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Translating the Poems of Maria Luise Weissmann

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I cannot recall exactly when I came across the poems of Maria Luise Weissmann for the first time. I was searching websites for poems in German that would complement verse of my own on certain themes (the seasons, the saints, love, the life and work of artists), and some of hers struck me as relevant to my aims. However, I was soon reading and translating her poems for themselves, without regard for my own ends. I had become fascinated with this little-known poet who died in her thirtieth year and whose body of work has left me wondering what she might have achieved had she lived longer.

The facts I have of her life are few, and garnered from a posthumous collection of her verse: She was born in Schweinfurt am Main in 1899; her father, a teacher, and mother encouraged her intellectually; and the family's move to Nuremberg during World War I broadened her horizons; it was there that her first attempts at poetry were published, under the pseudonym M. Wels. She later settled in Munich, occupying various secretarial posts, and in 1922 married Heinrich F. S. Bachmair, who published her four collections of verse as well as her translations of Paul Verlaine and Blaise Cendrars. She died of an infection resulting from angina in 1929 (Weissmann 102-3).

In translating the work of this little-known poet, I found myself drawing upon my knowledge of poems by two of her contemporaries as help. Right away, I found many resemblances to Rilke. Her "The Gorilla", for instance, like his "The Panther", describes the plight of a caged beast in a zoo, using the suitably confined form of the sonnet to do so. Yet Weissmann's gorilla rails against his condition in a way that is almost human and so connects us more fully to a species closer to our own, admittedly, than Rilke's panther. Weissmann's sympathy with her subject reaches a climax in her tenth line, when she abruptly truncates her iambic pentameter and in so doing suggests the way that the frustrated beast suddenly, surprisingly launches into a cry of protest at his entrapment. Though Weissmann's gorilla, like Rilke's panther, tends to roam his cell in a daze, his occasional heroic defiance distinguishes him from that other victim.

With this poem, as with most of the others by Weissmann, who primarily wrote in fixed forms, I was aided by the fact that I had a certain structure within which to work, given that rhyme and meter, for me, impose convenient parameters wherein I can navigate and limit myself to certain choices. And, although the finished translation will of course sound different from the original, I tend to work from the premise that it too should look and sound like a sonnet if the original was one: this is the least I can do to honour the original poet's intentions, I believe.

I was also aided by the fact that, with exceptions, Weissmann's lines, more so than Rilke's, tend toward being intact syntactical units – whole sentences, ideally, but at the least, whole clauses. In this, she made me think of Trakl, several of whose poems I had translated previously, and her "Abend in Frühherbst" in this grouping definitely reminds me of certain verses of his that trace the imperceptible changing of the seasons. And then, as is always the case with German, there are cognates that help in rhyming. *Land* and *Strand* in the selection here from Weissmann's group "Robinson" provide a case in point. More taxing is the common German coupling of *Baum* and *Traum* in "Auszug der Tiere", which I have had to subvert with the

use of *reverie* for *dream* (so as to provide a rhyme for *tree*). Finding appropriate rhymes indeed poses challenges, for though I determine the poem's structure before I begin translating, I tend not to plot out specific rhyme words I think I will need, instead leaving myself open to delightful surprises, the result being that sometimes (when I have to go back and start all over again) I wish I had been more systematic. However, when I do jot down rhymes beforehand, it often happens that the words that end the original lines will not work at the ends of my own!

A good bit of trial and error, then, was involved in order for me to couch these translations in the same structures that Weissmann used. But I hope that the result is a broadening of an audience for a poet who deserves further recognition. And perhaps, too, it will lead to other translators' interpretations of her work, as well as to scholars' investigations of her life and oeuvre. Like her gorilla's cry, like the cry of her own poems against the darkness of her early death, then, let these translations serve as a call for more attention to the poetry of Maria Luise Weissmann.

Bibliography

Weissmann, Maria Luise. *Imago: Ausgewählte Gedichte*. [Imago: Selected Poems.] Starnberg am See: Heinrich F. S. Bachmair, 1946.

