
Chapter 1

Exploring the poem

We know from poetry in our native tongue that it speaks in a language at once familiar and strange. We also know that poets whose work rises up from the mass of verse written in any given period have developed a language very much their own. How, then, can we be expected to cope with the challenge of poetry written in a foreign language?

Let us begin with a relatively accessible example, Ludwig Uhland's ballad "Das Schloß am Meere" (The Castle by the Sea; 1805):

Hast du das Schloß gesehen,
Das hohe Schloß am Meer?
Goldig und rosig wehen
Die Rosen drüber her.

Es möchte sich drüber neigen
In die spiegelklare Flut;
Es möchte streben und steigen
In der Abendwolken Glut.

“Wohl hab’ ich es gesehen,
Das hohe Schloß am Meer,
Und den Mond darüber stehen
Und Nebel weit umher.”

Der Wind und des Meeres Wallen,
Gaben sie frischen Klang?
Vernahmst du aus den Hallen
Saiten und Festgesang?

“Die Winde, die Wogen alle
Lagen in tiefer Ruh,
Einem Klagelied aus der Halle
Hört’ ich mit Tränen zu.”

Sahest du oben gehen
Den König und sein Gemahl?

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Der roten Mäntel Wehen?
Der goldnen Kronen Strahl?

Führten sie nicht mit Wonne
Eine schöne Jungfrau dar,
Herrlich wie eine Sonne
Strahlend im goldnen Haar?

“Wohl sah ich die Eltern beide,
Ohne der Kronen Licht,
Im schwarzen Trauerkleide;
Die Jungfrau sah ich nicht.”

(Have you seen the castle, the high castle by the sea? The clouds drift, golden and rosy, above it.// It longs to stoop downward into the mirror-clear tide, it longs to strive upward and climb into the glow of the evening clouds.// “Indeed, I have seen that castle, the high castle by the sea, and the moon standing above it, and fog spreading far around it.”// The wind and waves of the sea, did they resound briskly? Did you hear, from the high halls, the harp and festive song?// “The winds and the waves together lay in the deepest stillness; With tears, I heard a mournful song coming from the hall.”// Did you see the king and his consort walking on high? The rippling of their red cloaks? The shine of their golden crowns?// Did they not lead with delight a beautiful maiden, splendid as a sun, radiant with golden hair?// “Indeed, I saw the two parents, without their gleaming crowns, in black mourning dress – I did not see the maiden.”)

One of the first things we notice is that the ballad is structured as a conversation. One person asks questions and another answers (these answers are in quotation marks). This two-speaker format is not uncommon in ballads. Nonetheless, we should never take anything for granted about a literary text: we need to ask whether and how the author has made use of conventional features. One starting point for thinking about the poem, then, might be why Uhland opted for this structure.

Another possible entry to the poem might focus on the final stanza. The second speaker tells us that he has seen the royal couple walking on the ramparts, but has not seen the young girl, presumably their daughter. We hear that the king and queen were dressed in mourning garments, and we assume that the daughter is no longer alive; but we are not told anything at all about what precipitated her fate. Why does Uhland refrain from providing the full story in what, after all, is a variety of narrative poem?

Yet another approach to the poem might be to concentrate on the relationship between the natural setting and the human figures. Stanza 5 is structured around a correspondence between the two, with the winds and waves resting silently while a song of mourning resounds from inside the castle. This kind of analogy, where nature seems to be mirroring the feelings of human beings, is known as the “pathetic fallacy.” Working backward from stanza 5, we can see this effect at work throughout the poem. When the questioner recalls the castle in its happier days, nature is presented as suffused with radiant beauty; when his respondent speaks of his experience of the castle in mourning, nature follows suit as it is first cloaked in fog and then steeped in silence. Stanza 2 goes beyond the pathetic fallacy in personifying the castle, attributing to it a desire to look downward to the water and reach upward to the clouds. What is the function of this personification? What would have been lost if it had not been included in the poem?

Another entry point might be to consider the poem in terms of its imagery. Working through the epithets used to describe both human beings and natural phenomena, we notice patterns that connect the one with the other. I find it useful to mark up the text in ways that render these patterns more vividly. The golden clouds link up with the golden crowns of the king and queen and the golden hair of their lovely daughter. The rosy color of the clouds is picked up by the red of the royal cloaks. Radiance is everywhere: in the glow of the evening clouds, the ray of light that is refracted from the royal crowns, and the shine of the young woman’s hair. Yet there are also gradations: the beautiful maiden is compared with the splendor of the sun, but in the opening stanza the sun is setting (hence the rosy glow of the clouds), and in the first response to the questioner, the moon, not the sun, is present in the sky.

