



To cite this article:

Ruleman, William. ““The Cities in the Wood”: Translating Georg Heym’s Poems Set in Sylvan Scenes.” *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 13 (December 2018): 125-133.

aalitra.org.au

Australian Association for Literary Translation

“The Cities in the Wood”: Translating Georg Heym’s Poems Set in Sylvan Scenes

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Best known for his bleak and nightmarish depictions of the modern city, the German Expressionist poet Georg Heym (1887-1912) was also a sensitive and passionate portrayer of nature, and he never stopped writing poetry about it until his untimely death by drowning at the age of twenty-four. As the pieces here suggest, some of his dream-like poems set in natural landscapes present a strange and humbling contrast to human metropolises. Although Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud are rightly cited as having had the greatest influence on Heym’s style and themes, the poetry of the German and English Romantics also helps explain his worldview and his moods, while the verse techniques of John Keats, whom Heym especially admired, may well provide a model for how these poems can be rendered in English.

As Patrick Bridgwater has noted, Georg Heym’s “great love was, and remained, the world of nature,” a love that stemmed from his childhood amid the Giant Mountains (Riesengebirge) of Silesia (5). When Heym was twelve, though, his father was transferred to the noisy city of Berlin, whose environs both “fascinated” and “appalled” him (Bridgwater 211). Known to Heym at least in part through Stefan George’s translations (Bridgwater 144), Charles Baudelaire gave him the model for launching bitter attacks against urban life in such poems as “Der Gott der Stadt” (The City’s God) and “Die Dämonen der Städte” (The Demons of the Cities). He also provided the example of using classical forms, especially that of the sonnet, as a means for doing so (153). With its surrealistic and visionary imagery, Arthur Rimbaud’s “Le Bateau ivre” (The Drunken Boat) made an equally great impact on him (Seelig 217).

Inspired largely by Baudelaire and Rimbaud, the pieces that made Heym famous were those that dealt with the modern city. Antony Hasler’s landmark bi-lingual collection *Poems* (2004) gives these ample representation in English while also showing the range of Heym’s poetic subjects, including the French revolution, Shakespeare, the downtrodden (who also intrigued Baudelaire and Rimbaud), and of course nature. Still, those that I have selected here are not featured in Hasler’s book, nor have I come across them in English versions elsewhere. Yet except for “Der Schöne Herbst Naht Wieder” (“Another Lovely Autumn Nears”) of 1907, he wrote all of these in the last two full years of his life (1910-11). In fact, two (“Die Städte im Wald” and “Der Wald” of March and May 1911, respectively) were composed some months after “Der Gott der Stadt” and “Die Dämonen der Städte” (both of December 1910). And, of the more than five hundred pages of poems from those years that are featured in the first volume of Karl Ludwig Schneider’s comprehensive *Dichtungen und Schriften*, I count well over one hundred pages as being devoted to scenes in nature alone.

Although Heym never lived long enough to articulate a comprehensive philosophy of life, his journals do give hints of a worldview, and one may indeed contend that his poems set in nature pose an intriguing contrast to human realms.

Heym held a high regard for the natural world. In fact, his devotion to nature was so strong that by his twenty-second year he was seeking to establish a “new, humanistic religion” in subservience to the classical god Helios (4). The poem translated here as “Another Lovely Autumn Nears” celebrates the classical god of wine in a way reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose philosophy Heym admired (40, 47). English scholars may also remember the more conservative English Romantic William Wordsworth’s “The World Is Too Much with Us,” which praises the ancient Greeks for their awe of nature:

Great God! I'd rather be
 A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn,
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea,
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn. (802-3)

Indeed, Wordsworth's position here provides clues about Heym's initial attitude toward nature. It also helps explain his horror of the modern city, which can alienate us from the elemental powers that reside in all of us and leave us unmoored, isolated, and in pain. Yet one aspect of Heym's makeshift faith, alluded to in the last two stanzas of "Another Lovely Autumn Nears," is that it acknowledges the suffering we all share and so makes room for compassion; as Heym says in one of his letters regarding ancient Greek worshippers, "[b]ecause they sacrificed together, they came to know one another's troubles, and were therefore drawn closer together" (Heym, *Dichtungen* 31; Bridgwater 116).

