94/13

Luko Paljetak

Lorenzo Buj

Luko Paljetak was born in 1943 in Dubrovnik, on Croatia's Dalmatian coast. His first book, *Nečastivi iz Ruže*, was published in 1968, and he has since added over a dozen volumes to his oeuvre. At the same time he has been busy as a translator, working primarily on Canadian and British poetry; he has concentrated on Byron, Shakespeare, and Chaucer, including a landmark edition of the complete Canterbury Tales, issued by Zagreb's Znanje publishing house in 1986.

As it turns out, looking westward is very nearly a Croatian national trait, and history testifies to a long political and cultural saga of affiliation and compulsion. The ties that bind, however, have not always been freely chosen, as one may gather from even the most general listing of foreign military/territorial ambitions: Venice was highly influential during the Renaissance; Austro-Hungary controlled much of the area in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries; and Mussolini's Italy officially entertained the arrogant imperialist sentiment that Dalmatia was its sparkling backyard colony. It's hardly a surprise, then, that Paljetak's best work looks to, and derives from, a Western European tradition while also managing a specifically Slavic assimilation of its literary and cultural topoi. »Izlazak iz Šume« (»Leaving the Forest«), as we'll se, yields deeper meaning if we recognize its allusions to precursor texts, English and Italian.

Paljetak began as a sweeter, more traditionally mannered poet, relying on the romantic power of the imagination and on the mysteries of dream imagery at a time — the sixties — when this could have been considered ethically or politically irresponsible, no matter how mind-broadening it was. Over the years he has grown more ironic, his imagery has become more complex, more fluidly surreal, and the perennial poet of love has become the poet of death as well, although not in the grand, tragic, or even abject sense. Readers accustomed to Prufrock and the early Pound may agree that Paljetak's best work resonates with a high modernist updating of »troubadour« modes of erotic address, while his surrealism is much closer to the Spanish axis of practice than to Serbian and East European varieties. But Paljetak is more cheerful than either Pound or Eliot, and is never as irredeemably solitary as Machado. Moreover, when blood and bones appear in his work, they serve both naturalistic and emblematic purposes, while partaking in none of the barnyard violence and »kabbalistic« supenaturalism that one finds in Vasko Popa, say, or Miroslav Holub.

Paljetak's easy-going, warm weather surrealism is not beyond brooding or the invocation of folk magic, yet its primary tendency is to transform and update classical and medieval elements. The poetry is often Ovidian, if not in wholesale sensibility, then surely in its chosen range of reference: lovers, solitary or in pairs, must turn themselves into fruit, crawl into the »guts« of flowers, or blend in among the animals, becoming animals themselves, »clambering through forests full of zinc and silver« (»Kavez«/»Cage«); or a virgin disappears into a pool of water, ascends skyward by way of evaporation, and returns to the earth as a rain that washes the poet's »shaggy head« (»Indictment«). Elsewhere, Paljetak's natural hedonism lends itself to open-hearted humour. He sometimes adopts a slightly mocking tone toward the beloved or toward those Dalmatian madonnas whose cloying lassitude he so gently satirizes. In the fine poem »Mala teza o smrti« (»A Little Thesis on Death«), he manages a marvelously effective serio-comic blend, especially as concerns the sleeping princess. Afflicted by acne, languishing under the dormant heaviness of her own chastity, she cannot be mistaken for anything but a charming, self-deflating medievalism in the poem's otherwise cartoonish and surreal web.

Even with such echoes and allusions, however, the particularities of this world are specifically Dalmatian, and hence Adriatic. One thinks of the sea which is all at once fecund mystery, universal presence, and spiritual next-of-kin; and then one immediately calls to mind a multitude of red tile roofs, »buildings the colour of milk« (»Cage«), and an assortment of bleached-out objects, including old bones, stone walls, and a lover's moon-drenched body. This last detail is, in fact, telling, for Paljetak's lighting is often dusky and nocturnal; lunar imagery is abundant, numerous stars flicker in his poetic heaven — all this in contrast to that clear-eyed Apollonian sun that this Mediterranean poet so conspicuously evades.

