There is nothing more logical than a language in which everything that's illogical is an exception!

– Witold Gombrowicz
CALQUE: (kælk) [Fr., lit. ‘copy’, f. calquer ‘to trace’ (a design, etc.), ad. It. calcare, ad. L. calcare ‘to tread’.] 1. n: A loan translation; a literal translation of a compound, derivative, or phrase from one language to another, e.g. ‘thought experiment’ calqued from the German gedankenexperiment, ‘free verse’ calqued from the French vers libre, ‘blue-blood’ calqued from the Spanish sangre azul; vt. to adopt a word or phrase from one language to another by semantic translation of its parts. 2. n, vt: In translation practice, to consciously translate a word into the target language in a way that releases meaning not contained in the source language, e.g. to translate the contemporary Italian soggiorno into the archaic ‘sojourn.’ 3. n: An original work of fiction written using the conceptual or aesthetic system of a source text; literary work that translates not the content of a source text, but the mode in which that text was written, e.g. Ulysses, where Joyce’s hero traces a journey analogous to that of Odysseus while the novel itself stylistically and thematically genealogizes the English literary canon, beginning with Homer’s Odyssey.

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I Was A Frustrated Shoplifter: A True Tale of Woe

On April 29, 2007, at about three in the afternoon, I left my apartment in South Philadelphia intent on committing a petty crime. I headed north on the Broad Street subway, exiting at the Walnut Street Station. I walked two blocks north and entered the Borders Books and Music store located on the Northeast corner of the intersection of Broad and Chestnut Streets.

The security guard at that Border's location has a marked tendency to shadow me while I'm in the store. When I saw that he was not at work that day, I was relieved.

The crime I had in mind was the theft of a copy of Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*. I had read a borrowed copy the week before. Returning the book to its rightful owner had been an unpleasant experience, and I had determined to get a copy for myself. I planned to read it again right away. I could not, however, afford the $27.00 cover price. So I decided to steal it. Such an act would be in keeping with the spirit of the novel and its author, after all.

By the time I was in the store, physically and psychologically prepared for the commission of the caper, *The Savage Detectives* had been on bookstore shelves throughout the country for about three weeks. It had received a lot of attention in the press. Basically, it was the book of the month. I had not counted on this.

There were no copies of the book in the store. A clerk verified this strange fact for me. "That's weird," she said, checking again, "Yeah, it's sold out. How about that?"

I walked a few blocks to a Barnes and Noble. There were no copies there either. My will to crime increased with these frustrations. I slipped into several small, independent bookstores, ready to left hand the thing on sight, to grab it and run. Or to create some diversion, shout "FIRE," fake a seizure, punch an infant, and flee with my loot in the ensuing confusion. I was prepared to assault anyone who pursued me. I was ready to hide the book beneath a dumpster, like Charles Manson's guitar buried in the desert, and return for it when I was released from jail. I would have done anything.

But there was nothing I could do. There simply were no copies. Anywhere. I am somewhat consoled by the fact that what prevented me from accomplishing my crime was an event as unthinkable as the seven plagues must have been to Pharaoh. The first edition of a serious novel in translation had sold out, at least in Philadelphia. Amazing.

That said, I still haven't found a copy. And I still want one. Those with one in their possession should hesitate to invite me into their homes.

Brandon Holmquest

Notes on Reading Calque 2

I'm not going to talk much about our editorial goals this time because this 220-page book of translations, source material, interviews and criticism says everything about what we're doing. No jabs about the publishing industry or the literary landscape. We obviously think that it's important to find out what translators are thinking, so we talked to a couple. We obviously think it's important to publish Introductions by the translators in front of the translations, so we did. Obviously we think it makes sense to publish the original material as it appears in the original. And it's probably obvious that we think translations should be reviewed a certain way. Like other critical writers, translators use a variety of sources (criticism, biographies, reviews, other translations) to make their choices, so while an author's intentions may be a mystery, we can know the discourse (the language of the dialogue) into which the text was written. We can know its historical context and its reception. We can know the critical fossils that followed the text - essays or reviews written by notable or notorious critics. Knowing the world of ideas connected to a text is especially important in translation because translations are already part of that web.

An actual note actually on reading: Two symbols are dispersed throughout the book. The first: \[ \] indicates that a line has been broken by the margin, and not by the poem. The second: \[ > > \] indicates that the poem runs over the page and continues below, two numerical pages after because of our layout.

One final note on notes: Our website (calquejournal.com) features extensive glossaries and bibliographical information associated with the interviews.

Steve Dolph
Over the last six years, Natasha Wimmer has been quietly amassing an arsenal of translations in her name at the staggering pace of almost two a year. Quietly, that is, until the recent release of Roberto Bolaño’s *The Savage Detectives* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2007), a translation that has served as the catalyst for an explosion of interest in Latin-American literature generally, and in Bolaño specifically. In a very real sense, Roberto Bolaño is nobody’s secret anymore.

Wimmer’s first translation, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s *Dirty Havana Trilogy* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), is narrated by a man named Pedro Juan, a Cuban sex aesthete down and out and dossing on a Malecón rooftop among livestock and homewreckers. Her translation of Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The Way to Paradise* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 2003), tells the story of Gaugin’s misadventures in Tahiti, at the time a provincial backwater, and in particular Gaugin’s trials attempting to paint his Tahitian lover sleeping through a nightmare. *The Savage Detectives* takes the world of a Mexican poetic movement called visceral realism and throttles it with a rage unique to Bolaño, a combination of revenge sex, smutty talk and slap boxing. These novels are about art and dirt, and the people who make both simultaneously.

But Wimmer’s ability to represent these underworlds in English is not marred by the colloquial odors of the language these authors use. Her translations are precise, surgical. She cuts through the dense belly fat that might stick to other, less studied translations, and creates new voices for these authors in English, voices as raunchy and hard-boiled as the language allows, while at the same time as erudite and lucid as their Spanish counterparts.

Natasha Wimmer is currently at work on a translation of Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*, and was recently awarded an NEA grant for her work on this translation.

**Calque:** Tell us about your start as a translator.

**Wimmer:** I lived in Madrid for four years while I was growing up (from the time I was 10 until I was 14), which is where I learned to speak Spanish. Then I studied Spanish literature in college, and spent my junior year abroad in Madrid. So my Spanish is essentially Castilian Spanish, and my background is in peninsular literature. As far as apprenticeship is concerned: I had done some technical translations earlier on, but I would say that I learned most from editing, and also from simply reading.

I took on my first translating project while I was working at Farrar, Straus and Giroux. My first job in New York was as an editorial assistant at FSG, and I later became the managing editor, spending half of my time editing manuscripts and the other half trying haplessly to manage the house list. I worked on a lot of projects in translation, and when we had trouble finding a translator for *Dirty Havana Trilogy*, I decided to try a sample myself. FSG gave me the go-ahead, and that was how I got my start—through the back door.

Why did I decide to take a shot at it in the first place? Well, I think everyone who sets out to work in publishing is essentially trying to find one way or another to be as close as possible to the books they love. I had realized early on that I would never be a fiction writer, and I liked the idea that as a translator you could work on books that had already proved they deserved the world’s attention. I felt strongly that there were more than enough books in existence already (this was reinforced by my time at *Publishers Weekly*!), and that it would be most satisfying to throw my efforts behind the best of them. Also, what I liked most about being an editor was the pure line-editing—working on paper with language. I knew I wouldn’t mind sitting at a desk alone all day (and in fact I don’t—mostly).

My methods as a translator owe a lot to my training as an editor. Sometimes I almost feel as if translation is editing, just in a different form. I begin with a very fast, rough translation of a chunk of text (usually 8-10 pages), and then go back over it like someone editing a draft. I’m also very conscious of the need to
pull back from the work, of trying to view it from the reader's perspective, to feel the sweep of it rather than the crawl of it.

**Calque:** What were some of the manuscripts that moved across your desk at FSG?

**Wimmer:** Some of the translations I worked on in various capacities were Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Shadows on the Hudson*, Raphaël Confiant's *Mamzelle Dragonfly*, and Emmanuel Dongala's *Little Boys Come From the Stars*. I also edited a biography of Manuel Puig, by Suzanne Jill Levine, herself a translator (of Puig and Guillermo Cabrera Infante, among others).

**Calque:** This is a question often asked of authors, but I've never heard it asked of a translator: Who are your influences?

**Wimmer:** In a very general sense, all writers who revel in the pragmatic—writers who approach their work as a craft. I hugely admire the great natural talents, the force-of-nature writers like García Márquez, say, (and I love to read them), but I'm most moved by writers who conquer some kind of innate awkwardness in language and storytelling, or make that awkwardness part of their work. What's interesting about the great contemporary writers, I think, is that they seem to fall into both categories at once. Bolaño, for example, or David Foster Wallace, or (in a different register, and one of my favorites) Norman Rush. In a more specific (and possibly contradictory) sense, I would say that my translations are influenced by ideals of clarity, directness, and timelessness, maybe more as reflected in nonfiction than fiction, from Herodotus to Montaigne to contemporary essayists and journalists.

**Calque:** In your essay, "Roberto Bolaño and The Savage Detectives" you allude to dealing with this "awkwardness in language" that is a part of the work when you say that Bolaño's "two big books were intended to be something else: works encompassing rough edges, lapses, faults." Am I reaching to assume that you're talking about the ways in which Bolaño's novels redefine the genre around them? I think you're saying that the novel's form and content performs its moral/aesthetic imperative, this demand that "life [bleed] fully into art."

**Wimmer:** I do think that from the very beginning Bolaño wanted to collapse the divide between art and life. At first, he wanted to make the act of living a work of art (as he declares in his infrarrealist manifesto). Clearly, he wasn't the first to come up with the idea, but he took it pretty far—you could argue that even Rimbaud didn't squander (or lavish) as many years on reckless living. Then, taking things in the other direction, he did cram as much life as possible into his art. On the most basic level, *The Savage Detectives* (according to those who knew him) is 99% thinly veiled autobiography. Pretty much every character in the novel is based on a character in real life. And rather than try to tastefully cover his tracks, I get the sense that Bolaño reveled in exposing his sources. On a more sophisticated level, I think he relishes a similar rawness. Plenty of recent novels published in English make use of self-referentiality and the knowing blurring of fact and fiction, but they usually take an ironic tone. Bolaño is using the tools of meta-fiction to heighten our sense of existence rather than to achieve a privileged detachment.

**Calque:** What are the elements in novels that entice you to pick them as projects? Do you choose projects based on your tastes as a reader, or is there something else at work?

**Wimmer:** Taste enters into it—I would never translate a work I didn't respect, and I have turned down a few proposals—but because I got into translation from the publishing end of things, I've always been in the position of accepting commissions rather than proposing projects. I do some work as a reader for a few publishing houses, but there isn't a direct connection between reading and translating. So far, I've been lucky enough to work on great books, things that would have qualified as labors of love. The ideal translations, in my mind, are books that advance the literary conversation, but those are few and far between, and I'm also happy to work on novels by writers who are simply great storytellers or stylists. And I have a soft spot for nonfiction and for some unfashionable post-Civil War novels by writers from Spain, which I might pursue if I ever get some breathing room.
Calque: If you wanted to do something somewhat arbitrary you could trace a connection from Gutiérrez and Bolaño to post Civil War Spanish novelists (because you say unfashionable I’m assuming you’re not talking about Cela and other generación 50 writers), the connection being, in a political sense, disillusion with “the Revolution” whatever its manifestation, and in a literary sense rejection of the aesthetics paradoxically enforced by this “Revolution.”

Wimmer: I don’t know—it seems somewhat of a stretch. The literary and historical contexts are pretty different. And actually, I am talking about the generación 50 writers—but some of the lesser known ones (Carmen Laforet, Mercé Rodoreda, Ana María Matute, and I would argue that Cela is pretty unfashionable). Laforet and co. were writing in a climate of repression, under the guise of decorous prose. Their challenge was to master metaphor and veiled reference. Bolaño, meanwhile, is reacting to a world where everything is permitted, and his response is maximalist.

Calque: If there is a political current running through the project choices that set the parameters for “taste,” in what sense are the choices you make as a translator politically informed? Or do you stay focused on the literary relevance and aesthetic appeal of a text?

Wimmer: I certainly don’t approach translation in a boosterish kind of way—i.e. I don’t feel that novels should be translated solely because a certain country’s literature deserves greater representation in English. I think there are three categories of translations published in the U.S. today. First, classics with a built-in audience; second, popular page-turners, often with a literary veneer (e.g. Arturo Pérez Reverte); third, ambitious fiction that the serious reader feels a responsibility to familiarize himself with. Everything in between—what you might call mid-list fiction—is very hard to publish in translation. Or at least that’s how it seems to me. And maybe it’s not such a bad thing.

Calque: Did you begin to develop a large-scale theoretical approach as you worked on your earlier translations?

Wimmer: The only large-scale adjustment I’ve made (it doesn’t really qualify as a theoretical approach) is to nudge closer to fluency and further from fidelity. The struggle to balance fluency and fidelity is, of course, the classic translator’s dilemma. The more experienced I become, the more comfortable I feel taking a looser approach. But I still agonize about all kinds of decisions, large and small. On the sentence level, I’ve definitely come up with solutions to recurring problems. For example, there are certain filler words that I’ve come to recognize in Spanish and that I don’t feel I have to translate every time. And when I’m faced with a difficult sentence, I’ve developed the strategy of fixing on a certain key word or phrase and building the sentence around it. Then, if that doesn’t work, I choose a different word and try again. This prevents me from banging up over and over again against an awkward literal rendition.

Calque: In “Anglicizing El Ingenioso Hidalgo” (The Believer, July 2004), you wrote, “In general, the antidomestication approach is riskier. When it is successful, it gives the work a texture it lacks in a more standard translation, but when it fails it introduces a clumsiness that wasn’t present in the original text and draws gratuitous attention to the translation. What it often sacrifices is consistency—the cohesion of voice that comes naturally in the original, but which must be surreptitiously constructed in the translation.” Can you elaborate a bit on what the “antidomestication” approach to translation entails? Can this be extended into an approach toward an aesthetics of translation?

Wimmer: Well, to be honest, I don’t know much more than what you’ve quoted here. I’ve read very little translation theory, and I was basing my conclusions on other translations I’d read, on vaguely remembered Derrida-Barthes-etc., and on a sense that contemporary theory, in a mild and maybe unconscious form, had only fairly recently trickled down into mainstream translation. Even in English fiction, there’s been a recent fascination with broken English, or foreignized English: take Aleksandar Hemon, for example.

Calque: This approach comes, as you say, from Lawrence Venuti’s critical work on translation. Has Venuti’s critical work influ-
enced you as a translator or as a critic of translations?

**Wimmer:** I haven't read enough Venuti to be able to claim that he's influenced me as a translator. And in fact, while I'm fascinated by some writing on translation (particularly histories of translation and translator's memoirs, which I'd like to read more of), I'm wary of the academic perspective, partly because the focus often seems to be on translation as an end in itself, rather than as a tool.

**Calque:** How is the issue of "cohesion of voice" complicated when you're translating novels with many voices like *Delirio* and *Los Detectives Salvajes?*

**Wimmer:** I would say that a certain cohesion is built into the text. The author's larger choices—writing mostly in dialogue, relying on extended passages of description, using interior monologue, etc.—do far more than you might think to establish a voice or tone. What the translator can add is mostly fine-tuning. That said, I'm always very conscious of rhythm, and both Restrepo and Bolaño have very distinctive rhythms. With both novels, I wrestled a lot with run-on sentences (or sentences that would be considered run-ons in English). Restrepo's are more torrential; Bolaño's are more syncopated and unpredictable. In both cases, I had to decide how to handle them, and where it was permissible to break them up or add punctuation when basic sense was compromised in English. I would say this was the biggest challenge of both translations.

In terms of the specific voices of different characters, I'm very careful to try to choose the right vocabulary. When it comes to slang, I try to choose equivalents that are appropriate but not too dated or hackneyed. In practical terms, that means I gravitate toward the neutral, the literal, and the relatively obscure, trying to blend elements of all three to achieve something that will be at once distinctive and as timeless as possible. I think it's a general problem of translation that the formal and the informal sit uneasily together. Translators tend to fall into a more formal style in expository prose, and then reach too hard for slang terms in dialogue. I don't think I always succeed in avoiding the problem, but I'm conscious of it.

**Calque:** There's an interesting tension here in terms of where these difficult patterns are coming from, apart from the bolts and nuts of the sentences. These two authors are from diametrically opposed literary camps. Restrepo is oft-aligned with Allende and Bolaño was decidedly, emphatically, even scatologically anti-Allende. In what ways do the literary traditions these writers are working in (or against) impact your translation?

**Wimmer:** I really don't approach translation so strategically—I wish I did. Restrepo and Bolaño are definitely coming from different directions—Restrepo embraces the legacy of the Boom, whereas Bolaño rejects it. As a result, Restrepo is working in a more established tradition, and it might have been easier for me to find models to work from in translating *Delirium,* but it didn't happen that way.

**Calque:** In her birthday speech for Don Quixote at the PEN American Tribute for his 400th, Restrepo says of our experience with modernity, "what was madness for [Quixote], for contemporary man turns out to be a privileged form of reason." This cryptic sentence, at the end of an even more cryptic paragraph about metaphysical self-destruction, seems to perfectly sum up Agustina, Restrepo's protagonist in *Delirio.* To what extent, if at all, did thought-fragments like these influence your translation of this novel?

**Wimmer:** Not so much, except insofar as I tried to preserve Laura's general suggestiveness and metaphorical language. I like the way Agustina's metaphysical (and physical) deterioration seems to mirror Colombia's, but I don't think that even really occurred to me while I was translating the novel.

**Calque:** What kinds of access points did you look for while you were translating this dense, complex, and polyphonic novel?

**Wimmer:** It's been a while since I worked on *Delirium* (I translated it before *The Savage Detectives*), so I don't remember the specific process quite as well. In general, though, the Agustina
and Portulinus sections came more easily, and the Midas and Aguilar sections were more difficult. Midas for obvious reasons—it's always hard to translate slang, particularly when it's very regional and street-y. Aguilar was difficult because he has the most neutral voice—or rather, his is the voice of the reader, the observer. I tried to get across his slight stuffiness (the professor side of him), and also his more lyrical, literary side.

**Calque:** Restrepo's novels are wildly popular in Spanish in the US, and the translations follow suit. What's going on there?

**Wimmer:** I think Restrepo beautifully captures the sense of longing and nostalgia a lot of Hispanic readers feel for their countries (not just Colombia), while at the same time mourning so much waste and loss. At the same time, she does more than almost any heir of the Boom to give Magic Realism today a good name (not an easy task). Like García Márquez, she is a natural storyteller, and her prose is at once challenging and comforting. I would say that's a pretty good recipe for popularity.

**Calque:** One striking feature of your translation of *Delirio* is the shift from the third-person in the original: “Té lo voy a contar a calzón quitado porque tienes derecho a saberlo, le dice el Midas McAlister a Agustina,” to the first-person in the translation: “I'm going to tell you this point-blank because you have the right to know it, Agustina sweetheart, and anyway what do I have to lose talking about it all.” Can you talk about this decision, and what you think it does to (or for) the translation?

**Wimmer:** This was actually a decision made by Restrepo herself, in consultation with her literary agent in the U.S., Tom Colchie. The feeling was that the mixing of third person and first person wouldn't work as well in English as it did in Spanish, since the switch back and forth would be less distinct. I think it was probably the right choice—especially since at least one reviewer has written that the Agustina sections (which were the only ones that retained the first/third person back and forth) were occasionally confusing.

**Calque:** For all the problems that translating *Delirio* must have caused, the Bolaño must have been much worse. Most of the novel is a tangle of narrators (52 in all, each with a perfectly distinct, instantly recognizable voice) reflecting back on encounters with Belano and Lima starting in 1976. How did the novel's historical and/or literary context affect not only your reading, but your translation strategy?

**Wimmer:** In a basic sense, it involved a lot of fact-checking—I had to look up all the obscure poets and get some sense of who they were, for example. That's always a fun part of translating—becoming a mini-expert on the world of a novel. On a more abstract level, I was definitely conscious of the historical and literary context, but more as backdrop than anything else (and because it was interesting to me). As usual, it really only affected the translation practically in terms of language choices.

A more immediate influence on me while I was translating the novel was the time I spent in Mexico City. I was there for two months while I was working on the translation, and I lived on Calle Abraham González, which is the next street over from Bucareli. Everything I saw and heard seemed to relate somehow to the novel, and help me understand it better. I spent lots of time at Café La Habana (the original of the novel's Café Quito), and picked up on lots of slang. I wish I had been able to go to Bogotá while I was working on *Delirium*. Wish I could visit every country in any way related to anything I've ever translated!

**Calque:** What happened to the literary scene in Mexico City when *Los Detectives Salvajes* came out in 1998?

**Wimmer:** I don't really know what happened to the literary scene in Mexico City when the novel came out, although Francisco Goldman has written that young writers in Mexico City idolized Bolaño in the same way as an earlier generation idolized Gabriel García Márquez.

**Calque:** Heimito Künst, one of the narrators in *The Savage Detectives*, speaks in a way that is at once terse and yet overflowing with grid-locked syntax. He's clearly paranoid, probably schizophrenic; his voice is a maze. You translated him in a way that
reminded me of Beckett's Ping, or even Benjamin from The Sound and the Fury. It sounded pitch-perfect in translation, a fluid mix of dissonance and spontaneous (almost accidental) clarity. In Bolaño's version the second paragraph of Künst's section opens: "Un dia me tomé cinco coca-colas y de pronto me sentí mal, como si el sol se hubiera filtrado en la profundidad de mis coca y me lo hubiera tragado sin darme cuenta. Tuve fiebre. No podía aguantar, pero aguanté." The translation reads: “One day I drank five Coca-Colas and suddenly I felt sick, as if the sun had filtered down into my Cokes and I'd drunk it without realizing. I had a fever. I couldn't stand it, but I did stand it.” The repetition of “stand it” is not necessarily called for, and yet its appearance in the translation emphasizes the narrator's neurotic psyche subtly and effortlessly.

**Wimmer:** Interesting. Heimito Künst was probably the easiest character in the novel to translate. Short sentences are almost always easier than long sentences, and mannered speech tends to lend itself well to translation (natural stiltedness!). For the same reason, the Latin-spouting lawyer was relatively easy to translate. As for that particular sentence, I don't remember my exact thought processes. I guess I might also have translated it as "I couldn't go on, but I did go on," but it didn't seem to work in context. I do sometimes find myself working on the outside edge of the permissible sense of a phrase if it seems to fit the context better, but that can be treacherous—I often pull back, or ask myself whether the solution I've come up with is something demanded by the English or a verboten editorial amendment (not that I never make them, but I try to keep them to an absolute minimum).

The hardest section in the novel to translate was the Andrés Ramírez section, about the Chilean who sees numbers in his head. It was such an odd mix of Chilean platitudes, general eccentricities, and colloquialisms that I had a really hard time getting a handle on it. In fact, I'm not convinced it works even now.

**Calque:** Working along “the outside edge of the permissible sense of a phrase if it seems to fit the context better” sounds like the perfect articulation of the antidomestication approach. The story of Andrés Ramírez itself, in which a young Chilean stows away on a ship to Barcelona and eventually wins his fortune in the lottery (twice!), the kind of delirium he suffers because of the numbers, the visions of a thousand insect eggs, the ecstasy of inspiration and the suffering from silent Muses, all of this, including the tone in the Spanish, dark and sharp, catches a current that runs through the novel. I can't quite put my finger on it, but it's like Bolaño's not writing about magic numbers, but about poetry. Can you describe what is happening in this section?

**Wimmer:** I think you put it pretty well yourself—it is a kind of “ecstasy of inspiration.” And also a kind of stubborn opaqueness of vision. Some of Bolaño's imagery is pretty hermetic.

**Calque:** My co-editor, enamored with reading the book, and begging me not to take it from him, affectionately and jokingly called The Savage Detectives, “the last novel.” Now it's certainly not even the last novel for Bolaño, but one feels like he's right, in a way. With all the attention being paid to Bolaño right now because of this translation, one might also say it's “the first novel” after that rumor started about the death of the novel. Is this, somehow, the last novel? What do you think he means?

**Wimmer:** He's not the first to suggest that. But I would say there are lots of “last novels” these days. It's possible that the novel form is going down in a display of freakish fireworks, each explosion more brilliant and bizarre than the last. If so, The Savage Detectives is a particularly powerful blast. But I would be surprised if the novel expired in our lifetime.

**Calque:** If you could have written translator's notes for either of these novels, would you have?

**Wimmer:** In general, I feel that the function of a translator's note (as opposed to a translator's introduction) is solely to explain something that was impossible to make clear in the body of the novel itself. That wasn't necessary for either Delirium or The Savage Detectives. If anything, I guess I might have explained why I didn't translate certain words (i.e. left them in Spanish) in The Savage Detectives, but I hope that's obvious in context too.
Calque: Could the essay, "Roberto Bolaño and The Savage Detectives" stand in as a translator's introduction?

Wimmer: Maybe. When I wrote it, there was a dearth of biographical information available in English, and it seemed that readers might have difficulty placing Bolaño in the larger context of Hispanic literature. It's also just fun to trace the millions of references to real-life characters and situations (would love to see an annotated edition). But the novel clearly stands on its own, and I think any apparatus would only have weighed it down.

Calque: You're currently working on Bolaño's last novel, the enigmatic 2666. Can you tell us anything about how the work is going? What are some of the unique challenges it is presenting?

Wimmer: It's going well (I hope!). I'm only about a third of the way through. I'm using all kinds of things I learned from The Savage Detectives, but they're mostly small quirks of expression particular to Bolaño, things I've figured out how to translate. As for unique challenges: well, it's truly a test of stamina. It's over 1100 pages long. Unlike The Savage Detectives, it's told in the third person throughout (though the perspective changes in each of the five sections), so there are fewer issues of voice. The challenges are more page-to-page and passage-to-passage. Some stretches are easier and some stretches are harder. The more philosophical, esoteric interludes (the quintessentially Bolaño parts) are a challenge, as always.

Calque: What do you have planned for after 2666?

Wimmer: Nothing! I won't be done until December 2007, and after that I'm hoping to take a little time off and try to do some critical writing and reviewing.

Calque: Are there any forthcoming or recently released translations that you're excited to see?

Wimmer: I just read the new Javier Cercas novel (and his first novel, Soldiers of Salamis)—would recommend them, especially S of S. Otherwise, I'm not sure what's on its way. I'm always eager to see new fiction by Javier Marías. And there's a novel called Nada, by Carmen Laforet, just issued by Modern Library in a new translation by Edith Grossman. It was originally published in Spain in the 1950's and was one of my favorite books when I was a teenager.

Calque: Are there any novels that you wish(ed) you could translate but cannot? Like, are there pet projects you developed that you couldn't place? Or, are there any recent translations that you wished you could have gotten to first?

Wimmer: Nada! I was so envious when I heard Edith Grossman had translated it. I would've loved to take it on, for nostalgia's sake. But I'm sure Grossman did an excellent job. No other pet projects, as of now. Except that the Mexican historian Enrique Krauze claims he's writing an intellectual history of Latin America, and he knows I'd love to translate it.

[This interview was conducted via e.mail between April 2nd and April 20th, 2007]
Bill Johnston

Interviewed by Brandon Holmquest

Bill Johnston is one of Polish literature's most lucid advocates in the English-speaking world. A versatile translator of both poetry and prose, he has published fifteen books and numerous short pieces in magazines and journals.

His translation of Witold Gombrowicz's Bacacay was a major event in the ongoing effort to bring that author's works into English. He also translated Gombrowicz's memoir of his early life in Poland, Polish Memories, a key text for students of Poland's interwar artistic milieu. His other translations of such authors as Gustaw Herling, Magdelena Tulli, and Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński have been published by such leading houses as Archipelago, New Directions, Green Integer, and Ugly Duckling. He has been the recipient of numerous honors and awards for his work.

