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REVIEWS

From the Rivers
International Writing Program,
University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa
\$2.50, paper

Johannes Bobrowski: Poetry from East Germany

Johannes Bobrowski is probably the best known East German poet in this country and his recognition here is due in large part to the carefully evocative translations of Ruth and Mathew Mead. With the addition of *From the Rivers* (International Writing Program, University of Iowa) to the earlier volume, *Shadowland* (published in the United States by Alan Swallow and included in the Penguin volume *Johannes Bobrowski: Selected Poems*) English readers now have nearly all of Bobrowski's poems available to them. Other translators have also published translations of Bobrowski in magazines and anthologies, and I would hope there might be an eventual gathering of these into a "Collected Poems" volume with *Shadowland* and *From the Rivers*.

Much of Bobrowski's poetry bears a superficial relationship to the earlier German poetry of nature, but unlike much of that vein's shallow description of idyllic settings, Bobrowski is supremely concerned with the people in his landscapes and demonstrates a facility with technique that makes the poems seem at once spare and vibrating with covert meaning. Take, for example, "Night Swallows":

I
Cold,
the pierced air,
the black and the white, light, speaking
on routes of birds. The evening, its

bull-horn
aslant in the fire-smoke on the
horizon. You saw
the fish rise, as the waters
clashed, you took your hand
from my eyes, blackness flew
round us and without wing
and without cry.

II

We breathed,
the roof on my shoulder
was light and like a rain
skyless
the needles strewn in the sand,
night-swallows, souls,
where shadow was,
thick on the earth,
cold.

“Night Swallows” is, as well, a good example of the translator’s art in handling implication. By leaving out strategic verbs and connectives and allowing juxtaposition of images and phrases to build meaning in a subtler, yet larger, accumulation than would be possible if implied connectives had been written into the translation (as they often should be), the translators allowed the poem to open with a scattergun pattern of detail that defines a landscape by selective elements.

The poem then turns to the human “you” in the landscape and with “. . . you took your hand/ from my eyes . . .” adds the implication that the original viewer of this scene was seeing it with a limited perspective and the opening of that perspective lets blackness fly, wingless and silent.

Part II opens by breaking the dark quiet with the two human elements (the original viewer of the scene and the “you” that steps in, the poet and the reader) joined in breathing and the landscape in an expanded, more personalized view (“. . . the roof on my shoulder . . .”) is now heaven and earth (“. . . the needles strewn in the sand . . .”) and the swallows are now souls instead of shadows.

The final four lines of the poem again leave out connectives that allow the important implication that “souls” as well as “shadows” and “night-swallows” are “thick on the earth” and closely related in many ways already developed by the more personal middle of the poem which now expands and completes a circular return to “cold.”

This ability to present implication in a clear, yet not overly simplified, manner is one of the more difficult and important aspects of a translator's work. Without it we are left with a skeleton of the original or a translation which is really an essay on the original, not a re-creation of the art.

There are similarities in Bobrowski's poems to both Georg Trakl and Peter Huchel. Compare these passages from Trakl (my translations)

The red wind blows linens cold and black.
A dog rots, a bush, sprinkled with blood, smokes.
The reeds are flowing with a yellow chill
and a funeral procession slowly makes its way to the churchyard.
(December Sonnet)

A breath of decay chills me.
Blackbirds complain in bare branches.
It shivers the red wine hanging from rusted gratings,

while like the death dances of pale children
around the edges of decaying fountains,
shivering blue asters bend in the wind.
(Decline)

Autumn sun, weak and hesitant,
and fruit falls from the trees.
Silence lives in blue rooms,
a long afternoon.

Death tones of metal
and a white animal collapses.
Coarse songs of brown girls
are scattered in falling leaves.
(Whispered in the Afternoon)

to these passages from Bobrowski (translated by Ruth and Mathew Mead)

Let us sleep each
other's sleep and not
hear the stars and all the
voices in the darkness, the blood
only as it falls and sinks back

with red-edged, blackish
leaves under the heart.

(Midnight Village)

Cold. On the tip of a grass-blade
the emptiness, white,
reaching to the sky. But the tree
old, there is
a shore, mists with thin
bones move on the river.

Darkness, whoever lives here
speaks with the bird's voice.
Lanterns have glided
above the forests.
No breath has moved them.

(Shadow Land)

Lonely he will sing:
across the steppe
wolves travel, the hunter
found a yellow stone,
it flared in the moonlight.

(Call)

Plains—the lost
villages, the forests' edge.
And a thin smoke
in the air . . .

(Recall)

The mood and tenor of the imagery in both poets is dark, autumnal, with death lurking nearby. The death theme pushes to the point of obsession in Trakl's poems, so often solitary and inhabited only by birds, bats, and children who are metaphors of natural decay. The poems are not weaker for this obsession, but neither should one expect to come away whistling bright tunes from a Trakl poem. Bobrowski too is a dark poet, but his darkness is a more personal darkness and there are individual people with more active roles in his poems. Where Trakl's concern is the landscape of human suffering, Bobrowski places the individual into that landscape.

