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Joyous Conquest? On Retranslating Nietzsche's *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*

Duncan Large
University of East Anglia, UK
d.large@uea.ac.uk

Abstract: Friedrich Nietzsche's *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* is a seminal text, yet Kevin Hill's welcome new English translation is only the fourth that there has been. This essay considers Hill's translation strategy and finds that his overall goal of combining accuracy with readability is largely achieved, resulting in a translation that emphasizes fluency over pedantically exact equivalence. Hill is sensitive to the poetic aspects of the original German, and rises to the challenge of translating Nietzsche's creative phrasings. The essay considers some of Hill's stylistic and syntactic translation choices, then focuses on how he translates three specific lexical items (*Stern*, *Heerde*, *Mensch*), before concluding with an analysis of Hill's paragraphing as an interpretative feature.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Friedrich; Hill, Kevin; *The Joyous Science*; *The Gay Science*; retranslation; accuracy; readability; creativity; colloquialism; paragraphing.

Die fröhliche Wissenschaft (1882-7) is in many ways a groundbreaking text, and it contains some of Friedrich Nietzsche's most important philosophical formulations.¹ It is well known for introducing the thought that "God is dead" (§§108, 125, 343) and the notion of the "eternal recurrence" (§341), but it also introduces the concept of "amor fati" (§276) and the exhortation to "live dangerously!" (§283); it even introduces the formulation "Ecce homo."² *Die fröhliche*

Wissenschaft is also a very beautifully written text, as R. J. Hollingdale recognized:

Viewed simply as "literature," *Dawn* was the most notable publication of 1881, *The Gay Science* of 1882, in the German-speaking world: the language of *Dawn* is a model of what may be achieved in modern German in the way of conciseness and clarity, and *The Gay Science* exhibits a stylistic virtuosity unsurpassed in that language.³

In 1990 Renate Reschke—who would go on to become Professor of the History of Aesthetic Thought at the Humboldt-Universität in Berlin and Chair of the German Nietzsche-Gesellschaft—published an annotated edition of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* with Reclam Leipzig, thinking highly enough of the text to choose it as the one with which to reintroduce the

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Die fröhliche Wissenschaft ('la gaya scienza')," in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe, Vol. 3*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin, DE: de Gruyter 1988, pp. 343-651.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, "Scherz, List und Rache," in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe, Vol. 3*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin, DE: de Gruyter 1988, pp. 353-67, here p. 367, poem #62. [Henceforth cited as *SLR* with poem number]

³ R. J. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: The Man and his Philosophy*, London, UK: Ark 1985, p. 128.

philosopher to the (now former) German Democratic Republic after decades of rejection and neglect.⁴ The French translation of the standard Colli-Montinari edition of Nietzsche's works began to appear in 1967, and the first volume published featured Pierre Klossowski's (originally 1957) version of *Le gai savoir*,⁵ while much of Derrida's *Spurs* (1978) focuses on the controversial sequence of sections thematizing woman early in Book 2 of Nietzsche's text.⁶ Yet for all the acknowledgement of its importance in Germany and France, the text has had a rather patchier reception in the English-speaking world, and only three English translations were produced in its first 120 years. Thomas Common's 1910 translation (as *The Joyful Wisdom*) for the Oscar Levy *Complete Works* was the only one available until Walter Kaufmann's version (as *The Gay Science*) appeared from Viking Press in 1974 as the last of his many Nietzsche translations. The only other translation of the text to appear since then has been Josefine Nauckhoff's version (again as *The Gay Science*) for Cambridge University Press in 2001 – the text is still not available from other major English-language Nietzsche publishers such as Hackett or Oxford World's Classics; Adrian Del Caro's translation for the Stanford *Complete Works* (as *The Joyful Science*) will be available in 2023.

