

Hölderlin – Hälfte des Lebens

HÄLFTE DES LEBENS

Mit gelben Birnen hänget
Und voll mit wilden Rosen
Das Land in den See,
Ihr holden Schwäne,
Und trunken von Küssen
Tunkt ihr das Haupt
Ins heilignüchterne Wasser.

Weh mir, wo nehm ich, wenn
Es Winter ist, die Blumen, und wo
Den Sonnenschein,
Und Schatten der Erde?
Die Mauern stehn
Sprachlos und kalt, im Winde
Klirren die Fahnen.

I met this poem for the first time while still at school, almost half a century ago. What struck me most, apart from words I had not seen before, like 'hold', 'tunken', 'heilignüchtern' and 'Fahnen' (which our teacher pointed out meant weather-vane and not flag, otherwise it couldn't make that sound), was the beauty of the rhythm, the intensely musical pulse of the poem. Also the way 'hänget' hung like a precipice out over the water, waiting for its subject in line 3. And then, strangely enough, it was followed by 'in' + accusative, something I still find hard to visualise when compared with über + accusative. I noticed that there are many inversions of verbs in the poem, and that the word order is extremely important in creating the atmosphere.

HÄLFTE DES LEBENS

*Mit **gelben Birnen hänget**
Und **voll** mit **wilden Rosen**
Das **Land** in den **See**,
Ihr **holden Schwäne**,
Und **trunken** von **Küssen**
Tunkt ihr das **Haupt**
Ins **heilignüchterne Wasser**.*

***Weh mir, wo nehm** ich, wenn
Es **Winter** ist, die **Blumen**, und **wo**
Den **Sonnenschein**,
Und **Schatten** der **Erde**?
Die **Mauern** stehn
Sprachlos und **kalt**, im **Winde**
Klirren die **Fahnen**.*

I tried reading other poems by Hölderlin, bought the Penguin anthology of translations of his poetry, but found them too difficult to understand. This poem, however, stuck in my mind.

It was not until the mid-1990s that the poem entered my life once more. I received a copy of a book called 'De Muze in het Kolenhok' (The Muse in the Gloryhole), written by the Dutch poet Gerrit Komrij and published in Amsterdam in 1983. In this book he describes how he invited newspaper readers to send in their translations of the poem and was inundated by enthusiastic Dutch translators. Komrij then took the poem line by line, compared translations and arrived at a collage translation. In other words, he did a workshop on the poem.

Here is this collage, which I will subsequently compare with an earlier (and virtually unknown) Dutch translation of the poem by Albert Verwey, a famous Dutch poet.

HELFT VAN HET LEVEN

Met gele peren hangt
En vol met wilde rozen
Het land in het meer,
Gezegende zwanen,
En dronken van kussen
Doop je je hoofd
In 't heilig-nuchtere water.

Wee mij, waar vind ik, als
Het winter is, de bloemen, en waar
De zonneschijn,
En schaduw der aarde?
De muren staan
Sprakeloos en koud, in de wind
Kletteren de weerhanen.

The text faithfully follows the original, with the possible exception of 'hold', which has been translated as 'blessed'. Dutch is fortunate in being able to retain all the inversions.

What seems out of keeping to me is the use of the second-person singular – and in the language of speech (je¹ = jij; je² = jouw/jullie) to indicate the unstressed positions of the two words. It sounds too 'folksy' for the almost 'sacred' mood of the first stanza. It is also odd since 'jij' cannot normally be used to refer back to a plural subject – and could be even confused with the head of the reader. The verb 'dopen' also happens to mean 'to baptise', which is perhaps too much of a good thing, since 'tunken' cannot. The rhythm of the last two lines is altered by the extra syllable in 'sprakeloos' and 'kletteren'. 'Weerhanen' is a very unfortunate word to end the poem on – it does not come to rest like the original poem does.

Here is Verwey's attempt (I have no title) from around 1900:

Met gele peren hangt
En vol met wilde rozen
Het land in het meer,

Gij minlijke zwanen,
En dronken van kussen
Duikt ge het hoofd
In het heilignuchtere water.

