

Dear Students,

It is my pleasure to discuss translating the poetry of Elmer Diktonius with you. As the recipient of the Susan Sontag Prize for Translation, I was given the opportunity to translate his Swedish poetry and letters into English. As a Finland-Swede, Diktonius' expression caused many difficulties along the way. Of course, Diktonius' expressionist style presented substantial challenges as I tried to convey particular meaning, sense, and even image in another language, but it was his distinct play with languages that was especially daunting. As a bilingual writer, Diktonius wrote Swedish peppered with "fennicisms"; how was I to express the doubleness of his words? In "On Being Translated" Susan Sontag wrote, "Translation is about differentness. A way of coping with, and ameliorating, and, yes, denying difference—even if [...] it is also a way of asserting differentness."¹ How was I to show Diktonius' Finland-Swedishness in one language? Not only the foreignness of the two languages, but the culture, history, and mentality that guided Diktonius' writing. Pragmatic solutions may warrant italics and the dreaded footnote; they can help to elucidate as much they point to the "impossibility" of translation. I often found ways to show the multiplicity of Diktonian language with such tactics, but some things may, indeed, be untranslatable. (For example, Diktonius' play with his own name: *Dikt-och-ton-i-ljus*. Literally, poem-and-tone-in-light. The latter fails to convey the remarkable visual and aural resemblance between the name and phrase in Swedish). But these moments of apparent impossibility should excite, and not dismay, the translator. While on a translation panel, I remember what translator Susan Bernofsky said: instead of accepting the impossibility of translation, we should be more optimistic. She suggested that perhaps the translators for such situations haven't "been born yet." As incoming translators, I urge you to play with your translations as much as Diktonius played with his language. You will find yourself wrestling with fidelity in your struggle to convey literalness and meaning...spirit. Sontag explains:

The notion of ideal translation is likely to be submitted to two perennially opposed standards of translation. Minimum adaptation is one. It means that the translation will feel like one: it will preserve, even flaunt, the rhythm, syntax, tone, lexical idiosyncrasies of the text in its original language. [...] Full naturalization is the other. It means that the translator must bring the original text wholly "into" the new language, so that, ideally, one does not ever feel one is reading a translation at all. Inevitably, this work of dispelling all traces of the original lurking behind the translation requires taking liberties with the text: these adjustments or inventions are not only justified but necessary.²

It is important to keep in mind that when you are translating, your words become your words; they may attempt to house foreign meaning, syntax, spirit, image, material, rhyme, and mood all in the same body. But this body is also the

¹ Sontag, Susan, "On Being Translated," Where the Stress Falls. (New York: Picador, 2001) 339

² Sontag 342

culmination of your own understanding of your own language—your home—and the one you have learned, developed, and honed. You will find yourself ever returning to your translation, re-writing, un-writing, and writing anew—perhaps never satisfied, but hopefully content. Personally, when I translate, I do my best to sacrifice the flesh of the word in order to make holy ash of meaning and new matter.

Good luck and enjoy Diktonius!

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Big and Little Me (1)

I.

One spring I went into the world
to slay Scriabin
toss out that pansy Debussy
snatch Schönberg by the tail
(he wrote to me that he is conservative
that bastard!),
I had a few songs already
weak-kneed-singer exploding-critic
(an old whore died right after hearing it)
dynamite-symphonies in my back pocket,
the instructor's tender last words:
bolshevik music
acoustic no music—
seen without a doctor's note ripe for the madhouse:
therefore a genius

II.

Paris,
Paris?—rotten-fetid-beautiful.
The authors from Strindberg's
old tavern—beer—
“they can't even drink”
someone said.
The composers—well
the painters—hmm.
The most striking impression:
an old whore on Boulevard St. Michel
opened up her coat
naked, only long black stockings
a winter night with horrid weather and cold stars.
My soul froze and I wanted to murder.

III.

Over the Channel's hissing verdigris-waves
past Dover's brittle cheese-yellow chalk cliffs
via an express where opposite me
a dying nurse was coughing
(tuberculosis or gas poisoning)

to Victoria Station where the woman I loved
traveled for journeyed to
said: sir, why do you come? I do not love you anymore.
In a dark house I fought with her
2 weeks
chewed the carpets discovered tear-laughter
lost and won.

IV.

To East-End;
to plague-smelling fish stands
to crushed laborers
to syphilitic whores
to the Christian lies of Salvationist Soldiers
to the nauseant emptiness of hunger
to the communists on the street corners
to the madness of drinking
all of misery's despair
(that woman always by my side;
like my heart)
until I now
seeing through the lies
(call them as you will society religion art
myself)
stand here as I am
(without music without beauty
with hard words planting my
revolutionary dynamite)
in order to go farther tomorrow.

Big and Little Me (2)

I.

That night that night:
the sky like a deep black hole
no stars
and I
beaten
crawling on my soul's bleeding front paws
to my dark den.
That night I had lost everything.
That night I found myself.

II.

Take me completely
lick not my blood.
There is no placard in me
with the word: enjoy.
How would you chew something
that only loosens up for sharp teeth.
You crack them?—
what haven't I cracked?

III.

Life sows seeds in my hand
and I cast them in the earth.
Shall they sprout? shall they grow?
shall I see my harvest ripen?
I long for it
like the tree longs for its blooming,
but a suspicion tells me
that in my ash
my heart-seed will
find my soil.

IV.

The tenderness of night
doesn't at all agree
with my nature.
Steel-saturated I am—
landscape
indifferently benumbing
(am I a complete contradiction?).
My jaggedly trimmed thought-seeds
tear the dark to shreds—
my god: a star fell!

V.

After night-rain sun-soil
steaming
crisp smelling,
after grey-dusk clear-as-day—
its steel
peels off all the heart's pitifulness—
the ants' black backs
sway rhythmically
on their long main roads—
likewise rhythmic
my mind goes to work.

VI.

My soul has been washed clean by tears
in my soul suffering has plowed its furrows
and over my face life has flowed
digging its riverbeds.
How old am I? how young—
I don't know—
I am life's remains
which quiver with living.

VII.

See: I'm dancing!—
see my heart stand opened
and I dip my fingers
in my heart
and write with blood:
See: I'm dancing!—
it is the conqueror's dance
the dance of the gods
the dizziness of becoming—
See: I'm dancing!—
was I human? did I live? did I die?—
the world is too light—cast the universe
upon my shoulders—
for, you See:
I'm dancing!

VIII.

When I am dead
soft female hands will
wind a wreath
around my brow.
Not laurel—
wild forest flowers
which whither
as fast as I.
And I shall smile.
And the sun shall look upon me—
over its shoulders—
and say:
behold: the warrior smiles in his sleep—
he is a conqueror.

IX.

Was it poetry I wrote?—

I thought I exploded
and hurled my iron-splinter
into the world.
Truly, I even wanted:
to sow discord
to beget discontent
to bite reluctantly into tremendous leaps—
but most of this was perhaps a “must”.
My sacredness:
that I was burnable.

x.

I'm not pretentious enough to call this poetry.
Songs, hard songs—
if you don't have the voice to sing them
then swear them
(I swear with beauty, I say
in my old artist habit).
From the dawning shapelessness
arises meaning.
If you search for a flower in me you'll be lost—
I am only a seed.

xI.

The conqueror's wide wings carry me!
The world mocks my work?—
one day they will
smile upon it
without bitterness.
Everything printed and typed:
the road-dust on the traveller's coat.
And now I already thrust
(the beginning of my self)
my perspective's peak:
The cantus firmus of hammering:
it burned
yet it resounded!