

SOME THOUGHTS ON TRANSLATION AND EXILE

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I was living by the train station. Vilnius. New York in my rear-view mirror. I was on a Fulbright, and had received a NEA Translation Project Grant. I had work to do, and smoked in the stairwell, gazing out of a murky window at a grim winter landscape. My parents had been born here, in Lithuania. I was born in the USA, son of refugees from the second world war. Was this my true homeland?

Exiled Home

—*Vilnius, Lithuania*

Turn on another light
and the electricity
goes out. Now
you are really in it:
toes in ancient loam,
creaky wooden stairs,
a grimy window view,
a man chops wood
in the alley draped with snow.
White gauze wraps
the pleated roofs.
Light bleeds through,
trickling...
Is this what life is like?

The sharp strike of an axe,
the splinter and the crack,
a silent crow watches
from dead limbs.

Another project soon came my way. The Lithuanian poet and translator, Marius Burokas, asked me to be the translation editor of an anthology of young Lithuanian poets. The Lithuanian Culture Institute wanted to publish it to help promote contemporary Lithuanian poets. I took the job. I stayed in Lithuania. I translated, taught. Marius and

I worked together, taking time off from the anthology to translate each other's poems as well. One of the first ones he translated was the one above:

Ištremtas namo

Lietuva, Vilnius

Ijunk dar vieną lempą
ir elektra
dingsta. Dabar
tikrai įkliuvai:
kojų pirštai įsirausę į senovinę dirvą,
girgždantys mediniai laiptai,
vaizdas pro murziną langą,
sniegu nuklotame skersgatvyje
vyras skaldo malkas.
Stogų klostės
baltai sutvarstytos
Šviesa sunkiasi pro tvarstį,
varva –
Ar toks ir yra gyvenimas?

Staigiai kerta kirvis,
pokšt ir skykla
varnai tyliai stebint
nuo nudžiūvusios šakos.

The hardest thing he said, was to get the pacing just right, especially in the final stanza. Short poems are deceptively difficult. If the wording or phrases are off, the poetic impact slips away. (Poetic impact is as hard to define as to translate, slippery as a garden snake, but seductive, and what we all want from a poem.) Marius inserted the overtly onomatopoeic “pokšt” for my “crack”. He turned “sharp” into “sudden” (staigiai), and he turned an indicative phrase (“a silent crow watches”) into a participial one. All in a day’s work. The translation reads well. I felt it a shame that the overt reference to blood was lost. “Light bleeds through” becomes “Light seeps through the bandage” (“Šviesa sunkiasi pro tvarstį,”). But his phrase associates light with blood by means of the bandage and the verb. Whatever poetic strength there is in the original, Burokas conveyed it in his translation. Perhaps it is even better than the original?

Our translation activities were rather hectic at times. We often met at the Contemporary Art Center café, before it came under new ownership, before the food got better and the prices went up, back when a lot of writers and translators would stop by, not to mention artists. Our sessions there left an indelible imprint in my mind, expressed as well as I could make it in this, a rare poem about the act of translation itself:

North of Paradise

–Vilnius, Lithuania

The terrace lay empty as Eden
under a prescient autumn cloud.
No one risked the gift of rain
or early darkness like a shroud.

Marius and I tarried outside
smoking our Camel grays
before ducking inside to hide
from a sky so far away

from what summer had sung to us all.
We huddled, then, in a concrete den
where people whispered as if to a wall.
Sipping black coffee, we translated again,

turning self into other, yours into mine,
being reborn, or not, in every line.

I would rather not explain the poem, but speak around it, adding an analogy to its theme. Translation sometimes seems to me like acting. You, the translator, have to take someone else's words, and make them your own. It is not enough to read the lines, or to even read them with emotion. One has to give the impression that one is living it. Of course, the analogy is imperfect, for the translator is using his or her own words. But translators do need to fully embody the foreign text, accept it in their own minds, so that what comes out is their own, even if not their own. This, to me is the central paradox of translating (especially, I would say, in translating poetry). It is a risky practice, in that it can lead to changes to the text, but it is worth the risk. I never want a translated poem to read merely as a translated poem, glowing in the readers mind with

only the distant fire of the original. It needs to have its own flame, but of the same sort as the original. (Can anyone say what this means, exactly? Can anyone say what makes a good poem good, exactly? You know it when you feel it, like love.)

After the Paris terrorist attacks of November, 2015, Marius wrote a moving poem in response. It is another short poem, challenging the translator to capture the precision of its chiseled lines. Steeped as I am in the tradition of American Modernism, having lived in a country that has suffered terrorist attacks, and living now in Vilnius, knowing Marius, his family, and his neighborhood, I drew on this shared experience for my English version:

Po lapkričio 13-osios

mūsų šunys
išmoko neloti

loja sirenos
rytuos ir vakaruos

dūžta stiklas
kraują kitądien
užkloja gėlės

vėl ramu

tik naktį
gulim
atmerktom akim
prie artimo savo

klausomės
aštraus
nesiliaujančio

stygos zvimbimo

After November 13

Our dogs have learned
not to bark

sirens howl instead
east and west

glass breaks
then blood is covered
in flowers

all is calm

at night
with open eyes
we lie beside
our cherished ones

listening
to the high
unyielding

drone of strings

The last word of his poem, “zvimbimas”, is translated in the dictionary as “hum, buzz”, neither of which works to convey the sense of dread. His adjective to describe this sound, “aštrus”, would normally be “sharp” in this context. But it doesn’t sound right. “Sharp” is a musical term as well. “high” on the other hand, can convey pain in

the context of sound, as well as elevation, distance, power. This dread that terror brings can be overcome by our speech, by those who listen, by those who can feel what we feel, and say it.

We have no Eden, no Babel, but we have our speech, various as it is. We can hear each other, understand. We can make the Other our own, while leaving it Other – interweaving ourselves, channelling another’s voice, speaking a part that is, or has become, a part of us. Can we thereby overcome our original exile? Can I, in this way, overcome my historical exile? Translation, I believe, is a way to these goals, a way that meanders and never ends.¹

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