

Herbsttag – R.M. Rilke

Sometimes when translating a poem, confronted with a vain attempt to cater for too many formal considerations at once, it is better to retire, regroup and go for a half-solution, in the hope that some of the ideas can subsequently be incorporated into a later assault on the mission impossible.

The only book of poems I seem to have at the summer cottage is the *Gedichte fürs Gedächtnis* anthology I was once given by a German colleague when I retired. The German mood fits in well with my second attempt to get to grips with Günter Graß's *Grimms Wörter*, a book I stranded in back home, with the exasperated 'When is something going to happen in this book?' feeling. Down at the cottage, having just been painting all the black outside wood at a leisurely pace while listening to the bees at work on the lavender and hollyhocks, their drone diverging into minimalist chords and back again, I realised that a lack of incident – or forward-moving line of melody in this case – is not proof of any lack of texture in existence. And that *texture* is what Graß's book is all about. And that good literature and poetry can be low on event and high on texture.

Sometimes you get both high content and high texture in a poem. I realised this when I came across a poem that hit me a half a century ago – *Herbsttag* by Rilke. This was after having found Goethe's *Natur und Kunst*, which ends: *Wer Großes will, muß sich zusammenraffen; / In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister, / Und das Gesetz nur kann uns Freiheit geben.* And to try and catch the greatness of Rilke's poem is a mission impossible, I have discovered. Why are such lines as *Der Sommer war sehr groß* and *Wer jetzt kein Haus hat baut sich keines mehr* great? Even out of context they have an unforgettable ring to them.

As usual, I start by looking at formal characteristics. An interesting 3-4-5 stanza pattern. The rhyme scheme has ABbA/CDDC/EFfE. The line lengths are 10-11-10/10-11-11-10/10-11-11-10-11. I try to find end-rhymes, and let the form work backwards through the lines. But it won't work. As usual, it is the 11-syllable lines that seem to sabotage the project. Even the first 'flash of inspiration' 'to give the winds free rein' causes more problems than it solves. I can't rhyme *reign* with *rein*, and I need the *full* for line 4. In other cases, Rilke has repeated words and phrases *letzte, wer jetzt, voll/Vollendung*, and there are nice repetitions in *sein, Wein, kein* and *allein* and the end-rhymes *bleiben, schreiben, treiben*.

The one thing I must try to avoid is to introduce new images. The poem is so clear, so transparent.

So I go for the half-solution. I have another two weeks or so to try and improve on it:

Herbsttag

Herr: es ist Zeit. Der Sommer war sehr groß.
Leg deinen Schatten auf die Sonnenuhren,
und auf den Fluren laß die Winde los.

Befiehl den letzten Früchten voll zu sein;
gieb ihnen noch zwei südlichere Tage,
dränge sie zur Vollendung hin und jage
die letzte Süße in den schweren Wein.

Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines mehr.
Wer jetzt allein ist, wird es lange bleiben,
wird wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben
und wird in den Alleen hin und her
unruhig wandern, wenn die Blätter treiben.

Autumn Day 1

Lord, it is time. The summer's **reign** was great.
Lay on the sundials now your **lengthening** shadow,
and give the meadows winds that are **in spate**.

Decree the final fruits be **firm and fine**;
grant them two more warm southern days to fill,
force them to consummation and instill
the final sweetness into heavy wine.

The one now homeless **has no plans** to build.
The one now lonely will long so remain,
will write long letters, read, keep watch again
and in the avenues, with **mind unstilled**,
walk to and fro among **leaves' swirling train**.

The parts in bold above were unerringly located by my poetic touchstone, who rightly pointed out that the force of Rilke lies in his avoidance of such material. His sober tone is his strength – as soon as you try too hard, you weaken the poem. The translation does not resemble Rilke very much.

So what is the next step? I remember, with a shock, reading a fantastic English translation of *Der Panther*. It must be almost half a century ago. Could it have been Michael Hamburger? I recall comparing the original with the English and being taken aback at the skill of the translator. How was it possible? All I can recall of the translation fifty years on is that he rhymed *twirled* for the effect of the bars of the cage on the eye of the panther and *world*. I could do with a few good rhymes like that.

Maybe I should go back to square one and think of which words sound most right for the German ones? I have been thinking yet again about what a good translation ought to do – it ought to get as much of the original across as possible. And that isn't only words, far from it. But the wrong timbres, shades of meanings, stylistic level, etc. will sabotage a translation immediately. And that is what the bold bits above do. As soon as there are strict formal requirements, the translator's poetic brain tends to shut down and let 'clever

dick' takes over. So I could start by getting rid of the garbage – and see what new problems arise:

Autumn Day 2

Lord, it is time. The summer was so vast.
Lay on the autumn sundials now your shadow,
and let the meadows feel the winds' full blast.

