

In the end, I felt I had two originals before me

A conversation with Benjamin Stein about his bilingual poetry collection *Tiferet* (2026), conducted by Dirk Weissmann

Translated from the German by the authors.

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Born in East Berlin in 1970, Benjamin Stein now lives in Berlin again after a long period in Munich. He is best known as a prose writer and novelist, but has also been publishing poetry since the early 1980s. After the fall of the Wall, he studied Jewish Studies and Hebrew, worked as an editor and in the IT sector, co-edited the literary journal *spa_tien* and founded the literary weblog *Turmsegler*. His biography – shaped by his East German background, Jewish studies, the digital professional world and numerous stays abroad – forms the experiential horizon against which motifs in his writing such as language, memory, tradition, changes of place and multiple belonging acquire a particular sharpness.

With *Tiferet*, published in January 2026, Stein has brought out a poetry collection in which these various strands intersect in highly concentrated form. The cycle comprises seven elegies revolving around loss, linguistic crisis, memory and precarious forms of self-location: the death of the mother, the collapse of certainties and the search for renewed orientation. Personal experience, cultural memory and historical upheaval are closely interwoven throughout.

What is especially striking about *Tiferet* is the form of its publication. The book appears as a bilingual edition in which both language versions – German and English – possess authorial status. The self-translation of the elegies is thus an integral part of the first edition. This is where the collection is of particular interest to literary scholarship and to research on multilingualism. *Tiferet* makes visible the fact that, in the contemporary literary field, multilingualism is increasingly not something organised only after the event, but may already be built into the writing process, the form of publication and the editorial concept itself. The volume can therefore also be read as an exemplary case of a literature in which plurilingual modes of writing and publication are increasingly conceived in institutional terms from the outset.

Dirk Weissmann: Mr Stein, what prompted you to publish the elegies in *Tiferet* not only in German, but also in your own English translation? Was the English version part of the plan from the outset, as an integral element of the publication with Verbrecher Verlag in Berlin, or did it only emerge later in the process?

Benjamin Stein: The English version was not part of the original plan. Through it, however, the cycle returned to the problem that had underlain it from the outset: the loss of language through multilingualism. When, in February 2023, after ten years of refusing to write or publish, I suddenly felt the urge to express something in literary form again, I knew only one thing at first: it would not be a novel; it had to be poetry. I had a deep need to slow things down, to distill them. What drove me were inner states, losses, a sense of being torn inwardly, uncertainty — not a "story". I have been married to an Israeli woman for twelve years. Our two children have a mother tongue and a father tongue. Both are spoken at home. In my working life as CEO of an IT company active mainly in the Middle East, I spent my days writing and speaking English almost exclusively. On top of that, both in Munich and, since 2021, in Berlin, we have had a typically Jewish circle of friends, with all the Babylonian mixture of languages that entails. In families we know, people speak Hebrew, Spanish, English, Russian, Arabic.

Berlin in particular has once again become a polyglot Jewish hotspot. The lingua franca there is more often English than German, even though everyone is making an effort to learn German and then speaks it with their own particular accent and at their own stage of language acquisition. In the second elegy of *Tiferet*, the line is: 'German is slowly abandoning me'. That was no exaggeration at all, but a genuine distress. Finding my way back into German at the level of poetic language was a long and difficult process, and the first eighteen months of trying were one long failure. At the beginning I practised the classical form of the elegy. The strict form became a means of slowing down and a kind of walking aid on the path back into my own mother tongue — into a particular rhythm and a distinctive sound — while all around me there was this Babylonian confusion of languages. For the first few years I did not even expect that the work would ever be published. I felt I could no longer express myself "adequately" at all. At times I would have a poetic idea and realise that it was an English line, one I could not have rendered into German straight away.

The poetry that inspired me most in those years was recent English-language poetry from all over the world, along with favourites such as Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, e. e. cummings, Les Murray and many others — above all women. Their sound was in my ear, and they used so many devices I had internalised as frowned upon in German: alliteration, for instance, and internal rhyme.

