

Writing Is Translation Is Writing

BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS REVIEW

fungus skull eye wing: selected poems of Alfonso D'Aquino, translated from the Spanish by Forrest Gander. Copper Canyon Press, 2013. 75 pages. \$17.

Theme of Farewell and After-Poems, Milo De Angelis, edited and translated from the Italian by Susan Stewart and Patrizio Ceccagnoli. The University of Chicago Press, 2013. 133 pages. \$25.

Our Lady of the Flowers, Echoic, Chris Tysh. Les Figues Press, 2013. 134 pages. \$15.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WRITING AND TRANSLATING? In his seminal 1975 study *After Babel*, George Steiner embraces translation as a model of human communication, whether it be in one language or between languages, when he declares that “all acts of communication are acts of translation.” When I first encountered this notion, I was both enthralled and overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of what it had to say about language, expression, and the transmission of culture. True, original work is never wholly independent from the language of previous centuries and authors, the long tradition out of which a new poem is born. As Octavio Paz put it, “Every text is unique and, at the same time, a translation of another text.” Likewise, literature is, in one sense, a process of internally translating an individual experience in a specific time and place. A poem written in any language is a translation of the writer’s own cultural beliefs, perspectives, and attitudes in an effort at imperfect mimesis. Translators often wave the flag of this idea in signaling the art rather than the science of their endeavor—the banner of the American Literary Translators Association website is emblazoned with Steiner’s words—which inevitably raises the question of whether there is really even any difference between writing and translating.

Perhaps the only difference is, as Willis Barnstone gives it to us, that a translation calls itself what it is and exposes the scarlet T of its shame.

In my own experience, there is a distinct change in feel when I put aside my own writing for the morning and turn to translating a new poem. All of the anxiety that goes along with searching out a poem’s subject and questioning its emotional intelligence falls away, and I am left with the fun part of writing. I can wander for hours in the forest of synonyms and syntax, idioms and inflections of tone. The forest seems never to end. And yet. And yet! What excites me most is when I stumble upon an unknown grotto and the translation does something that I’m not expecting, which is exactly what I would say about the process of writing an original poem. I’m always holding out for that moment of discovery.

How, you may ask, can a translation do something unexpected? Hasn’t the original already laid it all out? Yes, and no. Since poetry functions on polyvalence, translation for me is often a process of unwriting the poem into a prose form and then rewriting it again as poetry. The prose form loses multiplicity of meaning, inference, and music, yet it is an integral step in working with the material in a new grammatical structure, in fully bringing it over into a new language and avoiding translationese. It is a lot like working with my own first drafts of a poem—those prosaic messes that few poets like to share—in order to discover the poem within. Just like the writing of a poem, translation is a matter of process. Whatever that process may be, the ultimate assessment of a translation is whether it has indeed managed in the end to discover a poem in the new language. By this I mean whether it has tapped into a principle of selection from among all of the synonyms and structural variations, or if it is simply following the drift of the original.

From the very first lines of Alfonso D’Aquino’s *fungus skull eye wing*, Forrest Gander’s translation feels utterly exacting in its choices. The opening short-lined poem that is also punctuationless (as are the rest of the poems in the book—even more necessity for deliberate arrangement) highlights the specificity of verb placement:

The statue doesn’t
but its shadow shifts
throughout the day
making a circle

It traces its own way
across the stones
fingering forward
along a blind edge [. . .]

How odd that opening line is. It feels rigorous, demanding on syntax (which would feel more natural as “the statue doesn’t shift, but its shadow does”) in a way that emphasizes the statue’s active choice in not doing something rather than its passive immobility.

Gander tells us in the introduction that he is interested in how D’Aquino’s syntax braids together the relationship between the human and inhuman to emphasize “the mutuality of perceptual experience—the intertwining of the seer and the seen.” Gander’s simple yet essential choice in verb placement animates the inhuman world, as does his frequent use of verbs that ascribe body parts to the inhuman, as in “fingering forward.” The effect creates a kind of restlessness to the poems, a hyper-sentient awareness of nature and the networks that connect us to our surroundings.

This is not easy poetry; it can be difficult to identify or locate the lyric utterance. Rather than narrative or situation, we get moments of looking, as in the poem “(green fluorite)” that conveys several different experiences of observing a crystal with intense scrutiny. Like many of D’Aquino’s poems, the investigation centers on contact between the speaker’s body and the object:

The contact
between the feeble cobalt-
colored radiation
of my fingerprints
and the intense
orange radiation
of this opaque piece
of green fluorite
I hold between fingers
gives rise
—at the simplest level
of the radiant glow
of these distant and
splendid bodies—
to the imminent encounter
of my skin and the crystal
and the deepest rapprochement
between inner planes
that fuse
—vibrations of light
converted to music—
between the mineral heat that transports me
and the crystalline images
locking into place
behind my eyes [. . .]

