On Translation and Temperament

The challenge for the translator is likewise to create poetry, but in a new language based on his relationship to the original that gives the translator the right to speak. The translator’s temperament toward the poet’s work as well as his own tendencies as a writer contribute to the poetry in its new language in equal measure.

Two things clearly establish from the outset the temperament of Jean Valentine and Ilya Kamin- sky’s translation from the Russian of Marina Tsvetaeva’s poetry, Dark Elderberry Branch. First, the cover defines the book as “a reading” instead of “a translation,” a deliberate emphasis on their interpretive role. While it is almost a cliché to think of translation as an act of very close reading, the adoption of this idea as a category differentiated from translation is refreshing. It brings to mind Tsvetaeva’s oft-quoted idea that “reading is complicity in the creative process,” which certainly must have informed the translators’ thinking, even if they don’t say it outright. Second, their dedication of the book as an homage to Tsvetaeva conveys a reverential attitude fueled by devotion to her work. Citing the vastly different temperaments of the two poets involved, Kamin­sky writes in his afterword, “Jean Valentine and I claim we are two poets who fell in love with a third and spent two years reading her together [. . .]: two years of two poets reading a third is an homage.”

Everything from the mercurial selection to the compositions afterward to the inclusion of an audio CD of the poems read in Russian demonstrate their deep engagement with Tsvetaeva’s work. The slim selection of poems and journal entries that comprise the book are clearly based on the translators’ personal reading habits, with juxtapositions and jumps that highlight their associations and thematic connections. The poem “from An Attempt at Jealousy” that explores love in a marriage marked by affairs, for example, is followed with two compelling lines written four years earlier in a journal: “To love—is to see a man as God intended him, and his parents failed to make him. /To fall out of love—is to see, instead of him: a table, a chair”—all of this to be further strung together with the next poem, a love note to her desk.

This kind of clustering is compelling, even if I also found myself missing my own habit of actively reading and making those connections for myself. The book’s rapturous attention is infectious and fitting. Tsvetaeva’s poems, often addressed to specific people, convey a state of intoxication through their quick jumps and dashes, as in “From Poems for Blok”:

Your name is—a bird in my hand, a piece of ice on my tongue. The lips’ quick opening. Your name—four letters. A ball caught in flight, a silver bell in my mouth. [. . .]

The translators seem, likewise, to write with the silver bell of Tsvetaeva’s voice in their mouths, and the journal entries give them a huge amount of traction in conveying the intensity and vulnerabil­ity of that voice’s poetics. At the same time, the subjective presentation might feel lacking if Tsvetaeva wasn’t already well established in English translation. The reading that Kaminsky and Valentine convey shows a particular interest in her thinking about poetry and writing. In this, their homage is also a study: two poets turning around the definition of lyric poetry, looking at the shadows and light a third poet casts on it. “A lyric poem is a created and instantly destroyed world,” Kaminsky quotes Tsvetaeva in his afterword. They underscore this idea by choosing to end the collection with a late journal entry that conveys her metaphysics and speaks to the impossibility of writing poems: “My difficulty [. . .] is in the impossibility of my goal, for example, to use words to express a moan: nnh, nnh, nnh. To express a sound using words, using meanings. So that the only thing left in the ears would be nnh, nnh, nnh.” There are other places to look for a more comprehensive understanding of Tsvetaeva’s themes, to which we thankfully can add the distinctive voice that arises from Kamin­sky and Valentine’s reading.

Kazim Ali and Mohammad Jafar Mahallati’s translation from Persian of Sohrab Sepehri’s po­etry, Avastheh-e Kheb, shares an interest in reading as complicity in the creative process. In his introduction, Ali is clearly struck by the relevance of Sepehri’s poetry to the current political climate in Iran, in particular the ways in which younger Iranians creatively reuse Sepehri’s personal lyr­ics in political contexts. Lines like “the haze of habit obstructs actual sight” and “we need to wash our eyes and see differently” are easily applied to many different discussions, from the debate over the dress code for women to the need for a change in diplomacy. If the selection of poems chosen for this book is an indication, Sepehri’s poetry lacks any direct political rhetoric—he was criticized for this during the political turmoil of the 1970s in Iran—and instead exudes a state of rapture with the natural world informed by a Sufi perspective. Ironically, as Ali points out, this affords greater political readings today.