One also finds echoes of earlier German poets in the selections presented here. Two Romantics in particular come to mind. One is Heym's fellow Silesian, Joseph von Eichendorff, with his forebodings of doom and images of human ruins overrun by nature in such poems as "Zwielicht" (Twilight) from 1815 and "Heimkehr" (The Return Home) from 1812. Another is the brooding Hungarian-born Nikolaus Lenau, whom Heym likened to himself and contrasted with more famous figures such as Goethe, George, and Rilke for the reason that Lenau, like him, had remained "decent" and "uncompromising" as a poet (*Dichtungen*, Band 3, 175). And, just as for Lenau, nature more and more became "an expression of his own propensity toward themes of death and transiency" (Schmidt 42), so nature remained for Heym a central focus "because of his obsession with death" (Bridgwater 202).

To be certain, the general view of Heym's later poetry is that it shows a marked preoccupation with death, which is linked to a "profound sense of alienation from the whole object-world as such, whether natural or man-made" (Bridgwater 202). Be that as it may, the poems here appear to *glorify* nature; one might even argue that they elevate it above human cities in status. For instance, one cannot help noting how, in describing woodland scenes, Heym uses words and phrases related to human kingdoms – words that, to give some examples, translate in English as *kingly*, *palace*, *chamber*, and *domain*. Forests, for Heym, contain *cities* – that is, they are geographical entities with their own laws and customs that call into question human systems. The images of mythic griffins and other strange creatures also give hints of the exotic that recall Baudelaire's "Correspondances" (1857) and Rimbaud's "Le Bateau ivre" (1871). Yet it is important to note that, unlike the earlier German and French poets mentioned, Heym effaces himself as speaker, offering little real commentary on the sights he describes.

Indeed, in this respect, one might argue that he approaches the perspective of the English Romantic John Keats, who argued that the poet has "no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body" (1220). One might think the comparison outlandish were it not for the fact of Heym's exuberant enthusiasm for Keats, whom he grouped with Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and the lesser-known French Symbolist Albert Samain as being "men with something to show for themselves" (Bridgwater 240). "Ich glaube nicht, daß es einen größeren Lyriker gibt, als Keats" (I do not believe that there is a greater lyric poet than Keats), he asserts in a journal entry of October 1910 (*Dichtungen*, Band 3, 147; Bridgwater 139). To be sure, even if Heym came to Keats chiefly via the translations of his good friend Ernst Balcke (Bridgwater 139), the English Romantic's emphasis on a verse "massively detailed" and "packed with images" was a quality that Heym had also admired in Baudelaire and sought to emulate (Bridgwater 142).

Keats advised his fellow Romantic, Percy Bysshe Shelley, to “load every rift of [his] subject with ore” (1235). I have found this advice helpful as I translate Heym, whose rhymes and meters are regular, therefore presenting the English translator with the problem that sometimes fewer words are necessary in English to convey the sense of Heym’s German. One solution is to do as Antony Hasler often does and downplay the rhymes and “strict metres”; agreeing with Martin Sorrell that “rhyme does not have such a strong place in English prosody,” he opts to work largely with a “lightly-asonanced English” and allows a “rougher, less regular pattern in the English line to assert itself where necessary” (xxii). But this can lead to an understating of Heym’s music—a music that, as Eugen Kurt Fischer has noted, resembles that of a pianist being compelled “continually to hold the pedal down, so that all the sounds are heard together, complicating and fusing themselves into a new sound experience”(Hasler xx). In my renderings, I have sought to accentuate this music, doing as Keats says poetry should do, that is, “surprise by a fine excess” (1211).

These poems show the same kind of self-effacement – the same kind of immersion in nature – that Keats effects in stanza five of “Ode to a Nightingale” and in the third and final stanza of “To Autumn,” respectively:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
 Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
 But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
 Wherewith the seasonable month endows
 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
 White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
 Fast fading violets cover’d up in leaves;
 And mid-May’s eldest child,
 The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
 The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves. (Keats 1185)

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
 Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—
 While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
 And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
 Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
 Among the river shallows, borne aloft
 Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
 And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
 Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
 The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
 And gathering swallows twitter in the skies. (Keats 1204)