His newest published work, a translation of three recent collections of poems by the poet Tadeusz Różewicz, was published by Archipelago in March under the title New Poems. At present he has five projects in progress, slated for publication at various times in the near future.

Born in the United Kingdom, Johnston was educated at Oxford's University College, the University of Durham, and the University of Hawai'i. At present he holds associate professorships in both Comparative Literature and Second Language Studies at Indiana University, and is Director of that university's Polish Studies Center.

He is also a very nice man who cheerfully spoke with us, via telephone from his Bloomington, IN home, for more than an hour and cheerfully corrected our mangled spelling of the names of various Polish authors.

Calque: Let's begin by talking about the nature of the Polish language and the early history of Polish literature.

Johnston: Okay. Well, if I say anything literally obvious then just stop me. Polish is a Slavic language, one of the West Slavic languages, related to Czech and Slovak. The earliest written records of the Polish language go back to the Middle Ages. The earliest literature to speak of would be early 16th Century. There was a tradition before then, but it primarily starts then. There are two poets in particular who are regarded as kind of the fathers of Polish literature: Mikołaj Rej and Jan Kochanowski. Kochanowski wrote in Latin as well as in Polish. He had a small daughter who died, and he wrote a very beautiful series of laments about her which was translated very nicely by Seamus Heaney and Stanisław Barańczak.

Calque: Is the common conception that Polish is very similar to Russian true?

Johnston: Well it's a Slavic language, yeah, so they're related. The structure of the grammar is quite similar and there are a lot of cognates between the two languages. But, Polish being West Slavic and also Poland being a Catholic country there has been a very heavy influence from Latin and also quite a strong linguistic influence from German. So it's quite a different kettle of fish to Russian, I mean certainly the two languages are not mutually comprehensible in the way that Polish and Czech more or less are.

Calque: How has the history of Poland and the Polish people shaped their literature?

Johnston: Obviously history is a constant presence in Polish literature, in a much more obvious way than perhaps in other literatures. In many ways it's sort of a double-edged sword, in that, although the politics have been very central there, it's also been a slightly limiting factor in the way that Polish literature is conceived. There's a very powerful cultural discourse of martyrology, dying for one's country and fighting for one's country, which runs through the last two hundred years of Polish history. That found its way into the literature a lot. It's been, in many ways,
a little dangerous. For example, Adam Mickiewicz, who's con sidered the greatest Polish writer, he wrote an epic poem called Pan Tadeusz, in the 1820's or '30's. He wrote a book towards the end of his life which was called The Books of the Polish Nation and of the Polish Pilgrimage. It's essentially the book which develops the notion of Poland as the "Christ of Nations." That image was a very common one and I think it's a dangerous one as well. It's one which has affected the way that Polish literature is perceived, both inside the country and outside the country, in the 20th Century as well, because you have the horrible sufferings of the Second World War, you have the time of Communism. I think its been partly to the detriment, in a way, of the development of Polish literature. It's meant that some very interesting literature has been sidelined because it didn't quite fit into these categories of highly politicized or highly historicized kinds of writing. I think Witold Gombrowicz was the classic example of that. He was an extremely marginal figure in the way that Polish literature was talked about and it was partly because he didn't fit that pattern.

Calque: Deliberately, more or less.

Johnston: Yeah, and he had really no choice but to engage with his decision not to do that. That became a choice of his, but it definitely didn't help his image that he was seen as a person who wasn't interested in that. He got a lot of flak, for example, for his novel Pornografia which is set in the Second World War, in a context which he had never personally experienced. In it he dealt with issues like the Home Army', the Polish Resistance, and people got really, really pissed off about that precisely because he was not playing into the established discourses. And the same thing with a number of his other books. I think that, in a sense, he was kind of a casualty of that historicism or historicalization or whatever you want to call it.

Calque: I was kind of trying to avoid bringing Gombrowicz up, just to see how long it would take us to get to him.

1 The Polish nationalist military force during WWII that found itself in the unenviable position of fighting both the Nazis and the Soviets.
West. He traveled in America and so on. He is not terribly highly regarded, and I'm not a big fan of his at all, but he was a major presence at the time. And then there were a number of very interesting things going on at the turn of the century. There was movement called Young Poland, which was mostly centered around Kraków, where there were some extremely interesting things going on. In drama, for example, there was a writer called Stanisław Wyspiański who wrote a play called *The Wedding* which is, after Mickiewicz's *Forefather's Eve*, probably the most important play in the Polish theatrical canon. That was premiered in 1901. The other really huge presence in the period immediately preceding the 30's and Modernism was a writer called Stefan Żeromski. He died in 1925, and at the time he died he was absolutely lionized. He was like the Miłosz of his time, in terms of his stature within the country. He'd written these novels which very much addressed the nationalistic kinds of issues. He wrote some historical books, he wrote a number of books looking at the condition of the urban poor, especially. Like Zola, in a sense, you know, literature with kind of a social conscience. I think it's interesting, coming back to Gombrowicz, that in Gombrowicz's memoir he specifically quotes Żeromski and Żeromski's diary. He does it in a moment where Gombrowicz has decided that he's finally going to go and visit Kraków, this great historical city, which he's resisted doing for a long time. When he goes there he starts thinking of Żeromski's diaries and how Żeromski had been there. Żeromski had this kind of romantic, effusive response to the city and its buildings and Gombrowicz kind of ironizes that response, but also with a sense of his own inadequacy that he isn't capable of that kind of a response to Polish history and these great monuments of the past and so on. So all of those things were going on and you know, Żeromski died just about 10 years, less than 10 years, before Gombrowicz's debut, so he was a very strong influence on that generation that emerged during the period in between the World Wars.

**Calque:** For many people it seems to come from nowhere that there would be this very vibrant literature coming out of a country like Poland, which is often thought of as a relatively small, "backwater" sort of country. We've all heard the jokes. What led to Polish literature succeeding on such a grand scale in between

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**Johnston:** First of all I know that people do think of it as a backwater country but it actually isn't. In the current EU it's one of the largest countries. It has a population of something like forty million, so it's a fairly geographically significant area. The Kingdom of Poland, in the 16th century, was one of the major powers in Europe. So it's not a small country in the historical sense at all, and that meant that Polish cultural influence extended very far both east and west and was influenced by the cultures that it encountered. It's an extremely rich language and culture which has been very positively affected by influences from Ukraine, from Lithuania especially, obviously, but also from Germany, from the Czechs, Hungary, even Sweden and so on. It has the historical consciousness of being a major regional power, and as I mentioned it had a very viable and really excellent literature since at least the 16th century. There were some wonderful Baroque writers, for example, from the late 17th, early 18th Century. Its Romantic poetry, really, if you know the language, it equals anything that you're likely to read from any of the other European literatures of that time. Mickiewicz wrote this amazing epic poem, *Pan Tadeusz*, that I mentioned before which is an absolutely delightful piece of work. There was a writer called Juliusz Słowacki, who was a couple of years younger than Mickiewicz, who also wrote the most extraordinary lyric poetry and verse drama and some very deep, philosophical long poems as well. There was another writer called Zygmunt Kracziński from the same period. They're all writing poetry, literature, much of which is kind of hermetic in terms of its cultural references but aside from that it really is a great literature. After that, in the 19th Century, there are poets, prose writers like Prus and many others. So this Modernist tradition really didn't come from nowhere. It came from one of the richest literary traditions in the region. You know, Russian literature really didn't exist in any kind of a form until about the 17th Century and really emerged only with Pushkin at the beginning of the 19th Century. By that time, Poland had 300 years of poetry and drama and fiction under its belt. So, it's actually an unusual cultural presence in that particular region. I don't think, from what I know, for example, of Czech literature, that they could compete in terms of the
sheer amount and variety and quality of Polish literature.

**Calque:** Which brings us back to the Polish avant-garde in the 20’s and the 30’s. What was it about the situation in Poland in 1919 or 1920, that gave them the space they needed to expand the literature so much?

**Johnston:** Well, that’s a good question. The simple answer is the end of the First World War and the beginning of Polish Independence. It’s not actually just a simple answer. One of the major reasons, really, was that living in a country that was partitioned and effectively occupied by Prussia, Russia, and Austria in the 19th Century, I think it was quite hard to be just a regular writer, to ignore the politics and the history. The generation of writers who came to artistic maturity after 1918 were really born into a very different country. The country had gone through a war, with the Soviets, in about 1920 or 1921.

**Calque:** The one Isaac Babel wrote about in *Red Cavalry*?

**Johnston:** Yes, exactly. So they’d been through that, but after that it was just a regular country, really. The older generation was still locked in the past in many ways. Gombrowicz writes about this in the memoir and elsewhere. For the younger writers I think there was a sense of a great deal of freedom to write about things that were not necessarily political. Poland has a very excellent tradition of translating foreign literatures into Polish, and also of learning foreign languages, and so most Polish writers are aware of trends in other countries and read widely and can kind of position themselves, not just in Polish literature but in world literature. I think Gombrowicz certainly had that sense. He read voraciously and very chaotically in philosophy and so on. He understood French extremely well, Spanish of course later on in life, and even in the ‘20’s he had a sense of what was going on in the rest of the world in terms of literature. If you read his memoir, he writes quite a lot about Witkacy and about Schulz,

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2 Poland, partitioned and occupied by its neighbors during the 19th Century, was restored to independent nationhood by the Treaty of Versailles.

3 The name taken by Witkiewicz to distinguish himself from his father, a prominent painter.

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as well as himself, and there really was a sense that they were trying to move literature forward. That was the prime goal. They wanted to do something which was different, to find new ways of expression. My own personal feeling, personally I can’t stand Witkacy. I think he was a complete poseur.

**Calque:** (cracks up laughing)

**Johnston:** I’m not the best person to talk to about him. I think, on the other hand, Schulz is a complete genius, and Gombrowicz too. I think it’s interesting that I may not be the only person who thinks that way. Witkacy’s star has waned somewhat in Poland, whereas right now there’s a lot of attention being paid to Gombrowicz. There are books constantly coming out. Schulz the same, to a lesser extent. For example, there was a Gombrowicz conference here in the US about two years ago. This year there’s going to be a Schulz conference in Belgium. So it’s clear that the academy, at least, is paying a lot of attention to those two writers in particular, but I think there was a sense very much at the time, that Gombrowicz was actually quite conscious of trying to do new things with literature on a world scale, not just on a Polish scale.

**Calque:** To what extent were the Poles aware of what was going on in France at the time, Dadaism and Surrealism and the various other literary and artistic avant-gardes?

**Johnston:** I think there was a lot of awareness. Paris had been a major center for Polish culture. All of the Romantic writers that I mentioned, all lived in Paris, and it continued to be a center for Polish émigré life all the way through into the 20th century. There were very strong connections. Gombrowicz was in Paris. He spent a year or two years pretending to study law or international relations or something, it was very bogus, but basically just hanging out in Paris. He was there, very much lapping up the atmosphere of the place. So I think the Poles were extremely aware of the artistic trends that were circulating in Paris at the time. Poland almost has a complex, especially about cities like Paris. These days it’s London, and maybe Berlin. They like to know what’s going on outside of their own country. I think
Gombrowicz particularly was very interested in those kinds of things. They were fairly conscious of the relationship between what Witkacy was doing, or Gombrowicz, and what the Surrealists were doing at the time.

**Calque:** What is nature of your beef with Witkacy?

**Johnston:** (laughs) I don’t think my beef with him is very interesting. I just find him a complete poseur. There’s an insincerity in his writing, a desire to shock for the sake of it. I don’t see the point of a lot of it. I guess you could call it Pythonesque, though that’s a very charitable way of looking at it. I don’t feel it has the authenticity, the sincerity that one feels in Schulz and Gombrowicz.

**Calque:** Where does Bruno Schulz fit in in all of this?

**Johnston:** Gombrowicz was very fond of him and admired him greatly. Schulz was a great admirer and supporter of Gombrowicz. He was a lot older than Gombrowicz, I think Schulz was ten years older, and he treated Gombrowicz as an equal. Schulz was a bit of a loner. I think one of the reasons why researchers are still interested in him is that he’s very complex. It’s very difficult to get hold of what he is he’s actually doing in his writing. But I think it’s not at all surprising that he is one of those three of four major figures from Polish writing in the 20th Century who is known outside the country, because he is absolutely unique on a world scale, in terms of the way that he uses language, the things that he writes about, and the way that he writes about them, and his world view. He wasn’t quite as much of an outsider as sometimes people make him out to be. He took a lot of trips to Warsaw, he knew the literati and so on, but he was definitely a strange and troubled and rather shy man who expressed himself much more clearly through his writing and his art, his drawing, rather than through social interactions.

**Calque:** When we talk about this period of time, and we talk so much about these three individuals, who are we overlooking?

**Johnston:** (laughs) Well, there was some interesting poetry going on at the time, in that period. Some amazing wartime poetry, some of which I’ve translated. There were a number of writers who were very young, actually, even younger than Gombrowicz and Witkacy, who wrote during the Second World War, so they were just kind of growing up in the ’30’s, who were really outstanding. There were some interesting experimental poets. There was a lot of really excellent fiction, more traditional fiction but just really, really interesting, a lot of it written by women. There was this prejudice or received idea at the time, that poetry was the domain of men and fiction was the domain of women, which is of course completely exaggerated, but there were a number of women novelists. I hesitate to use that term, because nobody talks about “male novelists,” but a number of writers like Zofia Nałomska, Pola Gojawiczyńska, Maria Dąbrowska. A number of writers who were writing things which still deserve to be translated. There were all sorts of very interesting experimental writers who have not been translated either. People like Wacław Berent, who are very interesting, who I think ought to find an audience at some point. So, as usual, where you have these huge names there’s a lot of interesting things going on that get overlooked.

**Calque:** What was the first volume of Gombrowicz that you translated?

**Johnston:** I did two, though I can’t remember what order I did them in. I did the memoir, *Polish Memories* I think it was called, which is a really awful title by the way. I didn’t want that particular title. *Polish Memories* just sounds like somebody’s photo album or something, some cheesy Hallmark movie. And then there was *Bacacay*, which is kind of like real literature.

**Calque:** What’s the original title?

**Johnston:** It’s *Więdomienia Polskie*, which means something like that, but I wanted to call it something like *A Polish Memoir*. I think it would have been much more...I don’t know. *Polish Memories* just sounds like somebody’s photo album or something, some cheesy Hallmark movie. And then there was *Bacacay*, which is kind of like real literature.

**Calque:** The publication history of *Bacacay* is somewhat unusual. It originally came out in Polish and it was a bit shorter,
Johnston: It was his first book and it was called *Recollections of Adolescence*. It came out in 1933 or so and it consisted of, I believe, the first seven of the stories which are now in *Bacacay*. It was misunderstood at the time, but it got him known. When he wrote *Ferdydurke* a few years later, that really sealed his reputation. Then he left Poland, went into de facto exile in Argentina and was there for a very long time. In the late '50s, or mid '50s, he really wanted to get back into the literary scene in Poland and he chose *Recollections of Adolescence* as his debut. He took the seven stories that appeared in the first edition, added two short, free-standing pieces which are incorporated into *Ferdydurke*, added three more stories that he had written subsequently, put the whole thing together, and gave it a different title, *Bacacay*. It was published in Poland I think about 1957.

Calque: During the infamous "Thaw"?

Johnston: Yeah, supposedly, but nothing really happened after that. He became kind of unpopular politically and one thing led to another. That was basically the only book of his that was published in Poland right up until the '80's, I think it was, maybe the late '70's. That was the next time it became possible to publish his books there.

Calque: In the introduction to her translation of *Ferdydurke*, and again in *Cosmos*, Danuta Borchardt writes about the uniqueness of Gombrowicz's phrasings in Polish and the difficulty rendering some of those in English. Did you have any problems like that when you were working on *Bacacay*?

Johnston: (laughs) Yeah, only several thousand. Translating Gombrowicz there are problems at basically every sentence. It is odd in Polish, so you have to figure out exactly how odd it is, and in what way, and how that oddness can be rendered in English. I think, if I had translated *Ferdydurke*, I might not have made the same choices that Danuta made, but I certainly faced the same kinds of problems. You could talk about this until kingdom come. Of course, I worried about individual issues the whole time, but I had a much broader concern as well, which was to try to find the voice that seemed right, so that reading the book as a whole one got a sense of what the writer was like, what his voice was like in Polish. There is a very distinctive Gombrowiczian kind of tone. So I was trying to focus on getting that, as well as the individual problems of words that he made up or used in very strange ways. There's also wordplay. There's a story in *Bacacay* called "Dinner at Countess Pavahoke's," where they're reciting this really ghastly poetry. I've translated a lot of poetry, and with poetry you try to do the best possible job you can, but here I was faced with having to do the worst possible job I could. I had to use really awful doggerel rhymes and get the rhythm wrong and get the tone wrong and everything. There were issues all the way through. One interesting thing about *Bacacay* is that I did the book the way that one does, sitting at a computer, going over drafts and looking at the text and so on. It wasn't until it was published that I started doing readings, and I noticed at the readings how amazingly theatrical the translation was, in the sense that it was inhabited in this incredibly obvious way by different voices. And I realized that's what I must have been doing as I was doing the translation. It's clearly what Gombrowicz does as well, but I hadn't really noticed it when I was working in solitude. It just popped out. I've read a number of the pieces at public readings in different places and that always happens. So that was an interesting by-product of the whole thing. And it's not accidental. Gombrowicz wrote plays as well, but there have actually been more theatrical productions of his prose works than his theatrical works. And that trend continues. There's clearly something profoundly theatrical in the original prose, and I guess I wasn't conscious of it until I came to read the things aloud.

Calque: How does Gombrowicz's style compare between a book like *Bacacay*, which is very deliberate and artful, and a more informal work like the memoir?

Johnston: Well, the memoir was a very different kettle of fish. A lot of the stuff in it was prepared for radio broadcast, so it has faced the same kinds of problems. You could talk about this until kingdom come. Of course, I worried about individual issues the whole time, but I had a much broader concern as well, which was to try to find the voice that seemed right, so that reading the book as a whole one got a sense of what the writer was like, what his voice was like in Polish. There is a very distinctive Gombrowiczian kind of tone. So I was trying to focus on getting that, as well as the individual problems of words that he made up or used in very strange ways. There's also wordplay. There's a story in *Bacacay* called "Dinner at Countess Pavahoke's," where they're reciting this really ghastly poetry. I've translated a lot of poetry, and with poetry you try to do the best possible job you can, but here I was faced with having to do the worst possible job I could. I had to use really awful doggerel rhymes and get the rhythm wrong and get the tone wrong and everything. There were issues all the way through. One interesting thing about *Bacacay* is that I did the book the way that one does, sitting at a computer, going over drafts and looking at the text and so on. It wasn't until it was published that I started doing readings, and I noticed at the readings how amazingly theatrical the translation was, in the sense that it was inhabited in this incredibly obvious way by different voices. And I realized that's what I must have been doing as I was doing the translation. It's clearly what Gombrowicz does as well, but I hadn't really noticed it when I was working in solitude. It just popped out. I've read a number of the pieces at public readings in different places and that always happens. So that was an interesting by-product of the whole thing. And it's not accidental. Gombrowicz wrote plays as well, but there have actually been more theatrical productions of his prose works than his theatrical works. And that trend continues. There's clearly something profoundly theatrical in the original prose, and I guess I wasn't conscious of it until I came to read the things aloud.

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Johnston: Well, the memoir was a very different kettle of fish. A lot of the stuff in it was prepared for radio broadcast, so it has
a very informal quality about it. It's more interesting to compare his prose across his major novels. Obviously, *Trans-Atlantyk* stands out because it's written in this extremely unusual style taken from Polish literary and social tradition, *gawęda*, storytelling from the 17th and 18th Century. That's one very clear example of Gombrowicz reaching back into the Polish literary tradition for a model, which then becomes extremely unusual when you happen to be writing in the 1950's or whenever it was that he wrote it. That's kind of unusual, but his style does differ and in a sense it's the most boiled down of all in *Cosmos*, which I think is his greatest novel.

**Calque:** Its fucking tremendous.

**Johnston:** Yeah. I was so pissed off at Danuta for translating that, I mean you can't believe how angry I was.

**Calque:** (laughs)

**Johnston:** But I'm so glad that she has finally done a translation directly from the Polish'. Its an absolutely brilliant novel. The language is just distilled to its essence. You can see that, to a certain extent, in a couple of the stories, the last two or three stories in the *Bacacay*, which were written during the 1950's. You can see it going there, but *Cosmos* is just an absolute distillation of Gombrowicz. Joking aside, I'm very, very pleased that it's finally available in a competent translation.

**Calque:** Is anyone working on *Pornografia*?

**Johnston:** Danuta's doing that actually. I think she's pretty much done with it by now, and that will be Yale University Press, again. She's been working on it for some time and she's either done now or will be done very soon.

**Calque:** Let's turn to the war. Gombrowicz takes off to Argentina, he's stuck there for years. Witkiewicz dies, a suicide. Schulz dies, murdered by the Nazis. The country is occupied and it remains so for fifty years. It strikes me as a major disaster. During the war and coming out the other side of it, how did Polish literature change?

**Johnston:** Well, as I mentioned, there are some amazing wartime poets. A number of the writers from the period of the war were quite extraordinary. I disagree with your assessment of the situation, that the war was a disaster for Polish literature. The worst thing that happened to Polish literature was Stalinism, actually. That had the great Szymborska writing odes to Stalin and all sorts of crap like that. That was a disaster. In terms of what happened after the war, Różewicz's style was created through the war. He fought in the Home Army and started writing poetry while he was still serving. He realized that the horror of the wartime experience required a whole other language. He decided that he was going to dispense with imagery, metaphor, and so you have this amazing pared down style. Herbert was the same. His consciousness was affected then. And Szymborska, I'm not a big fan of hers, but she was also from that period. There are many other writers. There's a writer called Anna Świrszczynska who wrote amazing poetry during the war, when she served as a nurse, and afterwards as well. So you could see that as the beginning of something amazing. I think the story in prose is a little harder. I don't think you have anything really brilliant in Polish prose up until maybe the 1960's. In poetry you've got a whole swag of people. In many ways the period of the '50's and '60's was extremely productive.

**Calque:** It strikes me that, before the war, you had a very formalistic, very self-conscious avant-garde, which was largely apolitical or political in a very quiet sort of way. Then, after the war, you have Borowski, Andrzejewski, Miłosz, and many others, working in such a way that the politics, the history brings them to a place where they become very concerned with a certain type of morality.

**Johnston:** I think focusing on morality is an excellent point. It's a point that I think speaks in favor of Polish literature. The whole of Polish literature after the war was really a response to the war, and to a lesser extent to Communism. Gustaw Herling
obviously is responding to Communism, having experienced the camps. With someone like Tadeusz Różewicz it was much more an encounter with Nazism. In many ways you could say that Polish literature found this really deep purpose. It's purpose was in fact to engage with the moral dilemmas and the moral devastation of the war, to figure out what people were supposed to do afterwards. If you look at the respect that someone like Zbigniew Herbert commanded, or Różewicz still commands, as a moral authority in the country, not just as a great poet but as someone to really look up to, who could really teach people how to think about things, you don't get that in poets in Britain or the US or anywhere like that. Right now I can't think of a single person who would fit into that particular mold here.

Calque: From 1939 until the 1980's, practically the whole of Polish literature in Poland happens underground, due to the political situation in the country. First under the Nazis, then under Stalinist Communism. Politically repressed books circulated in underground editions. What was the nature of this underground literary culture in Poland in the '50's and the '60's and what was its effect on the literature?

Johnston: I don't know a whole lot at all about the '50's and '60's. I can tell you about the '70's and '80's because I was living there in the '80's. We read a lot of literature in what in Polish is called bibułt, the underground, samizdat, whatever you want to call it. By the end of the '70's, there was a very well functioning machine that published Miłosz, for example, and Gombrowicz, and writers like Tadeusz Konwicki. I first read his A Minor Apocalypse in a samizdat edition. That would have been in '84 or something like that. We usually had them either a tiny format or a big page with four pages on it which you could barely read. But you could read them. You always had them for one or two nights, and you had to spend the whole night reading. Many of my friends in Kraków would circulate these things. Some of it was political, some of it was just straightforward literature. I remember reading things like a Russian novel called Faithful Ruslan. A lot of the Soviet literature, Russian literature and so on. A lot of the writers who were persona non grata, their books would circulate. It was actually a very major part of intellectual life in those days.

Calque: I understand that many of the presses were in the UK and France and the books would be smuggled into the country in small batches.

Johnston: Yeah. The borders, to a certain extent, were porous. I carried literature to and fro, not for organizations but just for myself, and you could usually get them in and out.

Calque: Many Polish writers work in multiple disciplines. Gombrowicz is a good example. He's producing short fiction and novels and plays and essays and memoirs, all of which are, in their own forms, reasonably well respected. Witkiewicz was that way. Schulz was a graphic artist as well as a writer. What is it about the cultural situation in Poland that allows people to work in multiple genres without it being seen as a contradiction the way it would tend to be in the United States?

Johnston: I never really thought about that, but it's certainly true. Różewicz is one of the most important poets of the 20th Century, and also one of the most important playwrights. There's a long tradition of that. Stanisław Wyspiański, who was the author of The Wedding, was also a graphic artist and he also designed stained glass. There are churches in Kraków that have his stained glass designs. Mickiewicz wrote plays, he wrote poetry, etc. etc. etc. There's a very long tradition. The way that Polish society is organized, there's a class which has always been called the intelligentsia. Within that class there are artists, and artists do arty things. Kantor, for example, the great theatrical director, was also a painter and probably also a poet for all I know. It's accepted that arty people do various kinds of arty things and that's the way it is. There's not that sense of specialization. Teatr Provisorium are an interesting example. You've got people who are really men of the theater, and they are all men, who are trained...
as actors and work in the theater and make plays and yet all of the plays are based on fiction. Most of them, anyway. And it was a big thing recently when Provisorium actually did a play. It was the first time they had ever done that. They did Ferdydurke, they did a thing based on Musil's Young Törless called Scenes from Mitteleuropa, and Trans-Atlantyk and so on, then all of a sudden they actually did a play, by Różewicz, as it happened, but even that they adapted quite seriously. Primarily they’re working in literature, they’re working in prose and making that connection. There really is just something in there. Artur Grabowski is a perfect example. Here’s a guy who writes drama, who writes poetry, who writes literary essays, and many people do that. They seem to feel quite free about crossing the boundaries of genre like that.

**Calque**: You mentioned Provisorium doing Scenes from Mitteleuropa. The idea that there is a cultural unity among the nations ordinarily referred to as Eastern Europe, or Central Europe, or Middle Europe, has been debated a great deal in recent years. What’s your opinion on that?

**Johnston**: I think there really is a Central European identity. It may be differentially felt in Poland depending on which partition you happen to be in. My wife is from Kraków, so most of the time that I’ve spent in Poland has been there. Kraków was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and there’s very definitely a sense that that cultural connection exists, a connection to the Czechs, Slovaks, the Hungarians, the Austrians especially. You can see it in the architecture and so on, but also culturally. I don’t know if that’s so much the case in Warsaw. But I think that things like joining the European Union, joining NATO, were immensely important symbolically because they did in a sense relocate Poland in Europe.

**Calque**: Which they’ve always wanted to do.

**Johnston**: Yeah. I can remember, back in the ‘80s, buying a road map of Europe, and it stopped at West Germany. It was like there was literally nothing beyond, there was no Europe, nothing between Berlin and the Urals, basically. Poland has always felt that it’s not just part of Europe but it’s part of this region where it had more cultural affinity to Germany than it does to Russia, in a way. So I always use the term Central Europe. I think it’s actually quite an accurate term, because I think a lot of what goes on in Polish culture has that regional feel to it. Polish culture relatively rarely reaches toward Russian culture. Everyone has read Russian literature, but it doesn’t reach for those kinds of models and those kinds of connections as frequently as it reaches in the other direction.