Paljetak's primary theme, as I've said, is love; his aesthetic is »troubadour« in the very loose sense of the word. The persona whose voice we hear throughout is a lover addressing his lady, only the lady is usually within arm's reach, and any idealism that pertains to her must be understood in the context of her availability and the poet's carnal familiarity with her. Even in his poems of domestic love, one senses that the sacredness of the erotic bond is ultimately sustained and wholly comprehended by the egocentric poetics of desire. The lady, the lover, the wife, hardly speaks; she is primarily

Luko Paljetak

an occasion for seduction, praise, lamentation, humour. Yet while a priori intimacy is already a condition of address, the speaker's superiority is always rhetorical and textual, and never moral, social, or sexual.

»Leaving the Forest« is a particularly complex example. The whole poem turns on a transformation the speaker has not witnessed, but whose effects will serve to intensify the centrality of his own desire. The poem is a double-sided, simultaneous allegory. On the one hand, there is the speaker's awe before the self-ravishing power of his own vision: his beloved emerges from a deep forest; she is widly changed, half-recognizable; meanwhile, he waits patiently for the duration of the poem; that is his prerogative, after all; he is witness to an emergence so masterfully conjured that we may well forget he is the sole agent of his own ecstasy. On the other hand, on what may be loosely called an epideictic level, there's the sense that this visionary — that is, pre-orchestrated and rhetorically dilated — materialization of love is the only way one can celebrate the breathaking and beautiful strangeness of the body-of-the-Other in one's life.

Indeed, the defamiliarization announced in the first line signals a shrewd revision of erotic epideixis. Having annihilated the cultural distance between lover and beloved in favour of a meeting at the edge of a forest that sumultaneously serves as naturalistic setting, threshold of transformation, anatomical analogue, and entranceway to the unconscious, the lover has almost completely done away with the whole cosmetic language of praise. Thus, Paljetak's defamiliarized beloved is figuratively indistinguishable from the thickets out of which she emerges; her nails are stained with the blood of slaughtered birds or martens, and she's compared to a wild fox. The untouchable hind of Petrarch's dream vision (»Una candida cerva...«), the »wild for to hold though I seem tame« hind of Wyatt's version of the sonnet (»Whoso List to Hunt«), and any number of dark seductive strangers or otherworldly sirens such as the Lorelei or Keats's La Belle Dame — all these literary phantoms appear briefly, show dimly, in Paljetak's poem as it anxiously builds toward a tableau, a tensed point of temporal suspension, a speaker poised at a moment of sexual and ontological thresholding. The tension between the *Noli me Tangere* and the »come hither« topoi is exploited so as to create a fiercer sense of dramatic energy between actors who are actually no strangers to each other. Even so, the speaker's stillness is crucial, for it augments the necessary fiction of a primal encounter. We can hardly keep from visualizing the engorged vitality of his erect patience as the woman steps foward. Therefore, if the original states that he awaits her »patiently« (»strpljiv«), I have chosen to translate this as »anxiously« for all of the above reasons, reasons illustrating the victorious strategies of manipulative self-abasement in the history of male love poetry.

Of course, from the translator's point of view, the major challenge is how one renders that final phrase: »svoju strasnu // prašumsku zajednicu.« Figurally speaking, the reference is to female sexual anatomy; fictionaly speaking, it alludes to the metamorphosis the speaker is about to undergo as he prepares to cast off a specifically human form of corporeality; and literally speaking, »zajednica« denotes a communal body. In fact, as an everyday term, »zajednica« has nothing particularly salacious about it, but it is a feminine word, a noun in this case latent with the notion of cooperative activity. If the passage may be literally translated as »...your terrifying prehistoric

forest community«, then we surely lose the inclusive indication that through intercourse of some sort the speaker is about to shed all vestiges of the human and the cultural, and will rejoin the realm of the alien and the animal.

This leads directly into the more prickly issue of »pretvaranje«, the Croatian word for metamorphosis or transformation. Paljetak uses »pretvoriti« again and again in putting forth a thematics of magic, instantaneous change, the taking on of new shapes, new limbs, new flesh, and new states of being. There is evident difficulty in seeking out a suitable English equivalent, for one must either take chances with »change« or a whole host of other Latinisms, with little in between to choose from.