Since I had this urge to resist anyway, I wanted to take all of that in and transform it into German — if I could manage to find my own language again at all. Only almost a year after the rupture of 7 October, when the Ishmael elegy came into being — for the most part in Portugal — did I feel at home in my own language again. And even then I still thought it was uncertain whether any publication would come of it.

DW: You mention that some poetic ideas first appeared to you as English lines and could not immediately be carried over into German. Does that mean the German elegies themselves were already the result of an inner process of translation, even before the later English version came into being?

BJS: No. Those were moments of inspiration, and I did not even write the English lines down, because I was fighting for German. I knew that, unlike more gifted colleagues such as Nabokov or Aitmatov, I would not be able to write anything adequate in a language other than my mother tongue – the language in which I had been able to "practise" for so long. That has to do with vocabulary, with a feeling for language, with idiomatic competence – things you can only acquire if you have lived long enough in a linguistic environment. In poetry, you have to be able to feel the temperature of a word. You learn that only through conversations with native speakers who themselves command and speak their language at a high level, and who can, when necessary, explain particular idioms and more subtle shades of meaning.

So the work on *Tiferet* was above all a withdrawal from the other languages, so that German could find a voice again.

There was, however, a strong feedback loop from English into German very early on: John Dowland's *The Second Book of Songs*. While I was practising the elegiac metre, I discovered Dowland. Together with a fellow writer, who also happens to be a serious musical connoisseur, I tracked down a great many recordings of Dowland's songs and listened to them – breathed them in, one might almost say.

The Dowland texts, some of which are not even by Dowland himself, dared something scandalous in their own time: they showed feeling. That, too, is frowned upon in German poetry, but it was precisely what I wanted for this cycle. The Dowland motto is no accident. The duet formed by Flow my tears and I saw my lady weep affected me deeply and stayed with me, because those songs manage to express grief without a trace of kitsch.

This also points to a language barrier. English did not need an Adorno debate of the kind Germany had in the wake of Nazism. English must have its own historically determined taboos; otherwise Dowland could hardly have been a scandal in the late Elizabethan period.

That is one advantage of the predicament of having slipped out of one's own mother tongue: one can return without feeling obliged to accept its taboos. It is the same with alliteration. If in English it is not merely "permitted" but cultivated to enchanting effect, why not attempt the same in German?

Other languages are other worlds, each with its own history. Poetry may rebel – perhaps it even has to. And by way of a detour through another language, through poetry in another language, there can be something like a liberation from the ideology of one's own linguistic history.

DW: You have mentioned the English Dowland motto. In *Tiferet*, however, there is not only the bilingualism of the German-English edition and of the website, but also a pronounced multilingualism within the text itself: English insertions, but also quotations in Hebrew, Arabic and other languages, as well as many strongly culturally marked words.

BJS: That is true, and it is no accident. Take, for instance, the Hebrew form of address to the son in the seventh elegy: Ahúw. It cannot be translated into German. The Hebrew word denotes a male person whom one loves, in every possible shade of love. I can use it for a child or for a husband.

The German word *Geliebter*, by contrast, definitely carries a sexual connotation. It captures only one of the three forms of love: *eros*. But that is not what is meant by *Ahúw* when addressed to one's own son. British and Australian speakers use "love" in such contexts, and it can even be used in situations that have little to do with love in the strict sense, but simply with warmth and goodwill. Even a shop assistant can call you 'love' to signal: you are welcome here; I am well disposed towards you. There is not a trace of *eros* in that, but rather *agape* – unconditional goodwill offered in advance.

In my multicultural and multilingual environment, I keep encountering words that grasp what is meant far more precisely than any German equivalent could. And at such a point in the text, there is only one option: to use that exact word. Germanising it would miss the mark.

By the way, I find it sad that my younger children, whose mother tongue is Hebrew, no longer call me *Abba*, but *Papa*. *Dad* would be worse. But I feel myself to be *Abba*. That is what I would like them to call me. Yet they, too, are navigating their way through the Babylonian tangle of words. There are other insertions as well: the quotation from the epitaph on Sylvia Plath's gravestone, for example – even though I transposed it into the elegiac metre – or the final line of the cycle: 'Hear, hear ...'. As I was writing, I felt very clearly: this must not be Germanised. It would not mean the same thing.

