

Hard, Beautiful Truths

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Tomas Tranströmer, versions by Robin Robertson, *The Deleted World*,
Enitharmon, £8.95, ISBN 1904634486;
Don Paterson, *Orpheus: A Version of Rilke's Die Sonette an Orpheus*,
Faber, hb. £12.99, ISBN 0571222684

Poetry is what is found in translation. That is, poets translate from silence itself, finding a language adequate to their experience, moving yet another fragment of the unsaid into “said” territory. Translations from other languages, whether (as in this case) Swedish or German, merely extend the range of these discoveries, at least in the best examples. These two volumes of translations, modestly called “versions” by their authors, represent the activity well, as both are by poets who understand that the first duty of the translator is to create a “version” that stands on its own as a poem in English.

Tomas Tranströmer is one of the finest poets in Sweden. For half a century, he has been publishing enigmatic, evocative poems that underline an almost occult sense of the relationship between words and things. He is a quiet poet, attuned to the slight shifts of weather and geography that, as metaphors, represent minute adjustments of mood and, in a larger sense, spirit.

What I love about Tranströmer is the way he explores language itself as a metaphor, as in ‘From March 1979’, taken from this new volume:

Sick of those who come with words, words but no language,
I make my way to the snow-covered island.

Wilderness has no words. The unwritten pages
stretch out in all directions.

I come across this line of deer-slots in the snow: a language,
language without words.

This archetypal poem forms a tiny myth, describing a literal journey with symbolic dimensions, thus extending the metaphor in various directions. Most of us who read a good deal are sick of those “who come with words, words but no language.” This revulsion often propels a poem into being, as in Yeats’s “I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree.” One arrives in the

land of silence: “Wilderness has no words.” The metaphor rapidly becomes a conceit, as the unprinted fields of snow become “unprinted pages.” The sleight of mind in the last stanza is, again, typical: Tranströmer deepens the image unexpectedly, giving a literal level – the deer’s footprints in the snow – and a range of associations, as we are left contemplating this “language without words” – which (in my own association) is akin to Chomsky’s Universal Grammar – which underlies speech, underwrites silence itself.

A sensuous and concrete poet himself, Robin Roberston does a fine job of creating versions of Tranströmer that stand on their own as poems in English. They are deftly musical, with phrases ringing in the ear after the page is turned, as in the last stanza of ‘A Winter Night’:

A darker storm stands over the world.
It puts its mouth to our soul
and blows to get a tone. We are afraid
the storm will blow us empty.

Even with the Swedish version staring at me across the page, I cannot judge how well Robertson has translated the original; but I know he has given us a gift in English, and one for which I, for one, will remain grateful. This strikes me as one of Tranströmer’s strongest collections, and we’re lucky that Roberston has taken to it so keenly, adjusting his own ear to the ear of the target poems, taking deep soundings in their chilly depths.

Don Paterson, another gifted poet, has turned to one of the most translated sequences of our time, the *Sonnets to Orpheus* of Rilke. This was a bold move, as Rilke is notoriously impossible to translate. Robert Lowell, who wrestled himself with Rilke, once said that it was almost impossible to imagine him in English, as his poems were sealed in German. Unsealing Rilke has become a minor industry over the decades since the *Sonnets to Orpheus* first appeared in 1922.

I have long admired the much-abused early translation of the sonnets by J.B. Leishman (1936), which Stepher Spender later reworked with varying degrees of success. In the forties, C.F. Macintyre offered a sturdy alternative to Leishman. Among many translators, Stephen Mitchell (1985) – well-known for his version of the *Tao Te Ching* – has done a splendid version of the sonnets, although everything Mitchell does sounds vaguely like Pablo Neruda in California. There was a marvellous version of the sequence by David Young, himself a good poet, in the late eighties. Only a couple of years ago, Edward Snow – a professor in Texas – published a vigorous, quite literal, translation.

But Paterson’s Rilke is, for me, the best version to appear thus far, giving

a concreteness to the poems that most earlier translations lack. It's easy to get lost in the huge mist of language sprayed by Rilke, with those oratorical flourishes that just don't work in English, as in the famous opening lines of the first sonnet: "*Da stieg ein Baum. O reine Übersteigung! / O Orpheus singt! O hoher Baum im Ohr!*" Paterson translates as follows: "A tree rose from the earth. O pure transcendence – / Orpheus sings: O tall oak in the ear!" The English-tuned ear cringes slightly, as it must, at such a line as "O pure transcendence." *Übersteigung* contains within it both "transcendence" and "ascendance" in German (the word derives from *steigen*, "to climb"), hence it exudes a double valence that cannot easily be accommodated in English. But the Paterson version works well, as in the second line the addition of "earth" (not in Rilke) lends a spatial sense to the image that quietly underscores "transcendence," making it more visual, if not quite literal.

Throughout these sonnets, Paterson consistently adds a concrete element to the language, admitting an earthiness that the German lacks. One further example will illustrate this. In the late poem in the sequence that begins "*Zwischen den Steren, wie weit...*," the poet contemplates the distances between stars and the vaster distances that occur between people, as between one child and another: "O how ineffably far." This later version is a more literal version, as translated by Edward Snow. Paterson does this with the stanza:

From star to star – such distances: and yet
 those encountered here are harder reckoned.
 Someone – a child, say, and then a second...
 What dark matter holds them separate?

There is no "dark matter" in Rilke. But Paterson's addition gives the line a freshness and contemporaneity that it lacks in the more literal version. It is also intriguing: the vast distance between two human beings characterized as a kind of negative space. The poem unspools to the end in a fresh, concrete way by adding elements not found in the German text, as when Rilke writes about the strangeness of a table laid with a plate of fish. Paterson writes: "How strange the eyes and dead mouths of the fish." Those eyes and mouths are Paterson's alone.

Rilke wrote the *Sonnets to Orpheus* only four years before his death. It was composed as an elegy of sorts for a teenager of his acquaintance, Vera Knoop, whose mother was an old friend. He had recently been sent a package by Vera's mother that contained a sixteen-page chronicle of her daughter's death by leukemia, and this prompted the sonnets, which were written in a blaze of thirteen days. As a whole, the sequence praises and rues

the endless flux of the universe, its transformations (death being only one stage in a cycle that inevitably points to rebirth). Orpheus, as the prototype of the poet, visited the realm of death, and miraculously returned to tell the tale; by implication, poets do likewise. In their brightest moments, Rilke's sonnets celebrate the hard, beautiful truths pried loose as from silence itself, in the tenth sonnet:

I praise all things wrested from doubt,
Those mouths alive with their new voice
having learnt the truth of silence.

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Poetry Review, 97:1, Spring 2007