I have sketched four possible avenues for exploring the poem. One thing I have pointedly not done is to comment on its rhymes: “each stanza employs an abab rhyme scheme.” In this instance, the rhyme scheme is not so complex that it requires more than this brief observation. There are no missing rhymes, half-rhymes, or eye-rhymes. All we need to do to include this observation is to tuck it into whatever statement we decide to make about the ballad form of the poem. With some other poems, it is easy to get bogged down in laborious accounts of rhyme schemes. In such cases, it is usually best to focus on the places where there is a break in the regular scheme. Your reader’s interest will be held more effectively if you state that “line x diverges from the otherwise regular alternating rhyme scheme” and then go on to suggest an explanation for the divergence. Here, however, that strategy is not necessary.

I have also not commented on the diction of Uhland’s “Das Schloß am Meere.” Part of its charm resides in its relatively simple word choice, no doubt

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the result of Uhland's desire to connect with folk traditions and to suggest a much earlier period in poetic history. Simple diction is an integral part of the ballad tradition. Yet he does not observe simplicity throughout: the word "spiegelklar" is a neologism, and the phrase "der Abendwolken Glut" is a genitive construction ("der Abendwolken" is the genitive plural; the phrase means "the glow of the evening clouds") common to more sophisticated German poetry. We find another of these genitive phrases in "der roten Mäntel Wehen" (the rippling of their red cloaks) and "der goldenen Kronen Strahl" (the shine of the golden crowns).

It should be clear from my comments on "Das Schloß am Meere" that there is no single, right way to work with a poem. I have suggested different ways to approach the text and sketched the outline of observations that would need to be reorganized and perhaps expanded in a finished essay. I have posed numerous questions, but not answered all of them. Further, my suggestions and observations assume that the aim is to give a close reading of the poem, but not necessarily to contextualize it. My allusions to the ballad tradition are brief, for example, and I have not said anything at all about the relationship of the poem to its period, Romanticism, nor about Uhland's views on the nature and function of poetry. The larger context is likely to provide more satisfactory solutions to the question why Uhland refrains from spelling out the entire story of the princess's death. This withheld information is undoubtedly a large part of the charm this ballad exerts on its readers: I call it the "puzzle" of the poem.

Indeed, one good way to approach any poem is to consider it as a puzzle. What features of the poem make us stop and think? Before declaring our puzzlement, however, we need to make sure we have as much information as can be gleaned from the text itself. Good knowledge of the language – and a dictionary of at least medium size – is an essential prerequisite. Words that seem familiar may turn out to have additional meanings we might not have suspected. We can learn a good deal about the potentialities of the language, moreover, by studying the ways in which poets stretch its capabilities. This is strikingly the case with Eduard Mörike's short but compelling poem, "Denk es, o Seele!" (O Soul, Remember This; 1852):

Ein Tännlein grünet wo,
Wer weiß! im Walde,
Ein Rosenstrauch, wer sagt,
In welchem Garten?
Sie sind erlesen schon,
Denk' es, o Seele,

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Auf deinem Grab zu wurzeln
Und zu wachsen.

Zwei schwarze Rößlein weiden
Auf der Wiese,
Sie kehren heim zur Stadt
In muntern Sprüngen.
Sie werden schrittweis gehn
Mit deiner Leiche;
Vielleicht, vielleicht noch eh'
An ihren Hufen
Das Eisen los wird,
Das ich blitzen sehe.

(A little pine tree is growing somewhere, who knows where, in the forest; a rose bush, who can say in what garden? They are already chosen – O soul, remember this – to take root and grow on your grave.// Two small black horses are grazing in the meadow; they return home to town in lively bounds. They will go at foot pace with your corpse; perhaps, perhaps even before the horseshoes that I can see flashing loosen on their hooves.)

