

Course: Transreading Ukrainian poetry: a crimson bush amidst silence
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Bohdan Ihor Antonych, Volodymyr Svidzinskyi and Dylan Thomas - poets on fire

Volodymyr Svidzinskyi

Лице люстра мертвіє в тіні...

Лице люстра мертвіє в тіні
І задавнена тиша спить,
Як налита в миску вода.
Тільки руки мої живуть –
Іноді чудно, якось окремо,
Іноді рух моїх рук
Вертає мене з задуми,
Як шурхіт у легкому листі.
Я встаю, іду до вікна.

Надбита колонка стоїть коло ганку,
Цвіль у її жолобках.
Долітають сюди сніжечки,
Долітають синиці ранками.
Прихилюся чолом до скла,
Довго на них дивлюсь.

Не люблю, як приходить ніч,
Завинена в темний платок
З імшано-зеленим цвітом.
Тиша стікає в великий став.
Сині синиці, де ви вночі?

Лице люстра трупіє в тіні,
Завіси стають кам'яні,
І, обчеркнений колом мовчання,
Я глухіше, сумніше горю,
Я горю, як китайський ліхтарик,
Забутий на гілці, в старому саду.

The mirror's face

The mirror's face dies into the shadow
And antique silence sleeps,
Like water decanted into a bowl.
Only my hands live,
Sometimes strange, somehow distinct,
Their movements
Draw me back from my meditations
Like the whisper of a leaf.

I rise and go to the window,
A battered post stands by the verandah,
Mould grows in the crannies
Where snowflakes gather ,
Where blue-tits alight in the morning.

I press my forehead against the glass
And gaze on them for a while.
I don't love how the night comes
Swathed in a dark headscarf,
Its moss green tones.
A huge pool of silence accumulates.
Blue tits where do you go at night?

The mirror's face becomes a corpse in the shadows
The curtains turn into stone.
In my defined circle of silence
I burn, yet more deaf and morose,
I burn, like a forgotten, Chinese lantern
Snagged on a branch in some old garden.

Bohdan Ihor Antonych

ПРАЛІТО

1

Впливаємо в соснове море,
в сосновий шум, сосновий спів.
Над нами небо неозоре,
над нами дах струнких верхів,
над нами віддихом глибоким
парують оліясті пні.

І чуєш, як під твоїм кроком
зростають зела запашні.

Тут не бажаєм більш нічого -
обкутатися мохом сну,
в прапервісний природи морок,
в прадавню впасти глибину.

Хай в нашім тілі, наче в соснах,
густа живиця закипить.
Хай в наші жили зелень млосна
і полум'я спливе й блакить.

2

Вростем у землю, наче сосни
(лопоче лісу коругов).
Наллється в наші жили млосний
рослинний сік — зелена кров.
корінням вгрузнуть ноги в глину,
долоні листям обростуть.
А бджоли до очей прилинуть
і мед, мов з квітів, питимуть.

Уже не кров — важка олія
в затвердлх ядрах набряка.
немов малина, спіє мрія,
солodka, пристрасна й п'янка.

Кущем черленим край дороги
ростеш у шумі тишини.
Лиш олень —
самець струнконогий
полохливої шука сарни.

Primal Summer

1

We bathe in the pine sea
In the murmur of pines, their song
Above us a starless sky
A roof of slender tree crowns
Respiring deeply.
Trunks glide away.

You feel beneath your footstep
Things grow green and fragrant.

Here we desire nothing more,
Sleep swaddled in moss,
In nature's primal dusk
Ancient depths where we are fallen.

Let the dense sap seethe
In our body, as in the pines,
Let there be languid green in our veins
Let the flame fade to azure.

2

We grow in the earth like the pines,
The banners of the forest flapping,
Plant juice, green blood,
Flows in our lethargic veins,
Legs thrust roots into clay,
Pine needles from palms sprout
Bees settle on our eyes, sip
Honey from them as flowers.

Blood is no more, is heavy oil
That splashes in our hardening centre,
Like a raspberry, dream ripens
Sweet, ardent and drunken.

You grow by the edge of the road
A crimson bush amidst silence,
Broken only by an antelope,
A slender legged loner seeking
A timid roe.

Dylan Thomas

The Force that through the green fuse drives the flower

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

The force that drives the water through the rocks
Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
Turns mine to wax.
And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls my shroud sail.
And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores.
And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

Course Introduction

I The Translations

The translations we will use on this course adopt an approach which we might describe as midway between creative and literal translation. As Jeremy Reed says:

poets are too often worked dead by translation. The substitution of one language for another, the attempt to match, word for word, the creative potential of the original, which is animated by virtue of the imagination charging the language, is the perfect means to making a poet redundant in a foreign language

(Montale 9)

If we are to render Ukrainian poetry effectively into English we must reckon with the traditions of both languages. The poems in these exercises are occasionally what Ukrainians might term a *perespiv*, a song over a song, and attempt to render these works as contemporary poems in English. The reader of a translation will always inevitably be listening to the voice of a translator. However, the translator must have listened carefully to the voice of the author and tune his language so it resonates at the same pitch. A translation of this kind is not a transcription but a duet, a poet's interpretation of a poet.

