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[THE EIGHT
STAGES
of

TRANSLATION]

with a selection
of poems and translations

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The Eight Stages of Translation

In this essay I will not deal with the theory of translation but I will try to answer the question: What is it like to translate a poem? We'll look mainly at the difficulties. The difficulties are all one difficulty, something immense, knotted, exasperating, fond of disguises, resistant, confusing, all of a piece.

One translates a poem in fits and starts, getting a half line here, weeks later the other half, but one senses a process. I'm going to simplify the process into eight stages. I mean by that the stages one goes through from the first meeting with a poem to its recreation, when one says goodbye to it. As I've mentioned above, the stages will often collapse into each other, or a single line will suddenly go through all eight stages in a flash, while the other lines lie about looking even more resistant than before. What I will do then is to pretend that all goes in order; but this is an ancient ploy. When one makes a map, one pretends the earth can be laid out flat. But a map helps us to visualize the territory.

I decided not to choose a poem I had already translated, which I would write about from hindsight, but instead I chose virtually at random a sonnet from Rilke's first series of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, a poem I did not know well. In preparation for this essay, I took the poem to a seminar in German translation and we all worked through the sonnet. The sonnet is this one:

XXI

Frühling ist wiedergekommen. Die Erde
ist wie ein Kind, das Gedichte weiss;
viele, o viele . . . Für die Beschwerde
langen Lernens bekommt sie den Preis.

Streng war ihr Lehrer. Wir mochten das Weisse
an dem Barre des alten Manns.

Nun, wie das Grüne, das Blaue heisse,
dürfen wir fragen: sie kanns, sie kanns!

Erde, die frei hat, du glückliche, spiele
nun mit den Kindern. Wir wollen dich fangen,
fröhliche Erde. Dem Frohsten gelings.

O, was der Lehrer sie lehrte das Viele,
und was gedruckt steht in Wurzeln und langen
schwierigen Stämmen: sie sings, sie sings!

1

During the first stage we set down a literal version, we don't worry about nuances—English phrases that are flat, prosaic, dumpy are fine. We only want the thrust.

Spring has returned again. The earth
is like a child that knows poems;
many, oh many. For the burdens
of her long study, she receives the prize.

Her teacher was hard. We liked the white
in the old man's beard.
Now, how the green [things] and the blue are called,
we dare to ask: she knows it, she knows it!

Earth, on vacation, you lucky one, play
with the children now. We'd like to catch you,
happy earth. Success goes to the happiest.

Oh what the teacher taught her, so many things,
and what is imprinted [or pressed] into roots and the long
difficult stems: She sings it, she sings it!

That is the literal. We notice immediately a problem with the gender of the child. Because Rilke is speaking of earth and a child at once, he is committed, *die Erde* being feminine, to a feminine pronoun, and we'll have to live with that, though we see the child could just as well be male. Earth is "it" in English, so we are already in trouble, and we'll have to face this issue sooner or later.

As we read the literal, our first reaction is: What happened

to the poem? Where did it go? So we read the original again and it's still marvelous; so evidently something has been left out—probably the meaning. Before we go farther with a translation then, we have to deal with the issue: What does the poem mean?

2

To find that is what I call the second stage. Some translators just print the literal version; they turn away from this stage.

If we enter it, we will need everything we have learned in literature courses, or from our own writing, (and all the German we can scrape up in order to penetrate the "problems." Often friends are helpful at this stage, to bring up quirky details that we haven't noticed.) Here, for example: Why is this child brought in? And if the earth has to be compared to a child, why a child "*das Gedichte weis*"? It calls up a typical European schoolroom scene, memorization of poetry; the student who memorizes best, sometimes a girl, wins a prize that the principal perhaps awards her in public at Student's Day. The scene contains the strenuousness and tension of European grade school education. What does that have to do with the spontaneity of spring? That's the first problem.

If we read over our own literal versions, the poem appears to be a sort of depressing testimony to the way school experiences persist in the European adult. It says the earth memorizes poems, gets a prize, and is good at identifying flowers. Then a game at recess appears involving a game of tag, and the poem closes with the child or the earth singing something, no doubt in a school recital. That is what the literal

says. If we read over the German, we realize something else or something more is being said, but what?

We go back to the first question. What does grade school education have to do with the spontaneity of spring? In line with that, we ask: Who is this teacher with a white beard or with white in the beard? The white has to be snow, and he winter. Apparently earth knows her own trees and flowers from some memorization work done in winter, the same time school is in session. That's odd. In this stage, it's important to follow every eccentric branch out to its farthest twig—if one doesn't, one pulls the poem back to the mediocre middle, where we all live, reasonably.

The third stanza continues to compare or associate earth and schoolwork. Earth is described now as "*frei*," which in the context means "out of school." During this stage a native born speaker is most helpful—the ambiguous meanings that surround "*weis*" in line two, "*frei*" in line nine, and "*gedrückt*" in line thirteen, a dictionary will not settle. A native born speaker can shorten the floundering time. Spring apparently resembles the recess time, or perhaps the "play day" some schools have in May. After that we are called immediately back to the teacher. It has been mentioned how strict he is, and now, how many things he teaches. As Americans we tend to get uneasy when our convictions that earth-life and poetry are spontaneous become challenged. The whole mood of American assumptions, of which Whitman is a part, leads us to associate growth—of which the growth from winter to spring is exemplary—with spontaneity, perhaps the spontaneous writing of poetry. But Rilke does not agree with this; he connects growth in this poem—earth growth at least—with discipline, difficulty, routine memorization. This

discipline he embodies in the major metaphor: the discipline of learning poems by heart. There is something un-American here, whether by American we mean Whitmanic gladness or the easy stages the "human potential" movement believes in. We don't find our hopeful prejudices supported by Rilke.