DW: If certain words or lines in the German had deliberately to remain foreign, did that question arise differently again in the English version? Were there places where the English could not simply follow the German, but had to find its own poetic solution – cases, in other words, where the self-translation does more than transfer the text and actually reshapes it? This also leads to the question of the English text's status within *Tiferet*. Do you see it as a self-translation, a creative appropriation – *Nachdichtung* –, or even as a new creation?

BJS: While the *Ishmael* elegy was coming into being, I was intensely occupied with Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Eliot uses a new language of modernism there and asks where, among the ruins, anything like home might still be found. *The Waste Land* searches for it in a cultural mixture extending from the Fisher King to the Upanishads, and brings into the English text not only Greek and Latin, but also German and Hindi.

In Eliot, that is an intellectual engagement. Cultural worlds and worlds of thought overlap and mingle. In my case, three of the seven elegies quite literally took me into other geographies: to the neighbourhood of Gaza, to the desert between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, to the Atlantic coast of Portugal, and then back again to Pankow in Berlin.

A language that is foreign to us is part of the experience of exile, just as much as our own, perhaps fascinated, but still uneasy sense of foreignness within another culture. The estrangement of the brothers *Itzchak* and *Ishmael* went so far that their descendants speak different languages, and a large part of the difficulty of mutual understanding and communication lies in the fact that one does not understand, or cannot speak, the language of the other.

Against this background, I had the idea of a multilingual website for the publication of *Tiferet* (<https://tiferet.net>). Alongside the German version, I wanted to see a Hebrew and an Arabic one as well. That was the first time the question of translation really arose: whether the particular form – what I do with the elegiac metre – could be carried over into another language at all.

I could only test that in English. At first, then, it was a technical experiment: can I carry not only meaning, but also rhythm, sound and atmosphere into the other language? It was an adventure,

a new encounter with my own text. It exposed inconsistencies and led to a number of revisions in the German.

The hospice scene in the first elegy, for example, had greater intensity and atmosphere in the translation, and I then tried to bring that back home into the German. There were also lines where the English version first made me realise that I had overdone something in German – for instance, an allusion to the chestnut tree in Orwell's *1984*. In English I would have had to quote 'under the spreading chestnut tree', whereas the German merely alluded to it. At that point the idea collapsed, and I cut the line, or rather reworked it so that it no longer evoked Orwell.

But I should also say clearly that I was extremely fortunate to find in Simon Pare an editor for the British English I wanted: someone who fully entered into the formal and sonic experiment, who edited, gave direction, and did not simply rewrite the poems himself. As a result, I think the English version still retains something of a German touch – certain unusual features that a native speaker will probably notice, and that make it clear I am a guest in the language, not at home in it.

DW: As you already do in the book, you have just named Simon Pare as the editor of the English version. Could you describe a little more precisely how that collaboration came about and what form it took? Such collaborative forms of (self-)translation now have a certain tradition in literature. What was your own experience of it?

BJS: I had made a first attempt with a poet and translator living in Berlin, who translates from German and Yiddish into American English. We had a very productive conversation, and he made notes on the text. Four kinds of problem emerged.

Sometimes I had simply missed the mark in the translation. More often, for the sake of the metre, I had used sentence constructions that were theoretically permissible, but so unusual that a native speaker would stumble over them. In some places, however, he also suggested changes that ran directly counter to my intended meaning. And finally, it was obvious that I lacked the idiomatic vocabulary – especially when it came to the differences between American and British English. On the question of metre we could not find common ground at all. We did not hear the same thing when we read a line aloud. That was frustrating, especially because in the meantime, in conversations with the publisher, the idea had come up for the first time of risking a bilingual printed edition.

Simon Pare was a stroke of luck for me. A writer friend drew my attention to him and to his translations into English. The samples on his website gave me hope that, although he was not specifically a poetry translator, he might be willing to take on a project of this kind.

