

The Two Lives of a Poet

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Gjekë Marinaj, *Teach Me How to Whisper: Horses and other Poems*, translated by the author and Frederick Turner. Syracuse University Press, 223pp., \$40 paper.

ALBANIA, ON THE EDGE OF THE ADRIATIC SEA BETWEEN Montenegro and Greece, is dim in the minds of most Americans. Many remember the country as a rigidly controlled Soviet outpost, holding tight to Stalinist repressions even as *perestroika* was advancing in Russia. Most know nothing about its present government (a parliamentary constitutional republic), its language, or its literature. Poet Gjekë Marinaj was born there in 1965. Persecuted after publishing a slyly rebellious poem (“Horses”) in 1990, he fled to Yugoslavia, then received asylum in the United States in 1991. He found his way to Texas, where he enrolled at the University of Texas at Dallas. There he pursued literary studies, ultimately receiving a PhD in 2012.

He has continued to write poems, which are now collected in *Teach Me How to Whisper*. It is not clear if all the poems in this volume were originally composed in Albanian. Some, such as “The Em Dash of Emily Dickinson,” look and sound as if they might have been written in English. If they were, what was the role of the translator?

We all know that translators of poetry face an all but impossible task. They need to recreate not just the meaning of a poem in another language but a simulacrum of its sound as well. How does one make a poem in a new language that combines the sense and the sound of the original in a rationally and emotionally convincing form? The problem is made even harder when the original language is as remote from English as Albanian, a distant Indo-European cousin twice removed, with few cognate words and few cultural touchstones in common.

If anyone can rise to the challenge, it is likely to be Frederick Turner, a poet able to handle meter and rhyme with dexterity, and one who has proven his skill as a translator. Working with Zsuzsanna Ozsváth, a fluent German speaker, he produced an elegant translation of Goethe's *Faust, Part I*, a translation that adheres not only to the original rhyme scheme but to the often-shifting meter throughout that kaleidoscopic dramatic poem. In the present instance, however, Turner's collaborator is not just someone fluent in Albanian, it is the poet himself, a one-time colleague at the university where Turner himself taught until his retirement in 2020.

For a translator, having the author as a collaborator, especially one who has some facility in English, may be a mixed blessing. Even if he lacks a native speaker's command of English, the author may at times prefer his own expression. The delicate negotiations that ensue can only be imagined, but they may result in odd constructions like "In many lands I am held as if a god" ("The Blue Nile"). To judge from the English we have here (and Turner is scrupulous in reproducing meter and rhyme—or their absence—as he finds them in the original language), Marinaj is a free-verse writer most of the time, who nevertheless frequently uses end-rhyme.

The book contains multitudes. It starts with verse recollections of Marinaj's home and parents, then moves on to poems about his native country, including celebrations of Skënderbeu (Gjergj Kastrioti), a hero who fought for Albania against the Ottoman empire, and a poignant recollection of Marinaj's own exile while awaiting permission to enter the United States. There are passionate and delicate love poems that bring the landscape to life: "with blown pine needles the wind / writes love's calligraphy upon the snow." And there are poems of protest (here called "Admonitions"), including "Horses" whose last line ("And compared to humans, horses we remain!") roused a once quiescent Albanian citizenry to rebellion.

The collection moves onward into matters such as Greek mythology, a celebration of heroic women (including the poet's mother), metaphysical speculations, and tributes to poets as seers and spiritual guides. The book's last sections celebrate notable places (Mount Fuji, the Nile, the Eiffel Tower, and India), and finish with a mini-epic called "The Lost Layers of Vyasa's Skin." This is a first-person narrative in which the poet changes his form and moves, fishlike, into a watery world where he is able, after much struggle, to lay hands (fins?) on sheets of mica that comprise the lost Upanishads of the Hindu Vedas. He delivers these to two seahorses in a crystal cave deep in the Bay of Bengal while observing that "For fish and poets not poverty nor terror, nor yet death / can shut their eyes and mouths."

As this epic, and indeed much of the book, suggests, Marinaj is at pains to convince readers that the poet is a creature of singular nobility and insight. Of course, the best way to demonstrate that is to

write very good poems. So readers will be eager to see how the poems stack up. And this is where the pesky problems of translation loom. The largely absent meter and the shaky command of idiom I alluded to earlier make it hard to read and really *hear* some of these poems as their author no doubt intended. What are we to make of sentences like these, all taken from a single poem (“Looking into Your Kind Eyes”)?

The breezy evening has engendered this
Translucent window
Into the labyrinths of your soul.

.....

The butterflies of pity
Drift silently
Into a redefinition of the modern mother.

.....

Let your pen flow its hope upon
The naked sheets
To vivify compassion's aquarelles . . .

It is certainly possible to see and appreciate Marinaj's wide-ranging concerns with his family, his homeland, his sense of history, and his position in the worldwide realm of poetry. But we often see through a glass darkly. Nevertheless, a few of the poems in this book spring off the page to affect us viscerally. One is a little poem called “Truth”:

Truth
Is an asymptote.

We are the curve of the search.

However hard we try to close on it
Never can we touch it.

The poem works without meter and without rhyme. It states a simple proposition with a mathematical metaphor, and it is easy to understand. It suggests that behind even the imperfectly realized verbal

structures in this book (for no poet, even in his native language, strikes gold every time) there is a real sensibility searching for, and sometimes finding, the right words.

A poet exiled from his homeland and from his native language, forced to recreate himself in a new environment and a distant tongue, is a figure of both nobility and pathos. His reputation and achievement may follow him into his new life, and he may be welcomed into the fellowship of poets in his new land, as Brodsky was, and as Marinaj now is, but he is unlikely in his second language to achieve the grace and distinction that were his birthright in the first. What he can hope to do is evoke for a new audience something of the tradition and the imaginative environment from which he emerged. This is an invaluable service, for we are all parochial, however cosmopolitan we imagine ourselves to be. We need wider horizons. Read this book, then, for the expansion of knowledge and the shift in perspective that come with exposure to a different culture and a new tapestry of experience. There are always new truths to encounter. *We are the curve of the search.* A