**Calque**: The relationship between Poland and Russia has always been very tense. The best anecdote I have to illustrate that is, a friend of mine who speaks Russian was walking down the street one day in New York. He saw a woman sitting on the curb, crying and talking to herself in what he assumed to be Polish. It was close to Russian, but not exactly and didn’t sound like Czech to him. So he went up to her and said in Russian, “Miss can I help you, do you need anything?” And she, still crying, looked at him and said, “I hate Russians!” and wouldn’t talk to him any more after that.

**Johnston**: (laughs) Oh, there you go. Yeah. There are all kinds of issues. Its very complicated, historically. Freud would have a field day. There’s this idea that the Russians are primitive, but on the other hand they’re powerful. It’s an envy and it’s a hatred because of what the Russians have historically done and the fact that that’s never acknowledged in the West. Everyone talks about the Germans invading on Sept. 1, 1939. Nobody talks about the Russians invading on Sept. 17, 1939. No one talks about the Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland during the war. Nobody talks about the Stalinist deportations to Central Asia during the war and the subsequent history of that. There’s a lot of well-based resentment, but there’s also this cultural envy. Stories of the primitiveness of Russians are very common currency in Poland, and probably some of them are true, but these are also stories that the Poles tell themselves to make themselves feel better, that they’re more civilized than the Russians. At the same time, they look at this country which is rich and powerful and even on the literary level, you know, who’s read Prus, for example, who is an outstanding novelist by any world standard, versus who’s read
Tolstoy? There seems to be this sort of mismatch in that Poland is not that much less powerful than Russia and yet they're nothing, essentially, on the cultural stage. That's why they make a big deal when they get a Chopin or the pope or something. Volumes could be written about that, and probably have, actually. It's a very interesting Freudian relationship.

**Calque:** This conversation has convinced me that we're dealing, not with a single Polish Modernism, but with two Polish Modernisms, pre-war and post-war. Both of those Modernisms seem to have been very aware of what was going on the West but it doesn't seem to have worked the other way around. I've read extensively in the criticism written by the major English-language Modernists, and I cannot find one reference to any Eastern European writer. Pound never mentions Kafka. He never mentions anybody from Poland. Neither does anybody else that I can find. What does the study of these Polish Modernisms add to the study of Modernism overall?

**Johnston:** Well I'm not a literary scholar so I might not be the best person to ask about this. I think my answer is going to be very amateurish and speculative. It does seem to me, though, that there were things going on in Poland that were not going on elsewhere. Partly because of the historical thing, but also because these were different writers. Schulz was a different kind of writer than any of the other writers writing in the other countries of Europe, and the same goes for Gombrowicz. I think they're unique figures on a world scale. I would hesitate to suggest that there's something quintessentially Polish that would contribute to Modernism. In recent years I've become very skeptical about the idea of the national project. But as writers, as individual writers with their own individual personal histories and so on, I think they do have a lot to offer in comparison with things that were going on in other countries, particularly in places like England and France and the United States.

**Calque:** You have a new book of poetry translations out. What can you tell me about its author, Tadeusz Różewicz?

**Johnston:** He's one of the last survivors of that amazing generation from the war. He was born in 1921, in a small town. I think that fact is actually quite significant in his case. There's a certain modesty about him, a certain diffidence that you don't often get in writers from big cities. Herbert is associated with Warsaw, for example. Miłosz is obviously off in the West. Szymborska is in Kraków. Różewicz has an almost Schulzian, small-town-origins sort of thing, which I actually really identify with because I'm from a small town myself. He fought in the Home Army during the war. He started writing at a pretty young age. His first major book was called *Unease.* It came out in 1946 and it was instantly apparent to people, right then, that they were facing something that had never ever been done in poetry before. He writes in this incredible, pared-down, simple, direct way, absolutely stripped of metaphor. He's boiling things down to an absolute essence. He became very famous very quickly and has produced a book every couple of years since then. He's got at least twenty major books out now. He's also a leading dramatist. His drama has a quality clearly influenced by Ionesco, Beckett, those kinds of writers. He had a play called *White Marriage,* and another one called *The Card Index.* Those are his best known ones, which are still played in Polish theaters today. He now lives in Wrocław in southwest Poland and, as you can see, is still churning books out. The three that I've translated for this new volume are from 2001, 2002, and 2004. As you can see from his poetry he is, again, a writer who crosses boundaries of genre. He's very much interested in art. He has a lot of friends who are artists and art critics, painters, sculptors and so on. Those themes come up in his poetry a lot. He reads extremely widely in philosophy. He's a great fan of Chekhov. One side of his poetry is writing about placing himself in this dialogue of art, in the broader sense of writing and painting and so on, but he's also got this fascination with popular culture. He makes all of these references to TV shows and little snippets of stories that he reads in the press. He's got this hang up about Harry Potter, who makes an appearance in several poems. I've actually met him and he's an extremely wry person, somebody who takes absolutely no bullshit, who says things that kind of cut to the chase immediately and that quality comes out in his poetry as well. There's a directness about it which is quite unusual. He's of the same generation as Szymborska, who was born in 1923, Zbigniew Herbert, 1924, Miłosz was a little bit
older. Różewicz always had this extremely minimalist style but he's never afraid to use obscenities. You could never mistake one of his poems for something by Szymborska or Herbert. The play of Różewicz's which Provisorium did was kind of an infamous thing itself. It was about the Home Army. The Home Army was the non-communist resistance during the war and there's been a huge amount of heroism and martyrology surrounding the Home Army. This noble struggle, not just against the Nazi's but also against the Communists. There were huge repressions against the Home Army after the war. They really did suffer. But also, terrible things happened, and Różewicz depicts some horrible, brutal things that the Home Army did that don't make them look good. There were protests, I think there were even death threats against him, but of course he was allowed to get away with it because he actually fought in the Home Army. It was a hugely controversial thing. That is quite typical of his work. He sees things very clearly. He is one of the few writers who has tried to take on these heroic discourses and actually engage with them and try to counter them in some way, to tell the truth of what actually happened during that struggle. In all of these ways, I think he's quite a remarkable figure. If you ever get a chance to read his earlier poetry from the '50's and '60's and '70's there are some amazing poems in there. Joanna Trzeciak is preparing a volume which is an overview of all of his work which hopefully will be coming out in a year or two, if not sooner. I'm hoping that it will compliment my work and show what an interesting writer he really is.

Calque: How did your work on Różewicz go?

Johnston: Well its not really for me to say.

Calque: Well how do you feel about it?

Johnston: I feel okay about it. I wasn't always able to get what I wanted. There are still a few moments in there that I'm not happy with. By and large I tried to get the voice, again, and I tried to use as few words as I possibly could. It's always instructive because, somebody who doesn't know translation, they look at a poet like Różewicz and they go, oh well this is simple.

This is just a couple of words here, it doesn't have to rhyme, just toss it into English. But I found that with some of the poems I struggled quite a lot. The word choice was really, really crucial. It's a huge problem, linguistically, because Polish has a very rich grammar. Polish has seven cases. All verbs are marked for person and number and tense and one or two other things as well, sometimes gender. So you can have one word but it gives you lots of information. The verb weszła is "she went in" for example, so you've got the she, you've got the past, you've got the movement and so on and so forth. Różewicz has got this boiled down style, but there's a lot of information packed into the words. I had to work very, very hard to really strip down the English but not strip it down too far so that you didn't know what was going on, because in the Polish you always know what's going on. That was a real struggle. As I say, whether I was successful or not really isn't for me to say. We'll see how people respond to the book, but at least I wasn't throwing my hands up in despair most of the time.

Calque: Well, I think we're about done. Would you like a desert island question?

Johnston: Sure.

Calque: If somebody's going to read one Polish book, what should they read?

Johnston: If you can make it four or five books then I'll answer the question, how about that?

Calque: Okay, go ahead.

Johnston: The first one would be Schulz, definitely. Second would be Cosmos. Third would be Prus's novel The Doll, which is available in English. It's not a wonderful translation but it is available. I will throw in one of my translations, which is a book called The Faithful River by Zeromski, this turn of the century novelist, which is just an absolutely fabulous, fabulous novel. It's just wonderful. It's short. It's brilliantly constructed. It's dramatic. It's got sex, violence, you name it. Everything. And then, Herbert, I would have to say. I think he's the greatest of the 20th Century poets.
Hawad

from *Détourner d'horizon*

• Translated from the French by Pierre Joris •

"Pour le nomade, la pensée n'existe qu'en marchant ou en chantant; et tout ce qui est nomade doit être soit chanté, soit marché pour être vraiment tel".  
— Hawad

Hawad (b. 1950) is a Tuareg poet, who has for some years now resided in the South of France. He belongs to the tribe of the Ikazkazen, part of the larger federation of the Kel Aïr whose original space of residence and roaming (now more and more threatened by the States’ stranglehold & controlled borders) lies between the western piedmont of the Aïr and the Tasmena in the Southwestern Sahara. Raised in the traditional Tuareg world, learning its cosmology & poetry, he followed the transhumance of the tribe’s cattle and traveled with the merchant caravans from the Sahara to the Mediterranean coast. Early on he was introduced to Sufi thought and met itinerant Sufi groups; later he stayed in a range of Sufi monasteries at the Libyan-Egyptian border and at nomadic camps around Baghdad. From childhood on he was familiar with the tifinagh, the written version of his tamajaq (Tuareg) language, which he now uses as the graphic medium to write down his poems and as a painterly calligraphy (An example of a Hawad poem in tifinagh in cursive (i) is given below). He then translates his poems into French, with the help of his wife, the ethnologist Hélène Claudot-Hawad (on whose work these notes are based).

The two poems translated from their French into English are the opening sections of Hawad’s 2002 book, *Détourner d’horizon*, published by Editions Grèges in Montpellier. Joe Lockard (on the “Bad Subjects” website) situates Hawad in an anarchist tradition and writes: “Hawad identifies himself explicitly with the rights of the excluded, refugees, marginalized and powerless peoples, and the simple vagabonds of the world. The existential conditions of the Tuareg people, traveling across the Saharan interior, speak to far broader social and personal explorations. Following this vein, Hawad begins his own poetic traverses by invoking the voice of Rosa Luxemburg as a fighter for dreams, whose meanings are as recognizable for an anti-cosmopolitan on camelback as for Europeans...Hawad assembles the Tuareg tribes, in their blue-faced alienation from Europe and the Americas, for a metaphorical journey through international airport waiting lounges and inhospitable foreign streets. Yet he continually searches out the human commonalities between the desperate geographies of his poetic visions.”

— Pierre Joris

(i)
DETOURNEMENT D’HORIZON

I.

Chaos,
chaos,
chaos et vertige
ô puits sans fond,
puits des rêves que nous creusons,
chaque nuit sans fin,
sous les pieds de toute autorité
qui veut nous mettre à genoux
dans les tourbières de l’histoire.

Avant de tourner le dos à l’espoir
et d’enfourcher les étiers du vertige,
j’entendais parler
de fraternité et de solidarité,
femmes et hommes
prêts à offrir leurs dents
pour mordre le rouleau compresseur,
à Paris, Londres, Berlin.

Mais dans les rues de ces précipices
villes déserts humains
gouffres casse-vue,
je n’ai pas rencontré un seul œil
sur lequel appuyer un regard
vacillant vers l’abîme.

Touf! seulement des bouses de cabots,
encerclées par une meute
de mouches vertes.

from HIJACKED HORIZON

I.

Chaos,
chaos,
chaos & vertigo,
o bottomless well,
well of dreams we hollow out,
each night endlessly,
der under the feet of all authority
that wants us to kneel
in history’s peat bogs.

Before turning the back on hope
and jumping into vertigo’s stirrups,
I heard talk of
fraternity and solidarity,
women and men
ready to offer their teeth
to bite the steam-roller

But in the streets of those precipices
human deserts cities
sight-breaking abysses,
I have not met a single eye
on which to lean a gaze
tottering towards the chasm.

Ha! only curs’ droppings
circled by a posse
of green flies.
Cousine gitane et toi, la Basque,
et l'Andalouse aux tresses noires,
par la moelle épinière
aigre et résistante de nos échines,
blessures grand ouvertes,
nos échines couvertes de cales,
je vous le jure, nulle part,
il ne nous reste un compagnon,
regard gercé par la conjonctivite
de la détermination,
pierre ponce, vue de lynx,
espoir concentré
dans la tige fragile
d'un idéal qui tangue,
ombre-liane de la douleur
remontant la tempête,
feu de ses propres illusions.

Sur toute cette terre,
dos craqué par la lâcheté,
aucune tête libre et rebelle
hormis celle de mon chameau,
démarche et regard fiers,
hautains et nostalgiques,
déversant son incrédulité
sur le mond au crépuscule.

You, Gypsy cousin and you, Basque woman,
and you, the black-tresse'd Andaluian,
by the bitter and tough
spinal cord of our backbones,
by the gaping wounds of
our strut-covered backbones,
I swear to you, not one
companion remains,
gaze crazed by the conjunctivitis
of determination,
pumice stone, lynx eyes,
hope concentrated
in the fragile stem
of a listing ideal,
liana-shadow of pain
sailing against the tempest,
fire of its own illusions.

On the whole of this earth,
its back racked with cowardice,
no free and rebellious head
except for my camel's,
its proud stride and gaze,
lordly and nostalgic,
pouring its incredulity
over the world at dusk.
2.

Et ce bras écho jailli
du cimetière et des dunes
du désert des déserts
pour étrangler les canons héritiers
de la colonisation française
du nord au sud du Sahara,
quelles menottes pourraient bien
le ramener dans la tombe des États
banano et couscousouïa de l'Afrique ?

Aucune entrave !
Alors laissons
l'haleine du soleil et les mirages
s'allier à l'esprit de l'ubiquité.

Toi, ombre,
mon ombre dans les cimes,
puisque tu connais la réponse,
continue à me suivre.

Brasse, brasse, vautour,
vautour, brasse, brasse !
Continue de gauler les vertiges,
orgueil et paradoxes
des fils du chameau,
délaissant les pâturages salés
pour brouter les entraves et les cadenas
qui arriment les villes
à la bosse cabossée
de leur éclipse.

2.

And this arm an echo shot forth
from cemetery and dunes
the desert of deserts
strangles the canons, inheritors
of French colonialism
from the north to the south of the Sahara,
what handcuffs could drag it
back into the tomb of the banana
and couscousouïa States of Africa?

No fetters!
So let's let
the sun's breath and the mirages
rally to the spirit of ubiquity.

You, shadow,
my shadow on the summits,
as you know the answer,
continue to follow me.

Weave, weave, vulture,
vulture, weave, weave!
Go on thrashing the vertigos,
pride and paradoxes
of the camel's sons,
leaving behind the salted pastures
to graze the fetters and locks
that bind the cities
to the beat up hump
of their eclipse.
Éclipse du jour,
imminence de l'apocalypse et de l'ironie,
voici une aube sans visage ni patronyme,
ni le moindre cou
auquel accrocher un nom.
Seulement les éboulis
du tonnerre et des ténèbres.

Un avion d'Air France
rempli de champagne et de folies bergères
échoue en plein désert sur un camp
de nomades interrompus,
corbillard de décharge radioactive.
Hé toi, notre hôte,
quand tu retourneras dans leur pays,
là-bas, chez eux,
si leur silence complice leur permet
de t'interroger à notre sujet,
crie-leur que nous sommes debout,
genou sur le sillage
de nos âmes.
Et dis-leur encore
que par le coude et les ongles des orteils,
nous rabotons leurs menottes
qui ligotent nos chevilles et nos bras.

Et par les dents,
nos soutenons toujours
les voûtes du ciel.
Et quand nous rongeons et fondons
les rotules de leurs chaînes
dans les flaques de sang et de pus
de nos clavicules,
nos phalanges pétrissent et mélangent
une bouillie de calcaire et de silex
pour nourrir les volcans
et les tremblements de terre
qui échancreront les carcans
de demain.

Eclipse of day,
imminence of apocalypse and of irony,
here's a dawn without face or surname,
lacking even a neck
on which to hang a name.
Only scree
of thunder and darkness.

An Air France plane,
filled with champagne and folies bergères,
crash lands in the middle of the desert
on a camp of interrupted nomads,
a hearse of radioactive discharges.
Hi, you, our host,
when you return to their country,
over there, where they live,
if their complicit silence permits them
to interrogate you concerning us,
tell them loudly that we are standing straight,
a knee on the furrow of our souls.
And tell them also
that with elbow and toenails
we file down their handcuffs
that fetter our ankles and arms.

And with our teeth
we still hold up
the arches of the sky.
And when we gnaw and melt down
the joints of their chains
in the blood and puss puddles
of our clavicles,
our phalanges knead and mix
a gruel of limestone and rock flint
to feed the volcanoes
and earthquakes
that will scallop tomorrow's
yokes.
Gog et Magog, nous sommes les alliés des Mongols et des Tatars, prêts à gober d’un seul coup et en bloc les frontières et les prisons. Nous sommes les clandestins, pillards de votre sommeil et de l’ombre de vos abris.

Paris, me voici précédant ma tête, ma tête d’éternel pirate, figure de la douleur, j’arrive, me voici chiquant la tabac de l’ironie. Ne me cherchez pas ici-bas dans vos égouts, vous dis-je, je suis trop haut et trop bas pour être vu. Je suis l’antique cauchemar d’un sommeil brassé dans la coquille de son insomnie. L’inconsolable et intarissable cancer gris, entre les cellules de vos prisons.

Capricieux mal qui est le mien. Avant que je n’écloisse dans le sein de ma mère, déjà j’étais le messager de ma mort et de ma naissance. J’arrive, me voici, j’arrive, j’arrive, précédant mon destin, et surtout, vous dis-je, ne me cherchez pas et ne m’attendez pas, ni dans le passé ni dans le futur. Je ne suis pas de votre horloge pour appartenir au parcours linéaire de votre temps.

Gog and Magog, we are the allies of the Mongols and Tatars, ready to gulp down borders and prisons. We are the clandestine raiders of your sleep and of your shelters’ shade.

Paris, here I am preceding my head, this eternal pirate head, figure of pain, I am coming, here I am chewing the tobacco of irony. Don’t look for me down here in your sewers, I say to you, I am too high and too low to be seen. I am the ancient nightmare of a sleep braced in the shell of its insomnia. The inconsolable and inexhaustible gray cancer, between the cells of your prisons.

Capricious evil that is mine. Before I blossomed in my mother’s womb, I was already the messenger of my death and birth. I am coming, here I am, I am coming, I am coming, preceding my destiny, and before all, I say to you, do not look for me and don’t wait for me, neither in the past nor in the future, I am not of your clock, don’t belong to the linear track of your time.
Je suis l'instant présent, 
fiancé blotti 
dans la chaleur de vos veines, 
mania fourmillement allergie 
termite ronge-nerfs. 
Et je transvase mon escorte de larves 
dans les souris électroniques 
de votre logique.

J'arrive j'arrive j'arrive 
suivant le vautour, 
ombre de mon ancêtre, 
vautour tisserand des capes noires 
et des linceuls rouges 
des sacrifiés.

I am the present moment, 
the betrothed huddled 
in the heat of your veins, 
mania swarm allergy 
nerve-gnawing termite. 
And I decant my escort of larvae 
into the electronic mice 
of your logic.

I am coming, I am coming, I am coming 
following the vulture, 
shadow of my ancestor, 
vulture, weaver of the black capes 
and red shrouds 
of the sacrificed.
Adam Mickiewicz

"Lilies"

- Translated from the Polish by Leonard Kress -

Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) is probably the best known and most important Polish poet. His Romantic epic, *Pan Tadeusz*, is known across the world as the epitome of Polish Romanticism. It has been compared to the works of Pushkin and Byron.

The poem *Lilies* (*Lilije*) is taken from his first collection, *Ballads and Romances* (*Ballady I romance*), written in 1822. Its importance to Polish literature and Polish Romanticism is similar to that of the *Lyrical Ballads* of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Milosz writes (in *The History of Polish Literature*) that “Mickiewicz took fantastic folk motifs and reworded them into poems, sometimes, though rarely, even imitating the rhythm of a folk song. The mixture of the miraculous and the humorous in these poems makes one think of Ovid. Also present in the *Ballads* is the region of the poet’s childhood, that Lithuania of fir forests and clear lakes inhabited by nymphs.”

While translating this poem, I was still under the thrall of Mickiewicz’s epic, *Pan Tadeusz*, and was searching for a language that would somehow capture the exotic, medieval, spirit-filled world of the ballad. In my attempt to find a language for this 19th century remake of a medieval ballad, I constantly referred to some of my favorite English medieval ballads and even some of their American Appalachian incarnations—*The Three Crows*, *Sir Patrick Spence*, the *Edward* ballads, *The Demon Lover*, etc., as well some Polish folk ballads that were transcribed by the 19th century Polish ethnographer, Oskar Kolberg, as well as the epic ballads still performed by singers and musicians from the Carpathian Mountains in southern Poland (these I encountered both in Poland and in Polish neighborhoods of Chicago.) Finally, I immersed myself in the world of the Finnish epic, *The Kalevala*, itself a 19th century Romantic recasting of folk songs and folk epics.

My version is roughly three-quarters the length of the original. *Pan Tadeusz* contained about 10,000 rhymed Polish Alexandrine couplets—each line containing 13 syllables, first seven, then a caesura, then six, and a total of 5 accents. Needless to say, I was exhausted, enamored, and even addicted to his long lines and rhymes. *Lilies*, however, consisted of fairly short lines: 7 syllables/3 accents—rhymed couplets. I made the decision to use longer lines: 5 accents and a looser rhyme pattern, pretty consistently ABAB/CDCD, etc. I don't think there was any way I could tell this bloody and tragic and supernatural story in something resembling rhymed couplets of iambic trimeter—without making the whole ordeal intensely funny and silly:

Oh, what a nasty act,
She kills her man in fact,
And drags him through the mud,
Then wipes off all the blood....

The original Polish is very minimal, condensed, almost clipped. This is possible in Polish because of the relatively free word order and the fact that Polish is a highly inflected language (7 cases.) Literally, the first 5 lines go like this:

This crime unbelievable,
Lady murders Lord;
having murdered buries in grave,
out to meadow by rivulet,
plants Wies at grave .

As you can see, my final version is wordier and less syncopated than the original.

Who could fathom such a crime?
She kills her husband, drags him to a grave,
beyond the pasture, by a muddy stream,
and there she plants lilies as she grieves.

- Leonard Kress
LILIES

Who could fathom such a crime?
She kills her husband, drags him to a grave,
beyond the pasture, by a muddy stream,
and there she plants lilies as she grieves.

Lilies, lilies, grow and flower,
Deep in the ground my husband lies,
Blossom lilies, grow and tower
High above his buried cries.

Smeared and stained with blood she runs,
into the woods, up a steep hill,
down a valley—night cuts short the sun's
last light. The wind is cold, wet and foul,
crows are cawing, starlings snap their beaks,
each tree hides the hooting of an owl.

She spots an ancient beech with bricks
that shield a tiny hermitage from dismal
wind and rain. She knocks, a door latch clicks,
a grizzled monk peeks out, shining a light.
She shrieks, shoving her way inside the hut,
her lips are blue, her eyes wild with fright,
her flesh as white as linen on a bed.

“What brings you here,” he asks, “on this raw night?”

“My husband's dead, what should I do?
Beyond the forest and frozen marshland,
back at home, lights are shining through
the windows—but years ago my husband
left to fight with Boleslaw the King.

“They said they went to wage war in Kiev,
two years they spent, fighting or dallying,
I don't know which, which rumors to believe.
"- Niewiasto, Pan Bóg z tobą,
Co ciebie tutaj niesie,
Wieczorną słoñną dobą,
Co robisz sama w lesie?"

"- Tu za lasem, za stawem,
Błyszczą mych zamków ściany.
Mąż z królem Bolesławem
Poszedł na Kijowiany.
Lato za latem bieży,
Nie masz go z bojowiska;
Ja młoda śród młodzieży,
A droga cnoty śliska!
Nie dochowałam wiary,
Ach! biada mojej głowie!
Krół srogie głosi kary;
Powrócili mężowie.

"Ha! ha! mąż się nie dowie!
Oto krew! oto nóż!
Po nim już, po nim już!
Starcze, wyznalałam szczerze.
Ty głoś świętymi ustą,
Jakie mówić; pacierze,
Gdzie mam iść na odpusty.
Ach, pójdę aż do piekła,
Zniosę bicze, pochodnie,
Byleby moją zbrodnię
Wieczysta noc powlekła."

"- Niewiasto, - rzecze stary-
Więc ci nie żal rozboju,
Ale tylko strach kary?
Idźże sobie w pokoju,
Rzuć bojaźń, rozjaśń lica,
Wieczna twa tajemnica.
Bo takie sądy boże,
Iż co ty zrobisz skrycie,
Mąż tylko wydać może;
A mąż twój stracił życie."

But I was young and other young men came from other armies. My virtue was attacked. Soon I broke my vows and wore my shame. They've passed harsh laws for such an act of treason—what if they find out? The war is won, the soldiers now parade.

“But now my husband won’t have time to doubt, his blood stains me, it’s dripping from the blade. Too late for him—I have confessed in prayer, but tell me what comes next, for you converse with Saints, they say you’re blessed. Tell me what you’ve gleaned from sacred text, where I must go to make my pilgrimage, for I’m prepared to crawl on glass and stone to bear a scourge that tears my flesh in rage, if only darkness might conceal my sin.”

“Do you repent?” he asked, “Or do you fear judgment? Go in peace, cast off your fright, uncloud your eyes, make them clear, pat some color in your cheeks—and laugh!”

“Your secret will be kept eternally. According to commandments set by God, an act committed far from public eye can only by a husband be avowed.”

The monk’s judgment calmed her down. She went away in quite a different state—quiet and free from morbid thoughts, alone, until she saw her children by the gate. “Our father,” they called, “Where has he gone?.” “He’s in the woods, sure to return by night.”

The children wait all night, and then another, then several days, until it’s been a week, till waiting seems to them a bother.
Pani z wyroku rada,
Jak wpadła, tak wypadła;
Bieży nocą do domu
Nic nie mówiąc nikomu.
Stoją dzieci przed bramą,
“Mamo, - wołają - Mamo!
A gdzie został nasz tato?”
- “Nieboszczyk? co? wasz tato?” -
Nie wie, co mówić na to.
- “Został w lesie za dworem,
Powróci dziś wieczorem.”
Czekają wieczór dzieci;
Czekają drugi, trzeci,
Czekają tydzień cały;
Nareszcie zapomniały.

Pani zapomnieć trudno,
Nie wygnac z myśli grzechu.
Zawsze na sercu nudno,
Nigdy na ustach śmiechu,
Nigdy snu na żrenicy!
Bo często w nocnej porze
Coś stuka się na dworze,
Coś chodzi po świetlicy.
“Dzieci - woła - to ja to,
To ja, dzieci, wasz tato!”

Noc przeszła, zasnąć trudno.
Nie wygnac z myśli grzechu.
Zawsze na sercu nudno,
Nigdy na ustach śmiechu!

- “Idź, Hanko, przez dziedziniec.
Słyszę tętent na moście,
I kurzy się gościniec;
Czy nie jadą tu goście?
Idź na gościniec i w las,
Czy kto nie jedzie do nas?”

But while they play the lady cannot break
the hardness that has grown around her heart.
Her guilty act repeats inside her mind,
smiles won’t shape her mouth, and with a start
she wakes from sleep and thinks she hears a fiend,
something knocking against the wall. “Children,”
it whines, “listen to me, your father calls.”

