



a miniature of Walther from the Grossen Heidelberger Liederhandschrift, dating from the beginning of the 14th century.



*a miniature of Walther from the Weingartner Liederhandschrift, dating from about 1300.
The illustration perfectly reproduces the position and attitude of the contemplative observer that Walther describes in 'Ich saz uf eime steine' ['I sat upon a rock'].*

WALTHER VON DER VOGELWEIDE

AUSGEWÄHLTE GEDICHTE SELECTED POETRY

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[The word **NOTE** beside a line or word in the original German indicates that there is a crux of translation, which is explored further. Click on **NOTE** to be taken to the relevant discussion, and then on **RETURN** to come back to the text.]

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INTRODUCTION

translating Walther

Walther von der Vogelweide (*circa* 1170 – *circa* 1230) has almost universally been acclaimed as the greatest German poet of the medieval period and, only marginally less universally, as the greatest lyricist in German before Goethe. What is immediately apparent in his work is its breadth and variety, in terms of both subject matter and imaginative attitude. His themes extend from love to politics, from the natural world to religion and the church, from philosophy to autobiography. And these topics are expressed in tones of voice that range from the deeply meditative to the raucous and strident, from the serious to the satiric, from the formalised to the colloquial. Few, if any, medieval poets seem to have embraced so wide a compass of human affairs, or to have treated it so variously.

The bare details of Walther's life, in so far as they are known or can be inferred, are presented in the Chronology section. However sparse these details may seem, what they show – and strikingly so – is how deeply his experience was shaped by flux and uncertainty. A primary instability – both physical and emotional – was his continual wandering from court to court in search of a living and a home, and then the battle to retain any position gained against a background of capricious patronage or political intrigue. Time and again, railing against the pressures faced by the itinerant singer he became, he reveals his yearning for the security and identity of a settled home. A related source of tension arises from the two worlds he inhabited: the courtly world of hierarchy, status, and subtle codes of behaviour, and the raw, unpatterned, scrounging world outside the court, where life was unpredictable, and survival far from assured. Then again, he confronts the aesthetic and imaginative differences between two very different kinds of poetic expression: the *Minnesang* (songs celebrating the refined, courtly love of a man for a lady whose beauty and excellence seem far beyond his grasp) and the *Sprüche* (realistic poetry of terse, direct, popular utterance). Even within the

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Minnesang tradition, indeed, he bears witness to contrasts, as the chivalric fiction of the unattainable lady and unrequited love begins to dissolve into the greater realism of love as partnership and mutual support. In all these ways, and many others, Walther expresses the tensions of opposites.

Walther's position – both within the court and outside it – involved not only the writing of words, but also the composing of music to accompany them, and then the crucial performing of both in a song before an audience, of whatever degree of sophistication. The single contemporary document to mention his name characterises him significantly as *Waltherus Cantor* – Walther the Singer. Of the three elements of words, music and performance, however, it is only his words that now remain, and through which his distinctive imagination can be seen. The words are in *Mittelhochdeutsch* (Middle High German), a language as far removed from modern German as Chaucerian English is from modern English. There are, consequently, a number of issues for any translator to recognise and resolve, issues that involve both the sense and the sound of Walther's text.

Sense and meaning

As other translations from medieval literature on this site have shown, one of the major pitfalls of translation is caused, not by words that are unfamiliar, and that obviously need a glossary, dictionary or thesaurus for their 'meaning' to become known, but by words that seem familiar in a modern context, yet which can mean something very different. Walther's text is full of such instances. On the surface, for example, his frequent use of the word *triuwe* may seem to correspond to the modern English *truth/true*; but this is a translation as misleading as it is accurate. *Triuwe*, for Walther, embraces a whole range of meanings: from religious *faith* and *faithfulness* to personal and social *loyalty*; from the *promises* one makes, and the *assurances* one receives, to the *legitimacy* or *genuineness* or *trustworthiness* of people and things. In its verb form (*triuwen*), its sense can range from the relatively specific 'trust', to the more general 'expect', to the even more general 'think'. To take another example, the word *milte*, which is both noun and adjective, is often translated as 'generosity/generous'. But in modern usage, the word evokes a far more universal and democratic attribute than it would ever have done in Walther's time. As Frederick Goldin cogently argues in the introduction to his edition [see Further Reading section], for Walther and his audience, *milte* is a restricted and socially determined term, applied exclusively to a high-born person who gives away precious things to an inferior in a

formalised procedure. As a final example, consider the word *owê*, which Walther often uses. Its closest equivalent in English is probably ‘alas’; but to translate it as such is to invoke a sense of archaic quaintness far removed from the force of the original German. ‘Owê’ is a cry; ‘alas’ is a bleat.

These three illustrations show the problems of diction that Walther’s language raises. Either the German word is rich and multi-layered (*triuwe*) and needs to be made more specific in English, or the German word is, by contrast, more specifying and focussed (*milte*) than its equivalent in English, or the original word (*owê*) seems stronger and more resonant than its pale, rather formulaic equivalent in translation.

Sound, rhythm and rhyme

Together with these issues of diction, the sound of Walther’s poetry also leads to important questions. The basic rhythm of his line (stressed and unstressed syllables arranged in a regular metrical pattern, which is often iambic) is not difficult to render in English. But the fact that his lines also rhyme poses far greater problems. The ghost that haunts all translations of poetry is raised again: if the original text rhymes, should not the translation also rhyme?

In Walther’s case, there are powerful arguments, undoubtedly, that the translation should. For the medieval audience that listened to the unfolding of his song, rhymes acted as an important acoustic marker, indicating to their ears where one line ended and another began, where one line was related to another, where one thought had been completed and another introduced. But even more, Walther’s rhymes both evoked and validated a courtly ethos of structure, symmetry and conformity. If words could be patterned to create an ordered acoustic, why not the much larger world of people and all their affairs? Conversely, if the world was perceived as structured and patterned, why should not its poetic articulation embrace a similar shape? From this broader perspective, rhyme is something much more than aesthetic decoration. It becomes a matter of fundamental substance. Part of the very meaning of Walther’s text inheres in the fact that it rhymes.

But however desirable as an ideal, the reality of the attempt to translate into rhyme is very different. Consider the following four versions of the opening lines from Walther’s most celebrated lyric, ‘Under der linden’:

Under der linden
an der heide
dâ unser zweier bette was
dâ mugt ir vinden
schône beide
gebrochen bluomen unde gras
vor dem walde in einem tal
tandaradei
schône sanc diu nahtegal

1. Under the lime-tree
On the heath
My love and I reclined an hour.
If someone looks, he
May find beneath
Remains of broken grass and flower.
Near the forest, in a vale,
Tandaradei,
Merrily sang the nightingale.
2. Under the lime tree
On the heather,
Where we had shared a place of rest,
Still you may find there,
Lovely together,
Flowers crushed and grass down-pressed.
Beside the forest in the vale,
Tandaradei,
Sweetly sang the nightingale.
3. Beneath a linden, in its shade,
Beside the heath, our couch we made;
And, should you near that spot, you’ll find
Bruised flowers and grass we left behind.
On forest edge, down in a vale –
Happy the day!
There sang so sweet the nightingale.
4. Under the lime-tree, on the daisied ground,
Two that I know of made their bed;
There you may see, heaped and scattered round,
Grass and blossoms, broken and shed,
All in a thicket down in the dale;
Tandaradei –
Sweetly sang the nightingale.

Although all these versions retain Walther’s rhyme scheme in the last three lines of the stanza, only the first two attempt to reproduce his pattern throughout (and even then, version 2 presents a false fourth line,

which rhymes with nothing). Although, too, none of the versions is without some merit, the prevailing impression is of rhyme schemes forcing diction and syntax into contorted shape. In version 1, ‘reclined *an hour*’ (which is not in the original) seems to be present only because the translator had already decided upon the later rhyme of ‘flower’. And the choice of ‘heath’ in the second line leads to the curiously dangling adverb ‘beneath’ in line 5. In version 2, there is more than a suspicion that the strangely inverted phrase ‘grass down-pressed’ is necessary only because it has to rhyme with ‘place of rest’. In version 3, similarly, the demands of the rhyming couplet force two added phrases: ‘in its shade’ and ‘we left behind’ which are, at most, only implied in the original. Again, in version 4, ‘and shed’ seems a redundant addition, necessitated only by the need to find a rhyme for ‘bed’.

To be sure, rhyme cannot always be held responsible for loose or forced translation, as the following *unrhymed* version of the same lines clearly shows:

Under the linden
in the heather
that’s where our double bed was.
There you’d find lovingly broken
both the flowers and the grass.
Down in the valley, down by the wood,
heigh de ho!
you should have heard the nightingale!

But the fact remains that to insist on rhyme because Walther rhymes is, almost always, to produce contrived, unidiomatic or bathetic effects. Crucially, the subtle *tone* of Walther’s lines – the shifts between high seriousness and colloquial vigour – is undermined; and the complex plays of different registers are minimised as the ear attends to the march of pounding rhymes: around, ground; springing, singing; way, lay; rang, sang...

Resolutions

The tentative answers that this new translation offers to these issues can now be presented. In terms of diction, a major aim has been to find and deploy a language that can embrace the many levels of Walther’s utterance, from the formal and canonical, through the reflective, to the colloquial and intimate. And so, the formal, decorous terms of courtly love are evoked by words, often deriving from a Romance rather than a Germanic base, such as ‘joy’, ‘delight’, ‘graciousness’, ‘excellence’:

Lady, give him such enormous joy
that you are all his heart’s delight.
He well deserves your graciousness
when all that’s good is found in you.

His more searching, reflective mode is rendered in the language of a private yet also shared intimacy, where the power of simple monosyllables is gently deflected by the occasional di-syllable:

The people and the places that as a boy I knew
have all grown strange to me, as if they were not true.
The children that I played with once are old and slow;
the fields are burned, the forests have been felled.

The colloquial vigour of his direct address is rendered by common elisions between pronoun and auxiliary verb (I’d, you’ll, I’ve, it’s), and by a sportive playing off of nouns against verbs (‘bustling/bustle’):

If anyone is sensitive to noise, I’d counsel this:
just give the court of Thürigen the widest berth.
You’ll go quite deaf and dizzy soon as you approach.
I’ve done the courtly bustling till I couldn’t bustle more.
It’s one crowd rushing out, another in, all day and night.
A miracle it is that anyone can hear at all.

By adjusting the level of diction in English in these ways, sensitizing it to the varying registers of Walther’s language, his words can be convincingly rendered in contemporary English.

The problems of sound, however, can be answered in only one of two ways: either to abandon strict rhyming altogether and to opt instead for off- and half-rhymes where full rhymes are impossible, or to abandon all attempts at rhyme and instead to opt for pulse, rhythm and stress as the auditory foundation of each line. The solution favoured in this translation is the latter. A combination of full and half-rhymes in a single poem can lead to ambiguous acoustic effects, neither fish nor fowl. Why rhyme these lines fully, the careful listener will ask, and those only approximately? Even a total reliance on half-rhyme can create a sense of restrictiveness only marginally less severe than full-rhyme. But the use of metre and rhythmic pulse as the acoustic building-block of each line allows plastic effects to emerge. A line may be metrically regular, or introduce irregular stresses for a specific purpose. It may be iambic, the prevailing natural pattern of English words and phrases, or change to trochaic or dactylic, and convey a different auditory effect. It may

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reproduce Walther's usual tetrameter, or lengthen or shorten the line to pentameter or trimeter. Through these flexibilities, each line of the translation can sound natural and unforced, to be spoken aloud as well as read on the page.

