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Two Poems by Robert Desnos

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Armine Kotin Mortimer
So often have I dreamt of you

Robert Desnos
J'ai tant rêvé de toi

So often have I dreamt of you that you are losing your reality.

Is it still time to reach this living body and to kiss on these lips the birth of the voice that is dear to me?

So often have I dreamt of you that my arms, crossing my chest in my habitual embrace of your shadow, would not bend to the contours of your body, perhaps.

And that before the real appearance of what has haunted and governed me for days and years I would become a shadow, no doubt.

O balancing sentiment.

So often have I dreamt of you that the time has passed, no doubt, for me to awaken. I stand asleep, my body exposed to all the appearances of life and love, and you, the only one who counts for me today, no more could I touch your forehead and your lips than the forehead and the lips of the next person.

So often have I dreamt of you, so often walked, talked, slept with your phantom, that all that remains for me, perhaps—and yet—is to be a phantom among phantoms and a hundred times more shadow than the shadow that wanders and will joyfully wander upon the sundial of your life.

Armine Kotin Mortimer — *Robert Desnos*

No, love has not died — *Non, l'amour n'est pas mort*

No, love has not died in this heart and these eyes and this mouth proclaiming its funeral's commencement.

Listen, I've had enough of the picturesque and colors and charm.

I love love, its tenderness and its cruelty.

My love has only a single name, only a single form.

Everything moves on. Mouths press against this mouth.

My love has only one name, only one form.

And if one day you remember it,

O you, form and name of my love,

One day on the ocean between America and Europe,

At the hour when the final ray of sunlight reverberates on the undulated surface of the waves, or else during a night of storms under a tree in the country, or in a fast-moving automobile

One spring morning on Malesherbes Boulevard,

A day of rain,

At dawn before you go to bed,

Tell yourself, I command it to your familiar phantom, that I was the only one to love you more and that it's a shame you didn't know it.

Tell yourself that you should not regret things: Ronsard and Baudelaire before me sang of the regrets of aged women and dead women who scorned the purest love.

As for you, when you are dead,

You will be beautiful and still desirable.

I will already be dead, entirely enclosed in your immortal body, in your astonishing image forever present among the perpetual marvels of life and eternity, but if I live

Your voice and its accent, your gaze and its rays,

The smell of you and the smell of your hair and many other things besides will live in me,

In me, though I am neither Ronsard nor Baudelaire,

I who am Robert Desnos, who, for having known and loved you,

Am worth what they are.

I who am Robert Desnos, to love you,

And who want to attach no other reputation to my memory on this contemptible earth.

Commentary:

Robert Desnos (1900–1945) took an active part in French surrealism and was an adept of automatic writing and dream writing. There is a lot of fun in his many surrealistic poems. But the two poems I want readers to enjoy come from a group of seven with the title "To the Mysterious Woman," written in 1926. Desnos was passionately in love with the music hall singer Yvonne George, the "mysterious" woman who inspired these poems and who died in 1930, the year "À la mystérieuse" was published in the collection *Corps et biens*.

Perhaps the most striking effect of these love poems lies in the *warmth* the poet achieves with the simplest language. The translation must above all render that warmth, resisting, however, the temptation to turn Desnos' language into complex verbal structures characteristic of poetic verse. As the poet writes in "No, love has not died," he refuses picturesque imagery and the "charm" one typically expects of lyric poetry. Instead there is a simplicity of diction that commands the translator to shun elaborate poetic language as well: no poetic reversals of word order, no far-reaching metaphors, a simple lexicon.

As quasi prose poems, rhyme and familiar poetic meter and rhythm are absent; yet the language is not prosaic. It might seem that the translator's task is simplified by the absence of poetic form, and it is certainly true that one can simply write in English without giving thought to meter, accentuation, or rhythm. But I feel it is important to stay as close to the structure of the French as possible, and that requires preserving word order in many places. For example, in "So often have I dreamt of you," the placement of expressions of dubiety—*perhaps, no doubt*—carries powerful impact, which would be lost if those words were placed in more ordinary word order. Most interesting is the *reversal* of doubt in the last stanza when the poet places an "and yet" immediately after a "perhaps." So unusual is such a structure that I sought to bring it out by using dashes, instead of setting "and yet" off simply by commas as it is in the original. (Dashes are rarely used in this way in French, and I see the unusual juxtaposition *peut-être, et pourtant* as serving to express this emphasis.) The French syntax brings out the strange internal conflict in the poet between his pride and his modesty; the "perhaps" signals his modesty while pride rises for a moment with the "and yet."

