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Hölderlin in the Barracks.

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HOELDERLIN IN THE BARRACKS

To read Hölderlin in English, in an American Army camp! To be captivated, once more, by this purest and perhaps greatest of all German poets, while we are fighting the Germans (not only the Nazis)! To be absorbed in these sublime auguries and invocations while the radio blares, "This is the Army, Mr. Brown...", and my barrack-mates discuss apprehensively such ominous topics as night guard, rifle-cleaning, and K. P. Life is amazingly rich in paradoxical, suggestive situations...

The edition I read - sprawling on my bunk as comfortably as possible - is the one just published by New Directions (Norfolk, Connecticut): Some Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin, translated by Frederic Prokosch. The slim booklet contains fifteen of Hölderlin's finest pieces - presented in both the English adaptation and the German original.

It is a truism that great poetry cannot be adequately translated into other idioms. If the translator - however sensitive and conscientious - is not a real poet himself, his version will inevitably be lacking in the charm and melody of the original. But if he happens to be a creative writer in his own right, he will produce a new poem by adapting the foreign text - a fine poem, perhaps, but essentially different from the work of art he ventured to reproduce in another tongue.

The job Frederic Prokosch has done seems to refute this axiom: some of his translations are indeed surprisingly successful. Of course, all conditions are particularly propitious in Prokosch's case. Here we have an American poet of Austrian descent - bilingual

by nature, cosmopolitan by conviction and disposition. His own style has a compellingly poetic cadence - and this is true, not only of his verse, but also of his winged, iridescent prose, the sensual charm of which is manifest again in his recent novel, The Conspirators - a book, tenuous and problematical in some respects, but enchantingly saturated with music and mystery.

Yet, it was not without slight apprehension that I began to read these foreign adaptations of so familiar, so beloved masterpieces - translations which (to quote from Prokosch's modest introductory note) "are offered, apologetically, as humble versions of a poetry which uniquely transcends translatability." Would I recognize the splendor and persuasion of the original?

At certain moments I was perturbed, disappointed. I tried "Socrates and Alcibiades" - a jewel in two short stanzas: concise, lucid, a poetic epigram of striking beauty and simplicity. No, it did not quite come off. The German text is austere, succinct, concentrated; in Prokosch's version, it becomes colloquial, almost flippant. Why does he translate the German word "Jüngling" with "lad"? "Adolescent" would have been more appropriate, or, if he wanted a one-syllable word, "youth", even "boy". The question with which Hölderlin's poem opens ("Warum huldigst du, heiliger Sokrates, diesem Jünglinge stets?") has a dignity and suggestive power in which the English translation ("Saintly Socrates, why should you incessantly praise this lad?") is definitely lacking. Socrates' answer - of the most moving and poignant grandeur in Hölderlin's formulation - reads beautifully, even in English:

(Saves up essential aspects of Hellenic philosophy!)

Who most deeply has thought, loves the most living. He
Only values the best who has beheld the world,
And the wise in the end shall
Often turn to the beautiful.

Evidently, certain shades have to be sacrificed. When Hölderlin speaks of the "heiligenüchterne Wasser" (as he does, in one of his last and most magnificent poems, "The Half of Life"), the double epithet has to be split into two and will thus be deprived of its strangely solemn quality. Prokosch's "saintly sobering water" in which the "beautiful swans" dip their heads, is of course not quite the magic liquid Hölderlin conceived; (the water he visualizes, incidentally, is not "sobering" but sober: its capacity of sobering the birds "drunk with your kisses" is but a secondary, accidental feature.)

This amazing piece - "The Half of Life", written shortly before Hölderlin's mental collapse, in 1803 - anticipates and surpasses a whole school of German poetry in the twentieth century - the expressionistic school - just as Rimbaud's Le Bateau Ivre became the model and fetish of generations of poets to come. Prokosch's version, although falling inevitably short of the original, maintains at least partly its miraculous accents and images:

Laden with yellowing pears
And with wild roses filled
Lies the land in the sea:
Beautiful swans,
Drunk with your kisses you
Dip your heads in the
Saintly sobering water.

Alas, where can I find, when
Winter arrives, the flowers? Where
The light of the sun
And the shadows of the earth?
The walls arise
Speechless and cold: in the wind
Clatter the banners.

The moderate "Alas" with which Prokosch begins the second stanza is decidedly less expressive than Hölderlin's nostalgic outcry, "Weh mir..." But the translator probably meant to avoid the

English "Woe is me," thinking it somewhat old-fashioned, not to say corny. And, then, why should we carp? On the whole - I repeat it - Prokosch has accomplished something very remarkable: namely, to communicate to his English-speaking audience the somber and yet elating message of the German lover of Hellas, the most disciplined and most profound of all romantics.

The three concluding lines of "The Half of Life" are a fine example of the translator's admirable skill: here the image conveyed through the English words corresponds almost perfectly with the original vision. And there are more such fortunate moments when Prokosch, with truly poetic intuition, ^{finds} ~~found~~ the precisely adequate English terms to catch the flavour and pathos of Hölderlin's German text. The poem Der Mensch (Man), for instance, remained almost completely intact while undergoing the precarious transmutation from one idiom into another. The last stanza ~~of that splendid piece~~ - almost untranslatable, one should think - reads beautifully in English:

Is it not he who still of the living stays
Most blissful? O, but all the more deeply fate
Who equalizes all things also
Tears the inflammable heart of the mighty.

Prokosch
~~He~~ observes indeed religiously the metres and expressions chosen by Hölderlin. And yet he is sometimes at his best where he ventures to deviate somewhat from the original, ~~text~~, as he does, for instance, most successfully in the famous opening lines of "Patmos": ~~here Prokosch says~~, "Near, near and - Difficult to grasp is the Almighty," for the German: "Nah ist - Und schwer zu fassen der Gott." The repetition of "Near" - missing in the original - is well in keeping with the sacerdotal tenor of the ^{work} ~~rhypso~~ and undoubtedly apt to increase its effectiveness. "Yet where the danger lies," continues the ~~American poet~~ ^{rhypso} - expressing

as exactly as possible, Hölderlin's august message in another idiom - "Likewise lies the salvation."

Beautiful words, these - earnest, heartening words. What profound and highly welcome comfort in these splendid songs and fantasies! Are they untimely, out of place, under the circumstances? But they are timeless: their validity transcends all limits of time and space. They are encouraging, for all their tragic and nostalgic undertones; for they confirm and exalt the divine flame inherent in all human drama. Hyperion's Song is as essentially true today, in an Army camp in Missouri, as it was 150 years ~~ago~~ ago, in the Neckar valley, or 2000 years before, in Athens - the place and epoch for which Hölderlin was homesick, incurably, during his whole miserable, wonderful life.

Sings Hyperion-Hölderlin - and I am moved, ~~upset~~ ^{struck}, comforted by his anguish and wisdom -:

Yet we are destined
Never to come to rest;
They falter, they fall,
These suffering mortals,
In blindness from
One hour to the next
Like water hurled from
Cliff upon cliff
Down the whole year long into
The Unfathomed.

This is the truth: I know it. More essentially, more truly true it is than the tiresome vicissitudes and petty struggles of our daily life - in these barracks or outside. With infinite boredom, endless agonies we atone for our mistakes, our cowardice, our lack of imagination. All these necessary sufferings and efforts - so grimly, inescapably real now - will fade away, become chimerical. "Yet all that endures," says Hölderlin, "is given to us by the poets."

KLAUS MANN.