Sepehri has a tendency toward abstraction, and the short lyrics that make up the middle sec­tion of the book read as effortless meditations on the “conditions of being,” as one scholar puts it, “the same way that a dove understands water and wind.” He is able to lead us into philosophical pondering over the nature of human loneliness with great ease, as in the title poem:

If you are looking for me, I am beyond nowhere [. . .]

Beyond nowhere there is a place desire opens like an umbrella, breeze like thirst sinks deep into the leaves.

Bells of rain carol fresh watery tunes about how lonely humans are here where the shadows of tree trunks stream into endlessness.

If you are looking for me, come soft and quietly, lest you crack the glass heart that cups my loneliness.

There is a lot of sinking, streaming, murmuring, susurrating, drizzling, grazing, slow slipping into slumber that gives these poems a wistful feel and grounds them in loneliness/solitude (which is the
same word in Persian). The translators note that the last three lines of this poem were used on banners and signs during the 2009 election protests. But as they are rendered here, the effectiveness of the lines as protest or political statement doesn’t come through; clearly the poem as a whole exists in the Iranian context in some way that we cannot access.

The translators’ discussion of the political readings is actually a little misleading, though, when it comes to understanding their engagement with Sepehri’s poetry. Rather, the translations themselves reveal their interest in eventuating Sepehri’s discourse for today’s American reader, in particular in the context of twentieth-century American poetry. References creep into the translations that feel almost unconscious, as in the poem “Water”: “And each citizen is attuned to the sound of a bud breaking into blossom”—James Wright, anyone? Other connections to American poetry are much more deliberate. Of the poem titled “Bright Existence,” they note that a fairer translation would be “Full Color,” yet they “felt a deep connection between this poem and the earlier work of American poet Brenda Hillman and so chose this rendering after Hillman’s book of the same name, which shares much affinity of style and theme with these poems of Sepehri’s.” It is an interesting dialog to construct, though it also raises questions about how to align Sepehri’s Sufism and Hillman’s interest in Gnosticism.

Rather than finding similarities between Sepehri’s poetry and contemporary American poetry, I am more intrigued by the differences. After all, we turn to foreign poetry to see how other traditions do it differently, and his inclination toward all, we turn to foreign poetry to see how other traditions do it differently, and his inclination toward...
alesc. Rather than thinking of poetry as what’s lost in translation, as Robert Frost’s absolutist view goes, Rivera demonstrates how translation is a process of finding poetry through a method of active reading. This is a book to read slowly, to feel your own complicity in the creative process. As Rivera describes it, the poems invite the reader to become “an interpreter within” them as they grow and change out of an understanding of the multivalence of words. Rather than anchoring experience to narrative—which creeps into the poems only slightly with general references such as, “there I am in the middle of this day”—Noël seeks to implicate the reader in experience. As the poem “Nowhere I” puts it, through the act of reading, we are “live flesh thrown into that precise moment,” the poems “a pure movement to return the you to you.” Rivera has fully inhabited that return to herself as the writer responsible for Noël’s English poems.

Yannis Ritsos’ Diaries of Exile, translated from Greek by Karen Emmerich and Edmund Keeley, makes an interesting juxtaposition to Noël’s poetry. Existing somewhere between poetry and diary, the three books that make up the volume convey what happens when one’s freedom to construct the world around us through observation and language is taken away. They chart Ritsos’ years of incarceration in increasingly restrictive detention camps for political prisoners during and just after the Greek Civil War. The poems convey his struggle to continue to write in a world circumscribed by harsh labor, censored letters, and the dullness of senseless work and routine. “We struggle to bind our attention,” he writes in an early entry, to a color to a stone to the way an ant walks. A bumblebee creeping along a dry leaf makes as much noise as a passing tram. That’s how we realize what silence has settled within us.

