

In Praise of Ozsváth and Turner's Poetry of Translation

Mark Olival-Bartley

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
The Golden Goblet: Selected Poems, translated
by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick
Turner. Deep Vellum, 234pp., \$12 paper.

THERE'S NO GAINSAYING THAT YOU HAVE MORE pressing concerns than to read a process-driven and autobiographical account celebrating a new translation of select verse by Goethe. Indeed, we all do. Scanning the headlines as we scroll through our social media feeds, we are collectively undone by illimitable crises: There's the pandemic, of course; catastrophic climate change; drought and famine; a global rise in fascism; the Holocene extinction; cyberwarfare; the acidification of the oceans; a worldwide recession—and the list goes on and on and on (and on). So, during this *annus horribilis*, marshaling whatever intellectual energy that remains to read, God help us, poetry seems, well, unseemly: After all, turning inward from the apocalyptic to seek, ostrich-like, the sanctuary of *belles lettres* suggests either brazen decadence or outright escapism. And, while we're playing the devil's advocate here, we might as well ask what possible value could a new translation of centuries-old verse by a dead white European male have for us now?

It's a fair question and the very one that Frederick Turner—co-translator with Zsuzsanna Ozsváth—poses with uncanny prescience at the outset of his introduction to *The Golden Goblet: Selected Poems*: “Why read Goethe now? Or let's say: ‘What is wrong with us now, that we

might require the help of Goethe?” Or, put yet another way: Given the magnitude and complexity of the foregoing catalogue of challenges facing humanity, how can reading Goethe help? In our first steps toward an answer, we would do well to keep in mind that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), during his long and eventful life, masterfully explored a host of genres in pursuit of the abiding interests of his polymathic intellect—he was equally at home in fiction (e.g. *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774; *Elective Affinities*, 1809), drama (e.g. *Götz of Berlichingen*, 1773; *Iphigenia in Tauris*, 1787), autobiography (e.g. *Italian Journey*, 1817; *Poetry and Truth*, 1830), scientific study (e.g. *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, 1790; *Theory of Colours*, 1810) and even military history (*The Siege of Mainz*, 1793).

Yet, for all this, Goethe is, first and foremost, a great poet—not only for his formidable lyrical gifts but as one who, as Turner notes, through “a supreme act of adulteration” was able to create “a common language that,” even in translation, “can connect all the thoughts and feelings of the human tribe.” To be sure, Goethe is often included with other great poets whose names now clamor as clichés—Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare—and whose literary stocks have also fallen as a result of the culture wars fought over their inclusion in the canon. That said, syllabus requirement or no, readers who have actually sojourned in the visionary worlds of the great poets are generally quick to praise and recognize the value of the experience, dismissing the most egregiously banal of those fraught ados. As to Goethe, well, he is the youngster of that storied pantheon and, as such, the most modern and familiar to us—and, because he is so winsome a wordsmith, one whose unremitting brilliance is so seamlessly melded to an authentic soulfulness, we relish his verse.

Of course, unless you are one of the hundred million or so literate in the language, the only way to savor the mellifluousness of Goethe’s mesmerizing mind is through the medium of a good translation, of which those for *Faust*—considered the greatest work of literature in German—abound. Indeed, while the prestigious challenge (and market potential) of rendering the poet’s masterpiece into English ensures each generation its own so-called definitive version, the greater bulk of Goethe’s shorter verse, equally artful, has always garnered much less attention among international publishers and, thereby, readers. Thankfully, Deep Vellum—a not-for-profit publisher based in Dallas with an impressive catalogue of literature in English by contemporary writers from around the world—and the Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas have come together to bring forth a new anthology of Goethe’s lyrical work, exquisitely translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner, *The Golden Goblet: Selected Poems*. Both Ozsváth and Turner are professors at UT Dallas, and both have published their own work to much acclaim; together, they have previously translated three volumes of

Hungarian poetry into English that have won great accolades, including the Milán Füst Prize, the highest literary award in Hungary. *The Golden Goblet* is their first translation of German literature.

At this point, I feel the need to pull back the curtain a bit: Reviews such as this are seldom read by poets themselves without the accompaniment of a disdainful smirk or a smile indicating an itching for a fight. (In a letter to me five years ago, Donald Hall dished that the poetry reviews were his least favorite part of *The New Yorker*.) This is all by way of saying that summarily judging another's volume of hard-won verse through, say, formulas of convention or, worse, platitudinous quips is an act of bad faith. And, for someone like me, who has lived in Munich for a decade yet remains a decidedly clumsy bilingual, I must confide at the outset that I am not an expert on Goethe's poetry; in fact, I feel much more comfortable reading in English. So, my legwork in evaluating the translation by Ozsváth and Turner lay equally in checking their versions of the poems against both the authority of Goethe's German alongside two other contemporary translators, David Luke (whose *Selected Poetry of Goethe* was published by Penguin) and Walter Arndt (whose *Faust* was published by Norton). I'm all but certain, too, that a lifelong proclivity toward formalist verse has played a role in my reading here of *The Golden Goblet*. Admitting these opinions, limitations, and biases is important—not least because, while most of us are wont to trust our intuitions in aesthetic matters, the means by which poetry can be translated with fidelity are manifold.