Kevin Hill's new translation is very much to be welcomed, then: let me say from the outset that I admire this translation and think it is very successful. With any new retranslation of a text that has already been translated multiple times, the reader is inevitably faced with the question of why it is necessary and what it is looking to achieve. Nietzsche himself gives one of his clearest statements on translating in §83 of the text itself, when he describes Roman translations of Greek classics as a form of conquest. As a retranslation, though, Hill's new version does not need to perform such heroics: since the previous translations have already won the text an English-language readership, Hill sets himself the more modest goal of making an

incremental improvement on previous versions. He describes his general approach as a translator in his "Note on the Text and Translation:"

Translation is somewhat freer than is often the case with Nietzsche's books, in part out of a commitment to the notion that the unit of meaning is the sentence and not the word. The overarching goal has been to present Nietzsche's thought as clearly and as gracefully as possible, while striving to avoid anachronism.⁷

These are indeed laudable goals, and they are largely realized in practice. Now Nietzsche has actually been well served by English translators over the years, and translations of his work have historically been very faithful (even the Levy translations were much more accurate and complete than was the norm a century ago). But Hill's suggestion here is that many translations have been too scrupulously faithful to the letter of Nietzsche's text, to the extent of sacrificing some of the spirit. No Nietzsche translations have been exactly word-for-word in the strict sense of the early interlinear Bible translations, but it is true that some have clung more tenaciously to the specific words of Nietzsche's text than others – and this has generally been the policy for the Stanford *Complete Works* – whereas Hill intends to give himself more license. Ultimately it comes down to the purpose of the translation: Hill is effectively signaling that his version is not intended to enable the reader to reconstruct Nietzsche's German if so minded; instead, he is aiming for a fluent translation that will work on its own terms. One would be wrong to read this as the translator merely giving himself *carte blanche* to ignore the source text – far from it! Hill is still not exactly letting his hair down with this translation, and has certainly not sacrificed accuracy for style: if we imagine a scale running from strictest accuracy to freest stylistic inventiveness, then perhaps Hill has nudged the needle a little further over to the right than usual, but it is a close-run thing.

Let me take a first example of his practice: the most immediate consequence of Hill's "commitment to the notion that the unit of meaning is the sentence" is his scrupulous observation of Nietzsche's sentence length. Specifically, he keeps Nietzsche's (often very long) sentences intact and resists the temptation to break them up – even when, as in the opening of §334,

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, transl. R. Kevin Hill, London, UK: Penguin Classics 2018, p. xxv. [Henceforth cited as JS]

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* ("la gaya scienza"), ed. Renate Reschke, Leipzig, DE: Reclam, 1990.

⁵ Nietzsche, *Le Gai Savoir*: "La gaya scienza" *suivi de Fragments posthumes* (Été 1881 – Été 1882), transl. Pierre Klossowski, Paris, FR: Gallimard, 1967.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles / Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche*, transl. Barbara Harlow, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

the sentence runs for over twelve lines. Before Hill, only Thomas Common in 1910 has been so scrupulous: Kaufmann breaks up the opening sentence of §334 into three, while even Nauckhoff (otherwise very conscientious in such matters) divides it in two. On the other hand, when it comes to individual words, Hill is less observant of exact equivalence and is not afraid to use two words where there is only one in the German, or vice-versa, especially in the interest of clarification. In the first section of the Preface, Hill translates "Und was lag nunmehr Alles hinter mir!" (P1) with "And consider what I had just passed through, what I had left behind!" (JS 7); in §11 he translates "der Kern des Menschen" with "the *pith and marrow* of a human being" (JS 44). I find such amplifications on the whole unobjectionable and at times positively helpful, although at times Hill does seem to me to take it too far, as when "Wir suchen nach Worten, wir suchen vielleicht auch nach Ohren" (§346) balloons into "We are endeavouring to find the words in which to express ourselves; perhaps we are also endeavouring to find the ears with which others might hear them" (JS 230-1). *Wir suchen nach Worten*, indeed!