This kind of encounter often builds, as it does here, to a connection that is both erotic and spiritual:

[. . .] A naked blue
body in plain sight
—that endless longing
for touch incandescing at the centerless
center
of every thought—
it stands maimed and lascivious
between coiled shadows that never stop
moving
—violet stumps
of legs and arms—
and it’s only visible
under the oblique light which flickers across it
its form unfolding
between my fingers
while it declares me and contains me
and in its dazzle
encodes
the instant in which I see it
and the colorless clarity of this room

How fitting that crystal in particular becomes the object of D'Aquino's inquiry. It allows the intertwining of the seer and the seen in its angular, opaque transparency that continues to unfold, to declare and contain what it mirrors as the crystal is turned. The poem also crystalizes an awareness of active attention in the process of reading. It's as if the poem is only fully formed at the moment of the reader's attention, building itself up to that moment, dissolving into opacity again after. By poem's end, we're left with the feeling of *Wait, what just happened?* and ready to read it all over again.

Gander points out that D'Aquino's poetry shares affinities with Hart Crane's, and I would agree. But instead of emphasizing a sense of private erotics, I would point to the way that both poets seem interested in how language at once builds and dissolves physical structures that stand for spiritual aspirations. This idea is a central motif in the book, captured by the play of variations on the words "transparent" and "translucent." In "Networks," the speaker's awareness of the resonances of natural forms is a matter of apperceiving each distinction, the "transparency of the particular / *the dissolved landscape*." And the final poem, "[Knot]," which is aptly titled and bracketed given the Droste effect of its ending, leaves us with a sense of never-ending refraction: "And the image in the depths of the image / [translucent] in another [image] translucing."

fungus skull eye wing is a book to read in one sitting, with the dictionary. It requires a certain kind of flight, a letting go of firm footing in normal modes of sense making and word usage so that you can fully immerse yourself in D'Aquino's perspective on a luminous natural landscape—and I'm not using "luminous" in that wishy-washy way that many books of poetry are called luminous, but because the world articulated by these poems has everything to do with light and how it "transparentizes," "iridesces," and allows things to be "interseen" (to use some of the book's wonderful neologisms). Part of my enjoyment in reading this book has to do with Gander's sensitivity to what he describes as the original's nuanced and counterpointed "orchestrations of sound," which become another organizing principle of his translation. He is smart enough not to try to stay "faithful" to the music of Spanish but to discover a new kind of orchestration suitable to the medium of English. But capturing music alone does not lift writing to the level of poetry. This iteration of D'Aquino's poetry displays all of Gander's writerly faculties at play and challenges us to pay close attention, lest we miss anything.

Milo De Angelis' *Theme of Farewell and After-Poems*, translated by Susan Stewart and Patrizio Ceccagnoli, similarly incites the reader to pay close

attention. Only, here the desire to not miss anything, to acknowledge and hold onto each line as it comes, derives from the book's intense aura of nostalgia. Even without knowing that the two collections comprising the book deal with the untimely death of the poet's wife from cancer, the heartbreak of nostalgia takes firm hold from the very first lines:

Keeping track of the seconds, the Eurostar's passenger coaches, to see you stepping down from the number nine, the baggage cart, the smile, the heartbeat, the news, the big news.
This happened in 1990. It happened, without a doubt it happened. And even before that, the dive into the Ticino's waters while the soccer ball was disappearing. It happened.
We saw the open secret of a moment.
The fairies were returning to their tenements, the hurricane was filling a hallucinated sky. Everything was there, emptied and full, for those of us who are waiting.

I reread this opening section a number of times before proceeding, not because I didn't understand it but because I recognized the feeling, ridiculous as it is, of not wanting to continue with a book that I know I will miss once I finish it. My premature nostalgia for the book and the speaker's nostalgia aligned in the numb repetition. "It happened, without a doubt / it happened."

This kind of awareness of anticipation, that heightened moment of waiting, is precisely the project of *Theme of Farewell* (leaving *After-Poems* aside for the moment). It explores how one's sense of time changes after receiving a terminal diagnosis. "Everything was / already on its way," De Angelis writes early in the sequence, "from then on, everything was here, unique / and lost, ours and far from us, burning. Everything asked / us to wait for it, to return to its true name." As he goes on to write elliptically of medical treatments and hospitals and visiting hours, the present grows immense with significance: "Inside the room, inside that exact way / of placing the objects, there was your anticipation / and everything was getting ready for the moment of entry, for the bare feet / crossing the border, every border [. . .]" This is an intimate grief, one, as Stewart points out in her introduction, that we are only allowed to follow mutely and only by accepting the poet's terms.

