

Translating a poem from German

'Der Panther' by Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926)

Im Jardin des Plantes, Paris

Rainer Maria Rilke, one of the best known German poets, was born in 1875 in Prague, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After much travelling, he settled in Paris, where he worked alongside the great French sculptor Auguste Rodin as his secretary. Rodin was a creative influence on Rilke, in effect his mentor for a time. It was probably Rodin who in 1902 suggested that Rilke should visit the dismal zoo in the Jardin des Plantes, where Rilke saw his 'panther' – which may well in fact have been a leopard. The powerfully sympathetic poem that came from this visit is one of Rilke's best known and most often translated poems.

1

Whether or not you are learning German, you will find translating this famous and deeply absorbing poem a fascinating challenge. As with any translation, the first step is to hear what it sounds like in the original language. The sound of the poem – its rhythms, its lines, its rhymes – is a clue to not just its meaning but to the 'voice' of the poem, to the emotions it carries or embodies. So your teacher's reading of it, aloud to you, and your listening, are the beginning of your work.

Der Panther

*Sein Blick ist von Vorübergehen der Stäbe
so müd geworden, daß er nichts mehr hält.
Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe
und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.*

*Der weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte,
der sich im allerkleinsten Kreise dreht,
ist wie ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte,*

in der betäubt ein großer Wille steht.

*Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille
sich lautlos auf—. Dann geht ein Bild hinein,
geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille—
und hört im Herzen auf zu sein.*

Once you have heard the poem read aloud, perhaps more than once, try to read it aloud yourselves, in chorus in your group or with a partner or on your own, if you feel confident. Even if you are not studying German, be bold and try to read it. By listening to it being read and reading it over a few times, you will begin to hear something of the poem's 'music'.

2

It is worth remembering that many translators of poetry do not know the language of the poem they're translating. They have to rely on intermediaries, other translators who will first dig out a poem's word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence meaning. Such a 'literal' translation, done by someone who knows the original language intimately, is sometimes called a 'trot'.

A trot will of course lack the rhythms and musical cadences of the original poem. It has been translated without a primary concern for its sounding 'like a poem'. The English of a trot is likely to feel rough and ready, even awkward. But English poems created from such literal versions have become not just great works of translation but great English poems.

So whether or not you're a student of German, a rough literal translation of 'Der Panther' will be invaluable, perhaps indispensable. And since it may well be the source of your own translation, your own Rilke 'Panther' poem, it must be valued for what it is. It is the means whereby fine translators – who seem to have the ability to 'X-ray' through trots to the original poem beneath – bring such poems into English.

For clarity's sake, the version keeps as far as possible to the German word order. Take the first two lines, for example:

*Sein Blick ist von Vorübergehen der Stäbe
so müd geworden...*

The natural English word order (in translation) would be: *His gaze has become so tired from the passing of the bars...*

But here it is: *His gaze has from the passing of the bars so tired become...*

*His gaze has from the passing of the bars
so tired become/grown that it holds nothing more.
To him it is as if a thousand bars it offered/gave,
and behind the thousand bars no world.*

*The smooth motion/gait/walk of the supple strong stride,
which himself in the very smallest circles turns,
is like a dance of power round a middle/centre,
in which numbed/deadened a big will stands (erect)
Only sometimes moves the curtain of the pupil
soundlessly upwards. Then moves an image in,
moves through the limbs' tense stillness
and in the heart stops being.*

3

'Der Panther' is a highly wrought poem in terms of sound, of its sound effects. Listen to how the word *Vorübergehen* bestrides the first line, taking up so much of the space of it. Listen to the sound of *Stäbe* echoing through the stanza, in *Stäbe gäbe* and again in *Stäben*, and later in *dreht* and *steht*. Listen to the finality of those long syllables in *daß er nichts mehr hält*. Listen to the power of *Tanz... Kraft* – and the fading away feeling of the final half-line.

Can a translation re-create effects that occur in the German in a new English poem? Perhaps, perhaps not. But you need at least to hear and consider the sounds, and recognise what they do, before deciding whether or not you can devise a parallel, as it were, musical structure in English.

Some things can transfer from one language to another; others will resist. Rhyme may resist. Every line in 'Der Panther' rhymes with one other line. Moreover, the rhyming words, particularly the nouns – *Schritte / Mitte, Pupille / Stille*— are crucial moments in the poem. Which might be preferable, to have crucial words at the end of lines, or to have not-so-crucial words that fitted a rhyme scheme? Can you preserve a rhyme scheme, or sound pattern like *Stäbe / hält / gäbe / Welt*, and still have the rhyming word sound important and right? Just as important, ask yourselves what is the mood, the tone of this poem? Such questions will arise for you and your group as soon as you embark on your own 'Panther' or your group version.

4

There are many translations of 'Der Panther' online. Rilke is a much translated poet. That shouldn't deter you. You will find translations that don't appeal to you; some will not sound to you much like poems either. You will want to do your own version, and do better.

Here are my first three drafts of the first two lines. They are meant to be criticised, to tempt you to improve on them.

1. *His gaze is so exhausted by the endless / passing of the bars, it holds nothing else.*
2. *His gaze is so diminished by his cage-bars' / ceaseless passage it holds onto nothing else.*
3. *The ceaseless procession of the cage's bars / has so depleted his sight it retains no other thing.*

None of these seems quite right. In (1) the line-break seems awkward – perhaps because it is the first line. Then the ending just fades away, unrhythmically. In (2) as well, the line-break on 'cage-bars' seems wrong, heavy. And I think I have to change 'onto nothing'. In (3), 'The ceaseless procession' is rather a mouthful; *procession* is three syllables and hurries the reader. 'It retains no other thing' perhaps goes better, but I'm not sure about 'retains'. Or 'thing', come to think of it. Clearly I have work to do! But it will be stimulating to work on this translation, fun even: as it will be for you, as you work on yours.

Robert Hull, 2015

You can find details and information about Rilke and 'Der Panther', as well as some specimen translations, at these websites:

<http://www.thebeckoning.com/poetry/rilke/rilke2.html>

<http://www.thefoolsparadise.com/der-panther/>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSIdzAdCU_A

There is a fine reading of 'Der Panther' at:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDG2BbNbjbk

And an interesting interpretation and translation at:

<http://www.thebeckoning.com/poetry/rilke/rilke1.html>