“Hanka, to the woods,” she tells one child. “Run!
I hear feet tramping on the bridge, the path
is thick with dust, perhaps some guests arrive.
Hurry, Hanka, don’t stop to catch your breath,
tell me what you see beyond the grove.”

They ride, raising great clouds of dust, horses
neighing, swallows darting all around.
Sabres clink and gleam, they ride, the forces
of King Boleslaw, the brothers of her husband.

“We’re glad to greet you in good health, they said,
our brother’s wife, sister to us by marriage.
But where is he?” And she, “Your brother’s dead.”
“How can that be?” one shouts in rage.
“When?” “More than a month I’ve borne this loss,
he perished in the war.” “But that’s a lie!”
he said. “Calm down, there’s been an armistice,
our brother wasn’t wounded in the war,
he left us safe and sound, he must be near.”

The lady pales in fright, her eyes eclipse.
She screams and faints. “Where is your husband,
our brother?” they ask. “We must find his corpse.”
Slowly she revives at their command.
Speaking like a faithful wife she sobs,
“Where is my husband now, my one true love?
Please tell me what you’ve done to him,” she begs.
Grown bold in her deceit she tries to prove
that she’s been wronged. And so she lied.
Jadą, jadą w tę stronę,  
Tuman na drodze wielki,  
Rżą, rżą koniki wrone,  
Ostre błyszczą szabelki.  
Jadą, jadą panowie,  
Nieboszczyka bratowie!

- "A witajże, czy zdrowa?  
Witajże nam, bratowa.  
Gdzie brat?" - "Nieboszczyk brat,  
Już pożegnał ten świat."  
- "Kiedy?" - "Dawno, rok minął,  
Umarł... na wojnie zginął."  
- "To kłamstwo, bądź spokojna!  
Już skończyła się wojna;  
Brat zdrowy i ochoczy,  
Ujrzyżysz go na twe oczy."

Pani ze strachu zbladła,  
Zemdlała i upadła,  
Oczy przewraca w słup,  
Z trwogą dokoła rzuca.  
- "Gdzie on? gdzie mąż? gdzie trup?"  
Powoli się ocuca;  
Mdlała niby z radości  
I pytała u gości:  
"Gdzie mąż, gdzie me kochanie,  
Kiedy przede mną stanie?"

- "Powracał razem z nami,  
Lecz przodem chciał pośpieszyć,  
Nas przyjąć z rycerzami  
I twoje łzy pocieszyć.  
Dziś, jutro pewnie będzie,  
Pewnie kędysz w oblędzie  
Ubite minął szlaki.  
Zaczekajmy dzień jaki,  
Poszlemu szukać wszędzie,  
Dziś, jutro pewnie będzie."
Posłali wszędzie sługi,
Czekali dzień i drugi,
Gdy nic nie doczekali,
Z płaczem chcą jechać dalej.

Zachodzi drogę pani:
- “Bracia moi kochani,
Jesień zła do podróży;
Wiatry, złoto i deszcze.
Wszak czekaliście dłużej,
Czekajcie trochę jeszcze.”

Czekają. Przeszła zima,
Brata nie ma i nić ma.
Czekają; myślą sobie:
Möże powrócić z wiosną?
A on już leży w grobie,
A nad nim kwiatki rosną,
A rosną tak wysoko,
Jak on leży głęboko.
I wiosnę przeczekali,
I już nie jadą dalej.

Do smaku im gospoda,
Bo gospodyni młoda;
Ze chcą jechać, udają,
A tymczasem czekają;
Czekają aż do lata,
Zapominają brata.
Do smaku im gospoda
I gospodyni młoda.
Jak dwaj u niej gościli,
Tak ją dwaj polubili.
Obu nadzieja łechce,
Obadwaj zjęci trwogą,
Żyć bez niej żaden nie chce,
Żyć z nią obaj nie mogą.
Wreszcie na jedno zdani,
Idą razem do pani.

“Listen to our plea, sister-in-law,”
they say, “we’ve waited long and we have tried
to find him, all in vain. At once we saw
what shame it is that you renounce the world,
why not one brother for another exchange?”

They speak, then pause, and as they stand,
anger and jealously blaze. One throws a challenge
to the other’s threat—hands to swords,
and soon she fears their awful violent wrath.

The lady cannot find the proper words
to calm them down. She rushes to the path,
begging for time. She runs into the woods
beyond the stream—the hermit’s hut beneath
the ancient beech. She knocks upon his door
and tells the monk her tale, seeking advice.

“How can I reconcile these brothers?
Both want my hand—both of them suit me.
I’ll lose my wealth, my children need a father.
Will God allow me once more to marry?
Every night I have the same bad dream:
I shut my eyes, I hear the door latch click,
someone wanders through the halls, it seems
like panting in my ears, it makes me sick,
and then he’s there, a bloody corpse
that stares at me and wields a bloody knife.
His mouth is sparkling and the flame laps
my face. I know he’s come to take my life.
Any chance for happiness is spoiled,
I’ve lost my will to live since this happened.
How can the brothers be reconciled,
both of them suffice, both want my hand.”

“My child,” replied the grizzled hermit,
“In due time, your crime will be punished.
If you repent, if you’re truly contrite,
God will listen. It’s good you rushed
- "Słuchaj, pani bratowo, 
Przyjm dobrze nasze slowo. 
My tu próżno siedzimy, 
Brata nie zobaczymy. 
Ty jeszcze jesteś młoda, 
Młodości twojej szkoda. 
Nie wiąż dla siebie świata, 
Wybierz brata za brata".

To rzekli i stanęli, 
Gniew ich i zazdrość piecze, 
Ten, to ów okiem strzeli, 
Ten, to ów słówko rzecze; 
Usta sine przycięli, 
W ręku ściśkają miecze. 
Pani ich widzi w gniewie, 
Co mówić, sama nie wie. 
Prosi o chwilkę czasu, 
Bieży zaraz do lasu. 
Bieży w dół do strumyka, 
Gdzie stary rośnie buk, 
Do chatki pustelnika, 
Stuk stuk, stuk stuk! 
Całą mu rzecz wykłada, 
Pyta się, co za rada?

- "Ach, jak pogodzić braci? 
Chcą mojej ręki oba? 
Ten i ten się podoba: 
Lecz kto weźmie? kto straci? 
Ja mam małe dziecka, 
I wioski, i dostatki, 
Dostatek się zmitrzęża, 
Gdy zostalam bez męża. 
Lecz, ach! nie dla mnie szczęście! 
Nie dla mnie już zamęcie! 
Boża nade mną kara, 
Ściga mnie nocna mara, 
Zaledwie przynęną oczy, 
Traf, traf, kłamka odkoczy; 

- to me, for I know things most people dread. 
Although your husband has been dead a year, 
I have ways to raise him from the dead."

"What do you mean? We're parted forever 
by the blade. I stand condemned 
for what I've done. I have this constant fever, 
this same nightmare, I should send 
away my children, enter cloistered walls, 
repent. Please, Father, do not resurrect 
that man, I couldn't bare his wails."

The old monk sighed, while tears flooded his eye. 
He hid his face and he began to shake, 
touching her hand. "It's time to marry, 
don't fear the ghost, only you can make 
him appear. He will not leave his grave."

"How will the brothers be appeased? 
which one will have me as his wife? 
One will rage, one will be pleased."

"Let God and fate resolve this strife. 
Send both of them to pick flowers at dawn. 
Let each one weave a wreath, hiding 
a sign and place them upside down 
by the altar. You'll reach with fate guiding 
your hand—that's how you'll chose a husband." 
Once more the monk's advice removes her fear. 
Joyously she makes her wedding plan. 
Her ghost is gone, she thinks, he won't appear 
unless she calls him back. Why would 
she ruin her own happiness? Straight home, 
she runs, stopping for nothing, through wood 
and meadow, field and grove—no harm 
awaits, she thinks. And yet no sooner does 
that thought arise than something halts 
her stride. She cups her ear trying to hear, 
someone approaches fast, someone vaults 
over fence and ditch in chase—Oh where 
does that voice come from? "Wait for me."
Budzę się, widzę, słyszę,
Jak idzie i jak dysze,
Jak dysze i jak tupa,
Ach, widzę, słyszę trupa!
Skrzyp, skrzyp, i już nad łożem
Skrwawionym sięga nożem,
I iskry z gęby sypie,
I ciągnie mię, i szczypie.
Ach, dosyć, dosyć strachu,
Nie siedzę mnie w tym gmachu,
Nie dla mnie świat i szczęście,
Nie dla mnie już zamiescie!

"Córko, - rzecze jej stary -
Nie masz zbrodni bez kary;
Lecz jeśli szczera skrucha,
Zbrodniarz Pan Bóg słucha.
Znam ja tajnie wyroku,
Miłej ci rzecz obwieszczę;
Choć mąż zginął od roku,
Ja go wskrzeszę dziś jeszcze."

- "Co, co? jak, jak? mój ojcze!
Nie czas już, ach, nie czas!
To żelazo zabojcze
Na wieki dzieli nas!
Ach, znam, żem warta kary,
I zniosę wszelkie kary,
Byle się pozbyć mary.
Zrękę się mego zbioru
I pójdę do klasztoru,
I pójdę w cienny las.
Nie, nie wskrzeszaj, mój ojcze!
Nie czas już, ach, nie czas,
To żelazo zabojcze
Na wieki dzieli nas!"

Starzec westchnął głęboko
I łem zdala oko,
Oblicze skrył w zasłonie,
Drżące załamał dłoń.
- "Idź za męż, póki pora, 
Nie lękaj się upiora.
Martwy się nie oculi,
Twarda wieczności brama;
I mąż twój nie powróci,
Chyba zawołasz sama."

- "Lecz jak pogodzić braci?
Kto weźmie, a kto straci?"
"Najlepsza będzie droga
Zdać się na los i Boga.
Niechajże z ranną rozą
Pójdź i kwiecie zniosą.
Niech każdy weźmie kwiecie
I wianek tobie splećę,
I niechaj doda znaki,
Żeby poznać, czyj jaki,
I pójdzie w kościół boży,
I na ołtarzu złożyć.
Czyj pierwszy weźmiesz wianek,
Ten mąż twój, ten kochanek."

[...]

Manager's Note: The full Polish version of this poem can be found online at www.calquejournal.com
All four of these translations will appear in a selection of twenty-two poems by Cavafy entitled *Half an Hour & Other Poems*, to be published by Stop Press of London, which previously brought out a group of twenty-two translations of poems by the same poet, *I've Gazed So Much* (2003), illustrated by the Swiss and American artist Dieter Hall; the forthcoming book will contain work by four Athenian artists.

The two early poems, *Walls* (published in 1897) and *The Windows* (published in 1903) were both written in 1896 and listed by Cavafy under the heading "Prisons." As the original texts show, both poems were composed in rhyme, a feature not reflected in the translations. The title in the original of *Walls*, TEIXH, denotes "city walls," and resonates with its two homonyms in Greek: TYXH, which generally denotes "fate," "luck," "fortune," (rendered as "condition" in my translation), appears at the end of the fourth line rhyming with the Greek title word "walls" at the end of the second line. The other homonym, TOIXOI, denoting "walls of a room," though it does not appear in the poem literally, also contributes, I would suggest, to its representation of the speaker's sense of imprisonment.

"The First Step," an early poem as well, was written in unrhymed hendecasyllabics in 1895 and was first published in 1899. Theocritus, the great pastoral poet, was probably born circa 300 B.C. in the Sicilian Greek city of Syracuse, though some authorities believe his birthplace was the island of Kos. The scene of the poem is usually identified as Syracuse, but I believe Cavafy may have had in mind Alexandria, where Theocritus spent a good part of his career. The young poet Eumenes is fictional.

"The Bandaged Shoulder," written in 1919, is one of a number of poems Cavafy withheld from publication. While selecting poems from *The Greek Anthology* to include in my collection of translations of ancient Greek love poems, *Acts of Love, Ancient Greek Poetry from Aphrodite's Garden* (Random House / Modern Library, 2006), I came across an anonymous epigram that reminded me of this poem.

When Menecharmos won the boxing match,
I crowned him with ten soft ribbons,
and gave his bloodied-up face three kisses,
but sweeter than myrrh it tasted to me.

(p. 104)

– George Economou
ΤΕΙΧΗ

Χωρίς περίκεψιν, χωρίς λύπην, χωρίς αιώνες
μεγάλα κ’ ύψηλά τριγύρω μου έκτισαν τείχη.

Καί κάθομαι και ἀπελπίζομαι τώρα ἐδώ.
Ἀλλ’ δὲν σκέπτομαι: τὸν νοῦν μου τρώγει αὐτὴ ἡ τύχη.

διότι πράγματα πολλά ἔξω νὰ κάμω εἶχον.
Ἤ ὅταν ἐκτίζαν τὰ τείχη πῶς νὰ μὴν προσέξω.

Ἀλλὰ δὲν ἀκοῦσα ποτὲ λρότον κτιστῶν ἢ ἴχον.
Ἀνεπαισθήτως μ’ ἐκλείσαν ἀπὸ τὸν κόσμον ἔξω.

WALLS

Thoughtless, pitiless, indecent,
they put up high, thick walls around me.

And now I sit here and despair.
I think of nothing else: this condition feeds upon my mind—

I had so many things to do outside.
How did I not pay attention when they were building the walls?

But of their building I never heard a noise or sound.
I hadn’t a clue they were closing me off from the world outside.
ΤΑ ΠΑΡΑΘΥΡΑ

Σ' αυτές τές σκοτεινές κάμαρες, που περνώ μέρες βαρυές, έπανω κάτω τριγυρνώ για νάβρω τά παράθυρα.- 'Όταν άνοιξει ένα παράθυρα θάναι παρηγορία.- Μα τά παράθυρα δεν βρίσκονται, ή δεν μπορώ νά τάβρω. Καί καλλίτερα ίσως νά μήν τά βρώ. Ίσως τό φῶς θάναι μά νέα τυραννία. Ποιος ξέρει τί καινούρια πράγματα θά δείξει.

THE WINDOWS

In these dark rooms, where I pass oppressive days, I go in circles looking for the windows.—If and when one is opened it will be some relief.—But the windows are not there, or I can’t find them. Maybe I’m better off not finding them. Perhaps the light will be a new oppression. Who knows what new things it will show.
ΤΟ ΠΡΩΤΟ ΣΚΑΛΗ

Εἰς τὸν Θεόκριτον παραπονιούνταν μιᾶ μέρα ὁ νέος ποιητής Εὐμένης·
«Τώρα δύο χρόνια πέρασαν ποὺ γράφω
κ’ ἐνα εἰδύλλιο ἐκάμα μονάχα.
Τὸ μόνον ὄρτιὸν μου ἐργὸν εἶναι.
Ἄλλοιμονον, ἐν’ ψηλῇ τὸ βλέπω,
pολὺ ψηλῆ τῆς Ποίησιος ἡ σχάλα·
κι ἄπ’ τὸ σκαλὰ τὸ πρῶτο ἐδῶ ποὺ εἴμαι
ποτὲ δὲν θ’ ἀνεβὼ ἡ δυστυχισμένος.»
Εἴπ’ ὁ Θεόκριτος· «Αὕτη τὰ λόγια ἀνάρμοστα καὶ βλασφημίες εἶναι.
Κι ἄν εἴςαι στὸ σκαλὰ τὸ πρῶτο, πρέπει
νάσαι ὑπερήφανος κ’ εὐτυχισμένος.
Ἐδῶ ποὺ ἔφθασες, λύγο δὲν εἶναι·
tόσο ποὺ ἔκαμες, μεγάλη δόξα.
Κι αὐτὸ ἀκόμη τὸ σκαλὴ τὸ πρῶπο
πολὺ ἀπὸ τὸν κοινὸ τὸν κόσμον ἀπέχει.
Εἰς τὸ σκαλὸ γιὰ νὰ πατήσεις τοῦτο
πρέπει μὲ τὸ δικαίωμά σου νάσαι
πολίτης εἰς τὸν ιδεῶν τὴν πόλι.
Καὶ δύσκολο στὴν πόλι ἐκείνην εἶναι
καὶ σπάνιο νὰ σε πολιτογραφήσουν.
Στὴν ἀγορά τῆς βρίσκοντας Ἀρμοθέταις
ποὺ δὲν γελά κανένας τυχοδιώκτης.
Ἐδῶ ποὺ ἔφθασες, λύγο δὲν εἶναι·
tόσο ποὺ ἔκαμες, μεγάλη δόξα.»

THE FIRST STEP

One day the young poet Eumenes
was complaining to Theocritus:
“For the past two years I’ve been writing
and have produced a single idyll.
It’s my only finished work.
Alas, I see how high it reaches,
Poetry’s Ladder, so very high.
Pathetic, I’ll never rise above
this first step I’m standing on now.”
Theocritus replied: “Such language
is unbecoming, blasphemous.
So what if you’re on the first step,
that should make you proud and happy.
No small thing to have got this far,
for what you have achieved is quite glorious.
And even this very first step
stands far above the common crowd.
Just to ascend to this step,
you must be a rightful citizen
of the city of ideas.
And difficult and rare it is
to be made one of its citizens.
In its chambers are Lawgivers
that no opportunist can fool.
No small thing to have got this far,
for what you have achieved is quite glorious.”
Ο ΔΕΜΕΝΟΣ ΩΜΟΣ

Είπε πού χτυπήσε σε τοίχον ή πού έπεσε. Μά πως ή πώς νάταν άλλη τού πληγωμένου και δέμενος όμοι.

Μέ μια κομμάτι βίανη κίνουν, 'απ' ένα ράφι για νά καταβάσει κάτι φωτογραφίες που ήθελε νά δει όπο κοντά, λύθηκεν ο επίδεσμος κ' έτρεξε λίγο αίμα.

Σανάδεσα τόν όμο και στό δέσιμο άργούσα κατώς· γιατί δεν πονούσε, και μ' αρέξε νά βλέπω τό αίμα. Πράγμα τού έρωτός μου τό αίμα έκείνο ήταν.

Σάν έφυγε ηύρα στήν καρέγια έμπος, ένα κουρέλλι ματωμένο, ἀπ' τά πανιά, κουρέλλι πού ἐμοιάζε γιά τά σκουπίδια λατ' ευθείαν και πού στά χείλη μου τό πήρα εγώ, και πού τό φύλαξα όρα πολλής τό αίμα τόν έρωτός στά χείλη μου ἐπάνω.

THE BANDAGED SHOULDER

He said he'd bumped into a wall or fallen down. But it's likely there was another reason for his injured and bandaged shoulder.

With a sudden, outstretched movement to reach a shelf and take down some photographs he wanted to look at closely, the bandage came loose and a little blood trickled.

I wrapped up the shoulder again, and took my time in the binding; he felt no pain and I enjoyed looking at the blood. A thing that belonged to my love, that blood.

When he left, I found in front of his chair a blood-stained rag from the dressing, a rag meant to be tossed right into the trash; and I raised it to my lips, and pressed it there a long time—blood of my love upon my lips.
Yvan Goll

from Dreamgrass

• Translated from the German by DONALD WELLMAN •

Born Isaac Lang on March 29, 1891, in Saint-Dié in the Lorraine region of France, Ivan Goll—poet, editor, and translator—contributed in multiple ways to the development of Modernism in the arts. Notably, his experiences of childhood and exile were multicultural (German-Jewish, French, and North American). His writing reflects this cultural hybridity, inflected by alienation, anguish, and the need for personal acknowledgement. His collaborators included Herman Hesse, Hans Arp, Hans Richter, Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso, and James Joyce. His early poetry, deeply marked by German Expressionism, sounded the themes of pacifism and universal brotherhood. Upon his arrival in Paris after World War One, his direct contact with Cubist poets in the tradition of Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars transformed his style into one of lucid fragments, collage-like in its construction. In 1922, in a collection he edited for the review Les Cinque Continents, he gathered (under the heading “surréalisme”) a group of poets largely descended from the tradition of Apollinaire. In October 1924, Goll published the groundbreaking journal Surrealisme. Goll’s conception of Surrealism emphasized verbal constructions, relying on disparate phrases, and avoided the Freudian play between language and the unconscious aspects of mental life. André Breton, vying for poetic ascendancy, attacked Goll’s surrealism in his first Surrealist manifesto (1924).

In 1921, Yvan married Claire Studer, a young journalist and his most important collaborator. Theirs was an extraordinary and passionate relationship, for Claire was also the lover of Rainer Maria Rilke during the first years of her courtship with Yvan (1917-19); and for eight years after his marriage to Claire, Yvan had a deeply therapeutic extramarital love for the poet Paula Ludwig (1931-39). Love and heartbreak and reunion are the subjects of Ten Thousand Dawns, a suite of poems by both Yvan and Claire that reflect the emotional turmoil of their lives. The shared honesty of these poems complements the themes of exile in Jean Sans Terre and love in Dreamgrass, Goll’s most significant publications. Goll’s poetry resolutely opposes any form of transcendentalism. His Jean Sans Terre, translated from French into English by Kenneth Rexroth, Galway Kinnell and William Carlos Williams, among others, depicts his anguished exploration of dispossession.

Displaced by the rise of Nazism, like so many other Jewish intellectuals, Goll and Claire spent the war years in New York City. There he was briefly reunited with Breton, whose work Goll featured in his journal Hemispheres, only to fall out with Breton again in disputes over the rights to published material. During this period Goll was one of the first to recognize seminal Caribbean authors, including Nicolas Guillén and Aimé Césaire, whose Cahier d’un retour au pays natal, he translated into English. He also began an investigation of kabala and other aspects of Jewish mysticism that serve in his poetry as geometric tropes in an abstract address to language.

Goll died of leukemia on February 27, 1950. Unfortunately for Yvan’s reputation, and for hers, Claire accused Paul Celan of plagiarizing from Yvan’s last works. Celan, who was among the poets who donated blood to Yvan, suffered deeply from the shock of this malignant slur. In the year leading to Goll’s death, Celan helped to create German language versions of some of Goll’s French poetry, while Goll himself was involved with the composition of Dreamgrass. The emotional pitch of Dreamgrass reflects the trauma of the poet’s deathbed emotions. Images combine a surreal exuberance with expressionistic urgency. “Dreamgrass grew / Nightshade love-pale” reads the title poem, with a hint of death-in-love mysticism. Writing in the German of his childhood, his universe, even as he approaches death, is godless, weighted with Expressionistic anguish over modern alienation from sacred sources of meaning; yet in his celebration of his love for Claire, the poet finds catharsis. She is both seductress and death mother in a plumbing of mythic realms: “In your eyes trout speed / And lightning bolts drown,” he writes in a later poem. In dying, perfection of soul lies in acts of love—for instance, in the building of a “Rain Palace” or a “House of Embers,” two of the most notable (and most often translated) poems from the last pages of Dreamgrass. The latter poem closes with an image of the beloved’s body, phoenix-like, transformed, “Your golden body gleaming like the nightly sun.” Selections from Dreamgrass and Neîla, a posthumous companion volume of lyrics, appear in the English collections edited by George Hitchcock and Rainer Schulte. Other than in these two out-of-print volumes, Goll’s German poetry is not well-represented in English.

— Donald Wellman
**DAS TRAUMKRAUT**

Alaun
Die ungeweinte Träne
in der Mulde meines Schädels

Das Traumkraut wuchs
Nachtfarben liebesfahl
Lange lange Menschenalter
Später daraus empor

Einmalige Blume
Unvermerkt von die Vögeln

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**DREAMGRASS**

Alum
Uncried tears
In the bowl of my skull

Dreamgrass grew
Nightshade love pale
Long long lifetimes
Later out of it upwards

Unique flower
Unobserved by birds
**Greise**

Euer nelkenfarbenes Fleisch  
Das noch von mageren Vögeln zehrt  
Und daran Feur fängt

Singet langsamer ihr Greise  
In dem Verwandelten Wind  
Und lasst den Tag nicht bröckeln  
Zwischen den Fingern

Der blaugefiederte Schlaf  
Hat Totenzähne  
Und die stimme des Kalks

---

**Old Men**

Your clove-colored flesh  
That still feeds on skinny birds  
And catches fire

Sing more slowly you old ones  
In the altered wind  
And let day not flake  
Between your fingers.

Blue feathered sleep  
Has deadmen's teeth  
And the voice of quick lime
Wasserträgerinnen
Hochgeschürzte Töchter
Schreiten schon herab die Sonnentotenstraße
Auf den Köpfen balancierend
Einen Krug voll Zeit
Eine Ernte un gepflückter Tropfen
Die schon reifen auf den Weg hinab
Wasser wasser immer weniger weniger
Wasserfälle Flüsse Tränen Nebel Dampf
Immer weniger Tropfen immer weniger Zeit
Schattenträgerinnen
Schon ergangene schon verhangene
Ewigkeit

Wasser carriers
Apron-clad daughters
Strut now down the sun-deadened street
On your heads balancing
A jug of time
A harvest of un gathered drops
That ripen now upon the path down hill
Water water always less and less
Waterfalls Rivers Tears Cloud Steam
Always fewer drops always less time
Shadow-carriers
Already gone already overcast
Eternity
DER HEILIGE LEIB

Behausung meiner Ahnen
Dies schwanke Knochenhaus
Auf Sand gebaut

Aus meinen Augen blicken
Sie allen meinen Straßen nach
Und meiner Milz ist ihre Garküche
In der sie kochen mit Fett und Blut

In der Ruinennische schläft noch meine Mutter
Am Kehlkopf klebt die Tabakrauch der Alten

Meiner heiliger Leib!
Die Opferstiere brüllen tief in mir
Und Rinderlendern duften samstags

Mein Mund beherbergt noch
Jahrhundertalte Silben
In meinen Ohren ist ein Rauschen und Lauschen
Und kein Gott

THE SACRED BODY

Home to my ancestors
This tottering bonehouse
Built on sand

In my eyes, they watch over
all my streets
And my spleen is their back kitchen
Where they cook with fat and blood

Among the ruins my mother sleeps still
Tobacco smoke from parents sticks in my larynx

My sacred body!
Sacrificial beasts roar deep in me
And beef tenderloins perfume saturdays

My mouth still holds
Centuries old syllables
In my ears a rustling and listening
And no God
**DAS KOHLEJÄHR**

Aus meinem Kohlejahr  
Schält sich das Vogelaug  
Ganz angepaßt der Rundung einer Nacht  
Und blickt und blickt  
Ins Herz des Zinns ins Feuer des Saturn  

Kohle mein Trauerhaupt  
Steig aus dem Wald des Alterns und der Werdung  
Von Palmenmark von Veilchenwein gelabt  
Im Gletscher eines Diamants  
Erbrennt das siebenfarbige Blut  
Noch blinde Frucht des kreissendens Gebirgs

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**THE COAL YEAR**

From my coal year  
The bird's eye laid bare  
Fitted perfectly to the rounding of a night  
And looks and looks  
Into the heart of pewter in the fire of Saturn  

Coal my sad head  
Rise from the forest of aging and becoming  
Refreshed by splashes of violetwine  
In the glacier of a diamond  
BURNS the seven-colored blood  
Yet blind fruit of the encircling mountain
Haizi

“Misfortune”

• Translated from the Chinese by Gerald Maa •

Haizi, the pen name of Zha Haisheng, lived from 1964 to 1989, born in the city of Gaohe in Anhui province. At the age of fifteen he entered Beijing University to study law. Upon graduating in 1983, he was appointed professor at Chinese Politics and Law University. On March 26th, 1989, Haizi, while traveling alone, committed suicide by laying down on a railroad track near Jiayu Gate, at the western end of the Great Wall of China. His suicide was a major literary event of post-Cultural Revolution China. Much like Sylvia Plath, Haizi was known more for his dramatic suicide than for the actual poems. However, again like Plath, after the fervor over the suicide died down, Haizi’s beautiful poems started to be taken seriously as poetry rather than as mere footnotes to a suicide.