Stewart and Ceccagnoli took on one of the hardest translation tasks: to replicate repetitions and relationships between poems that build and change throughout a book-length sequence. Especially for a poet writing in the hermetic vein, the recurrence and mutation of a private lexicon is paramount. Yet translation often thwarts efforts at one-to-one recurrence and calls for real ingenuity in replicating word play. Each language functions differently when it comes to how it builds poetic linkages, and the Anglophone reader is accustomed to making connections not just through direct correspondence but also through synonym structures. For example, the passage quoted above from "Everything was already on its way" uses anaphora by repeating "tutto" in the original, for which the translators rightly employ synonyms at the beginning of the poem:

Everything was already on its way. From then to here. All of time, luminous, skimmed across the lips. All the sighs strung on the necklace. Lambrante's shadows shut the door. The whole room, taken in, became the first heartbeat [. . .]

If they had tried for a more direct correlation to the original by hinging the anaphora on the word "every" where "tutto" occurs in the original, the meaning would shift drastically. "Every time" is utterly different from "all of time," "every room" distinctly universal compared to "the whole room."

"[T]he sequence is of paramount importance to De Angelis," Stewart writes in her introduction. With this as a guiding principle, the translators allow us to track the resonances that build throughout the second book, *After-Poems*. They have managed to preserve many of the direct repetitions that occur here, often carried by nouns: shower, hand, syllable, sentence, wine cellar, notebook, soccer ball. *After-Poems* feels less immediate than *Theme of Farewell*. Yet it provides an interesting revision of many of the same themes, which is its own kind of return from the vantage of time. "It will happen, / you used to say," De Angelis recalls the beginning of *Theme of Farewell* in the first section of *After-Poems*, "everything that happened / will happen." The specific switching between tenses gives pause and points to a further comment on how one's sense of time changes with time. Everything that happened will happen again and again in memory.

Given this terrain, De Angelis' poetry explores the implication that writing is a process of translating, in this case of translating the past through memory. His own experience as a translator of Virgil, Racine, Baudelaire, and others perhaps makes him more attuned to the idea, which he explores directly in several sections. In *Theme of Farewell*, it becomes a metaphor for love-making that culminates in "the sound / of the forgotten moment, the

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certainty of having / made a mistake in the translation.” He returns to the idea with more distance in *After-Poems*:

That’s how it is. The memory
of a man was only this
handful of syllables. Only they
come back from the wine cellars
where they live rent-free
and well-timed, they are
thrown beyond the rocks, they whisper
astonished words, they are a flapping
of wings, reaching forward, faithful
to a secret order. Now you
must do the translation.

Reading De Angelis’ words, I am struck by the possibility that writing conceived as translation inevitably carries within it an element of elegy—for times past, for experience never fully rendered, for that famous remainder of what’s lost in translation.

But there is also, of course, so much found. Which is the case with Chris Tysh’s poetic adaptation of Jean Genet’s novel *Notre-Dame des Fleurs*. Tysh’s book-length novel in verse, *Our Lady of the Flowers, Echoic*, raises the question of how to differentiate between writing and rewriting. Presented as original poetry, the book nonetheless performs a kind of translation (as both the introduction and publicity material describe it) in transforming a novel written in French into a poem written in English. Is this an adaptation, a reinvention, an appropriation? When do we stop calling something a translation and start calling it something else?

As does Genet’s novel, Tysh’s poem revolves around a set of characters that inhabit the Parisian underworld of drag queens, pimps, and thieves in the early 1940s. The non-linear story is narrated by a prisoner who at times merges with the central character, the drag queen Divine. “As I dart around, turning D into a saint,” the narrator tells us, “The reader will have to improvise his own / Notion of time and duration. Beyond good / And evil, I take her by the hand and lead [. . .]” At the same time, the narrator uses these stories, which are often lurid and transgressive on various levels, as an aid to masturbation. Sartre famously called Genet’s novel an “epic of masturbation,” and Tysh’s poem explores a similar terrain. “Some mornings, men wake up gasping,” the narrator admits, “So horny they’d swallow their own hand / To be done with wanting.”

