

Volume 14 number 1

Ezra has gone far too long without mentioning—wildly applauding, that is—the *Dictionary of Untranslatable*s. The translation of this French work appeared in Emily Apter’s Translation series at Princeton (2014). The French edition was from Editions du Seuil (2004, *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*). It is mainly oriented around philosophy, and offers 1,200 pages of alphabetized puzzlers from many languages. “One of the most urgent problems posed by the existence of Europe is that of languages” (xvii). This both understates the massive challenge posed by a compendium of untranslatable philosophy terms and also invites us into the space that usually absorbs us: the arena where we struggle to find words or “terms” for what is most hauntingly ineffable about life. “Despite the redoubtable scale of its erudition and the range of its philosophical ambition, the French edition of the *Dictionary* resonated with a heterogeneous readership: philosophers, scholars in all fields of the humanities, and everyone interested in the cartography of languages or the impact of translation history on the course of philosophy” (vii). Ezra has plumbed it for a few years and finds that the essays accompanying each term are often useful in general literature translation:

Who wouldn’t want a little help with the aesthetics, duende and/or divinity of “grace” (one of the entries), and all the derivatives of Latin *gratia* and *gratus*? Or, venturing further, *jetztzeit*, the “now-time,” as Walter Benjamin uses it? Or all the words (“terms,” “concepts”) around “time”?

Notes about this issue: We are always partial to Baudelaire (here at his gloomiest); we have printed much of his work, but it’s only fair—he jump-started all us moderns. Murayama Kaita is remarkable (separately from what appears here) for writing recognizably gay poetry in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Japan. And note that Tunisian Adam Fethi’s work is often sung.

If you have a project, and need solitude, apply for an Ezra Residency! (summer, New Hampshire—click the button above)

There is a publication notice in this issue.

FEATURED WRITER:

Marissa Davis is a poet and translator from Paducah, Kentucky, currently living and teaching in Paris, France. Her poems and creative nonfiction prose have previously appeared in Kindred Magazine, The Magnolia Review, The Carolina Quarterly, Duende, Rattle, and The Iowa Review.

Her work in this issue of *Ezra* is the Bulgarian poet (contemporary, working in Sofia) Aksinia Mihaylova. The poems in this issue were written in French. One of her books, *Ciel à Perdre*, won France’s Prix Apollinaire in 2014.

Salt and Couch Grass

A mast pushes through the clouds' great cyclops eye
and on dream's other bank—cold fish.

Cradle them on your knees, against the knife:
clothes drenched in salt, your mouth
extracts it from the strands of my hair,
from my hips:

you get accustomed.

Around you
sails of boats, veils of rain.

Fingers gradually restore their memory;
the knife's mark
on the lifeline
fills with blood, cracks.

Face buried in the hearth,
you chew ash,
your nostrils filling with the reek of burnt flesh;
my grandmother, on the old house's threshold,
sleeps leaning on the spinning wheel,
hands drawing circles in her sleep,
orienting the thread
to the shadow of the apple tree.

On dream's other bank—cold fish.
Lure them onto your knees, against the knife:
salted—
your hips, your armpits.

Bodies, still repeating the same motion,
restore their memory and
caught in the rapture of love
collapse
rise

collapse
rise

until they free their souls, until flesh
begins to speak the language
of snake and couch grass.

After

She buried all the smells
that reminded her of the man.
The shadow beneath her feet began to sob, to stumble
in the middle of the flowerbeds.
The narcissus' wide nostrils turned
towards the deep roots of lightning, inhaling
the breath of the grasses nestled behind the hill.

It rained for three straight weeks
and the snails covered with their tracks
every sign of their nights of love.
Like a wet butterfly
her body began to shiver in the morning wind,
transparent and purified as after a long fast—
free,
to death.

When I Am Full of Doubt

No matter what you write,
your words will be empty of sense—
because in the beginning was not the word
but the joy of bodies.

Then came the season of sweet hunger.

The horizon whitened; birds attacked the wheat.
The little beasts of words
that we threw at each other
snapped, with mounting fury,
at our shared future—and I understood
that only my senses were articulating
all the shades of blue
that infused your language.

This is how I lost you
at the end of a poem.

Now, silent-hearted,
I watch the August moon's smooth stomach
shudder in my porcelain mug.
But you cannot penetrate this landscape—
because above the shoulders,
you are a formidable winter.

I abide in my reality:
I give back your words,
I keep my joy.

Season

It was easy, before.
Tangled in ropes of rain,
in the cords of unknown streets,
our bodies freed themselves of fear,
renounced oblivion, became immortal.

It was easy even after—
after having shared the apple,
the glass of vodka, the *fado*,

the last cigarette,
the bell's peals in the early morning.

Then the rain ceased,
as the rain always ceases—
because the new Noah has not been born,
because we have yet to build our ark.

