

## How writers change the face of the world

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It has proven very interesting, my recent little quest to dig up the history of the passage from Freud quoted by Michel de Salzman in his luminous 1989 talk “Seeing: The Endless Source of Inner Freedom”:

“We would like to have wings in order to fly toward God; but it is not forbidden to go in that direction, even limping.”

Here is the back story. It reminds me of Borges' idea of “hronir”:

Until recently, the Hronir were the accidental products of distraction and forgetfulness. ... A scattered dynasty of solitary men has changed the face of the world. Their task continues.  
– Jorge-Luis Borges, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*

Hronir (Borges' plural of his made-up word “hron”) are copies, surrogates for originals. Borges says that the first hron is lesser than the original, but after several generations of such copying or trans-creation (I hesitate to use the word “plagiarism”) they often become better than the original.

Let's trace backwards from the beautiful rendition from Michel. He got it from Freud's popular book *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) which he probably read in German, where the quote is:

Was man nicht erfliegen kann, muss man erhinken  
Die Schrift sagt, es ist keine Sünde zu hinken.

In straightforward English this reads: “What we cannot reach flying we have to limp towards; as scripture says, it is not a sin to limp.” Michel inserted “God” which was not present in the German. Freud was an atheist, as Michel would have known--Freud mentions God numerous times, mainly as a damnable illusion (*The Future of an Illusion*, and *Moses and Monotheism*), yet his writings do more good for the name of God than the splutterings of billions of believers of several faiths. Strachey's standard English translation of Freud in many ways distorts his thought, as Bruno Bettelheim made a career of pointing out (*Freud and Man's Soul: An Important Re-Interpretation of Freudian Theory*). Also, in their versions of the quote both Freud and Michel, fail to mention the Koran, which is what was meant by “Die Schrift”.

Freud got the lines from Friedrich Rückert's translation of “Die beiden Gulden” [the two gold-pieces] a story-poem in his 1837 book *Die Makamen des Hariri* (*The Maqams of al-Hariri*). In Rückert the last three lines read:

Was man nicht erfliegen kann, muß man erhinken.  
Viel besser ist hinken, als völlig zu sinken.  
Die Schrift sagt: *Es ist keine Sünde, zu hinken*

(The second of these lines was omitted by Freud).

This book, a classic early example of the exuberant German scholarly orientalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is not available in English, but I found it in German and used Google translate to get a sense of it. The context of the last lines reads like this, slightly edited to capture more precisely Rückert's translation of al-Hariri:

I said:  
I am the Hareth ben Hemmam;  
How are you and all your junk?

He [a limping beggar] said:  
Now well, now lame;  
I sail with two winds,  
Kind and unkind.

I said:  
You should be ashamed  
to take refuge in an infirmity.

Then his expression darkened and he said:  
Let me inform you!  
I limp, but not for pleasure,  
I limp to eat, I limp to drink.  
I limp where stars of hope beckon me  
I limp where guilders flash towards me.  
Where one cannot fly, one must limp.  
Limping is much better than sinking.  
Scripture says there is no sin in limping.

[Rückert adds this footnote: The Koran says on the occasion of an exhortation to holy combat (Jihad):  
“But whoever limps, it is no sin for him,” namely to stay at home from the combat].

In plain words, the wanderer who spoke these words was a beggar, who affected a limp in order to beg more effectively (in Hariri's poem he is given two gold pieces by Hareth, the narrator). The beggar excuses himself on the grounds “ya gotta do what ya gotta do” (I am quoting verbatim here from a man who hired me to be a salesman, at which I proved totally ineffectual although I was paid handsomely, and learned a lot about how things are sold, which is often by means of a deceptive version of “truth”). He misleadingly cites the Koran where it says that it is no sin to limp, but it says so only in the sense that it is no sin to not go to war if you are actually lame.

I haven't been able to find that in the Koran but I haven't looked too hard. I assume Rückert was not lying about it, but who knows. I suppose one might be able to read multiple levels of meaning in such a statement, including that it might not be a sin to pretend to limp if you really are in need and have to beg. But that would be a stretch.

So the beggar distorted the Koran, and Freud distorted Hariri's account at least by omitting the context of begging. Strachey distorted Freud, And Michel distorted Freud's quote by bringing God into it, and leaving out the Koran. The result is a 4th generation hron, or even 5th generation if you conceive that Mohammed, or his scribe (Mohammad was said to have been illiterate), might have distorted what Allah dictated. In Michel's hands it finally becomes a very fine expression, having started out as a dodgy excuse!

Now I have nothing against draft-dodging, I did it in Vietnam and my father did it in WW II. I would have felt it no sin at all to pretend lameness to get out of having to go to war, especially a war which like both of these wars was promoted by patriotic propaganda that was designed to cover up the real imperialistic motives for sending the country to war.

It all shows that you really can't trust anything anybody writes. Sometimes checking up on what is written leads to an interesting chain of hronir.

There is a saying in the Koran (2:115, an Ayat of the Surah al-Baqarah [The Chapter of the Cow]) “whichever way you look what you see is the face of God (Allah)”—I would add a quip of my own: “whatever is written is the face of the world.” Anyone who has attentively observed what takes place in him when he reads the written word will have noticed that images immediately pop into the mind that represent what is read; and one instantly believes in these images. Even if a few seconds later one disagrees, which often happens, it is just another phase of the hypnotic process of reading. Ever since writing, people tend to believe and even “see” that what they read is how the world is.

So let us not fail, those of us who essay to be writers, to take our own places in Borges’ “scattered dynasty of solitary men,” as crafty crafters of further hronir, and change the face of the world.