

## Some thoughts about translating a sonnet into English from a Germanic language

The English sonnet tradition, which crystallised during the 16th century, took place at the same time as inflectional endings in the language were rapidly on the decline. The Petrarchan sonnet, with its 11-syllable line and its sense of harmony in the octave, with ABBA ABBA bringing you twice back to your starting point in a small and then larger sense of 'coming home', and its sestet that was clearly a three plus three construction in various permutations, e.g. CDE CDE or EDC EDC, where the implications of the content of the octave were often enlarged on, or the problem posed is resolved, did not seem to suit the English language. Nor did the adoration of a blameless female figure on a pedestal suit the temperament of the translators of Petrarch's sonnets, men who in several cases became the founders of the English sonnet tradition, poets such as Wyatt and Surrey. Gradually, the five rhymes of the Petrarchan sonnet became seven in English, and harmony was replaced by a sense of progression: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG, this reaching its climax in Shakespeare, where dramatic tension steadily increases over three quatrains and there is a final couplet which is often a *dénouement*, a summing up, or a sting in the tail. The woman has been brought down from her pedestal, or, in Shakespeare's case, become a man – or the very tradition of praising the woman is poked fun at, e.g. *My Mistress' Eyes are nothing like the Sun...*

So the first problem that faces the translator of sonnets which have retained all the formal constraints of the Petrarchan sonnet is to decide what to do with lines of 11 syllables (I should in all fairness state that Shakespeare did write sonnets containing lines of 11 syllables). The sonnets in languages such as German, Dutch and the Scandinavian languages normally use a blend of 11 and 10 syllables, but it is perfectly possible to write sonnets only containing 11 syllables. This is the case in the sonnet I wish to look at now, Goethe's *Natur und Kunst, sie scheinen sich zu fliehen*:

### **Natur und Kunst, sie scheinen sich zu fliehen**

Natur und Kunst, sie scheinen sich zu fliehen  
Und haben sich, eh man es denkt, gefunden;  
Der Widerwille ist auch mir verschwunden,  
Und beide scheinen gleich mich anzuziehen.

Es gilt wohl nur ein redliches Bemühen!  
Und wenn wir erst in abgemeßnen Stunden  
Mit Geist und Fleiß uns an die Kunst gebunden,  
Mag frei Natur im Herzen wieder glühen.

So ists mit aller Bildung auch beschaffen:  
Vergebens werden ungebundne Geister  
Nach der Vollendung reiner Höhe streben.

Wer Großes will, muß sich zusammenraffen;  
In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister,  
Und das Gesetz nur kann uns Freiheit geben.

Goethe observes the constraints of the Petrarchan sonnet mentioned above. We have an ABBA ABBA CDE CDE rhyme scheme and an 11-syllable line. The inherent danger in observing these constraints in an English translation is that the poem will not sound natural but like an 'import'. There are two immediate possibilities – reduce some of the lines to ten; increase the number of rhymes by introducing two new rhymes in the second quatrain: ABBA CDDC EFG EFG. This retains the harmonious balance of the original, but allows you to make the sonnet 'fit' the English language. Goethe's poem, despite its form, does actually have a final couplet feel to it – the last two lines are what most people remember of the sonnet. They are the message.

You can, to a certain extent, mitigate the loss of the eleventh syllable if you always avoid ending the ten-syllable lines with a short vowel. English has plenty of diphthongs and even triphthongs, and words like *hour*, *expire* exist in a limbo between 1-2 and 2-3 syllables, according to the speaker.

Here is David Luke's translation of the sonnet:

Nature and Art, they go their separate ways,  
It seems; yet all at once they find each other.  
Even I no longer am a foe to either;  
Both equally attract me nowadays.

Some honest toil's required; then, phase by phase,  
When diligence and wit have worked together  
To tie us fast to Art with their good tether,  
Nature again may set our hearts ablaze.

All culture is like this; the unfettered mind,  
The boundless spirit's mere imagination,  
For pure perfection's heights will strive in vain.

To achieve great things, we must be self-confined:  
Mastery is revealed in limitation  
And law alone can set us free again.

This I have found at <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/wednesday-poem-nature-and-art-by-j-w-von-goethe-translated-by-david-luke-1114712.html>

It is printed as 14 unbroken lines, but this seems odd, so I have taken the liberty of breaking it up so that it follows the original.

The first thing that strikes me is how well it reads. It does not sound like an 'import'. Apart from *other/either/together/tether* (which does not worry me, but might purists, since he successfully suggests rhyme), Luke has managed to retain the entire rhyme scheme. All his ten-syllable lines do exactly as I have just pointed out – they avoid ending in a short vowel.

So is this a success story? Not quite. For 'the good tether' Luke accepts ends up by changing the content and shape of Goethe's poem. It leads to padding, new material and changed material.

In the octave, Goethe does not run over into line 2, or break in the middle of line 5. He does not talk about 'phase by phase' but 'abgemeßnen Stunden'. He makes no mention of a 'tether'. And Luke has clearly added 'have worked together' to get a rhyme. I doubt if 'Geist' means 'wit'. He also uses the same word later, where Luke translates by 'spirit'.

The divergences become more marked in the first tercet. For 'Bildung' is not 'culture'. It is a very difficult word to translate into English, but culture operates at a broader level than 'Bildung', which has here to do with inner personal development and with formation, shaping of the character. And Goethe's statement is shortened into half a line, to make room for 'mind'. There is no mention in Goethe of 'unfettered', indeed, the whole concept is counter to the meaning of the poem. Discipline is not fettering the mind – it is the means whereby freedom is gained. Nor does Goethe mention imagination, and the addition of the word 'mere' is incorrect, with its belittling of imagination – hardly something Goethe would subscribe to. All Goethe has written is 'ungebundne Geister'. I think lines 9-10 of the translation differ radically from what Goethe wrote and intended, and that they are a direct result of Luke's choice to retain the entire rhyme scheme.

The last three lines read well, but I would question the word 'again'. The ultimate goal is the reaching of this higher level through subjecting oneself to the rigours of art. It is not finding freedom again, but gaining freedom as opposed to licence. But Luke needed a rhyme for 'vain'.

I admire Luke's skill as a craftsman, but feel his priorities have led to the original poem being twisted out of shape. There is, however, no perfect solution, for compromises will always have to be made. And attempting to retain the content of the poem may well mean that the result does not flow as well and sounds more like a translation. Judge for yourself:

**Nature and art, they seem to shun each other**

Nature and art, they seem to shun each other  
Yet in a trice can draw back close once more;  
The aversion's gone too that I felt before,  
Both equally attract me, I discover.

An honest effort's all that we require!  
Only when we've assigned art clear-cut hours,  
With full exertion of our mental powers,  
Is nature free our hearts once more to inspire.

Such is the case with all forms of refinement:  
In vain will spirits lacking due constraint  
Seek the perfection of pure elevation.

He who'd do great things must display restraint;  
The master shows himself first in confinement,  
And law alone can grant us liberation.