The spiders began to weave
their webs in the walnut tree
at the end of the garden—
so fine, so trusting of sunset,
that they could not resist
the burden of my thoughts,
impossible to share with you:

*our poems are snares for the wind.**

But how could I trap the wind
as it buried itself in the wild grasses
growing just after the first half of my life?
The air gliding like a scythe,
clearing the path
where the turtle of my insatiable desires
drags forward.

I won't tell you
that you are the spinal disc
on the roof of my turtle house;
that time passes quickly
and the minutes stretch
like a rainy November morning
at these altitudes
where you are not.

May that disc slowly detach
and the wind whistle beneath it,
tack itself between my stripped back

and the roof of my house;
and the cold seize my body.

I won't tell you
that when the disc finally falls,
I will remain forever
immobile, mute,
lying between the wild grasses
that have grown for centuries
on this damned peninsula.

I don't know why
I am telling you all this—
you do not speak my language.

You: nothing more than a stray summer rain
passing by chance
just after the first half of my life.

*"Snares for the Wind" (1987): poetry collection by Lithuanian poet Kornelijus Platelis.

Traduttrici/traduttori:

Gary Stephens (Su Dongpo)	Samina Hadi-Tabassum (Bashir Badr)
Rebekah Noelle Curry (Baudelaire)	Marissa Skeels (Murayama Kaita)
Stanton Hager (Wang Wei)	Hager Ben Driss (Adam Fethi)
Christopher Monier and Giulio Spagnol (Tortel)	Z. Sholem Berger (Basman-Ben-Haim)

Red Wintersweet

~~translated by Gary Stephens

Afraid of intruding on others, she over-sleeps, blossoms late, and alone,
worries her icy appearance is not in fashion.
She puts on a little red from peach and apricot,
but still presents a slender figure against the frost and snow.
Her cool, quiet heart reluctant to give herself to spring,
a red wine blush for no apparent reason, appears on her white skin.
The old poet didn't know the temperament of wintersweet,
taken as he was, with the green of her leaves and her blue-green branches.

Leaving Ziyou from the East House in the Rain (1093)

In this yard is a sycamore tree.
In three years I have seen you three times.
The year before last you happened to be in Ruyin.
I saw you there within the sound of the autumn rain.
Last year, during the time of autumn rain,
I was returning from Guangling.
This year I am leaving for Zhongshan and
my old white head has no date, no expectation, for return.
Don't sigh as the host at my leaving
for you are only a guest here too.
Even if we made our appointment to meet bed to bed, a long time ago,
on rainy nights, we have most often heard only the sound of windblown trees.
I stand and break a branch from this sycamore
for you to take on your trip of a thousand li.
Whether we will come here again in this life, we do not know.
Don't forget these feelings, this scene.

Pear Flowers over the East Fence (1077)

Pear flowers light white, willow branches dark green,
willow flowers flying among these falling pear petals, a town of blossoming.
Disconsolate, by the East Fence, covered like a tree holding snow,
how clearly and brightly I can see through this, the human world.

Written after Drinking in Lake-view Pavilion 1, June 27th (1072)

Black clouds flow down over the mountains like pouring ink.
Heavy white rain pounds on boats like bouncing pearls.
Fierce ground gusts blow through and disperse it all.
Now, from here, the lake appears sky's still mirror.

SU DONGPO

Spleen (“January, in spite . . . ”)

~~translated by Rebekah Noelle Curry

January, in spite at the entire town,
pours from his urn great waves of gloomy cold
on the pallid denizens of the nearby graveyard
and mortality on the foggy suburbs.

My cat looks for a bed on the tiled floor
and moves about restlessly, thin and mangy;
the soul of an old poet wanders in the gutter
with the sad voice of a shivering ghost.

The bell strikes a lament, and the smoking log
shrilly accompanies the croaking clock,
while in a hand of cards filled with rancid perfumes,

the bequest of some dropsical old woman,
the handsome jack of hearts and the queen of spades
speak darkly of their long-gone love affairs.

Spleen (“When the lowering sky . . . ”)

When the lowering sky weighs down like a lid
on the spirit that groans, prey to long ennui,
and the horizon that hemms our whole world in
drowns us in a day more gloomy than the nights;

When the earth becomes a dank dungeon,
where Hope, like a bat that flits in the dark,
goes beating its timid wings against the walls
and dashing its head against the rotted ceiling;

When the rain's long trails on the windowpane
look like the bars of some vast prison,
and a silent horde of vile spiders
come to spin their webs in our brains' recesses,

Suddenly bells leap out in fury
and cast up a dreadful howl toward the sky,
like wandering spirits, without a country,
who moan implacably over their plight.

—And hearses, unaccompanied by drums or dirges,
go in slow procession through my soul, while Hope
weeps in defeat, and Anguish, cruel tyrant,
plants its black banner on my vanquished skull.

Spleen (“I have more memories . . . ”)

I have more memories than if I had lived a thousand years.