The diction of this poem is relatively straightforward (although some items, such as the iron horseshoes and the – implied – horse-drawn hearse are no longer familiar sights for us). The verbs, in particular, are mostly simple ones: “wissen,” “sagen,” “denken,” “gehen,” and “sehen” form the backbone of the poem. With the exception of “gehn,” which refers to the horses, these other verbs are all connected with human consciousness in one form or another. The reader will notice the two diminutives, “Tännlein” and “Rößlein”: these are not merely sentimental, but support the concept of growth that is a central issue in the poem. The pine tree, the rose bush, and the horses – all of them growing things – illustrate a fundamental contrast between present and future.

The most striking feature of the poem is its use of the verb “denken” as a transitive verb: it is not coupled with its usual preposition, “an.” This is the first element of what I have called the puzzle constituted by this text. The slight stress that falls on “es” as a result of this unusual usage disrupts, ever so subtly, the basic iambic meter of the poem.

Having established this puzzling feature, we need to explore the way it fits with the poem as a whole. As in the case of “Das Schloß am Meere,” we can do so by taking several routes. One would be to look more closely at the way stress works in this text. Are there any other metrical divergences in the poem, and if so, do they support our general impression of the poem’s overall theme?

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Another route might be to ask about the addressee of the poem, the “Seele”; this leads, however, to a more basic question: who is the speaker of the poem? Unlike Uhland’s ballad, there is only one speaker in Mörike’s poem, but we need to take care not to assume that this speaker (often termed “das lyrische Ich” in German) is identical with the poet. Yet another way into the poem might be to think about the word “wo” in the first line, where it is used not as a question word, but as a substitute for the adverb “irgendwo.” Does this usage have any connection with the actual questions that follow: “wer weiß” and “wer sagt?” This cluster of issues contains the main pieces that need to be fitted together to solve the puzzle of Mörike’s text.

Let us begin with the word “Seele.” Is the unnamed speaker addressing his own soul? Or does the word refer to the soul of anyone who may be reading the poem? In the context of the grave mentioned in line 7, either could be possible; and we doubtless do best to keep both possibilities open. In the second stanza, both pronouns, “du” and “ich,” put in an appearance: “mit deiner Leiche” is contrasted with “das ich blitzen sehe.” Yet this distinction does not unequivocally prove that speaker and soul are two separate entities. The moment in the present, when the speaker perceives the flash of the horseshoes, is seen as a continuum with a future moment when the “du,” whether himself or someone else, will no longer be alive. The opening lines of the first stanza set up a related contrast, not simply between life and death, but between the brevity of human life and the relative longevity of natural phenomena. The pine tree and rose bush that are planted on a grave serve as living memorials for many years after the death of the individual. Yet the soul, too, if we consider it in religious terms, lives on after bodily death: indeed, its survival presumably outlasts the long-lived pine tree on the grave. In less religious terms, the “Seele” might represent the human psyche, of course. From that perspective, the human lack of knowledge expressed in the questions “wer weiß” and “wer sagt” is set against a deeper knowledge, precisely because we are mortals, we often prefer to forget: the knowledge that death is inevitable. The poem presents itself as a reminder of this fact, a *memento mori*, in other words. Nonetheless, the force that pre-ordains death is not made explicit. The elevated word “erlesen” bespeaks an irrefutable certainty, but the use of the passive voice lacks religious specificity: we do not know whether a deity or a more abstract fate is at work here. That, too, contributes to the tension between certainty and ambiguity.

Although the poem has a certain folk-like simplicity (and is introduced at the end of Mörike’s novella *Mozart auf der Reise nach Prag* (Mozart’s Journey to Prague; 1855) as a “Bohemian folk song”), we might also think of it as a meditation. This effect is heightened by a hidden “iambic pentameter” that emerges if we take each set of two lines as if they composed a single line. In

German, Shakespearean iambic pentameter is called *Blankvers* (note that the term does not refer to unrhymed verse as such). If we take “Denk’ es, o Seele” as a poem in “Blankvers,” then we could readily see it as a kind of soliloquy or monologue. Mörike’s other monologue-poems are, however, in free verse (in other words, unrhymed lines of varying length). The most we can say about the “hidden” iambic pentameter is that if it is indeed present here, its presence is in counterpoint with the song-like aspects of the poem.

