

O vanitas juventutis –
*on seeing an earlier translation of
'Herbsttag' by Friedrich Hebbel*

Dies ist ein Herbsttag, wie ich keinen sah!
Die Luft ist still, als atmete man kaum,
Und dennoch fallen raschelnd, fern und nah,
Die schönsten Früchte ab von jedem Baum.

O stört sie nicht, die Feier der Natur!
Dies ist die Lese, die sie selber hält,
Denn heute löst sich von den Zweigen nur,
Was vor dem milden Strahl der Sonne fällt.

Back in November 1996, my computer tells me, I attempted to translate this poem into English. The translation looked like this:

*A day in autumn, unlike any found!
The air is still, as if no breath were free;
Yet far and near there fall with rustling sound
The loveliest of fruits from every tree.*

*Oh, think not to intrude on nature's feast,
This is the harvest which is hers to call;
That which from every branch is now released
The rays of gentle sunlight cause to fall.*

I was rather pleased with the translation at the time. As the years passed, I started to worry about not having an 'ich' in the first line, but simply couldn't find a way of changing it. So I said to myself that the translation was probably OK, that there was no way of satisfactorily introducing an 'ich'.

Looking at the poem once more in 2009 – after the choir I am in had sung a version of it set to music by Heinz Lau (1951) at several concerts – I find the text will not leave me alone. And note that my translation often strikes me as being 'free' in the bad sense – like keeping the loud pedal down on the piano in an attempt to drown out a lack of technical precision.

I hastily rename the translation a 'first draft', for there are so many things I feel dissatisfied with. The first line in the original poem states that the 'I' has not experienced such a day before, not that the same applies to all creation. And my 'unlike any found' shifts the meaning further. Line two has distorted the German to get a rhyme for 'tree' in line 4. How breath can be 'free' or not, I have no idea. Line 3 has introduced a noun 'sound', so that I have a rhyme for 'found', or vice versa. Line 4 is OK.

Lines 5-6 I still like (Feiertag = Feast Day). Line 7 has 'denn' and 'nur' – two ideas I have completely omitted – and the 'that which' construction is heavy. Line 8 is OK.

THOUGHTS FOR THE SECOND DRAFT

The thing about the first line is that you have two possibilities for 'Herbsttag': 'day in autumn' and 'autumn day'. The latter gives you an extra syllable for other things, but the former has a more pleasing rhythm. 'This is an autumn day like none I've seen/known' is a clear candidate for a replacement. It has the advantage of being a full sentence with the 'ist' translated. So why not stop there? It has to do with the rhythm. xyyXx, yyXyX. (I have used 'y' for unstressed and 'x' for secondary stress, 'X' for main stress.) There is a statement, a caesura, and a personal comment. I have experimented with this, trying out 'whose like', 'such as' and other similar expressions, but have decided that moving the caesura one syllable to the right, strangely enough, gives me a similar sort of 'feel' to the German line. I have lost the 'ist', but gained the caesura. And I think this gives it preference over the other alternative.

*A day in autumn this, like none I've known!
The air is still, as if one scarcely breathed;
Yet far and near come rustling gently down
The loveliest of fruits from every tree.*

Line two I have decided to end with 'breathed' – it is stupid to change a line that can be translated so closely to the original just to get a rhyme word. I could change 'every tree' to 'all the trees' in line 4, to get a closer assonance, but Hebbel is thinking of the trees individually, not simply as a group. It makes line four much weaker, so I will refrain. Similarly, I will content myself with a spelling rhyme for lines 1 and 3 ('known'/'down').

My other problem has to do with the last two lines and the omitted ideas of an explanation ('denn') and a limitation ('nur'). The 'heute' I just don't have space for, but maybe it is implicit in the text.

The first thing to do is to get rid of the second 'every', which is not in the original, and to revert to the plural. The rhythm of 'von den Zweigen' and 'from the branches' is the same, but I am unable to put the translation at the same point in the line, due to the fact that 'löst sich' is going to give me a passive construction in English. Trying an 'For today all that is released from the branches is...' construction is hopeless in terms of rhythm and stress. So I sacrifice 'today', keep the 'feast'/'released' rhyme and start with the explanation 'For'. 'That which...' is then replaced at the beginning of line 8 by 'What...'.
Finding a position for 'only' is important, since it is not 'only from the branches' but 'only is released'. I am worried that even so, it is possibly to read 'from the branches only...'. I cannot change to 'all that is released' since this requires another 'is' afterwards. Furthermore, there are too many -ALL sounds. I will try 'alone' after the verb to try and get round this difficulty.

Here then, a dozen years later, is a contrite second draft:

A day in autumn *this, like none I've known!*
The air is still, *as if one scarcely breathed;*
Yet far and near *come rustling gently down*
The loveliest of fruits from every tree.

Oh, think not to intrude on nature's feast,
This is the harvest which is hers to call;
For from the branches is alone released
What rays of gentle sunlight cause to fall.