

Review · *Nance Van Winckel*

Tomas Tranströmer: Selected Poems, 1954–1986, edited by Robert Hass. Ecco Press. New York. 1987.

Only when the poet sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others, says Stevens, is he fulfilled. The imagination illuminates the murky spaces through which the poem struggles to isolate “what will suffice.” And what makes Tranströmer’s poems so remarkable is the great beauty of his particular illuminating imagination. Furthermore, it seems only reasonable that Tranströmer should be interested in how these illuminating perceptions take place. Such processes are often the subjects of his poems. Tranströmer shows us the spirit in motion as it tries to untangle itself from the world, and as it tries to reconnect.

TRACK

2 A.M.: moonlight. The train has stopped
out in a field. Far off sparks of light from a town,
flickering coldly on the horizon.

As when a man goes so deep into his dream
he will never remember that he was there
when he returns again to his room.

Or when a person goes so deep into a sickness
that his days all become some flickering sparks, a swarm,
feeble and cold on the horizon.

The train is entirely motionless.
2 o’clock: strong moonlight, few stars.

I’ve quoted all of this poem since it shows so well how Tranströmer’s peculiar light-effects of the imagination work. I’m struck first by the way this poem pushes farther and farther into the complete quiet and motionless depth of consciousness, which for Tranströmer is often lonely, filled

with eerie foreboding. But it's also a curious and provocative place, sweetly cunning. Such a place, one we feel Tranströmer knows so intimately, taunts us with its elusiveness, as if to remind us that no matter how deeply we enter the spirit, we barely glimpse the "flickering lights at the edge of town." How reminiscent this is of Stevens, of that beguiling imagination he loved so well and which was so often the subject of his later poems.

Those lights. Tranströmer makes me think of them in another way too: as the inner reflection of a busy, chaotic external world, a world that also beckons and beguiles us, and similarly taunts us with its elusiveness. Yet the understanding that matters most to Tranströmer is that which moves us toward a balance between inwardness and the societal world. For Tranströmer, the self, try as it may, cannot remain disconnected from what's around it. It too lives on, indeed thrives on, *context*. So we must look in and out, and at the same time.

Working for many years in Sweden as a psychologist, Tranströmer treated delinquent boys and the occupationally handicapped. But we see Tranströmer the physician only insofar as we are struck by his keenly observant eye and by the way he enters the mind with such courage and strength, and with such relish and intrigue. These powers propel the poems, energizing their every odd movement. In "A Man from Benin" the photographic image of a man pulls another man, an observer, closer and closer, until the observer establishes a connection to the one observed. It's a subtle, quiet movement toward that union, and it's the movement, not merely union itself, that drives the poem so forcefully. The poem shoots forward with such strength that when the last line suddenly stops it, everything seems to reverberate as if from impact: "*I am come to meet him / who raises his lantern / to see himself in me.*" (Tranströmer's italics.)

Yet perhaps the greatest beauty of this collection is how well the translations allow Tranströmer to sing as he undoubtedly does in his native Swedish.

From the deeps of the forest, I rise.
It lightens between trunks of trees.
It rains over my roofs.
I'm impressions's water spout.
—from "Through the Forest"

Earlier collections in English, like those of May Swenson, Robin Fulton, and Robert Bly, have been uneven and leave readers uncertain of Tranströmer's lyric voice. For Tranströmer is above all a lyric poet, one of the best of our time. And what a tribute to this volume that at last Tranströmer's lovely lyrical voice can make itself so consistently felt to English readers. Much credit for this is due Robert Hass, who so carefully and wisely *administered* to the book.

In "Morning Birds," to mention just one of many examples, the singing's own beautiful force in the poem convinces us of the powerful truth of the ending:

Fantastic to feel how my poem grows
while I myself shrink.
It is growing, it takes my place.
It pushes me out of its way.
It throws me out of the nest.

And how appropriate that the poem has been filled with so *many* birds, so many voices competing for one's attention, until finally amid all this squawking, the one song of the poem/bird is gathered and lifts over the others to be heard.

It is no coincidence that song, especially in the form of music, often appears in Tranströmer's poems, for the similarities between music and his own poetry are many: that lovely melodic voice and the resonant, often odd reverberations of image laid upon image, like sound upon sound. Indeed, sound can be something visual for Tranströmer. Synesthesia. Consider, for instance: "The sound [playing Haydn] is spiritual, green, and full of silence." Or:

The music is a house of glass standing on a slope;
rocks are flying, rocks are falling.