Wee mij, waar neem ik, wanneer
Het wintert, de bloemen, en waar
De zonneschijn,
En schaduw van de aarde?
De muren staan
Spraakloos en koud, de vanen
Klapperen in de wind.

The first thing you notice is the choice of *gij/ge* (which is a biblical or elevated second person singular pronoun, except in Flanders, where it can be used instead of the plural pronoun 'jullie') and the retention of the definite article for head, something that Komrij had changed to a possessive. Next, 'hold' has become 'minlijk' ('amicable, friendly' says my dictionary, although I wonder if 'lovable' is not more the right translation). Verwey has also chosen to write 'In het' in line 7, rather than contract, as Komrij does to capture the 'ins' of the German.

It is in the next stanza that Verwey chooses a different solution 'wanneer het wintert' means when it winters, i.e. becomes winter. This changes the rhythm and also the sense, since wintering is a process, whereas Hölderlin talks of the result of a process. Or so I thought. A Dutch friend has checked this and confirmed that it also means 'winters zijn', to be wintery. The friend also points out that this is an old-fashioned or literary usage.

Verwey chooses 'spraakloos' to keep the sound of 'sprachlos'. And then, in the last sentence, he chooses not to invert. 'Vaan' is a banner, flag or standard, not a weathervane. Komrij's 'kletteren' is more a rattling sound; Verwey's 'klapperen' more a flapping or fluttering, possibly chosen because he has not seen Hölderlin as describing weathervanes.

What is shared by both versions is a high level of the same rhythm of the original, something that will cause a problem in English.

Before moving on to a number of English translations, it is worth seeing how another Germanic language copes with the poem. Here is a Danish version by a well-known poet, Thorkild Bjørnvig, which dates from 1970:

HALVDELEN AF LIVET

Der hænger gule pærer
og fuldt af vilde roser
er landet i søen
I elskelige svaner,
og drukne af kys
dykker I hovedet
i hellignøgternt vand.

Ve mig, hvor tager jeg, når
det er vinter, blomsterne, hvorfra
solskinnet

og Jordens skygger?
Murene står
ordløst og koldt, vindfløjene
klirrer i blæsten.

(There hang yellow pears/and full of wild roses/is the land in the lake./You lovable swans/and drunk with kisses/you dip the head/in holy-sobering water.// Woe me, where do I take, where it is winter, the flowers, from where/the sunshine/and Earth's shadows?/The walls stand/wordless and cold, the windvanes/rattle in the wind [fresh breeze])

It is immediately clear that the poet is not interested in retaining the rhythmic pattern of the original. One of the problems involved in translating into Scandinavian languages is the fact that the definite article is tacked onto the noun. This problem arises in the second stanza, where there are five nouns with a definite article: 'blomsterne, solskinnet, Jordens, murene, vindfløjene'. The two in the plural – 'blomsterne, vindfløjene' – end with two unstressed syllables, thus making them difficult to position. The poet also varies the 'wo' + 'wo' construction, which is unfortunate.

How do the English translations fare? Let me start with one by a well-known and respected translator, Michael Hamburger:

The Middle of Life

With yellow pears the land
And full of wild roses
Hangs down into the lake,
You lovely swans,
And drunk with kisses
You dip your heads
Into the hallowed, the sober water.

But oh, where shall I find
When winter comes, the flowers, and where
The sunshine
And shade of the earth?
The walls loom
Speechless and cold, in the wind
weathercocks clatter.

The first thing to strike the reader is the title, which is a translation of 'Media Vita'. This is understandable if that is what Hölderlin intended. But he has no follow-up in stanza two to indicate that 'in the midst of life we are in death', so I am suspicious of the translation. It is desolation that speaks out here, not a fear of life soon coming to an end.

That was what I originally thought, but the evidence against me is very convincing.

The first two versions of the original had 'Die letzte Stunde' as their title. The final title was not added until 1805. In 1803, Hölderlin had prepared this and other poems for translation under the common title 'Nachtgesänge'.