I had prepared a short text describing what I had done with the elegiac metre and why. Then it came down to a trial run. I wrote to him, and after a phone call he became interested enough to take on the editing. At first we agreed on a test run with the first elegy. It worked straight away.

Simon entered not only into the text, but also into the author and his formal intentions. It gave me real energy to feel that he too took pleasure in pursuing all these questions, even though he was working on a mammoth translation project at the time and could only fit the elegies into his schedule here and there. I was very grateful for that.

There were a few hard nuts to crack, such as 'Spießrutenrufen' in the first elegy. I had come up with solutions I would rather not quote now, and in the end it was Simon who found the right one: Alley of cat-calls. Working by email, with annotated Word documents, we moved through the text

very quickly. That version then also convinced the publisher that a bilingual first edition in book form was worth attempting.

Months later, when I had to proofread the galleys overnight and approve them, and of course noticed yet more problems, Simon once again made himself available at short notice. In a phone call he went through my proposed corrections critically – and approved them. I was not only relieved, but also a little proud of how quickly I had learnt.

DW: You have just suggested that your discussions with the publisher played an important part in shifting the English version from a possible supplement to the website into something that could become part of the printed book itself. On a website, multilingualism is comparatively easy to realise; in book form, it is much more demanding. How did Verbrecher Verlag respond to the idea of publishing *Tiferet* not simply as a German cycle of poems, but as a bilingual edition with an English self-translation? Such a form is still rather unusual in German-language publishing. In your discussions, was this authorial bilingualism seen more as a publishing risk, as a way of broadening the possible readership, or from the beginning as an integral part of the project?

BJS: To the two publishers – Kristine Listau and Jörg Sundermeier – my wishes must have sounded like an imposition. Along comes the author with a slim cycle of elegies and wants a small-format hardback that fits into a coat pocket, preferably cloth-bound, because one should want to pick up the little treasure with pleasure. Oh, and the text is also to appear online in several languages, free of charge, alongside the book. That, I said, was simply the overall concept.

As a publisher, one can really only raise one's eyebrows and wonder whether the author has taken leave of his senses. Who is going to buy the book if the text is freely available online? The small-format hardback – Verbrecher Verlag does have such a series, after all – needs eighty printed pages for machine binding. With goodwill and airy typesetting, we reached forty. And cloth makes everything still more expensive. Commercially, none of it sounded very sensible. So I had to do some convincing, and come up with workable suggestions for how it could be done.

I took care of the website myself. As I mentioned earlier, while the text was taking shape, I was studying *The Waste Land* intensively. We are talking about roughly the same length of text. Eliot's American publisher, Liveright, had not been delighted either by the idea of bringing out *The Waste Land* as a slim pamphlet. He suggested at the time that Eliot should add notes to the complex, allusion-rich cycle, so that the appendix would give the book a little more volume.

Today the Poetry Foundation presents the poem online in such a way that the notes can be shown or hidden as needed. I found that very helpful: one can read undisturbed if one wants to, but the notes are close at hand if one wants to go deeper into the text. I adapted that for the *Tiferet* website. Certain words from other languages, allusions, geographical and religious backgrounds – none of that can be assumed as shared knowledge. I do not think one needs it in order to get something from the elegies. But knowledge does no harm either. And it is certainly illuminating for the public to learn what scene the students were imitating when, after 7 October, they demonstrated at the University of the Arts in Berlin with their hands raised and painted red.

The idea for the website was well received. For the book, however, none of us wanted the notes. Other ideas, such as an interview or an afterword, were also rejected, since they would have had to be about the same length as the poems themselves. In the book I would ideally have wanted no jacket copy, nothing about the author, no "meta" at all – only the elegies themselves.

That was when it occurred to me that all the problems could be solved, and all my wishes for the book met, if we made it a bilingual edition. I only had to find the nerve to suggest it to the publishers. Let us put it this way: they were not immediately delighted.