A German-born speaker will tell us that "*weiss*" in the second line does not only mean "know" but "memorize," and the context tells us the second meaning is the one used here. "*Beschwerde*" which is related to "burden," "heaviness," "pain," and "difficulty" emphasizes the painful labor-involved in growth, as does "*langen*" ("long") before "study," also the word "*streng*" applied to the teacher, and particularly the adjective "*schwierigen*" in the last line, surprisingly given to tree trunks or plant stems. A native speaker will tell us this is not a usual adjective for these nouns at all; so we guess by that that Rilke is laying special emphasis on the difficulty. Whatever the earth achieves therefore she does not achieve through spontaneity. When a poet from another culture contradicts our assumptions, we tend to fudge his point; therefore to struggle with each eccentricity we see is extremely important. Americans are merely twentieth-century readers. Rilke obviously is aware what we, as twentieth-century readers, think, and he violates our expectations consciously. What can it mean that the earth has a teacher? This detail connects to the idea of the evolution of the earth which Rudolf Steiner and others in Germany have written of. If earth has a teacher, it means earth learns gradually as a child does: the whole thing implies the earth has consciousness; one cannot learn and change without consciousness. We feel ourselves drawn here into areas we do not feel confident in, even to ideas we

cannot accept. If we cannot accept them, we will resist them as a translator and do a poor job translating the poem. During this stage, then, we test how far we are willing to go. It's clear that the poet is ahead of us, otherwise the poem would not be worth translating; it would have nothing "to say." So we need to estimate how much resistance we have or we need to sense inside whether we believe, say, in growth by disciplined labor, though it contradicts most cultural assumptions, and whether we believe the earth has a teacher. If we don't, we should let the poem alone and not translate it; we'll only ruin it if we go ahead.

Let's continue with this pursuit of problematic detail. A small problem arises with the ball game. The earth is "*froblische*," which Cassell's lists as "joyous, joyful, gay, blithesome, jovial, merry, frolicsome, gladsome." We gather the earth is not repressed, not hard-nosed, not "puritan," to use a cultural term. When Rilke suggests who will win in this game of tag with earth, we would expect it to be "the speediest child" or "the most competitive child." But it isn't so. He uses the same root "*frob*," and the most joyful child wins, and so "catches" the earth. Here again I feel him violating our expectations, perhaps Christian expectations this time, as opposed to pagan. The Greeks, not much given to sin and savior, always taught that the most joyful child, the most joyful sculptor, the most joyful runner would win. Who gains earth? If the translator believes it is the most repentant, the most sorrowful, the most obedient, he or she should not translate this poem—something will go wrong.

The final problem we notice centers around the curious word "*gedrucker*" in line thirteen, which is placed next to

"roots" or "trunks." "*Gedruckt*" means impressed, pressed on, laid on, stamped, imprinted. It implies a mechanical process. This word belongs to the world of factory presses, work, levers, human forces multiplied, offices, copiers, printing presses, drill presses. What is it doing here? In what sense can a root be "pressed" or "imprinted"? We have to answer it; if we don't, the poem will not be clear. There is enough ambiguity given by the forced movement to another language without additional uncertainty caused by a pious trust in ambiguity which amounts to a refusal to think the question through or risk an answer. What will we do with "*gedruckt*"? We might guess that the imprinting is genetic, as when biologists talk of an animal being "sexually imprinted" at a certain age. But if we accept that, we can't relate it to the singing or the difficulty. Is it possible some words are acoustically imprinted on the roots? No. Did earth's teacher *impress* this on the plants? I don't think so. Is this some sort of raised lettering, a reference to bark? I don't think so. It is pressed, not raised. How did a sheet-metal press get into this line? We could rephrase the question: How did a printing press get into this line? We see instantly its link with schoolwork because "printed" is exactly how the schoolchild finds the poem which she memorizes. It has been *printed*. After some debate, I adopted this solution, which may of course be wrong, but it allows me to put the details together into a meaningful whole for the first time.

Earth's teacher knows what discipline is, and so earth does. Plants cannot blossom all by themselves. They need earth before they flower. So earth is related to flowers as a human being is to a poem. A poem cannot blossom without a human

being; that suggests we should not let a poem lie on the page but should learn it by heart. So out of discipline this enormous blossoming comes and that blossoming from labor lies beneath the excitement that shows itself in the exclamations ending the second and fourth stanzas. It is wonderful to know something, but that is not enough; it also has to be sung, that is, carried by the human body into sound and music, delivered to others, so to speak. Just knowing a poem is not enough. This is quite a different meaning than we arrived at by reading the literal version.