Der Gorilla

Er atmet ihre Schwüle längst nicht mehr,
Doch lastet seinem Nacken immer noch der
Traum der großen Seen
Und läßt ihn tief zum Sand gebückt und
schwer
Im Takt zur Wiederkehr der Eisenstäbe gehn.
Er möchte wohl der Glanz der Papageien
sein,
Das Duften der Reseden und der
Walzerklang,
Doch bricht kein Strahl den trüben Spiegel
seines Auges ein:
Die Hand trägt still gefaltet den beträumten
Gang
Dem fremden Leuchten still und fremd
vorbei.
Manchmal, im Schrei,
Der fernher trifft, fühlt er sich jäh dem
Schlund
Des Schlafes steil emporgereckt entragen
Und knirschend seiner Stirne aufgewandtes
Rund
An steingewölbte Firmamente schlagen.

The Gorilla

It's been a while since he breathed his sultry
breeze,
Though his neck still bows with dreams
of great seas, and then
He's left in the sand once more, down on his
knees,
Or sent right back to the iron bars again.
He would gladly have, for his own, the
parrot's blaze,
The scents of mignonettes, the waltz's sound;
Yet no beam breaks the mirror of his eyes'
dim glaze:
His hand bears the silent crease of his dream-
dazed round
Past the strange lights that silently, strangely,
pass on by.
At times, in his cry,
Which strikes from afar, he feels wrenched
somehow
From the maw of sleep; and, erect as a
monument,
He wrinkles the dome of his upturned brow
And hammers away at the stone-arched
firmament.

Robinson findet sich am Strand der Insel

Und dies war alles, was er fand, erwacht:
Es lag ein Leib, voll Schmerz, an einem
Strand.

Hin floß ein Meer in hyazinthe Nacht,
Aufbruch in Blau ein unergründlich Land.

Der Wind lief schnell, die spitzen Möwen
stießen
Auf Beute rings, und heisre Affen schrien.
Die roten riesenhaften Falter ließen
Klirrende Flügel streifen über ihn,

Er lag, ein Leib voll Schmerz, gehüllt in
Feuer,
Er hob die Hand in Liebe über sich
- Getös der Welt ringsum scholl ungeheuer -
Er sagte streng, begrenzend, wissend:
ICH.

Aber öffne...

Aber öffne nur die Türe,
Aber tritt nur auf die Schwelle,
Hebe kaum den Blick und spüre
Schon die ungeheure Helle,
Schon den Glanz der leeren Räume,
Die wie Wiese rasch erblühten,
Schon den Tanz der schweren Träume,
Die sich hoben, die erglühten...
Zärtliche beschwingte Welle,
Sieh, kein Lufthauch, der nicht rühre -
Aber tritt nur auf die Schwelle,
Aber öffne nur die Türe!

Robinson Finds Himself on the Island Beach

And this was all he found when he woke: the
sight
Of a body lying in pain upon a strand.
Before him flowed a sea in a hyacinth night;
Behind, in broken blues, an endless land.

The wind ran fast; the sharp-beaked seagulls
poked
Around for prey; and husky monkeys
screamed.
The wings of giant red moths whirled and
stroked
His chill flesh in a warm frenzy as they
dreamed.

He lay, a body in pain, enveloped in fire.
In love he lifted his hand up high—
The roar of the world all round cried out like a
choir—
And said incisively, harshly, knowingly: *I*.

Just Open...

Just open up the door;
Just step onto the sill;
Just lift your eyes a bit more
And see the bright rays spill
In vast and gleaming streams
That, like the fields, now flow
And dance in heavy dreams
That rise and glimmer, glow...
No softly-surgings thrill
(wind-borne) you're not meant for:
Just step onto the sill;
Just open up the door!

Jugend des Propheten

Ich liebte Linnen und die sanften Seiden
Strich meine Hand mit Lust. ER flüsterte:
"Das harte Fell des Hirsches wird dich
kleiden."

Ich saß beim Mahle und mein Blick war
Schein
Des gelben Weins. Er sagte laut und hell:
"Die bittre Wurzel wird dir Speise sein."

Mein Schloß war fest... Und als ich mich
gerettet
Noch zu der höchsten Zinne, rief Er dort:
"O guter Schlaf, auf Dorn und Stein
gebettet!"

Ich lag bei ihr. In ihrer Brüste Bucht
Träumt ich den Heimat-Traum. Er hat
gewußt,
Ich würde einsam gehen und verflucht.

So brach ich auf. Denn daß ich ihm geglaubt,
Zwang mich sein unbesiegbar sichres
Wissen.
Groß hing sein Lächeln über meinem Haupt.

A Prophet's Youth

I loved linens and stretched my hands with joy
Toward gentle silks. *He* whispered:
"A stag's hard hide will clothe *you*, boy."