Indeed, when standing before the poetry section of a bookshop or library, every enthusiast has one or two litmus tests that he or she is given to favor in discerning whether a collection is worth reading. Mine is to flip through the pages and scan the enjambments, assessing how the breaking of syntax at the right margin allows for the play of interlinear ambiguity, however momentary, before the next line is read. Should I find lines ending, say, with prepositions or articles, there's a good chance that I'll shelve the book. On the other hand, should I encounter lines laden with phrases that might unexpectedly tack at the break or, better, verbs whose transitivity dangles the possibility of an unseen object or, better yet, consummate homonyms oscillating between being plural nouns or third-person-singular verbs in the present tense, then I'm smitten. It's at this time when I look for a chair, preferably somewhat out of earshot, and, seated, begin to (softly) read aloud and savor the language like an off-duty restaurant reviewer newly served at a novel eatery. Come to it, that bit about the enjambments is but a prelude: Reading aloud (to enjoy what Donald Hall impishly called, in that same letter, "aural sex")—for me, anyway—is the best test of taste. A non sequitur (and over-the-top mixed metaphor): In reading great verse aloud, I sometimes think of Der Blaue Reiter masterpiece *Fighting Forms*, Franz Marc's famous last painting, as a dynamic poetic ideal, in which opposing forces clash colorfully into

shards of echoes that, like the simile of vibrating violin strings in Rilke's in "Love Song", coterminously sound into a singular medley of metrics and occasional inversion, of sentential composition and enjambment, of lexical riches and metaphorical evocation, of delicious diphthongs and consonantal clusters, of lofty lyricism and downhome earthiness.

The syllabic count, the metrics, the rhyme scheme, and the even the number and line placement of the feminine endings matches Goethe's German perfectly

The Golden Goblet had me smitten from the very first. As a material object, the book is a pleasure to hold, handy in its heft; it's also a pleasure to behold, for it is handsomely designed (with a matte black cover that connotes both Janus and Warhol in its etching of the poet's iconic yet eerily forlorn portrait in neon green, pink, and orange above his surname in oversized white blackletter). As to the text, the generous font size of the Bembo typeface is easy on the eyes (even, as I found, without one's reading glasses), and the ample margins encourage the wholesale impression of variegated stanzaic forms and allow for their fulsome annotation. To assist the reader in contextualizing the poet's verse, there are two sizable preludes—an introduction by Turner ("Goethe the Revolutionary") and a foreword by Ozsváth ("Biography as Poetry, Poetry as Biography")—and an illuminating afterword by both translators on their collaborative practice ("Natural Meanings: On Translation"). Sensing the linguistic needs of their likely readers, Ozsváth and Turner elected to make *The Golden Goblet* a monolingual translation, thereby doubling its offerings; for those interested in reading comparatively, a list is provided of both the English and German titles of each poem. (All of Goethe's poetry in German, incidentally, can be easily found at a number of different websites or in inexpensive anthologies; I picked up a brick-sized hardback online for just five euros.)

I confess not having read Goethe since taking a survey course during my freshman year in college some thirty years ago—where we read *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a novel—and I am embarrassed to admit having never encountered his poetry before, save the occasional lyrical translation (like Rita Dove's "Above the Mountaintops," which appeared in *The New Yorker* three years ago). To gird myself for what I thought would be a tough Teutonic slog, I read Robertson's primer and Safranski's biography before delving into *The Golden Cup*—but I needn't have done that, for Ozsváth and Turner have fashioned an a thoughtfully user-friendly book that assumes no familiarity with Goethe's oeuvre yet

consummately achieves the objectives stated at the closing of Ozsváth's foreword: "Our goal has been to translate Goethe's poetry into English, approximating its musical, rhythmical, and visual achievement, and opening the door to this new world of treasures for English-speaking readers."

