
Forum

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A Biblical Ring to Mörike's "Ihm"?

To the Editor:

As a native speaker of German professionally concerned with (primarily but not only American) literature, I developed a growing interest when reading, first, the 1951 discussion about Mörike's poem "Auf eine Lampe" ("A 1951 Dialogue on Interpretation: Emil Staiger, Martin Heidegger, Leo Spitzer," 105 [1990]: 409–35) and then the 1991 debate (Forum, 106 [1991]: 312–14). My responses oscillated between, on the one hand, a certain impatience with the continued mixture of conceding and maintaining by the three 1951 disputants and, on the other hand, an increasing eagerness to join the discussion myself, in order to give yet another turn to the screw—with a view to making it finally sit fast, at least in one respect.

Following this impulse, I venture one more opinion on, if not final proof of, Mörike's use of "ihm" as a reflexive pronoun in the last line of his poem. For this, I owe a first hint to a theologian and Protestant minister, Helmut Neuschäfer, of Wiesbaden, Germany, for whom the language and grammar of Mörike's line at once had a biblical ring. In brief, on further investigation it turned out that John 5.26 in its original Lutheran German offers new or additional corroborative evidence: "Denn wie der Vater hat das Leben in ihm selber, also hat er dem Sohn gegeben, das Leben zu haben in ihm selber" 'For as the Father hath life in himself, so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself.' That is, "ihm" here definitely functions as a reflexive pronoun. A second proof is the fact that this "ihm," retained through the centuries, was changed into "sich" in the German Bible text revision of 1984. Third, both the earlier (older) "ihm" and the later (more recent) "sich," each in reflexive function, render nothing but the original Greek word, a reflexive pronoun, which Luther had translated into the German of his time.

There can be little doubt that Mörike, with four years' study of theology and twelve years as a practicing pastor behind him in 1846, was well familiar with biblical diction and most probably with the cited passage from John itself. On the strength of this possible discovery, I at first felt tempted to draw further conclusions concerning the overall interpretation of the poem, but on second thought I decided to leave this task to more competent minds. At this point, I only want to offer one more piece of corroborating evidence without claiming that it is of much consequence—or is it?

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