

'May Day Celebration'

by Johann Wolfgang Goethe

How grandly nature
Shines upon me!
How glistens the sun!
How laughs the mead!

From countless branches
The blossoms thrust,
A thousand voices
From underbrush,

And joy ecstatic
Fills everyone.
O sun! O earth!
O risk! O fun!

O love, oh, lovely,
So golden fair
Like morning cloudlets
On that hill there!

You prosper grandly
The dew-fresh fields
With breath of flowers;
The whole Earth yields!

O maiden, maiden,
How I love thee!
Your eye's a-sparkle—
How you love me!

Just as the lark loves
Singing and sky,
And morning-blooms thrive
On heav'n-mists high—

So do I love you,
With throbbing heart,
Who give me the youth,
Joy, courage, art

To fashion new songs,
New dances free.
Be ever happy,
As you love me!

—Translation by John Sigerson

In 1771, the brilliant, 22-year-old poet Johann Wolfgang Goethe composed the poem *Maifest* ("May Day Celebration"), which later came to be popularly known as *Mailed* or *Maigesang* ("May Song"), because of the title which Ludwig van Beethoven assigned to his musical composition of the poem.

Up to the final two lines, the poem presents a steamy picture of the exuberant youth, bursting with creative ideas, but still so immature as to believe that he requires doses of below-the-belt stimulation in order to continue to create. The implications of the ceremonial dance around the Maypole are, of course, obvious, as are the springtime blossoms, thrusting from their buds. The sentiment is further reinforced by the numerous exclamations of "O . . ." and "How . . ." (In the German original, the word for "how" is the much more explosive *wie*, pronounced "vee.")

Beyond these, shall we say, hormonal features, the lines leading up to the final couplet show the selfishness of one who is, in Shakespeare's words, "in love with love." Unlike with mature love, he loves the maiden not for her own creative potential, but merely for how she is useful as a goad to his own creativity.

The final couplet, however, lifts poem, reader, and audience out of this moist banality. The poet exhorts the maiden to be *eternally* happy, in the way she loves him. The only way that the maiden could be *eternally* happy in this way, is to love *that in the poet which is eternal*, i.e., his creative works. So, one is suddenly shifted out of immaturity, and into the adult realm of self-conscious love, in which the poet sees his immortality reflected through the eyes of the beloved!

Our English translation somewhat dulls the full impact of these final two lines, which in the German are: *Sei ewig glücklich, / Wie du mich liebst*. *Sei* (pronounced like "zigh" to rhyme with "high"), is the imperative tense of the German verb for "to be," and has a similar, but even greater verbal impact than the earlier repetitions of the German exclamation *wie*. Then, *wie* comes at the beginning of the next, and final, line—but no longer as a mere exclamation, but as a means of clinching the paradox between the final couplet and all that precedes it.

The metaphor of the poem—the solution to the paradox—transforms all that has gone before. Again, the original German is more precise in its means to attain that end: The final line in the fifth strophe, "How you love me," is *Wie liebst du mich*, while the poem's concluding line, "As you love me," is accomplished by simply rearranging the word order, into *Wie du mich liebst*—something which no English translation could ever fully capture.—*John Sigerson*

(For additional discussion of "Mailed," see, "Some Simple Examples of Poetic Metaphor," by Kenneth Kronberg, in "Symposium: The Creative Principle in Art and Science," *Fidelio*, Vol. III, No. 4.)