»Transform« and »transmute« are fine in some cases, but they are usually too bulky and technical sounding. »Metamorphosis«, in any of its variations, is syllabically chunky and lacks the light, plosive insubstantiality by which the (equally chunky) Croatian word silently introduces itself into a chosen context. »Pretvaranje« also carries connotations of dissimulation, dissembling, and disguise, while appearing much more often in everyday speech than »metamorphose«, »dissimulate«, or even the well-worn »transform« do in conversational English.

There are other matters of vocabulry and phrasing I could look at, but this would take us too far afield, and I would rather conclude with a brief discussion of the theoretical assumptions that I hope will justify the translations that follow. The poems in English are interpretations, transformations, as well as translations. A certain provisionality clings to them, and they are therefore submitted as experiments whose conclusions are as yet unstated. Since experimentation is a matter of technique, I might add that I have decided, in some cases, to deviate from Paljetak's original punctuation, usually inserting periods and semi-colons where a failure to do so results in neither profitable syntactical ambiguity nor in semantic efficacy. Yet in »Leaving the Forest« the very opposite of this is true: almost all of the original punctuation has been eliminated, and one must rely on a »natural« sense of caesura, or on various conjunctions, in order to maintain grammatical integrity while not foregoing the fluid dynamics so constitutive of the poem's dramatic temporality. I have also, in every case, avoided translating rhyme, due largely to matters of personal taste, but also in keeping with the suggestions of Paljetak himself.

Returning to the question of theory, I begin with Paul de Man, for whom translation is always already a transumption of a previously metaphorical text. In de Man's view, the »original« is through and through figural, and its language is thus latent with any number of possibilities of interpretation and reinscription. The translator doesn't work with a unified, »internally« coherent, and formally complete object of scrutiny, but with a text in which multiplicity and plurality are already encoded. »Translation« as one commonly think of it is, therefore, a misleading term, or at least one whose significant and highly suggestive nuances of meaning are easily and perhaps brusquely overlooked by those seeking immaculate fidelity and very nearly mimetic adequation between languages. Whether one is or is not disposed to forgive him, de Man is persuasive when he makes translation a subspecies of deconstruction, and thus enlists it under the sign of »theoretical reading«. Here he is, for example, elaborating Walter Benjamin's theory of translation:

The translation canonizes, freezes, an original and shows in the original a mobility, an instability, which at first one did notice. The act of critical, theoretical reading performed by a critic like Friedrich Schlegel and performed by literary theory in general — by means of which the original work is not imitated or reproduced but is to some extent put in motion, de-canonized, questioned in a way which undoes its claim to canonical authority — is similar to what the translator performs. (*The Resistance to Theory*, pp. 82-3).

Compelling as this may be, it must itself be translated or troped upon. De Man finally moves beyond Benjamin's »The Task of the Translator« and goes on to argue that the original text is never static, is always mobile and fluid insofar as it eludes the closures of history and opens onto reading, interpretation, and translation as a set of synchronic gestures. Translation thereby involves harmonic response, and not merely reproduction(an impossibility) or literalist mimicry. My impulse, at this point, is to take de Man to his unwritten conclusion by introducing a Bloomian rhetoric with the claim that every act of translation is an act — with all the *energeia* of will and affective labour that this brings to mind — of misreading. A misreading necessarily results in a revisionary transposition of the original text; it is a mode of response and not mimesis, though hardly assured that it can escape the manifold anxieties of repetition. Still, the original is certainly time-bound, and no matter how poetically or psychologically powerful, is constrained to speak to us from a particular historical or cultural context; and for that very reason it befalls translation to give back to the original one of the voices it never had and never could have. The translator, as Dudley Fitts once said, »must be a poet as well as an interpreter. To put it more bluntly, his interpretation must be an act of poetry.«

Misreading as a form of revisionary response is nevertheless not an open non-contextual assault on an original text, but rather a restaging of voices. Two voices, at the very least, interweave (I recall here the etymological origins of »text« as a woven thing, a noun derived from a verb), and thus one reads back and forth, from text to text, recognizing oneself and one's reading as the site of their encounter and their continuing life. The double realization earned by all this is that reading (of which translation is a branch) is a rigorously comparative acitivity, axiological *and* pluralistic, and that translation cannot escape its fate as theory and transvaluation.