In a good poem, which violates certain secret assumptions, this second stage may take several hours. I spent a long time on this stage alone, some of it arguing over the text with other students and translators. When working with a poem as complicated as this one, the translator can easily get pulled off into a bypath for half an hour; but none of the time is wasted. The more one talks, the more clear Rilke's beliefs become, and so his meaning. He is certain of it, and so the German has a lovely enthusiasm, expressed in lifting, joyful rhythms. If that store of feeling is beyond the translator, he or she should leave the poem be. At the end of this stage, the translator should ask himself whether the feelings as well as the concepts are within his world. If they are not, he should stop. I've had to abandon a number of poems at this point. I remember a Vallejo translation for example; in it I felt Vallejo's feelings toward his own images enter the violet or grief, range of the spectrum, where I could not follow him. At the age I was, the violet range was not accessible to me, and these feelings can't be faked. In the second stage, we decide whether to turn back or go on.

✓ If we decide to go on, we return to our literal version and see where it lost the meanings just found. We redo the literal and try to get it into English this time. We think of the genius of the English language, what its nature is. I'll call that the third stage.

✓ During this stage, we use all we know about the structure of the English language. During the composition of the literal version we followed the word order of the original German, and by doing that found ourselves drawn into the whirlpool of the delayed verb. German gains energy at times by delaying the verb, and even the main noun, so it appears late in the sentence. English gains energy the opposite way, by embarking the main noun immediately and the verb soon after. Most sentences in English that begin with prepositions, with "into" or "upon the" or "for the" tend to be weak in practice; this is not a doctrine but something we observe in reading or writing English. We have to face the issue of the delayed verb immediately, with the third sentence:

Für die Beschwerde
langen Lernens bekommt sie den Preis.

If we say:

For the burden
of her long study, the prize comes to her.

we can feel how dead and flat the lines are. Making the last phrase "she receives the prize" helps, but the lines still feel supine. If we take the main noun and main verb and move them to the front, we can say:

She receives the prize
for her long and strenuous study.

It sounds more like English now, and "strenuous" has added considerable energy to the line.

The delayed verb appears again in the green and blue passage of the second stanza. The line: "Now, how the green and blue are called" is not English at all; it belongs to "translatorese," a language never spoken but a language translators know and laugh about.

Anything we try will be an improvement:

So for blue things and green things, we dare
to ask their names, and she knows them!

That's not marvelous, but it is English and some of the passive, dead mood has disappeared. We feel more confident; we are back in our own language. Leaving the word order of the original poem behind is often painful; beginning translators especially resist it. They feel disloyal if they move the verb, but each language evolves in a different way and we cannot cancel a thousand years of language evolution by our will. Moreover, if we are disloyal to German, we are at the

same moment loyal to English. The word order of Spanish is closer to that of English, and this stage is usually less painful when translating from Spanish. So then, after redoing later lines, thinking solely in this stage of the sentence and clause structures natural to English, we would arrive at a new draft. We ignore the sentence structure of the German original, and try to move all sentences bodily into the genius of English. Along the way, we rephrase all other lines as well, so as to avoid being caught in the first phrases that have come to mind. The new version might look something like this:

Spring has returned once more. The earth
is like a child who has memorized her poems,
many, many poems. She receives the prize
for her long and strenuous learning.

Her teacher was strict. We were fond of the whiteness
in the old man's beard.

As for blue things and green things, we dare
to ask their names, and she knows them!

Earth, now out of class, lucky being, play
now with the children. We want to catch you,
happy earth. Only the happiest succeeds.

How many things the teacher taught her,
and what has been pressed into the roots
and long wiry trunks: she sings it, she sings it!

We translated the poem into English in the third stage. In the fourth stage we translate the poem into American . . . that is, if we speak the American language. In England, we would translate it into spoken English. It's the spoken quality that this stage aims at. The idea that a great poem should be translated freshly every twenty years is rooted in an awareness of how fast the spoken language changes. We need the energy of spoken language as we try to keep a translation alive, just as we need the energy of written.

Rilke's poems, like those of every great poet, mingle spoken language and written in the most delicate way; the poem balances informal tones and formal. But his poetry is never without the electrifying power that spoken rhythms bring. Rilke's group of ten "Voices" ("Die Stimmen"), in which a blind man speaks, a suicide speaks, and a drunkard speaks, carry astonishing and cunning rhythms, picked up by his ear with its immense feeling for the rhythms of intimate confession, the accents of desperate conversation, and the dying fall of street language. The aim is not street language, not slang as such nor the speech rhythms of half-educated people, but rather the desperate living tone or fragrance that tells you a person now alive could have said the phrase. Robert Frost believed in such rhythms and wrote of them brilliantly; he called the fragrance "sentence sound." Perhaps one in one hundred sentences we hear or read has "sentence sound." Frost gives a few examples: "The thing for me to do is to get right out of here" or "Never you say a thing like that to a *man*" —

in this decade it would be, "You can't say that to a *man*." Another example might be: "John, you come on right down here and do your work." We might end a poem: "And a lot of the changes in my life go back to that decision," and that line would be English but it would lack sentence sound. The phrasing with sentence sound would be: "And that has made all the difference." As Frost correctly says, it isn't the rational mind that understands these distinctions but the ear and the ear's memory.