Although these stanzas (unlike Heym’s) do begin with authorial commentary, by the end of each, we have lost all sense of the speaker and are fully enveloped in the natural scene. And the heavy alliteration and assonance in these lines, which make them impossible to pronounce rapidly and so give a tactile sense of earthiness, find counterparts in Heym’s own. Some prominent examples, among many, include lines 7 and 8 (“Aus hohen Eichen nickt mit schwarzem Schopf/Der Greife Volk aus ihrem roten Horst”) from “Der Wald” and line 8 (“Und rot im Abend lodert rings der Forst”) from “Die Städte im Walde.” Indeed, they show Heym painting with words as Keats does in those poems, revealing himself to be, like Keats, a poet who revels in the earth, its textures, and its sensations. As Heym’s contemporary John Wolfsohn wrote, Heym “[...] war gewiß kein Hölderlin, kein gewichtloser, spiritueller,

sternhafter Firmamentgeist. Er war der späten Hölderlins Gegenpol, ein trotzend, saftiger, bluthafter Erdgeist“ (*Heym was certainly no Hölderlin, no weightless, spiritual, starry ghost of the firmament. He was the late Hölderlin’s polar opposite: a defiant, verdant, full-blooded spirit of the Earth*) (my translation, qtd. in Seelig 216).

Accordingly, in order to give my renderings the earth-grounded tactility I find in Keats and Heym both, I have made the maximum use of such devices as alliteration and assonance. For instance, in “The Dream of the Very First Twilight”, I have opted for “The *kingly* fall of crimson trains” instead of the more idiomatic “*regal* fall”; and, in “From Night’s Green Wood”, I have created such constructions as “Along the flute that slipped his *grasp*, moss grows”. If this leads to some lines being hard to enunciate quickly, that is part of my intention; I wanted to produce the sense of groundedness and earthiness I find in Keats’s and Heym’s work alike.

As a translator, I do not consider my work complete until I have carried the work over into my own language and created a new poem in English. Indeed, there comes a point in the process for me when I am thinking less about faithfulness to the original in a strictly literal sense than to the creation of a new – and good – poem in my own native tongue. I do tend to hold with Willis Barnstone that “songless translations mislead the reader, and this is not good scholarship, not close and not truly literal” (96). And, given that I am a poet myself, my own stylistic idiosyncrasies will invariably (and unconsciously) make themselves felt. I can be faithful only, as Ernest Dowson said in another context, “in my fashion” (1211).

For me, the act of translating certainly involves a more than objective grappling – indeed, a heated engagement – with the original text. Still, after the dust settles, I do look back to see whether I have deviated too far from it. Here, I find that I largely have resisted the temptation to be more consistent with syntax. For instance, Heym tends to alternate complete sentences and fragments in a way that I find irritating; I have refrained from making his structures more parallel, concluding that, in some respects, these poems have the effect of journal entries: somewhat informal jottings that make the strange scenes they describe all the stranger – and yet all the more credible. Heym also makes more use of introductory subordinate clauses than is typical in English, and while I have refrained from this tendency in places, I have followed it in stanzas where it seems convenient and helpful in retaining the meter and rhymes or where it is more grammatically standard in English, as in line 12 of “The Cities of the Wood”.

In any event, I am ultimately of Allen Tate’s mind that “a pragmatic view of translation is [...] the only useful view” (“The Translation of Poetry”). As such, I look for whatever help I can find to get the job done. This involves my being receptive to the voices of English poets I find myself hearing in the transfer from one tongue to the next. In this case, the resemblances to Keats were unavoidable. If the result is that I have veered too far away from Heym’s own voice, I at least hope that these translations may in some respects stand as tributes to Heym’s admiration for Keats, as well as good English poems.

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Gedichte
By Georg Heym

Selected Poems
By Georg Heym
Translated by William Ruleman

Der Traum des Ersten Zwilichts

Der Traum des ersten Zwilichts auf dem
Tale. Des Grases Zittern, drauf die
Kälte taut.
Die Wolken ziehen an dem Himmelssaale
In Farben, wie sie nie der Tag geschaut.

Die Reisigen der Nacht. Die Panzer sprühn
Das erste Licht. Auf breiten Marmortreppen
Die Hellebarden und der Helmzier Grün.
Der königliche Fall der Purpurschleppen.

