

## 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 your students are studying German, it will be a richly stimulating challenge for them to translate 'Der Panther'. Not only is it a great poem, it is also much translated – often not well.

To approach the work of translating, the first step for students will be to hear the poem read aloud, so they know what it sounds like in the music of the original language. That is a way of saying that hearing the authentic untranslated sounds of the poem is a crucial first step on the way to uncovering its total 'meaning'. The poem's rhythms, the length of its lines, its rhymes, are clues not only to the 'voice' of the poem, and the emotions it carries or embodies, but also to its meaning. So the teacher's reading of the poem aloud, and the students' listening responses, even before they know what the poem means, are the beginning of their 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 the students have heard the poem read aloud, perhaps more than once, they should try to read it aloud themselves. They could do this in groups, in chorus, with partners or individually if they are confident. The important thing is to be familiar with the sounds and rhythms of the poem.

## 2

It is worth reminding students that many translators do not know the language of the poem they translate from, since they rely on intermediaries for the spade-work, other translators who will first dig out a poem's word-by-word meaning, and present it as a literal translation or 'trot'.

A trot will of course lack the rhythms and cadences of the original poem, having been translated for literal meaning only. Students should appreciate though, that the English of a trot, despite feeling rough and ready, is the English from which some great works not just of translation, but of English poetry have been developed.

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

I suggest to students in their Notes that 'Der Panther' is 'a highly wrought poem' in terms of sound. I offer examples of this, like the way the word *Vorübergehen* bestrides the first line, and the way the sound of *Stäbe* echoes through the first stanza, in *Stäbe*, *gäbe* and *Stäben*. I draw their attention to the long syllables in *daß er nichts mehr hält*, the power of *Tanz... Kraft* – and the fading away feeling of the final half-line.

The question the teacher will want to put to students is whether effects that occur in the German can be re-created in a new English poem? Students will need to decide for themselves about this, as about other questions they will face.

It would be good to point out to them that some elements of poems may transfer readily from one language to another, while others will resist. Metaphor will move across readily, while sound effects (including rhyme – and every line in *Der Panther* rhymes) will resist.

And since rhyming words, particularly nouns – *Schritte / Mitte, Pupille / Stille* – are crucial moments in the poem, the decision will be whether to have crucial words that don't rhyme at the end of lines, or not-so-crucial words that fit a rhyme-scheme. Equally crucial is for students to ask what the mood, the tone of the poem is, and whether the language of their version is consonant with it.

#### 4

Rilke is a much translated poet. There are many translations of 'Der Panther' online that are offered as poems. Students should look critically at such translations and be encouraged to go their own way, and do better.

In the same spirit of encouragement to be brave and original I offer, in the Students' Notes, my first three drafts of the first two lines.

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.*

I criticise these three attempts (in the Students' Notes) in the way I hope students will also feel free to criticise them, and not just them, but online versions they might meet, and their own early drafts. The work of translating becomes not only more challenging when done in that critical spirit, but more absorbing, ultimately more rewarding and certainly more fun.

**Robert Hull, 2015**

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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=nSldzAdCU\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSldzAdCU_A)

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

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDG2BbNbjbk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDG2BbNbjbk)

And an interesting interpretation and translation at:

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