

Faust, Part I, Lines 1699-1706

Werd' ich zum Augenblicke sagen:
Verweile doch, du bist so schön!
Dann magst du mich in Fesseln schlagen,
Dann will ich gern zugrunde gehn.
Dann mag die Totenglocke schallen,
Dann bist du deines Dienstes frei,
Die Uhr mag stehn, der Zeiger fallen,
Es sei die Zeit für mich vorbei!

Translation of the meaning:

If I say to the moment:
But stay, you are so beautiful!
Then you may clap me in fetters
Then I will gladly go under.
Then the death knell may ring out,
Then you are free of your service
The clock may stand still, the hand fall down
Time will be over for me.

Problems with meaning:

Werd' ich...sagen: literally, If I will say. But in English, we don't use the future tense in conditional clauses, even though in general we use the future in English more often than it is used in German.

Augenblicke: Literally, of course, the blinking of an eye. But it is conventionalized in German, the only word for 'moment' that isn't a loan word. So in reaching for 'moment,' an exact English *semantic* equivalent, we lose the flavor of the 'eyebinking,' which in English sounds quaint. We have an etymologic equivalent in English, "in the blink of an eye," but we don't use it in this syntactic context.

will ich gern...: Tense problem again. 'Will' is of course an auxiliary of intention--Ich will dieses Buch lesen-- but here you can't say 'I gladly want to go under,' because 'gladly' (gern) and 'want' don't go together in English, being considered redundant. So 'will gladly' is the best translation, maybe fudgingly allowable because 'will' in its archaic English meaning carries along the idea of intention.

zugrunde gehen: No exact English equivalent--to go to ground sounds like grounding out to second, or maybe going down to the basement.

Dann bist du...frei: Again, tenses have no exact equivalent. This is the present used as a future, which is more common in German than in English (the opposite of the above passage with 'Werd'ich..') 'You are free...' is close, but seems less conditional, even when used in this clearly conditional context, than the German 'Dann bist du...'

'der Zeiger': The hand of the clock, no problem, except that in English the word for this thing is also a hand. Der Zeiger is literally the pointer, but we don't call it a pointer' to say 'the pointer' sounds too unclocklike in English.'

Es sei: Ah, the subjunctive, the bane of English translators of just about anything else European. One could do it more as a command, as in the Biblical "Es sei Licht," and say 'May time be over for me,' but then you have the problem that all the other sentences with 'mag' and 'magst' are translated by 'may' (which after all is the direct English genetic cognate of 'mag'), and Goethe was presumably using a different locution here.

A poor attempt at a more poetic translation:

If to the moment I should say
But stay, I beg, you are so lovely
In fetters strong clap me away
I'll go to my demise full gladly.
Then may the deathknell be set ringing
From all your service you'll be free
The clock stand still, its hands freehanging
Time will be over then for me.

In an earlier iteration of this class, we came up with a few improvements on this version, or alternatives anyway, and I repeat it with the changes here:

If to the moment I should say
But **linger here**, you are so lovely
In fetters strong clap me away
I'll go to my demise full gladly.
Then may the deathknell be set ringing
Then from your service you'll be free
The clock stand still, its hands freehanging
Let time be over then for me.

I thought this was pretty poor, so I looked at one of the standard published translations, and found, to my surprise, that I didn't do much worse than the "expert." Here is

Walter Kaufmann's Translation:

If to the moment I should say
Abide, you are so fair--
Put me in fetters on that day
I *wish* to perish then, I swear.
Then let the death bell ever toll
Your service done, you will be free,
The clock may stop, the hand may fall,
As time comes to an end for me.

Here is a comparison of the two *verse* versions, trying to be fair both to my own and to the more learned one:

Line one: Identical (!!!)

Line two:

I kept the tetrameter, which Kaufmann abandons for this line only. I put in an extra 'I beg,' which keeps the meter. It's not there in the original, but there is a sense of begging in asking a moment, which is fleeting by nature, not to fleet.

"Abide" is more literary than "but stay." Kaufmann is thus more archaic, I more modern.

My "But stay" keeps the sense of *verweile doch*, which Kaufmann just left out.

"Fair" is archaic at best for "schön." "Schön" is an ordinary German word, while "fair" now means either good weather or kinda OK. "Lovely," I think, conveys that sense of longing, hoping against hope (unless you sell out to the Devil) that something fleeting won't fleet.

Line three:

I put an extra “strong” which does nothing except fill out the meter, but certainly doesn’t contravene the sense of fetters. Kaufmann, on the other hand, filled out his meter with “on that day,” which isn’t in the original either. I have “put me *away*” and the ‘away’ isn’t there literally in the original, but I would say that ‘put in fetters’ and ‘put away in fetters’ are equivalent.

Line four:

“full gladly”: now I’m the one with the archaisms--“full” as an intensifier sounds mildly archaic in 1993. Could also try “right” with similar effect. “perish” is probably stronger, and therefore better than “go to my demise,” but the latter is closer to ‘zugrunde gehn,’ since it has the “go to” in it.

The italicization or underlining of “*wish*” sucks. A cheap trick to make up for what you can’t do with plain words. But it refers back to my comment about the use of ‘will,’ above.

Finally, the “I swear” isn’t in the original at all, but is certainly excusable, since Faust is, in fact, swearing an oath in this passage.

Line five:

“Deathknell” and “death bell” are about even. No problem with either. Kaufmann’s locution is somewhat better than mine, since I imply some other agent in “be set ringing,” while he, like the original, just has it ring by itself.

Kaufmann’s “ever” is there to fill out the meter, as is my “set ringing,” an extra syllable from the original “schallen.” I think his adds more superfluous meaning than mine.