Sie ziehen langsam zu dem Mond empor,
Zu Schlosse und Gemach, zu ruhen lang.
Wie einst der Duft der Rosen lag im Tor
Von Sybaris, die in den Schlaf versank

Der Wald

Ein stiller Wald. Ein blasses Königreich
Mit grünen Schluchten voll und
Dorngerank.
Ein Wasser singt. Am Himmel fein und
schlank,
Wie eine Kerze, brennt die Sonne bleich.

Der Abend aber geht mit dunklem Kopf
Und dunkler Mantelschleppe in dem Forst.
Aus hohen Eichen nickt mit schwarzem
Schopf
Der Greife Volk aus ihrem roten Horst,

Und Goldgetier mit wunderlichem Prunk
Uralter Schnäbel krächzt im Baume grell
Und fliegt heraus, im wilden Winde schnell
Mit Schwingen groß in graue Dämmerung.

The Dream of the Very First Twilight

The dream of the very first twilight in the
vale.
The chill melts on the grass's quivering
green.
The clouds traverse the heavens' halls to
sail
In tints and shades the day has never seen.

The thickets of night. Their suits of armor
shine
With first sunlight. On marble stairs' vast
plains,
The gems of halberds and helmets flash
smaragdine.
The kingly fall of crimson trains.

In stately measure toward the moon they
soar,
To palace, chamber, slumber long and deep
As once the scent of roses marked the door
Of Sybaris, who sank away in sleep.

The Wood

A silent wood. A pale domain replete
With green ravines and vines of tangled
briar.
A rivulet sings. The sun's last fading fire
Burns like a candle on the sky's slight
sheet.

But now the evening moves with darkening
head
And darkening mantle train to its forest rest.
The griffin folk now nod, tall oaks their
bed,
Black shocks of hair upon their crimson
nest

As creatures golden, splendid, strange in
sight
Emit shrill caws in trees from ancient beaks
And soar out in the air on wild winds'
shrieks,

Tief in dem Wald ein See, der purpurrot
Wie eines Toten dunkles Auge glast.
In seinem wilden Schlunde tost und rast
Ein Wetter unten auf wo Flamme loht.

Die Städte im Walde

In großen Wäldern, unter Riesenbäumen
Darunter ewig blaues Dunkel ruht,
Dort schlafen Städte in verborgnen
Träumen,
Den Inseln gleich, in grüner Meere Flut.

Das Moos wächst hoch auf ihren
Mauerkränzen.
Ihr alter Turm ist schwarzer Rosen Horst.
Sie zittern sanft, wenn wild die Zinnen
glänzen,
Und rot im Abend lodert rings der Forst.

Dann stehen hoch in fließendem Gewand,
Wie Lilien, ihre Fürsten auf den Toren
Im Wetterschein wie stiller Kerzen Brand.

Und ihre Harfe dröhnt, im Sturm verloren,
Des schwarzer Hauch schon braust von
Himmels Rand
Und rauscht im dunklen Haar der
Sykomoren.

Aus Grüner Waldnacht

Aus grüner Waldnacht ruft Gegurr der
Tauben
Bald nah bald fern. Der Sonne Lichter irren
Ins Blätterdunkel. Kleine Vögel schwirren
Durch das Geranke und die Hopfentrauben.

Wings spread and great in gray twilight.
Deep in the wood, a lake with crimson glaze
Gleams dark and glassy as a dead man's
eye.
Down in its wild maw, storms rage, roaring
high,
To rest below with flames that rave and
blaze.

The Cities in the Wood

Massive forests, under giant trees,
Way down where endless deep-blue
darkness sleeps,
Whole cities rest in hidden reveries
Like islands in green oceans' brooding
deeps.

Their moss mounts high on walls of woven
vine.
Dark nests of roses form their ancient
towers,
Quivering mildly when their pinnacles
shine
And the woodland blazes red in evening's
hours.

And then high up in flowing robes they
stand
So like tall lilies, the princes at their doors
In lightning's silent candle-glow-like brand.

And, lost in the gathering storm, their zither
roars,
Its black breath blowing from the horizon's
band
To sigh within the dark-haired sycamores.

From Night's Green Wood

From night's green wood, the doves are
calling now,
First near, then far. The sun's last flickers
stray
Amid dark leaves. The small birds whirl
their way
Through every hop vine, every tangled
bough.