So during the fourth stage we begin to need the ear. As we read it over, the opening phrase, "Spring has returned again," which seemed adequate for both first- and third-stage drafts, doesn't sound so good anymore. Suppose we met a friend one day as we left our house. Could we imagine him or her saying, "Spring has returned again"? I don't think so. It doesn't sound right. We may not be able to move this phrase from written English to spoken American, but we can try.

What do we remember people saying to us? I remember: "It's spring!" "Spring is back," "Spring is here again," "It's spring again," "Spring has come again" (not likely, that one). How about "Spring is here, baby"? or "My God, it's spring!" The German definitely has the idea of a cyclical return in it, but we're not sure how important that detail is. For the moment we'll try "It's spring again."

"Viele, o viele," partly because of the "ee" sounds, does not sound bookish in German, but "many, oh many" does sound bookish in American. Suppose a friend comes from the grocery store and says he has bought some potatoes. You

want to know how much, and he says, "Many, oh many." It doesn't sound right. His answer would be humorous, but the German here is not. What might he say? How many potatoes? "Lots of potatoes!", "Tons of potatoes!", "Potatoes and potatoes!", "So many potatoes you wouldn't believe it!", "Scads of potatoes!", "Oodles of potatoes!", "Sacks and sacks!", "More than enough!", "A lot of them!", "A ton, a roomful!", "A lot, a lot . . . !" The American language is so astoundingly abundant now in possibilities, that one always ends up with more phrases than one can use, but there's great fun in that too. For the moment we'll choose: "A lot, a lot. . . ."

"She receives the prize for her long and strenuous learning" doesn't sound as if it were spoken language any more. Rarely in speech these days do we let a sentence go so long without a pause. "Receives" doesn't sound right either. We'll try "gets."

And she gets the prize,
gets it after study, hard work.

My ear feels better now; it remembers sentences like this, spoken hundreds of times. The sequence is two three-beat phrases, followed by one two-beat phrase, "hard work." That sequence is characteristic in spoken American English.

The next two lines sound all right, but the naming passage I don't like any more. We'll move the "daring to ask" concept to the front of the sentences:

We feel able to ask what the names of green
and blue things are, and she knows all of them!

Or

We feel able, looking at green shades and blue, to ask
what their names are, and she knows them!

Or

Asking what this is, so green, and that, so blue,
seems all right. And she knows the names!

Or

Asking about the blue, and about the green
seems right to do, and she knows. She knows!

I'm sure it's clear to the reader now the sort of work one
does during this step, and I won't go over the rest of the
poem in detail.

Asking the ear about each phrase, asking it, "Have you
ever heard this phrase spoken?" is the labor of this draft. The
ear will reply with six or seven new phrases, and these act to
shake up the translation once more and keep it from solidi-
fying. The language becomes livelier, fresher, lighter. Many

translators stop before this stage; some of them have an ex-
alted idea of the poet and think Rilke uses written German;
others associate literature with a written language, with writ-
ten English—many academic translators have this habit—and
it never occurs to them to move to the spoken. Nineteenth-
century translators in general rarely took this step; it was
Whitman, Pound, and William Carlos Williams who sharp-
ened everyone's sense for spoken English and spoken Ameri-
can. The marvelous translation that is now being done in the
United States, work that has been going on for thirty years
or more, is partly a gift of these three men and their faith
that poetry can be composed in spoken rhythms.

The new draft then might look something like this:

It's spring! The earth
is like a child who's learned poems by heart,
a lot, a lot! And she gets the prize,
gets it after study, hard work.

Her teacher was strict. We were fond of the white
we saw in the old man's beard.

Asking about the green—how about that blue—
seems all right, and she knows all the names!

Earth, now out of school, born lucky, play
now with the children. We want to play catch,
glad earth. The most glad catches you.

The teacher managed to teach her so much.
Astonishing! And what the roots and the long
strenuous stalks hold in printed form, she sings!

3
We haven't thought about tone yet. Does this last draft have the tone of the German? In what I'll call the fifth stage we need the ear again—not the ear turned outward toward human speech but the ear turned inward toward the complicated feelings the poem is carrying. Each poem has a mood. Harry Martinson remarked that to him a poem *is* a mood. A poem did not come to him out of an idea, but a poem marked a moment when he was able to catch a mood.

To succeed in this stage I think it is important that the translator should have written poetry himself. I mean that he or she needs the experience of writing from mood in order to judge accurately what the mood of a stranger's poem is. We need accurate judgment on mood now because in finding spoken phrases to replace the written we may have thrown the tone off. We may have the wrong "tone of voice" in the new phrases. The spoken language has dozens of tones available; sometimes in American, hundreds. The reason that "Spring is here, baby" doesn't sound right for the opening sentence is not because it isn't *spoken*—it carries a wonderful fragrance of the spoken—but rather because the mood of the original poem is quite different. Many translators stop before this stage; they translate a poem into spoken American and then quit. Pope put Homer into eighteenth-century spoken English and ignored the problem of mood. When in America we force Catullus into hip language it means we have stopped before struggling with this problem. Catullus likes mischievous words and obscene phrases, but he will lay them in among measured Latin rhythms. Overall Catullus's mood is

a tender, complicated grief that resembles the mood of Celtic art.

