

Like a Struck Tuning Fork: On Translating Sound in Tranströmer's "The Station"

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The Station

A train has rolled in. Car after car stands here,
but no doors are opening, no one's getting off or on.
Are there any doors at all? Inside, it's teeming
with closed-in people milling back and forth.
They're staring out through the unyielding windows.
And outside, a man walks along the train with a maul.
He's hitting the wheels, a faint ringing. Except right here! 7
Here the sound swells unbelievably: a lightningstroke, 8
a cathedral bell tolling, a round-the-world sound 9
that lifts the whole train and the region's wet stones. 10
Everything's singing! You'll remember this. Travel on!

In Tomas Tranströmer's poem, "The Station," from his ninth poetry collection, *The Wild Market Square* (1983), the ordinary scene of a train at the platform becomes a metaphor for something far from ordinary. The sound of the struck wheel widens beyond this singular everyday experience to contain the great mystery that surrounds our existence, a mysteriousness that, for a brief instant, feels as accessible as it does out of reach. This brings to mind Robert Bly's oft-cited remark about Tranströmer's poems being "mysterious because the images have travelled a long way to get there." "They are a sort of railway station," he says. And quite literally so in "The Station," where images arrive from vastly different points of origin and briefly stand together in the same place.

In the original Swedish, the poem's music is as precise as the imagery, slowly building in rhythm toward that "lightningstroke" and round-the-world tolling to a levitating pitch that sets everything singing, simultaneously offering a peek into the unknown. The images and sound feel inextricably linked to meaning, particularly in the four penultimate lines, which I'll use to discuss how this visual-rhythmic yoking posed a challenge in the translation. Below, I've included

the Swedish for lines 7 through 10, with a rough pronunciation guide beneath each. Although Swedish and English are quite different rhythmically, in terms of both word and sentence stress—there’s an unmistakable lilt to the former that’s simply not reproducible in the latter—the guide ought to at least give you a sense of the lines’ musical richness. Try reading them aloud. The *oh*-sounds are underlined and the *ah*’s are in bold, but the selection is also lush with *ay*’s and *ew*’s, as well as alliterative *l*’s and *k*’s. You’ll just have to imagine the slightly rolled *r*’s.

- 7 Han slår på hjulen, det klämtar svagt. Utom just här!
Hahn slohr poh yewl-en, day clem-tahr svahkt. Oo-tum yewst hare!
- 8 Här sväller klangen ofattbart: ett åsknedslag,
Hare svell-er clahn-gen oh-faht-bahrt: ett ohsk-nayd-slahg,
- 9 en domkyrkoklockklang, en världsomseglarklang
en dohm-shirkoh-clock-clahng, en vehrdsohm-sayglahr-clahng
- 10 som lyfter hela tåget och nejdens våta stenar.
sohm leef-ter hay-lah toh-get ohk nayd-jens voht-ah stayn-are.

In line 8, the compound word *åsknedslag* poses an interesting problem that’s worth talking about first because my translation of it (“lightningstroke”) ultimately set the tone for rendering the surrounding lines. Separately, *åska* means thunder and *nedslag* means down-stroke or stroke, so the literal translation is “thunder stroke.” But *nedslag* is typically associated with lightning (*blixt*) to form *blixtnedslag* or “lightning stroke.” In fact, three of my five dictionaries translate *åsknedslag* as “stroke of lightning,” the other two as “stroke of thunder.” Both are accurate, but neither, alone, suffices. Compounding words is common in Swedish, a useful practice that also allows for some unconventional and even surprising combinations. So for the Swedish reader, *åsknedslag* holds two senses’ worth of description—the sound of thunder and the associative flash of lightning. Unfortunately, my “lightningstroke” suggests mainly the latter. While compounding the word does little to disguise its inadequacy, it felt like a playful nod to the original. In the pronunciation guide, note how the hard *ō*-sound (oh) of the *å* in the first syllable, *åsk*-, accumulates over the course of the four lines, doubling in frequency by the end.

In line 7, the verb *klämtar* or “tolling” is faint (*svagt*), and the subsequent three variants of the noun *klang* (*klängen*, *domkyrkoklockklang*, *världsomseglarklang*), which means “ring” or “ringing,” grow progressively louder. To my ear, “tolling” suggested too weighty a sound for line 7—even “faint,” it conjures

largeness—and thus seemed more appropriate when describing the sound *after* it “swells unbelievably.” “Ringing,” on the other hand, seemed more suited to the distant, weaker sound of the other struck wheels. Whether my choice had more to do with the sounds of the words themselves or their relative meanings is difficult to say, since the mind processes both sound and image at once. It may be that settling on “lightningstroke,” with its hard *ō*, started the bell “tolling” in my head, thus setting the tone for my ensuing lines with their own slant-rhyming *ob*’s.

In Swedish, the reverberation of *klang* works beautifully. *Domkyrkoklockklang* (*domkyrka* is cathedral, *klockklang*, the ring of a bell) is an onomatopoeic mouthful of five, equally stressed syllables, harsh with *k*’s like the rhythm of a ticking clock or gonging bell. Paired with the slightly offbeat but syllabically similar *världsomseglarklang*, the line’s a veritable Big Ben of sound set off by the first *klang* in line 7. There’s no way to do this justice in English, especially while trying to repeat the key word three times in the course of two relatively short lines. Even dropping one of the repetitions and using “ringing” or “tolling” only twice sounded over-the-top to me. Ultimately, I chose to replicate, as best I could, the *sensation* evoked by Tranströmer’s musical *ab*’s and *ob*’s and the rhythmic beat of his *k*’s with my own, albeit inferior, soft vowel sounds and alliterative *l*’s. My use of the word “sound” for two of the three repetitions of *klang* is not a literal translation, but there’s something about its vagueness, especially juxtaposed with such vivid imagery, that captured for me the ineffable nature of this particular sound, which, after all, contains not just a struck train wheel, thunder, lightning, and an enormous bell tolling, but a glimpse into the beyond (what does *that* sound like?). Of course, “sound” *is* too vague. Nothing will suffice because, in this context, *klang* is more than a word, it’s a sound that travels a great distance, accumulating meaning, energy, and depth until, like a struck tuning fork, the entire world—physical and metaphysical—is lifted into singing.