

Now the day is full of song

Jeppe Aakjær (1866–1930) is, in a sense, Denmark's answer to Robert Burns. A century later, admittedly, but a 'folk' poet who wrote poems in a major dialect (that of Jutland) – poems (well, they seem songs from the start many of them) that sometimes sound as if we were in an age where the steam engine had yet to be invented, but poems that at other times happily include many features of industrial society. Carl Nielsen set a number of his poems to music, and thereby made them part of Denmark's popular heritage – say the first line, and most Danes can probably sing at least the first verse.

As a translator, these poems are tough. Since I do not have a natural English dialect (though this poem is mild by Aakjær standards in this respect), I have to go for mainstream English. A certain degree of old-fashioned folk-song English is permissible, e.g. waiting with the verb, and deviations from the actual words in Danish too if in rhyming position, for some of the words are clearly there for the rhyme rather than the sense, e.g. 'ved å', 'i hænde'.

Here, then, is the original + a word-to-word translation. Try listening to the song as well – see under 'Files' – unfortunately without the last verse.

Nu er dagen fuld af sang

Nu er dagen fuld af sang,
og nu er viben kommen,
bekkasinen natten lang
håndterer elskovstrømmen.
Plukke, plukke dugget strå,
plukke, plukke siv ved å,
plukke, plukke blomster.

Engen er nu gyldengul
af tunge kabbelejer,
søndenvinden byder op,
og dueurten nejer.
Plukke, plukke dugget strå,
plukke, plukke siv ved å,
plukke, plukke blomster.

Dammen ligger dagen ud
med brudelys i hænde,
rækker højt de ranke skud,
at solen må dem tænde.
Plukke, plukke dugget strå,
plukke, plukke siv ved å,
plukke, plukke blomster.

Nu vil mø med silkestik
på brudelinet sømme.
Den, som ingen bejler fik,

hun ta'r sig én i drømme.
Plukke, plukke dugget strå,
plukke, plukke siv ved å,
plukke, plukke blomster.

Ræk mig en forglemmigej
og sidst en krusemynte,
sådan slutter vi vor leg
så glad, som den begyndte.
Plukke, plukke dugget strå,
plukke, plukke siv ved å,
plukke, plukke blomster.

*Now the day is full of song/and now the curlew (peewit) is come/the snipe all
night long is wielding the (its) love-drum
Refrain: pluck, pluck bedewed (blade of) grass/pluck, pluck rushes (reeds)
by the river/pluck, pluck flowers.*

*The meadow is now golden-yellow/with heavy marsh marigolds,/the
southerly wind invites to a dance/ and the willow herb curtseys...*

*The pond all day long lies/with flowering rush (DA. = bridal light) to
hand/reaches up high the straight stems/so that the sun may light them...*

*Now maiden with silken stitch/will seam her bridal gown./The one who had
no wooer/takes one for herself in dreams...*

*Reach me a forgetmenot/and finally a curled mint,/such do we conclude our
game/as happy as it began...*

The first reaction as a translator is: Short lines, lots of rhymes. Oh no, not flowers' names! For the names of flowers are what they are – and they never rhyme with the line two lines above as in the original. They are too long or too short, and the stress pattern is normally hopeless.

Here is the suggested translation:

Now the day is full of song

Now the day is full of song
and now the curlew's calling,
hear the snipe that all night long
its love-drum beats till morning.
Gather, gather grass with dew,
gather, gather reeds anew,
gather, gather flowers.

Marigolds with heavy stance
have formed a golden meadow,
when the south wind calls a dance
the willow herb will follow.

Gather, gather grass with dew,
gather, gather reeds anew,
gather, gather flowers.

And the pond, till day is late,
has flowering rush to light it,
holds up high each stem so straight
to let the sun ignite it.
Gather, gather grass with dew,
gather, gather reeds anew,
gather, gather flowers.

Now young maids with stitches fine
their wedding gowns are seaming.
She who for a groom must pine
will find hers when she's dreaming.
Gather, gather grass with dew,
gather, gather reeds anew,
gather, gather flowers.

Hand me a forgetmenot
and mint ere our game's over,
then we will, as like as not,
end up as if in clover.
Gather, gather grass with dew,
gather, gather reeds anew,
gather, gather flowers.

The first thing I did was to look at the refrain, since three lines solved means 15 lines solved.