At first I argued naively that this would give us an international edition straight away. But no German publisher – not even Verbrecher Verlag – can handle distribution to the UK, the US or Australia in any real logistical sense. For that, one needs local publishers in those countries. My claim that Germany has a large exile community from all over the world, people who would still be more willing and able to read English than German, was also hard to prove.

In the end, I probably owe it to the advocacy of someone at the publishing house, who became enthusiastic about the English version and the two-language idea, that the proposal went through. Later, when we saw the proofs and the two versions side by side for the first time, there were no doubters left.

I was reminded of a story from Maxim Biller's first collection, *Wenn ich einmal reich und tot bin*. Beneath one of the stories appeared the line: 'Translated from the Czech by Maxim Biller.' That was not true, as he later told me himself, but it was an integral part of the exile narrative. When I remembered that, I realised for the first time how deeply multilingualism is also part of *Tiferet* thematically: loss of language, loss of home, exile and the struggle to return. Perhaps it had to be this way, and perhaps that is why it developed as it did, by such roundabout routes.

DW: From a literary-studies perspective, I find this step all the more remarkable. Within the framework of a European research project, the COST Action *MultiLiLiTrans* (<https://www.ucc.ie/en/multililitrans/>), we are currently looking at precisely such transformation processes in literary writing, publishing and the literary scene. You mentioned earlier that, for the *Tiferet* website, you could imagine Hebrew and Arabic versions alongside the German and English ones. Are there currently any plans, or already concrete steps, towards making these further language versions a reality?

BJS: I very much hope there will be Hebrew and Arabic *Nachdichtungen*. The website is prepared for right-to-left languages and is, in effect, only waiting for the texts – for which, at the moment, I have only interlinear placeholder translations.

The longer-term goal would be a Hebrew-Arabic book edition, published by an Israeli or Arab publisher, or in some form of cooperation. One must not stop attempting the supposedly impossible, even while people are still shooting at one another and hatred runs so deep. That is one of the ideas of *Tiferet*: to bring what appears unbridgeable closer together through something beautiful – poetry, for example.

But it will not be easy, because the text is politically convenient to no one. Through a fellow writer, among others, I have found a poet, translator and anthologist who has lived in Germany for a very long time and who edits Arabic-German poetry anthologies. Like Simon Pare, he is extremely busy. Our first phone call was promising. Whether he will actually agree to translate *Tiferet* is still open.

As for Hebrew, I have not yet taken any steps. One may ask oneself, psychoanalytically, why I am hesitating precisely there. In any case, I will take it on.

DW: Let us return once more to the German-English book edition. Could one say that the English version addresses a different reader from the German? Or do you imagine, rather, an ideal form of reading that moves back and forth between the two versions and discovers something of the actual text precisely in the deviations, shifts and differences between them? Could you also have imagined the English version as a separate edition, detached from the German text?

BJS: I regard every rendering into another language as an invaluable gift. Every single translation of my books is precious to me. I grew up in the GDR, a small fenced-in country. As an author, and as a poet all the more, I have remained locked in – namely, in this one language, the only one in which I can sometimes express myself as I want to.

My English rendering of *Tiferet* should not obscure that fact. If anything, it confirms it. At all times, exiled authors – and there have been, and still are, very many of them – have felt being cut off from their own language, the loss of language, to be perhaps the most painful part of the experience of exile.

Translators who take it upon themselves to carry one of my texts into another language unlock a prison cell. Every language means a new world. That is also why I have felt it as an obligation – and have managed it almost without exception – to visit every country in which a translated book of mine has appeared, in order to get to know the publishers of those books and the readers. So when you ask about the ideal reader I imagine, the answer is simply: someone who still takes pleasure in giving themselves over to the adventure of literature, even poetry; someone willing to be touched and moved, and to have the encrustations we all carry shaken loose. If literary scholars then go on to concern themselves with the nuances of difference between the German original and my English rendering, I find that exciting. But it has never been – and I hope you will not take this amiss – a motive for me in writing even a single verse.

