





## 2) Flashback: Wergeland's 'The Flower Piece'

### BESKUELSEN

Plumpe Menneskebeundring,  
som behøver Luft og Læber!  
Mere plump end Dyrs Forundring,  
der er taus og bly beskeden,  
krænker du i din Tilbeden,  
øder i Begeistringsheden; --  
med din Elskovs vilde Brunst  
du din egen Elskte dræber:  
din tilbedte rene Kunst.  
Ve, om nu, da jeg maa tale  
(saa nødvendigt som at Brystet  
stønner, naar det bliver krystet)  
denne Draabe skulde dale  
fra van Huysums Rosenblad,  
af min Læbes Mundveir rystet!  
Foraarsvinden, yr og glad,  
var af meer barmhjertig Hu:  
Duggens Glands fra Lund og Hegn,  
perlemoderagtig Regn,  
gjemt i foldet Marikaabe,  
hver en Draabe, hver en Draabe  
har letsindigen den plyndret,  
alle hen i Luften søndret  
-- denne ligger der endnu,  
yderligt som Taaren baaret  
bævende af Øjenhaaret,  
yderst i dit Diadem,  
yndige og blide Smerte,  
som din Byrde triller frem;  
skjøn som Perlen, der var værdig  
til at være Stjernes Hjerter;  
fuld som Magdalenens Graad,  
fuld og tung og bristefærdig;  
bristende, skjøndt endnu heel,  
som beslutningsmodent Raad  
i tungsindig Engels Sjel.

These opening lines of the first poetry section ([Find a native Norwegian to read aloud!](#)) must be some of the best-known in the Norwegian language, so when I was asked to translate 'Blomsterstykket', I was appalled at the task. And these opening lines simply *must* capture the feel of the original, or I will be for the chop.

'Blomsterstykket' is unlike any other literary work I have encountered. In his book 'Voldens blomster?', Frode Halland, after having dealt at length with the philosophical background to the book, looks at the actual work itself. It can be divided into six sections:

- Fortale: leksikon- og kunsthistorisk stoff om van Huysum og maleriet
- Beskuelsen
- Den hollandske Familie
- Gamle Adrians Blomsterbed
- Jan van Huysum, Blomstermaleren
- Jan van Huysum

The narrators varying from writers of encyclopedias, to the poet, to characters within the story. I have chosen what could be said to be the beginning of the work, although this is not apparent from any but the original 1840 edition, where the 'reviews' had separate, Roman

pagination, and were thus clearly not part of the actual work. They were Wergeland the translator in action.

What course of action should I take in looking at 'Beskuelsen'?

When I started translating this section, I had just been working on trying to compile an anthology of Danish poetry in translation from 'Ebbe Skammelsen' onwards, enjoying the beautiful craftsmanship of such Danish (or Norwegian?) writers as Kingo, Ewald and Wessel, so my mind was attuned to the rhythmic patterns of earlier poetry at this point. But coming to Wergeland was like shifting from Bach to Chopin. Although the shift from Danish to Wergelandsk was not all that great – his language, even the spelling of it, is clearly influenced by the Danish tradition. Prof. Olav Lausund wrote in a mail to me about 'Wergeland's difficult and at times highly confusing Norwegian (or rather Danish, interspersed with a few Norwegian forms)' [8 Jan. 2008].

And there are similar translation problems. Nearly always, although there are quite a few exceptions, Wergeland operates with either an eight-syllable line ending on an unstressed syllable or a seven-syllable line ending on a stressed one. His rhyme scheme is less strict. Practically all lines end up rhyming with another line, but exactly when is less certain. Sometimes three lines rhyme with each other rather than two.

English has less words ending in unstressed syllables. Most Norwegian verbs do, as do nouns and adjectives in the plural – and nouns in the singular with the definite article do as well. So the translator into English has to make an immediate choice – to stick rigidly to the same number of syllables, or to increase the number of seven-syllable lines. I chose the latter. This 'chopping off the weak final syllable' when translating into English has a long, honourable tradition, stretching back at least to translations of Italian sonnets by Wyatt and Surrey in the 16th century. The second choice is to allow myself the freedom to pick when I will rhyme a line, but to try and rhyme as frequently as Wergeland.

The third thing that struck me, reading the Wergeland, was that I kept on thinking of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. This may be because my Norwegian is sadly defective, but I kept on hearing rhythmic echoes of 'Hiawatha', although he always uses an eight-syllable, unstressed final syllable line:

But one morning, gazing earthward,  
While the village still was sleeping,  
And the fog lay on the river,  
Like a ghost, that goes at sunrise,  
He beheld a maiden walking  
All alone upon a meadow,  
Gathering water-flags and rushes  
By a river in the meadow.

Every morning, gazing earthward,  
Still the first thing he beheld there  
Was her blue eyes looking at him,  
Two blue lakes among the rushes.  
And he loved the lonely maiden,  
Who thus waited for his coming;  
For they both were solitary,  
She on earth and he in heaven.

Maybe it was also as a reaction to this sing-song effect that I decided to increase the number of seven-syllable lines. Longfellow himself was trying to recreate the feel of the Finnish Kalevala, which uses this eight-syllable line, although he was working with the aid of a German translation.

In reply to my first draft, Prof. Lausund made some interesting comments: 'I quite agree that the top priority must be to make the poem sound like Wergeland, and in this it seems to me that you by and large succeed. That's quite an achievement. I admire your ability to impose

poetic form on the lines and not least the ability to come up with convincing rhymes. I notice that you do not always follow Wergeland's rhyme patterns (to the extent that one can speak of rhyme patterns) and that Wergeland's trochaic lines (DUM-DI) mostly become iambic (DI-DUM). But that's as one would expect in English and hardly a weakness. The difficulties I've had with your version are mostly on the syntactic and semantic level...'.

(Comment: I don't think I replace trochaic lines by iambic. Lausund is reacting to the ending of the lines, the higher percentage of seven-syllable lines, I think. Judge for yourselves, after one last remark.)

Very true – the sentences get lost at times and it is often difficult to disentangle the meaning, so the syntax is a big problem. As well as individual words that get mistranslated – quite often as a result of getting the syntax wrong. In the opening passage there are three sentences – and the last is twenty-one lines long! Here then is the translation:

## THE CONTEMPLATION

Clumsy human admiration  
that needs air and lips to say it!  
Clumsier than the shy wonder  
humble beasts display, you blunder  
wholly in your adoration  
squander in rapt adulation; --  
with your passion's savage heart  
you misuse your love and slay it:  
your adored unsullied art.

Woe, if now that I need utter  
(so compelled I sense my breast  
gently moan when it is pressed)  
I should cause this drop to flutter  
from *van Huysum's* soft rose petal  
shaken by my lips' rough breath!  
Spring breeze, giddy, slow to settle,  
shows more mercy if you will:  
Dew's bright gleam from grove and hedge  
rain with iridescent edge,  
hid in lady's-mantle folds  
every drop the eye beholds  
it has plundered recklessly  
in the air has scattered free  
.. *this one* only lies there still,  
at its rim like teardrop borne  
trembling by an eyelash worn,  
outmost in your diadem,  
anguish that is sweet and tender  
rolled on by your weighty gem;  
lovely as the pearl whose splendour  
merits it the heart of stars;  
full as Magdalena's tears  
full and heavy, almost bursting;  
shattering and yet still whole,  
as sound counsel ripeness nears  
in an angel's saddened soul.