The word 'flowers', like all those ending in a triphthong as a result of -R becoming an unstressed central vowel in standard English in the 18th century, hovers between one and two syllables. There is no problem in treating it as a stressed + unstressed syllable in English. So 'blomster'///'flower' match. 'Pluck' or 'pick' are clearly not going to work. A good rule for translating is this: wherever you have added 'now' or 'then' to pad out a line you have made yourself a bad line. So 'gather' is the obvious choice. Anyone who can 'pick' reeds must also have pretty strong hands.

So the remaining problem is the rhyme. The Danish 'by the river' is a classic 'let's find a rhyme' piece of padding – where else could they grow? And 'bedewed' is oldy-worldy, so it has to go. I found 'dew' as the rhyme word very quickly. 'Anew' came when I started reciting the other line. 'Where did that come from?' I thought – as so often. 'Is it legitimate?' is the next question. Yes, here I think it is. And suddenly I have my 15 lines.

This is how I often work with rhyming poems. Start with the rhymes. Don't be afraid to take virtually any grammatically sensible word in the original line as your rhyming word. The first line Google can do for you. The second line has a proper name: 'vibe'. There are two words in English, both imitative: curlew and peewit. The latter is closer in sound to the Danish word, but sounds a bit

unpoetic. The word 'curlew' is a beautiful word – and for me very close to the actual sound of the bird – and I chose it also because I wanted to avoid 'come', which is a fiendishly difficult word to find convincing rhymes to. Added to which, I have to end lines two and four on a weak syllable. I am always scared of ending up with poems that have a plethora of –ING rhymes in English, but here I have a present participle plus a word now thought of as a noun 'morning'. They don't exactly rhyme, but have the same long vowel + a sonorant (the L, M, N, R group are very close phonetically). This lack of total rhyme is rarely something that worries me as a translator – I have certain colleagues who balk at using assonances, but I want a poetic equivalent – and to me this definitely is such.

No one word for 'elskov' in English – it means erotic love. The idea of 'wielding a drum of erotic love' – and of a snipe doing it – is beyond my powers of imagery. I have down-toned a bit. I have also been guilty of a tautology – all night long = until morning. But I badly needed the rhyme.

The next stanza offers me 'marsh marigolds' and 'willow herbs'. The latter is all right, but I have not enough space – or the right rhythm – for the former. So I have to change rhyme words. Again, I am happy to settle for something as close as 'meadow'/'follow'. I have also had to make a southerly wind a south wind. I am really in trouble with this verse, for I need a rhyme for lines one and three. The word 'stance' came to my aid here. For it not only means an attitude but a posture, the way in which the (marsh) marigolds hold their heavy heads.

The next original stanza offers heaven and hell. The word 'brudelys' = 'bridal light', the image elaborated on in the next stanza with the wedding gown. But it is the name of a flower – *Butomus umbellatus*. Alas, the only name in English is 'flowering rush'. This loses an important image. But there is nothing – as far as I can see – that can be done about it. On the other hand, how can a pond have something 'to hand' that it lifts up to the sun? This is really a bad case of letting rhyme win over sense.

This time, also to avoid –ING, I used a nifty device – add an unstressed word for the actual unstressed rhyme – 'it'. This involves changing quite a lot, but I hope the stanza has retained the sense and is actually more logical than the original. The translator's rule: allow yourself up to 10% plastic surgery.

Only one thing about the next stanza: 'stitches fine' is what I meant by the 'oldy-worldy' – post-adjectives are permissible, but only when used sparingly. I need to do this to get a rhyme for 'pine', which I regard as a definite improvement on the original, though still within the 10% rule.

The last stanza caused all sorts of problems. The original is pretty feeble – a string of clichés. And where did the 'curled mint' come from? Answer: what rhymes with 'began' in Danish.

Two can play at that game. I have moved up line three into line two 'and mint ere our game's over'. That means I need a bit more for line three 'as like as not', to give me a rhyme for yet another damned flower.

And here comes the crunch. 'To be in clover' in English means to be 'as pigs in clover', i.e. to have it good. It's a very common idiom, so every English reader would feel at home with it. At the same time, it plays on the meaning of yet

another botanical feature. It's not there in the original. But, poetically speaking, it is logical. In my opinion. Decide for yourself.