continued to make a different Zweig available.[55]

Even a famous writer's new collection can reveal how many decisions lie outside the translator's control. The Lost Writings of Kafka began with Barbara Epler's conversation with biographer Reiner Stach. Earlier English appearances complicated the proposed discovery story, and Stach objected to calling texts already present in German scholarly editions lost.[56]

New Directions' final description identifies seventy-four pieces selected by Stach, with only two never previously translated into English. Hofmann supplied a new English encounter with the fragments; he was neither their discoverer nor their selector. Making them approachable in one small book was nevertheless a real change in access.[57]

The time and income that make the books possible

The University of Florida first brought him as a visiting lecturer in 1990, with a continuing distinguished visiting appointment from 1994. Other teaching visits took him to Michigan, Rutgers and New York institutions. The university became a durable part of a life that continued to cross the Atlantic.[58]

In a 2010–11 German profile, Hofmann described teaching as the first work that paid for his time rather than requiring every piece of writing to earn its keep. He then divided most of the year in Florida from several months in Hamburg, where his partner Barbara Hoffmeister lived. Teaching could interrupt isolation as well as support it: students' responses made him consider which particulars of a piece they actually believed. A 2010 residency at Gut Siggen, spent translating Fallada, supplied another kind of support, including the unusual sociability of people asking about a translator's daily progress.[59]

Those arrangements help explain sustained production without reducing it to either heroic discipline or a comfortable academic subsidy. Translation needs concentrated time; it also competes for the verbal energy that might produce a poem. A salary, a residency and an advance purchase different kinds of time. The exact balance of Hofmann's income is not public, and a novel's sales do not tell us his earnings.

His own poetry remained an unresolved demand. After Approximately Nowhere, occasional new poems and a selected volume appeared, but the next full collection, One Lark, One Horse, did not arrive until 2018. André Naffis-Sahely heard an expanded geography and longer, more capacious lines in that return: travel, aging and accumulating losses had changed what the poems could hold. It was a development, not simply the resumption of an unchanged young poet's voice.[60]

John Palattella was more doubtful about some of its habitual abrasiveness, but admired a quieter attention in "Hudson Ride." American places and a Rhine-haunted imagination overlap during a train journey. The poem's achievement, in that reading, lies in its ability to observe without turning every perception into a grievance. A life spent serving other writers had not settled how Hofmann should write as himself.[61]

Nor did teaching narrow him to German. His 2019 Clarendon Lectures, published as Messing About in Boats in 2021, followed poems by Rilke, Rimbaud, Montale and Karen Solie. The shared boat motif let a listening audience travel among four languages. It was another exercise in making foreign writing usable without requiring the audience to become specialists first.[62]

Kairos and the ordinary work afterward

Jenny Erpenbeck offered Hofmann Kairos, their first collaboration. He brought memories of his own family's East German origins and visits across the border to a novel in which an unequal love affair unfolds around the end of the GDR. He estimated about a year of work

and perhaps twenty readings of the English during revision. The initiative was the author’s, and the historical resources were partly his own.[63]

Erpenbeck already had a substantial English readership built through other translators, particularly Susan Bernofsky, with Kurt Beals translating her essays. John Domini’s 2023 review recognized that continuity while praising the new translation’s handling of volatile images, shifts of tone and formal locutions. Hofmann entered an existing English life; he did not create Erpenbeck’s international career from the beginning.[64]

He was attentive to the social assumptions English might smuggle into her characters. In 2025 he explained that the young woman’s East Germany must not acquire the tone of affluent, entitled American youth. Restricted consumer choice and different habits of expectation needed to survive without an explanatory lecture. A translator’s decision about idiom was also a decision about the historical world a reader would inhabit.[65]

The 2024 International Booker Prize gave the collaboration a conspicuous public platform. Its £50,000 award was divided equally between Erpenbeck and Hofmann. The judges praised the English’s rhythms and emotional range. The award made a translator visible beside an author in a way the ordinary circulation of translated books often does not.[66]

A year later, their accounts of the consequences differed. Erpenbeck described a new surge of German sales; Hofmann said the prize had scarcely changed his position there, where readers could read the original. He had returned to ordinary translation work. He warned against expecting a prize to permanently rebase a life, while arguing that prizes had grown more important as dependable creative livelihoods weakened. Recognition was real and materially useful, but it did not abolish the next manuscript or the next negotiation.[67]

By then, other long attachments were continuing. The Frog in the Throat brought another Markus Werner novel into English in 2025. Hofmann had corresponded with Werner without meeting him; advocacy could persist after the author’s death. Robert E. Goodwin had also helped build Werner’s English bibliography. A literary relationship need not be personal friendship, and sustained commitment need not mean exclusive possession.[68]

Koeppen’s postwar novels were circulating again in 2026 through New Directions. Reviewing the trilogy that August, Deborah Eisenberg described returning to Death in Rome after an earlier unsuccessful encounter and finding it newly electrifying. Hofmann’s translations now sat beside introductions by Pankaj Mishra and Joshua Cohen. An English text’s effect can arrive decades after it was made, through a fresh edition, a changed historical moment, and another reader’s changed receptiveness.[69]

How much has he changed the flow?

His importance is best understood as concentration rather than control. Around certain writers he has made an English body of work substantial enough to keep discovering. He has helped move books from specialist enthusiasm into broad circulation. Through

anthologies and selected poems he has made some parts of a career far more available than others. Through sentences and introductions he has changed the character readers hear. Those are different achievements, and the disagreements surrounding them are evidence of their consequences.

There is also a limit built into the method. The more readers trust his name, the easier it becomes to mistake one translator's affinities for the contours of a whole literature.

For Hofmann himself, the traffic has never been entirely one-way. In early 2025 he said he had spent most of the preceding five years in Germany and had grown more attached to German, even though English remained his working language.[70]

In 2026, Pferd und Lerche brought his own poetry into a bilingual German edition through Marcel Beyer and Jan Wagner. The younger poet whose work he had once selected was now helping carry his work in the other direction.[71]

That return offers a fitting image of the vocation. A German-speaking child became an English poet; the poet's need for work and for more literature became a long series of translations; those translations helped give other writers new readers and, sometimes, new literary descendants. The authority accumulated along the way remains exposed and revisable: that of a writer who keeps putting his taste, his language and years of his life behind particular books.

Sources and further reading

The notes link to interviews, first-person essays, publisher and institutional records, and critical responses. Publication dates refer to the editions discussed; reissues are distinguished from new translations. This profile draws on material available through 5 October 2026.

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