And so, every line of this translation has been spoken aloud, wherever possible before an audience of others, so that its rhythmic stresses could be tested and, where they were faulty, amended. Speaking and re-speaking the words in this way, indeed, achieves a special kind of authenticity, however fragile it may be. With both music and actual performance long since vanished, it is the closest an English-speaking listener can now come to that singer's voice – the voice of Walther von der Vogelweide – that so beguiled his audiences eight centuries ago.

Tim Chilcott
May 2005

CHRONOLOGY

There remains only a single documented trace of Walther's life and career (see the entry for November 1203 below); and almost all the remaining information is speculative, gleaned from his lyrics. Certain names (either of his supporters or his adversaries) are known, as well as certain periods and episodes (crusades, political events, attendance at particular courts, and so forth). But beyond the inferences that can be drawn from this material, there is little that is incontrovertible.

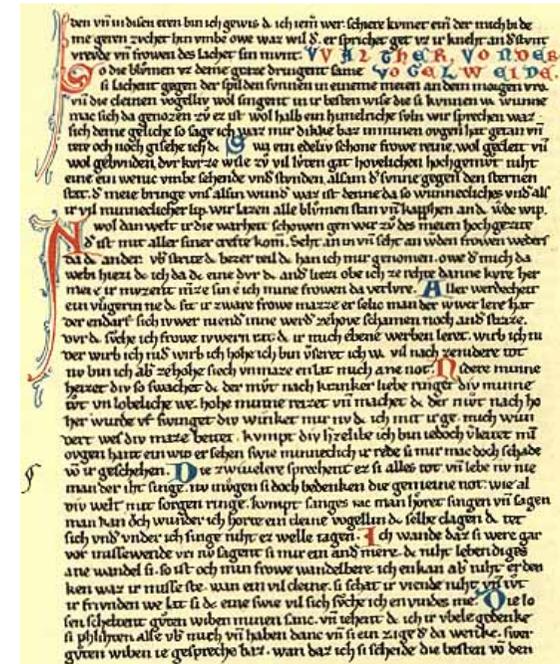
[A possible dating of individual lyrics, and of the historical references that some of them contain, is presented after the English translation of each poem.]

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| <i>circa</i> 1170 | born, possibly in South Tyrol or Franconia, though fourteen other places also claim to be his birthplace. He later writes that it was Austria where he learned how to 'singen unde sagen'. |
| 1190s | at some point during this decade, possibly in 1194, seems to have joined the court of Duke Friedrich of Austria in Vienna, though in what precise capacity (beyond the general function of <i>singer</i>) is unknown. |
| 1198 | leaves Vienna, probably after Friedrich's death on crusade in mid-April. It is unclear whether his departure is voluntary or forced. Friedrich's successor, Leopold VI, may have shown less regard for him. Begins an itinerant career as a singer in the service of a number of kings, princes and dukes, though he may have returned to the court at Vienna at certain times after 1198. |
| [1199–1203?] | after a period of considerable anxiety, enters the service of Duke Philip of Swabia, in whose court he composes some of his most celebrated poetry. At |

- some time during 1201–03, however, he seems also to be in the service of Hermann, Landgrave of Thuringia
- November 1203 an account-book entry showing that Bishop Wolferger of Passau has given five schillings to purchase a fur coat for ‘Walthero Cantori de Vogelweide’ in Zeiselmayer. By this time, Walther has left Philip’s service, and has entered the service of lords unfriendly to Philip.
- circa 1207 seems to have returned to the service of Hermann of Thuringia, though for how long is unknown.
- March 1212 present in the retinue of Dietrich of Meissen to welcome the return of Otto IV from Sicily, whose service he seems to have entered briefly. But by the following year, has left Otto and entered the service of Frederick II.
- 1213–17 at some point during this period, re-enters the service of Hermann of Thuringia for a third time.
- 1220 probably granted a fief by Frederick II, though its effectiveness in supporting him is doubtful.
- 1227 the probable year of his last poem, which may have been composed in the late autumn of that year.
- circa 1230 dies, possibly in Würzburg.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The medieval manuscripts that contain Walther’s work are almost entirely free of punctuation, apart from a full stop at the end of each strophe or stanza. I have weighed the merits and demerits of supplying ‘modern’ punctuation to his text over many months. Pointing his text could be of considerable advantage to the reading eye, yet it could just as easily misrepresent the experience of *listening* to the words as they are spoken, or as they were originally sung. In acknowledgment of Walther’s original medium, the German text is presented here unpunctuated. However, normal punctuation is supplied for the translation, since it is meant to be read as a piece of contemporary English.



an illustration of Walther's text, transcribed about 1290, in the Kleiner Heidelberger Liederhandschrift. The poem 'So die bluomen uz dem grase dringent' ['When all the flowers push upwards through the grass'] can be seen towards the top of the page.

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Walther's poetry is presented here in terms of its major themes, though obviously, there is sometimes a considerable overlap of subject matter in individual poems. Within each major theme, however, the poems are presented as far as possible chronologically, whenever dating is known or can be inferred.

Click on either the original or the translated first line to be taken to the relevant poem. Click on [RETURN](#) to come back to this index.

Court

<i>Mir ist verspert der sælden tor</i>	To me, the gate of paradise is shut
<i>Ich hørte ein wazzer diezen</i>	I heard a river roaring
<i>Dô Friderich ûz æsterrîch also gewarp</i>	When Frederick of Austria drew his last breath
<i>Diu krône is elter danne der künic Philippes</i>	The Crown is older than King Philip is
<i>Der in den ôren siech von ungesühte sî</i>	If anyone is sensitive to noise, I'd counsel this
<i>Drîe sorge hab ich mir genomen</i>	There are three things that exercise my mind
<i>Der hof ze wiene sprach ze mir</i>	Vienna's court declared to me
<i>Sît willekomen hêr...</i>	'Welcome, I'm master of the house' ...
<i>Ich hân hêrn Otten triuwe...</i>	I have Lord Otto's word ...
<i>Ich hân mîn lêhen al die werlt...</i>	I've got my fief, you world! ...
<i>Der künic mîn hêrre lêch mir gelt...</i>	The lord my king has given me a salary
<i>Ich was durch wunder ûz gevarn</i>	I went out, seeking marvels in the world
<i>Ich hân gesehen in der welte ein michel...</i>	I've seen the greatest wonder in the world

Love

<i>Vrouwe vernemt dur got [von] mir dîz mære</i>	Lady, for God's sake listen to my news
<i>Sô die bluomen ûz dem grase dringent</i>	When all the flowers push upwards through the grass
<i>In einem zwîvellîchen wân</i>	I sat there, lost, confused
<i>Ez ist in unsern kurzen tagen</i>	In our brief days on earth
<i>Lange swîgen des hât ich gedâht</i>	I long had thought I would keep quiet
<i>Under der linden</i>	Beneath the linden tree
<i>Saget mir ieman waz ist minne</i>	Can someone tell me, 'what is love?'
<i>Diu minne lât sich nennen dâ</i>	Love lets its name be said

Poetry

<i>Owê daz wîsheit unde jugent</i>	Alas that mastery and youth
<i>Nû wil ich mich des scharpfen sanges...</i>	Well then, I'll also strike some grating tones
<i>Von rôme voget von pülle künic...</i>	Ruler of Rome, King of Apulia, may your pity ...
<i>Ich drabe dâ her vil rehte drîer slahte sanc</i>	I ride along with three good ways to sing

CONTENTS

Religion

<i>Ich sach mit mînen ougen</i>	I've seen with my own eyes
<i>Nû wachet uns gêt zuo der tac</i>	Wake up and watch. The day draws near
<i>Swelh herze sich bî disen zîten niht verkêret</i>	What heart is there that would not fall from faith

Nature

<i>Uns hât der winter geschât über all</i>	Winter has fallen over all the world
<i>Dô der sumer komen was</i>	When the summertime had come
<i>Diu welt was gelf rôd unde blâ</i>	The world was radiant, red and blue

Philosopher

<i>Ich saz ûf eime steine</i>	I sat upon a rock
<i>Vrô welt ir sult dem wirt sage</i>	My lady world, your master must be told
<i>Wer sleht den lewen wer sleht den risen</i>	Who kills the lion? Who kills the giant?
<i>Owê war sint verswunden alliu mîniu jâr</i>	Where have they gone to, all the years I had

Mir ist verspert der sælden tor

mir ist verspert der sælden tor
dâ stên ich als ein wise vor
mich hilfet niht swaz ich dar an geklopfe
wie möht ein wunder græzer sîn
ez regent beidenthalben mîn
daz mir des alles niht enwirt ein tropfe
des fürsten milte ûz æsterrîche
fröit dem süezen regen gelîche
beide liute und daz lant
erst ein schœne wol gezieret heide
dar abe man bluomen brichet wunder
und bræche mir ein blat dar under
sîn vil milterîchiu hant
sô möhte ich loben die liechten ougen weide
hie bî sî er an mich gemant.

RETURN

To me, the gate of paradise is shut

To me, the gate of paradise is shut.
I stand an orphan there, locked out;
however much I knock, it's all in vain.
What greater marvel could there be? –
on every side of me, the rain falls down,
but not one single drop is given me.
The open purse of Austria's noble prince,
like gentle rain, refreshes
both the people and the land.
He is a lovely meadow, beautifully adorned,
where you can gather countless flowers.
And if he plucked a single leaf for me –
his hand so generous, so rich in gifts –
I then could praise the wondrous sight of him.
So let him, then, remember me.

[An early complaint by Walther about his exclusion from the court, possibly written in 1198, after the death of his patron Duke Frederick of Austria. The 'noble prince' referred to is probably Leopold VI, Frederick's successor.]

RETURN

Ich hôrte ein wazzer diezen

ich hôrte ein wazzer diezen
und sach die vische vliezen
ich sach swaz in der welte was
velt walt loup rôr unde gras
swaz kriuchet unde vliuget
und bein zer erden biuget
daz sach ich unde sag iu daz
der dekeinez lebet âne haz
daz wilt und daz gewürme
die strîtent starke stürme
same tuont die vogel under in
wan daz si habent einen sin
si dûhten sich ze nihte
si enschüefen starc gerihte
si kiesent künege unde reht
si setzent hêren unde kneht
owê dir tiusche zunge
wie stêt dîn ordenunge
daz nû diu mugge ir künece hât
und daz dîn êre alsô zergât
bekêrâ dich bekêre
die cirkel sint ze hêre
die armen künege dringent dich
philippe setze den weisen ûf und heiz si treten hinder sich. **NOTE**

RETURN

I heard a river roaring

I heard a river roaring
and saw the fishes swimming;
I saw whatever was in all the world:
fields and forests, leaf and reed and grass,
whatever creeps or soars in flight
or puts its feet upon the earth.
I realised, and tell you this:
nothing that lives is free of hate.
Wild animals, and reptiles too,
battle it out in furious fights,
and all the birds do just the same.
But all have sense enough to see:
they'd find themselves in dire straits
did they not frame the firmest rules.
They choose their king, and make their laws,
say who'll be servant, who'll be lord.
And yet, for you who speak the German tongue,
what order is your kingdom in,
when every fly now has a king
and all your glory vanishes?
Reform yourselves! Turn and repent!
The coronets of lesser kings
will push you all aside.
On Philip's head, then, place the crown
and make them come to heel.

[This strophe is often taken, with Ich saz ûf eime steine and Ich sach mit mînen ougen, to constitute a single poem, though drawing the material together in this way raises several problems, not least of dating. The song above, though, probably belongs to 1198. The analogy Walther draws between the structures of the animal kingdom and those of the human has classical roots, and was widespread in medieval political thought.]