In China he is commonly considered the most important contemporary Chinese artist. It is not an exaggeration to correlate Haizi’s role in Chinese Modernism with T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound’s role in American Modernism. Haizi was a voracious reader of foreign literature, ushering in many writers to China’s intellectual terrain (something necessary to Chinese Modernism, considering the Cultural Revolution’s success in un-doing the humanities). He wrote poems and prose pieces dedicated to or in direct contact with such authors as Hölderlin, Baudelaire, van Gogh, Kafka, and Pushkin. Prolific, Haizi wrote an enormous number of poems during his abbreviated life; half of his Collected Poems is an epic abandoned at four hundred-plus pages.

Like Hölderlin and Blake, Haizi was nostalgic for the ancient culture at the source of his country’s tradition. Like Hölderlin trying to synthesize the logos of ancient Greece with the pathos of Christianity, Haizi tried to synthesize the collective resolve of traditional Chinese culture and the existential nature of the Western literature he prized. It is said that two of the three books Haizi brought along on his final trek along the Great Wall of China were the Bible and a translation of Joseph Conrad’s works.

Haizi dedicated “Misfortune” to his favorite poet, Hölderlin. The poem is Haizi’s conversation with and homage to his progenitor. Haizi’s poetry, this one in particular, and a famous essay called “The Poet I Ardently Love—Hölderlin” have been foundational to China’s reception of the German Romantic. Haizi wrote “Misfortune” while night-journaling between November 1st and 7th, 1987. Both Haizi and Hölderlin are pastoral poets of the polis. Haizi inherited his preoccupation with the native ground, the dialectic of Christianity and ancient logos, and the Dionysian, directly from his love for this poet. In madness and aesthetic solitude, Haizi found his closest kin in the poetry of Hölderlin.

Although Haizi shared many of the high Modernist principles of the Misty poets (the group of contemporary Chinese poets—including Bei Dao, Gu Cheng, Yang Lian, and Duo Duo—the English speaking world is most familiar with), he has never been categorized as a Misty poet due to differences in aesthetics and in his manner of engagement with China’s political and literary tradition. Chinese literary critics generally perceive Haizi as, paradoxically, more enigmatic, more clear, and less dogmatic than the Misty poets (how much of this consensus is influenced by the Misty poets’ identity as political dissenters is up for debate).

The Cultural Revolution not only undid an entire tradition of humanities but also isolated China’s culture from the rest of the world. Haizi wrote in the rubble left over after decades in which anti-intellectualism and didacticism ruled literature. He wrote at a time where translations of over a century’s worth of Western literature and philosophy inundated China’s intellectual scene. He created the territory of a Modernism we must acquaint ourselves with if we wish to understand the climate of contemporary Chinese literature from the interior.

—Gerald Maa
MISFORTUNE

— for Hölderlin

1. Wine in Sickness

Lifted up a sickbed
My Hölderlin he just lies on this one bed
Horse frenzied sprint
Across all of France from east to west

Become a Symbol of the pure poet, the ill poet
O misfortune’s poet
People tether you like a horse
Tethered on one sickbed in a carpenter’s home

I do not know
In dying dusk of August
Second brother seeks Sophocles
Whether or not he has eased your pain with tragedy

When those sisters and abbot
Raised misfortune’s wool
Burning wool
The burning like white snow’s

He says—do not worry, fretful gods
Wait for an ode to the native ground to be sung through
Just then can I bore into them
Dark and slow-witted horns

Abundant horns horns that wail a noise
Crown and frenzied horn: I lie down
—“ten thousand years is too long”
Only these horns poetry dark poet blind
2. 怀念 或没有收获

等你手拿钝镰刀
割下白雪和羊毛
不幸的荷尔德林已经发疯

修道院总管的儿子
银行家夫人的情人
不幸的荷尔德林已经发疯

等你建好医院
安放好一张又一张病床
荷尔德林就躺在第一张床上
经历没有收获的日子
那是幸福的
—— “收获即苦难。”

只好怀念大雁——
那哭泣和笑容的篮子
当你追随我
来到人类的生活
只好怀念大雁——
那被黄昏染红的肉体的新娘。

3. 牧羊人的舞蹈——对称——黑暗沉寂之国
（有题无诗）

2. Reminisce or without Gain

Wait for your hand to grasp dull sickle
Shear off white snow and wool
Unfortunate Hölderlin's already gone mad

Son of the monastery master
Lover of the banker's Madame
Unfortunate Hölderlin's already gone mad

Wait for you to finish building a hospital
Having positioned one sickbed after another
Hölderlin just lies down on the first bed
Experience days without gain
Those are happy ones
—“gain is misery”

Could only reminisce for wild goose—
That weeping and smiling basket
When you follow me
Arrive at human life
Could only reminisce for wild goose—
That bride of flesh dyed red by dusk.

3. Shepherd's Dance—Symmetry—Dark Still Country
4. After Blood is Darkness—More Red than Blood is Darkness

Hölderlin—tell me what that darkness is
And how he inundates you
How he squeezes you into his chest
Like the Ganges having inundated a steed

The one existing the one braying sore and O the dark pail's master
You—now and how over abyss hover—dismally dance—me you will desert
And me you ridicule—Hölderlin
However you've already grown into a part of the dark God

Native ground
......we still, embracing this fragment of pail dissipating in light,
construct land and village
After all they will be inundated by darkness
Tell me, Hölderlin—my poetry is written for whom

Poison-poetry and grains in the burrow dug deep
House and fruit tree—these fragments—how will it emerge in darkness, Hölderlin?
O the dismal road journeyed on for six years
Whether or not brothers comprehend? Whether or not to sympathize with Diotima—although she's already long dead?

Which god once used hands to draw you across the path of interwoven light and darkness?
You on that harbor saw what kind of old mother and carpenter's kin?
Are they phantoms or are they Truth?
Beauty or falsehood? dismal or ecstatic?

Or are they the two converged to one: govern.
After blood is darkness—more red than blood is darkness
I forever reminiscing of you
Misfortune's brother Hölderlin!
5. Devoted to Fate Goddess

Embrace the one worn lamp flung broken by the man seated in
the heart
Embrace the happy fauna on cliff and leap down

Red wild goose
Gaze over beautiful villages and towns across the river

Some lines of verse devoted to fate goddess
Confess of pain on mountain without restraint

Red wild goose
In Southern wind faintly rustle

Young girl feeds on sheep sheep feeds on verdant grass shoots
sprouted after adolescent death
A lump of white clouds swept you away

Sheep that comes and goes with the wind
—fate goddess!

5. 致命运女神

怀抱心上人摔坏的一盏旧灯
怀抱悬崖上幸福的花草纵身而下

红色的大雁
隔河相望美丽村镇

致命运女神的几行诗句
痛苦在山上但说无妨

红色的大雁
在南风中微微吹动

少女食羊羊食少年死后长出的青青草杆
一团白云卷走了你

随风来去的羊
——命运女神！

1987.11.7夜录
Aodhagan Ó Rathaille, Proinsias Nuinseann, and Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin

Selected Poems

• Translated from the Irish by Michael S. Begnal •

In The Hidden Ireland (1924), Daniel Corkery wrote of Aodhagan Ó Rathaille, “His themes are scanty: one might, indeed, say he had but two; the first, Ireland and it broken... the second, himself, broken too; and sometimes those two themes become one.” Nowhere is this more apparent than in Ó Rathaille’s deathbed poem, “Cabhair ní ghairfead” (1729). In his lifetime, the native Gaelic Irish had become increasingly dispossessed, a process beginning in earnest with the defeat of Hugh O’Neill at the Battle of Kinsale in 1601, but which accelerated as the decades wore on and the English consolidated their control over Ireland. By the time he wrote this poem, Ó Rathaille had come to despair of any significant military resistance, and watched as his native lands were taken over by English landlords and his way of life was destroyed.

It was not difficult for Ó Rathaille to identify, in his degraded personal circumstances, a wider political cause, and part of his genius was the way his poetry allowed his rage to become the rage of a nation whose culture, language, and customs were under attack by a foreign oppressor. In a way, it was through the poets of the 18th century – Ó Rathaille foremost among them – that Irish nationalism in the sense that we know it today was formed.

Proinsias Nuinseann (or, in English, Francis Nugent), a contemporary of Ó Rathaille, was a poet of County Westmeath. The 18th century was a time when the Penal Laws proscribing the Catholic religion were in full effect; the English were attempting to suppress the Irish Gaelic culture it had more or less conflated with through the material effects of colonization. Thus the subject of the poem becomes the harrassment of the Catholic clergy and the murder of an apparent supporter of his own native ways. With Gaelic leaders becoming scarce, many Irish had little to fall back on but prayer. Though somewhat decadent compared to the earlier bardic poetry it hoped to emulate, “Farewell Rider” (1708) provides a true insight to the reality of Nuinseann’s times.

Writing at the turn of the 19th century, Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin hailed from County Cork and fought in the 1798 Rising. Some have seen him as the bridge between the bardic tradition, which was tied to the older, aristocratic Gaelic Order (which Ó Rathaille clearly harked back to), and the ideal democratic republican future as articulated by Wolfe Tone – Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter working together to free Ireland from the yoke of British domination. But whatever idealism Ó Longáin may have had as a young United Irishman dissolved in poverty and the harshness of the Penal Laws under which he struggled to make a living as a farmhand, an occupation which he felt was beneath him as a true poet. In the earlier piece, “Mr. Martin’s Horses” (1800), Ó Longáin still harbors the hope of French or Spanish aid. By the time of “This Cold Shed” (1822) that hope has gone and, as with Nuinseann and Ó Rathaille, there is little left for Ó Longáin but the comfort of his religion – still at that time technically illegal under British-imposed statutes.

All of the poems, in their original Irish, adhere to a strict metrical form in which assonance and alliteration play a key role. However, in order to convey the original meaning as closely as possible, and considering that the two languages are very different from each other, I have chosen to go with a rhythmic free verse in these translations, using both assonance and alliteration organically where appropriate in English. I don’t subscribe to any particular theory of translation. My process, and what I did here, was first to make a literal translation; with a rough working version I set about turning it into a real poem, one that is fully functioning as a poem in the English language. And for this I essentially brought in my own poetic method, the unstated criteria...
I use when writing my own poems.

A case in point is Nuinseann's line, “mar chualas sagart dá chia­padh is é ag dreo go cré,” which might be literally rendered as “it was heard a priest being tormented and he decaying to dust.” But in English it made more rhythmical sense to say, “it’s known a priest was attacked,” with that iambic or near-iambic sound. This also avoids the awkward syntax of “being tormented.” While “he decaying to dust” isn’t bad by itself, and gives the alliteration of the d, it has an antiquated ring and wouldn’t have worked well with the rest of the line. As Nuinseann is referring here to the priest’s old age, I instead went with my own construction, “one withered with dusty age.” So my complete line reads, “it’s known a priest was attacked (one withered with dusty age).” In place of the possible d alliteration, I now have the three w sounds (“one withered with”). Of course, any number of translations of a given poem is possible, but I offer these as my best reading of what Nuinseann, Ó Rathaille, and Ó Longáin were trying to convey poetically of their people, their times, and themselves.

— Michael S. Begnal
**CABHAIR NÍ GHAIRFEAD**

Cabhair ní ghairfead go gcuirthear mé i gcruin-chomhrainn—dar an leabhar dá ngairinn níor ghaire-de an ní dhomh-sa; ár goadhach uile, glac-chumasach shiá Eoghain, is tollta a chuisle, 'gus d'imigh a bhrí ar feochadh.

Do thonnchrith m'inchinn, d'imigh mo phríomhdóchas, poll im ionathar, biora nimhe trim dhrólaínn, ár bhfonn, ár bhfothain, ár monga, 's ár mìnchóngair i ngeall le pinginn ag forrinn ó chrích Dhóbhair.

Do bhodhar an tSionainn, an Life, 's an Laoi cheolmhar, abhainn an Bhiorra Dhuibh, Bruice 'gus Bríd, Bóinne, com Loch Deirge 'na ruide 'gus Toinn Tóime ó lom an cuireata cluiche ar an rí coróinneach.

Mo ghlam is minic, is silmse síordheora, is trom mo thubaist 's is duine mé ar míomhthrom, fonn ní thigeann im ghaire 's mé ag caoi ar bhóithre ach foghar na Muice nach gontar le saigheadóireacht.

Goll na Rinne, na Cille 'gus chríche Eoghanacht, do lom a ghoile le huireaspa ar díth córach; an seabhac agá bhfualíd sin uile 's a gcíosóireacht, fabhar ní thugann don duine, cé go d'oiféanta.

Fán tromlot d'imigh ar chine na rí mógra treabhann um uiseannaibh uisce go scímghlóirach; is lonnmhár chuiriid mo shrutha-sa foinseoga san abhainn do shileas ó Thruipill go caoin-Éochaill.

Stadfadsa feastá—is gar dom éag gan mhoill ó treascadh drágaín Leamhan, Léin is Laoi; rachad 's na bhfasc le searc na laoch don chill, na flatha fá raibh mo shean roimh éag do Chriost.

(c. 1729)

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**I WON'T CRY FOR HELP**

I won’t cry for help till I’m put in a fitted coffin—
I swear it wouldn’t be granted even if I did.
Our only support, the strong-handed of Eoghan’s seed:
his veins pierced and his strength withered.

Wave-shaken my brain, my prime hope gone,
a hole in my intestine, bitter spikes through my guts.
Our lands, our shelter, our trees, our smooth paths
sold for a penny by a gang from Dover.

The Shannon is silent, and the Liffey, the rushing Lee,
the river Barraduff, the Brucka, the Bride, the Boyne,
the shallows of Loch Dearg and Tóim’s Wave, run red
since the Joker laid bare the coronated King.

My howls come often, I pour out endless tears,
heavy my plight, I’ve become unbalanced,
no tune in my voice as I wail along the roads,
only the sound of the Pig unwounded by archers.

Hero of the Rinn, the Cill, Eoghanacht country,
his strength stripped through lack and injustice.
The lord who now holds these lands and collects its rents
gives favor to no one, not even his own relations.

Heavy damage to our high royal race,
and so the water plows down from my temples,
angrily they squeeze out fountainous streams
into the river flowing between Truipeall and soft Youghal.

But I’ll stop now—death draws close ever since
the dragons of the Laune, Loch Léin, and the Lee
were destroyed: I go lovingly to the grave to join them,
the princes my ancestors served before the death of Christ.
**BEIR BUAIMH, A MHarCAIGH**

Beir buaimh, a mharcaigh, nár dhealaigh le nós na nGaedhaol! Ó ruaig an chatha cé ndéarfadh nár mhór an spéis, ach ruathair rátha faoi scathibh is fá mhóin is scéun, mar scuabas sagait an bealach sa tóir na ndéarg—

mac tírigh a’ tafann ar easpagh, ar óird ’s ar chléir, na tuata eachtracha dá dtarraingt chun móide is bréag mar chualas sagairt dá chiapadh is é ag dreo go cré, ’gá shuathadh is ’gá mhartradh, ’gá shatailt fán fhód le pén.

Ar uaign mo charad is claisneach ’sis brónach mé, gan snuaídh ar mo leacaibh ach ag fior-dháil na ndear go fheir; ní luaifead feasta laoidhreach fá chró mo Thaidhg ach gabháil do phaidribh, as cleachtadh, ar tómba a ré.

(c. 1708)

**FAREWELL RIDER**

Farewell rider, who never gave up the Gaelic way!
Since the rout in battle who could say there’s much interest but for occasional, panicky, frightened raids on forts, as priests are swept away by marauding redcoats—

those wolves barking after bishops, the religious, the clergy, foreign bumpkins dragging them off to swear false oaths; it’s known a priest was attacked (one withered with dusty age), pushed around, maimed, then trampled to the ground in pain.

At my friend’s grave I’m restless and sorrowful, no color in my cheeks, but pouring copious tears onto the grass—I will no longer recite poems about Tadhg’s bloody death, but take to prayers, out of practice, on the tomb of his age.
An fear céanna cct. i mBaile Philip san mbláin 1800.

Is méin liom insin daoibh gan bhluadar láithreach, créad bheir sinne timpeall chapaill Mháirtin; éag mo dhaoine is laghad mo charad láimh riom, 's an saol bocht cinnte 'om stríocadh ar easpa fáltais.

Mo scéan mo sceimhle scís mo scalladh cráite, mo chréacht mo chaí mo dháith mo dhainid chás mhí, Éire i ndaoirse arís gan casadh i ndán di, Is in aol 'na luí is ea chímse sraith dá cairde.

Má ghéillimid do laoi dar chansad fáige, tá tréanfhir groi le tóacht 'nar measc tar sáile do réidh snaidhm don bhúsion-se i nglasaibh tarla, is do shaorfaidh sinn ó chuí na ndanar ngáifeach.

Mo scéal chum cinn dá dtíodh ba seascair sán m'é, bhíadh léamh ar laoithe linn is léalhair áRSA, féasta is fionta is draoiithe ag spreagadh sárchrot, is tréada an fhill gan ríocht gan rath i gcláir Loirc.

Mr. Martin’s Horses

Philipstown, 1800

I'm going to tell you all right now, straight out, just what led me to this toiling with Martin's horses: the death of my relations, dwindling friends, and this poor heartbreak of a life lashing me with poverty.

What shock, what shaking terror, what scalding agony, like a gaping wound, my deplorable lack, my plaintive loss, Ireland enslaved once more with no end in sight, and lying in quicklime I see her would-be allies.

But if we can believe in the song our forebears chanted, there's some mighty force still to come from across the sea who will ease the troubles of those now in bondage, and free us from the yoke of these loathsome barbarians.

My story would improve then, I'd be finally content, we would read again our epics and our ancient books, there'd be feasts and wine and poets rousing the plangent harp, and those treacherous hordes broken, now scarce in Lorc's plain.
An fear céana cct. iar mbeith dho 'na chónait i mboth bheag dbeáróil mbuírdeataigh agus i ndrochfeirm tbalín an tan sin, noch do bhí ró-dhaor air; i bparóiste Dhuína Boilg nó Carraig na bhFear in aice Chorcaí isin mbliain 1822. Do bhí ár n-aímnneacha ar na dóirsibh an bhliain sin.

Fuacht na scailpe-se, deatach is goaith geimhridh,
cruas na leapa so 's easpa brait lae is oíche, 
muarchuid teacsanna, deachuithe is glaoch cíosa, 
tug buartha cathach mé, easpaitheach éagainteach.

Mo scuaine leanbh go dealbh gan aon tí agu, 
's an tsuaircbehan chneasta, a mbanaltra bhéilbhinn sin, 
cruas na reachta so ag Gallaibh dár ngéiridhibirt, 
do buair, do mheaithlaigh, do mhairbh go lèir mh'intinn.

Ar cuairt dá dtagadh sin, caraid dom fheafraise, 
níor thuallang mh'acmhainn a threastal ná a chaomhdhion liom 
ag sluaite danar ag taisteal gach aon oíche 
ar fuaid árbhailte ag bagar an chlaondlí orainn.

Uain ná aga níl agam do ghleas caoilphinn 
le a luafainn grafadh mo leabhar i saorscribhinn; 
atáid uaim iar scáipeadh go seachmhallach saobhnaíseach, 
suarach searbh ar aiste nár cheim cí dhom.

A Uain ghil bhanaltran bheannaíthe an chaomhRí sin 
d'huascail scata ó phheannait na ndaor-gclaoinbheart, 
ruaíse Gallaibh as fearannaíb saor Chrómhthainn 
uaínn tar caise, is nár chasaid go héag choíche.

The cold of this shed, smoke and winter wind, 
this hard bed with never enough blankets, 
the amount of taxes, tithes, and demands of rent—
all makes me mournful sad, plaintive poor.

My children destitute, they don't have a damn thing, 
nor that pleasant mild woman (their sweet-mouthed mother); 
the cruelty of these English statutes—meant to drive us out— 
has grieved, decayed, has utterly numbed my mind.

If anyone were to call, friends asking after me, 
my means wouldn't even allow me to offer hospitality, 
bands of foreign thugs roaming through our towns 
every single night, threatening us with penal law.

I don't have the chance or time to ready my pen 
to work my calligraphy on manuscript pages, 
my own books are scattered, indeliberately lost 
as if petty, insignificant—makes me look incompetent.

O bright Lamb of the blessed wet-nurse and gentle King 
Who suffered in multitudes with crooked, evil torment, 
expel the Saxons from the lands of noble Crimhthainn, 
back across the sea, and may they never return.
The Chamorro Bible

from *YSalmo Sija/The Psalms*
• Translated from the Chamorro by CRAIG S. PEREZ •

Almost every Sunday, my grandmother dragged me to Catholic mass at the Dulce Nombre de Maria Cathedral Basilica in the village of Hagatna, the capital of the Pacific Island of Guahan (or Guam, in English). The Basilica marks the site where the first Catholic church on Guahan was constructed, in 1669, under the guidance of Padre San Vitores. Guahan, a Spanish colony from the 17th century to 1898, has been a U.S. territory since the Spanish-American War.

Although mass was held in English, each night my grandmother recited the rosary in Chamorro, the native language of Guahan. She said her mother taught her the prayers in Chamorro, and that her mother would read her the psalms from the Chamorro Bible. Bored during mass, I read the psalms in the English language Bibles. The voice of the psalms—helpless, threatened, confused, hopeful, and trusting—continues to haunt me. After my family emigrated to California, I asked my grandmother if she still had her mother’s Chamorro Bible, but she said it that had been lost when she was just a young girl.

In 1900, a Protestant minister named Francis Price arrived on Guam. He believed that translating the Bible into Chamorro would help him connect to his congregation. He began by transcribing a Chamorro teacher’s translation of a Spanish Bible into Chamorro. This method proved too slow, so Price then had several Spanish-speaking Chamorros translate independently; Price then compiled these translations to suit his ideas of the Chamorro language (which reflected a Spanish-influenced orthography). In 1907, they had translated the four Gospels, Acts, and Psalms into the Chamorro language. The bibles were printed and distributed on Guahan in 1908.

By 1922, the U.S. had implemented a California-style public school system. All classes were taught in English by Americans and local English-speakers. Chamorro was prohibited in schools and on playgrounds. By government order, about 900 Chamorro dictionaries and other books were collected and burned. Some people attribute the loss of the Chamorro Bible to this linguistic colonialism. Some people also point to the destruction caused by World War II, during which the Japanese occupied Guahan, forcing the people from their homes and into concentration camps. Despite speculation, the disappearance of the original Chamorro Bible remains a mystery. Now, the Chamorro Bible is available online at chamorrobible.org.

When I first read *YSalmo Sija* (the Psalms) in Chamorro, I stumbled over the text because, while I lived on Guam, Chamorro was not taught in the schools. But as I continued to navigate the text, I began to hear the etchings of my grandmother’s voice. Staring at a computer screen an ocean away from my homeland, I whispered the words that at one point my grandmother had heard her mother whispering.

While reading *YSalmo Sija*, I heard another voice. It was not my grandmother’s voice, nor was it the psalmic voice I remember from childhood; it was a voice translating the Chamorro into English, rendering the violent pulse and colonial currents of the language itself forced into psalm. I tried to capture this voice in these translations, fragmented psalms held together by silence, omissions, and ellipses.

As a result, my translations are neither objective nor transparent. Often, a phrase will translated into its ‘colonial reality’ (“Dichoso y taotao”, literally “Blessed the people”, becomes “we are cursed”). Other times, a phrase will be omitted to show disbelief (“ya todo y finatinasña mumemegae”, which roughly means, “and all he does shall prosper”, becomes “...”). Finally, a phrase will often be translated to question its very meaning (“Sa si Jeova ja-tungo y chalan manunas: lao y chalan manaeley ufanmalingo” means roughly “God knows the righteous path; the path of sinners shall perish”, but is translated to “will the Landlord of our path ever perish?”). Although this free / open / subjective / experimental translation methodology does not force meaning cleanly from one language into another, my hope is that these translations clearly translate the voice I hear in the Chamorro psalms, a voice that has been burned and lost and forgotten for too long.

- Craig Santos Perez
Lord, they chastise me hot

Have mercy, O Lord; I am weak. Heal me, O Lord, my bones are questions

Psalm 6
I will not praise his echoed names
He made a trench for us to appe
Be heed with birth ["""] of those
Instruments of death, return ["""]
If he doesn't turn, the drip of the sword, bow ready
God is angry with the colonized day
Depend us, Lord. ["""] Stand, hear.
Judge them! Judge me!
Then we compress ["""]

Arise, O Lord, in anger ["""] and awake to the sentence
Let the mighty take more land, my soul and day and dus. Still
If I traded peace for nations ["""]
O Lord, God, I have done this
There my soul like a poor, republican until there is nothing to incorporate
[""]
O landlord, My God, listen us [""]

Psalm 7
O Lord, O Lord, we are emptied of your name
Like birds of the territorial sky, and dead fish and all the parts of the rounded sea
Like oxen, sheen, beasts of the closed field
Made dominion of others' hands. Made a thing under others' feet
Lower than angels, yes. But lower than freedom?
Who are we that you have forgotten?
Named heaven, moon, fingers, stars. [...] Named the dead mouths of babies learn English and avenger.
The dead mouths of babies learn English: enemy and avenger.
O Lord, our land is emptied of your name.
With all my heart...

I will not remain silent...
or sing

In which the military presence falls and does not maintain my right...

You have denied the nation...

The military, your destructions are perpetual; our villages, our memory has perished

But the Lord endures forever...

The nation is drowned in the trench they made; our feet in their net

The Lord is known by his sentences, snared. Sila

God has forgotten our nation...

That nations know themselves to be just men.

Psalm 9
Luis Cernuda

from Desolation of the Chimera
• Translated from the Spanish by Stephen Kessler •

Luis Cernuda (1902-1963) was born in Seville and came of age amid the cohort of Spanish poets known as the Generation of 1927 (Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Vicente Aleixandre, Jorge Guillén, Pedro Salinas, et al.). On publication of his collected poems, La Realidad y el Deseo, in 1936—a volume to be augmented and revised throughout his life in several subsequent editions—Cernuda became firmly established as one of the leading voices of this group, which was soon to be shattered by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Lorca was murdered, others went into exile or were silenced.

Invited to lecture in Britain in 1938, Cernuda went abroad. He ended up teaching for nearly ten years in Glasgow and London before taking a post in 1947 at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, where he taught until 1952. Seduced, literally and figuratively, by a visit to Mexico that year, he left the United States to live with the family of Manuel Altolaguirre in the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacán. He returned to the U.S. only for brief teaching jobs at UCLA and San Francisco State in the early 1960s.

Openly gay in both his life and his writing, Cernuda’s recurrent themes are “forbidden pleasures,” exile, wandering, the poet’s vocation, and nostalgia for a lost Andalucía.

The poems here are from his final book, Desolación de la Quimera (1962), written mostly in Mexico, in a state of abject isolation from his former friends and compatriots in Spain. Ironically, it was at this time that his star was in fact rising among younger Spanish poets, who saw him as one of the signal figures of his generation.

Cernuda’s alienated, cosmopolitan perspective has been increasingly appreciated by Spaniards in the subsequent half-century. A mixture of nostalgia and bitterness pervades these writings, combined with the confidence of a master with nothing left to prove. Straightforward, unadorned, almost prosaic in style, the poems serve as the last testament of a proud sensibility stripped of its illusions yet holding fast to an ideal vision of poetry and sexual love.

These translations are part of a work in progress, Desolation of the Chimera: Selected Later Poems 1950-1962. Some of them appeared in a limited-edition chapbook, Captive Music, from Q Ave Press. My version of Cernuda’s collected prose poems, Written in Water, was published in 2004 by City Lights Books. A Selected Poems, translated by Reginald Gibbons, was reissued in 2000 by Sheep Meadow Press.

—Stephen Kessler
MÁLIBU

Málibu,
Olas con lluvia.
Aire de música.