In 'Gedichte fürs Gedächtnis', edited by Ulla Hahn, she quotes a letter written in 1800 by Hölderlin to his sister: "Ich kann den Gedanken nicht ertragen, daß auch ich, wie manche andere, in der kritischen Lebenszeit, wo um unser Inneres her, mehr noch als in der Jugend, eine betäubende Unruhe sich häuft, daß ich, um auszukommen, so kalt und allzunüchtern und verschlossen werden soll. Und in der Tat, ich fühle mich oft wie Eis, und fühle es notwendig, solange ich keine stillere Ruhestätte habe, wo alles, was mich angeht, mich weniger nah und eben deswegen weniger erschütternd bewegt." Her comment is that the poem has found perfect images for 'die Angst vor einer Lebenskrise', which in Hölderlin's case was the fear of a loss of his poetic powers – for him, a form of death. At the same time, she writes, these images are also existential symbols of human existence.

The second argument in favour of 'media vita' is that of the grammar and imagery of the poem itself, my Dutch friend points out. He paints a late-summer/autumn scene, with yellow pears and wild roses in the late-summer flowering, the swans above their mirror image in the now quiet and still, cooler but not yet frozen water. In the second stanza he asks emphatically where he can immediately fetch all this from when it is winter, i.e. where he now is, he is already thinking of the winter, and in the last three lines he actually transposes the reader, still full of the summer, into this cold season. So in the midst of life, we are in death.

Hamburger has chosen to ignore the rhythm of the original, but to keep all the parenthetical phrases. So he manages to retain something of the syntactical feel of the poem, although differing considerably in the number of syllables per line. The 7-7-5-5-6-4-8 of the first stanza, for example, becomes 6-6-6-4-5-4-10. The one word that Hamburger has altered completely is 'stehn', which is now 'loom'. This is the sort of trap many translators, myself included, often fall into – he influences the reader's impression of the scene in a particular direction not indicated, though perhaps suggested by the original. I would say – let the reader do the work, not the translator. For here the translator has filtered out other possible readings of 'stehn'. Another shift of emphasis is 'hallowed', which is 'geheiligt' rather than 'heilig'. And his 'But oh' sounds a bit pathetic to me, whereas pathos is avoided in the German poem.

The next translation, undated, by Richard Sieburth, raises different problems.

Half of Life

With its yellow pears
And wild roses everywhere
The shore hangs in the lake,
O gracious swans,
And drunk with kisses
You dip your heads
In the sobering holy water.

Ah, where will I find
Flowers, come winter,
And where the sunshine
And shade of the earth?
Walls stand cold
And speechless, in the wind
The weathervanes creak.

The insertion of 'its' in line 1, the word 'everywhere' in line 2 and 'hangs in the lake' all seem weaknesses to me. I don't know how a shore can hang 'in' anything (cf. Hamburger's translation). We have yet another word for 'hold', 'gracious', which does not seem out of place, although I will discuss later what I have read about the meaning of 'hold' at the time Hölderlin was writing. In the second stanza, 'come winter' is a poetic platitude. For some reason, 'walls' is without an article, although 'weathervanes' is with. The order of 'speechless and cold' has been changed, but I cannot see any reason for this. The word 'creak' is a credible sound, but is not the same as 'klirren', which implies a more repetitive and noisy sound – and has the wonderful -RR- in the middle.

David Constantine, undated, is next:

Half of Life

The land with yellow pears
And full of wild roses
Hangs into the lake
O gracious swans
And drunk with kisses
You plunge your heads
In the holy, the sober water.

Alas, for where in winter
Shall I come by flowers and where
The sunlight and
And shade of the earth?
The walls stand
Speechless and cold, the wind
Clatters the weathervanes.

The first three lines are prose rather than poetry. I can understand the choice of the word 'plunge', since the 'trunken/tunkt' is now paralleled by 'drunk/plunge', but the movement is too violent. I see it as a slow, stately dipping of the head – that, at any rate, has been true of the swans I have seen making this movement. A pity that 'dunk' is more 'toast and marmelade being dipped in coffee', or makes you think of 'slam dunk' in basketball. There would appear to be not satisfactory replacement for 'dip'. Swans that 'duck' their heads, sounds almost like a contradiction in terms. That Hölderlin wanted this repetition is clear from his revised earlier version 'und trunken von/Küssen taucht ihr/das Haupt ins hei-/lignüchterne kühle Gewässer'.

