MIRA ROSENTHAL

New Poetry in Translation

On Translation and Temperament

Books Discussed in This Review

Dark Elderberry Branch: Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva, a reading by Ilya Kaminsky and Jean Valentine. Alice James Books, 2012. 53 pages. $15.

The Oasis of Now, Sohrab Sepehri, translated by Kazim Ali and Mohammad Jafar Mahallati. BOA Editions, 2013. 86 pages. $16.

The Rest of the Voyage, Bernard Noël, translated by Eléna Rivera. Graywolf Press, 2011. 101 pages. $16.

Diaries of Exile, Yannis Ritsos, translated by Karen Emmerich and Edmund Keeley. Archipelago Books, 2013. 138 pages. $15.

Reading a book of poems in translation is a lot like being at a wedding as someone's date. You've never actually met the bride or groom, and you're stuck standing with a bunch of strangers trying to strike up conversation with the awkward inquiry, "So, how do you know the happy couple?" (The fear, of course, is that you'll ask this of the bride's own mother.) Slowly you piece together different parts of their lives. Talk to a childhood friend, and one picture of the bride begins to form in your head. Talk to a work colleague, and you get a completely different sense of her personality. Of course, you never actually get to talk with the bride at her own wedding, save for a "congratulations" and a "thanks for coming" as you shake hands in the receiving line. Instead of the real thing, she becomes an amalgam of these different portraits.

When sitting down to read a book of poetry in translation, I have to admit that the first question in my mind is indeed, "So, how do you know the poet?" By this, I mean that I want to know why the translator chose the particular author. What connection brought the translator to the wedding? More importantly, how does this connection color the picture of the poet that the book constructs? I ask these questions because a translation is an act of rewriting that necessarily interprets the original in various ways. How the translator views his role as an interpreter, whether stated or implied by his choices, helps me understand the parameters of this particular portrait of the poet.

My conversation with the book is, thankfully, less socially awkward as I sit in my easy chair sipping a cup of coffee. But there is still a little discomfort in the worry that I will show some profound ignorance of the poet's culture (oh, you're her mother!), since I lack a real familiarity with the majority of cultures around the world. Do I know enough about the history of the poet's country or the biographical details of her life in order to read her poetry well? How much are these things important in understanding her work? In this, I rely heavily on what the translator chooses to highlight in the introduction, notes, and other writings that contextualize the poetry for the reader.

Because of this, I am partial to books of poetry in translation that help me get a sense of the translator's approach. I don't mean technical choices but rather temperament: just as the poet has an overarching temperament that comes through in her work, so too the translator has a temperament in rewriting and contextualizing the poems. Temperament is different from tone or style or tendencies toward certain subject matter. All of these contribute to temperament, which remains ineffable, a kind of emotional hue that hangs around the writing and helps elevate it to what we call poetry. 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 Kaminsky'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 three 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 compassionate afterword 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 in such a brief selection.

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, nhh*. 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, *The Oasis of Now*, 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 sloping 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 abstract thought is refreshing. I go along with it, understanding that the idea of a thing is central to the way his mind seems to work. "It was midnight," he writes in one poem, "Because of the heavy storm of fruit / the idea of a tree contorted itself into a strange new blueprint."

But I have a harder time reading past the excessive use of modifiers, which shows up here and there in the short lyrics ("fresh watery tunes") and becomes problematic in the longer poems that frame the book. "Water's Footfall" and "The Traveler" explore, respectively, the beginning and ending of a literal and spiritual journey. "The Traveler" begins, "At dusk, amid the exhausted existence of every object and concept in the world, / expectant eyes observed the thick air of Time." As it continues, the modification of many nouns and verbs does indeed exhaust the poem, which might be a mark of the translators' desire to get it right by trying to capture the nuance of the original. Still, to Ali and Mahallati's credit, the musical muscularity of the short lyrics turns up in the long poems, which are interesting in their examinations of the spiritual quest narrative.

Bernard Noël's collection *The Rest of the Voyage*, translated from French by Eléna Rivera, is likewise invested in the insights presented by travel. It would be more accurate, though, to say (in)sights, since he is interested in how the gaze and our effort to capture visual moments necessarily alter them. The two long poems and section of short poems that make up the book are all concerned with travel. There is very little pathos here. Rather, the poems present moments of looking, one after the next, an accretion of observations that emerge out of the chaos around him. There is a sensation of continual motion as the focus picks out one image and then the next, magnifying bits and pieces of the whole, as in the short poem "Paris-Nantes":

> successive rows of shrubs hills and fog curtains
> drawn during the entire trip toward Le Mans
> current events suffocate us let us breathe
> they're a placard in the small sun suddenly
> fallen on the top of the station's platform
> then lowlands and the specter of apple
> trees [. . .]

Toward the end of the poem, this listing leads the speaker to reflect on it, which happens at rare but welcome moments in the collection:

> [. . .] the mind consumes the images and so keeps
> quiet this puts into it a light silence
> which sometimes is then itself reflected in
> order to just grasp the comings and goings
> of vision a crowd of trees washing their feet
> in a field of gray water covered in mist

Noël's rhythmic eleven-syllable line and the apokoinu constructions made possible by the lack of punctuation give a feeling of constant discovery in the creation of new meanings.

And it is precisely with a desire to discover and create new meanings that Rivera approaches the translation. Her temperament and method fit the material perfectly. In her introduction, she describes translating Noël's work as a resource and gift. The translations convey this sense of wealth in the abundance and mastery of her line variation, rhythm, and pacing—no small achievement when working in syllabics without punctuation. "At first I thought I would never be able to work with such a constraint over a long book of poems," Rivera confesses, "but it soon allowed me to let go of the French and make poems in English from his poems." In this way, the translations become an extension of Noël's project of refracting the ways in which we construct the world around us through choices in what we observe and how we convey it in language.

The liberation provided, ironically, by faithfulness to form allows Rivera's English poems to co-

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alesce. 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 3" 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 as "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 spare 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 despairs 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 drams 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 handkerchief / 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.

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: Obra poetica* (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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