

UC Santa Barbara

Translation Studies Journal

Title

Selected Poems from "Sebastian Im Traum"

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2d60086g>

Journal

Translation Studies Journal, 2(1)

ISSN

1555-8614

Authors

Trakl, Georg

Tapscott, Stephen

Publication Date

2007

Copyright Information

Copyright 2007 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Translator's Preface

Stephen Tapscott

These poems are lyrics by the Austrian poet Georg Trakl [1887-1914] from his book *Sebastian im Traum* (published posthumously by his friend Ludwig von Ficher in 1915). In English we tend to know Trakl as an 'expressionist' poet, and we tend to concentrate on the poems of his last period, when he was in the Austrian army and suffered a grievous case of shell-shock after the battle of Grodek, leading to his suicide. In these lyrics from shortly before those final poems, however, Trakl is trying on personae as a mode to deflect some of the grief of selfhood and of adult disillusionment. Paradoxically, I think, the process of 'deflection' permits him a clearer, and more vivid, articulation of the anguished diminishment that are the great theme of the middle of his career. Writing through other perspectives permits to help him think through questions of traumatic loss, identity, and 'private' language; coincidentally, those are the questions that both Rilke and Wittgenstein praised as the thematics their friend Trakl helped them to approach.

The figure of 'Elis' is Trakl's reworking of the Scandinavian folk-hero Elis Froeborn, who drowned in a well on his wedding-day when he was 19; years later he was resuscitated, oddly uncorrupted, although his fiancée had aged through the intervening years. 'Kaspar Hauser' was a feral boy discovered in Nuremberg in 1828. He had apparently been held captive and out of human contact for years; although philosophers and psychologists and linguists took an interest in him as a 'noble savage' and tried to teach him language, his only comment about his past was the line quoted in the poem (Kaspar Hauser was assassinated, apparently by someone from his shadowy past, in 1833). 'Sebastian' is Trakl's idealized figure who summarizes the prelingual idealism of childhood -- and who is therefore subject to the wrenching disorientation that the loss of that innocence involves.

The diction of these personae poems is crisply factual. Although the arguments tend toward the surreal and the expressionist (rhetorical modes which pressure diction toward a kind of abstraction), Trakl flavors his German declarative-sentences with a surprisingly direct factual elegance. Some of the effects that English can accommodate through Latinate diction,

Trakl accomplishes through his neologisms, through his oblique prepositions that complete German nouns in unexpected ways, and through his oddly elegant compound adjectives. That is, although Trakl doesn't use such Latinate diction, the English-language translator can echo some of what Trakl accomplishes, by using those dimensions of English.

Gedichte / Poems

ELIS

1

Vollkommen ist die Stille dieses goldenen Tags.
 Unter alten Eichen
 Erscheinst du, Elis, ein Ruhender mit runden Augen.

Ihre Bläue spiegelt den Schlummer der Liebenden.
 An deinem Mund
 Verstummt ihre rosigen Seufzer.

Am Abend zog der Fischer die schweren Netze ein.
 Ein guter Hirt
 Führt seine Herde am Waldsaum hin.
 O! wie gerecht sind, Elis, alle deine Tage.

Leise sinkt
 An kahlen Mauern des Ölbaums blaue Stille,
 Erstirbt eines Greisen dunkler Gesang.

Ein goldener Kahn
 Schaukelt, Elis, dein Herz am einsamen Himmel.

2

Ein sanftes Glockenspiel tönt in Elis' Brust
 Am Abend,
 Da sein Haupt ins schwarze Kissen sinkt.

Selected Poems from *Sebastian im Traum* by Georg Trakl

Translated by Stephen Tapscott

ELIS

1

Perfect, the stillness of this golden day.
 Under ancient oaks
 You appear, Elis: serene, with open eyes.

Their blueness recalls the slumber of lovers.
 On your mouth
 Their rosy sighs fell silent.

At evening the fisherman drew in his heavy nets.
 A good shepherd
 Leads his herd along the forest verge.
 How righteous, Elis, are all your days!

It descends so slowly,
 The olive's blue stillness along the barren wall;
 The dark song of an old man dies away.

A golden boat,
 Your heart, Elis, rocks in the solitary sky.

2

A soft carillon rings in Elis' breast
 At evening,
 As his head sinks back in the black pillow.

Ein blaues Wild
Blutet leise im Dornengestrüpp.