The repeated "endeavouring to find" in the example above suggests that the search for clarity does occasionally shade into unwelcome verbosity, pomposity, or archaism (so that the "grace" and succinctness of Nietzsche's thought gets sacrificed), as when "weil er durch sie Vortheile hat!" (§21) becomes "because it redounds to his own advantage!" (JS 53), or the section heading "Gegen die Reue" (§41) becomes "Against Rue" (JS 66). There is much here that is graceful, though, too, as when Hill turns the "delicate" (Common) or "subtle sculptures on the scales of reptiles" (Kaufmann, Nauckhoff) in §8 ("mit den feinen Sculpturen auf den Schuppen der Reptilien") into a "subtle bas-relief of reptile scales" (JS 42). I like "gods, heroes and superhuman beings" (JS 143) for "Göttern, Heroen und Uebermenschen" in §143, and Hill's translation waxes suitably poetic in the penultimate section, when "wir Frühgeburten einer noch unbewiesenen Zukunft" (§382) becomes "we firstlings of an as yet uncertain future" (JS 280). Hill's approach yields its best results when he allows himself to expand just a little beyond word-for-word equivalence. Sometimes the translator's hand is forced, as when Hill finds a nice work-around for the awkward and relatively untranslatable coinage, a substantivized reflexive adjective, at the end of §284, and "Es sind die grossen Selbst-Ungenügsamen"

becomes "Their greatness consists in their self-dissatisfaction" (JS 182). At others Hill clearly manages to extract more of the nuances of meaning from the German than his predecessors. An example would be §324, where "heroic feelings" are said to have their "Tanz- und Tummelplätze." Where Common writes "have their arena and dancing-floor," Kaufmann has "find places to dance and play" and Nauckhoff "have their dance- and playgrounds" (a particularly clear example of the kind of close adherence to the German that Hill is looking to get beyond). Instead, Hill rewrites it slightly—not in order to convey the German alliteration, which all English translators have been wise to let go, but in order to bring out the full free-for-all, knockabout sense of *tummeln*: for Hill, the heroic feelings "have their place, and are free to dance and romp about" (JS 205).

Examples like this demonstrate that Hill is not afraid to give his Nietzsche a colloquial edge, with formulations such as "on the go and out and about" (§6, JS 40), "We have a pretty good idea" (§109, JS 121), "we're *jostled!*" (§154, JS 148), "have some sense knocked into them" (§348, JS 235), and "hobnob" (§373, JS 271). Such formulations strike me as entirely appropriate since so much of Nietzsche's style is conversational. Just occasionally Hill seems to me to overstep the mark, and I would single out a couple of instances where Hill's Nietzsche is rather blunter than the original, calling a spade a spade where Nietzsche himself was more mindful of Prussian censors (or just more observant of contemporary proprieties). Nietzsche concludes §13 with a reference to "Freudenmädchen" (literally, "joy girls"), a euphemism (*filles de joie*, "ladies of the night") which Kaufmann and Nauckhoff both render with the neutral English term "prostitutes." With his translation "the gay lady," Thomas Common seems to me to go so far in the direction of euphemism that it starts to obscure the meaning of the original, but in his own way Hill, too, strikes me as over-egging the pudding—perhaps straining too hard for a strong closure to the section—by translating the term as "whores" (JS 47). Nietzsche uses the equivalent German word *Hure* only once in the book, in "To the Mistral Wind," the final poem of "Songs of the Outlaw Prince": one of the ways in which that Appendix signals its transgressivity is through its relatively unbuttoned use of language like this, and another example is at the end of "The Fool in Despair." Here, Nietzsche plays with the reader when he coyly breaks off the concluding word "besch.....," leaving

one to construct the (half)rhyme with "Ueberweisen," "bescheissen" ("shit")—rather as Swift in his 1732 poem "The Lady's Dressing Room" goads us into finding a rhyme for "wits" in "Celia, Celia, Celia sh-." Thomas Common opts for straight euphemism here ("defoul"); Nauckhoff observes Nietzsche's teasing propriety ("sh-"), but Hill follows Kaufmann in seeking to *épater les bourgeois* by allowing Nietzsche to actually say "shit."

