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Reader's Guide

from Patty Crane
 translator of *Bright Scythe*

Author Asks:

1. In the Introduction to *Bright Scythe*, David Wojahn describes Tranströmer as “a poet almost helplessly drawn to enter and inhabit those in-between states that form the borderlines between waking and sleeping, the conscious and the unconscious, ecstasy and terror, the public self and the interior self.” Using one of Tranströmer’s poems, can you give an example of this, explaining what the particular in-between state(s) is/are, how the speaker arrived there, how that shift impacts the poem, and the effect it has on you as a reader?
2. Tranströmer is known for his arresting images and startling metaphors. In his poem “Further In,” the speaker is heading into the city and finds himself stuck in a long line of traffic when: “All of a sudden the red sun/ hits the middle of my windshield/ and comes streaming in./ I am seen-through/ and some writing shows up/ inside of me/ words in invisible ink/ that appear/ when the paper is held over fire!” How do imagery and metaphor work in these lines? What are we seeing and what does that “say” in the larger context of this poem?
3. What recurring images, ideas or themes stand out for you in *Bright Scythe*? Why do they stand out? How does their presence affect the overall tone of the book? How would you describe that tone?
4. Compounds are common in Swedish, and Tranströmer often puts them to great and sometimes unconventional use. For the translator they present interesting challenges, among them how to render the composite meaning while retaining nuances of sound, rhythm, humor, etc. In *Bright Scythe*, can you find a few examples of compounds that I carried over? Are there other word choice options I might have considered? Why do you think I translated each the way I did? What opportunities did those compounds present?
5. The translations in *Bright Scythe* are presented side-by-side with the original Swedish. How does this impact you as a reader? Does it contribute in any way to the reading of each poem? Whether or not you understand Swedish, did you “read” all or part of the original? If so, why? If not, why?
6. I’m often struck by the stark, deceptively simple contrast of imagery in Tranströmer’s poems, for example between darkness and light or stillness and motion. In “Two Cities,” “the luminous shore hypnotizes the blacked-out one.” In “The

Tree and the Sky,” it’s “the moment snowflakes leaf-out in space.” Pale moths beat against the dark windowpane in “Lament,” and in “Winter’s Formulas,” the speaker stands under a starry sky while the world crawls in and out of his coat. What effect does such contrast have on the poems? Find different examples of this in *Bright Scythe* to explain. What makes it deceptively simple?

7. What is your sense of Tranströmer’s relationship to the natural world? Citing examples from *Bright Scythe*, how is that relationship manifested in his poetry? How do you think he would define “nature”? How would his definition differ from yours?

8. In *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, Eliot Weinberger says: “Translators always assume that only one reading of a foreign word or phrase may be presented, despite the fact that perfect correspondence is rare.” Susan Sontag, in her essay “The World as India,” takes it a step further: “Translation, by definition, always entails some loss of the original substance.” What do you think they mean and how is it of particular significance to the translation of poetry?

9. In *Air Mail*, a collection of letters between Tomas Tranströmer and Robert Bly, Tomas responds to Robert’s first attempt at translating “A Winter Night” by saying the poem “probably can’t be translated so that the rhythm is retained.” What’s your sense of the rhythm in my version of “A Winter Night”? Do you think that, in general, capturing a poem’s original rhythm is important? If so, why? And how, whatever the language, might you attempt to accomplish this? If not, why?

10. The origin of this book’s title, *Bright Scythe*, is from the final line of Tranströmer’s prose poem, “Nightingale in Badelunda.” What is the image in that line? What is its significance to the poem? And what about its significance to the book as a whole?

Writing Exercises:

grind/ polish/ sharpen/ whet

Find a poem written in a foreign language that you understand. If English is your only language, try a poem in English that confounds you. Type the original poem and then, below each line, type the literal translation. For English-to-English, try synonyms. Using your dictionaries, include as many options for key words as you can (i.e. for the Swedish word *slipar*, I might consider grind/ polish/ sharpen/ whet). Copy and paste your literal translation along with the original lines, and begin whittling away the word choices. Try to be as true to idiom and meter as possible and always bring the original lines forward, ideally re-reading them as you go.



The Sound Mirror

Now find a poem written in a foreign language that you don't understand. If it's accompanied by an English translation, don't read that just yet. Read the foreign poem several times, aloud, using your imagination to sound out the words and rhythm until they begin to evoke for you some kind of meaning or sense. Now write a poem which, line by line, mirrors that rhythm and sense. Then you can read the translation of the poem to see where that might take you.

Further Reading:

1. *Air Mail: The Letters of Robert Bly and Tomas Tranströmer*
2. Robert Bly – *Leaping Poetry and Friends, You Drank Some Darkness*
3. Eliot Weinberger – *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*
4. Jean Valentine – *Door in the Mountain*
5. Rolf Aggestam – *Between Darkness and Darkness* (translated by Lars Nordström & Erland Anderson)
6. Gary Snyder – *The Practice of the Wild and The Gary Snyder Reader*
7. Adonis – *The Pages of Day and Night*
8. Lorine Niedecker – *Collected Works*
9. Elizabeth Bishop – *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979*
10. James Wright – *Above the River*

