

The poem or the lyrics?

When Denmark won the Eurovision Song Contest in 2000 with 'Smuk som et stjernesked' (Beautiful as a shooting star), with a refrain that claimed the writer's wife became more beautiful for every year that passed, I was somewhat surprised to find that the English translation/lyrics said the first line was 'Fly on the Wings of Love'. The English text mentions nothing – *nada* – about the passing of time.

So I began to wonder if the text has to fit the music, not what is actually there in the original. For the Olsen song was in praise of his wife, who – in his eyes – became more beautiful for every year that passed. The song is about long-lasting love, not infatuation.

'Sænk kun dit hoved, du blomst...' is a case in point. Every Dane can recognise it, but the poem itself, by Johs. Jørgensen, is eminently forgettable. Cloyingly romantic, it would never have survived without Carl Nielsen's music.

So what should a translator do? Translate, or write some new lyrics?

Here is the original, with a word-to-word translation:

Sænk kun dit hoved, du blomst

Sænk kun dit hoved, du blomst,
bøj det i bladene ned,
vent kun med lukket krone
nattens livsalige fred.

Natten, den milde, den tyste,
kommer, o bøj dig til blund.
Sov under gyldne stjerner,
sov dig salig og sund.

Sov som et barn, der vugges
blidt i sin moders favn,
vågner kun halvt og sukker
smilende moders navn. (1903)

(Just lower your head, you flower, /fold it down into the leaves, /just wait with closed crown/night's blessed peace.

Night, the mild one, the silent one, /is coming, oh bow down to close your eyes. /Sleep beneath golden stars, /sleep yourself blessed and healthy.

Sleep like a child that is rocked/gently in its mother's embrace, /wakes only half and sighs/smiling its mother's name.)

Not a poem that can claim immortality.

Even so, it has become immortal, thanks to the wonderful melody by Carl Nielsen. This is a haunting tune that ends on a question mark in every verse, defying the content of the text.

So, what is the translator to do? Follow the text, ignore the text – or modify the text?

I have chosen the last alternative. See what you think:

Just bow your head, little flower

Just bow your head, little flower
let all your leaves hold you tight,
with folded petals wait for
calm bliss that comes with the night.

Night's coming, gentle and silent,
bow down and lay you to rest.
Sleep beneath stars so golden,
sleep till you're sound and you're blessed.

Sleep like a child that is cradled
safe in its mother's embrace,
drowsy, her sweet name sighing
gazing up into her face.

And when making your decision, listen to the recording under 'Files'.

Technical remarks:

As often in such poems, there is a fixed pulse with three accented syllables in each line, but not a strict syllable count. And only lines 2 and 4 rhyme on a stressed single-syllable word. This makes life a lot easier, as it fits the English language more comfortably than rhyming words that have more than one syllable and where the last syllable is unstressed.

So I start by looking for the rhyme words in the first verse. The Danish words in those positions are 'down' and 'peace'. 'Peace' offers me no convincing rhymes from my rhyming dictionary (oh yes, I use one – or run the rhymes through my head: cease, geese, lease...) apart from 'cease', but I can't see how that would work in line 2. So I look through the words in line 4 and choose 'night'. Since I have a 'holding' image suggested in lines 2 and 3, the word 'tight' pops up immediately. The botany of the first stanza puzzles me – a flower has a head with petals on it which fold in over the centre at night. Fine, but to bow its head down into the leaves makes me wonder what sort of flower this can be. I have weakened the imagery of line 2 and introduced the idea of holding and cradling that is returned to in stanza 3. The rhyme has dictated the content of line 2, but I feel the poem has not thereby been distorted.

One more thing about stanza 1 – 'you flower' would sound very odd in English. Added to which, 'head' only has one syllable, so I need two before 'flower', which (as I have remarked about an earlier workshop poem) wavers between 1 and 2 syllables with its triphthong.

Stanza 2 came quickly. Once I saw 'blessed' in line 8, I knew something could be done with 'rest' in line 6. The length of line 8 does not make the line unsingable at all. And if you remove the second 'you're', the line becomes imbalanced.

Stanza 3 I find a bit yucky. And if a small child, being rocked in its mother's arms, is likely to sigh with a smile it's mother's name (let's hope it's not Amantha, for example), seems highly dubious to me. The repetition of 'mother' also disturbs me in the poem. The Danish 'moder' is the long form of 'mor', the present word. So it all adds to the sentimentality of the stanza to my, admittedly non-Danish, ears.

The word 'favn' is one we desperately lack in English. It is encompassing arms, the dictionary tells me, or 'embrace'. Now 'arms' is a terrible word to rhyme with, for mother's charms are not involved here. But 'embrace' has definite potential. If I choose 'face', the word that springs to mind, I will have to alter the last two lines to get enough of the original content in. The mention of the child half-awakening – this fills at least a line in English – will have to be compressed to the adjectival 'drowsy', so that I can shift the mother's name up into line 11. And, for the sake of the rhythm, I have changed to 'her sweet name', trying to retain a bit of the 'moder' feeling by the addition of 'sweet', but also trying not to coat the line with sugar. Line 12 now needs a verb, and 'gazing' I like because that is what a child does and, it must be added, because the 'gazing... ..face' gives a feeling of the poem coming to its timely end.