The rocks roll straight through the house
but every pane of glass is still whole.

—from "Allegro"

As with music, the imaginative reverberations given off by Tranströmer's layering of images make for a wild, jazz-like music. A poem entitled simply "Loneliness" is a good example. In its two sections, the poem presents two very different views of loneliness. In section I, a man facing his own demise in the swift moment before it's about to arrive watches it come toward him. He has swerved into the lane of oncoming traffic. The headlights keep approaching, as toward "a boy in a playground surrounded by enemies." This is the frightening and often isolating loneliness the imagination can reveal to us, the one that Plath and Lowell and many others were so mesmerized by and drawn to. Nearing it, the spirit squeezes so tightly into itself it threatens to disappear. Then we read section II, where we see a beautiful and demure side of solitude and loneliness. A man walks out "on the frozen Ostergotland fields" and makes something like a plea *for* isolation:

To be always visible—to live
in a swarm of eyes—
a special expression must develop.
Face coated with clay.

We must live both within the world and within our deepest selves at the same time. We cannot turn our backs on either. I can't think of a poem that takes on this modern dilemma in any better, tougher, or truer way.

Another way Tranströmer syncopates movement in these poems is through his unique combination of sparse language and dramatic, riveting imagery. It was to this combination that the deep image poets, Bly and Wright, were so drawn. Bly, for instance, was one of Tranströmer's first translators. Yet none of Tranströmer's American counterparts strike quite the same intriguing weights and rhythms between language and image. It is his very studied, sure-footed movement toward inwardness that so compels me. "In the slot between waking and sleep / a large letter tries to get in without quite succeeding." With what perfect clarity this image speaks, evoking a whole state of consciousness with one deftly perceptive stroke.

Tranströmer's images often strike me this way, as if they had simply been around in just that form all along waiting for someone to pass by and "see" them. In the prose poem, "The Blue House," when someone who

lived in the house died, it was repainted. “The dead person does the painting, without a brush, from within.” Through a steady reexamination of its past, Tranströmer makes the house, as a kind of reliquary of memory, stand firm.

Titles. Like Stevens here too, Tranströmer is a master. But Tranströmer’s titles may seem deceptively simple. Take the poem “Track” quoted in the beginning. Moving into the poem, we sense the hook to the title quite literally: a man’s life paused on its track to take stock of itself. But as the poem moves and allows us to look elsewhere, we cannot forget that track. It is always there, always running through that very dark and lonely field.

A title I like even more is “After the Attack.” Here are the first two stanzas:

The sick boy.
Locked in a vision
with tongue stiff as a horn.

He sits with his back towards the painting of a wheatfield.
The bandage around his jaw reminds one of an embalming.
His spectacles are thick as a diver’s. Nothing has any answer
and is sudden as a telephone ringing in the night.

So what attack, we wonder. We read on. We read about a painting the sick boy sees nearby, and we begin to realize we’re slowly entering his sensations, no longer those of the voice who’d been observing the boy in the earlier stanzas. The title stays in our minds. What attack? Then, as the details of the painting begin to take control of the poem, we realize it’s the painting itself that has attacked the boy, and as quickly as that hits home, the poem scores *its* little blow. It’s made its attack as well. And I come back again and again to that bandage around the boy’s jaw—the other attack—and think how he’ll never see the world in quite the same way again. His perceptions of everything have been altered. Now everything has the power to lurch forward and connect to him—like an attack.

In his brief preface to this collection Hass summarizes his process of selecting and editing these poems. Yet I doubt these brief remarks adequately express the efforts Hass brought to this collection. He mentions

asking the impressive crew of translators—Bly, Swenson, Fulton—to make some revisions of their earlier translations. Clearly Hass has helped to bring forth a collection that finally establishes a consistent style and voice for Tranströmer—no small feat, I’m sure.

There was a little game I foolishly tried to play against myself when I first began reading these poems: “Guess the Translator.” And it’s a tribute to the book that I lost so badly. Initially, I was sure, for instance, that a certain poem must have been a Bly translation, only to discover that it was someone else’s. For, thankfully, the marks of the translators’ hands have not been left on these poems, which is yet another beauty of this collection: what stands before us are poems made by the poet who could only be Tranströmer.