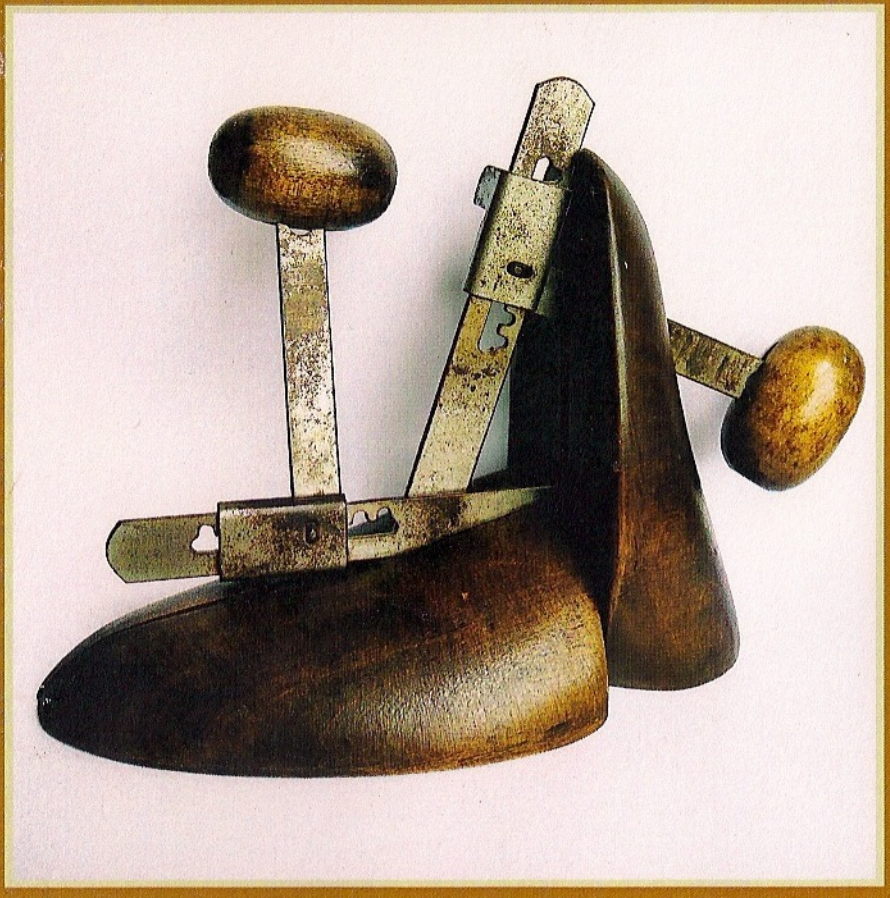
ROWBOAT

POETRY IN TRANSLATION



Issue Number Three

A Darker Storm:
A Review of Tomas Tranströmer's *The Deleted World*
by Norman Minnick

Shortly before the Nobel Prize for literature was announced late last year, Alexander Nazaryan wrote an essay for Salon.com on why American novelists do not deserve the Nobel Prize, suggesting that "the Academy finds our writers insular and self-involved." It is has been 20 years since an American has won the Nobel Prize, and 63 years since an American poet has won the award.

Tomas Transtömer may not be as prolific as other Nobel laureates such as Czeslaw Milosz or Seamus Heaney, but he has been championed in the States by many respectable poets and translators and published in a handful of fine collections including *The Half-Finished Heaven* (Graywolf, 2001), *Selected Poems 1954-1986* (Ecco, 1987), and now *The Deleted World* (FSG, 2011).

The reason for his popularity may lie in Nazaryan's assertion, for Tranströmer's poetry is not in any way insular or self-involved. While many American writers spend their time in a university with other writers, Tranströmer worked as a professional psychologist at a juvenile prison, as well as with the disabled, convicts, and drug addicts. His poetry delves deeply into the psyche, but this is more often the psyche of humanity than of the self alone. He has been described as "a metaphysical visionary poet" (Neil Astley), and the poet John Haines has said that to read his poems is to be "introduced to a new stone age, in which the tools and conveniences of modern society are becoming artifacts and fossils." Yet Transtömer would have failed a university Creative Writing course. At the university for which I previously taught, the Creative Writing professor would hand out a list of forbidden words to her students; among the words on that list were soul, dark (darkness), silence, snow, cosmos (heavens), star (starry), love, and heart. One or more of these words appear in just about every poem in this collection.

Predominant in Tranströmer's poetry is the tension and relationship between man and the natural world. Storms are prevalent—a reminder of our own vulnerability in the face of the destructive power of nature. *The Deleted World* opens:

> Suddenly the walker comes upon the ancient oak: a huge
> rooted elk whose hardwood antlers, wide
> as this horizon guard the stone-green walls of the sea.
> A storm from the north. It is the time of rowanberries.
> Awake in the night he hears—far above the horned tree—
> the stars, stamping in their stalls.