A few quibbles aside, then, Hill does seem to me to achieve his objectives as a translator (accuracy combined with readability), and the overall tone achieved feels right: colloquial without being slangy, mischievous and high-spirited but with serious intent ("joyous science"), avoiding technical obfuscation but always rhetorically adroit and self-aware. For the remainder of this contribution, I have picked out Hill's translations of three of Nietzsche's terms on which to focus, and one more general issue. The three terms are: *Stern*, *Heerde*, and *Mensch*; the more general issue relates to the structuring of Nietzsche's paragraphs.

One of the most famous sections in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* is §279 "Sternen-Freundschaft," which is widely regarded as being an allegory of Nietzsche's estrangement from Wagner. The concept that gives this section its title is rendered by all previous translators as "Star Friendship," but Hill makes this a "Planetary Friendship." If the reader was paying attention earlier on, Hill clarifies the point he is making by this translation in a note to §109, where he translates "die kyklischen Bewegungen unserer Nachbar-Sterne" as "the cyclical movements of our solar system" (JS 121): he translates "Stern" (otherwise "star") as "planet" when cyclical movement is involved (for example §322, JS 204). I am persuaded of the sense of this, even if it means that, for instance, the direct verbal link is broken between the "Jest, Trick and Revenge" poems "Planetary Egoism" ("Sternen-Egoismus" SLR 29, JS 21) and "Star Morals" ("Sternen-Moral" SLR 63, JS 30). Nietzsche does use the German word "Planet" for "planet" elsewhere (§§317 and 337, JS 202 and 216), but Hill is surely right that his usage in this area is quite slippery and can bear greater precision in English.

Another bold move from Hill comes when he translates Nietzsche's compound nouns with *Heerde* (herd) mostly using the English adjective "gregarious" rather than just following the German and forming a compound with *herd-* in English, as most modern translators have done. Hence, he employs

"the gregarious" for *Heerden-Menschen* (§23, JS 56), "gregarious instinct" for *Heerden-Instinct* (especially in §116, JS 128, but also §§50, 117, 149, 296, 328, JS 72, 129, 146, 190, 207), "gregarious animal" for *Heerdenthier* (§352, JS 239), "gregarious nature" and "gregarious utility" for *Heerden-Natur*, *Heerden-Nützlichkeit* (§354, JS 242). Hill does not dispense with "herd" altogether (for instance, in the title of §117 "The Herd's Pang of Conscience" for *Heerden-Gewissensbiss*), but as a general principle he trusts that the etymology of "gregarious" (from the Latin for a flock of sheep) will not be lost on the modern English reader, and revives a translation first used by Oscar Levy's translators Helen Zimmern (for her *Beyond Good and Evil*) and Thomas Common (in his *Joyful Wisdom*), who were in turn drawing on nineteenth-century English-language biological discourse.

Talking of retro moves, I was struck by how often Hill translates the German noun *Mensch*—which is grammatically masculine but means non-gendered "human being"—with "man." In his "Note on the Text and Translation," Hill declares that

no attempt has been made to foist a language of gender neutrality upon Nietzsche which would be alien to both his time and his own sensibility" [JS xxv],

but I think with his translations of *Mensch* he goes too far the other way and is guilty of what Richard Polt calls "suggesting sexism at points where none is apparent in the original text."⁸ Hill is perfectly capable of translating "Mensch" with "human being" (see above, on "der Kern des Menschen" in §11), but surprisingly often he translates it with "man," for example in the title of §283, where for "Vorbereitende Menschen" Kaufmann and Nauckhoff have "Preparatory Human Beings," and even Common has the gender-neutral "Pioneers," but Hill has "Preparatory Men" (JS 181). He is quite consistent in this, from §13 ("die Menschen der ritterlichen Kaste" rendered as "men of the knightly caste," JS 46) to §365 ("wir posthumen Menschen" translated as "we posthumous men," JS 260).