Make final fruits mature on tree and vine;
grant them the balm of two more southern days,
force them to consummation and then chase
the final sweetness into heavy wine.

The one now homeless will not build a home.
The one now lonely loneliness won't shift,
will keep watch, read, write letters low on thrift,
and restlessly in avenues will roam
both back and forth when leaves begin to drift.

I soon had to return to the same line lengths as before, so I have reduced the second assault to removing the non-Rilke like expressions of the first draft. Interesting! Only *shadow*, *meadow* and *wine* have survived as rhyme words. And I can see some new rhymes already lined up for the firing squad (but I couldn't find a third rhyme for *long* and *throng!*).

Yes, the *shift*, *thrift*, *drift* trio are for the chop! *Low on thrift* is terrible – perhaps the worst piece of translation so far. It must be possible to get some feminine rhymes into the poem, especially the last stanza:

Autumn Day 3

Lord, it is time. The summer's run its course.
Lay on the autumn sundials now your shadow,
and let the meadows feel the winds' full force.

Make final fruits mature on tree and vine;
grant them the warmth of two more southern days,
force them to consummation and then chase
the final sweetness into heavy wine.

The one now homeless will not build a home.
The one now lonely long will go on fighting,
will stay awake, read, do much letter-writing
and restlessly in avenues will roam
this way and that when leaves begin their sliding.

Improvement to the first two stanzas, but *fighting* and *sliding* do not work in the last stanza. Back to 10-syllable lines alas.

Autumn Day 4

Lord: it is time. The summer's run its course.
Lay on the autumn sundials now your shadow,
and let the meadows feel the winds' full force.

Make the last fruits mature upon the vine;
give them the warmth of two more southern days,
force them to consummation and then chase
the final sweetness into heavy wine.

The one now homeless will not build a home.
The one now lonely long will seek reprieve,
remain awake, read, letter-write in sheaves
and restlessly in avenues will roam
this way and that among the drifting leaves.

Comment: still two places with near rhymes: *days/chase* and *reprieve/sheaves, leaves*, but the translation flows better and sounds more natural – possibly because of the very high proportion of one- or two-syllable words.

I have tried reading the original and this last translation out loud. Several times. The musical correspondence level is high, despite the lack of the missing unstressed syllables at the end of the lines. Naturally, I wonder why. And find that all the stressed syllables that rhyme are long vowels (by which I mean long single vowels or diphthongs). That this is what gives the poem its pace and its languidness in terms of sound. This also applies to many unrhyming stressed syllables in the original: *Süße, schweren, Haus, allein, Briefe, Alleen, unruhig*. And in English there are: *warmth, sweetness, homeless, lonely, remain, awake*. Conclusion: there is a dimension that is often ignored in translation and it is an important one. It is the cadence of the poem. To focus exclusively on the words that have been translated is missing the point here. You could always argue that *war sehr groß* is not *run its course*, or that *lange Briefe schreiben* belongs to a different stylistic level than *letter-write in sheaves*, but in terms of cadence they are dead right – despite the missing final unstressed syllables. So it is more a question of what emphasis one places on various aspects of translation when it comes to poetry. There are many metaphors one can use regarding poetry translation – one can take different translations of the same poem as being different interpretations of the same original work, like various interpreters of Bach's cello suites, e.g. Casals, Tortelier, Starcker, Yo-Yo Ma, Gastinel, Isserlis, etc. But when considering the language into which the original is translated, one could think of the language and the culture as a transcription for a different instrument, e.g. Rilke is a clarinet, but the English translation has to be for an oboe, the Danish for a cor anglais, the Swedish for a flute, the French for a viola, etc. Having listened to Bach cello suites played on a violin, recorder and accordion (among others!), I know that it is perfectly possible to recognise the original, provided the transcription is good enough. The translator's job is to maximise the recognisability of the transcription, taking into consideration the nature of

the instrument on which it is now to be performed. This is what I mean by the timbre of the particular language of a poem.

Feedback: this version an improvement, but *reprieve* and *in sheaves* still stick out as not being like Rilke, the first striving for a rhyme and over-interpreting, the second a bit odd.

The basic problem is still that in terms of rhyme, the third stanza is a repetition of the second, with an extra line tacked on that repeats the second of the rhymes: ABBAB. But in terms of sense, the stanza breaks after the first line. There then come four lines about the lonely person, three of which have the same rhyme, so the translator has to find the same rhyme for three lines out of four that sound natural for remaining lonely, writing long letters and drifting leaves.