DW: I can well understand that. I have often found that writers are reluctant to be confined to the dimension of multilingualism and self-translation. At the same time, from a literary-studies perspective, one further question does suggest itself, if you will allow me to press the point. In self-translation studies, the question is often asked whether, in bilingual forms of a work, it still makes sense to speak of an "original" and a "translation" at all. Would you continue to see the German version of *Tiferet* as the source text, to which the English version is secondary? Or do the two texts now stand side by side for you, more as two variants of the same poetic event?

BJS: In the afterword we did not use, but which can be read on the website in German and English, I wrote that, in the end, I felt I had two originals before me. That makes for a good closing sentence to an afterword, but one has to be more precise about it.

The primary poetic process took place in German. German is my mother tongue and, as a poet, my instrument. From Rilke I took up ideas from a German elegiac tradition, tried to transfer them into the present, and broke with taboos in German poetry that are after-effects of twentieth-century German history.

A *Nachdichtung* or poetic recreation is something quite different. The struggle had already been fought through. The text already existed. One no longer had to suffer the verse into being, only to "translate" it.

The rendering was therefore more of a craft challenge – without wishing to diminish the feedback effects we spoke about earlier. The term "second original" is justified insofar as the *Nachdichtung* also comes from me as the author and, in some passages – which you may then identify for yourself – really did have to take its own poetic paths.

It is also justified if, as I tend to do, one regards multilingualism as belonging to the very subject matter of the cycle.

DW: At the same time, Rilke – who is so central for you – is also especially relevant to the history of literary multilingualism. In his final creative period, Rilke wrote a large number of poems in French, and in the so-called *Doppeldichtungen* (double poems) he treats motifs and ideas in parallel in German and French, without either version simply being understood as a translation of the other. Do you have any relation to this late, multilingual Rilke?

BJS: I am afraid I do not. I learnt a little French as a teenager because, at an international socialist youth camp, I had fallen in love with a French girl and wanted to write her letters. That would certainly not have been enough to read Rilke's late French poems. And to this day I have enough grappling with Rilke writing in German.

Apart from that infatuation, however, there is another story that connects me with French. My paternal grandmother's sister fell in love in 1945 with a French prisoner of war, went with him to Rouen, and married him. For fifty-five years she did not speak German at all, and tormented herself to the point of exhaustion in trying to get rid of her German accent, because in France she was treated like an outcast for being German.

When she wanted to visit my grandmother in Berlin for a few days in 2001, the two sisters could no longer understand one another. She then stayed for two whole months. After a few weeks she began speaking German again – and in Berlin dialect. So I learnt directly from her something of what it means to drive one's mother tongue rigorously out of oneself.

My own experiences in France, incidentally, have been quite different. With my great-aunt's story in mind, I made the greatest effort, many years ago in a small village in Brittany, to speak French in the bakery. The baker's wife replied to me in German, her eyes shining.

Many years later, the French edition of my novel *Die Leinwand* was published by Gallimard. From my great-aunt to Gallimard in less than seventy years. How many generations is that? If we in Europe were able to rid ourselves of the so-called hereditary enmity, why should that not be possible elsewhere too?

DW: To close, let me ask the question more fundamentally once again. Has working on the English version changed your relationship to German? After the self-translation, did you return to the German language differently from how you felt you were leaving it, or losing it, at the beginning of the project?

BJS: If I do not begin a new project soon, I will fall out of German again. That is simply the Babylonian muddle I live in. I have already become careless again with the handwritten journal. I know that without disciplined 'practice' it no longer works. Language, too, evidently atrophies.

I have a few good ideas for poetic projects. I still have unfinished business with Mayakovsky and with Neruda. The idea of writing something like German odes today strikes me as so subversive that my fingers are itching.

DW: After this experience, can you imagine working poetically in English in the future as well? Or does English remain for you more a language of self-translation, of testing, and of distance from German?

BJS: I shall not become an English-language poet in this life. Immersing myself in English and in the English-language poetic tradition was immensely inspiring and liberating for me. That will remain. It is a very fertile love affair.

But German is where I dwell. In English, I can only... luftwurzeln. And now you try translating that!

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