Faust [part 1]. Translated Into English in the Original Metres

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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FAUST

_by_

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH, IN THE ORIGINAL METRES, BY

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[Illustration]

FAUST

It is twenty years since I first determined to attempt the translation of _Faust_, in the original metres. At that time, although more than a score of English translations of the First Part, and three or four of the Second Part, were in existence, the experiment had not yet been made. The prose version of Hayward seemed to have been accepted as the standard, in default of anything more satisfactory: the English critics, generally sustaining the translator in his views concerning the secondary importance of form in Poetry, practically discouraged any further attempt; and no one, familiar with rhythmical expression through the needs of his own nature, had devoted the necessary love and patience to an adequate reproduction of the great work of Goethe's life.

Mr. Brooks was the first to undertake the task, and the publication of his translation of the First Part (in 1856) induced me, for a time, to give up my own design. No previous English version exhibited such abnegation of the translator's own tastes and habits of thought, such reverent desire to present the original in its purest form. The care and conscience with which the work had been performed were so apparent, that I now state with reluctance what then seemed to me to be its only deficiencies,—a lack of the lyrical fire and fluency of the original in some passages, and an occasional lowering of the tone through the use of words which are literal, but not equivalent. The plan of translation adopted by Mr. Brooks was so entirely my own,

that when further residence in Germany and a more careful study of both parts of _Faust_ had satisfied me that the field was still open,—that the means furnished by the poetical affinity of the two languages had not yet been exhausted,—nothing remained for me but to follow him in all essential particulars. His example confirmed me in the belief that there were few difficulties in the way of a nearly literal yet thoroughly rhythmical version of _Faust_, which might not be overcome by loving labor. A comparison of seventeen English translations, in the arbitrary metres adopted by the translators, sufficiently showed the danger of allowing license in this respect: the white light of Goethe's thought was thereby passed through the tinted glass of other minds, and assumed the coloring of each. Moreover, the plea of selecting different metres in the hope of producing a similar effect is unreasonable, where the identical metres are possible.

The value of form, in a poetical work, is the first question to be considered. No poet ever understood this question more thoroughly than Goethe himself, or expressed a more positive opinion in regard to it. The alternative modes of translation which he presents (reported by Riemer, quoted by Mrs. Austin, in her "Characteristics of Goethe," and accepted by Mr. Hayward),[A] are quite independent of his views concerning the value of form, which we find given elsewhere, in the clearest and most emphatic manner.[B] Poetry is not simply a fashion of expression: it is the form of expression absolutely required by a certain class of ideas. Poetry, indeed, may be distinguished from Prose by the single circumstance, that it is the utterance of whatever in man cannot be perfectly uttered in any other than a rhythmical form: it is useless to say that the naked meaning is independent of the form: on the contrary, the form contributes essentially to the fullness

of the meaning. In Poetry which endures through its own inherent vitality, there is no forced union of these two elements. They are as intimately blended, and with the same mysterious beauty, as the sexes in the ancient Hermaphroditus. To attempt to represent Poetry in Prose, is very much like attempting to translate music into speech.[C]

[A] "'There are two maxims of translation,' says he: 'the one requires that the author, of a foreign nation, be brought to us in such a manner that we may regard him as our own; the other, on the contrary, demands of us that we transport ourselves over to him, and adopt his situation, his mode of speaking, and his peculiarities. The advantages of both are sufficiently known to all instructed persons, from masterly examples.'" Is it necessary, however, that there should always be this alternative? Where the languages are kindred, and equally capable of all varieties of metrical expression, may not both these "maxims" be observed in the same translation? Goethe, it is true, was of the opinion that _Faust_ ought to be given, in French, in the manner of Clement Marot; but this was undoubtedly because he felt the inadequacy of modern French to express the naive, simple realism of many passages. The same objection does not apply to English. There are a few archaic expressions in _Faust_, but no more than are still allowed—nay, frequently encouraged—in the English of our day.

[B] "You are right," said Goethe; "there are great and mysterious agencies included in the various forms of Poetry. If the substance of my 'Roman Elegies' were to be expressed in the tone and measure of Byron's 'Don Juan,' it would really have an atrocious effect."—_Eckermann_.

"The rhythm," said Goethe, "is an unconscious result of the poetic

mood. If one should stop to consider it mechanically, when about to write a poem, one would become bewildered and accomplish nothing of real poetical value."—_Ibid_.