One of the ways of trying to reduce the 'pomposity level' of English is to cut down on Romance-based vocabulary and beef up Germanic-based words. This often means reducing the length of words and increasing the 'everyday' feel of the language (although I am ignoring the word-frequency level in that remark – 'in sheaves' is pure Germanic, but the combination of these two words is quite unusual. Furthermore it introduces another image, something I claimed I ought to try and avoid.)

Here then is yet another version:

Autumn Day 5

Lord: it is time. The summer's run its course.
Lay on the autumn sundials now your shadow,
and let the meadows feel the winds' full force.

Make the last fruits mature upon the vine;
give them the warmth of two more southern days,
force them to consummation and then chase
the final sweetness into heavy wine.

The one now homeless will not build a home.
The one now lonely long will stay that way,
remain awake, read, letter-write all day
and restlessly in avenues will roam
this way and that when caught leaves drift and stray.

My only immediate reservation about this new version is that the overall sound-picture has changed and I now have a very great many /ei/ vowel sounds. The German original had many /ai/ vowel sounds, but I have perhaps a preponderance (sic!) of the /ei/ sound now. The words *day* and *way* now also both occur twice. And it can always be argued that the original doesn't mention 'all day', only says 'long'. Or that I have replaced the final verb by two verbs (although *treiben* sounds so evocative to me, as if one word in English isn't enough).

On the plus side, I now have a very high frequency indeed of everyday words, also of monosyllabic words. I think the 'sticking-out' feeling is less. The 'mesmerism' level is higher.

Feedback: why 'autumn' in line 2; why 'caught' in the last line?

The problem in line 2 is that the English fills two syllables less, and I don't want to introduce a superfluous image. Maybe this is a better solution: *Let fall upon the sundials...* It has the (dis)advantage of a parallel *let fall.../let...feel...* construction. I am unsure if this is a good or a bad thing. To be on the safe side, I have an alternative line 3: *expose the meadows to...* The reason I have not replaced with the latter is that the original starts the third line with *und*, and I feel that *expose* breaks this flow.

Re the last line: there are various possibilities I can think of: *when the leaves drift and stray* (rhythmically a disaster); *when leaves begin to stray*; *as leaves begin to stray* (both sound like the refrain of a sentimental song); *among the leaves that stray*. This last version is a possible candidate, but *treiben* means more than just to stray, and it produces a spineless sort of line. Since leaves drift on the wind and are caught by it, I did not feel the addition of 'caught' was all that criminal. A further possibility is the word *midst*, but it is listed as literary or poetical: *midst leaves that drift and stray*. Replacing *midst* by *with* possibly weakens the line, but it links the idea of *roaming* and *straying*, which is maybe implicit in the original. All in all, I prefer the line unaltered except for replacing *when* by *as*. But am prepared to keep on thinking about it.

And, just as I was falling asleep, the word I have been looking for since I started popped up – leaves are caught by the wind, which causes them to *stir*. It is the logic of first *stir* and then *stray* that has been lacking. For *drift* and *stray* are part of the same process, so the *stray* becomes superfluous. And *stray* I cannot omit, as it is the only rhyming word I can find to make up a trio. I realise that I have now three images – *caught*, *stir* and *stray*, whereas the German only has *treiben*, but at least I feel the picture I get in my head is right, and that is the closest I can get. This combination, strangely enough, works better with *when* than with *as*.

Autumn Day 6

Lord: it is time. The summer's run its course.
Let fall upon the sundials now your shadow,
and let the meadows feel the winds' full force.

Make the last fruits mature upon the vine;
give them the warmth of two more southern days,
force them to consummation and then chase
the final sweetness into heavy wine.

The one now homeless will not build a home.
The one now lonely long will stay that way,
remain awake, read, letter-write all day
and restlessly in avenues will roam

this way and that when caught leaves stir and stray.

The word order of line 2 is still unnatural. It falls better into place if you start with the sundials:

Autumn Day 7

*Lord: it is time. The summer's run its course.
Upon the sundials now let fall your shadow,
and let the meadows feel the winds' full force.*

*Make the last fruits mature upon the vine;
give them the warmth of two more southern days,
force them to consummation and then chase
the final sweetness into heavy wine.*

*The one now homeless will not build a home.
The one now lonely long will stay that way,
remain awake, read, letter-write all day
and restlessly in avenues will roam
this way and that when caught leaves stir and stray.*

Time out!!