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Faust in Translation: The Case of the Missing Echo

Garold N. Davis

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In order to acquaint more students with the masterpieces of world literature, language departments are offering an increasing number of literature classes in translation. Although these classes can be an exciting challenge, the instructor may approach them with some ambivalence. Even where the translations are good (as translations go) and the students demonstrate a positive response, one misses "das heilige Original," and may find oneself lamenting nostalgically with Goethe in the Faust "Zueignung": "Ihr Beifall selbst macht meinem Herzen bang." Nevertheless, Faust is excellent for such a course, and the situation is certainly not all negative. As a concept, "Faust" persists in the students' minds like Oedipus and Hamlet. Students come to the course convinced that the encounter will be an exciting one, and rightly so. There are cautions, however.

As teachers of literature in translation we soon become aware that each translation has its own peculiar problems. Faust is no exception, quite the contrary. And in addition to the normal problems one might expect in over twelve thousand lines of rhymed verse there is one particularly troublesome problem in all Faust translations which if not identified and understood can cause students to miss many important linguistic clues to an understanding of the text and miss, as well, much of the stylistic pleasure. This is the problem of the "missing echo."

Goethe's fondness for echoes, for the constant recurrence of thematic and symbolic words, is well known. That these echoes in Faust seldom occur in exact repeating patterns, but in kaleidoscopic variety, becomes evident as one studies the text. The more obvious of these passages seems to pose no difficulties beyond those normally encountered by translators when working with rhyming verse. Here, for example, is a well-known passage with which the translators have been relatively successful.

Gretchen, devastated emotionally and spiritually following the visit with Lieschen at the well turns to the Mater dolorosa to find sympathy for her sufferings (3587 ff.):

Ach neige,
Du Schmerzenreiche,
Dein Antlitz gnädig meiner Not!

Over eleven thousand lines later Gretchen again approaches Mary, the Mater gloriosa, and her prayer is now the antithetical joyful echo of her earlier sorrowful supplication (12069 ff.):

Neige, neige,
Du Ohnegleiche,
Du Strahlenreiche,
Dein Antlitz gnädig meinem Glück!

The appeal "neige" repeated in both cases, the echo of "Schmerzenreiche" as "Ohnegleiche," "Strahlenreiche," and the repetition of "Dein Antlitz gnädig meiner Not!"
gnädig" with the shift of "meiner Not" to "meinem Glück" is all clearly intended to arouse in our ear and mind the linguistic-poetic relationship of the two passages. As one can see from the following English examples, the translators have identified this poetic relationship and have translated the echoing patterns with some skill. Lines 3587-89 compared with lines 12069-72:

Walter Arndt:

Incline,
Thou rich in grief, oh shine
Thy grace upon my wretchedness!

Incline
Thou past comparing,
Thou radiance bearing,
Thy grace upon my happiness.

Walter Kaufmann:

Incline,
Mother of pain,
Your face in grace to my despair.

Incline, incline
That art divine,
Thou that dost shine,
Thy face in grace to my sweet ecstasy!

Charles E. Passage:

O deign
Amid your pain
To look in mercy on my grief.

Deign, O deign,
Amid thy reign
In radiance,
To look in mercy on my joy.

George Madison Priest:

Oh, bend Thou,
Mother of Sorrows; send Thou
a look of pity on my pain.

Bend, oh bend now,
Matchless, attend Thou,
Thy radiance send now,
Look upon my bliss in charity.

Bayard Taylor:

Incline, O Maiden,
Thou sorrow-laden,
Thy gracious countenance upon my pain!

Incline, O Maiden,
With Mercy laden,
In light unfading,
Thy gracious countenance upon my bliss!
It is not difficult to draw students' attention to the linguistic-poetic relationship of these two passages, even in the translations. As the passages expand from two to four (and more), however, the problems of translating become more complex, and consequently the echoes fainter. The difficulty lies in the fact that these echoing passages may be separated by hundreds or even thousands of lines, and the translators do not always maintain the echoing patterns of the rhyme as the text would force them to do, for example, if they were dealing with succeeding lines in a short lyric poem. Even after pointing out the thematic relationship of one passage to another, if the rhyming or linguistic echo is not present the students may still not fully appreciate either the problem or the structure. A good illustration is the sequence of thematic ideas deriving from Faust's confrontation with the Erdgeist, beginning at line 512, as the Erdgeist says to Faust:

Du gleichst dem Geist, den du begreifst,
Nicht mir!