The younger we are, the easier it is to make mistakes in tone. During my late twenties, I translated over sixty poems of Rilke's. A few years ago when I went back to look at them, I had to throw away virtually every line I had done because I had confused Rilke's mood with certain violent moods I had at the time. I had made almost every line more extroverted than it was. I may still be doing that.

Rilke is especially difficult in the matter of mood because German in one of its levels is high-flown. All language has two levels at least: an upper and a lower. We recognize the "upper" in Shakespeare's sonnets; language high-flown, ethical, elaborated, capable of concept, witty, dignified, noble in tone.

We might speculate that in the American language now only the "lower" level is alive. It flows along on earth; it is a physical language that everyone contributes to, warm, intense, with short words, well connected to the senses, musical, capable of feeling. This sensual language is the only one we have; William Carlos Williams used this language by principle when he wrote, and Brecht used the lower level by choice in his German poems. In America the "noble" stream dried out around 1900, against the will of Henry James, and since that time, as Williams declared, the writer has had no choice.

What we have to do then in Rilke is use our one level to carry his two. The problems of tone are tremendous. Pablo Neruda's *Odas Elementales* go into American so much more easily because by 1956, when he wrote them, Neruda too

was using only the sensual language. But Rilke in 1920 found both the "upper" and "lower" languages alive, and the presence of both in his work is a part of his greatness. Rilke not only invited in the "noble language" with its immense garden of associations, but he carried it brilliantly. Rilke's richness became especially noticeable during World War II when the Nazis were destroying the resonance of the German language by inserting brutal bureaucratic jargon. A German professor sympathetic with the Resistance told me that in his city the word "Rilke" was a secret password for their Resistance and became so precisely because of Rilke's rich language.

We notice that this problem of "noble language" causes a lot of trouble to translators in their effort to translate Rilke into English. Rilke translations have frequently been nobly dead. The translator, in the effort to rise to the upper or resonating level he senses in Rilke, abandons our living language and resorts to old cloudlike phrases that are now only scenery. He tries, from the best intentions, to retrieve and revive dusty clauses and high-flown diction and stuff them into the poem, with the result that the living language dies, both languages die, and Rilke seems ridiculous. J. B. Leishman, speaking of a palace in one Rilke translation, says:

And, dazzlingly from all points manifest
(like pale sky with diffused illumination),
by weight of fading portraiture possessed
as by some deep interior contemplation,
the palace, in unfestive resignation,
stands taciturn and patient as a guest.

It is hard to recognize these lines as Rilke's. The vividness is gone and the senses have evaporated. Mr Leishman is not inaccurate, but the translation fails in tone, and that comes from pretending that the aristocratic stream of language is still alive in English. We have to use the feeling stream only; it is grievous, but we have no choice. As I mentioned, Rilke used both languages, but interestingly the simple or feeling language grows stronger as he grows older. Each poem he wrote in the ten years before his death moves toward its own tone fragrance, in contrast to the poems from *A Book for the Hours of Prayer* in which a whole group of poems carry a single tone, often high-flown.

To return to our sonnet, if we read the sonnet that comes just before it in the Sonnets to Orpheus and the sonnet just after, we notice great distinctions in mood. The sonnets on each side plunge into memory; number 22 for example sinks into a sort of deep Gothic memory, with slow heartbeats. The sonnet we have, by contrast, is light-hearted, gay, and enthusiastic—the exclamation marks alone indicate that—but the light-heartedness is one that comes after long brooding or long thoughtfulness. The point is not only that "It's spring" but that "It's spring again." So the simple statement "It's spring!" doesn't seem quite right now, in mood. Moreover, the stopped sounds in "a lot A lot!" create a pugnacious mood, even though enthusiastic, that "viele, o viele" doesn't have. Moreover we notice that changing the word order of the sentence about receiving the prize has changed the mood of the stanza. In German the prize represents the close of a learning process; but we, by moving the prize to the middle,

interrupted the process. The prize interferes with the grief of learning, so to speak. So we'll have to change that.

It's spring once more. The earth
is like a child who's learned poems by heart,
many of them . . . and after hard work
and long study, she gets the prize.

That's better. Studying the next stanza, I have become uneasy with the tone of "how about that blue." Perhaps we should aim for a softer tone.

Her teacher was strict. We were fond of the white
we saw in the old man's beard.
And we can ask the blue flower's name
and that green bush—she knows all the names!

I'm a little dissatisfied also with "glad" earth or "happy" earth. Both are too light. Something is wrong with their mood. Neither "glad" nor "happy" carries the dark side, as one feels "fröhliche Erde" does. The adjective "fröhliche" may be related to the word Freya, the ancient Germanic Great Mother. Her joy has a lot of darkness in it. Perhaps Freya's darkness is connected to the luck she brings.

Earth, now out of school, lucky inside, play
now with the children, we want to touch you,
deeply glad earth. The deepest catches you.

"deeply glad" may be wrong but we'll try it; and I feel better about the mood of that stanza now; it has a little more darkness in it.

But I don't feel the next line is right—there is a lovely enthusiasm in the German "O, was der Lehrer sie lehrte, das Viele," that I don't feel that in the line:

The teacher managed to teach her so much

The tone is wrong. We feel some praise for the teacher in the German line: "O, was der Lehrer sie lehrte, das Viele." We could try: "The teacher she had, he taught her so well."
We could try leaving out "he":

The teacher she had taught her so well!
So much!

