

Tinkering under the bonnet

HCA was a precocious writer of poetry in his early twenties – the apt title of one of his early poems was ‘rhyme devil’. He was a kitten on the keys, exploring various genres, revelling in his capacity to rhyme, imitating other poets, exploring the craft of poetry writing. In the latter half of his twenties, he seems to have mastered a wide range of technical skills and his subject matter becomes less selfie and more deeply personal. Round the corner the wonderful explosion of his fairy tales awaits, but between 1828 and 1833 he often seems to manage to blend craft and imagination into some fine poems. He becomes capable of projecting his feeling for nature without making it reflect his own image in a typically Romantic, rather narcissistic way. A good example of this is the opening of ‘October’ in the collection ‘The Twelve Months of the Year’, which offers a potpourri of styles and explorations of the reaches of poetry. Here it is in Danish:

Storcken er reist til fremmed’ Land

Storcken er reist til fremmed’ Land, Spurven boer i dens Rede;
Løvet falder, men Bærret staaer redt paa den sorte Hede.
Taagen ligger saa kold og klam, Vedet fældes i Skoven,
Bonden gaaer paa den vaade Mark, vælter Jorden med Ploven.
Over de sorte Muldvarpskud flyver en vildsom Svale,
Skjuler sig mellem Mosens Rør, kan ei synge, ei tale.
Draaben falder saa kold og tung ned fra Træernes Grene;
Minderne leve, uden dem følte sig Hjertet ene.
Som Oceanets dybe Ro førend Stormene stige,
Ja, som et Havblik er der i hele Naturens Rige,
Havblik, Forbudet paa en Storm, snart den stiger med Vælde,
Da skal Skoven staae som et Vrag, alt de Masterne fælde.
Tomhed breder sig meer og meer, her er ei Fryd, ei Smerte;
Livstomt staaer den stolte Naturs svulmende Digterhjerte.

It looks like a chunk of verse, but is actually in sonnet form. The comparison between an outer world and an inner world is perhaps implied, but not insistent. It is the use of the word ‘heart’ at the end of the octet and the sestet. But it is Nature that is personified. Nature has a poetic swelling heart. The poet keeps his own Wertheresque weltenschmerz out of the picture.

I wanted at once to try and translate it. Well, the Danish word ‘gendigte’ is more appropriate. I wanted to be able to ‘re-imagine’ it in English. After four lines I gave up. Why was that? Mainly because it poses certain problems that have specifically to do with the difference between Danish and English. All the rhymes are feminine, every line ends on an unstressed syllable. English nouns, verbs and adjectives rarely add morphological endings that result in this extra syllable. And the definite article always comes after the noun in Danish. Take the first quatrain for example. Each line starts and ends with a noun, producing a Xx stress pattern:

Storken er reist til fremmed' **Land**, **Spurven** boer i dens **Rede**;
Løvet falder, men **Bærret staaer** redt paa den sorte **Hede**.
Taagen ligger saa kold og **klam**, **Vedet** fældes i **Skoven**,
Bonden gaaer paa den vaade **Mark**, vælter **Jorden** med **Ploven**.

Furthermore, the lines (15 syllables) have a stressed caesura on the eighth syllable (except in line 10).

Consider the English equivalents: *The stork, the sparrow, the foliage, the berry, the mist, the firewood, the farmer, the earth*. The rhythmic pattern is completely different. So the main problem is to capture the same rhythmic pattern and flow in the translation.

Is there help at hand? Yes. For the definite article can be used in two ways – it can *specify*, or it can *classify*. Here is an example of each: *The stork was building its nest on the roof*. (specifying, describing a single stork). *The stork is an ungainly but fascinating bird*. (classifying, describing a whole species). The same applies to the indefinite article: *A stork is approaching from the east//A stork always migrates in autumn*. So the problem is not solved by replacing *the* by *a(n)*. But there is a third possibility. In English we can classify by using the noun in the plural without an article: *Storks are always a sign of good luck*. Bingo! That offers a solution to the problem at the beginning of the lines. And we simply have to avoid nouns at the end of lines, unless they end on a weak syllable.

So here is my attempt to retain the 'feel' of the poem transposed into English:

Storks have flown off to foreign lands

Storks have flown off to foreign **lands**, sparrows their nests are keeping;
Leaves all fall but berries cling **on**, out on the heath half-sleeping.
Swirling mists lie so cold and **dank**, wood's felled and stacked for burning.
Farmers trudge through the soggy **fields**, ploughshares furrows are turning.
Over the molehills black as **pitch**, one frenzied swallow's winging,
Hides among bogland's many **reeds**, mute its cheeping and singing.
Droplets dribble heavy and **cold**, down from the tree's wet branches;
Lonely hearts' memories **survive**, vital to save their chances.
Like the deep calm the oceans **know** ere the storms toss and labour,
Yes, as if seas were all **becalmed**, such is the realm of Nature,
Dead calm, presager of a **gale**, soon its fury unfurling,
Then will the forests be as **wrecks**, tattered masts downwards hurling.
Emptiness spreads out more and **more**, here there's no pain, no pleasure;
Nature's poetic swelling **heart** – empty now beyond measure.