In choosing the vocabulary that will ideally render the lexicon of the French, I pay special attention to repetitions and to words that serve to raise the tension, as well as the placement of the "I (or "me") and the "you." For similar reasons, it is important to preserve the line length of the originals. Spacing, placement of key words, short or long lines, repetitions, words with multiple valences—all make poems of these prose lines. What may seem a word-for-word mistranslation may actually stem from a deliberate choice. In "No, love has not died," I translate *se révèrbère* as "reverberates" for multiple reasons: the image is of a shimmering *movement* on the undulating waves; the three syllables do that movement better than the two of "reflects"; the internal rhyme of "**ver**"—"**ber**" contributes to the lively reflection of the sunlight—and in any case this was a chance to keep a poetic effect. I find "reflects" too suggestive of a calm, mirror-like surface.

Three particular comments on "So often have I dreamt of you": As the poet is dreaming, one expects he will be asleep, but not usually while standing. In French, *dormir debout* indexes great tiredness, but when coupled with *histoire*, as in *une histoire à dormir debout*, it means a cock and bull story, something that doesn't make any sense. But the poet audaciously uses the expression for its literal meaning, and subtly suggests that his dream is *not* senseless; better, it is productive. This I chose to translate "I stand asleep" rather than "I sleep standing," which is more literal, for the sake of rhythm and to convey the oddity of the poet's posture.

Set off as the shortest line and approximately in the middle, the nominal phrase *O balances sentimentales* is the most challenging to translate. A possible literal translation is "ô sentimental scales." But "scales" is a bad translation: the sonority of a long ***a*** sound betrays the softer, longer sounds of the two ***a***'s in *balances*; and it is hard not to think also of other meanings or associations of scales: fish scales, scaly skin, climbing, even ladders, none of which should be evoked at this point. "Balance" also implies a regular back and forth movement, like a pendulum; the French verb *balancer* indicates such movement, and its metaphorical meaning extends to hesitation or uncertainty in a person. Whether the line evokes the side to side movement of a pendulum or the up and down adjustments of a weighing balance with two pans, the words convey the poet's uncertainty and hint that a swing of the balance in the right direction will restore his confidence.

“Shadow,” occurring four times, key word in the lexicon, translates *ombre*. Though this word has several possible meanings, I chose to use “shadow” each time, with no variation, just as the poet chose only one word. I hope the context allows the reader to ponder other possible values for the word, such as “shade” in the sense of Dante’s *Inferno* or the idea of something fleeting or ephemeral, or only the shadow cast by the person and not the actual body. The real body of the woman, appearing, would darken the poet into a sunless shadow. A shadow is also a vain illusion, a phantom: Desnos’ love was unrequited. At its last occurrence, the word takes one of its most literal meanings, the darkness cast by something that interrupts the sun, when the poet speaks of the woman’s life as a sundial.

In “No, love has not died” I find the most powerful expression of the immortality that poets ascribe to themselves *because they have loved*. It is a motif found in many poems, particularly, as Desnos writes here, in famous poems by Ronsard and Baudelaire. But Desnos takes the motif and turns it around in two ways: if he does live, she will live in him, immortal. And for me the most moving moment in these poems, is the plain and simple affirmation that he is Robert Desnos, spoken twice.

The repetition of “only one name, only one form,” with slight variants, points directly to the double method by which love does not die: the form points to the body and all its parts—heart, eyes, mouth, voice, gaze, hair, all present in the poem; and the name points to the trio of poets who have known how to love a woman. Even dead, the woman—her form—will be beautiful and desirable: that is the magic the poem operates. And the poet, in the space of one stanza, is “already dead,” and then alive because he can affirm his name.

Deported in February 1944 by the Nazis for his resistance activities, for which he was denounced, shunted among six different camps, Robert Desnos died of exhaustion and typhus in June 1945 in the Terezin concentration camp after the SS abandoned it, in the month before his forty-fifth birthday.

Source text:

Desnos, Robert. “So often have I dreamt of you” and “No, love has not died.” *Corps et biens*, Gallimard, 1953, pp. 91, 98–99.