

Norwid Lost in Translation

Cyprian Kamil Norwid, *Poems—Letters—Drawings*. Trans. Jerzy Peterkiewicz et al. Carcanet, £7.95 (pbk)

It is my hope that during my lifetime Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821-1883) will join Baudelaire, de Nerval, Laforgue, Rimbaud, Hölderlin, Dickinson and Hopkins to become internationally recognised as a shaper of twentieth-century poetic sensibility. Carcanet has just issued Norwid's *Poems—Letters—Drawings*, the translations mainly by Jerzy Peterkiewicz. This is the first Norwid volume in English published outside Poland. Will it bring the fulfilment of my hope a step nearer? Alas, I fear it won't. The translations are often so bad, they are likely to have the opposite effect. Readers will ask: why are Poles so obsessed with this clumsy and at times clearly unintentionally comic verse. They will also wonder why a very reputable publisher of poetry is responsible for this débâcle.

Let's consider a passage in one of Norwid's most celebrated poems, his "Rhapsody in Memory of General Bem", who fought for Polish and Hungarian independence, then settled in Syria and converted to Islam. Norwid's way of celebrating this remarkable life is to imagine Bem's funeral as a mysterious mediæval rite. But instead of progressing to a swift burial, the cortège embarks on a nocturnal quest through a moonlit valley. Peterkiewicz gives us this:

They enter the ravine, they get lost... emerge from a moonlit
door
Darkly against the sky, caressed by a cold gleam
That snatches up their metal, immobile meteor,
And the stilled chorale bursts forth, once more like a moun-
tain stream.

Readers may well feel bewildered, wondering what is being described in this contorted language. In fact, Norwid's image is as straightforward as it is stunning in its strangeness. The cortège enters a valley, in which it is temporarily hidden from view (not lost). The mourners then emerge into the moonlight, which plays along their armour, like a star which consequently is unable to fall, and is therefore not an "immobile meteor". The bizarrely positioned "door" has to be dragged in to provide a rhyme for "meteor", itself a mistranslation of "star", which by implication means the light of the moon. "A mountain stream" is an expansion of "wave" to rhyme with "gleam", and as to the meaning of "a cold gleam/ That snatches up their metal", that's anyone's guess.

So many translators of Polish classical verse ruin it by insisting on the primacy of rhyme, in the crude belief that it is the defining characteristic of poetry, a belief in which they have recently been encouraged by the maniacal Joseph Brodsky. Too often that is achieved at the impossible price of monstrous padding, hence the "moonlit door". Peterkiewicz has many more such gems. For example, he adds fourteen words to the laconic 47-word "Fatum", while "Darkness" (or rather, "Obscurity") has been bloated from 86 to 128 words.

However, the volume is not a total loss. It has a useful introduction with a good summary of the poet's life, the poems are interspersed with extracts from Norwid's illuminating correspondence, there is a selection of his graphic work, which at its best comes close to Daumier's, some self-portraits and Pantaleon Szyndler's magnificent patriarchal likeness, painted a year before the poet's death. But then, pictures unlike poems, don't require a translator. Regrettably, they will not be enough to establish the poet's reputation abroad.

We are told on the title-page that the poems have been translated "in collaboration with Christine Brooke-Rose and Burns Singer". One would like to know more about the Brooke-Rose contribution. In *Botteghe Oscure*, where these translations first appeared in 1958, she is credited as the sole translator of "Autumn" and "Pilgrim". The question is of some importance, because these two versions, now reproduced verbatim, are among a very small number of the successful translations here. They also happen to represent two polarities in Norwid's poetry. "Autumn" is taut, strange and obscure:

O—rather than tread thorns and on fangs of spears
Walk without cries,
Than to tread mud—mud is of how much tears,
Mists are of sighs.

First let them flow in rainbows into heaven
For a goldener dawn;
Return as banners then, with tidings even,
Full-blossoms-borne.

Far sweeter to tread thorns and on fangs of spears
Walk without cries,
Than to tread mud—mud is of how much tears,
Mists are of sighs.

“Pilgrim” is semantically transparent:

Above the states there is the state of states,
Like a tower, over flat roofs,
Jutting into the clouds.

You think that I receive no rates
Because my building moves
And is of camel-hides.

Yet I endure even in heaven’s womb
While it seizes my soul
As if a pyramid.

Yet I own land with as much room
As I cover with my sole
Whilst on I tread.

If we had a whole volume of such translations, I might begin to
hope again.