Málibu,
Agua cautiva.
Gruta marina.

Málibu,
Nombre de hada
Fuerza encantada.

Málibu,
Viento que ulula.
Bosque de brujas.

Málibu,
Una palabra,
Y en ella, magia.

MALIBU

Malibu,
Waves in the rain.
Musical air.

Malibu,
Water contained.
Cove of the sea.

Malibu,
Fairytale name.
Enchanted force.

Malibu,
Owl-calling wind.
Wood full of witches.

Malibu,
Merely a word,
And magic in it.
AMIGOS: ENRIQUE ASÚNSOLO

Me iba por tiempo no más largo
Del que, entre una y otra visita, distanciaba,
Por su poca salud, la ocasión de vernos
Y, al despedirme, dijo: “Quizá cuando regrese
Ya no me encuentre.” No le creía. Pero, ¿cómo ayudarle
Ante el final que afrontaremos solos?

Ausente yo, brusca y definitiva, la noticia
De su muerte. Y recordé: ante alguna bebida
Bien compuesta, ante algún plato
Bien ordenado, con él, de humor sutil, aquellas horas
Que, al pasar, no dejaban saciedad ni fastidio,
Cuando yo estaba, por una vez, en compañía.

Acaso no sea justo al decir sólo eso:
Poesía y pintura (hizo de mí un retrato),
Aficiones en él gemelas, tácito fondo eran,
Dándole otro valor a la amistad que nos unía.
Pero saber vivir fue su don más profundo.

Quisiera verle aún. ¿De qué muerto podemos decir eso?
Oída su palabra, todo cansa: lugar, cosa, persona.
Mas él, al irse, tras de sí deja viva la apetencia
De la conversación y la amistad interrumpidas.

FRIENDS: ENRIQUE ASÚNSOLO

I was going away for a time no longer
Than the usual breaks we took,
Because of his bad health, between our meetings,
And as I was saying goodbye he said: “Maybe when you come back
You won’t find me here.” I didn’t believe him. But how could I have helped him
Up against the end we face alone?

While I was gone, news of his death came,
Blunt and definitive. And I remembered:
Over some nicely mixed drink, or some well prepared Meal, being with him, his subtle wit, those hours Going by not sated but not bored,
When for a while I was in good company.

Maybe it isn’t fair to say just that:
His twin passions, poetry and painting (He did a portrait of me), were the tacit background,
Giving another dimension to our friendship.
But knowing how to live was his deepest gift.

I’d like to see him again. Which of the dead Can we say that about? His talk once heard,
Everything else feels tired: places, things, people. But leaving, he left a living appetite For friendship and conversation interrupted.
Peregrino

¿Volver? Vuelva el que tenga,
Tras largos años, tras un largo viaje,
Cansancio del camino y la codicia
De su tierra, su casa, sus amigos,
Del amor que al regreso fiel le espere.

Mas ¿tú? ¿volver? Regresar no piensas,
Sino seguir libre adelante,
Disponible por siempre, mozo o viejo,
Sin hijo que te busque, como a Ulises,
Sin Ítaca que aguarde y sin Penélope.

Sigue, sigue adelante y no regreses,
Fiel hasta el fin del camino y tu vida,
No eches de menos un destino más fácil,
Tus pies sobre la tierra antes no hollada,
Tus ojos frente a lo antes nunca visto.

Pilgrim

Go back? He may go back who has,
After long years, after a long journey,
Grown weary of the road and longs
For his land, his house, his friends,
The love faithfully awaiting his return.

But you? Go back? You don't think of going back,
But going on freely ahead,
Young or old, ready for anything,
Without a son to seek you, like Ulysses,
Without an Ithaca waiting and without Penelope.

Go on, go on ahead and don't look back,
Faithful until the end to the road, your life,
Don't wish you had an easier destiny,
Your feet on ground that's never been walked before,
Your eyes wide to what hasn't yet been seen.
**TRES MISTERIOS GOZOSOS**

El cantar de los pájaros, al alba,
   Cuando el tiempo es más tibio,
Alegres de vivir, ya se desliza
   Entre el sueño, y de gozo
Contagia a quien despierta al nuevo día.

Alegre sonriendo a su juguete
   Pobre y roto, en la puerta
De la casa juega solo el niñito
   Consigo y, en dichosa
Ignorancia, goza de hallarse vivo.

El poeta, sobre el papel soñando
   Su poema inconcluso
Hermoso le parece, goza y piensa
   Con razón y locura
Que nada importa: existe su poema.

**THREE HAPPY MYSTERIES**

The singing of birds, at dawn,
   When the weather's cooler,
Happy to be alive, it slips
   Into your sleep and infects
With pleasure the one waking to the new day.

Happily smiling at its poor
   Broken toy, the little child plays
With it alone in the doorway
   Of his house and, blissfully
Ignorant, delights in finding himself alive.

The poet, dreaming on paper
   His unfinished poem,
It looks good to him, he's pleased and thinks
   Rightly and madly
That nothing else matters: his poem exists.
TIEMPO DE VIVIR, TIEMPO DE DORMIR

Ya es noche. Vas a la ventana.
El jardín está oscuro abajo.
Ves el lucero de la tarde
Latiendo en fulgor solitario.

Y quietamente te detienes.
Dentro de ti algo se queja:
Esa hermosura no atendida
Te seduce y reclama afuera.

Encanto de estar vivo, el hombre
Sólo siente en raros momentos
Y aún necesita compartirlos
Para aprender la sombra, el sueño.

TIME TO LIVE, TIME TO SLEEP

It's night. You go to the window.
The garden below is dark.
You see the evening star
Pulsing in lonely splendor.

And quietly you pause.
Inside you something groans:
That unattended beauty
Seduces you, calls you out.

Man only feels the enchantment
Of being alive in rare moments
And still he needs to share them
To understand shadows and dreams.
LUNA LLENA EN SEMANA SANTA

Denso, suave el aire
Orea tantas callejas,
Plazuelas, cuya alma
Es la flor del naranjo.

Resuenan cerca, lejos,
Clarines masculinos
Aquí, allí la flauta
Y oboes femeninos.

Mágica por el cielo
La luna fulge, llena
Luna de parasceve.
Azahar, luna, música,

Entrelazados, bañan
La ciudad toda. Y breve
Tu mente la contiene
En sí, como una mano,

Amorosa. ¿Nostalgias?
No. Lo que así recreas
Es el tiempo sin tiempo
Del niño, los instintos

Aprendiendo la vida
Dichosamente, como
La planta nueva aprende
En suelo amigo. Eco

Que, a la doble distancia,
Generoso hoy te vuelve,
En leyenda, a tu origen.
Et in Arcadia ego.

FULL MOON DURING HOLY WEEK

Rich and soft, the air
Refreshes the narrow streets,
The little plazas, whose soul
Is the orange blossom.

Near and far you can hear
Masculine clarions
Here, feminine flutes
And oboes over there.

A magic moon shines
In the sky, full
Moon of Good Friday.
Orange blossom, music, moon,

Interwined, are bathing
The whole city. And briefly
Your mind can hold it
All, like a lover’s

Hand. Nostalgia?
No. What you’re reviving
Is the timeless time
Of a child, his instincts

Learning life
Happily, as
The young plant learns
In friendly soil. An echo

Which, doubly distant,
Generously takes you back,
In legend, to your beginning.
Et in Arcadia ego.
**DOS DE NOVIEMBRE**

Las campanas hoy  
Ominosas suenan.  
Aún temprano, el aire,  
Frío acero, llega  

Por tu sangre adentro.  
Recuerdas los tuyos  
Idos este año  
Dejándote único.  

Ahora tú sostienes  
Solo la memoria:  
El hogar remoto,  
Familiares sombras,  

Todo destinado.  
Contigo al olvido.  
El azul del cielo  
Promete, tan limpio,  

Aire tibio luego.  
Y por el mercado,  
Donde están las flores  
En copiosos ramos,  

Un olor respiras,  
Olor, mas no aroma,  
A tierra, a hermosura  
Que, antigua, conforta.  

A pesar del tiempo,  
Al alma, en la vida,  
Materia y sentidos  
Como siempre alivian.

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**NOVEMBER SECOND**

The bells today  
Sound ominous.  
Even early, the cold  
Steel air comes  

Into your blood.  
You recall your own,  
Gone this year,  
Leaving you alone.  

Now you have  
Only memory:  
The faraway home,  
Shadows of family,  

Everything destined  
With you for oblivion.  
The sky's clear  
Blue promises  

Warm air later.  
And in the market,  
Where bunches of  
Flowers abound,  

You breathe a smell,  
A smell, not an aroma,  
Of earth, of beauty,  
Ancient and comforting.  

In spite of time,  
As always in life  
Things and the senses  
Lighten the soul.
A PROPÓSITO DE FLORES

Era un poeta joven, apenas conocido.
En su salida primera al mundo
Buscaba alivio a su dolencia
Cuando muere en Roma, entre sus manos una carta,
La última carta, que ni abrir siquiera quiso,
De su amor jamás gozado.

El amigo que en la muerte le asistiera
Sus palabras finales nos trasmite:
“Ver cómo crece alguna flor menuda,
El crecer silencioso de las flores,
Acaso fue la única dicha
Que he tenido en el mundo.”

¿Pureza? Vivo, a las flores amadas contemplaba
Y mucho habló de ellas en sus versos;
En el trance final su mente volvía
A la dicha más pura que conoció en al vida:
Ver a la flor que abre, su color y su gracia.

¿Amargura? Vivo, sinsabores tuvo
Amargos que apurar, sus breves años
Apenas conocieron momentos sin la sombra.
En la muerte quiso volverse con tacito sarcasmo
A la felicidad de la flor que entreabre.

¿Amargura? ¿Pureza? ¿O, por qué no, ambas a un tiempo?
El lirio se corrompe como la hierba mala,
Y el poeta no es puro o amargo únicamente:
Devuelve sólo al mundo lo que el mundo le ha dado,
Aunque su genio amargo y puro algo más le regale.

WITH REGARD TO FLOWERS

He was a young poet, barely known.
On his first venture into the world
In search of relief from his illness
He dies in Rome, a letter in his hand,
The last, unopened letter from his love
With whom he’d never had the pleasure.

The friend who was with him at his death
Passes along to us his final words:
To watch the way some little flower grows,
The quiet growing of the flowers,
May well have been the only happiness
I’ve ever had in the world.

Purity of heart? Alive, he regarded his beloved flowers
And often wrote about them in his verses;
In his final delirium his mind returned
To the purest happiness he’d known in life:
To watch a flower opening, its color and its grace.

Bitterness? Alive, he had his heartaches
Bitter to swallow, his brief years
Barely knew a few minutes out of the shadows.
Dying, he tried to return with tacit sarcasm
To the happiness of the slowly opening flower.

Bitterness? Purity of heart? Or why not both at once?
The lily withers the same as the weeds,
And the poet is neither wholly pure nor bitter:
He gives back to the world what the world has given him,
Though his pure and bitter genius may give something more.
CLEARWATER

Píntalo. Con un pincel delgado,
Con color bien ligero. Pinta
El reflejo del sol sobre las aguas,
En su fondo piedrecillas que sueñan.

Las hojas en los olmos, que algún aire,
Al orear, mansamente remueve.
Al fondo, sombra azul de unas colinas.
Quieta en el cielo, alguna nube clara.

Dentro de ti sonríe lo que esperas
Sin prisa, para su día cierto;
Espera donde feliz se refleja tu vida
Igual que este paisaje en dulces aguas.

CLEARWATER

Paint it. With a fine brush,
In a nice light shade. Paint
The sun glittering on the water,
Little rocks dreaming in the background.

The leaves of the elms, which a slight breeze,
Whispering, gently rustles.
Beyond, some shadowy blue hills.
Hanging in the sky, a white cloud.

Inside you smiles what you’re waiting for,
In no rush, in its good time;
You wait for the place where your life is reflected
Gladly as in this freshwater landscape.
Lo Que al Amor le Basta

De nuevo el amor tiene
Presa en ti. De servirle
A pesar de ti mismo
La edad aún no te exime.

Sin amor, libre eras,
Cuando tus ojos vieron
La nueva criatura
Que despertó al deseo.

Los ojos ya alimentan
Ese encanto en el alma
Y otra cosa no quieres.
¿Sólo contemlar basta?

¿Eso te basta? Y cómo,
Viéndola, a todo llena
Una razón; y es todo
Sin razón, al no verla.

Mirar a lo que amas.
Si bastara ese encanto
Nada más; si bastara
Este mirar lo amado.

En la fase primera
Del amor te demoras
Sin allegarte al cuerpo
Cuyo existir adoras.

What's Enough for Love

Again you've been caught
By love. Even age
Doesn't exempt you from it
In spite of yourself.

Loveless, you were free,
When your eyes beheld
The new creature
Who sparked your desire.

Your eyes still feed
That spell in your soul
And you want nothing else.
Is it enough just to see?

Is that enough for you?
Just seeing him, one thought
Fills everything; without
Seeing him, nothing makes sense.

To gaze on the one you love.
If only that spell were enough
And nothing more; if only to look
At the one you love were enough.

In the first phase
Of love you defer
Getting close to the body
Whose being you adore.
HABLANDO A MANONA

Manonita, Manona,
Ahora has aprendido
Cómo el aire, de pronto,
Se lleva los amigos.
Y así
Tú estás ahí,
Yo estoy aquí.

A veces Dios nos hace
De un cariño regalo,
Por un poco de tiempo,
Cuando bien nos portamos.
Y al fin
Tenemos que vivir
Tú ahí, yo aquí.

¿Está bien, te parece,
Manona, Manonita,
Que el cariño no sea
Para toda la vida?
¿Y así
Tú estés ahí
Y esté yo aquí?

Esperemos, Manona;
Manonita, paciencia:
Tal vez nuestros afectos
Dios los pone a esa prueba.
Y así
Tú estás ahí
Yo estoy aquí.

Y luego una mañana,
Despertando, hallaremos
Sonrientes las caras
De los que estaban lejos.
Y al fin
No estaremos así:
Tú ahí, yo aquí.

SPEAKING TO MANONA

Manonita, Manona,
Now you know
How the air all of a sudden
Carries away your friends.
And so
You're there
And I'm here.

Sometimes when we've been
Good, God gives us
A tender gift
For a brief time.
And in the end
We go on living,
You there, me here.

You think it's fair,
Manona, Manonita,
That tenderness can't last
A whole life long?
And that's why
You're there
And I'm here?

Let's hope so, Manona;
Manonita, be patient:
Maybe God is putting
Our tenderness to a test.
And that's why
You're there
And I'm here.

And then one morning
On waking we'll find
The smiling faces
Of the faraway ones.
And at last
We won't be like this:
You there, me here.
Jenny Erpenbeck

from The Book of Words

• Translated from the German by Susan Bernofsky •

Jenny Erpenbeck (born 1967 in East Berlin) is one of the most interesting younger writers to emerge in Germany over the past decade. Her debut, *Geschichte vom alten Kind (Story of the Old Child)* was a smash success when it came out in 1999—the quirky, uncanny tale of an “old child” (indeterminate age + amnesia) who is found on the street one day and put in a Home for Children where she most decidedly doesn’t fit in. Her life there is described with a weird detachment that is deeply unsettling, not least because the third-person narration is so closely linked to the title character’s point of view.

In 2005, New Directions published the volume *The Old Child and Other Stories* which contains both the novella described above and a selection of five stories from Erpenbeck’s next collection, *Tand*. This is a title I would have liked to translate as “All That Glitters” (the word “Tand” is a collective noun referring to flashy, worthless things, baubles), but as it turns out in the title story, the word comes from a line of poetry by Theodor Fontane that in English winds up going: On sand, on sand, rests all that’s built by human hand! I wonder if there’s a word for a translation that turns out to rhyme with its original.

Erpenbeck’s 2005 short novel *Wörterbuch (The Book of Words)*, from which the following excerpt is taken, is a fascinating, difficult book that looks fairly simple at first. The narrator is a child, and the narration is childish, but in the course of the book it gradually becomes clear that strange, cruel things lie just behind the façade of the story as it’s being told to us. I hesitate to offer too many specifics, since experiencing the unfolding of this story un-forewarned is one of the pleasures of this book. The present excerpt appears early on in the novel, when we are only just beginning to suspect what sorts of things might be amiss. A few pages before this excerpt, one of the narrator’s little school friends reports that her mother has been trampled to death while feeding her horses; many more disappearances follow, and it quickly becomes difficult not to think in terms of a military dictatorship.

The themes of scorching heat, sunshine and the Holy Trinity have been introduced earlier in the book by the narrator’s wet nurse who tells her the story of Saint Difunta Correa, who perished on a journey through the desert but miraculously managed to save the life of her infant child, which was found still suckling at her dead breast. The appearance of this saint (who is worshipped above all in Argentina) is the strongest clue we get in the novel as to the story’s location. Near the end of the book, historical reasons for thinking of this country emerge as well.

The novel is called *The Book of Words* because, as the narrator learns even at an early age, words don’t always mean what they’re supposed to, particularly when the government keeps changing. She walks around collecting words and noting their new senses. Even “father” and “mother” take on new meanings. Did I forget to mention that this little girl is often visited by ghosts? The complete translation of *The Book of Words* is forthcoming in Fall 2007 from New Directions.

— Susan Bernofsky

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German text excerpted from *Wörterbuch*, Copyright © Eichborn AG, Frankfurt am Main, 2004, 123-130.
Ob die Sonne sich abnutzt. Ob sie in Ländern wie hier, wo sie das ganze Jahr über jeden Tag scheinen muß, schneller als anderswo schäbig wird. Ob sie in Ländern wie hier, wo sie beinahe zu jeder Zeit alles sehen kann, außer nachts, oder wenn es, was selten geschieht, einmal regnet, selbst Spuren davonträgt von dem, was sie sieht. Ob das, was unter ihrem Strahlen vorfällt, auf sie zurückscheint. So daß die Sonne je nachdem, was sie bescheint, selbst vollkommen oder verwahrlost, heil oder kalt aussieht. Ob das, was unter ihrem Strahlen vorfällt, auf sie zurücktritt. So daß die Sonne selbst, je nachdem, was sie bescheint, selbst vollkommen oder verwahrlost, heil oder kalt aussieht. Ob das, was unter ihrem Strahlen vorfällt, auf sie zurücktritt. So daß die Sonne selbst, je nachdem, was sie bescheint, selbst vollkommen oder verwahrlost, heil oder kalt aussieht. Ob das, was unter ihrem Strahlen vorfällt, auf sie zurücktritt. So daß die Sonne selbst, je nachdem, was sie bescheint, selbst vollkommen oder verwahrlost, heil oder kalt aussieht. Ob das, was unter ihrem Strahlen vorfällt, auf sie zurücktritt. So daß die Sonne selbst, je nachdem, was sie bescheint, selbst vollkommen oder verwahrlost, heil oder kalt aussieht. Ob das, was unter ihrem Strahlen vorfällt, auf sie zurücktritt. So daß die Sonne selbst, je nachdem, was sie bescheint, selbst vollkommen oder verwahrlost, heil oder kalt aussieht. Ob das, was unter ihrem Strahlen vorfällt, auf sie zurücktritt. So daß die Sonne selbst, je nachdem, was sie bescheint, selbst vollkommen oder verwahrlost, heil oder kalt aussieht. Ob das, was unter ihrem Strahlen vorfällt, auf sie zurücktritt. So daß die Sonne selbst, je nachdem, was sie bescheint, selbst vollkommen oder verwahrlost, heil oder kalt aussieht. Ob das, was unter ihrem Strahlen vorfällt, auf sie zurücktritt. So daß die Sonne selbst, je nachdem, was sie bescheint, selbst vollkommen oder verwahrlost, heil oder kalt aussieht. Ob das, was unter ihrem Strahlen vorfällt, auf sie zurücktritt. So daß die Sonne selbst, je nachdem, was sie bescheint, selbst vollkommen oder verwahrlost, heil oder kalt aussieht.
Bauch verbrennen und die kleinen rosafarbenen Knöpfe über dem Herzen, und schließlich das Herz selbst, das am weitesten innen ist. All das würde schwarz werden und, solange es glüht, in die Nacht hinauffliegen und erst, wenn es oben in der Luft abgekühlt ist, als Ascheregen auf die Erde zurückfallen. Ich sei aber nicht aus Papier, wiederholt meine Mutter. Trotzdem zieht sie mich jedesmal, wenn ich ein Feuer anfassen will, weg und sagt: Heiß.


on top of my heart, and finally the heart itself, the innermost part of me. All these things would turn black and keep flying up into the night as long as they were still smoldering, and only after the air had cooled them down would they return to earth in a rain of ashes. But I am not made of paper, my mother repeats. Nonetheless she pulls me away any time I want to touch fire, saying: Hot.

Eyes, nose, mouth. How often my mother shut her eyes the instant before my index finger hit its mark, how often my father opened his mouth to show me what a mouth is and then closed it around my finger as if he were going to bite, but he didn't bite. If you wanted to play ball with someone's head, only one thing would get in the way: the nose. My father's teeth are very white, and when I probe around inside his dark mouth with my finger, they feel damp and hard. I see a tree and say tree, I smell the cake my mother bakes on Sunday and say cake, I hear a bird twittering in the garden, and my mother says: That's right, a bird. We put the cake into our mouths, it vanishes there, mouth, eyes and nose: holes, the beginnings of paths, no one knows quite where they lead. Stomach, my mother says, but I've never seen my stomach from the inside, at least what I eat comes out again on the other end, but what about the things I put into my eyes, where do they go, are all of them supposed to fit inside my head, even if I were to stack them up the way our housekeeper stacks the laundry, folding it and placing one piece atop the other, there still wouldn't be room, I don't think, and therefore I keep saying all the things I am seeing so they'll change course inside my head and go out again through my mouth. Shit, I say later when I see what has become of the cake. That's a filthy word, my mother says, wiping my bottom. Don't say words like that, she says and flushes. But it's something we even ate. That was before, my mother says, and we go back to the other room. So the cake has gotten dirty on its way through my body. You can't look at it that way, my father says, it doesn't have anything to do with you, it's just a matter of the word. I'm not allowed to say it. No, my mother says, words like that should never cross the lips of a young lady. Eyes. Nose. Mouth. So it's precisely the things


Diesmal haben wir aber gewonnen, sagt meine Freundin Anna auf dem Schulhof zu mir und treibt mit den Füßen den Ball bald hierhin, bald dorthin. In der ganzen Welt spielt niemand besser als wir. Wir sind die Meister. Annas Fußball stößt sich an einem Kiesel und kommt von der Bahn ab. Zwei zu eins, sagt that are filthy that are supposed to be stacked up and stored in my head and aren't allowed to change course and go out again through my mouth. But, I say; if I see a foot that is dirty and say foot, then that's a filthy word too, isn't it, but my mother says no, the word itself is clean. Aha. It's only the word shit I'm not supposed to say, but now that's really quite enough, my mother says. My father says: time for a walk. The obelisk stands at the eye of the city, on the large square with cars circling around it, since yesterday it's been wearing a wooden skirt, I slide my hand across the white letters on the fence boards, there's a spotlight shining on them, and my father reads aloud: Silence is health.

Maintaining an equilibrium, my father said one day when I came home from school with my hair tousled, by no means depends on the physical strength possessed by you or your opponent, equilibrium is always an equilibrium of the methods you employ. On this occasion my father showed me a maneuver that lets you twist an attacking arm onto your opponent's back before he even knows what's happening and in this way hold and overpower him. Whenever I played shop as a little girl, I always gave my customers play money along with the marbles I was selling instead of requesting payment. I hadn't yet understood that even in buying and selling there is an invisible equilibrium to be upheld, one utterly indifferent to the often shabby appearance of the coins. If all the maneuvers my father has employed while rubbing the holster of his service weapon until it is shiny have served to preserve some equilibrium or other, then this light, invisible weapon assuredly balances out many things whose nature is not immediately apparent to me upon gazing only at his gun or its holster.

But this time we won, my friend Anna says to me in the schoolyard, nudging the ball this way and that with her feet. No one in the whole world plays better than we do. We're the champions. Anna's soccer ball hits a pebble and changes course. Two to one, she says, now it's been proven. She runs after the ball. And that's why they're setting off fireworks now, she shouts, coming to a stop beside the ball, we can hear the firecrackers,
Ich schlafe. Meine Großmutter erzählt meiner Tante, wie ihr am Vormittag schwindlig geworden war. Karussellfahren gratis, sagt sie, die Schränke haben im Kreis um mich getanzt, aber dann wurde mir schwarz vor den Augen. Dann hab ich die Englein singen, sagt meine Großmutter. Gratis. Und lacht. Meine Mutter sagt zu ihrem Bruder, meinem Onkel: Also komisch finde ich das schon, daß sie sich nicht meldet. Schließlich ist sie unsere Schwester. Ich habe ihr sogar angeboten, bei uns zu wohnen. Und meine Tante lacht auch und sagt, ach, man muß gar nicht so alt werden, um zu fall en, unser Nachbar ist am Sonntag vom Dach seines Schuppens gefallen, er wollte nachsehen, ob er den Hammer unten liegengelassen hat, und hat sich heruntergebeugt, aber sein Hintern hat auch schauen wollen und ist nachgerutscht, und schon lag er unten. Der Nachbar. Vielleicht hat er, sagt meine Großmutter, ein Gläschen zuviel getrunken. Kann schon sein, sagt meine Tante. Mein Onkel sagt, man darf nicht vergessen, mit diesem Mann hat sie's nicht einfach. Dann bringt sie ihn eben mit, sagt meine Mutter. Mein Onkel sagt nichts. Also ich verstehe das jedenfalls nicht, sagt meine Mutter. Mein Onkel sagt zu meinem Vater, zwei zu eins ist nicht schlecht, was. Und mein Vater antwortet, wir sind jetzt die Meister. Mein Onkel sagt, daß ich das noch erlebe, und lacht, but because the brick wall all around our schoolyard is so high and perhaps also because, as always, the sun is shining, we can see neither flowers nor rings of fire nor shooting stars or golden rain in the sky. Maybe they forgot about the sun, Anna says, stepping back at an angle for a running start, then she kicks the ball, shooting it at me, that is, at the goal behind me, which I am guarding. I'm the goalie, and the goal is a bit of grass between an empty milk carton on the right and a stone wastepaper basket on the left, I step to one side of the goal I am guarding, and the ball hurls into it. If it had struck me, I'd be dead. That isn't fair, Anna says. Plenty of room on a soccer field like this, and as for the grass, the softer the better. Body after body beneath the grass, hands outspread, and above all these hands, mouths and eyes, the ball rolls toward the goal and gently glides into it, we're the champions.