RETURN

Dô Friderich ûz œsterrîch alsô gewarp

dô Friderich ûz œsterrîch alsô gewarp
daz er an der sêle genas und im der lîp erstap
dô fuort er mînen krenechen trit in die erde
dô gieng ich slîchent als ein pfâwe swar ich gie
daz houbet hanht ich nider unz ûf mîniu knie
nû riht ich ez ûf nâch vollem werde
ich bin wol ze fiure komen
mich hât daz rîche und ouch diu krône an sich genomen
wol ûf swer tanzen welle nâch der gîgen
mir ist mîner swære buoz
êrste wil ich eben setzen mînen fuoz
und wider in ein hôhgemüete stîgen.

RETURN

When Frederick of Austria drew his last breath

When Frederick of Austria drew his last breath,
his soul found life, his body went to death.
He took my cocky crane-strut down with him to the grave,
and like a peacock then, I slunk around wherever I could go.
I let my head droop down until it reached my knees.
But now I hold it up again, so high and brave.
I've found a friendly hearth, a home;
empire and crown alike have let me in.
So who'll get up and dance as fiddles play?
Now that I'm free of all my cares,
at last I'll walk about with sure and steady step,
and rise up once again, my heart held high.

[Frederick of Austria, who had been a patron of Walther since 1194, died on crusade in April 1198, with effects on Walther's position that he vividly portrays. The change in fortune also depicted was almost certainly the result of him being accepted into the service of King Philip.]

RETURN

Diu krône ist elter danne der künic Philippes sî

diu krône ist elter danne der künic Philippes sî
dâ mugent ir alle schouwen wol ein wunder bî
wie si ime der smit sô ebne habe gemachet
sîn keiserlîchez houbet zimt ir alsô wol
daz sî ze rehte nieman guoter scheiden sol
ir dewederz dâ daz ander niht enswachet
si liuhtent beide ein ander an
das edel gesteine wider den jungen süezen man
die ougenweide schent die fürsten gerne
swer nû des rîches irre gê **NOTE**
der schouwe wem der wise ob sîme nacke stê
der stein ist aller fürsten leitesterne.

RETURN

The Crown is older than King Philip is

The Crown is older than King Philip is,
but you can gaze upon a miracle in it,
how perfectly the goldsmith made it fit.
His kingly head so well suited it
that none could ever rightly separate the two.
Neither does not respect the other.
The two of them now smile upon each other –
the noble stone, that young and generous man.
The sumptuous sight of them delights the princes' eyes.
Whoever wonders who the rightful emperor is,
let them behold upon whose head the orphan jewel is set.
The stone is every prince's guiding-star.

[King Philip's legitimacy is attested by the perfect match between his head and the crown he wears. A song probably written after Philip's first coronation in September 1198.]

RETURN

Der in den ôren siech von ungesühte sî

der in den ôren siech von ungesühte sî
daz ist mîn rât der lâz den hof ze düringen frî
was kumet er dar dêswâr er wirt ertœret **NOTE**
ich hân gedrunge unz ich niht mê gedringen mac
ein schar vert ûz ein ander in naht unde tac
grôz wunder ist daz ieman dâ gehœret
der lantgrâve ist sô genuot
daz er mit stolzen helden sîne hab vertuot
der iegeslîcher wol ein kenpfe wære
mir ist sîn hôhiu fuor wol kunt
und gulte ein fuoder guotes wînes tûsent pfunt
dâ stüende doch niemer ritters becher lære.

RETURN

If anyone is sensitive to noise, I'd counsel this

If anyone is sensitive to noise, I'd counsel this:
just give the court of Thüringen the widest berth.
You'll go quite deaf and dizzy soon as you approach.
I've done the courtly bustling till I couldn't bustle more.
It's one crowd rushing out, another in, all day and night.
A miracle it is that anyone can hear at all.
The Landgrave is a man who's quite disposed
to squander all his money on proud warriors,
who each could fight an exhibition bout.
I know his lavish way of life:
if vintage wine should cost a thousand pounds a load,
no knight would find his glass was empty, even then.

[Walther's first stay in the court of Hermann, Landgrave of Thuringia, has been variously dated between 1199 and 1203. There appears to be a considerable tension between praise for the Landgrave's generosity and criticism for his profligate, raucous court. Where hearing is impossible, of course, no song that Walther sings has any worth.]

RETURN

Drîe sorge hab ich mir genomen

drîe sorge hab ich mir genomen
möht ich der einder zende komen
sô wære wol getân ze mînen dingen
iedoeh swaz mir dâ von geschiht
in scheid ir von ein ander niht
mir mag an allen drin noch wol gelingen
gottes hulde und mîner frowen minne
dar umbe sorge ich wie ich die gewinne
daz dritte hât sich mîn erwert unrehte manigen tac
daz ist der wûnnekliche hof ze wiene
in gehirme niemer unz ich den verdiene
sît er sô maniger tugende mit sô stæter triuwe pflac
man sach liupoltes hant dâ geben daz si des niht erschrac.

RETURN

There are three things that exercise my mind

There are three things that exercise my mind –
if I could happily resolve just one of them,
my hopes and present state would be so much improved.
And yet, for me, whatever may turn out,
I won't take one of them and part it from the other two;
it yet may be that I'll achieve all three of them together.
The grace of God, my lady's noble love –
how I can gain these two distresses me.
The third has turned me down for so long now:
that is Vienna's lovely, joyous court.
I will not rest until they think me worthy to come in.
Such virtue has it fostered, such loyalty preserved.
You see the hand of Leopold, who gives and never holds back,
scared.

[The three supreme values in Walther's ethical triad are here presented: God, human love, and the court. His reference to the three in that order is morally impeccable; but interestingly, considerably more attention is devoted to the court than to God or love – in this poem, at least.]

RETURN

Der hof ze wiene sprach ze mir

der hof ze wiene sprach ze mir
walther ich solte lieben dir
nû leide ich dir daz müeze got erbarmen
mîn wirde diu was wîlent grôz
dô lebte niender mîn genôz
wan künic artûses hof sô wê mir armen
wâ nû ritter unde frouwen
die man bî mir solte schouwen
seht wie jâmerlîch ich stê
mîn dach is fûl sô rîsent mîne wende
mich enminnet nieman leider
silber golt ros unde kleider
die gab ich unde hât ouch mê
nun habe ich weder schapel noch gebende
noch frowen zeinem tanze owê.

RETURN

Vienna's court declared to me

Vienna's court declared to me,
'Walther, I ought to be so dear to you,
yet I offend. God show me pity now.
My glory reached once to the skies.
No court could equal mine,
King Arthur's set apart. Now, though, I'm poor.
Where are the ladies and the knights
that you should witness crowding here?
Look how desolate I stand;
my roof is rotten, walls are falling down.
I'm loved by no-one now...the bitterness...
Clothing, horses, silver, gold –
I gave away, and had still more to give.
I have no garlands now, no headdresses,
nor ladies for the dance...

[A later evocation of the Viennese court in its decline, which movingly presents the change between past glory and present dereliction.]

RETURN

Sît willekomen hêr wirt dem gruoze muoz ich swîgen

sît willekomen hêr wirt dem gruoze muoz ich swîgen
sît willekomen hêre gast sô muoz ich sprechen oder nîgen
wirt und heim sint zwêne unschamelîche namen
gast und herberge muoz man sich dicke schamen
noch müeze ich geleben daz ich den gast ouch grüeze
sô daz er mir dem wirte danken müeze
sît hînaht hie sît morgen dort waz gouelfuore ist daz **NOTE**
ich bin hein oder ich wil hein daz trœstet baz
gast und schâch kumt selten âne haz
hêre büezet mir des gastes daz iu got des schâches büeze.

RETURN

‘Welcome, I’m master of the house’

‘Welcome, I’m master of the house’ – a greeting I fall silent at.
‘Welcome, my guest’ – I have to answer, or give a bow.
Master, House – two names that have no shame attached;
but *Guest* and *Lodging* – the sense of shame you feel.
So may I live till I can also greet a guest,
and that it’s me, the host, who’s offered thanks.
‘Be here tonight, be there the next.’ What juggling, gypsy life is that?
‘I’m home’ or else ‘I’m bound for home’ is much more comforting.
Guest, like *Checkmate*, can generate such enmity.
So save me from the name of *Guest*, my lord, so God can save you
from *Checkmate*.

[Lines that present the stark distinction between Walther’s wandering from place to place and his desire for a settled home and identity. The request (or reproach) in the last line may be to either Otto IV or to Frederick II, both of whom suffered political and military reverses (checkmates) in the period 1211-14.]

RETURN

Ich hân hêrn Otten triuwe er welle mich noch rîchen

ich hân hêrn Otten triuwe er welle mich noch rîchen
wie genam aber er mîn dienest ie sô trûgelîchen
ald waz bestêt ze lônenne des künic Friderîchen
mîn forderunge ist ûf in kleiner danne ein bône
ez ensî sô vil obe er der alten sprûche wære frô
ein vater lêrte wîlent sînen sun alsô
sun diene manne bæstem daz dir manne beste lône
hêr otte ich binz der sun ir sît der bæste man
wand ich sô rehte bæsen hêren nie gewan
her künic ir sît der beste sît iuch got des lônnes gan.

ich wolte hêrn otten milte nâch der lenge mezzen
dô hât ich mich an der mâze ein teil vergezzen
wær er sô milt als lanc er hete tugende vil besezzen
vil schiere maz ich abe den lîp nâch sîner êre
dô wart er vil gar ze kurz als ein verschrôten werk
miltes muotes minre vil danne ein getwerc
und ist doch von den jâren daz er niht wahset mêre
do ich dem künige brâhte daz mez wie er ûf schôz
sîn junger lîp wart beide michel unde grôz
nû seht waz er noch wahse erst ietze über in wol risen grôz.

RETURN

I have Lord Otto's word: he still would make me rich

I have Lord Otto's word: he still would make me rich.
Then how can he accept my service here so treacherously?
And what obliges Frederick, the king, to give me recompense?
My claim on him is smaller than a bean,
unless this much: that he would find some joy in words of old.
A father once, in times long gone, advised his boy,
'Son, serve the meanest man, so that the best one gives you your reward.'
I am the son; and you, Lord Otto, are the meanest man.
I never served a nobleman so bad and downright mean.
You are, lord king, the best. God give you means to grant reward.

I tried to gauge Lord Otto's largesse by his height.
I slipped up there. The measure didn't fit.
Were he as generous as tall, he'd be a model of true worth.
Straightway, I measured him again – his body by his generosity –
and then he turned out far too short, like mis-cut cloth,
his heart more stunted than a dwarf.
And more than that, he's of an age when he will grow no more.
When I applied the measure to the king, how he shot up!
His youthful shape grew strong and tall;
and look how much he still can grow – a giant, to compare.

[A poem about Walther's change of allegiance from Otto IV to Frederick II, probably composed between 1212 and 1214.]

RETURN

Ich hân mîn lêhen al die werlt ich hân mîn lêhen

ich hân mîn lêhen al die werlt ich hân mîn lêhen
nu enfürhte ich niht den hornunc an die zêhen
und wil alle bæse hêren dester minre vlêhen
der edel künic der milte künic hât mich berâten
daz ich den sumer luft und in dem winter hitze hân
mînen nâhgebûren dunke ich verre baz getân
si sehent mich niht mêr an in butzen wîs als si wîlent tâten
ich bin ze lange arn gewesen âne mînen danc
ich was sô volle scheltens daz mîn âten stanc
daz hât der künic gemachet reine und dar zuo mînen sanc.

RETURN

I've got my fief, you world! My fief at last!

I've got my fief, you world! My fief at last!
I need not fear the frosts of February upon my feet;
and all those stingy masters I'll now beg to so much less.
The noble, generous king has taken care of me.
So fresh air in the summer, and in the winter, warmth.
I'll come up to my neighbours now much better dressed,
no longer like the scarecrow that they used to see.
I've been so poor so long, against my will,
so full of grumbling that I had bad breath.
But now the king has sweetened it, and – by his act – my song.