The raw material may be the same, but Tysh transmutes it into poetry. To give you a sense of the kind of alchemy she performs on Genet’s prose, take this description of Divine’s lover, the pimp Mignon Dainty-Feet:

I must insist on Mignon’s looks
Undoubtedly a thug he carries
Bits of light that trail like ivy on a stele
A pedestal half-hidden with flowers
He’s been pissing on since boyhood:
Legs spread, knees slightly bent
“I’ve dropped a pearl,” he says

The poem uses this form of seven-line stanzas throughout and draws a wonderful momentum from the push-pull of enjambment and sonic rhythm. The stanza above corresponds to a long paragraph in the novel, here in the 1963 English version by Bernard Frechtman, who translates the name Mignon as Darling:

Though a hoodlum, Darling had a face of light. He was the handsome male, gentle and violent, born to be a pimp, and of so noble a bearing that he seemed always to be naked, save for one ridiculous and, to me, touching movement: the way he arched his back, standing first on one foot, then on the other, in order to take off his trousers and shorts. Before his birth, Darling was baptized privately, that is, beatified too, practically canonized, in the warm belly of his mother. He was given the kind of emblematic baptism which, upon his death, was to send him to limbo; in short, one of those brief ceremonies, mysterious and highly dramatic in their compactness, sumptuous too, to which the Angels were convoked and in which the votaries of the Divinity were mobilized, as was the Divinity Itself. Darling is aware of this, though only slightly, that is, throughout his life, rather than anyone’s telling him such secrets aloud and intelligibly, it seems that someone whispers them to him. And this private baptism, with which his life began, gilds his life as it unfolds, envelops it in a warm, weak, slightly luminous aureole, raises for this pimp’s life a pedestal garlanded with flowers, as a maiden’s coffin is bedecked with woven ivy, a pedestal massive though light, from the top of which, since the age of fifteen, Darling has been pissing in the following position: his legs spread, knees slightly bent, and in more rigid jets since the age of eighteen. For we should stress the point that a very gentle nimbus always isolates him from too rough a contact with his own sharp angles. *If he says, ‘I’m dropping a pearl,’ or ‘A pearl slipped,’ he*

means that he has farted in a certain way, very softly, that the fart has flowed out very quietly. [Emphasis mine]

The paragraph goes on about Darling’s farts for a while, all of which is passed over in Tysh’s adaptation. She lets the rambling and noise of background narrative fall away in favor of the striking image. We lose more than a little of the idea behind that image, yet her poetic compression deftly juxtaposes Mignon’s angelic aura with his crass ways.

At times, especially toward the end of the book, the intensity of the poem’s imagery and lyricism falters in favor of narrative. The lines grow shorter as the momentum of the plot quickens, and the poem becomes a little dull. I couldn’t help but wonder if this was a result of “fidelity” to the original’s narrative arc. Even given all of the project’s betrayals, the original shows through at such moments and marks the poem as an act of translation. It is possible to approach the book as a work of original writing, but it cannot be read adequately without the knowledge of its link to what came before.

Our Lady of the Flowers, Echoic feels less taboo than Genet’s novel undoubtedly was when it was first published in 1943. Television and movies have inured us to the criminal world and blurred the line between moral and immoral. The poem’s biggest transgression is, perhaps, the very act of its appropriation. Some of the most moving moments occur when the narrator grows self-reflective and contemplates the very nature of his impulse toward lyricism:

At times when I’m really down
I can’t help but sing certain key
Phrases pimps invent behind
Closed doors. That kind of slang
Turns me inside out like a glove
As I pan with my sluice box
Amidst waste and gravel

I can’t help but read these meta moments as descriptions of Tysh’s own poetic project, as her form of the *Ars Poetica*. Tysh pans with her sluice box in the river of Genet’s prose to discover lyric gold—those certain keys that strike the ear and keep the pen moving.

I will be returning to each of these books often to keep my own pen moving. They represent the kind of “great labor” that Eliot talked about in terms of a poet’s claiming of the past. The translator and the writer alike always have before them the poem that stands prior, and they proceed fully aware that “art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same.”

A recent Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, MIRA ROSENTHAL is the author of the prize-winning collection *The Local World*. She has received numerous awards, including fellowships from the NEA, PEN, and the MacDowell Colony. She is a translator of contemporary Polish literature, most recently Tomasz Różycki’s *Colonies*, which won the 2014 Northern California Book Award and is shortlisted for the 2014 Griffin Poetry Prize and for the PEN Award for poetry in translation. Her poems, translations, and essays have been published in many literary journals and anthologies, including *Ploughshares*, *Harvard Review*, *Slate*, *PN Review*, *A Public Space*, *AGNI Online*, and *Mentor and Muse: Essays from Poets to Poets*. She will be the Distinguished Visiting Writer at Cornell College next spring.

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