Trakl was immersed in the Impressionist movement, and its effects are everywhere evident. An extensive pattern of symbology based on the use of color exists in his poems, and one can see even in these brief

examples that both poets rely on the implications of color words. Trakl's use of color is extensive enough to give larger tonal effects to his landscapes, while Bobrowski's landscapes are less impressionistic, more realistic. They are not, however, always literally real, though based heavily on Bobrowski's homeland in Tilsit (East Prussia) on the Lithuanian border. They are visual and tactile, but steeped in folklore, and his accumulations of suggestive detail are both physically grounded and spiritually loaded with implications.

Bobrowski has acknowledged an even more direct influence from the poetry of Peter Huchel. "In march 1965, six months before his sudden, unexpected death at the age of forty-eight, Johannes Bobrowski was asked in an interview in East Berlin whether any living poets served as models for him in his own writing. His immediate answer was, 'Peter Huchel, of course. I first read a poem of his in Soviet prison camp, in a newspaper, and it impressed me immensely. That's where I came to see people in a landscape—to such an extent that to this day I do not care for an unpeopled natural setting. I am no longer charmed by the elemental forces of a landscape, but by nature only when seen in connection with, and as a field of, the effective activity of man.'"¹

Compare, for example, Peter Huchel's "Fog" (my translation)

Greengolden leaching
of the marsh.
Bittern reeds.
The coils of the evening
trace the sky.
Pale yellow they lick
the tops of the alders.

In the morning
an odor of calamus²
rises on the fog.
And on the water
the wind sweeps
the shadows
of the leaves
together.

to Bobrowski's "Calamus" (translated by Ruth and Mathew Mead)

The water-wind, a howl,
flies around
with sails of rain.
A blue dove
has spread its wings
across the wood.
Lovely in the broken iron
of the fern
the light moves
with the head of a pheasant.

Breath,
I send you out,
find a roof,
enter through a window, regard
yourself in the white mirror,
turn without sound,
a green sword.

Although the example here of Peter Huchel's poetry is not the individual in a landscape as one might expect from Bobrowski's comments, it does serve to point out other similarities of mood, style, and approach to imagery that the two poets share.

Bobrowski's accumulations of suggestive detail add up beyond the individual poems to a larger landscape as well, a landscape Bobrowski called "Sarmatia," which roughly corresponds to the area of central and southern Russia between the Vistula River and the Caspian Sea. Little is known about the Sarmatian people beyond the fact of their mixed ethnic origins and that legend plays a large part in their history. The real "Sarmatia" may not be very different from Bobrowski's mythic vision of it.

Some of Bobrowski's poems can be seen as mythic re-creations of neglected history, or in their more somber moods, historical elegy. Here is "Village Church 1942."

Smoke
around log-wall and snowy roof.
Tracks of crows
down the slope. But the river
in the ice.

There
dazzle, broken
stone, debris, the arch,
sundered the wall,

where the village stood
against the hill, the river
sprang in the early year,
a lamb, before the door,
a round bay
lay open to the wind,

which blows round the heights,
sombre, its own
shadow, it calls, rough-voiced
the crow
cries back.

Bobrowski's more personalized landscapes, though distinctly and clearly presented, do sometimes suggest a more dreamlike view of the scene, and in this, he may have been influenced by his admiration for Chagall (one of Bobrowski's poems is written to Chagall). Here is "The Latvian Autumn."

The thicket of deadly nightshade
is open, he steps
into the clearing, the dance
of the hens round the birch-stumps is forgotten, he walks
past the tree round which the herons flew, he has sung
in the meadows.

Oh that the swath of hay,
where he lay in the bright night,
might fly scattered by winds
on the banks—

when the river is no longer awake,
the clouds above it, voices
of birds, calls:
We shall come no more.

Then I light you your light,
which I cannot see, I placed
my hands above it, close
round the flame, it stood still,
reddish in nothing but night

(like the castle which fell
in ruins over the slope,
like the little winged snake
of light through the river, like the hair
of the Jewish child)
and did not burn me.

It is unfortunate that poets of the stature and talents (any human being of creative intelligence for that matter) of Johannes Bobrowski and Peter Huchel have been treated with the kind of neglect and repression that the East German government has routinely subjected its best poets to, often forcing them to leave their homeland or resign themselves to a droll existence as one of the "party-line" writers whose politics have swallowed their art.

Fortunately for all of us, Bobrowski's poetry is faring much better in the hands of the world community of poets, translators, critics and readers than it did in his own country, and with translators as careful and capable as Ruth and Mathew Mead to clear away the boundaries of language, Bobrowski's poetry may yet find its place in world literature.

Notes

¹John Flores, *Poetry in East Germany*, Yale University Press, 1971. Also develops Bobrowski's "Sarmatia" and view of history.

²A variety of reed.

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