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Ibycus 286

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In spring, Cydonian apple trees
hand-fed by river streams
in the unspoiled orchard of the Maidens,
and vine-blossoms too,
grown fat beneath vine-shade

But for me Love scorns rest
in every season—

roiling out of its skin all over
with lightning fire
like a Thracian stormburst,
darting forth from Aphrodite
with manias to parch the tongue,
night-dark, shameless

violently
tearing up my wits feetfirst

Cicero called Ibycus of Rhegium the most “afire with love” of the archaic Greek lyric poets. Indeed, little is known about Ibycus other than the fact that he wrote poetry about love. At some point he left Rhegium for Samos, where he likely composed poetry for wealthy patrons under the tyranny of Polycrates; extant sources locate his *floruit* in the second half of the 6th century B.C. He writes not in “standard” Attic Greek but in the Doric dialect, stippled with Homeric language; in the few poems we have, his subjects are myth, beauty, and love. Otherwise our information about Ibycus’ biography is as tattered as his body of work, which survives only in quotations and fragments of papyrus.

“Fragment 286” (probably a complete poem) is stunning proof of Cicero’s assessment. In a handful of lines Ibycus skillfully shifts his audience from the pastoral lull of a vine-shaded orchard to the twisting, relentless grip of desire. Capturing the rapid shift between the two is the most crucial part of my translation. Structure-wise, Ibycus does the work for me. Halfway through the poem—“But for me” marks the switch—the relative structure of the first stanza breaks down; words begin to run over their line-end, and the meter of the second half does not correspond to the first. While I have dispensed with the notoriously complex meters of Greek lyric poetry and translated into free verse, I have sought to achieve the same sense of restless urgency with language and line breaks.

Translating Ibycus’ contrasting images is as much a challenge as a delight. The poet packs his lines full of antithesis: the orchard is nourished by a river while the madnesses of love are “parching,” and the youthful idyll suggested by the first half contrasts sharply with the adult reality of love portrayed in the second. My efforts to translate the nuances of the Greek language attempt to convey these contrasts. For example, the vines that are “increased” (*auxomenai*) in Greek are here “grown fat” for a stronger sense of the contentment that the next lines are about to disrupt; “stormburst” preserves the sound of the Greek *Boreas* but removes the problem of explaining that the mythological name represents the traditionally fierce north wind.

Indeed, mythological names often pose a problem for the modern translator. For example, some commentators (e.g. Campbell, 1982) propose that the mysterious “Maidens” of the first stanza are nymphs, but admit there is no definite parallel for the Greek *parthenoi* used by itself as a title. One recent commentary (Wilkinson, 2012) suggests the word refers simply to young women. Another (Tortorelli, 2004) makes the argument that the maidens are, perhaps, not nymphs but Muses, which invites tempting parallels between love and poetic inspiration. In light of this latter argument, I have chosen to capitalize “Maidens” to suggest that the word is a title; whatever their specific identity, the reference to maiden divinities (in their “unspoiled” orchard) in the poem’s first half and then to Aphrodite, the goddess of desire, in its second makes for another elegant contrast.

The fragmented state of the poem only compounds its difficulty. Our readings of this papyrus are not stable; in particular, scholars have suggested many

substitutions for the verb in the last line of the poem, from “guards” (*phulassei*) to “shakes” (*tinassei*). A translator must choose from the variety. In this case, not only is there a *comparandum* for the latter in the erotic poetry of Sappho, who likewise compares love to a wind that shakes the heart like a gale on mountain trees, but it is also a far superior fit for the poem.

After all, Ibycus’ view of love, at least in the fragments we have, is a fervent and chaotic one. In the next of Ibycus’ fragments (287), Eros looks up at our poet from beneath dark eyelids; his gaze, the poet tells us, is melting. I have tried, in my translation, to reflect the portrayal of love that Ibycus crafts so masterfully: personified, restless, and physical (“roiling out of its skin”), love darts and parches, is violent, consumes like fire.