

In the spring of 2001, I was sent this poem by Eichendorff by someone who claimed it was untranslatable.

Mondnacht

Es war, als hätt der Himmel
Die Erde still geküßt,
Daß sie im Blütenschimmer
Von ihm nun träumen müßt.

Die Luft ging durch die Felder,
Die Ähren wogten sacht,
Es rauschten leis die Wälder,
So sternklar war die Nacht.

Und meine Seele spannte
Weit ihre Flügel aus,
Flog durch die stillen Lande,
Als flöge sie nach Haus.

Many attempts later, I was forced to admit he was right. This is what I had arrived at:

Moonlit night (draft 1)

It was as if the heaven
Had softly kissed the earth,
That of it all her dreams now
In flower-sheen must have birth.

The air sighed through the cornfields,
The ears' soft sway was slight,
The forests gently rustled,
So starry was the night.

My soul stretched wide and wider
Its wings above the ground,
Then flew through silent landscapes
As if 'twere homeward bound.

My main reasons for dissatisfaction with the translation were these:

- Certain formal considerations had not been met. The original had an ABAB rhyme scheme (with slight deviations: *Himmel/-schimmer; spannte/Lande*). The poem changed rhythm in lines 10-11, and this change had a poetic function – it was here action was introduced into a scene practically without motion, this being expressed in the gently rocking rhythm of the other lines.
- Apart from *Blütenschimmer*, the vocabulary is extremely simple and unpretentious.

- There were sound-patterns set up in the original that were lost completely.

It was only a few days ago that I came across the original again, in a book called *Gedichte fürs Gedächtnis*, compiled by Ulla Hahn. In the introduction to this book she argues convincingly for the physical experiencing of poetry. Most striking for me was this passage:

Unsere Sprache ist ein hochorganisiertes, uraltes System, das in Bedeutungen wurzelt, die uns oft gar nicht mehr bewußt sind, aber tief und lebendig in unserem Unterbewußtsein weiterwirken. In der Dichtung werden Muster aus diesen verborgenen ebenso wie aus den deutlich hörbaren Bedeutungen gebildet. Diese verborgenen Muster sind die stärkeren, ihnen sollten wir vertrauen. Das Hörgedächtnis greift sich diese Muster, von dem, was es an der Oberfläche hört, heraus; filtert aus der unmittelbar gehörten Oberfläche der Verse diese tieferliegenden Muster. Mitunter trifft uns eine solche Klangfigur, trifft uns ein Strom syntaktischer Kraft mit geradezu physischer Wucht.

It is this power I feel is at work in the poem.

The first poem of the anthology is from the mid-13th century (anon):

Dû bit mîn, ich bin dîn:
des solt dû gewis sîn.
 dû bist beslozen
 in mînem herzen:
verlorn ist daz slüzzelîn:
dû muost immer drinne sîn.

Her comment is 'Kein Wort, keine Silbe zuviel'; 'Bild und Klang sind von dem, was die Worte sagen, nicht zu lösen'. This might sound like the old 'sound and content' chestnut, but here she is evidently right. Learn the poem by heart (by 'heart and mind' UH says) and recite it, and it becomes a magic spell. The language becomes incantatory.

Something similar applies to the Eichendorff poem. Not a word or syllable too much. No, but I would add: only the right words will do. And only the right words in that particular combination. And the translation must also give that impression, create that illusion. And fulfil UH's second condition of the inseparability between image and sound and what the words convey.

I set about redrafting and came up with a second draft:

Moonlit night (draft 2)

It was as if the heaven
Had softly kissed the earth,
Her dreams of him for ever
To flower-sheen must give birth.

Through fields the air moved faintly,
The ears' soft sway was slight,
The forests rustled gently,

So starry was the night.

My soul stretched wide its pinions
Above the moonlit ground,
Then flew through quiet dominions
As if 'twere homeward bound.

A friend of mine has looked at both. The objections are these:

The language is more 'dignified' and more complex than the original. This gives the drafts a 'sought after' feel to them; they lack the natural inevitability of the original. This applies in particular to draft 2, compared to the naturalness of the rhyme in the original. The drafts are more 'restless' and less natural – and therefore less evocative. The lines left alone are better, except for the last line, where the English sounds more 'difficult' and 'thicker' in terms of sound.*

These comments fitted in very well with my own misgivings. So now I know what to try to avoid. But the question is – where do I go from here? Should I learn the German poem by heart and say it out loud time and time again until it can release some deeper experience inside me? So that the unconscious can work more, and better, than the conscious rhyme-smith chiselling away?

Since writing this, I have received a suggested version that contains a part-answer to my problem. The ordinary vocabulary has partly been prevented by my choice of rhyme. If I had chosen kissed/mist for lines 2 and 4 and lightly/sway/slightly/lay for lines 5–8, it becomes easier to arrive at a more natural version (this is a combination of my 2nd version and the version sent to me):

Moonlit night (draft 3)

It was as if the heaven
The earth had softly kissed,
Of him she now for ever
Must dream in flower-mist.

Through fields the air moved lightly,
The corn did softly sway,
The forests rustled gently,
So clear the star-night lay.

My soul stretched wide its pinions
Above the moonlit ground,
Flew through the quiet dominions
As if 'twere homeward bound.

I can still see obvious objections. 'Schimmer' is more 'gleam, sheen' than it is 'mist'. There are now three adverbs in stanza two. The beautiful 'flog...flöge...' has still to be captured. But the language is definitely simpler.

Any suggestions?

* **Pianoforte or fortepiano?**

Five years after Eichendorff's poem 'Mondnacht' was written, Schumann composed his Piano Quintet in Eb major, op. 44. I have many recordings of this work, but one of the favourite ones is by the Michelangelo Piano Quartet, plus Antonio De Secondi on second violin. They are playing on period instruments. The fortepiano is becoming the pianoforte of today, but in the 1840s it still had the less powerful, tinkling strain of the former. And this affects the whole balance of the piece. It is a question of timbre.

I mention this because it raises one of the fundamental questions of translating earlier poetry – what type of language should be used? Should the modern translator use a modern orchestra or play on period instruments?

Clearly, it would be wrong to use vocabulary that did not exist at the time, or words whose meanings have changed drastically since that time. Equally clearly, it would be wrong to try and create the illusion that the translation dated from the same year as the original poem. But what, then, is the balance that should be struck?

I have faced this question a lot over the past couple of years, as I have tried to translate an anthology of Danish poetry from the medieval ballad to the present day. A medieval ballad has to sound medieval, a Romantic poem like a poem a Romantic English writer could have written.

This raises another issue – a translation is a transference of not only the words themselves but the culture to which they belong. So the translation of a German Romantic poem has culture-specific markers that a German reader is picking up unconsciously and consciously, according to how well-steeped that reader is. As a translator, I have to try and arouse echoes and undertones/overtones (to continue the music metaphor) which an English reader will register in, hopefully, a similar way. It is this, too, that I would call the 'timbre' of the poem.

Let me take one small example. If Eichendorff can write 'hätt', 'müßt', then perhaps I am justified in using 'twere'. But this is not a *carte blanche*. The objection to my translations still applies if the naturalness of the original has become stilted in English.