A huge chest of drawers stuffed with balance sheets,
with poems, with love letters, writs, ballads,
and heavy locks of hair coiled in receipts
hides fewer secrets than my sad brain holds.

It is a pyramid, an immense sepulcher,
more crowded with the dead than the common pit.

—I am a graveyard abhorrent to the moon,
where, like remorse, the long worms crawling

ceaselessly attack my dearest departed.
I am an old boudoir full of faded roses,
where a jumble of outmoded fashions lies,
where melancholy pastels and pale Bouchers
alone breathe the scent of perfume left unstoppered.

Nothing matches the tedium of the limping days
when under the heavy drifts of snowy years
ennui, the fruit of morbid apathy,
takes on the vastness of immortality.

—Henceforth, O living substance, you are no more
than a granite core surrounded by vague terrors,
drowsing in the depth of some hazy Sahara;
an old sphinx ignored by the indifferent world,
unmarked on the map, whose savage mood
sings only when the light of the sun sinks down.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

Bamboo Woods

~translated by Stanton Hager



Alone,
quiet in a bamboo copse,
I linger the lazy hours
 strumming my lute and whistling songs.

Deep in trees,
 hidden by night,
no companion seeks me out
 except the bright-faced moon.

Return to Sung Mountain

Brightly loops the river through banks of lush grass
 as if rushed onward by its own desire.

Alongside, a horse pulls a cart slowly, slowly,
 according to its different nature.

As daylight dims to dusk, birds flock home to roost.

People, too, drift homeward. Empty waterfront
and ancient river crossing
again face each other through the night.
As shafts of sunset sweep autumn mountains,
distant Sung's descending ledges beckon me to climb.
I trudge home for now and shut the door.

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WANG WEI

Athens

~~translated by Giulio Spagnol and Christopher Monier

Child, figs in his hand.
The bees are there, buzzing in the street.
The child petrifies to the laughing of Priapus,
He smears the marble with dark honey
And the bees will eat.

At the end of it, the porticoes.
But white, more elevated.
They tremble the same cry as the azure.

The animals are bony and short-haired
(As in Spain).
A puddle of oil goes rancid
At the foot of the votive stone.
Pods of shelled beans,
We offer the gods what men eat
And the same words that
Repudiate the night, suspended
Above the Theater.

JEAN TORTEL (France, 20th century)

One Rose Madder

~~translated by Marissa Skeels

Don't hold back, be not ashamed

Come, come

Take thy tube of natural red

Push it, cocked, against thy palette

Squeeze, at once

Paint, at once, with that garance

Paint lively, in its rawness

Stick that one rose madder

Paint skies in scarlet

Draw trees in scarlet

Sketch grass in scarlet

Humbly draw cocks in scarlet

Humbly draw gods in scarlet

Don't hold back, be not ashamed

Come, come

With a single rose madder,

draw a red cloak upon thy poverty.

MURAYAMA KAITA (Japan, late 19th)

Freedom
(A Sarcastic Song)

~~translated by Hager Ben Driss

The first says: My country is a room
as narrow as the mornings of a breadwinner.
If I go home
with my children's dinner,
I have to stay outside
and leave my place to the broom.

*

The second says: My country is a pomegranate seed.
Each time I need
to change my trousers,
I have to proceed
from the neighbor's window.

*

I said whispering low,
surrounded with the furniture of horror:
My country is smaller and smaller and smaller,
so small that
if the rays of sun
inside cleave,
we are obliged
to leave.

(Composition and singing: Ezzin Safi)

ADAM FETHI (Tunisia, contemporary)

It turns out nothing is mine

~~translated by Zackary Sholem Berger

It turns out nothing is mine
though I've got everything here,
there's no problem, I think,
shutting the door. There's no key.

So I know
I'll be lost in the streets
with what I own.

It turns out nothing is mine.
Given reality -- why dream?

RIVKA BASMAN-BEN-HAIM

Our Love Fell Apart When Building a Home Together

~~translated by Samina Hadi-Tabassum

Our love fell apart when building a home together

You had no shame in setting it ablaze

And so I drink my sorrows away at the local pub

In the eyes of the innocent the innocent mourn

Sometimes a stone heart is mistaken for a beating heart

Yet people spend a lifetime building a love together

Even a morning dove cannot foresee its doom

Where and when a serpent is placed in its nest

I know other women will come into my life

The question is how long will it take to forget you

BASHIR BADR (From Hindi)

PUBLICATION NOTICE:

NIGHTAND DAY, Abdulhamid Sulaymon o'g'li Cho'lpon, translated with introduction by Christopher Fort. Academics Studies Press, 2020. 278 pp.

The preeminent poet of Uzbekistan (1897-1938) is beautifully presented by Fort, whose gifts as a translator, lengthy introduction, and bibliography make this important novel not just accessible but exciting.

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