I am sleeping. My grandmother is telling my aunt how she got dizzy that morning. A free-of-charge carousel ride, she says, all the cupboards were dancing around me in a circle, I was seeing stars, and then everything went black. Then I heard the angels singing, my grandmother says. Free of charge. She laughs. My mother says to her brother, my uncle: All the same, I think it's funny she hasn't called. After all, she's our sister. I even told her she could stay with us. And my aunt laughs too and says, oh, you don't even have to be so old to fall, our neighbor fell off the roof of his shed last Sunday, he wanted to look over the edge to see if he'd left his hammer down there, so he bent over, but then his rear end wanted to look too and came sliding down on top of him, and the next thing he knew he was lying on the ground. The neighbor. Well, maybe he'd also had a bit too much to drink, my grandmother says. Quite possible, my aunt says. My uncle says, you've got to remember what she must be going through with such a husband. Well, then let her bring him too, my mother says. My uncle doesn't say anything. None of this makes any sense to me, my mother says. My uncle says to my father, two to one, not bad, eh? And my father replies, we're the champions now. My uncle says, I never thought I'd see the day, and laughs, and my father laughs too, and my aunt says, well, it's true a per-
und mein Vater lacht auch, und meine Tante sagt, obwohl, am Vormittag sollte man ja nicht trinken, meine Großmutter gibt keine Antwort. Ich liege am Boden und schlafe. Meine Mutter sagt, daß sie da so schlafen kann, mitten im Zimmer am Boden, alle schauen einen Moment lang auf mich, keiner spricht, dann sagt meine Mutter, ich werde mal nachsehen, ob das Essen schon fertig ist. Meine Tante sagt, aber Fenster putzen solltest du auf keinen Fall mehr allein, denn die Leiter ist wirklich gefährlich. Meine Mutter ruft, das Essen ist fertig. Komm, lieber Herr, sei unser Gast, und segne, was du uns bescheret hast.

son shouldn't start drinking in the morning, my grandmother gives no response. I am lying on the floor, asleep. My mother says, how can she sleep like that, on the floor in the middle of the room, and everyone looks at me for a moment, no one says anything, then my mother says, let me go see if dinner's ready. My aunt says, but you definitely shouldn't wash the windows by yourself any more, that ladder really is dangerous. My mother calls out: Dinner is ready. Be present at our table, Lord, be here and everywhere adored. Your mercies bless, and grant that we may feast in Paradise with Thee.
Marja-Liisa Vartio

from Hers Were the Birds

• Translated from the Finnish by Jill Timbers •

Marja-Liisa Vartio (1924-1966) is a major Finnish author whose writing was influenced by her studies of art history, world literature and folk poetry. She first earned recognition for her lyric poetry and for the way she wove mythology and dreams into her poems. Vartio also wrote short stories and radio plays as well as five novels. Today the novels are generally recognized as her most important work. She became a central literary figure who helped renew prose writing in 1950's Finland with Modernist-Symbolism and a daring use of time and point of view.

Vartio relies heavily on dialogue. She observes and reports without interpreting, and lets her characters reveal themselves through their behavior and speech. Their memories and perceptions often contradict one another. The interplay of memory, perception, distortion and reality is leavened throughout by humor. Vartio leaves it to the reader to sort through the various realities. As intricately as their lives are woven together, the individuals remain isolated; though they interact and are dependent on each other, they never really connect. Vartio is legendary for her use of humor and irony. The novels may depict isolated individuals unable to communicate, but the stories are never bleak.

The first book I read by Vartio, Tunteet, (literally, Feelings), follows the relationships of a young woman who moves from her country home to study in the city. There are laugh-out-loud funny miscommunications and achingly poignant episodes. I hope to find a publisher for my translation of this novel soon. Tunteet contains several motifs that reappear in Vartio's last novel, Hänen olivat Linnut (Hers were the Birds), excerpted here: conversations that don't connect, misinterpretations, contradictory perceptions, bird imagery, collision between Swedish-Finn and Finnish-Finn, questions of class and power.

The excerpt here comes from midway through Hänen olivat Linnut, published posthumously in 1967 by Vartio's husband Paavo Haavikko. It is widely considered her masterpiece. Different characters tell their versions of the same or overlapping stories. Vartio never tries to sort out the versions for us. Real and unreal, past and present, all merge and blur. A pastor's widow lives with her servant Alma and a collection of stuffed birds which the widow inherited from her husband. Family members come and go. Vartio uses the birds as complex symbols, but this is not evident in this passage. However, beneath the crazy humor and absurdity, the novel is charged with sexual tension, power issues, and questions of gender identity, evident in this excerpt, in which the pastor's son is home for a visit. We experience the encounter between the son, Antti, who is a student, and his mother's servant Alma, a farm girl, through Alma's impressions.

In Finland, once print runs sell out, books often remain out of print. However, Vartio's novels continue to be reissued, and some, including Hänen olivat Linnut, have recently been adapted for the stage. Her journals were also released recently. Vartio's novels have been translated into many languages, but to date only passages have appeared in English, translated by myself and others. Vartio's books are set in 1950's Finland but her focus is on individuals. Her stories are just as relevant today, because people still muddle forward in private little bubbles; we all watch life from our own perspective and we still have difficulty communicating.

Jill Timbers

– Odota.  
Ja Alma näki itsensä seisomassa heidän molempien vierellä, seisomassa, mutta ei se ollut yksin hän, se oli samalla mies, yhtä aikaa mies ja nainen, ja ärtynyt, ja poika oli häränpurrikka, kiimassa mutta ei vielä harkää, koiranpentu joka yritti, hoiti oman asianasta. Ja tyydyttämättömänä, raivoissaan Alma nousi verkkovajalle. Hän tajusi äkillisen pimeyden, näki iltaruskon kiiluvan vajan harvan lautaseinän läpi, ja verkot verkkovajan seinillä, liikantelevat, tuuli alkoi liikkua, kuin hengitys harvan lautaseinän läpi. Kahahtava ääni, kun hän nousi, suori itsensä. Tukka oli avunnut, hän etsi kampaa, kysyi pojalta olivatko talalla kampaa, ja Antti etsi housujensa taskusta kamman ja antoi sen Almalle. Verkkovajan ovenpulloiset olivat kumpikin kiinni, poika oli pannut ne kiinni. Alma kääntyi, kampasi tukkansa, huokasi, ja poika seisoi nyt hän nen takanaan, verkkovajan oven suulla.  

– Nousee sumu, Alma sanoi, kampasi hiukkasi selin poikaan, kasvot seinää vasten kuin siinä olisi ollut peili.  
– Niin nousee.
Alma käntyi, työnsi kamman pojalle, vetäisytään siitä ensin pitkät mustat hiukset pois, ja meni ulos.

– Mihin sinä sen viet.

Poika oli tullut jäljessä laiturille.

– Nousee sumu, Alma sanoi ja vetäisi pois saavien farkunsa．

– Tytön huulet, Poika tarttui saavin toiselle puolelta, ja he kantoivat sen verkkovajaan.

– Tuuli suhahteli verkoissa, käytä heilahtelivat hiljaa.

– Lahde kalalle minun kanssani, pois Alma sanoi. Poika katsoi hänelle silmiin.

– Kalalleko, minun kanssani, pois toiselle kalalle, Antti sanoi.


– Istutaan, sanoi poika.

– Ei tässä nyt istuta.

– Mikset sinä lähde minun kanssani kalalle, saareen ongelle?

– Ei kala nyt syö, Alma sanoi.

– Mennään sitten ongelle, hän kuuli äänensä sanovan, se tuli kaukast, kuin joku toinen olisi ollut puhumassa hänen suullaan ja hän itse kolmantena siinä kuuntelemassa sanojen tarkoittusta.

– Mitä sinä teit Holger-sedän kanssa ongella. Äiti sanoi että te kävitte ongella.

Alma turned, pushed the comb toward the boy, having first taken long black hairs out of it, and went outside.

“Where are you pulling that?”

The boy had followed her onto the dock.

“A mist is rising,” Alma said, dragging the wash tub the length of the dock. “Inside, into the fishing net shed. Help me.” Alma bent down with her back to the boy, tugging with one hand on the tub, which tottered and almost spilled on the dock’s slippery planks.

“Take hold, carry it,” she said. The boy held on to the tub’s other handle and they carried it into the fishing net shed.

The wind whistled through the nets, the floats swung softly.

“Come fishing with me. I’ll row,” the boy said. He looked into her eyes.

“Fishing? with you? No thanks.”

“You go fishing with Uncle Holger.”

“Who told you that? One time I went.”

“One,” said Antti, with the pastor’s wife’s smile, that diabolic know-it-all smile, showing the teeth behind the lips, thick red lips like a girl’s, and Alma went to the other side of the tub and grasped the tub’s edges, knowing full well why the boy was laughing. “What do you want from me? What?” she asked the boy when he looked at her, because the boy; the boy’s eyes, the pastor’s wife, the pastor’s wife’s eyes, gleaming in the dim shed, were staring into her eyes from the other side of the tub, and the boy came, taller than Alma, a spindly boy; the pastor’s wife’s eyes, a girl’s lips, so close in front of her that Alma backed into the corner, the wall behind her and a heap of old rotting fishnets beneath her.

“Let’s sit,” the boy said.

“This isn’t the time for sitting.”

“Why won’t you go fishing with me, to the island to fish?”

“The fish aren’t biting now,” Alma said.

“Let’s go fishing, then,” she heard her voice saying. It came from far away as if someone else were talking with her mouth and she herself was a third person there listening to the meaning of the words.

“What did you do, fishing with Uncle Holger? Mother said you went fishing.”
Alma ei katsonut poikaa kohti. – Miten niin, hän vastasi. – Mitä sinä oikein tarkoitit, hän kysyi pojalta, hyvin tietäen, mitä tämä halusi sanoa, mutta hänen järkensä kieltäytyi vastaamasta, selittämäästää pojalle ettei se ollut sitä mitä poika tarkoitti, sitä mitä tarkoittivat nuo silmät, tuo hymy. Eikö poika ollut seissyt kasvimaalla katsellen Almasta aidan toiselta puolen, ja kun hän oli siirtynyt muualle, toiselle puolen kaalimaata, kasvot kohti poikaa, varoen kyykistelemästä selin, oli poika käännytynä häntä kohti kuin aurinko.

– Mitä sinä minusta oikein haluat.
Alma oli yrittänyt aina väistyä, mutta minne tahansa hän oli mennyt, oli poika tullut perässä.
– Anna minun olla, Alma sanoi.
Poika hymyhti, kuin äitinsä.
– Kerää hyönteisesi, hoida omat asiasi, anna minun olla.
Mutta äkkiä Alma tajusi että poika nyt pilkksi häntä, pilkkasi sillä että tarttui häneen, koski häntä, seisoi siinä röyhkeästi, aikomatia, tarkoittamatta. Alman silmat menivät mustikkohti kuin aurinko. Eikä han pilkkasi seissyt essaan paasta ettei se ollut, oli poika tullut irrotti, kuin juuri kivi piti.


– Potkaisen, Alma sanoi ja yritti potkaista, mutta poika irrottii kätensä, siirtyi sivuun, ja hänen huohottaessaan ja yrittäessään päästä ovelle, säppäi aukaisemaan, huohotus, pojan pää ja märkä suu hänen niskassaan, poika polvillaan hänen niskassaan työntäen hänen selkäänsä käsiillä, kurkusta pidellen, väänään kaulaa eikä hän saanutää äntää kurkusta irti – kuin piru, hän ajatteli perästä päin – olisi salvannut hänen äänessä pidellen kurkusta niin kovin kouriin ettei yksikään ääni päässyt sieltä ulos, kuin hukkuva, ja hänen kätensä työntämässä poikaa pois, pitämässä kiinni pojasta, kunnes hän laskeutui verkkojen päälle, ja poika,

Alma did not look toward the boy. “What do you mean?” she answered. “Just what do you mean?” she asked the boy, knowing very well what he wanted to say, but her reason kept her from answering, from explaining to the boy that it was not what the boy meant, not what those eyes and that smile indicated. Had not the boy stood at the vegetable garden watching Alma from the other side of the fence, and when she moved to another place, to the other side of the cabbage patch, with her face toward the boy, being careful not to squat with her back to the boy, the boy had turned toward her like the sun.

“What is it you want from me?”
Alma had always tried to avoid him but wherever she had gone, the boy had followed.
“Leave me alone,” Alma said.
The boy gave a snort, like his mother.
“Go get your bugs and mind your own business. Leave me alone.”

But all of a sudden Alma realized that the boy was making fun of her, mocking her by grabbing her, touching her, standing there brazen without intending or meaning anything. Alma’s eyes went black and she grabbed the boy. He yielded, but Alma could feel that he did not want to, he was trying to get away, away, now that she wanted to. She did not let go. Door shut, latched. Alma followed the boy when he came. A minute ago Alma’s hands were pushing him away, but not now. The boy’s eyes began to glaze, he moved, rocked, listlessly. But Alma waited, and the boy like a supple animal clutched Alma’s body, hands on her back, her hips, too many hands to count, as if the hand that she’d just wrenched off her leg and the hand that was again down her back, sliding lower, gripping her arm and tearing her clothes were not just one but many hands against which Alma could do nothing.

“I’ll kick,” Alma said and tried to kick, but the boy released his hand, moved aside, and as she groped for breath and tried to reach the door, to open the latch, panting, the boy’s head and wet mouth on her neck, the boy on his knees at the back of her neck, pushing against her back with his hands, holding her throat, twisting her neck so she cannot let out any sound from her throat – like a devil, she thought later – as if he had latched her voice shut by holding her throat so roughly that no sound could get out, like someone drowning, and her hands pushing the boy away, holding onto the boy, until she lowered herself down onto the nets, and the boy, the boy’s hands on her legs, her hips, inside...
Tuonne. Ja Alma otti poikan.

Poika kuin vasikka joka ahneesti työntää turpaansa ämpäriin, harkävasikka jota hän oli tyttöönä juottanut kotona veräjän suulla sen tökkiessä turppaa ämpäriin niin että hänen oli pitänyt rihtaita ämpäriä, mutta turpa yhä ämpäriissä, pää pitkällä yhä ämpäriä perässä, ja poika, ruustinnan poika, poika, ei kenenään poika vaan härkä joka nyt töykkii, kuin unissaan, iski, töykkii, iski, töykkii, päääll hänen vatsansa aloaassa, maha, pukki vatsaa, piti häntä jaloista, riihtoi, osamaatta tehdä mitään määrettyä. Ja kun nainen hänessä tajusi sen, hän sanoi — Tuonne. Ja Alma otti poikaa kuin olisi riisunut lasta, työnsi kätensä pojan jalkojen väliin, kuin kyllästynneenä, ja sanoi: — Tuonne. Alma odotti, ja hänen oli hyvä olla, hän tunsi pojan painon, se huohotti, retkahti, oli kuin kuollut.

— Ääsis tulee.

Se oli vale, hän vain sanoi.


Poika kuin vasikka joka ahneesti työntää turpaansa ämpäriin, harkävasikka jota hän oli tyttöönä juottanut kotona veräjän suulla sen tökkiessä turppaa ämpäriin niin että hänen oli pitänyt rihtaita ämpäriä, mutta turpa yhä ämpäriissä, pää pitkällä yhä ämpäriä perässä, ja poika, ruustinnan poika, poika, ei kenenään poika vaan härkä joka nyt töykkii, kuin unissaan, iski, töykkii, iski, töykkii, päääll hänen vatsansa aloaassa, maha, pukki vatsaa, piti häntä jaloista, riihtoi, osamaatta tehdä mitään määrettyä. Ja kun nainen hänessä tajusi sen, hän sanoi — Tuonne. Ja Alma otti poikaa kuin olisi riisunut lasta, työnsi kätensä pojan jalkojen väliin, kuin kyllästynneenä, ja sanoi: — Tuonne. Alma odotti, ja hänen oli hyvä olla, hän tunsi pojan painon, se huohotti, retkahti, oli kuin kuollut.

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— Ääsis tulee.

Se oli vale, hän vain sanoi.

Poika. Ei poika, härkä. Alman mieli oli takertunut härän kuvaan ja unohtunut siihen kunnes hän tuttui, mitä oli tapahtumassa sai äänen: — Minä sanon äidillesi. Sihisevä ääni, hänen, joka oli antanut periksi, antan...
tämässä, viaton kuin ruustinna.

He istuivat pimeässä kuin miettien kumpikin keitä he olivat, mitä heille oli tapahtunut.


Mikhail Sokovnin was born in Moscow in 1938. From an artistic family, he began writing at an early age, even forming a magazine with his friends in his school days. He went on to study Russian language and literature at a pedagogic institute, after which he became a lector in the Bachkhrushin Museum of Theater during winters and a literary tour guide in the summers, occasionally giving lectures on riverboats.

Due to the hopeless nature of such an attempt, Sokovnin never undertook publishing in the Soviet Union. Audiotapes, recorded by the artist Oleg Vasilyev in the last years of Sokovnin’s life contain the main body of his work. Until the release of A Scattered Selection in 1995, an anthology with an introduction by poet Vsevolod Nekrasov (Grafitti: Moscow, 1995), he had only been published in Kovcheg (“The Ark”), a magazine based in Paris, in 1978.

Pages From the Book Of Varius was written with the participation of A. Mal’kov. It is a small collection of absurdist stories ostensibly centering around Varius. His presence, though not always named, persistently makes itself felt, whether it is in the first person, the tone of the narrator, or most importantly in the disorienting verbal structures that dizzyingly turn the reader himself into Varius. In this selection from the Pages, which comprises about a fifth of the work, all of these aspects of the language and tone are represented.

At the first glance, the influence of Daniil Kharms seems so apparent that one is tempted to dismiss the work as imitation. The intensity of Sokovnin’s fascination with the morbid and the mundane as they interact and shape everyday language has him writing in Kharms’ model, that is, in short, terse, and purposefully understated bursts of prose. However, as Vsevolod Nekrasov points out in his introduction to A Scattered Selection, Sokovnin is remarkable for his lyricism.

Pages from the Book of Varius is a study in disorientation. On the literal level, the narrator will often slip up, whether in intentional carelessness with details (see, “A Difficult Choice,”), or outright slips of the tongue, after which the narrator’s apologies do nothing to clear up the confusion. This ostensible misleading is accompanied by more subtle tripwires in the language itself. A device more common for Sokovnin’s (and Nekrasov’s) poetry that can also be found in the prose is the repetition of various words with similar sounds but completely different meanings, arranged as to give the reader an impression of equality between divergent concepts. In his poetry, this method often propels an accumulation of images; in his prose, it stops the reader from contemplating plot elements, leaving him standing in his tracks, looking for the central meaning supposedly at the core of each fragment. This is but one of the poetic devices widening the divide between Sokovnin and Kharms.

Equally disorienting, for example, is the use of “this,” “that,” and “it.” In Russian, all of these are encapsulated by the word “то.” “The Man Who Said The Wrong Thing,” is a fireworks display of the “то” game. Beginning with the title, the translator is presented with the problem. “Говорить не то,” literally means to say “not that,” which, in the subsequent text, has more potential to bend its meaning in combination with the other thats in Russian than the word “thing” in English, which is only correctly open to being misconstrued through the implementation of a phrase like, “the thing is that.” Looking at the first phrase of the text, we see that the literal English translation runs something like, “Not that he would say completely not that,” and just from here, one sees the incommensurable difference in the flexibility of the meaning of “that” in the two languages. The problems the reader is faced with are exacerbated by the fact that the sentence is a run-on, taking advantage of the rule that in Russian, there
is always a comma in front of “что” (which relates to “то,” accusatively). In addition, the normal comma rules which apply to prepositional phrases are used to mislead the reader. Once the confusion caused by this in the middle of the text with “то есть не то, чтобы” is somehow dealt with (“somehow,” being the operative word when it comes to my translation, where the solution is messy, though successfully off-putting), one meets the ambiguity at the end, with “то и дело.” In this case, the phrase would imply the cause of why everything came out wrong for this man, or underline that such an outcome would be unavoidable. Instead, it asks to be parsed into “that,” and “his action,” that is, “the thing he did.” Other than as an open invitation to translate this passage well, I am pointing to the difficulties of the text in order to show just how seriously Sokovnin takes his paronomasia. More than a display of verbal wit, it shows the reader the tangled paths of the thinking of “Man Who Said The Wrong Thing” while muddling the reader’s own ability to think linearly, to understand the right thing. This disorientation is not absurd for the sake of being absurd, it has an object: Varius.

A character like Varius is neither uniquely Soviet nor new to literature, especially in the 20th century. However, Sokovnin, who had not read Kafka, is remarkable in his approach to forgetting and being forgotten as verbal phenomena, beyond the effects of totalitarianism and depersonalization on the individual. From Varius’s absence in many of the stories, or from the passage dealing with the controversy of his name, we are met with the fact that our lyrical hero himself is a mutable verbal phenomenon... Since Mikhail Sokovnin’s death from a chronic heart disease in 1974, his readership has not grown far beyond the circle of his friends. The questions raised by Varius, untouched for the most part, are as novel and intriguing as the appearance of a new forgotten author.

— Bela Shayevich
Archippus... that is, not Archippus—Varius of course, simply a slip of the tongue. Nobody called him that, and it would be strange to call him that when it wasn't his name. It is true that names have a certain influence on people, sometimes determining their fate, but even in this case Archippus in no way determined his fate especially since, as we already said, it wasn't his name, he, of course, was named something else.
ЧЕЛОВЕК, КОТОРЫЙ ГОВОРИЛ НЕ ТО

Не то, чтобы он говорил уж совсем не то, что бы он хотел, но он, собственно, и делал всегда что-нибудь не то, то есть не то, чтобы совсем не то делал, но все-таки то и дело выходило у него не то, что бы он хотел сказать.

THE MAN WHO SAID THE WRONG THINGS

It wasn't that he would completely not say the thing that he would want to say but really, he was always not doing the right thing, that wasn't the thing, that is, not that he would do the wrong thing, but nevertheless the thing and what he did would come out as not the thing that he would want to say.
Ливорнская Колбаса

Чтобы его совсем не замечали - так сказать было бы сказать неверно, да и это, в сущности, могло бы быть отчасти удобным ему, в конце концов, даже выгодным, если бы это было, но его все-таки замечали, даже особенно замечали и замечали особенно в тех случаях, когда ему, напротив, хотелось бы остаться незамеченным и наоборот.

Этот магазин он знал как свои несколько пальцев, в этом мы могли бы даже вам поручиться. Он собрался двигался вместе с очередью и, подойдя, можно сказать, как бы прямо протянул чек: "Ливорнской колбасы, пожалуйста, и не беспокойтесь, резать - нет - не надо." Она долго щарила возле себя под прилавком, потом подала ему бутылку прованского масла, уже хорошо завернутую. Варийсу вновь пришлось сосредоточиться и оставаться стоящим перед прилавком.

"Я просил ливорнской колбасы. Вы, вероятно, ослышались", - сказал он, холодя.

"Здесь не аптека", - едко заметили ему из очереди.

Нет, едва ли стоит так думать, будто над ним смехались, да и сам Вариус не подумал этого, он ведь знал, что прежде всего следует разыскать причину в себе: возможно, что он просто неправильно положил мысль на язык.

"Ливорнской колбасы", - тщательно выверяя каждый звук и в то же время держа предмет перед сознанием, еще раз и уж во всяком случае на этот раз произнес он. Правда, его не услышали.

"Колбасы!" - как-то неестественно громко испугался Варийус.

И увиделось ему, как в глазах старушки с кошельком, стоявшей через человека, мелькнуло нечто, что можно было бы принять и за сочувствие. И тут же - как бы случайно - из ее незадолго упомянутого кошелька стали выпрыгивать мелкие монеты, и кто бы мог их сосчитать?

Варийус поспешно согнулся, чтобы помочь подобрать их.

Liverwurst

So that he might go unnoticed—to put it like this would be to misconstrue it, and this in itself could be, in part, convenient to him, ultimately even to his advantage, if it were this way, but nevertheless, he was noticeable, even noticed and noticed even in those situations when he, on the contrary, would prefer to have gone unnoticed and vice versa.

He knew this store like the back of his hand, and this we could even vouch for. He moved concertedly with the line and, stepping to the counter, handed over the stub purposefully, one could say: "Liverwurst please, and don't worry about slicing it—no—it's unnecessary." She rummaged under the counter for a long time and then gave him a bottle of olive oil which had already been wrapped.

Varius was forced to focus again and remain standing in front of the counter.

"I asked for liverwurst. You must have misheard me," he said growing cold.

"This isn't a pharmacy," somebody in line acridly remarked.

No, it is hardly worth thinking that he was being laughed at, and Varius himself did not think this, he even knew that first and foremost he should search for the reason in himself: it is possible that he simply put his thoughts into words incorrectly.

"Liverwurst," meticulously forming each sound and at the same time picturing the thing in his mind, he said it once again and, in any case, for sure this time. It's true, however, that he wasn't heard.

"Liver sausage!" somehow unnaturally loud, Varius startled himself.

And he saw how something glimmered in the eyes of the old lady with the satchel, standing one person over, that could have been taken for sympathy. And instantly, as if by accident, small coins started springing from her recently mentioned satchel, and who could count them all?

Varius hurriedly bent down to help pick them up.
“These are mine, I dropped them,” the old lady said anxiously.

“Of course, of course—they are yours,” Varios assured her a little too hotly, as he himself was becoming embarrassed, since he had really stopped gathering them and, without a doubt, was heading towards the exit.

“No, I’ll have to wait to come to this store again, I’ll have to go to another store for a while, which is in a completely different place,—yes, yes, in a completely different place,”—Varius very firmly decided for himself.
У Варриуса был некоторый архив, конечно, не ахти какой архив, не архи-архив, но все-таки...

Varius had a certain archive, of course, not an ah what an archive, not an arch-archive, but nevertheless...
A DIFFICULT CHOICE

He decided to get to know the one who seemed more decisive than her two friends so that later he could get to know one of the less decisive ones, who, as it seemed to him at first, attracted his attention more than the rest of her friends.

She immediately led him underneath a canopy, which was something like a lampshade, which had stuck itself to a pinkish townhouse, which had at one point been some sort of office. As soon as they got under the canopy, the folding walls closed and he saw the semblance of a room. On the floor, like rags or rubble, lay people, covered by this rubble or, most likely, rags, little by little they began to get up and the old man was first to start the game.

He remembered that he too had played this game before, tossing the stuffed red python in his hands, and that certain rules would come back to him on their own if he would start playing it again. They offered him his choice of many little toys that had been laying on the floor, on the small table, and he didn't guess, and they hung a heavy wooden rifle on his shoulder and placed a little sack in his hands. Feeling what was about to happen, this time he chose the thing that was proscribed by the rules, and they took the sack away from him, but for some reason hung a bow with a velvet lining and little bells from his neck. He imagined how much harder it would get later and started straining his memory. But of course, he perfectly remembered this green glade in front of the house and the stuffed red python, which was swinging on his palms-down hands. Nevertheless, he again chose the wrong thing and they poured a vast multitude of trinkets into his pocket which felt like the shards of something and pricked him at that.

The thing of it was that under no circumstances should he get on the wooden horse—this he remembered very well and, when they offered him the horse, he flatly refused it and found himself out in the open, in the dark side street by the yellowish house with the canopy.
With the contrived feeling of an initiate he went up to the two friends with the third and began to notice that she was the very other one who attracted his attention more than the others.

He wanted to go under the canopy again and mentioned to her that he had remembered many rules and would like to undergo the ordeal again, especially since he now knew that one shouldn't get on the wooden horse.

She submissively led him under the canopy, where this time leading the game was the son of that decrepit old man, who was sleeping on some fragment of rubble, and now he couldn't find the toy table and the heavy rifle with the bells. But now he remembered that if he were to sit on the wooden horse, then it would be just about right, since then they would be left alone and, indeed, when he got on it, he was immediately given a big cardboard box that came apart, soon after which he reunited with the two of her friends and the third.

It was already late in the evening and he thought of how nice it is that one can still meet families capable of amusing themselves in such a pleasant and deeply cultured manner.
When Miltos Sachtouris (1919-2005), one of Greece's most honored and influential poets of the second half of the previous century, died two years ago, a fair number of his poems had appeared in English translation in a scattering of diverse journal, anthology, and small book publications. None of these presentations of the poet's work gives as complete and impressive a picture of the poet's accomplishment as this selection of translations by Karen Emmerich from his major collection, a compilation of nine smaller volumes, now in its ninth edition, *AIONI MKT AT A (1945-1971), KEΔROΣ 1988.*

Though not typical of the commonly held view of Sachtouris's poetry as a nightmarish vision, a critical position that is useful up to a point but also limiting to a full appreciation of its depth if pushed too far, the following poem, "A Few Dangerous Pieces," articulates the poet's moving stand about himself as artist and also exemplifies Emmerich at her most effective as translator.

```
A few dangerous pieces
of chaos
is my soul
which God cut
with his teeth

others carry theirs on boards
showing them
buying them

but I don't sell mine
people look
and ask questions
some laugh
others pass by

but I don't sell mine
```

(p. 155)

A parallel Greek and English reading of this poem, as well as of all the others in Emmerich's book, reveals the approach to her task as translator to be largely that which in 1680 John Dryden called "metaphrase," the first of three kinds of translation he defined in his famous preface to his translation of Ovid's *Epistles* as "turning an author word by word and line from line from one language into another." An at times demeaned approach—it has even been scorned as "parroting"—metaphrase is nevertheless the course many, if not most, translators of verse basically take, including, it should come as no surprise, numerous translators of modern Greek poetry. Just how well this approach suits Emmerich's capabilities and serves her renderings of the singular voice of Sachtouris will be considered shortly, but, keeping in mind for the moment the benefits of the perspective of a parallel reading of both books, I would like to address a matter raised by the "Translator's Note" at the end of the volume.

