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The three Ms of German poetry

by [John Simon](#)

On *Twentieth-Century German Poetry: An Anthology*, edited by Michael Hofmann.

Verse translators come in three varieties: Those who get almost nothing right; those (the majority) who get some things right; and those rare birds who get everything, or at least almost everything, right.

By everything I mean the three Ms: Music, Metaphor, and Meaning. By music I mean meter, rhythm, cadence, and, where it exists, rhyme. By metaphor I really mean imagery, but can't resist having three Ms. Under meaning I include poetic diction, which must tackle the problem of how to handle the language of past centuries: should it be modernized and, if so, to what degree? Is there perhaps a language that manages to be timeless?

You may gather that verse translation is no easy business. Whoever undertakes it is either a hack, a well-meaning innocent, or, now and then, a truly gifted translator who may or may not be a poet himself.

Poetry anthologists, too, come in three varieties ...

John Simon's collections of film, theater, and music criticism are available from Applause.

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