An understanding of this passage is crucial at several points in the drama, and Goethe often gives us the necessary echoing clue. At line 623, for example, Faust is reflecting on the experience he has had with the Erdgeist and (rather hastily) concludes:

Nicht darf ich dir zu gleichen mich vermessen!

In the second act as Thales leads Homunculus to an audience with the misanthropic Nereus we hear Nereus' sarcastic comments on humankind, who are never satisfied to remain in their proper station (8096-97):

Gebilde, strebsam, Götter zu erreichen,
Und doch verdammt, sich immer selbst zu gleichen.

The echo of "gleichen" is heard once again in the final scene of the drama, this time suggesting a realization of the unity implicit in the words of the Erdgeist. The "Büßerin, sonst Gretchen genannt" says (12084-87):

Vom edlen Geisterchor umgeben,
Wird sich der Neue kaum gewahr,
Er ahnet kaum das frische Leben,
So gleicht er schon der heiligen Schar.

It is important to discuss the thematic significance of those sections in the text where the echoes occur, but these echoes are likely to be absent from the translation. The English translations of the lines quoted above read:

Close to the wraith you comprehend,
No me!

No, I may not presume to be your equal:

Those artifacts, to godly likeness ornone,
Yet sentenced to be ever but their own.

'Mid spirit choirs fresh life commencing,
The novice scarce regains his wit,
The heavenly host but dimly sensing,
Already he has merged with it.

In the German text the word "gleichen" is repeated as a significant echo, joining these four passages together into a reference of meaning.
The English translations of "gleichen" in these passages are: "close to," "equal," "their own," and "merged," which although adequate for the individual passages do not convey the same interrelated meaning, at least not in the same way. In each case the echoing key word is missing. Here, some linguistic explanation and a reading of the pertinent passages in German will be of significant help to the student confronting the text in English.

Finally, there is a more complex echoing pattern which can be vitally significant to an overall understanding of Goethe's Faust. This is a pattern in which the echo is heard frequently and throughout the text, building a subtle and at the same time more profound linguistic and poetic relationship of meaning.

The very important episode of the second Study scene in which Faust begins his translation of das Wort is an example of such a pattern. The sequence of Wort, Sinn, Kraft, and Tat is echoed throughout the text, but the echoing pattern is overlooked in most translations. This particular pattern, which is extremely complex, will require a more thorough treatment than the limits of this paper allow. I will conclude, rather, with another pattern, equally subtle and equally important, involving only a single word and consequently one easier to treat as an example with little commentary. This is the echoing pattern of the key symbolic word ewig.

When one looks closely at the text one finds that the concluding "Ewig-Weibliche" is not an isolated and unusual adjective-noun construction. "Ewig," as it turns out, is more ubiquitous than unusual, and the "Ewig-Weibliche" is the culmination of a long series of anticipatory constructions, which, with their echoing patterns, build toward the magnificent conclusion of the Chorus Mysticus. Once having seen this pattern it is not difficult to identify it for students reading the text in translation, provided constant reference is made to the German original.

The compounds of eternity begin early in the drama. During his first confrontation with Mephistopheles, Faust contrasts the eternal creative power with Mephistopheles' daemonic futility. Having quickly recognized the nihilistic ambitions of the "Geist der stets verneint," Faust says (1379 ff.):

So setzest du der ewig reyen,
Der heilsam schaffenden Gewalt
Die kalte Teufelsfaust entgegen,
Die sich vergebens tückisch ballt:

The echo of ewig scattered though Part I increases in frequency throughout Part II. This linguistic key is directed against Mephistopheles in still another passage, this time by the chorus of Trojan women who recognize him in his most hideous disguise as the nihilistic antagonist to the creative and beautiful (8744 ff.):

Doch uns Sterbliche notigt, ach,
Leider trauriges Mißgeschick
Zu dem unsäglichen Augenschmerz,
Den das Verwerfeliche, Ewig-Unselige
Schönheitliebenden rege macht.
Another of these compounds of eternity spoken also by the chorus of Trojan women antici­oates Mephistopheles' speech following Faust's death (11595 ff.), which echos with the line, "Ich liebte mir dafür das Ewig-Leere." The Trojan women, directed to return to Hades, ask themselves (9117 ff.):

Blinkt nicht der goldne Stab
Heischend, gebietend uns wieder zurück
Zu dem unerfreulichen, drautagenden,
Ungreifbarer Gebilde vollen,
Überfüllten, ewig leeren Hades?

