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Lullaby by Rainer Maria Rilke and *Amen* by Georg Trakl

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Wally Swist
Lullaby

Rainer Maria Rilke
Wiegenlied

If I lose you one day,
will you then sleep alone
without my murmuring beside you,
as do branches of the linden?

Without my lying beside you, always
astir and leaving you with my words,
lowered as eyelids, across your breasts,
your arms, your mouth.

Without my watching over you, so I might
secure you, so you can be alone with
who you are, as in a garden, among clusters
of aromatic mint, the spicy star-anise.

Amen

Georg Trakl
Amen

Decay spreads through the room's stale air,
Shadows fall on yellow tapestries; the blanched sorrow
Of our hands arcs in blackened mirrors.

Brown pearls are drawn through rigid fingers.
An angel's
Eyes open, like blue poppies, in the silence.

The evening, also, is blue.
Upon the hour of our death, Azrael, liquidator and restorer,
Shadows a brown garden like nightfall.

Commentary

Lullaby

Illustrators are considered, at best, peripheral in the art of translation. However, the books assembled and edited by Ferris Cook are quite remarkable. She has illustrated the work of Neruda and Rilke. If you, as a reader, are not discerning you will miss that her books are anthologies of previously translated material, face to face in Neruda's case, with the original Spanish. She provides her favorite translations and, unobtrusively, includes an illustration of her own to accompany each poem. Her books of Neruda's English translations are *Odes to Common Things* (Bullfinch Press, 1994) and *Odes to Opposites* (Bullfinch Press, 1995), as well as *The Rose Window* (Bullfinch Press, 1997). If you want to read the best of Neruda and Rilke in a lush format, read these volumes. They fit nicely in the hands and the quarter cloth bands on the spines feel wonderful to hold.

I first came upon "Lullaby" when I was twenty and just beginning to read M. D. Herter Norton's translations of Rilke. Reading Rilke over the last 45 years has nourished me over my entire lifetime. I return to Rilke and return yet again. I also knew Stephen Mitchell, when he was a graduate student at Yale, and he would stop me on the street, and excitedly show me his newest Rilke translations. Of course, Stephen is now considered one of the most eminent of all of Rilke's translators.

However, certain poems reintroduce themselves to you over the decades, and "Lullaby" is one of them. Every time I read that poem I see what one translator has done with it that differs from another. The poem, as lyric, could reasonably be said to define what lyric poetry is. Each line needs a distinct lightness but firmness to carry it to its destined conclusion, which are fragrances themselves, nearly the aroma of childhood and its garden—both as metaphor and as physical image.

Nearly every translation of "Lullaby" has not disappointed me but I have never found those translations adequate or fully accommodating of the rhythms, images, and lyric that I felt, saw, and heard in the poetry. "The beauty of the German," Stephen Mitchell would relay to me on one of the streets that

intersected campus, busy with students, “is not easily transferrable into our English. It isn’t as musical.”

Somehow, through my readings of the poem, through more than four decades, I saw what was a perfectly fashioned lyric, no more and no less. I worked with my own memories of the linden and its fragrance since there is a street in New Haven named Linden Street, which is redolent every spring. I worked with the sensuality of the second verse and my own memories of what Rilke writes in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* as “the memories of many nights of love.” I worked with the final image, that of the garden, and the solitude one might find there, in Rilke’s respect of honoring our aloneness but in doing so often enough feeling the essence and closeness of another.

However, the poem needs to hit its marks, like a gymnast, and it must become the arcs within itself in matching the music it creates within that music. What I hear in “Lullaby” is not only the music of ourselves by which we can fall asleep and dream but that by which we awaken in remembering the essence of our very selves.

Amen

I initially read English translations of the poetry of Georg Trakl forty-five years ago, when I was twenty. The expressionistic elements of his poetry gripped me, especially with its use of images, much like that of a painter who uses mostly primary colors. There was also an elemental essence that I found in Trakl’s work, which offered itself as a haunting simplicity that presented itself in a desolate and haunting landscape. To learn that he died in WWI after attempting to treat nearly a hundred badly wounded German soldiers without the use of morphine only seems to add to the horrific qualities often found in Trakl’s poetry. If there were one painting that could summon Trakl’s poetry it would be Edvard Munch’s “The Scream.”

When I came across “Amen” in reading Robert Firmege’s translations of Trakl’s poetry in *Song of the Departed: Selected Poems of Georg Trakl* (Copper Canyon, 2012), I recognized nearly everything that I admired in a poem by Georg

Trakl. However, as I was reading and rereading the poem in English I kept on *seeing* and *hearing* the poem differently. The images realigned differently in my vision and I saw a necessity of actually providing a brief brushstroke of an introduction as to who “Azreal” is and his importance in the closing lines of the poem.

Source texts:

Rilke, Rainer Maria. “Wiegenlied.” <https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/wiegenlied-o>

Trakl, Georg. “Amen.” *Song of the Departed*, translated by Robert Firmage, Copper Canyon Classics, 1988, 2012, p. 64.