The Elegance of an Inventory-taker

Ivan Božičević

Luko Paljetak: Inventar; 1993

In collections of poems that preceded *The Inventory*, about twenty of them, Luko Paljetak had already assumed the role of an inventory-taker. An inquisitive spirit, open to sensations and vibrations of all sorts, from empirical to metaphysical, from real to artistic, the poet has remained true to his fundamental proposition that no material is a priori poetic or unpoetic. Nothing is unsuitable for a poem, nor can anything determine the poetical quality of material save poetic intelligence and intuition. Peljatek has never been one to champion conventional hierarchies; he likes to do unusual experiments with things, facts and phenomena which would seem to hold an established position on the axiological ladder of modern civilization and »progress«.

In his book *The Inventory*, the poet sets his inventory in order. In one of the introductory poems, he explicitly calls himself the inventory-taker. Far from doing a conventional, routine job, he lists things that both do and do not exist in the realm of his senses. This task that »has no end/because it has no beginning«, he accomplishes with his characteristic light touch, elegance and subtlety, as well as passion and genuine dedication. The poet arranges an inventory of his days and occupations, but his intention is not to produce a reliable catalogue or a survey. The facts he selects are but a departure point for imaginative actions, inventive operations and adventures, games and acrobatics. He deals in metamorphoses, transpositions, identifications and mimicries. His poems rarely rest on a single motif; rather, there is an entire range of motifs. Each poem starts from the dominant one that generates others. To achieve this, the poet resorts to associations, reminiscences, allusions, correlations. His moves and reflexes are unpredictable, and effects strange and poetically efficient. For instance, in one of the poems, the poet watches three girls in a swimming competition. At the end of the poem, they reach the goal — pregnant. Why pregnant? Isn't it bizarre? No; they have been inseminated by his desire and fascination. The poet has transplanted himself into the swimmers, transposed his emotions into their swimming. »I swim in them«, he says briefly and clearly (»Swimming«).

To move inside another body: »Do you see me inside yourself when you look into your body?« is an obsession repeatedly articulated. There is, of course, nothing rough or violent in this penetration. It is tender, gentle, soft. Like in nature, but not everybody can discover it in nature. Paljetak is well-versed in that. In the poem »A Prayer to Chamomile« he praises the plant in which he senses the smell of the archetypal, the plant that is »a silent implementation of an excellent plan«. The poet who loves to inhabit other bodies and things urges the chamomile to enter his body, to infuse his blood and refresh his spirit, to enable his body to »serve longer«, and join the community of light that thrives in the rays of the sun. Even an ordinary light bulb contributes to this community. Therefore one must pay respect to it, write a praise to its glowing glory.

The poet composes prayers and praises to plants, animals, things and people, particularly his nearest and dearest. A line in the poem devoted to his mother, who has passed on, says: »Let nothing ever hurt her there« (»Prayer for My Mother«, »A Meal in Heaven«). Female beauty is also an inventory that must be listed, and Paljetak has been doing so from his earliest poems. He is interested in all women, regardless of their appearance or the time they lived in. He is not exclusive: the women he finds inspiring are not necessarily real »tangible« women. They can be faces from photographs, paintings, movies. He can easily establish contact with beauties from bygone days. He courteously claims that in their company he »feels just fine« (»Portraits, Female«). The sonnet is the form he prefers when he observes and studies feminine traits. His emotions and observations require little space, the fragile »small fortress of the sonnet« is sufficient. When he deals with a »real« woman, Paljetak tends to be ironic, funny, nicely ceremonious and even lascivious. He sees real women as guides to a »better and nearer future« (»Desire«, »Of an Evening«, »Little Love Song«). Paljetak loves the community of light, but he is also a night person. He conducts his inventory in dark rooms, too; it is tiresome always to be in the light. Under the cover of the night, one can much more lucildy think about the long »history of the journey through darkness«. Even when darkness is dangerous, one must not be afraid. Some things can be seen only at night. Night is full of secrets, mysteries, apparitions. To those who are afraid of darkness, the dawn brings relief, but emptiness, too. Because »when the day breaks, there will be nothing on all sides«. Night is also the time of art; that is when art works best. The whole of history is nothing but the history of art. Luko Paljetak attempts to contribute to this history with each new book and each new poem. His contibutions have been many, and respectable, and signed by an authentic artist of poetry.