Ein brauner Baum steht abgeschieden da;
Seine blauen Früchte fielen von ihm.

Zeichen und Sterne
Versinken leise im Abendweiher.

Hinter dem Hügel ist es Winter geworden.

Blaue Tauben
Trinken nachts den eisigen Schweiß,
Der von Elis' kristallener Stirne rinnt.

Immer tönt
An schwarzen Mauern Gottes einsamer Wind.

A wild blue beast
Bleeds softly in the brambles.

There a brown tree stands, secluded,
Its blue fruits dropped away.

Signs and stars
Sink gently in the evening pond.

Behind the hill, winter has arrived.

Blue doves
Sip nightly at the icy sweat
That drips down Elis' crystal forehead.

Constantly it sounds
Along the black walls, God's lonely wind.

SEBASTIAN IM TRAUM

Für Adolf Loos

1

Mutter trug das Kindlein im weißen Mond,
 Im Schatten des Nußbaums, uralten Hollunders,
 Trunken vom Saft des Mohns, der Klage der Drossel;
 Und stille
 Neigte in Mitleid sich über jene ein bärtiges Antlitz

Leise im Dunkel des Fensters; und altes Hausgerät
 Der Väter
 Lag im Verfall; Liebe und herbstliche Träumerei.
 Also dunkel der Tag des Jahrs, traurige Kindheit,
 Da der Knabe leise zu kühlen Wassern, silbernen Fischen hinabstieg,
 Ruh und Antlitz;
 Da er steinern sich vor rasende Rappen warf,
 In grauer Nacht sein Stern über ihn kam;

Oder wenn er an der frierenden Hand der Mutter
 Abends über Sankt Peters herbstlichen Friedhof ging,
 Ein zarter Leichnam stille im Dunkel der Kammer lag
 Und jener die kalten Lider über ihn aufhob.
 Er aber war ein kleiner Vogel im kahlen Geist,
 Die Glocke lang im Abendnovember,
 Des Vaters Stille, da er im Schlaf die dämmernde Wendeltreppe hinabstieg.

SEBASTIAN IN DREAM

for Adolph Loos

1

Mother carried the infant, under the white moon,
 In the nut-tree's shadow, the old elder-tree:
 Drunk on poppy-juice, the mourning of the thrush.
 And silently,
 With pity, a bearded face leaned toward her,

Softly, in the darkness of the window; an old tool
 Of the forefathers
 Lay there in ruins: love, and autumn's revery.
 And so that day of the year was dark, that sad childhood,
 As the boy went down to the cool waters softly, to the silvery fish,
 A respite, and a face:
 As he threw himself stonily down toward the pounding stallions,
 In the grey of night, his star rose over him;

Or when he walked, holding his mother's icy hand
 At evening, through the autumn graveyard of St. Peter's Church,
 A frail corpse lay quiet in the dark of its chamber
 And spread its cold eyelids over him.
 But he was a little bird in the naked branches;
 The bell reached out through the November dusk,
 The father's silence, as he walked down the twilight twisting stairs, in sleep.

Frieden der Seele. Einsamer Winterabend,
 Die dunklen Gestalten der Hirten am alten Weiher;
 Kindlein in der Hütte von Stroh; o wie leise
 Sank in schwarzem Fieber das Antlitz hin.
 Heilige Nacht.

Oder wenn er an der harten Hand des Vaters
 Stille den finstern Kalvarienberg hinanstieg
 Und in dämmernden Felsennischen
 Die blaue Gestalt des Menschen durch seine Legende ging,
 Aus der Wunde unter dem Herzen purpurn das Blut rann.
 O wie leise stand in dunkler Seele das Kreuz auf.

Liebe; da in schwarzen Winkeln der Schnee schmolz,
 Ein blaues Lüftchen sich heiter im alten Hollunder fing,
 In dem Schattengewölbe des Nußbaums; Und dem Knaben leise sein
 rosiger Engel erschien.

Freude; da in kühlen Zimmern eine Abendsonate erklang,
 Im braunen Holzgebälk
 Ein blauer Falter aus der silbernen Puppe kroch.

O die Nähe des Todes. In steinerner Mauer
 Neigte sich ein gelbes Haupt, schweigend das Kind,
 Da in jenem März der Mond verfiel.