Die großen Spinnen wohnen in dem Farne.
Voll blauen Scheines glänzt ihr Netz wie
Tau.
Sie gleiten schnell auf ihrem schwanken
Bau,
Und weben enger ihre weißen Garne.

The massive spiders dwell among the ferns,
Their dew-like nets agleam with wet blue
veins,
To glide with swift strides on their slender
skeins
And give their white threads ever tighter
turns.

Ein hohler Baum, vom Donner einst
gespaltet
Vergeßner Zeit. Doch grünt noch sein Geäst.
Im Laube wohnt ein Schwan, der auf das
Nest
Den schwarzen Mantel seiner Schwingen
faltet.

A tree all hollowed, thunder-cracked, with
rings
Of lost days. Yet its boughs are still leaf-
blessed.
In the foliage lives a swan, whose nest
Accepts in folds the black cloak of his
wings.

Der alte Waldgott schläft im hohlen Baum.
Die Flöte graut von Moos, die ihm entsank.
In seiner Hand verflog der dünne Trank
Der kleinen Rehe in dem langen Traum.

The ancient wood god sleeps in the hollow
tree.
Along the flute that slipped his grasp, moss
grows;
And in his hand, now lax, no longer flows
The drink the deer sipped in long reverie.

Der Schöne Herbst Naht Wieder

Der schöne Herbst naht wieder, wie ein
zweiter
Doch dämmrig stiller Frühling. Ungewisses
Ist viel in Tal und Luft. Wir wissen nicht,
Will sich's gestalten oder schnell verziehn.
Die blassen Tage gleiten träumend hin,
Wie Bänder schmalere und verblaßter Perlen.

Another Lovely Autumn Nears

Another lovely autumn nears, so like
A second spring, though faint and still. So
much
In sky and vale remains unsure. Will it
Assume firm form or fade? We do not know.
The pale days glide away in dreams as fast
As slender bands of pearls whose luster's
lost.

Mit Erntesang und lauter Schnitter Freude
Entwich der Sommer, aus den dunklen
Locken
Noch hie und da auf goldne Wiesen streuend
Der roten Blumen Fülle. In der Ferne
Noch tanzt er auf sonnen Hügeln hin.

The summer slipped away with harvest song
And reaper's joy, although its sable curls
Still scatter here and there, on golden fields,
The richness of red blooms; and, far away,
It frolics, dances still on sun-laced hills.

Doch aus den kühlen Wäldern naht der
ernste
Und weiche Bacchos schon, den
Thyrusstab
In sein Revier zu pflanzen, daß er sammle
Die Treuen, die im weiten Land verborgen
Voll Sehnsucht warten, daß der Gott
einzieh.

Yet from the chill woods now the soft and
solemn
Bacchus comes to plant his Thyrsus-staff
In his domain so he may take the true:
The ones sequestered far out in the land
Who wait with longing for the god to come.

Was in dem lauten Sommer schlief, wird
wach,
Und taucht herauf, und will sich still ergehen,
In diesen stillen Tagen. Es verliert
Der Schmerz die Härte, wie Brokat
verbleicht.
Die Freuden sind nicht laut, doch immer tief.

Und viel Gesichter, die sich sonst fremd
Voll Spott vorbeigehn, sie erkennen sich
Und sehen nun, daß auch in sie eingrub
Sich tiefer Schmerz, und bald verbrüdern sich
Die sonst Verhaßten. Sie erkennen wohl,

Daß allen Leid gemeinsam, daß es leichter,
Wenn sie's gemeinsam tragen. Und am
Abend
Wenn sich die Stern im tiefen Strome
spiegeln,
Entbrennen auf den Hügeln rings die Feuer
Des tiefen Dankes. Und der Gott zieht ein.

What slept in noisy summer now awakes
And rouses up and will indulge itself
In silence on these quiet days. Pain loses
All its hardness, like a bleached brocade.
The joyful are not loud, but ever deep.

And many faces that in other times
Pass by in mockery now look within
And see that in them, too, the deepest pains
Lie buried, so that soon they form a bond
With every brother they once loathed. They
see

That we are kindred in our suffering,
Which lightens if we bear it hand in hand.
And when the evening star is mirrored in
The river's depths, the fire around the hills
Flares up with gratitude. And the god
appears.