The problem is that we're getting caught in the human part of the poem now. Rilke's German, because "Erde" is feminine, is able to hold our attention evenly divided between what the *earth* learns, and what the *school girl* learns: we see with two eyes at once. But because "Erde" is "it" in English, we've lost one eye. We're forgetting the earth. By repeating "she" we're losing some of the deep earth mood, and veering too far toward the more human mood we feel in the girl student. For the sake of tone, we may have to replace that "she" with "earth."

The teacher earth had taught her so well!
 So much! And what nature printed in roots
 and knotty, slender trunks, she manages to sing!

Summing up, then, in this stage we move to modify errors that may have come in with the emphasis on the spoken. Most of all we open ourselves for the first time to the mood of the poem; we try to be precise about what its mood *is*, distinguishing it from the mood of nearby poems. We try to capture the poem's balance high and low, dark and light, seriousness and light-heartedness.

6

In the next stage, which I call here the sixth, we pay attention to sound. The question of tone has led to this. If we wonder whether the poem's tone is enthusiastic or melancholic, there is only one thing to do: memorize the poem in its original German and say it to yourself, to friends, to the air. No one can translate well from a poem he or she hasn't learned by heart: only by reciting it can we feel what sort of oceanic rhythm it has, which is a very different thing from analyzing the meter.

When we recite Rilke's German, free from the page, we notice immediately that there is a powerful beat on the opening syllable of the first, third, and fourth lines. This is a rhythm characteristic of pagan poetry; almost all Greek poems begin with this resolute firm stroke on the first syllable, and much of *Beowulf*. Christian poetry gradually evolved toward

iambic rhythm, in which the first syllable is somewhat ingratiating, softer, more modest, and prepares the way for the heavier second stroke. Throwing the energy toward the start of the line hints again at the poem's nature, which is more pagan than Christian. A number of phrases: "viele o viele," "Streng war ihr Lehrer," "dürfen wir fragen," "Erde, die frei hat," "fröhliche Erde" start the line with a stroke, a confident assertion, causing a rocking motion.

What's wrong with "a lot! a lot!" as an opening to line three is that it doesn't have this initial stroke. "Many, o many" is better, but the crest doesn't rise high enough. "Viele, o viele" resembles a high rising wave, and the sound "ee" in "viele" helps it to rise. "Ee" is high. The "an" in "many" does not carry the line far enough up.

In our last draft the opening lines read:

It's spring once more. The earth
 is like a child who's learned poems by heart,
 many of them . . .

We can only get a higher wave in line two by going to an open vowel. We'll try this:

so many poems . . .

The opening phrase:

Frühling ist wiedergekommen

also has a rocking motion, and our versions of that sentence so far, though spoken and all right in tone, feel a bit flat: "It's spring," or It's spring once more." I'd favor trying to pick up some sort of rocking motion.

Spring is here, has come! The earth
is like a child who's learned poems by heart,
so many poems . . .

We're getting there.

We can distinguish in a poem between two sound energies, one in the muscle system and one in the ear. That is very roughly stated. The rocking motion we have spoken of is a body motion, which Donald Hall calls "goat foot" because of its association with the Greek drum and dancing. Similarly, in a recent essay Robert Hass struggles to separate certain rhythms felt in the muscle system from meter. "I have already remarked that meter is not the basis of rhythmic form." The body motion alerts the mind and builds tension which is later released. Most nineteenth-century translators, ignoring the distinction, imagined that by following the meter of the original poem precisely they would arrive at the rhythm. But it didn't happen. The translator's job is to feel the body rhythm of the line, but that may or may not lead to the meter. The rocking motions, or body motion, is primary, not meter. Using Donald Hall's metaphor, we can speculate that we can understand the meter in a poem without necessarily experiencing the goat's foot. A flat line, in

metered or free verse, may have human feet but not goat's feet.

I've mentioned a second quality of sound—sound calling to sound, which is related to internal rhyme. I don't feel right in talking about that one yet because I'm just learning it myself. But if the reader will memorize the Rilke poem in German and say it over many times, he will understand sound calling to sound without my help.

Keeping these two aspects of sound in mind, and saying the German over many times, I decide to make the following changes in the first stanza:

Spring is here, has come! The earth
resembles a child who has learned her poems:
So many poems! Her study long,
strenuous, earns it. . . . the prize comes to her.

In the next stanza I decide, for the sake of internal rhyme, to change "strict" to "stern." The rhythmical wave in German rises at the left wall with "Nun, wie das Grüne," so we have to do some work with the English rhythm at that point. "And we ask the blue flower's name" is too flat. There's no heavy stroke at the start.

What names to give to green patches, and blue
occurs to us, we ask! Earth knows it by heart!

The change helps.

Let's go on to the third stanza. I see that by altering the ninth line I can shift the rhythm over to the left. We had:

Earth, now out of school, lucky inside, play
now with the children. We want to touch you,
deeply glad earth. The deepest catches you.

We'll try:

Earth, free from school now, joyful, come,
play with the children. We want to touch you,
deeply glad earth. The deepest catches you.

