

One of the best-loved poems in the Danish language dates from 1829 and is by the Danish poet Johan Ludvig Heiberg. Its title is 'Bacarole':

*Natten er så stille,
luften er så klar,
duggens perler trille,
månens stråler spille
henad søens glar.*

*Bølgens melodier
vugge hjertet ind,
suk og klage tier,
vindens pust befrier
det betyngte sind.*

Here is my suggestion for a translation:

*Calm the night, unstirring,
And the air so clear
Pearls of dew uncurling,
Moonlight rays unfurling
'Cross the glassy mere.*

*Dulcet waves appeasing
Heart that yearns for rest,
Sighs and sorrows ceasing,
Breath of wind releasing
Mind so long oppressed.*

There are, of course clear reminiscences of Goethe's 'Über allen Gipfeln...', which dates from 1780.

The translation problem that immediately presents itself is this: The rhyme scheme is ABAAB, where A ends on an unstressed syllable. That means 60% of the poem. This is not typical of the English language. The tendency is often, in such cases, to resort to lines ending in -ING, -EN, -ED (after verbs that end in -D, -T, often as past participles, e.g. untended, presented). Here, however, we have the possibility of using the -ING solution in two different ways – as the progressive form of the present tense; as a present participle. I have chosen to go for the latter alternative, i.e. the translation is full of present participles. The reader must decide whether this is too insistent or not.

The next point, although a small one, is worth consideration. The word 'glar' no longer exists in the Danish language. It is the result – if I call to mind my 'History of the German language' studies of almost half a century ago – the result of Verner's Law, as in 'was/were' in English. The Danish word for 'glass' is 'glas'. The only form of the word still extant is 'glarmester', which means a

glazier. I have taken over this idea of variant forms by using the word 'mere' instead of 'lake' in line five. This is a dialect word in English, but familiar to all native-speakers in such a combination as Lake Windemere, etc.

I have one other 'odd' word: 'dulcet'. This is now ironically used in 'dulcet tones', but the meanings are: a) Pleasing to the ear; melodious. b) Having a soothing, agreeable quality.

A few other considerations:

The Danish still has a difference between singular and plural endings of the verb in the present tense: 'trille, spille, vugge' are plural; 'tier, befrier' are singular. 'Stille' is an adjective; 'melodier' is a plural ending of 'melodi'. So Danish has really exploited -E and -ER, which both have several meanings. My -ING endings also have two different functions: normally they are present participles, but in line 1 the use is adjectival, i.e. the night is both calm and unstimulating.

The verbs 'trille' and 'spille' literally mean 'to roll' and 'to play'. I tried out many solutions for these two verbs, but eventually came up with 'to unfurl', which is what a flag does in the wind – it unfolds or unrolls. This led me to pick 'uncurls', which is a bit free for a bead of dew, but one helluva rhyme.

That 'appeasing' has /z/ and 'releasing' has /s/ doesn't bother me in the slightest, though I know it upsets certain purists (who shall be nameless).

In terms of sound patterns, I have gone for words with long vowels, so that they slow down the line and give this sense of stasis. 'Yearn' is better than 'long', for example. If you count the long/short vowels in the English translation, the 'longs' have it.

And if you combine this with all the present participles (where time no longer exists – present participles give no indication of tense whatsoever), you can see that the translation attempts to reproduce stasis, the eternal present of the moment of observation.