"_All that is poetic in character should be rythmically treated_! Such is my conviction; and if even a sort of poetic prose should be gradually introduced, it would only show that the distinction between prose and poetry had been completely lost sight of."—_Goethe to Schiller_, 1797.

Tycho Mommsen, in his excellent essay, _Die Kunst des Deutschen Uebersetzers aus neueren Sprachen_, goes so far as to say: "The metrical or rhymed modelling of a poetical work is so essentially the germ of its being, that, rather than by giving it up, we might hope to construct a similar work of art before the eyes of our countrymen, by giving up or changing the substance. The immeasurable result which has followed works wherein the form has been retained—such as the Homer of Voss, and the Shakespeare of Tieck and Schlegel—is an incontrovertible evidence of the vitality of the endeavor."

[C] "Goethe's poems exercise a great sway over me, not only by their meaning, but also by their rhythm. It is a language which stimulates me to composition."—_Beethoven_.

The various theories of translation from the Greek and Latin poets have been admirably stated by Dryden in his Preface to the "Translations from Ovid's Epistles," and I do not wish to continue the endless discussion,—especially as our literature needs examples, not opinions. A recent expression, however, carries with it so much authority, that I feel bound to present some considerations which the accomplished scholar seems to have overlooked. Mr. Lewes[D] justly

says: “The effect of poetry is a compound of music and suggestion; this music and this suggestion are intermingled in words, which to alter is to alter the effect. For words in poetry are not, as in prose, simple representatives of objects and ideas: they are parts of an organic whole,—they are tones in the harmony.” He thereupon illustrates the effect of translation by changing certain well-known English stanzas into others, equivalent in meaning, but lacking their felicity of words, their grace and melody. I cannot accept this illustration as valid, because Mr. Lewes purposely omits the very quality which an honest translator should exhaust his skill in endeavoring to reproduce. He turns away from the _one best_ word or phrase in the English lines he quotes, whereas the translator seeks precisely that one best word or phrase (having _all_ the resources of his language at command), to represent what is said in _another_ language. More than this, his task is not simply mechanical: he must feel, and be guided by, a secondary inspiration. Surrendering himself to the full possession of the spirit which shall speak through him, he receives, also, a portion of the same creative power. Mr. Lewes reaches this conclusion: “If, therefore, we reflect what a poem _Faust_ is, and that it contains almost every variety of style and metre, it will be tolerably evident that no one unacquainted with the original can form an adequate idea of it from translation,”[E] which is certainly correct of any translation wherein something of the rhythmical variety and beauty of the original is not retained. That very much of the rhythmical character may be retained in English, was long ago shown by Mr. Carlyle,[F] in the passages which he translated, both literally and rhythmically, from the _Helena_ (Part Second). In fact, we have so many instances of the possibility of

reciprocally transferring the finest qualities of English and German poetry, that there is no sufficient excuse for an unmetrical translation of _Faust_. I refer especially to such subtile and melodious lyrics as “The Castle by the Sea,” of Uhland, and the “Silent Land” of Salis, translated by Mr. Longfellow; Goethe’s “Minstrel” and “Coptic Song,” by Dr. Hedge; Heine’s “Two Grenadiers,” by Dr. Furness and many of Heine’s songs by Mr. Leland; and also to the German translations of English lyrics, by Freiligrath and Strodtmann.[G]

[D] Life of Goethe (Book VI.).

[E] Mr. Lewes gives the following advice: “The English reader would perhaps best succeed who should first read Dr. Anster’s brilliant paraphrase, and then carefully go through Hayward’s prose translation.” This is singularly at variance with the view he has just expressed. Dr. Anster’s version is an almost incredible dilution of the original, written in _other_ metres; while Hayward’s entirely omits the element of poetry.

[F] Foreign Review, 1828.

[G] When Freiligrath can thus give us Walter Scott:—

“Kommt, wie der Wind kommt, Wenn Wälder erzittern Kommt, wie die Brandung Wenn Flotten zersplittern! Schnell heran, schnell herab, Schneller kommt Al’e!—Häuptling und Bub’ und Knapp, Herr und Vasalle!”

or Strodtmann thus reproduce Tennyson:—

“Es fällt der Strahl auf Burg und Thal, Und schneeige Gipfel, reich an Sagen; Viel’ Lichter wehn auf blauen Seen, Bergab die Wasserstürze jagen! Blas, Hüfthorn, blas, in Wiederhall erschallend: Blas,

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