

## Natten er så stille...

J.L. Heiberg (1791–1860), after some years in Kiel as a lecturer, returned to Copenhagen in 1825, where he successfully introduced the vaudeville genre, his idea being to combine drama with music and add more depth of character, producing comedies (lystspil) with a popular appeal. His 'Princess Isabella', a romantic intrigue, was first performed in 1829. The poem appears under the title 'Barcarole' in this comedy. It was set to music in 1840 by the Danish composer C.E. Weyse. As a result of this, since Danes love to sing poems set to music on all festive occasions, and since the tune is as simple and subtle as the text, this poem is now as famous in Denmark as Goethe's 'Über allen Gipfeln' is in Germany. And Goethe's influence is obvious.

The Scandinavian languages share certain features: 1) the definite article is tacked onto the end of the noun; 2) adjectives agree with the noun, taking a plural ending; 3) nearly all nouns have an unstressed ending in the plural; 4) nearly all verbs have an infinitive and a present tense ending that is unstressed. Three of these features are very much in evidence in this poem. Scandinavian word order, on the other hand, is closer to English than German and Dutch are.

- 1) *natten, luften, duggens, månens, søens, bølgens, hjertet, vindens*
- 2) NONE
- 3) *perler, stråler, melodier*
- 4) present tense: *trille, spille, vugge, tier, befrier* (the –R is a singular form that has since taken over all persons in the present tense). There are no infinitives in the poem.

All four features produce a STRONG + WEAK pattern in the line. All four features mean it is very easy to end a line in a weak syllable. This applies to three out of five lines in each verse. The lines ending in a strong syllable mark a 'returning home' feeling – both verses are clearly 2+3 lines. And there are only two rhymes.

As with Goethe, the calm of the evening is contrasted with the unquiet heart. It is typical of Romantic poetry to choose dawn or dusk as a pivotal point of the 24-hour cycle, when the turning wheel of existence seems to poise, when the setting sun kisses the rising moon, etc. Looking out over water, with the horizon marking the faint line between land and sky is another common metaphor that enhances this feeling. All of these we find in, for example, poems by Wordsworth. So in terms of content, there are few problems in trying to translate this poem into English. The problems lie elsewhere. How can the English language capture the cadence of the Danish? What solutions can be found to having 60% of the lines ending in a weak syllable?

Since it is the feeling of 'timelessness' in nature at this twilight moment, I have chosen to choose a 'timeless' form of the verb, the present participle, which has no tense marker. The use is adjectival in the first line ('unstirring'), but the other instances all suggest something taking place in an eternal NOW.

Normally, I would not exclusively resort to this solution. Some other possibilities we will examine in a moment, in connection with Ida Gerhardt's poem.

The other problem I had to try to solve was to convey the simplicity of the Danish text. Only one word stands out as poetic: 'glar'. I have, like Heiberg, chosen an unusual word in this position: 'mere'. This is a dialect word for a lake, e.g. Windemere. Both of us needed a rhyme! My vocabulary is not as simple as Heiberg's. I can find no way round using more 'highfaluting' words. This is a problem many translators also had with Goethe's poem.

As regards rhyme – my attitude is that near rhymes and assonances are a very small price to pay if the resulting translation touches similar nerves in the English reader. To insist on absolute rhymes often results in stilted and unconvincing language.

## De profundis

Ida Gerhardt (1905–97) read Classics at university and is known as a translator of Lucretius. She later also studied Hebrew and was co-translator of the psalms, a translation that appeared in 1972. It was not until the 70s and 80s that she became well-known as a poet. She often draws heavily on classical themes, from both Antiquity and the Bible. Her style, syntax and vocabulary are 'retro'. Had I seen the poem in isolation, I would have dated it half a century earlier. In 1979, completely different types of poetry were being published.

In the poem, the mere sight of the swans would arouse fear as well as joy. The sight and sound of something so completely other-worldly could well be the *deinon* of the ancient Greeks, and the plea would seem to be for *catharsis*, for release from 'the depths'. Other dimensions – the swan as exile (Baudelaire, *Le Cygne*), as song-bird, or as close to the divine (Hölderlin, *Hälfte des Lebens*) are possibly present as echoes as well.

The poem is highly crafted and the language of each stanza is not that of normal prose. In normal Dutch the first four lines would read: '*Stel dat we nog nooit zwanen hadden gezien/en we zouden ze ontdekken op het water/o, wat zouden we dan schrikken van vreugde,/lachen en huilen misschien.*'). Words like 'ontwaren' (to descry) and 'vervaren' (= 'bevreesd maken', 'angst injagen' [to be frightened, terrified, appalled]). The hypothetical subjunctive of both verses intensifies the compression of the lines. It is a tight jewel of a poem.

Although an ABBA ACCA, it could be argued that the assonance of B and C is close enough to view the poem as an ABBA ABBA poem. This I can't match in English. And I have given up counting syllables, for this is a poem where the stresses are more important. The Germanic languages are stress languages, and Gerard Manley Hopkins was right in realising that the 'sprung rhythm' of the line is the important thing. If you count syllables, the poem appears to be 10, 11, 10, 7 (assuming that you crunch 'eindelijk' into two syllables). But the poem is something else. Each line starts with a stress. And lines 1 and 4 of both stanzas end with one. Line 3 is an expansion of line 2. Line 4 a comment on the first three lines. As with Heiberg, the lines ending in an unstressed syllable tell us there is more to come. The final stress tell us we have returned home. The circle is completed.

All the major Germanic languages except English (although Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' starts with 'Had we but world enough, and time, This coyness, Lady, were no crime...') have a compressed form of the hypothetical subjunctive without 'if'. In some of the languages, subjunctive forms of the verbs make this clear (e.g. G. *Hätten wir...*). So the first problem in translating is the first word to be translated. It *is* possible, however, to use 'should' in the second lines, since 'should' also means 'should we happen to'. This last element I have replaced by 'chance to', and 'were they'.

Dutch, like the Scandinavian languages, often adds an unstressed syllable in the plural of nouns. Similarly, most infinitives end in an unstressed syllable. Like German, it places the main part of the verb at the end of a clause in composite tenses. So word order becomes more of a problem.

I have chosen to write 'we would' in lines 3. I could have shortened to 'we'd' to make the syllable counts match, but I read the line with a completely unstressed 'would'. And optically, it is more convincing, taken Gerhardt's style into account. Furthermore, it almost creates the impression of a quatrain with a final line shortened by two syllables, a technique not unknown in both Dutch and English verse.

Only two of the eight lines 'rhyme' in the strict sense. This does not worry me. For as a reader I have the illusion that they do, because of the rhythmic patterns of the lines. I have used another strong—weak ploy – repeat the last word; 'descry them'/'by them'. Other possibilities for this combination are to use past participles for verbs ending in –D or –T, e.g. 'faded'/'waded', or adverbs, e.g. 'stately'/'lately'. You very often have to think syntactically in resolving this problem, and be prepared to change word classes.

It is not simplicity of vocabulary that causes problems in this second poem. It is the tightness of construction and stylistic level of the vocabulary, with its biblical and classical echoes.