Now the "deeply glad" earth passage bothers me. None of the phrases we've tried please me. "Happy earth," "glad earth" . . . "deeply glad earth." The last seems closest. So separating "fröhliche" into an adverb and an adjective may be a solution. Rilke uses two words from the same root, "froh," and we should follow him if we can. "Happy" and "happiest," "glad" and "gladdest" do that, but they are too light. Listening to the German sound, we notice that Rilke uses here the open "oh" sound for the first time in the poem. "Wir wollen dich fangen . . . Dem frohsten gelingts." It's possible that the "aeh" sounds we have been using in "happy" or "glad" are wrong for his mood. I decide to try this:

Earth, free from school now, joyful, come
play with the children. We want to catch you,
wholly glad earth. The most whole gets you.

One can never be sure, when helped by sound to a solution, if the solution is reasonable, justifiable, within Rilke's area of meaning. After brooding about it, I decide the emphasis on "whole" as opposed to "happy," "glad," or "perfect" is all right. Some associations that cluster around "froh" are carried in our culture by "whole." We notice for example that becoming whole, whole earth, whole-wheat bread, resonate with certain associations around the earth mother. I have to trust my sense of it. I may be wrong, but the line now seems to me more in focus than it was.

The German of the next line has a strong opening beat with "O was der Lehrer. . . ." If I want something like that I'll have to abandon my old line, even though I like it:

The teacher earth had taught her so well

I'll try "Earth's teacher," and rephrase also the final two lines of the poem:

Earth's teacher taught her things, so many!
And the sounds that lie printed inside roots
and long entangled stalks: she carries and sings them!

I'll set down here, then, a draft worked out after brooding over Rilke's rhythm, which has a strong rocking motion, and the dominant vowel sounds of the poem, and internal and external rhymes.

Spring is here, has come! The earth
resembles a child who has learned her poems.
So many poems! Her study long,
strenuous, earns it. . . . The prize comes to her.

Her teacher was stern. We loved the white
that showed in the old man's beard.

What names to give to the green patch and the blue
comes to us, and we ask: earth knows it by heart!

Earth, free from school now, joyful, come
play with the children. We want to catch you,
wholly glad earth. The most whole gets you.

Earth's teacher taught her things, so many!
And the sounds that lie printed inside roots
and long entangled stalks: she carries and sings them!

(7)
We are nearly finished now. During what I will call the seventh stage we ask someone born into the language to go over our version. Perhaps we go back to the native speaker who helped us in the first draft; if we did not get such help then, we do now; we ask him or her to find errors that have crept in.

For beginning translators, this stage is very painful. As beginners, we tend to give ourselves permission to veer away from the poem's images, pulled away in fact by our private mental horses, and dismay sets in when we realize that some

of our best solutions are simply wrong. Hardie St. Martin has always performed this reining-in function when I, or James Wright with me, translated from Spanish. Once I remember he found in a single Jimenez poem that I had already worked over for months, and that contained only twenty lines to start with, twenty-two errors that could not be allowed to stand. The error sometimes was in tone, sometimes in image, or slant of image, or I had picked up a South American coloring the word had rather than its Castilian coloring, or I had gotten the rhythm or vowels wrong. None of us can learn a foreign language well enough to pick all these things up.

During this new stage we also have a second change to ask about the implications of certain words that have begun to bother us. I want to check out my sense of "fröhliche" and "Frohsten" and talk some more about "gedruckt." I didn't notice "schwierigen" so much at first, but now I see it as an unsolved or entangled knot of associations, and I want to know what its German root is. Almost all words that seem abstract now once, as Owen Barfield makes so clear in his book on the history of words, carried a physical motion at the start, perhaps pulling or cutting or lifting. Sometimes knowing the German root helps to choose an English word. If one has a German friend nearby then the labor of this stage can be done gradually, as the problems come up, and that is probably best. But if not, we should take on this stage by will, and consider it as important as any of the earlier stages. We have been slowly possessing the poem and making it ours—we have to do that to bring it alive—but it is possible that we have kidnapped it instead.

Our last stage is making the final draft. We read back over all our earlier drafts—perhaps a half line was said better in one of them. We have to make our final adjustments now. I decide to change the blue and green clause once more, but I won't make many substantive changes. As a result of the conversation around "schwierigen" I've decided to use "involved," and I notice that the *n*'s are coming along well in the final stanza, and "involved" will help that. During this stage we allow ourselves, at last, the pleasure of examining other people's translations of the poem. That is fun we can't deny ourselves after all the work, and we can sympathize with each translator. We don't expect much from J. B. Leishman, and he doesn't give much.

Spring has come again. Earth's a-bubble
with all those poems she knows by heart,—
oh, so many. With prize for the trouble
of such long learning, her holidays start.

One can see he has had trouble with his rhymes. I believe in working as much as possible with internal rhymes, but I think it's best not to insist on reproducing end rhymes. Nineteenth-century translators often felt obsessive about end-rhyming, and usually did it in exactly the same pattern as in the original poem. Leishman's version shows a common outcome: the translator has to add images that destroy the poem's

integrity. There is no mention of earth bubbling in Rilke's poem, and the "start of the holidays" interferes with the learning process he is evoking. Leishman's third stanza reads:

Eager to catch you, Earth, happy creature,
play with the children now outpouring!
Conqueringly foremost the happiest springs.