Especially in the second stanza, questions arise about how best to scan (graphically represent the meter of) certain lines. Does the first line begin with an unstressed and a stressed syllable, “zwei schwärze,” or should we give a little more weight to the word “zwei”? Further down, the word “schrittweis” might be read in two ways, either as a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable (“schrittweis”) or as a stressed syllable followed by a secondary stress (“schríttweis”). Similarly, in the penultimate line of the poem, we might wish to give a little more stress to the word “wird” following the strong syllable “los” (“lós wird”). This effect is due in part to the reader’s expectation that a three-beat line will follow the two-beat line “An íhren Húfen.” Finally, although the final line may be scanned with three stresses – in accord with the basic scheme in this poem – it would sound more natural to read it as beginning with two unstressed syllables. In their subtle tension with the poem’s iambic underpinnings, these metrical uncertainties echo the central thematic tension between the pre-ordained and the unpredictable.

The striking use of alliteration in “Denk es, o Seele” makes up, in a sense, for its lack of rhymes. Indeed, it harks back to the very earliest forms of Germanic verse where alliteration pulled lines together in much the same way as rhyme later unified couplets or stanzas. The repeating sounds “w” and “sch” (the former mainly but not exclusively in the first stanza, the latter anticipated in the first stanza by “schon” but then predominating in the second stanza as “Schwarz,” “Stadt,” “Sprüngen,” “schrittweis”) bring unity to the disparate images over which the mind seems to skip as it picks its way between thoughts of living things and the finality of the grave.

The ambiguous currents that traverse this poem in terms of both meter and imagery underpin its central theme: the knowledge of death that we mostly prefer to keep buried in the deeper realms of consciousness. The speaker is thus not some wiser person, but our own more profoundly attuned inner self. This self, however, hesitates to yield entirely to the knowledge of death, though it accepts with some reluctance that the end of life can arrive more rapidly than we think. The repetition of “vielleicht” articulates this reluctant admission. The final words of the poem allude, on one level, to the present moment, represented by the flash of light struck by the horses’ hooves. On another level,

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though, this flash can be understood as a correlative of the sudden insight that present and future are connected. As sight and insight come together in the final line, the fleeting spark from the horseshoes gives rise to recognition of the eternal. In a final irony, superstition has long regarded the horse shoe as a sign of good luck and a talisman that could fend off evil spirits and natural catastrophes. Yet nothing, of course, can ultimately fend off death. From this vantage-point, we can now understand better the puzzling use of “denken” as a transitive verb in the key phrase “Denk’ es, o Seele.” What happens in this poem is no ordinary type of thinking, but something more penetrating, a mental process that cuts to the heart of a complex matter, the relation of life and death. This is not idle thinking, but an intense kind of thinking that also is a type of knowing. It is an unusually active form of thinking that brings to the surface thoughts that we sometimes fear. To solve the puzzle of “denken” with the accusative is also to penetrate the mystery of life and death.

At this point, let us reflect on the process of exploration that has yielded this analysis. Some of the work has been done backstage, as it were. This includes work with the dictionary and the grammar book. Since poetry often uses words in unusual ways, it is always wise to check the possible meanings of a given term. There we can find, for example, that “Eisen” means both “iron” and “horseshoe.” A grammar book can tell us more about “denken” and “denken an.” In the case of a short poem like this one, we can do a complete scansion, which will not only help to establish the basic metrical scheme but also alert us to important divergences. In writing up an analysis, it is always more productive to highlight the moments where the poem departs from its general meter, since these are often moments of heightened significance. Marking up the text in various ways – underlining the alliterating consonants, circling related sets of imagery – provides a view of the poem as a network rather than as a purely linear construct. Identifying the speaker of the poem is essential, because, like other literary texts, poems are crucially structured in terms of perspective (point of view).

Preliminary work on the text avoids some common mistakes. Instead of trudging stolidly through one line after another, commenting on elements of the poem as we encounter them, we now have a view of the poem as a whole. In this case, I began with the diction, which enabled me first to establish what I termed the backbone of the poem, formed by simple words of knowing, thinking, and saying. That also allowed me to move swiftly to the use of “denken” as a transitive verb, a feature I regard as the central “puzzle” of the poem, intricately connected with its meditation on life and death. Preliminary work also permitted me to work more efficiently with such formal aspects of the poem as meter. Eliminating cumbersome sentences describing the metrical

scheme, I was able to identify from the outset some important exceptions to the basic pattern. Such exceptions are almost always more meaningful than the underlying scheme, and because they raise questions about their function in the poem, they are certainly more arresting for the reader of the analysis. Finally, having given some thought to the question “who is the speaker?” allowed me to summarize my thoughts about the poem’s “ich” and “du” in a single paragraph without sprinkling my observations throughout my reading of the poem. That eliminated back-tracking and kept the focus more strongly on the relation of speaker and addressee that is so complex an issue in this text. Collecting thoughts according to issues makes your reading move better and prevents the analysis from becoming bogged down in description.