[This exultant shout is usually dated to 1220. The fief was probably bestowed on Walther by Frederick II, though its effectiveness seems to have been minimal, as the next poem shows.]

RETURN

Der künic mîn hêrre lêch mir gelt ze drîzec marken

der künic mîn hêrre lêch mir gelt ze drîzec marken
des enkan ich niht gesliezen in den arken
noch geschiffen ûf daz mer in kieln noch in barken
der nam ist grôz der nutz ist aber in solher mâze
daz ich in niht begrîfen mac gehœren noch gesehen
wes sol ich danne in arken oder in barken jehen
nû râte ein ieglich friunt ob ich ez halte oder ob ichz lâze
der pfaffen disputieren ist mir gar ein wiht
si prûevent in den arken niht dâ ensî ouch iht
nû prûeven hin nû prûeven her sone habe ich drinne niht.

RETURN

The lord my king has given me a salary

My lord the king has given me a salary of thirty marks,
yet not one single penny can I lock up in my chests,
or load it on to any boat and ship it cross the sea.
The title's grand enough, but the revenue's so small
that I can't see it, hear it, hold it in my hand.
How much should I declare, locked up or on board ship?
Will every friend advise me: should I keep or leave the grant alone?
How much the clergy taxes me, I do not care.
They'll find nothing in my chests, for nothing's there.
They can calculate for ever. The money-box is bare.

[Several reasons have been put forward why Walther failed to receive any income from his fief (that it was far away in Italy, that it was in fact occupied by someone else, that the crop failed on the land he was granted, that the king was manipulating him). But in the absence of firm evidence, all of them remain conjectural.]

RETURN

Ich was durch wunder ûz gevarn

ich was durch wunder ûz gevarn
dô vant ich wunderlîchiu dinc
ich vant die stüele leider lære stân
dâ wisheit adel und alter
gewaltig sâzen ê
hilf frowe maget hilf megde barn
den drîn noch wider in den rinc **NOTE**
lâ si niht lange ir sedeles irre gân
ir kumber manicvalter
der tuot mir von herzen wê
ez hât der tumbe rîche nû ir drîer stuol ir drîer gruoz
owê daz man dem einen an ir drîer stat nû nîgen muoz
des hinket reht und trûret zuht und siechet schame
diz ist mîn klage noch klagte ich gerne mê.

RETURN

I went out, seeking marvels in the world

I went out, seeking marvels in the world
and came upon so many wondrous things.
I found the great thrones empty, grievously,
where wisdom, age, nobility
once sat all powerfully.
Help, Virgin Lady; help, Virgin's Child –
return these three once more into the court.
Let them not wander long from home.
Their manifold distress
fills my heart with pain.
That foolish rich man now has their triple throne, the triple homage paid.
That all must bow to him alone where once those three things stood!
So justice limps, good breeding grieves, a sense of shame is sick.
That is my charge. I could charge more, and willingly.

*[An indictment probably addressed to the dissolute and corrupt court of
Heinrich VII, who was crowned in 1222 at the age of only eleven.]*

RETURN

Ich hân gesehen in der werlte ein michel wunder

ich hân gesehen in der werlte ein michel wunder
wær ez ûf dem mêr es diuhte ein seltsæn kunder
des min fröide erschroken ist mîn trûren worden munder
daz gelîchet einem guoten man swer nû des lachen NOTE
strîchet an der triuwen stein der vindet kunterfeit
ez bîzet dâ sîn grînen nicht hât widerseit
sîn valscheit tuot vil manigem dicke leit
zwo zungen habent kalt und warn die ligent in sîme rachen
in sîme süezen honge lît ein giftic nagel
sîn wolkenlôsez lachen bringet scharpfen hagel
swâ man daz spürt ez kêret sîn hant und wirt ein swalwen zagel. NOTE

RETURN

I've seen the greatest wonder in the world

I've seen the greatest wonder in the world,
and had it been at sea, it would be thought a strange and eerie monster.
My joy is horrified, and all my sorrow comes awake.
It looks like some good man. And yet whoever struck its smiles
upon truth's touchstone would find it counterfeit.
It bites, but does not snarl before to warn that it will fight.
Its falseness causes many men much grief.
It has two tongues, both cold and warm, together in its mouth.
In the sweetness of its honey there lurks a poisoned clove.
Its cloudless laughter brings the bitterest hail;
and when one catches on, it turns its hand and makes a swallow-tail.

[The sustained contrasts here evoke the shifting cunning of the dissembler at court, who is almost certainly an actual and eminent person, despite his anonymous identity.]

RETURN

Vrouwe, vernemt dur got [von] mir diz mære

vrouwe vernemt dur got [von] mir diz mære
ich bin ein bote und sol iu sagen
ir sült wenden einem ritter swære
der si lange hât getragen
daz sol ich iu künden sô
ob ir in welt fröiden rîchen
sicherlîchen
des wirt manic herze frô.

vrouwe enlât iuch des sô niht verdriezen
ir engebt im hôhen muot
des mugt ir und alle wol geniezen
den ouch fröide sanfte tuot
dâ von wirt sîn sin bereit
ob ir in ze fröiden bringet
daz er singet
iuwer êre und werdekeit.

vrouwe sendet im ein hôhgemüete
sît an iu sîn fröide stât
er mac wol geniezen iuwer güete
sît diu tugent und êre hât
vrouwe gebt im hôhen muot
welt ir, sîn trûren ist verkêret
daz in lêret
daz er daz beste gerne tuot.

ja möhte ich michs an in niht wol gelâzen
daz er wol behüete sich
krumbe wege die gênt bî allen strâzen
dâ vor got behüete mich
ich wil nâch dem rehten varn
ze leide im der mich anders lêre
swar ich kêre
dâ müeze mich doch got bewarn.

RETURN

Lady, for God's sake listen to my news

Lady, for God's sake listen to my news:
I am a messenger and must tell it you.
A knight will bring a heavy heart to you
that he has borne so long.
And I am now to let you know,
if you'll enrich the world with joy,
without a doubt
so many hearts will then be glad.

Lady, do not neglect in anything
to raise his spirits to the height of joy.
This surely will advantage you and all
who take delight in sharing joy.
For he'll employ his every means –
if indeed you bring him joy –
to sing aloud
your honour and your praise.

Lady, give him such enormous joy
that you are all his heart's delight.
He well deserves your graciousness,
when all that's good is found in you.
Lady, raise his spirits high.
If you so wish, his sorrow can be changed;
and then he'll learn
to gladly strive for all that's best.

'Yet can I trust what he will do?
And will he keep himself in hand?
Crooked paths may lie beside straight roads.
So then, dear God, protect me now.
I'll travel down the honest road,
frustrating him who'd teach me differently.
Wherever I may go,
may God protect me.'

[One of Walther's very earliest lyrics, which presents a characteristic entreaty to the lady to respond to her suitor's pleas. The lady's wariness in the final stanza provides a nice, guarded counterpoint.]

RETURN

Sô die bluomen ûz dem grase dringent

sô die bluomen ûz dem grase dringent
same si lachen gegen der spilden sunnen
in einem meien an dem morgen fruo
und diu kleinen vogellîn wol singent
in ir besten wîse die si kunnen
was wünne mac sich dâ gelîchen zuo
ez ist wol halb ein himelrîche
suln wir sprechen was sich deme gelîche
sô sage ich waz mir dicke baz
in mînen ougen hât getân
und tæte ouch noch gesæhe ich daz.

swâ ein edeliu schœne frouwe reine
wol gekleidet unde wol gebunden
dur kurzewîle zuo vil liuten gât
hovelfîchen hôhgemuot niht eine
umbe sehende ein wênic under stunden
alsam der sunne gegen den sternen stât
der meie bringe uns al sîn wunder
was ist dâ sô wünneclîches under
als ir vil minneclîcher lîp
wir lâzen alle bluomen stân
und kapfen an daz werde wîp.

nû wol dan welt ir die wârheit schouwen
gên wir zuo des meien hôhgezîte
der ist mit aller sîner krefte komen
seht an in und seht an schœne frouwen
wederz dâ daz ander überstrîte
daz bezzer spil ob ich daz hân genomen
owê der mich dâ welen hieze
deich daz eine dur daz ander lieze
wie rehte schiere ich danne kûr
hêr meie ir müeset merze sîn
ê ich mîn frowen dâ verlûr.

RETURN

When all the flowers push upwards through the grass

When all the flowers push upwards through the grass,
as though they're smiling at the dazzling sun;
when very early one May morning,
the tiny birds sing forth
the best songs that they know –
what joy can be compared to this?
It is half heaven.
But if we have to say what equals it,
I'll tell you what has often been
more pleasing to my sight,
and would be now, if only I could see it.

A noble, chaste and lovely lady,
in splendid dress from head to foot,
who likes to be among her friends,
her spirits high and yet controlled,
who lets her eyes glance round from time to time,
just like the sun among the stars –
May brings us all its miracles,
but which of them can be as marvellous
as this figure of such loveliness?
We leave the flowers alone
and gaze upon the gorgeous lady.

So, if you want to see the truth,
let's go then to the festival of May.
It's come in all its plenteousness.
Look at it, then look at these fine ladies,
and see which one surpasses now the other.
So don't I have the greater of delights?
Oh, if anyone gave me the choice –
to choose the one and let the other go –
how quickly would my choice be made!
So Mr. May, I'd sooner you became like March
before I'd give my lady up for you.

*[A characteristic contrasting by Walther of natural and human beauty,
though the contest is clearly decided before it has been joined.]*

RETURN

In einem zwîvellîchen wân

in einem zwîvellîchen wân
was ich gesezzen und gedâhte
ich wolte von ir dineste gân
wan daz ein trôst mich wider brâhte
trôst mag ez rehte niht geheizen owê des.
ez ist vil kûme ein kleinez trœstelîn
sô kleine swenne ich iu gesage ir spottet mîn
doch frôut sich lützel ieman er enwizze wes.

mich hât ein halm gemachet frô
er giht ich sül genâde vinden
ich maz daz selbe kleine strô
als ich hie vor gesach von kinden
nû hæret unde merket ob siz denne tuo
si tuot, si entuot, si tuot, si entuot, si tuot
swie dicke ichz alsô maz so was daz ende ie guot
daz trœstet mich dâ hæret ouch geloube zuo.

RETURN

I sat there, lost, confused

I sat there, lost, confused,
and down at heart. I thought
I'd served her long enough.
But then some crumb of comfort came my way.
And yet to call it comfort would be wrong;
you couldn't even say it was the slimmest ray of hope.
It was so small, you'd laugh at me, were I to say.
Yet no one's glad without a cause.

A blade of grass has cheered me up.
It says that I'll find favour once again.
I measured out that little stalk
as I've seen children do.
Listen and see now if she will or won't.
'She will, she won't, she will, she won't, she will'
As often as I've tried, it's come out right.
That gives me hope. You have, of course, to trust in it...

[A poem about the significance of insignificance, though with an ironic undercutting of the entire theme in the last sentence. Another version of the ritual 'She will, she won't, she will...' would be 'She loves me, she loves me not, she loves me...']

RETURN

Ez ist in unsern kurzen tagen

ez ist in unsern kurzen tagen
nâch minne valsches vil geslagen
swer aber ir insigel rehte erkande
dem setze ich mîne wârheit des ze pfande
wolte er ir geleite volgen mite
daz in unfuoge niht ersluege
minne ist ze himel sô gefuege
daz ich si dar geleites bite.

RETURN

In our brief days on earth

In our brief days on earth, so many
counterfeits of love are struck.
Whoever truly knows her seal and image, though,
I give my pledge that this is true:
if he should go protected by her care,
unworthiness will never mark his death.
Love sits so beautiful in heaven,
I beg that she will lead me there.

