The Difference Within

DOMINIQUE HECQ

There are many metaphors for literary and especially poetic translation, most of them pejorative: kissing a bride through her veil; les belles infidèles (women beautiful hence unfaithful); the wrong side of a Persian carpet, its design blurred by extra threads; traduttore, traditore (translator, traitor). Robert Frost believed that ‘poetry is what gets lost in translation’, and I tend to agree with him. However, I also believe that the act of translation is a re-creation. But there is a catch: in order to re-create, you have to destroy first.

In a poem titled ‘Everything is different’, the poet Paul Celan imagines an encounter with a translator in which, dismembering and remembering, the act of translation could not get more drastic:

The name Osip comes toward you, you tell him
What he already knows, he takes it, he takes it off you with hands,
You loose the arm from his shoulder, the right one, the left,
You fasten your own in their place—
—what ripped apart, grows back together—

Although well shy of Celan’s drastic dismembering/remembering process, my own translating practice has often taken ‘poetic freedom’. As a rule I try to be literal yet idiomatic, faithful yet fresh. The rub is in the ‘yet’ part. Someone once remarked that my translations from the French into English only contain Anglo-Saxon words. I don’t know whether this is a sin or not, but I’m sure that this changes the rhythm of the poem. You could say that there is a loss and a gain. I have recently applied this process to my own work from the English into French and I notice that I am given to fracturing, contracting, omitting, intensifying and changing nouns into verbs or indicatives into imperatives or gerunds, and so on.

Perhaps translation is the art of loss. For when it comes to translating poetry, it is the blanks that are pressing. And what I hear through the interstices of words presses back to a kind of writing translated from the dark. It’s like encrypting an enigma. For one moment I am in this interval between two languages, neither in one or the other, poised on the brink of some petrified mass of tongues. It’s an uncanny process. Exhilarating or terrifying, depending on how the music spreads in the crypt. Perhaps this has to do with what poetry means to me: a nocturnal space above the void, the all. And translation? Like writing itself, it is the difference within. The question mark at the heart of all writing.

A poem in translation is, ultimately, only a creative transposition. If poem in translation doesn’t sound like a translation from the unknown, it sounds like a transliteration or an imitation. For me it makes sense to approach the question of translation from the dark (the crypt); perhaps only because as a poet what frightens me most is the fading of sense.

OUTSPEAKING RED

If I were ivy I would twine
these long lean limbs, unyielding as stone
squash the reticent heart and fill his eyes
from my vine with leaves of longing
he’d learn to love me soon enough
if he was bone and I were blood
a flowing tide, I’d draw away
leaving him pale as I am red

Dominique Hecq

AU-DELÀ DU ROUGE

Si j’étais lierre j’enlacerais
ces membres longs, durs comme pierre
flétrirais le cœur réticent, vigne ardente
j’emplirais ses yeux de désir
il apprendrait vite à m’aider
s’il était os et moi sang
marée fluide, je me retirerais
le laissant pale comme je suis rouge

Dominique Hecq

FAR OFF THE WORLD

Far off the world
is burning. Here,
early evening, in
hazy light, birds
trill and chirp.
A gentle summer breeze
bringing fragments
of flowers, ash.

Ray Liversidge

UNTITLED (POEM)

Typical bedroom of the
Typical teenage girl

Typical posters
(pretty boys a sassy girl dangerous men)
peeling off the walls leaving
streaks of greasy blue
Makeup colours scattered across the dressing table
black and blue and too-red
(acne cream
buried under crumpled tissues)
CDs strewn like poker chips
around the player

A few well-loved books
spines cracking pages swollen dog-eared
hiding brand new textbooks
(bright whole untouched despised)

Typical unmade bed
quilt kicked down the end
pillow smeared black and blue and too-red
(one arm of the secretly-loved teddy bear
sticking out from under the covers)

Clothes hamper overflowing
lid jammed down
worn-once fashion and can’t-bear-to-throw-them-out jeans

Three pairs of shoes and one over tossed
into the corners
under the desk
(which is not a workspace
more a dumping ground
for everything that doesn’t have a place
and many things that do)

All still here
all left behind
nothing touched
since that day

Without her
just
typical bedroom
of the typical teenage girl

Marian Dalton