I would like to move now to a more conventional lyric, Theodor Storm’s “Hyazinthen” (Hyacinths; 1851). Here is the text:

Fern hallt Musik; doch hier ist stille Nacht,
Mit Schlummerduft anhauchen mich die Pflanzen.
Ich habe immer, immer dein gedacht;
Ich möchte schlafen, aber du mußt tanzen.

Es hört nicht auf, es rast ohn Unterlaß;
Die Kerzen brennen und die Geigen schreien
Es teilen und es schließen sich die Reihen,
Und alle glühen; aber du bist blaß.

Und du mußt tanzen; fremde Arme schmiegen
Sich an dein Herz; o leide nicht Gewalt!
Ich seh dein weißes Kleid vorüber fliegen
Und deine leichte, zärtliche Gestalt. –

Und süßer strömend quillt der Duft der Nacht
Und träumerischer aus dem Kelch der Pflanzen.
Ich habe immer, immer dein gedacht;
Ich möchte schlafen, aber du mußt tanzen.

(Music resounds far off; but here night is still and silent. The plants breathe on me with slumberous scent: I have always, always thought of you, I wish to sleep, but you must dance.// It never stops, it rages without cease; The candles burn and the fiddles shriek, the rows of dancers part and come together, and all are glowing, but you are pale.// And you must dance; a stranger’s arms press close upon your heart; oh, do not suffer harm! I see your white dress fly past and your light and delicate form. –// And more sweetly streaming the night’s perfume wells up, and more dreamily from the calices of the plants. I have always, always thought of you; I wish to sleep, but you must dance.)

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Let us imagine that you have done the preparatory work needed before delving more deeply into this poem. You have looked up the vocabulary in a good dictionary, noticed the contrast between the speaker and the addressee of the poem, and identified its meter and rhyme scheme. You have doubtless also noticed the frequent use of “und” at the beginnings of lines. Now it is time to make note of the elements that leap out of the regular patterns you have observed, and ultimately, to decide on the best way to approach the poem as you write up your findings. Don’t forget to look for something puzzling that may open up the text in unexpected ways.

In fact, this poem poses several puzzles. Some lie on the level of syntax: why does the speaker say “anhauchen mich die Pflanzen” instead of using the more normal word order “hauchen mich die Pflanzen an”? Arguments from meter and rhyme do not suffice to solve this puzzle: we should expect an accomplished poet to handle this sort of problem without resorting to bizarre grammar. It is always wise to assume that when a poet strays from normal usage, there may be a good reason for it. In this case, the phrase with the strangely unseparated prefix is also unusual on the thematic level: usually, we think of perfume emanating from flowering plants, but not of plants breathing on us. The poet’s decision not to separate the separable verb captures the overpowering nature of the hyacinth scent, which, however sensuous, also represents a kind of threat. The speaker longs to sleep, but does he want to lose consciousness altogether?

Other puzzles are located at the thematic level. Why should the beloved, the person addressed as “du,” actually suffer harm if she dances with a stranger? The speaker’s cry, “o leide nicht Gewalt!” seems on the face of it a rather extreme reaction. Surely the young woman has the right to dance with an unknown partner at what seems to be a ball attended by other people and accompanied by a group of musicians? Yet why is the speaker himself not dancing? Why is he confined to an unlit space, and why does he long to sleep rather than to dance? Why doesn’t he pull himself together and step out onto the dance floor?

At this point in our exploration, we may wonder whether there is a connection between the syntactical and the thematic puzzles. Let us begin with the phrase “o leide nicht Gewalt!” What elements in the poem underscore the speaker’s fear that his beloved might come to harm? For one thing, a dance where participants are arranged in rows that open and close, separating couples and bringing them together again, seems to have lost its measured formality and to have turned into a wild celebration. The dance never stops, it “rast ohn Unterlaß,” and the violin music “schreit” as if to join in the furious abandon of the dancers, who “glühen,” as if to heighten the gleam of the burning candles. Similarly, but with a quite different force, the plants’ perfume advances almost