[Just as money can be forged, so too can love's 'seal and image' be counterfeited by hypocrisy and deception. But true love protects against 'unworthiness', the abnegation of all the moral and spiritual codes that inhere in the court.]

RETURN

Lange swîgen des hât ich gedâht

lange swîgen des hât ich gedâht
nû wil ich singen aber als ê
dar zuo hânt mich guote liute brâht
die mugen mir wol gebieten mê
ich sol singen unde sagen
und swes si gern daz sol ich tuon sô suln si mînen kumber klagen.

hœret wunder wie mir ist geschehen
von mîn selbes arebeit
mich enwil ein wîp niht an gesehen
die brâht ich in die werdekeit
daz ir muot sô hôhe stât
jon weiz si niht swenn ich mîn singen lâze daz ir lop zergât.

herre waz si flüeche lîden sol
swenn ich nû lâze mînen sanc
alle die nû lobent daz weiz ich wol
die scheltent danne ân mînen danc
tûsent herze wurden frô
vor ir genâden dius engelent lât si mich verderben sô.

dô mich dûhte daz si wære guot
wer was ir bezzer dô dann ich
dêst ein ende swaz si mir getuot
des mac ouch si verwænen sich
nimet si mich von dirre nôt
ir leben hât mînes lebennes êre stirbe ab ich sô ist si tôt.

sol ich in ir dienste werden alt
die wîle junget si niht vil
so ist mîn hâr vil lîhte alsô gestalt
daz einen jungen danne wil
sô helfe iu got hêr junger man
sô rechet mich und gêt ir alten hût mit sumerlaten an.

RETURN

I long had thought I would keep quiet

I long had thought I would keep quiet,
but now I'll sing as I have sung before.
Good friends have helped me change my mind,
and can expect much more of me.
I'll sing the poetry I write;
and what they want, I'll do, if they will grieve for my distress.

So listen to the wondrous way
I came to all this grief.
My lady will no longer look at me,
though I it was who brought her all her fame
and raised her spirit high.
She does not think, if my song dies, the praise of her will die as well.

Lord, what curses will she suffer then
if I give up my song.
All those who now are praising her – I know this well –
will censure her, though that I do not want.
A thousand hearts were filled with joy
by her sweet grace; they'll pay for that, if she destroys me now.

When I believed that she was kind,
who could have given better than I did?
That is now past; whatever she may do to me,
she must expect the same from me.
If she will rescue me from my distress,
I'll raise her honour high. But if I die, she'll die as well.

If in her service I grow old,
she'll scarcely keep her youth herself.
And if my hair turns grey as well,
she'll want a younger man than me.
But then, young man, so help me God,
give me revenge, and beat young twigs across her wrinkled skin.

[A realistic portrayal of the reciprocal dependence, and estrangement, between the poet and his unidentified lady. She does not live if Walther does not sing.]

RETURN

Under der linden

under der linden
an der heide
dâ unser zweier bette was
dâ mugt ir vinden
schône beide
gebrochen bluomen unde gras
vor dem walde in einem tal
tandaradei NOTE
schône sanc diu nahtegal.

ich kam gegangen
zuo der ouwe
dô was mîn friedel komen ê
dâ wart ich enpfangen
hêre frouwe NOTE
daz ich bin sælic iemer mê
kuste er mich wol tûsentstunt
tandaradei
seht wie rôt mir ist der munt.

dô het er gemachet
alsô rîche
von bluomen eine bettestat
des wirt noch gelachet
inneclîche
kumt ieman an daz selbe pfat
bî den rôsen er wol mac
tandaradei
merken wâ mirz houbet lac.

daz er bî mir læge
wessez ieman
nu enwelle got sô schamt ich mich
wes er mit mir pflæge
niemer nieman
bevinde daz wan er und ich
und ein kleinez vogellîn
tandaradei
daz mac wol getriuwe sîn

RETURN

Beneath the linden tree

Beneath the linden tree
upon the heath,
where we two made our bed,
you still can find,
lovely together,
the flowers and grass pressed down.
Beside the woodland in the vale,
tandaradei,
sweetly sang the nightingale.

I came to meet him
in the fields.
My sweetheart was already there.
He greeted me –
Heaven's own Queen –
and gave me joy for evermore.
Did he kiss me? oh, a thousand times!
tandaradei,
see my lips, how red they are.

There he had made up
a sumptuous bed
from every kind of flower.
Whoever passes by that way
will laugh
with great delight.
From the roses you can see
tandaradei
just the spot where my head lay.

If any were to know –
oh God forbid! – he lay with me,
I'd die of shame.
And what he did to me,
may nobody find out
but him and me,
and a tiny, tiny bird,
tandaradei,
who will, I think, not breathe a word.

[The most celebrated of all Walther's minnelieder, which counterpoints with great skill natural and human worlds, the sexual and the religious, naivety and knowingness, conventional utterance and individual voice. Whether the lady ever existed as an individual, though, is unknown.]

RETURN

Saget mir ieman waz ist minne

saget mir ieman was ist minne
weiz ich des ein teil sô wist ichs gerne mê
der sich baz denn ich versinne
der berihte much durch waz si tuot sô wê
minne ist minne tuot si wol
tuot si wê so enheizet si niht rehte minne
sus enweiz ich wie si danne heizen sol.

obe ich rehte râten künne
waz diu minne sî sô sprechet denne jâ
minne ist zweier herzen wünne
teilent sie gelîche sost diu minne dâ
sol abe ungeteilet sîn
sô enkans ein herze alleine niht enthalten
owê woldest dû mir helfen frouwe mîn.

frouwe ich trage ein teil ze swære
wellest du mir helfen sô hilf an der zît
sî abe ich dir gar unsmære
daz sprich endelîche sô lâz ich den strît
unde wirde ein ledic man
dû solt aber einez rehte wizen frouwe
daz dich lützel ieman baz geloben kan.

kan mîn frouwe sîeze siuren
wænet si daz ich ir lieb gebe umbe leit
sol ich si dar umbe tiuren
daz siz wider kêre an mîne unwerdekeit **NOTE**
sô kund ich unrehte spehen
wê was sprich ich ôrenlôser ougen âne
den diu minne blendet wie mac der gesehen.

RETURN

Can someone tell me, 'what is love?'

Can someone tell me, 'what is love?'
I know a part of it, and would learn more most willingly.
Who understands it more than me
can teach me why it makes one ache.
Love is love if it does good.
If it does harm, you cannot rightly call it love;
how you could call it that, I wouldn't know.

If I could find the truth of what
love is, the world would shout out 'Yes!'
Love is the joy between two hearts:
when each heart bears an equal share, then love is there.
But if there is no equal part,
one heart alone cannot take hold of it.
And so, my lady, help me, please.

Lady, I bear too burdensome a load.
If you will help me, help me now in time.
But if you feel indifferently to me,
just say so plain and clear. I'll then give up the fight,
and stay an uncommitted man.
But lady, you will know what's right.
No-one else will sing your praise so well.

But could my lady turn her sweetness sour?
And does she think that I give joy, to be returned by pain?
Shall I give praise to her
only to find her mocking me for it?
I'd then see some injustice there!
And yet what could I say, who am both deaf and blind,
for when love dazzles, who can ever see?

[A rejection of a one-sided love, which causes only pain, in favour of the mutuality and reciprocity of true love. The trenchant realism of Walther's attitude, especially in the last stanza, is softened by the realisation of the last two lines. Love overcomes all rational thought and reasonable behaviour.]

RETURN

Diu minne lât sich nennen dâ

diu minne lât sich nennen dâ
dar sî doch niemer komen wil
si ist den tôren in dem munde zam
und in dem herzen wilde
nû hûetet ir iuch reinen wîp
vor kinden bergent iuwer jâ
sône wirt ez niht ein kindes spil
minne und kintkeit sint ein ander gram
vil dicke in schœnem bilde
siht man leider valschen lîp
ir sult ê spehen war umbe wie wenne unde wâ rehte unde weme
ir iuwer minneklîchez jâ sô teilet mite daz ez gezeme
sich minne sich swer alsô spehe der sî dîn kint
sô man sô wîp die andern dû vertrîp.

RETURN

Love lets its name be said

Love lets its name be said
where it itself would never come:
as from the mouths of fools
whose hearts know no control.
So noble women, take great care.
Hide your 'yes' from those who're boys,
so it is no children's game.
Sworn enemies are love and childishness.
How often in a handsome face
one wrongly sees the person there.
You first must study why and how, when and where, and specially
on whom
you give your loving 'yes', so it is fitting there, in harmony.
See, Love, see who studies so. Choose that one as your child –
that man, that woman. Drive out all the rest.

[This warning against precipitous love, especially between those of different ages or social background, may have been occasioned by the marriage between Heinrich VII and Margaretha von Battenberg of Austria in 1225. He was only thirteen; she was in her twenties. Their marriage was not happy. Walther's lines were probably composed during that year, or shortly thereafter.]

RETURN

Owê daz wîsheit unde jugent

owê daz wîsheit unde jugent
des mannes schœne noch sîn tugent
niht erben sol sô ie der lîp erstirbet
daz mac wol clagen ein wîser man
der sich des schaden versinnen kan
reimâr waz guoter kunst an dir verdirbet
dû solt von schulden iemer des geniezen
daz dich des tages nie wolte verdriezen
dun sprâches ie den vrouwen wol.... NOTE
des sîn si iemer danken dîner zungen
und hetest anders niht wan eine rede gesungen
sô wol dir wîb wie reine dîn nam dû hetest also gestriten
an ir lob daz elliu wîb dir iemer genâden solten biten.

dêst wâr reinmâr dû riuwest mich
michels harter danne ich dich
ob dû lebtest und ich wær erstorben
ich wil ez bî mînen triuwen sagen
dich selben wolt ich lûtzel klagen
ich klage dîn edelen kunst daz si ist verdorben
dû kundest al der werlte fröide mêren
sô du ez ze guoten dingen woltes kêren
mich riuwet dîn wol redender munt und dîn vil süezer sanc
daz die verdorben sint bî mînen zîten
daz dû niht eine wîle mohtest biten
sô leist ich dir gesellschaft mîn singen ist niht lanc
dîn sêle müuze wol gevarn und habe dîn zunge danc.

RETURN

Alas that mastery and youth

Alas that mastery and youth,
the beauty of a man, his excellence,
cannot be handed over when his body dies.
For this, a wise man well may mourn,
who best can realise the loss.
Reinmar, what wealth of art now perishes with you.
It's yours for ever now, the rightful fame
of never growing weary in your praise
of women's goodness...
and so they should be ever grateful for your voice.
And had you sung no other song than this,
'Joy to women, how pure the name', you would have striven so
to speak their praise, they all should pray for mercy on your soul.

The truth, dear Reinmar, is that I now mourn for you
much more than you would ever mourn for me
if I had died, and you remained alive.
I'll tell you, and I promise this is true,
for you yourself I'd scarcely shed a tear.
But for your precious art that now has gone, I mourn.
You had the skill to raise the whole world's joy,
when you'd a mind to write about great things.
I grieve now for your eloquence and your most gentle song,
and that I live to see them pass away,
and that you could no longer stay with us.
I'll keep company with you; my singing soon will cease.
So may your soul fare well; and thank you for your voice.

[Reinmar was a contemporary of Walther's, probably older, who seems to have served in the Viennese court. Whether, though, Reinmar was Walther's teacher, whether they were rivals, and whether a feud developed between them, is purely speculative. The poem above, which was almost certainly written before 1210 (probably 1207-8), presents a clear-eyed distinction between human personality and poetic genius.]

