

# The Alter Ego

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Robert Henryson, *The Testament of Cresseid and Seven Fables*, translated by Seamus Heaney, Faber, £12.99, ISBN 9780571249282; Marina Tsvetaeva, *Bride of Ice: New Selected Poems*, translated by Elaine Feinstein, Carcanet, £14.95, ISBN 9781847770608

Seamus Heaney's excursions into translation have differently brought home works which had initially seemed unlikely or intransigent subjects for him. His latest piece of advocacy, a translation of the Scots medieval writer Henryson's *Testament*, together with selected fables from Henryson's own versions of Aesop, again seems a surprisingly far reach, not least for the technical intricacy involved. Henryson deploys 'rhyme royal' stanzas, the tightly-rhymed seven-line units through which he most obviously attuned his work to that of Chaucer. Heaney's feat is remarkable in retaining not only the tone, but the complex shape, of Henryson's writing.

And yet this book reminds us that Heaney is, amongst everything else, a fantastic technician: adept at dialect, but also crafter, from at least *Field Work* on, of authoritative stanzaic forms. Heaney's introduction here, as in the corresponding one for *Beowulf*, mentions the proximity of the original's idiom to his own sound-world. He reminds us of the Ulster Scots spoken "across the River Bann" from the family farm. Proximity, then, but also distance, defining distance "across" dividing lines. Scope, therefore, for translation as a political (reconciliatory) act from Heaney once again. Coming home, homeliness, are thence, particularly, features of the Fables selected for translation. As 'The Prologue' has it:

In homely language and rough turns of speech  
I have to write, for always eloquence  
And rhetoric remained beyond my reach  
Therefore I humbly pray your reverence [...]

Heaney's own canniness in translating versions of the local and the colloquial is on display here. Throughout the book, he often retains Henryson's rhyme-

words – “eloquence / reverence” are in the original, and the (to us) slightly off-key or precious “reverence” performs what the verse says. But “beyond my reach” is a neat modernising of Henryson’s “I never understude”; and “rough turns of speech” reminds us of the “roughshod” rhetoric which Heaney has espoused across his career.

Henryson turns out to be another perfect Heaney alter ego, then; advocate of the “plain and homely” whilst acknowledging the visionary potency of the natural world. What seems striking, though, is Heaney’s concern to appropriate to his own voice the “moralitas” of Henryson, the concluding philosophical reflections upon the events narrated in each tale. The morality is, again, familiar: “Blessed be life lived free of dread / And blessed be a frugal decency”. We are reminded that Heaney has not been averse previously to drawing out the “message” of the experience in his poems, as in ‘Changes’ in *Station Island* (“Remember this. ...It will be good for you”). But the now seventy-year old Heaney is perhaps taking on that hieratic function more concertedly. However, this dogged tone can also create unease. At the end of *The Testament*, for instance, the morality chides “deceitful” womanhood in search of untrammelled sexual gratification. In deciding to translate that particular conclusion, the inherent conservatism of this whole project takes on a tone out-of-tune with its moment.

Marina Tsvetaeva’s poetry is about as remote as it is possible to be from a recognisable modern English idiom, partly because it is remote from colloquial Russian also. In his compelling and admiring essay on her, ‘Footnote to a Poem’, Joseph Brodsky wrote of a use of language “oversaturated with stresses”, but contained by tight rhyme schemes. It was a saturation driven by Tsvetaeva’s candidness about her own experience, and by a “need to say”, which overwhelmed all previous lyric limits. Elaine Feinstein’s collection of lyrics and sequences, *Bride of Ice*, marks the latest version of her forty-year crusade to make Tsvetaeva’s voice heard. Her method throughout has been to abandon rhyme from her versions of the original quatrains, as well as to abandon the stressed and often neologistic vocabulary. In its place, she has evolved an idiom which, from sentence to sentence, captures something of the abstract reach of Tsvetaeva’s work, whilst also conveying the deliberately juddering and disorienting experience which we can understand as the true experience of reading her.

To this end, the additions Feinstein has made to the new selected are tremendously helpful in allowing us better to see the kinds of boundary Tsvetaeva was concerted in crossing. ‘The Red Horse’ is a parable, partly a

displaced autobiography, about the forces which drove Tsvetaeva to need to speak, about a terror of abandonment (“Your Angel doesn’t love you!”) which launches a violently compensatory will to apotheosize poetry and the poet:

Who attached these heavy wings  
on my shoulders? I am  
a witness of living storm –  
someone who sees shadows,

until I am carried high  
into the blue above us  
at last – on a red horse –  
by my own Genius!

These lines convey the (literal) scale of the task facing Feinstein in rendering the staged lyric drama of the original. Tsvetaeva is a fugitive personality, one intensely aware of the distance between us, and particularly perhaps of the distance between those most intensely in love. All of her addresses, indeed, including this newly-translated ‘New Year’s Greetings’, the verse letter to the dead Rilke (who she had never met), are a lover’s outcries which range across impossible gulfs: “I shall only understand when we meet again. / What joy to end with you, begin with you.” Everything is pitched at similar high intensity, typified here by the expanded version given of the sequence ‘Wires’, a series once again to an absent poet, in this case Pasternak. From these poems, rapidly-written across a couple of months in 1923, Feinstein brilliantly captures a fleetingness, an obscurity, and breathless uniqueness which amazingly brings us full and distinctive voice:

With other people – in heaps  
of roses – in bits of weeks  
only guessed at...

I remain  
yours, like a chosen bundle,

even as the wind picks me up  
like sand or gravel... .

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