Soul's peace. Lonely winter evening,
 The dark forms of shepherds by the old pond,
 The infant in the straw hut; O how softly
 His face sank back, in black fever.
 Holy night.

Or when he walked holding his father's firm hand
 Up the dark Mount of Calvary
 And in the twilight clefts of the rocks,
 The blue shape of humankind would pass through his tales,
 The blood flowing crimson from the wound below the heart.
 O how softly the cross rose in the dark soul.

Love: as the snow was melting in the black corners,
 A blue breeze tangling happy through the old elderberry,
 In the shade-vault of the nut-tree;
 And softly his rose-colored angel appeared to the boy.

Joy: as an evening sonata rang through the cool rooms,
 On a brown ceiling-beam
 A blue moth crept from its silver cocoon.

O the nearness of death. From the stony wall
 A yellow head bent down, the child keeping silent,
 That March, as the moon decayed.

Rosige Osterglocke im Grabgewölbe der Nacht
 Und die Silberstimmen der Sterne,
 Daß in Schauern ein dunkler Wahnsinn von der Stirne des Schläfers sank.

O wie stille ein Gang den blauen Floß hinab
 Vergessenes sinnend, da im grünen Geäst
 Die Drossel ein Fremdes in den Untergang rief.
 Oder wenn er an der knöchernen Hand des Greisen
 Abends vor die verfallene Mauer der Stadt ging
 Und jener in schwarzem Mantel ein rosiges Kindlein trug,
 Im Schatten des Nußbaums der Geist des Bösen erschien.

Tasten über die grünen Stufen des Sommers. O wie leise
 Verfiel der Garten in der braunen Stille des Herbstes,
 Duft und Schwermut des alten Hollunders,
 Da in Sebastians Schatten die Silberstimme des Engels erstarb.

Rosy bell of Easter in the vault of the night
 And the silver voices of the stars:
 So that a dark madness dropped in shivers on the sleeper's brow.

O how quiet, to walk by the blue river
 Thinking about forgotten things as, from the green branches,
 The thrush warbled something strange into the sunset.
 Or as he walked, holding the old man's bony hand
 At evening, along the city's crumbled walls,
 And the old man carried a pink infant wrapped in his black cloak:
 Then the spirit of evil appeared, in the shade of the nut-tree.

Groping steps down the summer's green stairway. O how softly
 The garden decayed in the bronze stillness of autumn.
 The scent and the sadness of the old elder-tree,
 As the silver voice of the angel faded in Sebastian's shadow.

KASPER HAUSER LIED

Für Bessie Loos

Er wahrlich liebte die Sonne, die purpurn den Hügel hinabstieg,
Die Wege des Walds, den singenden Schwarzvogel
Und die Freude des Grüns.

Ernsthaft war seinen Wohnen im Schatten des Baums
Und rein sein Antlitz.
Gott sprach eine sanfte Flamme zu seinem Herzen:
O Mensch!

Stille fand sein Schritt die Stadt am Abend;
Die dunkle Klage seines Munds:

Ich will ein Reiter werden.

Ihm aber folgte Busch und Tier,
Haus und Dämmergarten weißer Menschen
Und sein Mörder suchte nach ihm.

Frühling und Sommer und schön der Herbst
Des Gerechten, sein leiser Schritt
An den dunklen Zimmern Träumender hin.
Nachts blieb er mit seinem Stern allein;

Sah, daß Schnee fiel in kahles Gezweig
Und im dämmernden Hausflur den Schatten des Mörders.

Silbern sank des Ungeborenen Haupt hin.

SONG OF KASPER HAUSER

for Bessie Loos

He truly loved the sun as it climbed down the hill going crimson,
Paths through the forest, the blackbird as it sang,
The gladness of the green world.

Self-possessed where he lived, in the shadow of the tree,
And his aspect was pure.
God spoke a gentle flame into his heart:
O human.

The city felt his footsteps softly in the evening;
The only protest from his dark mouth was,
I wish I were a Horseman.

But scrub-brush and beast pursued him,
Through neighborhoods and twilight-gardens where the pallid people lived.
And his killer tracked him down.

Spring and summer and lovely the autumn
Of the righteous, his gentle foot-steps
Down past the dreamers' darkened rooms.
At night he stayed alone with his star,

Saw the snow as it fell through naked branches
And, down the corridor of dusk, the assassin's shadow.

Silver it sank, the head of the one who had never been born.