RETURN

Nû wil ich mich des scharpfen sanges ouch genieten

nû wil ich mich des scharpfen sanges ouch genieten
dâ ich ie mit vorhten bat dâ wil ich nû gebieten
ich sihe wol daz man hêrren guot und wîbes gruoz
gewalteklich und ungezogenlich erwerben muoz
singe ich mînen hoveschen sanc sô klagent siz stollen NOTE
dêswâr ich gewinne ouch lihte knollen
sît si die schalkheit wellen ich gemache in vollen kragen NOTE
ze œsterrîch lernde ich singen unde sagen
dâ wil ich mich alrêrst beklagen
vinde ich an liupolt hoveschen trôst sô ist mir mîn muot entswollen.

RETURN

Well then, I'll also strike some grating tones

Well then, I'll also strike some grating tones.
Where once I made a timid plea, I'll now bark out commands.
It's clear to me: the gratitude of ladies, gifts of lords,
must be obtained by violence, flout all courtesy.
If I sing a courtly song, they moan about it to that Stolle clod.
I'll tell you, I get anger-swollen veins as well.
So, if they want the vulgar stuff, I'll stuff it down their throats.
Austria it was where first I learned the singer's art,
so that is where I'll take my grievance first.
If Leopold gives shelter in his court, my mood will be improved.

[A characteristic complaint from Walther that singers of lesser talent, and more vulgar subject matter, do better at court than the poet who maintains the classic virtues of courtliness. A probable period for the poem is between 1210 and 1217, when Leopold went on crusade.]

RETURN

Von rôme voget von pülle künic lât iuch erbarmen

von rôme voget von pülle künic lât iuch erbarmen
daz man bî rîcher kunst mich lât alsus armen
gerne wolde ich möhte ez sîn bî eigenem fiur erwarmen
ahî wie ich danne sunge von den vogellînen
von der heide und von den bluomen als ich wîlent sanc
swelh schœne wîp mir gebe danne ir habedanc
der lieze ich lilien unde rôsen ûz ir wengel schînen
kume ich spâte und rîte fruo gast wê dir wê NOTE
sô mac der wirt wol singen von dem grünen klê
die nôt bedenkent milter künic daz iuwer nôt zergê.

RETURN

Ruler of Rome, King of Apulia, may your pity

Ruler of Rome, King of Apulia, may your pity be aroused
that I, with such rich art, am left so poor.
I'd love, if only that could be, to warm myself by my own fire.
Ah, how then I'd sing about the tiny birds,
about the moorland and the flowers as well, as I did once.
Whichever lovely woman gave me thanks,
I'd have the lilies and the roses blooming on her cheeks.
I get in late, and ride out early: too bad, you poor old guest.
Well may the owner of a house sing of green clover.
Answer this need, my generous king, lest it becomes your own.

[The contrast between the richness of his art and the poverty of his circumstances is a constant theme in Walther's poetry. This later poem, generally dated 1220, shows how little improvement he seems to have witnessed. Frederick's needs in the last line could refer to his efforts to get his son elected German king, or to his troubles with Rome over the crusade to Jerusalem.]

RETURN

Ich drabe dâ her vil rehte drîer slahte sanc

ich drabe dâ her vil rehte drîer slahte sanc
den hôhen und den nidern und den mittelswanc
daz mir die rederîchen iegeslîches sagen danc
wie kônde ich der drîer eime nû ze danc gesingen
der hôhe der ist mir ze starc der nider gar ze kranc
der mittel gar ze spæhe an disen twerhen dingen
nû hilf mir edelr kûniges rât dâ enzwischen dringen
daz wir alle ein ungehazzet liet zesamene bringen.

RETURN

I ride along with three good ways to sing

I ride along with three good ways to sing,
to hit the mark in high, or low, or middle style,
so that the connoisseurs of song will each time give me thanks.
But how can I now sing in even one of them?
The high style is too powerful, the low too weak.
The middle, in these wretched times, goes far too carefully.
So help me, Noble Counsel of the King, to forge a path between them now
so all of us together can produce one unresented song.

[The three levels or styles of poetry was a medieval critical concept with its roots in classical antiquity. The apparent insufficiency of all three styles leads to Walther suggesting one universal, reconciling utterance, which will gain favour with everyone. The exact circumstances that led him to this proposal, though, are unknown.]

RETURN

Ich sach mit mînen ougen

ich sach mit mînen ougen
manne und wibe tougen
dâ ich gehôrte und gesach
swaz iemen tet swaz iemen sprach
ich hôrte in rome liegen
zwêne künige triegen
dâ von huop sich der meiste strît
der ê was oder iemer sît
dô sich begunden zweien
die pfaffen unde leien
daz was ein nôt von aller nôt
lîp und sêle lac dâ tôt
die pfaffen striten sêre
doch wart der leien mêre
diu swert diu leiten si dernider
und griffen zuo der stôle wider
si bienen die si wolten
und niht den si solten
dô stôrte man diu gotes hûs
ich hôrte verre in einer clûs
vil michel ungebære
dâ weinte ein clôsenære
er clagete gote sîniu leit
owê der babest ist ze junc hilf hêrre dîner cristenheit.

RETURN

I've seen with my own eyes

I've seen with my own eyes
the things that men and women do;
I've seen and heard
what each one did, what each one said.
From Rome I heard a lie
that would betray two kings.
From that the greatest strife arose
that ever has been, ever will,
when feuds broke out between
the priests and laity.
They caused distress beyond all bounds,
with souls and bodies lying dead.
The priests fought wildly on and on;
the laymen, though, had greater strength.
The priests then all laid down their swords
and snatched the surplice up again.
They banished those they wished to ban,
but never were they those they should.
They then destroyed the house of God.
And from a hermit cell, far off,
I heard great lamentation,
a hermit weeping there
bewailing to his God the grief he felt:
'Oh no, the Pope is just a child. Lord, help your Christendom.'

[The catalogue of religious and political turmoil depicted in this poem is usually dated to 1201, though it might have been composed in 1205. Both years witnessed the divisions between two German kings (probably Otto and Philip), and between papal and secular authority. The Pope referred to in the last line is Innocent III, who was thirty-seven when he became pope in 1198.]

RETURN

Nû wachet uns gêt zuo der tac

nû wachet uns gêt zuo der tac
gegen dem wol angest haben mac
ein ieglich kristen juden unde heiden
wir hân der zeichen vil gesehen
dar an wir sîne kunft wol spehen
als uns diu schrift mit wârheit hât bescheiden
diu sunne hât ir schîn verkêret
untriuwe ir sâmen ûz gerêret
allenthalben zuo den wegen
der vater bî dem kinde untriuwe vindet
der bruoder sînem bruoder liuget
geistlich orden in kappen triuget
die uns ze himel solten stegen
gewalt gêt ûf reht vor gerihte swindet
wol ûf hie ist ze vil gelegen.

RETURN

Wake up and watch. The day draws near

Wake up and watch. The day draws near
that everyone will fear to face,
each Christian, Jew and heathen.
We've seen so many signs of it;
it's told us clearly it will come,
as Scripture truly teaches us.
The sun has darkened all its light.
Disloyalty has spilled its seed
in every place along the roads.
The father finds a traitor in his son;
a brother lies to brother,
and churchmen under hooded cloaks deceive,
who should have led us into Paradise.
Violence grows wild, justice withers in the courts.
So wake up now! We've been asleep for far too long.

*[The portents of a universal Day of Judgment are here juxtaposed
against what is very probably a reference to a precise historical event
(line 7): the solar eclipse of 27 November 1201.]*

RETURN

Swelh herze sich bî disen zîten niht verkêret

swelh herze sich bî disen zîten niht verkêret
sît daz der bâbest selbe dort den ungelouben mêret
dâ wont ein sælic geist und gotes minne bî
nû seht ir waz der pfaffen werc und waz ir lêre sî
e daz was ir lêre bî den werken reine
nû sint si aber anders sô gemeine
daz wirs unrehte wûrken sehen unrehte hœren sagen
die uns guoter lêre bilde solden tragen
des mugen wir tumbe leien wol verzagen
ich wæn aber mîn guoter clôsener clage und sêre weine.

RETURN

What heart is there that would not fall from faith

What heart is there that would not fall from faith these days,
when now the Pope himself adds fuel to heresy.
A holy spirit and a love for God live in that heart,
but look at what the priesthood do and teach.
It used to be their deeds and teachings both were pure.
Today, they share a common, yet how different, goal:
we see them act, we hear them teach, unholiness,
who should be models of the good they preach to us.
We simple laity are losing heart.
My dear good hermit, I believe, laments with bitter tears.

[An attack against the corruption of the Pope and his clergy, probably composed 1212-13. The unidentified hermit in the last line clearly stands for the purity of uncorrupted faith.]

RETURN

Uns hât der winter geschât über al

uns hât der winter geschât über al
heide unde walt sint beide nû val
dâ manic stimme vil suoze inne hal
sæhe ich die megde an der strâze den bal
werfen sô kæme uns der vogele schal.

möhte ich ver slâfen des winters zît
wache ich die wîle sô hân ich sîn nît
daz sîn gewalt ist sô breit und sô wît
weiz got er lât ouch dem meien den strît
sô lise ich bluomen dâ rîfe nû lit.

RETURN

Winter has fallen over all the world

Winter has fallen over all the world.
The heaths and woodlands now look so pale,
where once many voices enchanted the ear.
But were I to see girls throwing their ball
in the street, the song of the birds would come back again.

If I could but sleep the whole winter through,
waking up for a while just to curse
that its power stretches out far and wide.
Yet God knows, one day he'll be conquered by May,
and I shall pick flowers where the hoarfrost now lies.

*[A seemingly artless evocation of winter, though with a nice
enjambement in lines 4-5 echoing the throwing of the ball, either from
hand to hand, or from girl to girl.]*

RETURN

Dô der sumer komen was

dô der sumer komen was
und die bluomen dur daz gras
wünneclîchen sprungen
aldâ die vogele sungen
dô kom ich gegangen
an einen anger langen
dâ ein lûter brunne entspranc
vor dem walde was sîn ganc
dâ diu nahtegale sanc.

bî dem brunnen stuont ein boum
dâ gesach ich einen troum
ich was von der sunnen
entwîchen zuo dem brunnen
daz diu lînde mære
mir küelen schaten bære
bî dem brunnen ich gesaz
mîner sorgen ich vergaz
schier entslief ich umbe daz.

dô bedûhte mich zehant
wie mir dienten elliu lant
wie mîn sêle wære
ze himel âne swære
und der lîp hie solte
gebâren swie er wolte
dâne was mir niht ze wê
got gewaldes swiez ergê
schœner troum enwart nie mê.

gerne slief ich iemer dâ
wan ein unsæligiu krâ
diu begonde schrîen
daz alle krâ gedîen
als ich in des gûnne
si nam mir michel wûnne
von ir schrîenne ich erschrac
wan daz dâ niht steines lac
sô wær ez ir suonestac.

When the summertime had come

When the summertime had come,
and flowers sprang up
so beautifully above the grass,
and all the birds were singing,
I came to where
an endless meadow lay,
with crystal water rising there.
It wound its way beside the wood
where the nightingale sang on.

By the stream there stood a tree
under which I dreamed a dream.
Trying to escape the sun,
I'd gone straight towards the spring,
where the lovely linden-tree
offered cooling shade.
I lay down beside the spring,
forgetting all the cares I had,
and soon fell deep in sleep.

And then at once it seemed to me
that every land was serving me,
and that my soul was floating there
in heaven, free of pain,
while my body here on earth
came and went just as it wished.
I'd been set free from every care.
Whatever God may give to me,
there'll never be a sweeter dream.

