

This Music Is So Heroic

ALAN BROWNJOHN

Tomas Tranströmer, trans Robin Fulton, *New Collected Poems*, Bloodaxe,
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Natalya Gorbanevskaya, trans. Daniel Weissbort, *Selected Poems*, Carcanet, £12.95, ISBN
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Gjertrud Schnackenberg, *Heavenly Questions*, Bloodaxe,
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Readers in Sweden – but equally many who are well acquainted with his work in translation – have been wondering for some time when Tomas Tranströmer would be seriously considered for the Nobel laureateship. It can only have been an understandable reluctance to make the award on home ground that held the Swedish Academy back, because there has long been a world-wide acknowledgment that no living poet deserved it more. For nearly forty years Tranströmer's poems have inspired translators in other countries – over fifty at the last count – to render in their own languages the compelling images and insights he has derived from coming to grips with the austere Scandinavian landscape.

In these islands, the American poet Robert Bly was the first to publish, in 1972 in a London Magazine Edition, thirty translations of poems chosen from Tranströmer's first five books. In 1983, the same year as the original appeared in Sweden, John F. Deane in Dublin brought out a remarkable version of his ninth short volume, *The Wild Marketplace*. Most recently, in 2006, Robin Robertson translated with striking freshness a small selection from seven books, published with facing Swedish text, by Enitharmon. But from the mid-1980s onwards Robin Fulton has dedicated himself to rendering into English the entire body of Tranströmer's work. The current *New Collected Poems* updates – with a number of additions, mainly short poems written since the poet's major illness in 1991 – Fulton's edition of 1997, which in turn substantially expanded the *Collected Poems* of 1987. It is fitting not only that Tranströmer's achievement should be recognised with the Nobel honour as he turns eighty, but also that the reissue of a volume showing Fulton's incomparable skill and dedication as a translator should so happily coincide with the award.

Robert Bly caught the essence of Tranströmer's poetry in his introduction to the 1972 book, *Night Vision*, where he remembered Mallarmé urging poets to achieve mystery "by removing the links that tie the poem to its occasion in the real world." To Bly it seemed that with Tranströmer "the link to the worldly occasion is stubbornly kept, and yet the poems have a mystery and surprise that never fade." From the start – and Tranströmer retains two items ('Storm' and 'Five Stanzas of Thoreau') from his teens – there is an unmistakable quality of rigour, sparseness and concreteness about the poems. They are a lesson in economy. They resist every temptation to abandon reality and perpetuate the alarming adolescent fantasy (described here in the prose 'Exorcism') in which their author felt "trapped by a searchlight which radiated not light but darkness."

Tranströmer's is a modern rational consciousness confronting the complexities and terrors of the twentieth century world with the help of the particular calm he finds in the seascape of the Stockholm archipelago (which several ancestors worked as seamen; they are commemorated in *Baltics*), its history, its stones and sounds ("You need only close your eyes to hear plainly / the gulls' faint Sunday over the sea's endless parish") – and the quiet of the inland forests. And yet it is the achievement of a poet who has lived in the city, worked in a demanding, down-to-earth

profession (as a psychiatric worker with young offenders) and seen much travel and experience elsewhere in Europe, in Africa and in Asia: see 'The [Balkan] Journey's Formulae', 'Downpour over the Interior' (in the Congo) or 'Streets in Shanghai'.

Personal life and relationships make an appearance as sudden overwhelming presences. In 'The Couple', two lovers in a dark hotel room sense that "the town has pulled closer / [...] The houses have approached. / They stand up close in a throng, waiting, / a crowd whose faces have no expressions." And in 'Alone', in the second before a fatal car crash (which in fact doesn't occur), "My name, my girls, my job / broke free and were left silently behind [...] / The seconds grew – there was space in them – / they grew as big as hospital buildings." Is he a political poet? Only if he can be that without slogans and exhortations, just writing compelling, mysterious poems with patent elements of shock and compassion felt on encountering poverty or violence; as with 'In the Nile Delta', or in 'Schubertiana': "This music is so heroic' [...] / But those whose eyes enviously follow men of action, who secretly despise themselves for not being murderers, don't recognise themselves here, / and the many who buy and sell people and believe that everyone can be bought, / don't recognise themselves here. / Not their music." The "music" of Tranströmer's poetry is in its unindulgent, truthful, moment-to-moment connection with a real world rendered always with what Fulton sees as essential to it: "the very sharply realised visual sense [...] the first-time reader or listener has the immediate feeling of being given something very tangible."

The *Selected Poems* of Natalya Gorbanevskaya in Daniel Weissbort's translations is a welcome updating, with all her books up to 2010 represented. It is a pity that new readers unfamiliar with the poet's life and work would need to refer to Weissbort's 1972 edition to learn more about her early experiences as a writer and appreciate fully how Gorbanevskaya's dissident activities in the Soviet Union 1968 led to her detention in a psychiatric prison. But the interview here with the critic Valentine Polukhina is informative and revealing, not least for an element of reserve and caution in Gorbanevskaya's responses which also prevails in many of her poems, even after thirty-five years of exile.

All are very short, and nearly all are untitled. Those from the fifties and sixties are coded and muted cries of anguish; a foreign reader needs to listen closely for the implications in her command "Search as you might, hop, don't look round, / like a sparrow on the Hermitage roof. / [...] A battle-tested sparrow like a boat among mountainous waves." There is little optimism or consolation, even of a traditional kind: "Love, what nonsense, / what bird-brained foolishness, / when it's already too late / to spare or pity me." After reaching Paris in 1976 she declares that "to language itself are my due love declarations", but hers – as she makes eloquently clear in a 1983 lecture Weissbort includes here – is the Russian of an exile citing her gratitude to Delaunay, Brodsky and Mandelstam, and with not much to celebrate in her adopted countries. Modestly, Gorbanevskaya concludes that "the linguistic problems of the poet in exile are not so arduous as are the daily problems of life for ordinary émigrés", and it is notable that around half of the poems here are from the last decade. Among them are some of her most clear and candid pieces, and there is even an occasional note of lyrical joy as in 'Three poems about the rain': "those tender, / flowing contacts, that douse heat / and quench thirst... / The cloudmaster has unclenched his fist / and I'll suffer no more."

If elegy in poetry, at any rate in Britain, has in recent decades become more directly personal and intimate in mood and detail – see the way Douglas Dunn, Peter Porter, Ted Hughes and Penelope Shuttle have written about the loss of partners – the American poet Gjertrud Schnackenberg has taken, in *Heavenly Questions*, a step backwards into traditional formality of a dangerously weird and ambitious kind. Four of the six lengthy poems with which she commemorates the dead husband with whom she shared many of these interests address

“unanswerable cosmological, philosophical and mythological questions.” The two sections most closely concerned with the immediate circumstances of his death, ‘Sublimaze’ (a painkilling drug) and ‘Venus Velvet No.2’ (the pencil, or “vein of graphite ore”, she uses to note things in the hospital) are much the most moving and appropriate. These at least allow the reader with an ear sensitive to rhythm to forget for a while the monotonously unvarying iambics she has chosen to employ throughout, a medium which somehow sanctions other lapses of judgment: the appearance of “myriads”, “infinities”, a “wondrous deed” and an “immaterial labyrinth”. Schnackenberg’s intention seems to be to clothe her tribute in a special solemnity and mystery afforded by these plodding pentameters; a sad mistake, because incantation they might be but poetry they are not.

Alan Brownjohn’s latest book is *The Saner Places: Selected Poems* (Enitharmon, 2011).