I have kept till last a discussion of Hill's most immediately obvious interpretative move, which is to divide up Nietzsche's (often very long) paragraphs, generally at points where the original uses a long

⁸ Richard Polt, "Translator's Note," in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, transl. Richard Polt, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett 1997, pp. xxxi-xxxii, here p. xxxi.

dash for punctuation. Common and Nauckhoff both leave Nietzsche's paragraphs as they are; here Hill is following in the footsteps of his *Doktorgrossvater*, Kaufmann, whose justification for the practice is "to make the structure of Nietzsche's arguments clearer."⁹ Hill does not comment on the practice, but one assumes it is part of his overall strategy to "present Nietzsche's thought as clearly...as possible."

Kaufmann's practice has certainly proved controversial in the past: reviewing the Nauckhoff translation, Christopher Janaway remarks approvingly on her eschewing of Kaufmann's "adventitious paragraph breaks," adding:

It is a surprise, if one is used to Kaufmann, to find that in the whole book the number of paragraph breaks within a numbered aphorism is zero.¹⁰

In turn, then, it is a surprise to find Hill adhering to this practice when he is so scrupulous about keeping Nietzsche's long sentences, and it is not, say, imposed on him by Penguin Classics house style. In fact, the practice of Penguin translators has varied considerably on this point: Hollingdale's translations always keep Nietzsche's paragraphs intact; Michael A. Scarpitti's *On the Genealogy of Morals* (2013) breaks paragraphs relatively infrequently and discreetly, whereas Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann's *Human, All Too Human* (1994)—acquired by Penguin from University of Nebraska Press—explicitly follows Kaufmann's practice in order "to present a more readable English text."¹¹ I take the view that Nietzsche

would have split up his paragraphs himself if he had wanted to make his text (superficially) more readable, and that more is lost than gained by treating his long dash or *Gedankenstrich* (thought dash) as equivalent to a paragraph break, which is why I have followed Hollingdale in my own Oxford translations, and why the Stanford *Complete Works* translations keep to Nietzsche's own paragraph breaks. But aside from the question of which practice benefits the reader most, this whole issue raises the important question of the structure of Nietzsche's paragraphs. Reading Hill's translation with its additional paragraph breaks made me appreciate (because it is rendered more graphically on the page) just how often Nietzsche rounds off a section with a short, forceful resolution separated from the rest by a dash, a kind of pithy summary of the foregoing (QED!), or a response to it, after the manner of the final couplet in a Shakespearean sonnet. This kind of paragraph coda is a trademark gesture in *The Joyous Science*, and there are countless examples: it will often link back up with the title of the section, and it often challenges the reader.¹²

What this demonstrates is that Kevin Hill's version makes an important contribution to Nietzsche scholars' appreciation of this text, and there is always room for another translation of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*. I have focused in these remarks on Hill's translation itself, but one can also feel very confident in the philosophical and philological scholarship that underpins this fine new edition. It is not surprising that *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* and Nietzsche's other works of the "middle period" should have been attracting considerable attention in recent years; what is perhaps surprising is that it has taken this long. I hope that Hill's new translation will provide a further spur to the new-found interest in this rich and important text.

⁹ Walter Kaufmann, "Translator's Introduction," in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, transl. Walter Kaufmann, New York, NY: Vintage Books 1974, pp. 3-26, here p. 25.

¹⁰ Christopher Janaway, "The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* 8 (January 2002), <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-gay-science-with-a-prelude-in-german-rhymes-and-an-appendix-of-songs/>.

¹¹ Marion Faber, "Introduction," in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, transl. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann, London, UK: Penguin 1994, pp. ix-xxvii, here p. xxvi.

¹² Just in the first two books, §§3, 50, 68, 72, 82, 85, 87, and 88 conclude with "zinger" punchlines, while §§13, 14, 27, 58, 91, and 106 have scarcely more extended conclusions.