Leishman is helpful, in a way, because reading his translations one grows determined to retranslate.

Al Poulín, who published *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus* in 1977, is a much better translator. We could look at his first two stanzas:

Spring has returned again. The earth
is like a child who's memorized
poems; many, so many . . . It was worth
the long painful lesson: she wins the prize.

Her teacher was strict. We liked the white
in the old man's whiskers.

Now when we ask what green or blue is, right
away she knows, she has the answer!

This is not so bad; good work on the spoken. But rhyming caused trouble again. He wanted to rhyme "earth," and ended up with "worth." Rilke doesn't say whether the prize was worth all the effort or not. Possibly a half-rhyme with "an-

swer" pulled him into "whiskers," which loses some dignity and some feeling of the snow. In general, though he is translating with considerable accuracy, we feel that he stopped his labors after the spoken stage. He does not work on sound. His lines are not joyful in sound. In fact, the *s* sounds dominate: "lesson," "memorized," "prize," "strict," "whiskers," "ask," "answer." The *z* and *s* sounds produce a kind of hissing that encourages anxiety.

His third stanza goes:

Earth, lucky earth on vacation,
play with the children now. We long
to catch you, happy earth. The happiest will win.

He uses "happy" and "happiest" so the "oh" sound doesn't have a chance to enter. Of course one might say that if a translator is doing all the sonnets, he has no time to pay so much attention to one. We understand that, but it is perhaps better to do one carefully than to do the whole fifty-five.

The French translation by J. F. Angelloz, which he did with Rilke's knowledge, is accurate and clear. We notice that in the third stanza he uses the word "complices" to translate "schwierigen":

O, ce que le maître lui enseigna, l'innombrable,
et ce qui est imprimé dans les racines et les longs
trons complices: elle le chante, elle le chante!

To my surprise, I found a commentary on this poem by Angelloz at the back, which I hadn't known of before. Now that we have gone over the poem so carefully, Angelloz' commentary is extremely interesting, and I'll translate it here, roughly, from the French.

Here spring blazes up and fills the poem. Holthusen says that the true season of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* is summer, the season of fullness and possession. But that is a misconception. Rilke had a predilection for transitional times and, especially during the final years of his life, for that transitional time the Germans call, so happily, "Vorfrühling." He saw such transitional times as the creative periods. It was, in fact, at the start of February 1922 that he completed the *Elegies* and the *Sonnets*; it was on the 9th that he wrote "Children's Spring Song" (Frühlings-Kinder-Lied) which he sent to Madame Oukama-Knoop to replace the sonnet beginning "O das Neue, Freunde, ist nicht dies" (published in *Späte Gedichte*, p 97), and to serve as a counterpart to the horse poem (Letter to Madame Oukama-Knoop, February 9, 1922). And, finally, it was at a similar time of the year, in 1913, that Rilke experienced, at Ronda in southern Spain, the incident that inspired this sonnet.

In a convent church he heard a mass accompanied by music, as by bouquets of joyful sound; it was a remarkable music, with a dance rhythm; to it children were singing an unknown text to the sound of a triangle and a tambourine. Rilke considered this sonnet as an interpretation ("Auslegung") of that mass, and he found in it "the mood of spring at its most luminous." He starts, in essence, with a cry of joy that greets the return of spring. Moreover the earth is compared to a child, who knows numerous poems; she

receives the prize for assiduous work. But it is wrong to talk of a comparison; in fact, there is an identification going on of the springtime earth, the children singers, and the Orphic poet himself, who, in the second stanza, uses "we." There is a parallel identification of winter, an old man with a white beard, a singing master, whom Rilke does not mention again, and Orpheus, who teaches the art of distinguishing the main springtime colors (green, blue), as he also teaches all creatures to listen. And now, the earth freed from winter, the children, who have learned their poems by heart, and the poet himself, who takes part in the awakening of nature, play tag with the earth, source of all joys; the victory goes to the most joyful of them. The sonnet closes in a magnificent harmony: the universal impulse of Dionysius expresses itself in singing; and all of it—we can think also of the early sonnets—all of it is Orpheus singing.

I am encouraged by this story. And our interpretation of the poem is supported by his comments, and what I called "pagan" he calls "Dionysian." It is possible that the mysterious teacher of the earth is Orpheus.

Well, then, after studying once more all our earlier drafts, and making our final sound and rhythm adjustments, and after taking in what we can from other people's translations and commentaries, we are ready to set down the final draft. We know that we haven't captured the original: the best translation resembles a Persian rug seen from the back—the pattern is apparent, but not much more. The final version, then, so far, is this:

Spring is here, has come! The earth
is like a child who has learned her poems—
so many poems! . . . Her study, long,
strenuous, earns it . . . the prize comes to her.

Her teacher was stern. We loved the white
showing in the beard of the old man.
What is blue and what is green have distinct names—
What are they? Earth knows all that by heart!

Earth, free now of school, lucky one, come,
play with the children. We want to tag you,
wholly glad earth. The most whole catches you.

Earth's teacher, how much he taught her!
So much! And what lies printed inside roots,
inside long, involved stalks: earth carries that and sings it!