This comparison of Mephistopheles' "eternal emotiness" with the over-filled yet vacuous Hades to which they must return is an important echoing pattern, since in the speech of the Trojan women the powerful series of adjectives gives a vivid picture of the sterility of the anti-creative forces of Hades and consequently of the negative Mephistopheles himself.

From the time of Faust's death and Mephistopheles' expression of love for the "Ewig-Leere," the compounds of eternity begin to ring forth in a virtual chorus; never in symetrical or exact patterns but, as is always Goethe's way, in continually varied and varying forms. And as these forms multiply in frequency and intensity toward the conclusion, we begin to understand more clearly the important time motif that is woven into the Faust drama, but now in relation to the timeless.

Throughout the "Grabegung" and the "Bergschluchten" scenes, the echoes of "ewig" alternate between Mephistopheles, with his cacaphonic nihilistic satire, and the angelic hosts, until Mephistopheles is finally silenced. The varying echoes continue to build, however, culminating in the total harmony of the "Ewig-Weibliche." Following are further examples of this echoing pattern, which, as can be seen from the Table, are not present in the English translations.

Mephistopheles, commenting on the jaws of hell (11646-47):

Und in dem Siedequalm des Hintergrundes
Sen' ich die Flamenstadt in ewiger Glut.

Mephistopheles, on the approach of the "Himmelische Heerschar" (11697-98):

Hier zu verlieren, wär' euch ew'ge Schande;
Ans Grab heran und haltet fest am Rande!

Chorus of Angels, strewing the roses (11731-34):

Worte, die wahren,
Äther im Klaren,
Ewigen Scharen
Überall Tag!

Mephistopheles, perverting his feeling of love into a pederastic attraction, with ironic mockery (11789-91):

Fürwahr, der Ernst steht euch recht schon;
Doch möchten' ich euch nur einmal lächeln sehn!
Das wäre mir ein ewiges Entzücken.

Following the departure of Mephistopheles, the eternal compounds are extremely positive in nature in preparation for the final song of the Mystical Chorus.

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Pater Ecstaticus (11854 and 11862 ff):
Ewiger Wonnebrand,
Glühendes Liebeband,
Siedender Schmerz der Brust,
Schäumende Gotteslust....
Daß ja das Nichtige
Alles verflüchtige,
Glänze der Dauerstern,
Ewiger Liebe Kern.
Pater Profundis (11882-83):
Sind Liebesboten, sie verkünden,
Was ewig schaffend uns umwallt.
Pater Seraphicus (11918 ff):
Steigt hinan zu höherm Kreise,
Wachset immer unvermerkt,
Wie, nach ewig reiner Weise,
Gottes Gegenwart verstärkt.
Denn das ist der Geister Nahrung,
Die im freisten Äther waltet:
Ewigen Liebens Offenbarung,
Die zur Seligkeit entfaltet.

Die vollendeteren Engel (11958 ff.):
Wenn starke Geisteskraft
Die Elemente
An sich herangerafft,
Kein Engel trennte
Geeinte Zwienatur
Der innigen beiden,
Die ewige Liebe nur
Vermag's zu scheiden.

Chor der Büsserinnen (12032 ff.):
Du schwebst zu Höhen
Der ewigen Reiche,
Vernimm das Flehen
Du Ohnegleiche,
Du Gnadenreiche!

All of which culminates both thematically and linguistically in the Chorus Mysticus
(12104 ff.):
Alles Vergängliche
Ist nur ein Gleichnis;
Das Unzulängliche,
Hier wird's Ereignis;
Das Unbeschreibliche,
Hier ist's getan;
Das Ewig-Weiβliche
Zieht uns hinan.

Translations can hinder the students from complete enjoyment of the linguistic echoes Goethe so carefully provided for an understanding and appreciation of the drama, but with careful guidance and constant textual and oral reference to the original, the beauty and significance of Goethe's Faust will not be lost.
Notes

1 The German text quoted throughout is the Goethes Werke, Band III, edited by Erich Trunz (Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1960).


3 For comparison only the Walter Arndt translation is used here as an example of a common problem.

4 To avoid interrupting the text with English examples, the Table following is provided for a comparative reference to the German passages cited.
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