In her perspicacious introduction, Emmerich fixates on getting at what it really means to maintain a dedication to writing in such circumstances. “Even under the harshest conditions on [the infamous prison island] Makronisos,” she reminds us, “Ritsos was constantly writing, on whatever scraps of paper he could find, including the linings of cigarette packs, which he hid or buried in bottles in the ground.” Emmerich’s desire to understand, to really understand in a compassionate way, what it took for him to continue believing in writing grounds the translations in a historical context essential for an American audience to be able to read the poems well. Ritsos’ work is readily available in English. But for a reader just coming to his poetry with this book, Emmerich serves as a good host by introducing him in this way.

Out of that context, it becomes clear that writing is “a form of therapy or salvation,” as Ritsos puts it, was at the same time obstructed by the internalization of censorship. The poems in the sequential diaries grow more and more sparse as he wrestles to find things that can bind him to a world beyond his own entrapment. The first diary gives a real sense of place, atmosphere, and interactions between people in the camp. While he despair’s that “I don’t fit into my voice,” there is still the possibility of belonging to it, as the entry for November 6, 1948, relates:

> Evening. The bell for the evening meal. Shouts from the boys playing soccer. Was it yesterday?—I don’t remember;—a stunning sunset
> So violet, so gold, so rosy.
> We stood there. We watched. We talked alone, alone, tossing our voices into the wind so as to tie things together, to unbind our hearts. [.. .]

In the second and third diaries, entries that used to come once or twice a day are much farther apart, and they convey in various ways the sense of no longer being able to inhabit experience: “you forgot the proper pronunciation / of your name,” “we’re left outside our voice,” “These people [. . .] carry a number of keys in their pockets / but have no door to open.”

Emmerich and Keeley’s translation functions on the belief that Ritsos doesn’t let the poetry become wholly pessimistic, and they are careful not to pin down his images by reading them one way or the other. It would be interesting to hear the alternate possibilities for translating the final image in the book, a “larger and deeper” sky that never tires, to see how their choices might have privileged ambivalence. Either way, the poems still relate profound despair. The speaker in the third diary feels “neither rage nor sorrow” and seems resigned to the futility of “trading two dramas of hope / for five counterfeit stars.” But Ritsos’ sense of being tied to the world, which recurs throughout the diaries with images of binding and unbinding, conveys his core belief in connection even in the most dire situations. “Ah Kaiti,” he writes in the penultimate entry, “we here / at the edge of our handcuffied / tied tight as a knot our vow to the world.” Even at the very edge, Ritsos upheld his belief in poetry as that which forms a bond.

It is no small task to read deeply and carefully, as all of these translators have done in the process of relating their homage to, dialog with, extension of, and context for poetry written in another language. It takes time, years. They have all succeeded in writing poetry in English that conveys their bond with the original. In various ways, the temperament of their readings transforms the poetry in the process, interpreting it and painting a portrait that privileges their particular connection to the work. They show us how, in the end, it’s not that translation is a form of reading but that all reading is an act of translation.

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**CIRCE MAIA**

**two poems**

*Translated from the Spanish by Jesse Lee Kercheval*

**Things by Their Name . . .**

And if they do not have one?
What is the name of this sadness you get from the three ascending notes of *The Death of Ase*, in this music?

Careful, it is not called The Sadness. You will have to go the long way to name it because it does not exist outside the notes but nevertheless the notes are not it.

**Treason**

The last sun did not say to him: I am the last sun.
Nothing prepared him.
The water slid over his body and he didn’t know this was the way that the water said: goodbye. He did not know.
No one told him anything.
When night came, it came to stay.
And he never knew.

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**Circe Maia** was born in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1932, but has lived most of her life in the northern city of Tacuarembó. She is the author of nine books of poetry and is one of the most important voices of the generation that brought Latin American literature to the world’s attention. Her collected poems, *Circe Maia: Obras poéticas* (RebeKa LinKa editores, Montevideo), was published in Uruguay in 2011.

**Jesse Lee Kercheval** is the author of twelve books of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. Her latest book is the novel *My Life as a Silent Movie* (Indiana University Press, 2013). She is currently editing *América Invertida: An Anthology of Younger Uruguayan Poets*. 

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