Line six:

Almost the same. To fill out the meter, Kaufmann adds a “done,” which is not in the original, but certainly implied; I add an “all” which is about the same value. In the more recent version, I think the class improved greatly on this.

Line seven:

“Stop” and “Stand still” are equally good (that is to say, not *quite* right) for “stehn” here. Mine adds a superfluous but not distorting “still,” while Kaufmann shifts from the cognate to a different word, but with the same meaning. I think Kaufmann’s “fall” is better than my “freehanging,” but the sense is about the same.

Line eight:

I like mine better. “Over” is cognate to “[vor]über,” which is very close in meaning to “vorbei.” Also, Kaufmann adds an “as,” making this whole line *modify* everything that has gone before from line three on out. Mine preserves the original grammar, in which the last sentence, rather than modifying, adds another action to those enumerated in lines three through seven.

Overall sound:

Neither is particularly good; they both sound lightweight in comparison to the original. In comparing the translations to each other, each has its strong and weak points. Kaufmann at least has one line pretty close: line seven, which I fluffed to the consistency of merrigues. On the other hand, his seems more forced, and that italicized *wish* is really awful.

Prince Teng's Pavilion By Wang Bo (649-676)

騰王高閣臨將渚
配玉鳴鸞罷歌舞
畫棟朝飛南浦云
珠簾暮捲西山雨

閑雲潭影日悠悠
物換星移幾度秋
閣中帝子今何在
檻外長江空自流

Pinyin phonemic transcription

Teng Wang gao ge lin jiang zhu;
Pei yu ming luan ba ge wu.
Hua dong zhao fei nan pu yun;
Zhu lian mu juan xi shan yu.
Xian yun tan ying ri you you
Wu huan xing yi ji du qiu?
Ge zhong di zi jin he zai?
Jian wai chang jiang kong zi liu.

Translation of the meaning:

Prince Teng's high pavilion looks down on the river islet
Hanging jade and ringing buckles end the singing and dancing.
In the morning, the painted beam flies on the clouds of the southern shore
In the evening, the pearl curtain winds around the rain of the western
mountain.
The reflection of the random clouds in the pond is sadder by the day;
For how many returns of autumn have the animals come and gone or the stars
moved on?
The imperial son in the pavilion: where is he now?
Outside the fence, the long river flows emptily on its own.

Vocabulary problems

Line 1: "Pavilion" is an omnibus word for about six different things in Chinese: dian, ge, ting, lou, etc. Becomes a cliché.

Line 2: "luan" is about impossible to translate without a long circumlocution--it's a jade belt-ornament.
The syntactic relations of "ba" (to end, or to quit) are ambiguous here: Do the ringing of the jade buckles actually end the festivities, as the syntax implies (unlikely), or do they signal the end, or do they ring as people end the dancing, or is it the singing and dancing of the buckles that ends? Lots of possibilities here.

Lines 3 and 4: These next two lines are no problem semantically. More when we get to the verse translations.

Line 5: "Xian" as a modifier for "yun" (clouds) is a hard one. It can mean lazy, or superfluous, or irrelevant, but here it has the feeling of the clouds being rather random. I tried "desultory" but it seemed too fancy and likely to distract from the rest of the English.

Line 6: "Wu" is more like "creatures" or "things" than just animals, and certainly refers to "plants and animals." But to put in "plants and animals" or worse, "living things" stretches this out way beyond the specificity or detail of the original.

Lines 7 and 8: The last two lines seem to have no problems semantically.

A try in metrical (not yet rhymed) verse:

Prince Teng's high pavilion looks down upon the river islet
Hanging jade and ringing buckles bring an end to the singing and dancing.
The painted crossbeam flies in the morning 'midst the clouds of the
southern shore
The pearled curtain curls in the evening 'round the rain of the western
hills.

The random clouds' pond reflection grows daily ever sadder
How many retuning autumns have the animals gone or the stars moved on?
The emperor's son in his high pavilion: Tell me, where is he today?
Outside the fence the long river flows emptily on its own.

What's startling here is that it works. This is not a strict English meter, and it's not the original Chinese of one-syllable feet, but it preserves the heptameter and the hammering feel of the original because of the mostly trochaic feet. The exquisite parallelism of the third and fourth lines is fairly easy to preserve; though it's no longer exquisite, one can still gain a glimmer of what the original might have been like.

Shall we try to rhyme this one?

Prince Teng's high tower looms o'er the river bend
The jade belted guests leave; their songs and dances end.
The painted beam flies in the lofty clouds in early morn.
The pearled curtain wraps the rainy hills at evening's end.
The random clouds' pond reflection grows daily sad
How many falls have the stars gone round or the beasts all fled?
The emperor's son in his high tower: where is he now?
Outside the fence the long river rolls through its bed.

Comment: This is hard. I've tried not to use too many silly, 19th-centuryish English poetic fillers, but I plead guilty to "in early morn" and "O'er." I don't think much is gained by putting it in rhyme. The parallelism of three and four is shot by the exigencies of rhyme; one of the finest passages of Chinese poetry is trivialized here. Quite a few semantic changes have to be made, including but not restricted to: "River bend" for "river bank" "Guests" and "leave" in line two, not in the original.'

Took out "south" and "west" in the parallel lines; also added the gratuitous "early" and "end," which wrecked the parallelism also.

"Falls" isn't necessarily readily comprehensible.

"Rolls through its bed" is quite far off of "emptily flows by itself," but I rather think it preserves the original meaning reminiscent of "Old man river, he just keeps rollin', he don' know nothin..."