Stanza two offers an explanation 'for', which is not in the original. To 'come by' is a bit too much 'get hold of' and too little 'find'. To 'clatter' is not normally a transitive verb, although this is possible, e.g. 'she clattered the dishes onto the table'. The original says it happened in the wind and uses the verb intransitively.

Here is Fred Uhlman's translation from 1978:

Hung with yellow pears

And with wild roses loaded
The land is mirrored in the lake,
You sweet swans,
Drunk with kisses
You dip your head
In the sacred, sober water.

Ah me, where can I seek
In winter the flowers
And where sunshine
And shadow of earth?
The walls stand
Speechless and cold, in the wind
Icy flags tinkle.

I wonder if Uhlman is a native speaker of English, for I find the last word 'tinkle' completely out of place. Uhlman has to explain how his 'flags' can make that sound, so he adds 'icy'. 'Tinkling icy flags' is so far removed from the original that the original desolation is replaced by a Christmassy feeling. The other oddity is 'with wild roses loaded', where the inversion plus the repetition of the vowel sound seem distinctly wrong. Nor does it say anywhere that the land was mirrored in the lake. 'Sweet' is too twee. And the use of the singular 'head' referring back to a plural subject is unusual English.

Finally, here is the translation I made back in 1998:

HALF OF LIFE

With yellow pears full-laden
And covered with wild roses
Land slips into lake,
You swans alluring,
And drunken with kisses
Dipping your heads
In sacred-sobering water.

Ah me, where will I, when
The winter's come, find flowers, and where
The sunshine and
The shadows of the earth?
The walls all stand
Speechless and cold, the wind-caught
Weather-vanes clatter.

This is the only English translation I have found that has attempted to stick faithfully to the originally number of syllables per line as well as the rhythmic pattern.

How does it look, over a decade later? I am still not satisfied that I have found a solution for 'hangen + in + accusative. The 'overhang' suggested by 'hänget' rather than 'hängt' is part of what is missing. I think of land almost toppling into the lake, but my verb is too smooth and gradual – although English does have the words 'landslide' and 'landslip' which are not.

I note typical tricks I used back then to increase or decrease the number of syllables in a line: 'full-laden, drunken, winter's, all stand'.

In addition, I have lost a main verb by choosing 'dipping' in line 6. Maybe I should try 'dip low' or 'dip down', but it sounds as if I am rooting for an extra syllable more than anything else. To choose 'Dip their x heads', adding an adjective, is nearly always a bad solution, open to the same objection as Hamburger's use of 'loom'.

The choice of 'alluring' is based on the meanings 'charming, fascinating, enticing', which I have read were perhaps the most likely when Hölderlin was writing. I cannot tell whether this is in fact true – I mainly know the word from 'Du bist wie eine Blume, so schön und hold und rein'. Placing the adjective after the noun I feel was justified – it captures something of the elevated tone of the first stanza.

The 'trunken von Küssen' image, suggests my Dutch friend, is that on the swans beak repeatedly kissing the surface of the water and thus its mirror image. If that is true, the swan is in fact attracted by itself – it finds itself 'alluring'. In contrast to the swans' intoxication, the water itself is still, holy, sober.

In the second stanza I have chosen 'shadows' not 'shade', also because I don't really see how 'shade' fits the picture the poet is conjuring up. He is talking about a lack of sunshine, which results in a loss of shadow. Shade is normally what you seek to avoid sunlight. I think 'shadow' in the singular is preferable – it is also implied by the lack of definite article and the implied repetition of the singular accusative 'den'. My solution has something to do with syllable-counting once again, I fear.

I like 'wind-caught' very much, even though it is perhaps that I deviated most from the original. The C- repetition of 'caught/clatter' works well for me, as does the image – I can see and hear those vanes very clearly.

So, despite things having been lost, I think my overall priorities were right in translating the poem. This time I have few regrets.