Near the beginning of her afterword, Emmerich makes a curious, if not troubling, claim: "My translation includes nearly all of the poems contained in the Greek collection; I have left out a handful of poems that simply did not survive the transition into English" (p. 231). Sachtouris's book contains 205 poems, out of which she omits 25, or, put another way, 12% of the total. Quite "a handful." If this can be explained as a poor choice of words, what is the explanation, or excuse, for the rest of the second half of the sentence? What does "poems that simply did not survive the transition into English" mean? Rather than speculate about the implications of some of the possible answers to this allegation, let me report that in my parallel reading of the two books...
I introduced the omitted Greek texts at the exact points from which they were missing and could not figure out how they differed significantly enough from those that preceded and followed them to deserve disqualification. Whether or not one takes my word for it, at least the word here is unambiguous. That they succumbed somewhere along the line is not the fault of the untranslated poems, some of which are highly prized works, such as "The Telephone," "Snow," and "The Mouse," if I may endow them with English titles. Because "The Mouse," TO ΠΟΝΤΙΚΙ (p. 235 in the Greek edition), a poem that interacts decisively on the meaning of the unique position of the poet in Sachtouris's world with other poems that Emmerich translated for the book, such as the above quoted "A Few Dangerous Pieces," "The Factory" (p. 59-60), "The Poet" (p. 181), "For Dylan Thomas" (p. 212) "The Poet's Head" (p. 217) and others, should never have been left out, I supply a version of it here.

So one goes on talking about a Martyr and the other keeps answering about a mouse

One goes on talking about a Saint and the other keeps answering about a dog

and that's when inside the darkness

I saw the Poet completely by himself and around him all aglitter the void

If a subsequent edition of this important book is ever a possibility, Emmerich and her publisher might consider including the omitted poems and thus avoid the misleading suggestion that the contents of the Greek and English volumes mirror each other as precisely as their titles do.

Still, this English version fairly traces the trajectory of Sachtouris's poetry through the richest, most productive decades of his career and provides the non-Greek reader with an almost completely open window upon the poet's undeviating and carefully cultivated commitment to his gift. It did not take him long to develop a distinctive style characterized by fragmented and traumatic images, the frequent deployment of colors, a seemingly simple diction, and a small inventory of words as some of its most salient features.

That the young Sachtouris was affiliated with the artists and writers who first brought Surrealism to Greece and subsequently became one of its most important poets has been well rehearsed by critics, literary historians, and translators both here and in Greece. So, too, has the notion that his writing is permeated with the cruelty of twentieth-century Greek history, "creating," in Emmerich's words, "a kind of cumultative madness, a paralogical perspective that keeps coming at the world—or fleeing from it—at an angle" (p. 232). The significance of the term "paralogical" for the poet's work, however, begins with his choice of the word ΠΑΡΑΛΟΓΑΙΣ as the title of his second book of poems (translated as Paralogues by Emmerich), published in 1948, a title which signals a subtle departure from the predominant influence of surrealism revealed in his first volume of poems, The Forgotten Woman (1945), and a creative reconnection with Greek folk poetry, particularly to a short narrative form that summarizes folk tales. Kimon Friar surely had the right idea, but probably overplayed it by daring to translate the Greek title of this second book as Ballads in the Table of Contents to his slim volume of translations from the work of Sachtouris, published in 1980 under the title With Face to the Wall, which is also the title of the poet's third book of poems, published in 1952.

One of the qualities Greek folk poetry offered as stimulant to Sachtouris's well-known innovations in imagery and color can be readily observed in the dynamic passage of a thread of red through the world of nature in this folk poem: "The red lips I kissed, dyed my own, / which stained the handkerchief I wiped with, / and when I washed it in the river, the river turned red / and then the shore and the middle of the sea. / The eagle dove for a drink and dyed his wings, / and half the sun was dyed red and the full moon." The introduction of the folk element to his poetic grounding in surrealism enabled Sachtouris to penetrate the complex and perplexing state of his world with a poetic voice that rings true above all other things to his special sense of self.
This singular poetic, generally identified as “paralogical,” would eventually exercise a broad and profound influence upon succeeding generations of poets in his country.

The first of two poems Sachtouris wrote about the famous island of Hydra, the place to which the Athens born poet proudly traced his provenance, appears in this book entitled Paralogues and provides an excellent example of the kind of effect his bonding of the folk tradition to the surreal could have.

Hydra

They hung my blood from the branches
they cast my blood into the sea
the wildflowers the painted teeth the bitter kisses
the fish the ships in the sea
all built their nests in my blood
and dyed their sails with my blood
and with my blood they flapped their wings
all the terrible birds in the sea

(p. 56)

That this well-turned version of the poem is the outcome of an absolute fidelity to a word for word, line by line method, speaks to the amenability of Sachtouris’s writing to this approach as well as to the translator’s good judgment in working with it. Like all dedicated translators, Emmerich reminds us in her afterword that she is committed to capturing as much of what is going on in a poem as she can. Yet there are some features of a poem that can be out of reach, such as the extraordinary effect of the -α and -ια sounds that fill the ends of every one of this poem’s lines with a powerful onomatopoeia that resonates with human lament and the calls of “all the terrible birds of the sea.” Regrettably, Emmerich does not use her afterword to discuss the ways in which she has had to cut her losses, for it would have been instructive if someone with her qualifications had specifically addressed “the profound challenges to the translator” (p. 234) that this poet’s work presents.

Although translation by strict metaphrase can result in a successful, if transparent, rendition, as in the first “Hydra” poem, it can also lead to less than satisfactory results and even failure if not handled with creative tact. Generally, the combination of Emmerich’s skills as translator and what she calls the “openness” of Sachtouris’s poems, a quality she claims her translations uniquely bring into focus (p. 234), help her to side step the pitfalls inherent in this approach. But not without exceptions, as in her translation of the poem “The Poet.”

When they find me on the wood of my death
the whole sky will have turned red
there will be a suspicion of sea
and a white bird, above me, will recite
into a now-terrible darkness, my songs.

(p. 181)

The main problem comes in the first line. What would an anglophone reader make of the literal rendering of the second half of the line as “on the wood of my death”? The word for wood in Greek, ξύλο, has strong metonymic associations, just as its English counterpart enjoys its own very different connotative senses, and the English “wood” cannot stand on its own for the Greek word in this context. Kimon Friar realized this in his translation, which I will quote in its entirety for the sake of making some further comparisons with Emmerich’s.

When they find me on the wooden slab of my death
the sky will have turned red from end to end
there will be the slightest suspicion of sea
and a white bird from above in a now frightening darkness will recite my songs.

(p. 42)

To make good idiomatic sense the translation must convey the image of a corpse laid out on a wooden plank or board, or slab, as Friar would have it, and the most minimal of paraphrases of the literal sense would have accomplished it. Conversely, Emmerich translates the Greek phrase in the second line that modifies the word for “sky,” πέτρα για πέτρα, by compressing it into the single word “whole,” eliminating the magnitude of an image that Friar
preserved aptly with the idiomatic substitution “from end to end.” It is also possible this image provides a powerful backdrop against which a reader might respond to the religious association the Greek ξυλο has with “the cross,” for which it is often substituted. While it is certain Sachtouris would have used a Greek word for whole if that is the word he had wanted, it might be debated whether or not he intended to wash this poem with a religious ambience, though I find that to be an element not altogether absent from his work. Finally, both translators seem to be unable to deal with the third line in any way other than a literal word for word rendering of “a suspicion of sea,” to which Friar adds the word “slightest” in the interest of making it sound more acceptable in English. Because it occurs to neither of them to reach for (at what risk?) something more idiomatic, they both end up with wooden, un-English sounding lines.

While Emmerich’s translation of “The Poet” illustrates one kind of rarely occurring exception, the book contains many translations that are exceptional for their strange and gripping beauty.

I Turn

I turn round and round bloodied
in the moon of my sleep

the fire whitens within me

fierce dollhouse with your lilacs

raising your crimson eye
you wither me

trees burning your oranges
like candles
I will rest
in your freezing rain

the fire whitens within me
the wax drips
hot in my heart

and you marble moon

you shatter me

Thanks to Karen Emmerich and Archipelago Books, the English-speaking world now has at its fingertips a selection of translations that give the fullest and most satisfying reading experience to date of this remarkable Greek poet.

And it is this remarkable poet to whom the final word must be given. Sachtouris wrote a poem entitled Ο ΤΡΕΛΟΣ ΛΑΓΟΣ (p. 131 in the Greek edition), which seems likely to me to refer to one of his favorite literary characters, the Mad March Hare from the Tea Party scene in Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. Reading through Sachtouris’s poems in both Greek and English, I am drawn more and more to the relevance to them of the observation by Marc Edmund Jones that Carroll’s Mad Hare represents an instance of “genius in insanity usefully applied” as a figurative projection of the poet quietly contemplating the effects of the intensity of his consciousness altering making. Behind the striking, at times shocking, images and juxtapositions in his depiction of the nightmare reality that has been so readily associated with his work, let’s remember to picture a poet going through life composing poem after poem with his small arsenal of words but pulling out all the stops in the instrument of his giant ingenuity.

In honor of the March Hare, let me quote in closing Emmerich’s translation of this signature poem, insisting that every time you think you see the word “crazy” you will instead read the word “mad.”
The Crazy Hare

Ran through the streets the crazy hare
ran through the streets
slipped through the wires the crazy hare
fell in the mud

Daybreak shone the crazy hare
night opened up
hearts dripped blood the crazy hare
the world shone

Its eyes welled up the crazy hare
its tongue swelled
a black insect moaned the crazy hare
death in its mouth

(p. 118)

A Note on Typos, Omissions, Etc.

Typos: “Nostalgia” (p. 82): seventh line reads “window” for the plural παράθυρα in the original (p. 92). “The Coffee House” (p. 223): “you no-nothing” should read “you know-nothing.”

Omissions: Untitled poem after “Under the Sky” (p.133) should have a small five-point star above it. Missing from page after the title page for “from The Vessel ” (p. 203) is the dedication “For Yianna.”

Etc.: Given the title of this journal, consider the one-word sixteenth line “phosphorescing” in the poem “Sunset” (p. 170) for the Greek original’s φωσφορίζοντας (p. 190).

In *The Savage Detectives* Bolaño catalogues the entropy of visceral realism. Over the course of the novel several members are purged from their ranks, their patron goes mad, others move to Tel Aviv, Paris, or Barcelona, a few to the States, couples split up, they grow old, or ill, try out painting, or worse, publishing. Meanwhile the group’s poetic exercises take on an odor of desperation—masturbatory writing, Western Ballads, automatic writing, and (gasp!) translations. Amid this decay Arutro Belano and Ulises Lima move like shades made of stone, and the bulk of the novel is told through first person accounts recalling moments when Belano or Lima, as they traveled across Europe, and into Israel and Liberia, passed through the lives of the narrators. In the memories of these narrators Belano and Lima are often associated with images of shadows or phantoms, and a sense of death—sometimes figurative other times literal—lingers in the tone of the telling.

Natasha Wimmer ends her essay on Bolaño’s life and work, “*Roberto Bolaño and The Savage Detectives*,” (still the most thorough contextualization of the novel, and to whose expertise I will defer this particular burden) saying that, “[i]n a sense, *The Savage Detectives* is the story of two ghosts, men lingering into the afterlife.” Over the twenty-some years that contain the action of the novel, Belano and Lima are poignant though distant memories. Their afterlife, like that of any tragic hero, exists in the oral tradition that follows them. Sometimes the glass darkens on a section and we hear someone remembering a conversation with a friend or lover who in turn was recalling Belano or Lima. These are the most heartbreaking sections of the book, and in turn, the most well-translated, but more on that further on.

I’m compelled to begin my critique with the argument that, contrary to the way the novel has been written about in the mainstream literary press, *The Savage Detectives* is not literature of ex-ile. Bolaño himself rejected the term as trite, and even the most insensitive read-through should reveal that *The Savage Detectives* is not about flights from, but flights toward fate, toward experience, toward that thing the beats called “it,” though thankfully Bolaño’s reincarnation is cleansed of the proto-hipster attitude (two parts entitlement, one part pseudo spirituality) that pervaded beat literature. Belano and Lima are ghosts and shadows not because they’ve died, but because they’ve always-already passed beyond the person remembering them to some other phase of their life. Their assignation as ghosts is not a characterization of the object, but rather an interrogation of the subject: the narrator in one sense, and the act of narration in another.

“And I swear on my mother’s grave,” says Hipólito Garces, an acquaintance of Ulises Lima, “that right then I was more afraid than before, I don’t know why, it must have been how late it was, or that gloomy hall, or my poet’s imagination running away with me. Shit, I actually started to shake. I thought I saw another shadow behind Ulises Lima’s shadow in the hall.” Read literally, one could argue that Hipólito is saying that Lima’s presence is spectral, that a ghost is following Ulises, that Ulises is the walking dead. But we find out later, from another narrator, that Hipólito Garces is a leech, that he’s been scamming Ulises. The speech quoted above comes at a point when Lima is about to abandon Garces for good. Ulises did not bring the shadow with him. The shadow belongs to Hipólito’s own fears of being discovered as a scoundrel. The shadow is his own fear attached to Lima’s body. Later he says, “yet all I wanted to do was run away. But at that moment my fear of being left alone was even stronger.” The novel’s central critique is not of the wanderlust life of its protagonists, or of their failure of ambition, failed relationships or failing health. *The Savage Detectives* is about the fictions we make out of our own lives, which we call memories.

That Lima and Belano are the focal points for this morbid imagery is no fault of their own. Daniel Zalewski (“Vagabonds,” *New Yorker*, March, 2007) shrewdly associated the form of *The Savage Detectives* with its forerunner, Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, in which sixteen narrators recollect the passage of a dead body across a fraught landscape. But his commentary doesn’t do the thought-
work to justify the association. Faulkner's novel, more than anything else, is an analysis of the way language forms memory through spontaneous, subconscious associations. The absolute focus on the Addie Bundren's coffin is simply a narrative device that reveals how these associations pass between people, as the coffin does. In *The Savage Detectives* the focus is on two living people, who are also passed among the narrators, and as in the coffin does. In *The Savage Detectives* the focus is on two living people, who are also passed among the narrators, and not the objects of the narration, are the true subjects of the story. This fact makes Zalewski's reading all the more banal. He continues, later in the paragraph, to suggest that *The Savage Detectives* could have been titled, "Self-Portrait in Fifty-three Convex Mirrors." This quip totally ignores the reality of the novel, in which the lives of the narrators end up being more connected than any of them are to Belano or Lima on their own. The mirrors (and if they're anything but normal mirrors then they're cracked looking glasses, as Joyce would have it) actually reflect the narrators own deformed identities built from fractured histories.

Because of the focus on the artifice of language as a tool for building memory, *The Savage Detectives* is very much a post-modern novel, and a very good one, though it takes a sincere reading to grab hold of the razor-sharp critique that Bolaño makes of nostalgia-mongering in all its forms, especially that of mythic autobiography. To presume that Bolaño is laying out dozens of monologues and creating all these voices with a straight face is almost laughable. Reading closely we see that the characters most at home in their own mythology are the ones who receive the most severe indictments. Bolaño's severity varies, as does his sympathy, depending on how much these people profit from their myths, though one could also argue that it varies based on how detached from reality they become. These indictments don't necessarily take the form of karmic justice. More frequently, and most effectively, Bolaño punishes them by rendering their voices dead. Like any good satirist, Bolaño destroys his enemy simply by revealing him for who he truly is.

Bolaño does this especially well with the poets and writers who we see, toward the end of the middle section of the novel, at the Madrid *Feria del Libro* in July, 1994: Aurelio Baca, Pere Or-
frivolous pining and philosophizing. But *The Savage Detectives* is structured, and because it's serious literature there's more going on than "what the characters do," there's more being said than what's explicit, and the novel resists interpretation in ways that hit-and-run quoting can never account for.

*The Savage Detectives* is like a goddamned Kandinsky when it comes to resisting interpretation. The novel begins in the form of the journal entry of Juan García Madero, a young poet on the make. He tells the story of his initiation into the visceral realists and of the sexual and literary escapades that ensue. So we think: Oh okay, easy, it's like a hard-boiled *Sentimental Education* or something. Wrong. By the time Madero's journal picks up again, at the end of the novel, we are left with more questions than answers, and none of the characters are lazing over how to make art that matters. The novel's end is literally a riddle, and anyone who signed up thinking that *The Savage Detectives* is a course on "How To Be A Young and Sexy Modern Poet in the Modern World" should withdraw before the deadline. But even if your interpretations end up as playful as these (and they probably should) you still have to give an interpretation, or a reading, or something. The novel demands it. Thus was I was left feeling cheated after reading Siddhartha Deb's review in *Harper's* ("The Wandering Years," April, 2007), which is actually a review of everything by Bolano available in English translation except for *The Savage Detectives*. Deb starts out nicely enough with, "Ostensibly about a quest by Belano and Lima for a mythical woman from the 1920s, *The Savage Detectives* is a hustler of a book," but then downshifts back to discussing episodes from *Amulet* and *Last Evenings on Earth* according to their historical pertinence, and *The Savage Detectives* is not brought up again. Is this all *Harper's* has to tell us about this novel? If *The Savage Detectives* is "ostensibly" about an odyssey, at least have the decency to tell us what it's about implicitly.

But fret not, because we have *The New York Times Book Review* ("The Visceral Realist," by James Wood, April 15, 2007) to lavish us with insights as they diligently tidy up the end of the review. This "mythic woman" that Deb refers to is the poet Cesárea Tinajero, visceral realism's patron saint. In the 1920s, she was a member of the movement's first incarnation, but she has long since disappeared into the Sonora desert. The odyssey that bookends the novel, which Juan García Madero records, is a search for Cesárea. Eventually Lima and Belano find something significant. They find the last copy of the only issue of *Caborca*, Cesárea's literary journal, which published one of her poems, "Siôn." The poem is quoted below in full.

![poem](image)

Stunning, no? This poem's retrieval has the stink of the Grail all over it. Its keeper, an original visceral realist named Amadeo Salvatierra, cannot offer an interpretation, but Lima and Belano take one look at it and say, "it's a joke, Amadeo." The old man still confused, the young poets throw him a bone and give him a playschool interpretation. They draw triangles on top of the blocks and let him think they look like boats on the horizon, placating him with a reading that has the "boats" adrift in a violent storm, an allegory for all existence. A perfectly decent reading, as long as you're someone who thinks that Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" is a poem about landscaping. James Wood certainly buys this reading, which he uses at the end of his review, though for some reason he calls it a quote unquote poem instead of just a poem, which is what it is. He slips on the same banana peel as the other reviewers I've noted. He ignores the obvious fact that Lima and Belano are literally in hysterics at this cotton candy interpretation. Like the other reviewers he takes the narrators at their word, not stopping to consider that maybe the word "irony" exists in Spanish as well.

All this carrying-on I'm doing may seem a bit jesterish, but I
am dead serious. Anglophone audiences depend on these literary publications to create the English-language version Bolaño. They are the vanguard for the discourse on an emerging author, and they've ended up making him sound like a chain-smoking ne'er-do-well snickering over his inside jokes. These reviews do the opposite of what they should be doing. Instead of offering complicated and incisive interpretations of a difficult book from an important literary figure, they've flattened Bolaño and The Savage Detectives into gingerbread shapes sweetened for delicate palettes. But this is only half the point. These four reviews are perfectly passable, generous even, I suppose, except for the fact that The Savage Detectives is A TRANSLATION authored by Natasha Wimmer. Among these four articles this unassuming fact is brought up a total of – count ’em – four times. These epigrams are so short that I don’t mind quoting them all here, in their entirety. I’ve numbered them for easy reading.

1. Zalewski: “The novel, which has been given a bracingly idiomatic translation by Natasha Wimmer, is a teeming, ‘Manhattan Transfer’-like collage featuring more than fifty narrators.”

2. Abramovich: “Natasha Wimmer’s translation, too, is lucid—reviewer-speak for ‘I don’t speak the original and am in no position to judge’—in part because Bolaño himself seems to have been incapable of writing a convoluted sentence.”

3. Deb: “this 600-page novel has finally been published in English in a translation by Natasha Wimmer.”

4. Wood: “(The pleasure we take in this, as readers of English, owes everything, of course, to the book’s talented translator, Natasha Wimmer, who repeatedly finds inspired English solutions for what must be a fiendishly chatty and slangy novel.)”

It’s hard to tell if “bracingly idiomatic” is compliment or condemnation. But no worries, dear Reader, Zalewski is not going to explain himself, so you can rest assured in ignoring these pithy words. The lucidity Abramovich speaks of is, despairingly, limited to the novel under review, because we never find out what the other “part” of the equation is. Deb’s line is barely worth quoting except for the implication that “finally” means Wimmer took her time, which I’m pretty sure she doesn’t mean. What Wood writes (parenthetically) is correct, I admit, but more than he could possibly know. It shouldn’t be too much to ask, what with all their employees and such, that among the major venues for book criticism, at least one could find a qualified reviewer who at least spoke the source language of the most important novel in translation in the last 5 years. And what’s going to ruffle feathers isn’t my off-handed treatment of their articles, it’s the fact that my implying that these reviews are ungenerous is, in fact, a lie. Unfortunately, these reviews are actually generous when it comes to the translator, at least so far as the current trends are concerned, in which assignments are given to reviewers who (by their own admission) are unqualified to review the book.

But no need to hold your breath: The Savage Detectives is a fucking incredible novel especially in translation. Wimmer’s translation is lucid and bracing, long-awaited and inspired and everything else they said. I know because I read the translation and before it had cooled from my sweaty hands, I’d already torn through the original, overjoyed to find Bolaño’s electric and masterful use of the Spanish language had been carried across into English still pulsing and bloody, exchanged expertly in a deft and decisive transplant, so skilled that the surgical scars are almost invisible and the English version literally hums with the same energy, at the same frequency, as the original.

Because an in-depth analysis of the full scope of this translation cannot be done here, let me refrain myself to talking about one passage from one section, in which Ulises Lima is again seen as a ghost. I said earlier that the most well-translated sections were the ones in which the narrator remembers someone remembering. One of the best begins Chapter 21, narrated by Daniel Grossman from Mexico City in February, 1993. He recalls a trip he took to Oaxaca to visit a friend, Norman, whose ex-girlfriend was Ulises Lima’s love-object when the four of them lived together in Tel Aviv. After a week in Oaxaca Norman starts driving them back, fast, in his Renault. The Spanish begins:
And then Norman looked at me and I saw in his face, I swear, the same look he had when we met in high school, much thinner, bird-faced, with his hair longer and his eyes brighter and a smile that made you love him immediately, a smile that told you we’re here, now we aren’t.

On its own it’s actually a pretty good translation (if I do say so myself); the rhythm is decent and it certainly sounds natural. But it’s only passable if you don’t consider Wimmer’s version:

And then Norman looked at me and I swear he had the same expression on his face that he used to have when he was sixteen or fifteen, the expression he had when we met in high school, when he was much thinner, with his bird face, his longer hair, his brighter eyes, and he had a smile that made you love him instantly, a smile that said here today, gone tomorrow.

First there’s the choice to translate “cara” (literally “face”) as “expression.” Unlike “look,” which disappears into the rhythm and doesn’t add anything to the Spanish in terms of significance, “expression” almost sounds like the dead look that Norman is giving the narrator (especially if you consider the extended significance of the Spanish word “máscara,” mask). Expressions are not self-conscious, as looks can be, and the choice of this word, in a way that is infinitely subtle, creates Norman’s character in a way that “look” never could. Then there’s the rhythm. Starting with “ex-

pression,” Wimmer’s version uses this word’s slurring sound to punctuate the clauses. Then look at the use of “when” and “with” in Wimmer’s version, where it’s missing from the other translation. These words are practically invisible, yet they serve to slow down the pace of the sentences, bring them closer to the Spanish in tone, if not in meter.

If these details seem insignificant, remember the words of Mark Twain, still the greatest prose stylist and satirist American letters has ever known: “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter,” he said, “it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning bolt.” This applies in any translation, but especially here, where Roberto Bolaño’s Los detectives salvajes had been given a pitch-perfect voice in English. Where another version might sound natural, Natasha Wimmer’s translation sounds inevitable.

See? Now that wasn’t so bad, was it? This kind of review, especially because of the evident quality of Wimmer’s translation, is almost paint-by-numbers in its facility. Almost. The prerequisite for doing this kind of work is realizing that a novel in translation is always two novels, and that the one under review was directly derived from the other. To think of a translation as an independent object is to only show half of the picture, and therefore, to only do half of the work. And in the end this is the point that I have to come back to: thought-work should be the operative phrase in literary reviews. Even if a review neglects a crucial aspect of a work, the reviewer must still think about what the novel is saying, she must still give us information we couldn’t just Wiki, he must complicate and interrogate the novel’s meaning, not simplify, or what’s worse, explain it away. If people are actually reading less and less it’s certainly not for lack of fantastic work, as the novel under review clearly demonstrates, and don’t even tell me it’s the internet’s fault, that’s just propaganda to get us to watch more TV. Maybe it has something to do with the way books are being presented to us. I mean who even remembers the articles I’ve been excoriating? If the answer is “Nobody” then maybe reviews shouldn’t be written so as to be disposable, here today, gone tomorrow.
CONTRIBUTORS

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JILL GRAHAM TIMBERS is a professional Finnish-English translator who steals as much time as possible for translating Finnish literature, too. She has published fiction by Juhani Aho, Eeva Kilpi, Marjatta Koskinen, Leena Lehtolainen, Marja-Leena Mikkola, and Marja-Liisa Vartio in literary journals and anthologies. Timbers’ translation of an essay about how translating literature turned one Finn’s world inside out just appeared in the *ATA Chronicle*, February 2007. Her translations of passages by Leena Lander are scheduled for upcoming publication in *Beacons and Words without Borders*. Timbers began studying languages in ninth grade, and that was the year she resolved to become a translator. After working with a number of languages, and focusing on French and German in college, curiosity led her to try the non-Indo-European language Finnish. She found a Finn and lined up an independent study. Timbers has studied and worked in Finland, in various roles from bicycle mechanic to computer programmer to visiting university library fellow. In the U.S. she was a reference librarian at Central Michigan University until the Internet made it possible to be a full-time translator, living among the cornfields while working for clients in Finland. Timbers lives in Illinois with her Finnish husband and three sons.

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Translator LEONARD KRESS is the author of 3 collections of poetry, most recently *Orphics*, from Kent State University Press. He has also published poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and translations from Polish in *APR, Missouri Review, Iowa Review, Massachusetts Review*, etc. He currently teaches religion, philosophy, and literature at Owens College in Ohio. He has translated the work of Jan Kochanowski, Szymon Zimorowic, Czeslaw Milosz, and Tadeusz Borowski and written critically about the contemporary poet, Tomasz Jastrun as well as the role of Poland in the poetry of Polish-american poets. His translation of Adam Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz* is available as a PDF download from HarrowGate Press: http://www.harrowgatepress.com/pan.pdf
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