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Translator's Preface

Kurt Heinzelman

In 1831 Heinrich Heine moved to Paris where he lived until his death in 1855. During this exile, which was at first self-imposed, Heine became mainly a polemical writer on matters political and philosophical for both French and German newspapers. In due course the German government declared him *persona non grata*. Cut off from his traditional funding sources, including family monies, he became of necessity one of the few of any age who makes a living exclusively off what he writes.

Even before the Nazis decreed the poems of this Jewish expatriate to have been written by "Anonymous," many of Heine's poems had acquired an almost folkloric status, the way "Goodnight, Irene" and "This Land is Your Land" have for American readers: one thinks of the Siren-like "Die Lorelei" or the trenchant labor cry that is a mix of Greek choral ode and German drinking song, "Die Schlesischen Weber" ("The Silesian Weavers"). Heine's personal authorship also tended to vanish under the weight of his lyrics' myriad musical treatments (by the likes of Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, Brahms, and Strauss). And yet it is the tonally complex voice in Heine's poetry, which musical settings can often straiten, that I find most compelling. It is that voice which I tried to transmit in the translation of "In Der Frühe" (literally, "At Dawn").

The poem comes from Heine's first book of poetry published in France, *Neue Gedichte* (1844), which was also his first book of poetry in 17 years. Probably the "wife" in the poem is his own wife whom he called Mathilde. Her real name was Cresence Eugénie Mirat, 15 years his junior, 19 years old when he first met her, a semi-literate, orphaned shop-girl with, as Heine put it, "a beautiful behind." Neither his social nor his intellectual equal, both she and her care of him during his decade-long paralytic illness are often disparaged, although Heine seems not to have complained very seriously. The play of voice in this poem—from jocund to rueful, perhaps with a final touch of self-irony—is the crux. At first he seems to be addressing his wife directly, and his plangent praise of her seems to roll around in his mouth as if he's enjoying his words as much as the breakfast she's laid out for him. At last and almost, it seems, by accident, having regaled her looks for so long, he notices—and he must be expressing this to

himself alone, as if the poem had forgotten its original audience—that she is running to fat (in her Taille or waist, the German specifies).

I confess to several instances of paraphrasis in my translation. In stanza 3, the German considers 3 alternatives—that her voice is like a) a flute, b) angels, or c) nightingales. I leave out the nightingales and replace them with a rhetorical question, which seems to me the point of these utterly conventional comparisons and is also a colloquial American way of expressing what I surmise is Heine's slightly boffo tone here. The poem concludes not just with a rhyme but with exact repetends as he calculates with pedantic precision how very little lessened in size he would wish her waist to be. I saw a way to slim the last lines by rhyming two different ways in which English makes comparative adjectives, thus by a grammatical wobble (which retains the rhyme) hoping to represent the tonal hiccup at the end of this meal.

Gedicht / Poem

IN DER FRÜHE

Meine gute, liebe Frau,
 Meine gütige Frau Geliebte,
 Hielt bereit den Morgenimbiß,
 Braunen Kaffee, weiße Sahne.

Und sie schenkt ihn selber ein,
 Scherzend, kosend, lieblich lächelnd.
 In her ganzen Christenheit
 Lächelt wohl kein Mund so lieblich!

Auch der Simme Flötenton
 Findet sich nur bei den Engeln,
 Oder allenfalls hienieden
 Bei den besten Nachtigallen.

Wie die Hände lilienweiß!
 Wie das Haar sich träumend ringelt
 Um das rosge Angesicht!
 Ihre Schönheit ist vollkommen.

Heute nur bedünkt es mich
 --Weiß nicht warum--, ein bißchen schmaler
 Dürfte ihre Taille sein,
 Nur ein kleines bißchen schmaler.

EARLY ONE MORNING by Heinrich Heine

Translated by Kurt Heinzelman

She's got my breakfast
 Laid on, dark roast
 Coffee, double cream,
 My loving, lovely wife.

She pours it out herself,
 Joking, flirting, smiling
 With lips like nothing
 Else in Christendom.

I want to say her voice
 Is like a flute. Or,
 Like angels. But no—
 What do I know of perfect?

She is a perfect beauty.
 What should be lily-white
 Is. The way that hair should
 Frame a face: it does.

Which is why it's odd
 This morning to see that she
 Could be a bit more slender.
 Yes, just a bit slenderer.