I could have slept forever there,
but then a wretched, dreadful crow
began to screech in spite.
May every crow receive
what I could throw at them!
It robbed me of my happiness.
The screeching startled me,
and had I come across a stone,
it would have been his Judgment Day.

ein vil wunderaltez wîp
diu getrôste mir den lîp
die begond ich eiden
nû hât si mir bescheiden
waz der troum bediute
daz merket lieben liute
zwên und einer daz sint drî
dannoch seit si mir dâ bî
daz mîn dûme ein vinger sî.

RETURN

A wonderful old woman then
came up to comfort me.
I asked her under oath
and she explained to me
the meaning of my dream.
So mark this well, dear friends,
'Two and one, now that makes three.'
And something more she said to me,
'Thumbs are fingers, aren't they now?'

[With more than a suspicion of irony, Walther here plays with several literary conventions: a scene in nature as an earthly paradise, the revelatory dream, the sudden intrusion of common reality, and the gnomic utterance from an old person's mouth, which may mean something or nothing.]

RETURN

Diu welt was gelf rôt unde blâ

diu welt was gelf rôt unde blâ
grûen in dem walde und anderswâ
kleine vogele sungen dâ
nû schrîet aber diu nebelkrâ
pfligt si iht ander varwe jâ
sist worden bleich und übergrâ
des rimpfet sich vil manic brâ.

ich saz ûf eime grünen lê
da entsprungen bluomen unde klê
zwischen mir und eime sê
der ougenweide ist dâ niht mê
dâ wir schapel brâchen ê
dâ lît nû rîfe und ouch der snê
daz tuot den vogellînen wê.

die tôren sprechent snâ snî
die armen liute owê owî
des bin ich swære alsam ein blî
der wintersorge hân ich drî
swaz der unt der andern sî
der wurde ich also schiere frî
wære uns der sumer nâhe bî.

ê danne ich lange lebt alsô
den krebz wolt ich ê ezzen rô
sumer mache uns aber frô
dû zierest anger unde lô
mit den bluomen spilt ich dô
mîn herze swebt in sunnen hô
daz jaget der winter in ein strô.

ich bin verlegen als êsâû
min sleht hâr ist mir worden rû
süezer sumer wâ bist dû
jâ sæhe ich gerner veltgebû
ê deich lange in selher drû
beklemmet wære als ich bin nû
ich wurde ê mûnch ze Toberlû.

RETURN

The world was radiant, red and blue

The world was radiant, red and blue,
the green of woods and other spots
where tiny birds sang forth.
But now the hooded crow croaks out.
And changes to the colours of the world? Oh yes.
It now is pale – a grey on grey –
and deepens furrows on so many brows.

I sat upon the greenest mound
where flowers and clover had sprung up
between me and a lake.
Such pleasure for the eyes has faded now.
Where once we made up garland chains,
the snow and hoar frost now lie deep.
The tiny birds are all distressed.

The foolish cry out, 'Let it snow!'
The poor reply, 'Oh no, oh no!'
And I grow heavy, like a piece of lead.
I have three winter cares.
Whether one or all,
I'd be so quickly free of them
if summertime were near.

If I must live like this for long,
I'd rather eat raw crab.
Summer, make us glad again!
You decorate the meadows and the shrubs;
and I can dance with flowers,
my heart afloat in warm sunshine,
with winter chased away like straw.

I've come as low as Esau was,
my smooth, clean hair become all rough.
Lovely summer, where are you?
I'd gladly have the fields ploughed up again.
But if I have to face this any more,
trapped in as I am now,
I'd rather be a monk at Toberlu!

[This evocation of the physical and emotional changes between summer and winter is charged with a virtuoso display of Walther's rhyming skills. As can be seen, each of the five stanzas in the original German concludes with the same rhyming vowel, and in the proper alphabetical order (â, ê, î, ô, û). But if the exigencies of rhyme seem occasionally to lead to forced meanings in the original, even more would this be so in a translation that tried to follow the same rhyming pattern. Hence, no attempt is made here to conclude each stanza with the same vowel sound. Toberlû (later known as Dobrilugk, and then Doberlug) was a Cistercian monastery renowned for its strict asceticism.]

[RETURN](#)

Ich saz ûf eime steine

ich saz ûf eime steine
und dahte bein mit beine
dar ûf satzte ich mîn ellenbogen
ich hete in mîne hant gesmogen
mîn kinne und ein mîn wange
dô dâht ich mir vil ange
wes man zer welte solte leben
dekeinen rât konde ich gegeben
wie man driu dinc erwurbe
der deheinez niht verdurbe
diu zwei sint êre und varnde guot
daz dicke ein ander schaden tuot
daz dritte ist gotes hulde
der zweier übergulde
die wolte ich gerne in einen schrîn
jâ leider des enmac niht sîn
daz guot und weltliche êre
und gotes hulde mêre
zesame in ein herze komen
stîg und wege sint in benomen
untriuwe ist in der sâze
gewalt vert ûf der strâze
frîde unde reht sint sêre wunt
diu driu enhabent geleites niht diu zwei enwerden ê gesunt.

RETURN

I sat upon a rock

I sat upon a rock
and crossed my legs
and propped my elbow on my knee,
and cradled chin and cheek
inside my hand.
And pondered very seriously
how one should lead one's life on earth.
There was no counsel I could give
how one could gain three things together
without destroying one or other.
Two are esteem and what we own,
which often do each other harm.
The third is God's own grace,
worth so much more than both of them.
I'd like them in one chest, all three.
But sadly now, there is no way
that what we own, and honour from the world,
together with the grace of God,
can come and meet within a single heart.
The ways and means are barred to them.
Betrayal lies in ambush now
and violence roams the streets.
Peace and justice have the deepest wounds.
Until these two are first restored, the other three will be
without a guard.

[This strophe is often taken, with Ich hôrte ein wazzer diezen and Ich sach mit mînen ougen, to constitute a single poem, though drawing the material together in this way raises several problems, not least of dating. The song above, though, probably belongs to 1198. The attitude of the figure portrayed (legs crossed, elbow on knee, chin and cheek resting in hand) is an iconic medieval image of the contemplative philosopher.]

RETURN

Vrô welt ir sult dem wirte sagen

vrô welt ir sult dem wirte sagen
daz ich im gar vergolten habe
mîn grôziu gûlte ist abe geslagen
daz er mich von dem brieve schabe
swer ime iht sol der mac wol sorgen
ê ich im lange schuldic wære ich wolt ê zeinem juden borgen
er swîget unz an einen tac
sô wil er danne ein wette hân
sô jener niht vergelten mac.

walther dû zürnest âne nôt
dû solt bî mir belîben hie
gedenke was ich dir erbôt
waz ich dir dînes willen lie
als dicke dû mich sêre bæte
mir was vil inneclîche leit daz dû daz ie sô selten tæte
bedenke dich dîn leben ist guot
sô dû mir rehte widersagest
sô wirst dû niemer wol gemuot.

vrô welt ich hân ze vil gesogen
ich wil entwonen des ist zît
dîn zart hât mich vil nâch betrogen
wand er vil sûezer fröiden gît
do ich dich gesach reht under ougen
dô was dîn [schœne an ze] schouwen wunderlich al sunder lougen
doch was der schanden also vil
dô ich dîn hinden wart gewar
daz ich dich iemer schelten wil.

sît ich dich niht erwenden mac
sô tuo doch ein dinc des ich ger
gedenke an manegan liechten tac
und sich doch underwîlent her
niuwan sô dich der zît betrâge
daz tæet ich wunderlîchen gerne wan deich fürhte dîne lâge
vor der sich nieman kan bewarn
got gebe iu frouwe guote naht
ich wil ze herberge varn.

RETURN

My lady world, your master must be told

My lady world, your master must be told
that I have paid my debt in full.
My greatest debt is now paid off,
so let him nullify my bond.
Whoever owes him anything must feel much grief.
A long time was I in his debt; I borrowed money from a Jew.
He gave me no reminder till the day
when he would have the pledges back
which could not be repaid.

‘Walther, you’re angry now without good cause;
you must now here remain with me.
Just think of all I’ve offered you,
and how submissive I have been
when you have made your pleas to me.
Heartily do I regret you weren’t so meek.
Consider now – your life is good.
If you refuse to serve me ever more,
you’ll never find your happiness again.’

My lady world, I’ve suckled at your breasts too long;
it’s time to wean myself away.
Your charms have almost blinded me;
you give so many of the sweetest joys.
And when I see you right before my eyes,
your beauty is so wonderful, it cannot be denied.
But then I feel such awful shame;
I go and look at you behind,
and there I always find you vile.

‘Then since I cannot change your mind,
do just one thing that I desire of you.
On every lovely, dazzling day,
think of coming here sometimes
if time hangs heavy on your hands.’
With warmest pleasure I’ll do that. I do not fear your snare
from which no-one is safe.
God grant you, lady, peaceful dreams.
I’ll set off for my lodging now.

[The central image here is of the world as a house with the devil her master; and the dialogue between the world and Walther presents both his renunciation of her temptations and her continuing enticements. Walther's contrast between the beauty of the world's front and the ugliness of her back corresponds to a celebrated figure on the south façade of Worms cathedral – a woman fair in front, but with a hollowed back crawling with toads and snakes.]

RETURN

Wer sleht den lewen wer sleht den risen

wer sleht den lewen wer sleht den risen
wer überwindet jenen und disen
daz tuot jener der sich selber twinget
und alle sîne lit in huote bringet
ûz der wilde in stæter zûhte habe
geligeniu zuht und schame vor gesteren
mugen wol eine wîle erglesten
der schîn nimt drâte ûf und abe.

RETURN

Who kills the lion? Who kills the giant?

Who kills the lion? Who kills the giant?
Who overcomes this man or that?
All those who rule themselves do this,
and bring their bodies under self-control,
from unrestraint towards the haven of strict discipline.
Good breeding that's assumed, or tactfulness with guests –
for some short while, these may shine bright.
But gloss that goes on quickly, quickly is rubbed off.

[A short prescription for an ideal in human personality – moderate, self-disciplined, and true to the self.]

RETURN

Owê war sint verswunden alliu mâniu jâr

owê war sint verswunden alliu mâniu jâr
ist mir mîn leben getroumet oder ist ez wâr
daz ich ie wânde ez wære was daz allez iht
dar nâch hân ich geslâfen und enweiz es niht
nû bin ich erwachet und ist mir unbekant
daz mir hie vor was kûndic als mîn ander hant
liut unde lant dar inn ich von kinde bin erzogen
die sint mir worden frömde reht als ez sî gelogen
die mîne gespilen wâren die sint træge unt alt
bereitet ist daz velt verhouwen ist der walt
wan daz daz wazzer fliuzet als ez wilent flôz
für wâr mîn ungelücke wânde ich wurde grôz
mich grüezet maneger trâge der mich bekande ê wol
diu welt ist allenthalben ungenâden vol
als ich gedenke an manegen wûnneclîchen tac
die mir sint enpfallen als in daz mer ein slac **NOTE**
iemer mære owê.

owê wie jâmerlîche junge liute tuont
den ê vil hovelîchen ir gemüete stuont
die kunnen niuwan sorgen owê wie tuont si sô
swar ich zer welte kêre dâ ist nieman frô
tanzen lachen singen zergât mit sorgen gar
nie kristenman gesæhe sô jâmerlîche schar
nû merket wie den frouwen ir gebende stât
die stolzen ritter tragent dörpellîche wât
uns sint unsenfte brieve her von rôme komen
uns ist erloubet trûren und fröide gar benomen
daz müet mich inneclîchen wir lebten ê vil wol
daz ich nû für mîn lachen weinen kiesen sol
die vogel in der wilde betrüebet unser klage
was wonders ist ob ich dâ von an fröiden gar verzage
wê waz spriche ich tumber durch mînen bæsen zorn
swer dirre wûnne volget hât jene dort verlorn
iemer mâr owê.