After reading and annotating *The Golden Cup* once through, I followed the second reading of each poem by reading alongside it both Goethe's German originals, and English translations by either Walter Arndt or David Luke (or sometimes by both). Assessing the poems impressionistically in that manner, one after another, was just too difficult for me (and my gnat-like memory): So, I dusted off my Olympia manual, typed up iterative sets of representative poems, taped together those individual sheets of A4 (Europe's equivalent to letter-sized typing paper in the U.S.), and, pen in hand, scanned the metrics of each version, noting the rhyme scheme (and whether the rhymes were masculine or feminine). In marking up the translations of Arndt, Luke, and Ozsváth and Turner, I sought to see how each discrete translation met my litmus tests in reckoning with the challenge of the original's enjambments and replicating the inimical music of its German verse.

To get a sense what this looks like, consider these iterations of "Chorus Mysticus," the final lyric that ends *Faust* (Part II), Goethe's masterpiece.

GOETHE

Alles Vergängliche
Ist nur ein Gleichnis;
Das Unzulängliche,
Hier wirds Ereignis;
Das Unbeschreibliche,
Hier ists getan;
Das Ewigweibliche
Zieht uns hinan.

OZSVÁTH AND TURNER

All that is transient
Is but a fiction;
All insufficiency
Here becomes action;
All wordless mystery
Here may be done;
The ever-womanly
Still draws us on.

ARNDT

All that is changeable
Is but reflected;
The unattainable
Here is effected;
Human discernment
Here is passed by;
The Eternal-Feminine
Draws us on high.

LUKE

All that must disappear
Is but a parable;
What lay beyond us, here
All is made visible;
Here deeds have understood
Words they were darkened by;
Eternal Womanhood
Draws us on high.

At first blush, the three translations seem akin to one another—yet, in looking closer at the prosody of each, differences are thrown into relief. For example, while Luke’s translation certainly has the same number of lines and rhyme scheme as Goethe’s original, the number of syllables per line, their pattern of stresses, and the resulting music differs appreciably from what a German reader experiences in reading this lovely verse aloud. Note how Goethe’s metrics are varied, whereas Luke’s are monotonous; note how Goethe’s poem has two feminine rhymes, whereas Luke’s has none. Though Arndt’s translation fares better than Luke’s with a closer approximation to Goethe’s syllabic count per line and the inclusion of feminine rhymes, these do not perfectly match the German nor does Arndt’s metrics. Given the relative brevity of the lines, Ozsváth and Turner, amazingly, have achieved the impossible: the syllabic count, the metrics, the rhyme scheme, and the even the number and line placement of the feminine endings matches Goethe’s German perfectly. (Although there’s no way to ever really know, I’m of the mind that Ozsváth and Turner might have even sought to up the ante with an oblique homage to John Donne, the seventeenth-century English poet given to melding the sacred and profane.)

Here are the final two stanzas of Goethe’s “Selige Sehnsucht,” which Luke translates as “Ecstatic Longing” and Ozsváth and Turner as “Blessed Yearning”: All versions have the same syllabic count per line, rhyme scheme (almost), and alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes—in reading the English versions, take note of their syntactical and lexical choices.

GOETHE

Keine Ferne macht dich schwierig,
Kommst geflogen und gebannt,
Und zuletzt, des Lichts begierig,
Bist du Schmetterling verbrannt.

Und so lang du das nicht hast,
Dieses: Stirb und werde!
Bis du nur ein trüber Gast
Auf der dunklen Erde.

LUKE

Distance tires you not nor hinders,
On you come with fated flight
Till, poor moth, at last you perish
In the flame, in love with light.

Die into becoming! Grasp
This, or sad and weary
Shall your sojourn ever be
On the dark earth dreary.

OZSVÁTH AND TURNER

Space can’t clog your spellbound yearning,
You come flying just the same,
And at last, drawn to the burning,
You’re the moth come to the flame.

You would be Earth’s sullen guest
In the darkness glooming,
If you’d never felt this quest:
Die into becoming!

In addition to avoiding Luke’s pitfalls of twisting word order around to ensure the rhyme (as in the prepositional phrase of his final line), Ozsváth and Turner employ their lineation in the service of sentence design, whose rhetorical power crescendos with each successive line until the exclamation. Even a decision as slight as Luke’s to render “earth” in the lower-case, evoking “soil” rather than “the world,” seems ill-fated: The technical proximity to Goethe’s verse notwithstanding, the pathos of Ozsváth and Turner’s version is simply lost in Luke’s for want of a metaphorical nail. (In this sampling, too, one senses that Ozsváth and Turner are reaching out to their readers allusively. One can’t help but hear the echo of Auden’s elegy to Yeats: “Earth, receive an honoured guest”.)

A final example might suffice. Here are the last two stanzas of “Der König in Thule,” which Goethe famously has Gretchen sing as she undresses in Faust, Part I. Here, the King of Thule, now *dying*, surrenders his final treasure—a gift from his one true love.

GOETHE

Dort stand der alte Zecher,
Trank letzte Lebensglut,
Und warf den heiligen Becher
Hinunter in die Flut.