I sat at table and couldn't help but stare
At the golden wine. He said to me, loud and
clear:
"The bitter root, my friend, will be *your* fare."

My castle keep was hard, and when I fled
Up to the highest battlement, he called:
"O what a good sleep, with thorn and stone
your bed!"

I lay with a lass, and, cradled at her breast,
I dreamed the dream of home. He already
knew
I'd roam alone and cursed and never rest.

So I broke down. For I believed what he said.
His unassailable knowledge mastered me.
His certain smile loomed great above my
head.

Auszug der Tiere

Es waren eingekreist die ahnungslosen
Verirrten Tiere eh sie sich versahn
Von Wand und Wand. Ganz fern im
Grenzenlosen
Zog noch von Himmel eine blasse Bahn.

In einer Nacht war Mond in ihren Träumen.
Sie brachen auf, gezogen in das fahle
Trügende Licht. Und wie ins Laub von
Bäumen
Stiegen sie ins Geäst der Kathedrale.

Und stiegen träumend fort bis in das letzte
Gezweig der Giebel und erwachten kaum
Als sich ihr Fuß hinaus ins Leere setzte:
Sie fanden sich verstiegen in dem Raum,

Der Erde nicht und der nicht Himmel hieß,
Ganz heimatlos. Sie starrten in des Lichts
Ziehenden Strahl bis sie der Blick verließ
Und sie versteinten, irren Angesichts.

Abend im Frühherbst

Weit ausgegossen liegt das breite Land.
Der Himmel taucht den Scheitel noch ins
Licht,
Doch seitlich hebt gelassen eine Hand
Die dunkle Maske Nacht ihm ins Gesicht.

Viel fette Lämmer weiden auf der Flur,
In Gärten steht das Kraut in seiner Fülle,
Herbstwälder ziehn als eine goldne Spur,
Am Baum die Frucht glänzt prall in ihrer
Hülle.

Es ist der letzte dieser kurzen Tage:
All Ding steht reif und rund und unbewegt
Schwebend in sich gebannt wie eine Waage,
Die Tod und Leben gleichgewichtig trägt.

The Procession of the Animals

Before the clueless beasts could say how or
why,
They found themselves surrounded, wall to
wall.
And yet quite far away in the boundless sky,
A train still moves, as pallid as a pall.

One night the moon was in their reveries.
Drawn into and borne by its pale light, they
broke down.
As if they were climbing into thickly-leaved
trees,
They rose into the cathedral's woven crown.

And dreaming, they climbed until they
reached the last
Gable's branches and were hardly awake
When their feet came to rest in emptiness,
held fast
Within a space they could not escape or
mistake

For heaven, much less the earth. And now
they were quite
Without a home. They stared into that zone
Of blinding light till it left them lost in night.
And, faces crazed, they turned to stone.

An Evening in Early Autumn

It spreads out far and wide, the spacious land.
The sky still laves the mountain peaks in light,
Yet from one side, it calmly lifts a hand
To its face to make the darkling mask of night.

Fat lambs now graze upon the meadow grass.
The gardens teem with herbs in ample
quantity.
Like tracks of gold, the woods of autumn
pass;
Firm fruit gleams in its rind upon the tree.

It is the very last of these brief days.
All things stand ripe and round and silent
there,
Adrift, bewitched, and poised on scales that
raise
Both life and death aloft in thinnest air.

Uralt...

Schweig, mein Geliebter; Mund auf Mund
Wurden wir groß, wurden wir alt
In einem nie gestillten Bund,
Alt wie der uralte Wald.

Alt wie der Mond, mein Lichtgesicht,
Bist du am Himmel tausend Jahr
O schmale Sichel aufgerichtet,
Der ich die Ernte war.

Alt wie das Meer, die dunkle Saat,
Nach dir gereift, sehnsüchtige Flut,
Steigt zwischen uns den ewigen Pfad
Dunkel das ewige Blut.

Ancient...

Be calm, my love. Your lips to mine,
We aged as we never dreamed we could.
In one never-stilled bond, we grew tall and
fine
And old as the ancient wood.

Old as the moon, my face of light;
And you, slender scythe, for ages, you
Have stood erect in heaven's night
Reaping me ever anew.

From the old, dark seed, old as the sea,
It rises in ripened and fiery flood
Between us, on through eternity:
The dark, eternal blood.