Where have they gone to, all the years I've had?

Where have they gone to, all the years I've had?
Has life been just a dream, or was it real?
What I believed was there, did it exist?
Perhaps I was asleep, and couldn't tell.
And now that I'm awake, things known as closely
as my own right hand, I do not recognise.
The people and the places that as a boy I knew
have all grown strange to me, as if they were not true.
The children that I played with once are old and slow;
the fields are burned, the forests have been felled.
Did not the river flow where it has always flowed,
the sadness that I feel could not be borne.
Many who knew me well now greet me distantly;
a lack of understanding plagues the whole, wide world.
Often I remember so many joyous days
that now have vanished traceless, like ripples on the sea
for evermore.

How miserably young people now behave.
The ones who always were so glad of heart
do nothing now but fret. Why is this so?
Whichever way I turn, no-one is glad.
Dancing, laughter, singing – all buried under care.
No Christian ever saw such a miserable crowd.
Just look at how the women now tie up their hair,
and how proud knights go dressed like clods.
Disturbing letters come to us from Rome;
they bring us nought but grief, and banish all our joy.
We used to live so happily; but now I am distressed
that all my laughter soon will turn to tears.
The wild birds too lament our plight;
small wonder then that I lose heart.
But these are foolish words – to rage away like this –
whoever seeks joy in this world will lose it in the next,
for evermore.

owê wie uns mit süezen dingen ist vergeben
ich sihe die bittern gallen in dem honege sweben
diu welt ist ûzen schœne wîz grûen unde rôt
und innân swarzer varwe vinster sam der tôt
swen si nû habe verleitet der schouwe sînen trôst
er wirt mit swacher buoze grôzer sünde erlôst
dar an gedenket ritter ez ist iuwer dinc
ir traget die liechten helme und manegen herten rinc
dar zuo die vesten schilte und diu gewihten swert
wolte got wan wære ich der segenunge wert
sô wolte ich nôtic armman verdienen rîchen solt
joch meine ich niht die huoben noch der hêrren golt
ich wolte sælden krône êweclîchen tragen
die mohte ein soldenære mit sîme sper bejagen
môht ich die lieben reise gevaren über sê
sô wolte ich denne singen wol und niemer mêr owê
niemer mêr owê.

RETURN

Oh how we have been poisoned by the sweetnesses of life.
I see the bitter gall there, floating in the honey.
The world is lovely from outside – all white and green and red –
but once inside, the world is black and dark as death.
For those whom it has led astray, I'll show where comfort lies.
A simple penance can wipe out great sin.
Remember that, you knights. It's your concern.
You wear your shining helmets, and suits of strong chain mail;
you carry sturdy shields and consecrated swords.
I wish to God that I could win your victory;
I'm poor, and it would bring me rich reward.
I don't mean land, or gold from lords.
I yearn to wear the crown of bliss eternally,
which any simple soldier could come by with his sword.
If I could cross the ocean on that longed-for voyage,
my song would be rejoicing, and never more 'oh no, oh no',
and never more 'oh no'.

[This poem, usually known as Walther's elegy, is thought to be his last, and was probably composed in 1227. In it, he movingly evokes the mutability and seeming unreality of human experience, and the impossibility of permanence, on either a personal or a social level. But the elegy is also rooted in contemporary political events. The 'disturbing letters' sent from Rome are the papal edicts of October 1227, excommunicating Frederick II for his delay in carrying out the promised crusades – crusades which are a significant reference point in the third strophe.]

RETURN

NOTES

philippe setze den weisen ûf und heiz si treten hinder sich

There is an ambiguity in this line: is the word ‘Philippe’ in the dative or the vocative case? If dative, the meaning is ‘place the crown on Philip’, an address to other princes. If vocative, the meaning becomes ‘place the crown upon yourself, Philip’, an appeal to the tradition in which the emperor crowns himself. I have chosen the former meaning, though both may seem equally legitimate. [RETURN](#)

swer nû des rîches irre gê

the line literally means, ‘whoever loses his way with respect to the Emperor *or* Empire’, a vague and rather perplexing expression. The translation tries to capture the essence of the thought with ‘whoever wonders who the rightful emperor is’. [RETURN](#)

was kumet er dar dêswâr er wirt ertœret

ertœren has the dual meaning of ‘to make *or* become a fool/to drive silly *or* mad’ and ‘to make *or* become deaf.’ The translation seeks to play on both these meanings in the alliterative ‘you’ll go deaf and dizzy’. [RETURN](#)

sît hînaht hie sît morgen dort waz gougeluore ist daz

gougeluore is an extremely rare term in Walther’s vocabulary, and indeed in Middle High German generally. The compound derives from two roots: *gougel*, meaning ‘magic, tricks, foolery’ (and the related *gogel*, meaning ‘wild, unruly’), and *luore*, denoting ‘way of living’ or ‘the way one acts or behaves’. The word clearly evokes the unsettled life of the wandering singer, compelled to change roles and identity like some quick-change artist or magician. The translation tries to convey the sense both of wandering and of short-lived, illusory performance: ‘what juggling, gypsy life is that?’ [RETURN](#)

den drîn noch wider in der rinc

rinc is the circle in which judges or council members sat. The English word ‘court’ nicely captures both the judicial and the social dimensions implied.

[RETURN](#)

NOTES

daz gefichet einem guoten man swer nû des lachen

the phrase *einem guoten man* reads *einem bæsen man* (‘an evil man’) in another manuscript. But Walther’s point is about the *contrast* between appearance and reality, not the similarity. And so the figure *appears* good, kindly and welcoming. It is only when its smiles are tested on *der triuwen stein* (‘truth’s touchstone’) that its duplicity becomes clear. *Einem guoten man* is therefore preferred in this translation. [RETURN](#)

swâ man daz spürt ez kêret sîn hant und wirt ein swalen zagel

wirt ein swalen zagel (make a swallow’s tail) refers to the sign for the taking of an oath, whereby index and middle fingers are raised stretched out. However, the image could also refer to an invalidation of the oath by the fingers of the *left* hand simultaneously pointing *downwards*. The swallow was often associated with capriciousness and deceit. [RETURN](#)

tandaradei

a strictly meaningless refrain, but perhaps representing the song of the nightingale. [RETURN](#)

hêre frouwe

a phrase, which roughly means ‘noble *or* gracious lady’, that has occasioned lengthy debate. If it is construed as in apposition to the *ich* of the previous line, the sense is ‘I was greeted as a noble lady’. But the phrase could represent the actual words spoken by her lover as he greeted her, and so should be placed within inverted commas: “‘Gracious lady’ was his greeting”. A third interpretation is that the words are an ejaculatory prayer, apostrophising the Virgin Mary, with the sense ‘Mother of God!’ Since none of these interpretations is definitive, the translation seeks to retain the ambiguity by placing the phrase within dashes. [RETURN](#)

daz siz wider kêre an mîne unwerdekeit

literally, ‘only to find her turn it to my dishonour *or* degradation’. The translation tries to render the abstract noun rather more specifically and concretely. [RETURN](#)

dun sprâches ie den vrouwen wol....

The line is incomplete in the manuscript. [RETURN](#)

singe ich mînen hoveschen sanc sô klagent siz stollen

The translation seeks to combine the two possible meanings of *stollen*: either a man actually called ‘Stolle’, who, because of position in the court or poetic ability, stood in opposition to Walther’s courtly songs; or a more general colloquialism meaning an unrefined, clumsy person.

[RETURN](#)

sît si die schalheit wellen ich gemache in vollen kragen

the literal meaning of *ich gemache in vollen kragen* is ‘I’ll make their necks *or* collars full’, i.e. ‘I’ll give them all that they can stand *or* bear’. The translation seeks to convey the colloquial vigour of the original in ‘I’ll stuff it down their throats.’ [RETURN](#)

kume ich spâte und rîte fruo gast wê dir wê

For a clear indication of the ignominy that Walther attaches to the word *gast* (‘poor old guest’), see the poem *Sît willekomen hêr wirt dem gruoze muoz ich swîgen* / ‘Welcome, I’m master of the house’ – a greeting I fall silent at’, above. [RETURN](#)

die mir sint enpfallen als in daz mer ein slac

Literally, *ein slac* is a blow or stroke ‘upon the sea’. The evanescent quality that Walther emphasises, though, seems best translated as ‘ripples’. [RETURN](#)

FURTHER READING AND LINKS

The major editions of Walther’s poetry are:

medieval German text

Die Gedichte Walthers von der Vogelweide, ed. Karl Lachmann. Berlin: G. Reimer, 1827. 2nd ed. 1843.

Walthers von der Vogelweide, Untersuchungen, ed. Carl von Kraus. Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter, 1935.

Walther von der Vogelweide, Gedichte, ed. Peter Wapnewski. Frankfurt am Main and Hamburg: Fischer, 1962.

Die Lieder Walthers von der Vogelweide. Vol.1: Die religiösen und die politischen Lieder. Vol.2: Die Liebeslieder, ed. Friedrich Maurer. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 3rd ed., 1967.

Die politischen Lieder Walthers von der Vogelweide, ed. Friedrich Maurer. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 3rd ed., 1972.

Walther von der Vogelweide: Sprüche und Lieder, ed. Helmut Protze. Leipzig: VEB Bibliographisches Institut, 1983.

Walther von der Vogelweide: Werke, ed. G. Schweikle, 2 vols. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1994-98.

Walther von der Vogelweide: Leich, Lieder, Sangsprüche, ed. Christoph Cormeau. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996.

On the web, <http://www.fh-ausburg.de/~harsch/germanica/Chronologie/13Jh/Walther> presents an index of all Walther’s poems. The original text of many poems is easily accessible from the index.

translations from medieval into modern German

Walther von der Vogelweide, Gedichte, ed. Peter Wapnewski.
Frankfurt am Main and Hamburg: Fischer, 1962.

medieval German text with translations or accompanying material in English

The Penguin Book of German Verse, ed. Leonard Foster.
Harmondsworth: Penguin, rev. ed. 1959.
[a selection of six celebrated poems, with a prose translation beneath each.]

Selected Poems of Walther von der Vogelweide, ed. Margaret Fitzgerald Richey, rev. Hugh Sacker. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965.
[a selection of 64 poems, together with notes and a glossary of German words.]

Poets of the Minnesang, ed. Olive Sayce. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.
[contains a generous selection from Walther's work, together with useful notes and a glossary of German words.]

Walther von der Vogelweide: The Single-Stanza Lyrics, ed. and trans. Frederick Goldin. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.
[an excellent edition of some 120 poems, with the original text faced by an English translation. The accompanying introduction and notes are outstanding.]

translations into English without original German text

'I Saw the World': Sixty Poems from Walther von der Vogelweide, trans. Ian G. Colvin. London: Edward Arnold, 1938.
[a rhyming translation, with notes, which presents a range of Walther's poems.]

<http://www.german.leeds.ac.uk/MHGLit/HeywWalther.htm>
[translations of 20 poems by Harry Heyworth, half of which were first published in 1983, and the latter added for this site.]

www.dunphy.de/ac/Walther
[translations of 13 poems by Graeme Dunphy, with brief commentary.]

<http://www.monadnock.net/translations>
[translations of 3 poems by Leonard Cottrell, and of one poem by R.D. Oliver.]

In addition, Walther's most famous poem 'Under der Linden', is translated by Bob Richmond at <http://members.aol.com/RSRICHMOND/vogelweide.html> and by Keith Bosley at <http://www.brindin.com/pgvogunt.htm>. www.german.leeds.ac.uk has an interesting section about the poem, comprising two notes and two commentaries, as well as two translations.