Er sah ihn stürzen, trinken,
Und sinken tief ins Meer,
Die Augen täten ihm sinken.
Trank nie einen Tropfen mehr.

ARNDT

There stood the hoary drinker
And sipped of life’s last glow,
Then flung the holy trinket
Into the brine below.

He saw it plunging, winking
And sinking deep at sea,
His lids grew heavy, sinking
No other drop drank he.

OZSVÁTH AND TURNER

Old drinker in his palace,
He stood, drank life’s last glow,
And threw the sacred chalice
Into the flood below.

He saw it fall, and drinking,
Founder into the main.
His eyes, too, now are sinking;
He never drank again.

LUKE

The old man still drank as his life’s flame sank
Then over the waves he stood,
And the sacred cup he raised it up,
Threw it down to the raging flood.

He watched it fall to the distant shore
And sink in the waters deep;
And never a drop that king drank more,
For he’d closed his eyes to sleep.

This, of course, is the golden goblet of Ozsváth and Turner's title. In addition to sundry markers of contrast, what stands out for me in Ozsváth and Turner's rendering vis-à-vis the others is the manner in which they have infused Goethe's crafted verse with playful soulfulness; in doing so, they have enabled the great German poet to speak in an idiom that we can understand and appreciate. (Please forgive this indulgence, but I would be remiss if I didn't say that, once again, I detected some high-end word play: Goethe was born and raised on the Main.) In the end, poetry is an emergent art greater than the sum of its parts.

True translators, like true poets, are made as much as born—and the extraordinary beauty of these translations led me to Zsuzsanna Ozsváth's heart-breaking memoirs of the Holocaust and her recovery of life thereafter at home in Dallas with her family. During the Nazis' siege of Budapest when she was a child, Ozsváth found life-affirming properties in the music and imagination of Goethe's verse as recited by the children with whom she played, for this was poetry that her mother had read to her and that they both had loved. Decades later, she pursued doctoral studies in German literature in Texas and wrote a study of Goethe as part of her dissertation; as an adult, she found that the study of such poetry gave her life meaning and joy. The extraordinary beauty of these translations also led me to Frederick Turner's own exquisite verse and his brilliant disquisitions of expansive poetics and the classical spirit. The bold (and convincingly-argued) thesis of "The Neural Lyre," an award-winning essay that he and a Munich-based researcher co-authored, is that metrical verse is a universal phenomenon because its properties complement the workings of the human brain; moreover, the properties of such poetry are salutary, conferring real-world benefits to our physical well-being and mental health.

I was saddened to learn that Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner will be retiring from UT Dallas this year, for their extraordinary lives—in concert with their immeasurable gifts as translators—have indeed recovered *The Golden Goblet* from the cold depths of age and churning murkiness of language for us to once again admire. Yet, before we lament the inevitable drinking and sinking of that invaluable chalice once more, there is some wonderful news to share: A new English version of Goethe's *Faust* has been translated by Ozsváth and Turner, is now being published by Deep Vellum, and will be made available for purchase on 3 November 2020, Election Day. ♪

References

- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. "Above the Mountaintops," translated by Rita Dove. *The New Yorker*, 13 November 2017.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Faust, Part One: A New Translation with Illustrations*, translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner. Deep Vellum, 2020.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Faust*, 2nd ed., translated by Walter Arndt and edited by Cyrus Hamlin. A Norton Critical Edition. Norton, 2001.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Goethes Gedichte in Zeitlicher Folge*. Insel Verlag, 1982.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Selected Poetry*, translated by David Luke. Penguin Classics, 2005.
- Ozsváth, Zsuzsanna. *My Journey Home: Life after the Holocaust*, with a foreword by Hobson Wildenthal. Cherry Orchard Books, 2019.
- Ozsváth, Zsuzsanna. *When the Danube Ran Red*, with a foreword by David Patterson. Religion, Theology, and the Holocaust. Syracuse UP, 2017.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Neue Gedichte*. Insel Verlag, 1955.
- Robertson, Ritchie. *Goethe: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2015.
- Safranski, Rüdiger. *Goethe: Life as a Work of Art*, translated by David Dollenmayer. Liveright, 2017.
- Turner, Frederick. *The Culture of Hope: A New Birth of the Classical Spirit*. The Free Press, 1995.
- Turner, Frederick and Ernst Pöppel. "The Neural Lyre: Poetic Meter, the Brain, and Time". *New Expansive Poetry: Theory, Criticism, History*, edited by R. S. Gwynn. Story Line Press, 1999.
- Turner, Frederick. *Paradise: Selected Poems, 1990-2003*. David Robert Books, 2004.