The biggest challenge is presented by the infinitely complex grammar and endlessly flexible word order of Ukrainian. The language has seven cases, every verb exists in two forms, sentences can be as flexible as a bendy balloon. The agreement between case endings which is echoed in the sound of the words also creates endless possibilities for internal rhyming.

The degree to which a translation is a word for word rendering depends in part on how the poet uses their own language. Tychyna, for example, exploits the flexibility of Ukrainian, its inflexions and the freedom with which sentences can be constructed to the full. These devices cannot be duplicated in English without creating a text which sounds awkward. A translator must also create a work which captures the beauty and spirit of the original- I hope that the works presented here at least partially capture the power of the original work.

II Ukraine and Russia- a thumbnail sketch

It is almost impossible to find a popular history in English which gives an accurate account of the relationship between Russia and Ukraine. I am, therefore, trying to cram a thousand years of history into two brief paragraphs.

Ukraine is the successor of Rus, a medieval Slavonic kingdom whose capital was Kyiv and which encompassed what is now North Ukraine and parts of Belarus and western Russia. The country was Christianised by Bulgarian missionaries in the tenth century who brought their language with them – it became the written tongue of Rus, known as Old East Slavonic. However, the spoken language, which is preserved in graffiti on the walls of St. Sophia in Kyiv, was Ukrainian and the variant of Old East Slavonic used in Ukraine had many elements of the spoken language: it is the ancestor of written Ukrainian.

Rus fell under the onslaughts of the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Muscovy was created as a vassal state of the Mongols in the same period and its people were largely

Finno-Ugric tribes who were Slavicised, using the written language of Rus. Eventually, it became the state we now call Russia and annexed Ukraine, whose capital Kyiv was regarded as its cradle, in the seventeenth century. However, the Russians could not understand why Ukrainian, the original spoken language of Rus, was different from the tongue they spoke. Russia came to regard Ukrainian and Ukraine as artificial constructs separating one Russian people. The language was prohibited from many areas of public life under the Tsars and Russia still struggles to accept that Ukraine has a distinctive language and culture. However, the fact that writing in Ukrainian was for long periods a radical political act, and the language's history which stretches back to the origins of Slavonic culture that give this literature a distinctive character.

Writing Game 1: A muse of fire

Oh for a muse of fire! What poet hasn't called on the muses in some form to rush to their aid when they have been staring at a blank piece of paper? Blake spoke of the "red fires of Orc" the spirit of revolution in his mythology. Fire destroys but also inspires. Our first writing exercise looks at three poets who were on fire in different ways - literally and metaphorically - and used fire in their poetry.

On 27 September 1941, the Ukrainian poet Volodymyr Svidzynskyi was arrested by the Soviet secret police and accused of anti-soviet agitation. He and other Ukrainian cultural figures were herded towards the East like livestock. When the convoy was at risk of being surrounded by the advancing German army Svidzynskyi and his fellow prisoners were burned alive. For the Soviets, as for the Nazis, people were just resources for the regime or imperfections to be culled. The handwritten manuscript of his unpublished poems was believed to have burned with him. In the poem that follows this introduction you will see that he had described himself as burning in silence - the poem was written in 1934 as Ukrainians were dying in their millions from an enforced famine and mass shootings which affected most of Svidzynskyi's peers. He survived by saying nothing and this poem tells his story by not telling it but exploring a clearly defined silence. He had prophesied that he would be burned in one of his poems. Yet, although he wrote little, the work he produced is on fire.

Bohdan Ihor Antonych (1909-1937) lived his adult life in what was then Poland and died aged twenty-eight. His work uses fire as a symbol for raw elemental nature. Antonych was at heart a pagan for whom the sun was alive, and saw spirit in all things. Trees, rocks and stones were living creatures for him. The poem *Primal Summer* speaks of flame "fading to azure", the poet imagines himself and his beloved returning to nature and becoming plants. It is a surrender but a surrender to immortality.

Dylan Thomas's identification with nature was of course much more volatile, less a surrender than an affirmation that he was nature's energy. The green fuse of his poem suggests an explosive power. Both he and Antonych 'liked a drink' but the Ukrainian poet was an ecstatic who would drink vodka and rhapsodise about the sun. Thomas, as one of my friends, the daughter of the headmaster of a school in Barry, told me, was a little edgier. Her father had to fish him out of a pub in Barry once because he was due to give a reading at his school. He turned up with a plaster on his cheek as a result of a brawl or a fall. Thomas asserts that he is driven by nature's energy but the poem recognises his mortality too. Antonych yields to being part of nature, finding transcendence there, but Thomas is haunted by death.

These three poems deal with isolation and mortality with affirmation and silence. They

allow us to touch on the experiences we have now, of isolation during the pandemic and the freedom we did not know we had before the virus came.

Your Exercise:

Read and enjoy the poems and reflect on what they say to you about freedom and confinement.

Then write a poem about your own confinement during the pandemic and what life was like when you were free and what it will be like when you are free again.

You could, like Svidzynskyi, use your surroundings. Were you in an apartment? What were the furnishings around you? What was the view like through your window?

Were there people you loved who you could not hold or speak to face to face?

Did you miss people's smiles, the smiles of strangers when you were on the streets or in the shops?

Did you feel that your life had been kidnapped, that nature itself had been abducted?

Did you, like Thomas, commune with nature and confront your own mortality?

