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The Picket Fence by Christian Morgenstern

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John Perry
The Picket Fence

Christian Morgenstern
Der Lattenzaun

A picket fence stood on the green,
with spaces you could see between.

An architect one day appeared,
and thoughtfully caressed his beard,

then took the spaces from the fence
and built a splendid residence.

The fence, meantime, stood all forlorn:
the slats were there—the spaces, gorn!

—embarrassing for all the town;
and so the Council took it down.

The architect? He ran away
to Afri- or Americay.

Commentary

Christian Morgenstern (1871–1914) was a German poet of significant nonsense and lexical buffoonery, in time and style roughly midway between Edward Lear and Ogden Nash, though with an enhanced philosophical component derived from Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. The poem presented here is taken from his first collection *Galgenlieder (Gallows Songs)*, published in 1905.

“The Picket Fence” strikes one as a verbal simulation of an optical illusion, in which the eye-brain collaboration obliges the observer to see a two-dimensional drawing as one or another of two possible objects, depending on where it interprets the boundary between figure and field. Or as a philosophical riff on the equal significance of being and nothingness, presence and absence, matter and void. As art derives its power from the juxtaposition of form and space, so music builds beauty from the interplay of sound and silence, and poetry from what stays unsaid as much as from what is said.

The poem is typical of Morgenstern's sophisticated nursery-rhyme mode, expressing his observation (shared with Nietzsche) that in every adult there hides a child, the immortal creator *homo ludens*. It is reminiscent of that master of English philosophical nonsense, Lewis Carroll, as exemplified in the Cheshire Cat: which is the more remarkable, a cat without a grin or a grin without a cat?

My translation faithfully reproduces the form of the original, which is an absolute prerequisite in comic or whimsical verse (and preferably in all verse translation, if technically feasible). It is the test of validity: if the translator can't at least simulate the packaging, then the whole undertaking is mere plagiarism. Translating the content, of course, demands a little relaxation of the rules, beginning with the first line, which rejects the folktale cliché, “There was once....” “Thoughtfully caressed his beard” is pure padding—but then, so is the original line. With its spaces purloined, the German fence is naked, literally a “gruesome and vulgar sight.” My “embarrassing” perhaps fails to make this explicit, but concurs in its tacit condemnation of the action of the prim city fathers. The folksy conversion *Ameriko*, luckily for my rhyme, has its exact Irish-English equivalent in the folksong chorus form “Americay.”