Tranströmer's poems, like pop-up thunderstorms on a summer afternoon, are at once terrifying and awe-inspiring. Reading them can be an otherworldly but at the same time very ordinary experience—an almost out-of-body feeling that brings with it a sense of how transient and fragile human existence really is. Here is his description of how a bus "negotiates the winter night:"

> Few passengers: some old, some very young.
> If it stopped and switched off its lights
> the world would be deleted.

This is a frightening image; yet the jolt of relation between the inner and outer worlds here feels right, and is a sensation common to many of Transtromer's poems. May Swenson, another of Tranströmer's translators, calls this tension between interior and exterior images "double exposure."

Tranströmer has mentioned his disappointment with the rhythm of his poems in English translation. Among his translators, Robin Robertson's versions (I say 'version' because Robertson makes a point of distinguishing them from translations) are perhaps the

most rhythmical. Here are a few versions of part two of "Black Postcards," beginning with Robertson's translation:

> In the middle of life, death comes
> to take your measurements. The visit
> is forgotten and life goes on. But the suit
> is being sewn on the sly.

Robin Fulton's:

> In the middle of life it happens that death comes
> to take man's measurements. The visit
> is forgotten and life goes on. But the suit
> is sewn on the quiet.

Robert Bly's:

> Halfway through your life, death turns up
> and takes your pertinent measurements. We forget
> the visit. Life goes on. But someone is sewing
> the suit in the silence.

Joanna Bankier's:

> In the middle of life it happens that death comes
> and takes your measurements. This visit
> is forgotten and life goes on. But the suit is
> sewn in the silence.

The Swedish:

> Mitt i livet händer att döden kommer
> och tar mått på människan. Det besöket
> glöms och livet fortsätter. Men kostymen
> sys i det tysta.

The literal meaning of *Tysta* in the last line is 'silence.' Robertson's on the sly gives the word quite another connotation, and Fulton's sewn on the quiet feels strange, even misleading. Bankier's translation is my favorite.

Several versions of Transtromer's early poem "Ostinato" make clear the difficulty of remaining true to both imagery and rhythm. Here is the first stanza:

> Under vråkens kretsande punkt av stillhet,
> rullar havet dånande fram i ljuset,
> tuggar blint sitt betsel av tång och frustar
> skum över stranden.

May Swenson's translation isn't bad:

> Under the buzzard's circling dot of stillness
> the waves race roaring into the light,
> chewing on their bridles of seaweed, snorting
> froth across the shore.

Maybe because he chooses not to employ the present participle, Fulton's is the clumsiest:

> Under the buzzard's circling point of stillness
> ocean rolls resoundingly on in daylight,
> blindly chews its bridle of weed and snorts up
> foam over beaches.

Robertson uses a three-line stanza. His use of consonance (in the several "S" sounds) is appealing and not overbearing.

> Under the buzzard's circling point of stillness
> the ocean rolls thundering into the light; blindly chewing
> its straps of seaweed, it snorts up foam across the beach.

Bly says that Tranströmer's poems "are so luminous that genuine poetry can travel to another language and thrive." No matter which translator is handling the poems the luminosity of the image prevails, allowing us feel the tension between the animate and the inanimate. There is a psychic weight as well as a lightness of touch in these poems, and these qualities permeate his poems in translation.

Recently, Robin Fulton accused Robinson of borrowing "excessively" from Fulton's own translations of Tranströmer. In a letter printed in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Fulton states:

> An excessively large number of Robertson's lines are identical to mine in my Tranströmer translations (as published by Bloodaxe, and New Directions): elsewhere, wittingly or unwittingly, Robertson makes arbitrary changes to the Swedish, a language he does not seem to understand. His versions are neither dependable translations nor independent imitations: they show a cavalier disregard for Tranströmer's texts and I have yet to see a reviewer able or willing to say so.

While several editors and critics have come to Robertson's defense, I have to agree that these versions are exceptionally close to other translations and not "relatively free versions" as Robertson asserts in his introduction to *The Deleted World*.

Previously published in Great Britain in 2006 by Enitharmon Press, *The Deleted World* is a fine but small sampling of the newest Nobel laureate's verse. Yet it is barely an introduction to his work as a whole, for it does not include iconic poems such as "Allegro," "Track," "The Scattered Congregation," "Schubertania," or "Vermeer." At $13 for 15 poems I would recommend that you spend an extra dollar and purchase *The Half-Finished Heaven* from Graywolf, which contains 50 poems plus Robert Bly's spirited

and insightful essay; or pick up Ecco Press's *Selected Poems* (edited by Robert Hass) which includes over 100 poems by a variety of translators for $15.99.