

ELOGE DU LOINTAIN

Aux sources de tes yeux
vivent les filets des pêcheurs
Aux sources de tes yeux
la mer tient ses promesses.

C'est là que je jette,
coeur qui connaît les hommes,
mes vêtements et je fais d'un serment:

Plus noir dans le noir, je suis nu davantage.
Le renoncement seul fait moi-même.

Aux sources de tes yeux
je dérive, rêvant de rapine.
Un filet capta un filet:
nous nous séparons enlacés.

Aux sources de tes yeux
un pendu étrangle la corde.

(trad. Denise Naville)

On Paul Celan

—John Felstiner

Many languages have a bad word to say for translation, a pejorative metaphor. In Yiddish, kissing a bride through her veil; in French, *les belles infidèles*, comely (and hence unfaithful) women—the invidious inverse being faithful, thus homely; in *Don Quixote*, the wrong side of a Persian carpet, its design blurred by extra threads; and famously in Italian, *traduttore-traditore* (translator-traitor). Then English, “Poetry is what gets lost in translation”—but why not “lost and found” as an apt metaphor of exchange? Pace Robert Frost, something may well be gained in translation.

Or if gain seems presumptuous, then at least something is gained in scrutinizing the process of carrying a poem across from one tongue into another. (Again a metaphor: carry across= Latin *trans-late*= Greek *meta-phor*.) Having learned so much from seeing Pablo Neruda’s *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* into English, I find this sort of scrutiny revealing, not only of poetry’s transnational contingencies but of its essence. Paul Celan once said, *La poésie ne s'impose plus, elle s'expose*. “Poetry no longer imposes, it exposes itself,” and the same may be said of translation.

Taken at its fullest, the act of translating a poem works doubly. To reach a fresh, idiomatic, yet just version, one moves by way of history, biography, literary tradition, theory, philology, prosody—whatever serves. And in becoming fully answerable—that “attentiveness” Celan called “the natural prayer of the soul”—one opens a sense of the poem. The task is at once creative and critical.

Take Celan’s “Lob der Ferne” (Praise of Distance), a poem that stems from his brief 1948 Viennese sojourn. In translating it, I kept in mind—among other things—Celan’s 1948 essay on the surrealist painter Edgar Jené. Summoning “the ash of burnt-out meaning and not only that,” Celan’s essay proposes to “never leave the depths and keep holding dialogue with the dark wellsprings.”

But it was Celan’s painstaking 1955 revisions to a French translation of “Lob der Ferne” (Eloge du Lointain) that ultimately gave me a glimpse of the poem’s intent. Before Denise Naville’s translation came to light, I had tried “Wildsea” for Celan’s invented word *Irrsee*. Then I saw how Naville’s *eau trouble* (troubled water) had provoked Celan to suggest *la Mer Egare[e]* (the wayward, bewildered sea), and then *la Mer Démente*—which led my own translation from “Wildsea” to “Madsea” for those dark depths of silence.

BABEL AND BEYOND

Translators on Translation

Paul CELAN

ELOGE DU LOINTAIN

Aux sources de tes yeux
vivent les filets des pêcheurs de la Mer Démente.

Aux sources de tes yeux
la mer tient ses promesses.

C'est là que je jette,
coeur qui a séjourné parmi les humains,
mes vêtements
et me défais de l'éclat d'un serment:

Plus noir dans le noir, je suis nu davantage.
Dans la défection je suis fidèle.
Je suis, étant moi-même, toi.

Aux sources de tes yeux
je dérive, rêvant de rapine.

Un filet capta un filet:
nous nous séparons enlacés.

Where the lyric speaker (in Naville's translation) calls himself a heart *qui connaît les hommes*, "who is acquainted with men," I had come somewhat closer to *das geweilt unter Menschen*: "who abode among men." But then came Celan, *qui a séjourné parmi les humains*, specifying *Menschen*, human beings he could trust.

What did it mean for the poet veering these French verses, not strictly his, toward his own? After the war with its "thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech," Celan had been asked if he would switch to Romanian or French. But "only in the mother tongue can one speak one's own truth," he replied. "In a foreign tongue the poet lies." Celan once told a German audience that "this one thing: language, remained near and not lost in the midst of the losses," and that a poem, "in essence dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the—not always greatly hopeful—belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps." So the poet's small cleavings, urging the French closer to his mother tongue, meant no less than survival.

Inserting his own German lines as touchstones, Celan took most pains with two stark paradoxes at the poem's center. *Abtrünnig erst bin ich treu* had yielded Naville's *Le reniement seul fait ma foi* (Only denial makes my faith). Consulting his bilingual dictionary, he plotted French possibilities for *abtrünnig*: "unfaithful," "in revolt," "rebellious"; and for the action: "defect," "abandon," "desert," "deny one's faith." First he made it *Dans la défection, je suis fidèle* (In defection I am faithful). But the final draft of the French version shows just one change—*Apostat*, a religious distancing—and I have followed in English with "Apostate only am I true."

For the poem's strangest paradox, *Ich bin du, wenn ich ich bin*, Celan sought something more literal. *Je suis toi, lorsque je suis moi* (I am you, when I am I). But he ultimately reverted to Naville's mysterious *Je suis, étant moi-même, toi* (I am, being myself, you). In any event, it is Paul Celan's *ich ich* that astonishes, the first-person sprung against itself. Would it work in English? "I am you, when I I am"!

Beneath its sexual drift, Celan's paradox can hold for a kind of translational genius: *Ich bin du, wenn ich ich bin*. A brilliant translator himself, Celan rendered Apollinaire, Mandelstam, Shakespeare and Dickinson with penetrating, possessive energy, taking them too through the "thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech" in his own naked human voice.

Lob der Ferne

Im Quell deiner Augen
leben die Garne der Fischer der Irrsee.
Im Quell deiner Augen
hält das Meer sein Versprechen.

Hier werf ich,
ein Herz, das geweilt unter Menschen,
die Kleider von mir und den Glanz eines Schwures:

Schwärzer im Schwarz, bin ich nackter.
Abtrünnig erst bin ich treu.
Ich bin du, wenn ich ich bin.

Im Quell deiner Augen
treib ich und träume von Raub.

Ein Garn fing ein Garn ein:
wir scheiden umschlungen.

Im Quell deiner Augen
erwürgt ein gehenkter den Strang.

Praise of Distance

In the springs of your eyes
Live the Madsea fishermen's nets.
In the springs of your eyes
The sea keeps its promise.

Here, as a heart
That abode among humans,
I throw off my clothes and the glare of an oath.

Blacker in black, am I more naked.
Apostate only am I true.
I am you, when I am I.

In the springs of your eyes
I drift on and dream of spoils.

A net snared a net:
Embracing we sever.

In the springs of your eyes
A hanged man strangles the rope.



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