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Sonnet 19 by Rainer Maria Rilke

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David Radavich
Sonnet 19

Rainer Maria Rilke
Sonett 19

Somewhere gold lives in the spoiling bank
and is intimate with thousands. But even
the blind one, the beggar, is to the copper penny
like a lost place, a dusty corner under the chest.

In the businesses nearby money feels at home
and garbs itself in silk, carnations, and furs.
He, the silent one, stands in the breath-pause
of all the breathing money, awake or asleep.

O how does it close at night, this always open hand?
Tomorrow it hauls fate again, and daily
holds it out: bright, suffering, ever destructible.

If only someone, a witness, finally grasped and praised
its long duration, astonished. Only speakable
by the singer. Only audible to the godlike.

Commentary

When translating a poet as well-known and frequently interpreted as Rainer Maria Rilke, one must have compelling reasons. Many gifted poets, in many languages, have tried with varying degrees of success to render Rilke's complex syntax and multi-layered meanings into something approaching accessibility in a totally new language. This is a Sisyphean task, to be sure, but a number of us are driven to it by love of these poems and poet.

In a case like that of Rilke, I am driven at the outset by frustration. Many available English translations, in my view, don't get close enough to the original to satisfy. Of course, no English version can approach anywhere near the original for complexity of thought and density of language; some associations must be sacrificed. Nonetheless, I want to try to reach further in my own searching.

That reaching involves a number of small but important decisions that nevertheless add up to a substantial overall effect. The first line of Rilke's Sonnet 19 (from Part II of *Sonnets to Orpheus*) I have rendered as "Somewhere gold lives in the spoiling bank." Other translators have rendered the German word *verwöhnenden* as "indulgent" or "pampering." While these are legitimate meanings of the German, they strike me as too mild, or even cute in the case of "pampering," for a poem which communicates such a trenchant critique of wealth and power. "Spoiling" in English carries with it a negative connotation of rotteness, which I consider justified by the later assertions of the poem.

Word order is a crucial question when translating German. This language, with its four declensions, allows for freer word positioning than does English. This issue presents itself in the second and third lines of the first stanza. I have decided to hew close to the original word order with "But even / the blind one, the beggar, is to the copper penny / like a lost place. . . ." Moving the prepositional phrase would not help elucidate the dative German original in English.

In the final stanza, however, one needs to bring the verbs "grasped" and "praised" closer to the subject in English. Here the German word order cannot be effectively maintained:

“finally its long duration, astonished, grasped and praised.” Also in this line, I used the word “grasped,” with its double meanings of both understanding and reaching out to touch the “open hand” of stanza 3.

For some reason, none of the English translations I have read make a point of keeping Rilke’s emphatic “only” parallel in the last two lines. This strikes me as important, both musically and in terms of meaning. The word *Göttlichen*, “godly” or “godlike,” is rendered in one translation simply as “the god.” This is an unfortunate misreading. At the end of this sonnet of noteworthy social critique, Rilke leaves open the real possibility that the artist (poet or musician) or spiritually aware (“godlike”) person can witness and grasp the suffering, lost, forgotten beggar. This is an incisive assertion by a poet we often assume is concerned more with philosophical or aesthetic matters. I felt called to capture that assertion more forcefully in my English translation than I have seen elsewhere.