VAN TOORN & TIBULLUS

THE ART OF TRANSPOSITION, as opposed to that of translation, has its own exigencies, the first of which is a Janus-like double sensitivity. Responsive to the original from which he works, the transposer must also be attuned to the temper of his times. The tension between these two poetic ideals is all the tauter if the original belongs to an ancient culture, as it does in the case of Montreal poet Peter Van Toorn's "Elegy on War: Invention of the Sword" (*In Guildenstern Country*, 1973). At the same time, the transposition must be a successful poem — or what is the point? Otherwise we should talk of ponies, cribs, and glosses.

The source text consists of the first fourteen lines in the last elegy of the well-known sequence Tibullus devoted to Delia (1, 10). Considered by some to be his earliest elegy, possibly written when he was as young as seventeen, its first lines epitomize the bucolic themes which are the poet's hallmark. For this reason, all debate about date of composition aside, this poem caps off the Delia sequence with a flourish, though there are no references to eroticism at all. Instead, the poet's persona soliloquizes upon the threat of war and his own impending conscription into the 31 B.C. campaign in Aquitaine. Stock allusions to classical culture pervade these lines: the Golden Age, the carefree shepherd with his flocks, the soldier forged of iron, the common cup. Van Toorn has no trouble dealing with these potential anachronisms. He portrays the past in terms of a thoroughly modern psychology. Rather than a line-for-line correlation of texts, there is a striking conflation of past and present situation.

How far Van Toorn deviates from his source is not apparent until two-thirds through his own 29-line poem. Up to then, approximately two lines of English match every one of Latin, a good average given the density of elegiac distich. He does not duplicate the alternating hexameters and pentameters of the Latin, though he does hold to a steady compromise of eleven syllables with variably shifting accents. The extra line in English allows him space to catch up and then to supplement the original. *Quis fuit horrendos primus qui protulit enses*? ("Who was he who first made terrible swords?") thus becomes:

> Who was he, this first butcher and
> weaponmaker
> who simplified dying and growing up for
> a boy?

The notion of a boy soldier-to-be and the hint at childhood sword-fight weapon-training (which follows in line five) would have been inappropriate in classical culture, even for a pacifist like Tibullus. In the early 1970's when debate raged over military toys and news reports on Vietnam beamed in across the Canadian border, it made sense.

By the same process of poetic extrapolation, Van Toorn transmutes the second line *quam ferus et vere ferreus ille fuit* ("how savage, as if truly forged from iron, he was") into:

> He must have been old and grisly, this first
> soldier,
> (poured in the same mould as his pig-iron
> sword)
> forgetting to patent the world's most
> patented toy.

Even in these early lines when there is a relative correspondence between original and transposition, Van Toorn takes liberties which distinguish his poem from translation proper. Where Tibullus has

dirae mortis ("grisly death"), Van Toorn has his *soldier* "old and grisly." Literalists would here insist that he misdeclined *dirus, -a, -um*. What has happened is that Van Toorn took a hint, either from the original or from a translation he studied. "Grisly" is a hard word to forget. The subsequent "his armlong blade was soon tooled into a cold / killing machine" subsumes Tibullus' "a quicker road to grisly death was opened." Van Toorn's goal is a metamorphosis of the Latin, terse and balanced as it is, into a contemporary vernacular flavoured with the disaffection and cynicism of the early seventies.

By the same logic, *Nos ad mala nostra / vertimus in saevas quod dedit ille feras* ("to our misfortune we pervert what he intended for wild beasts") translates:

> Old fool, probably forged it for hacking up
> wood,
> or butchering bears; and no one
> understood —
> till there was a market for it.

Though Van Toorn updates the idiom and substitutes an occasionally incongruous item here or there (like that bear), he does not remove his poem from its Latin setting. He is after bigger game. His unwilling conscript speaks the lingo of our times, but allusions to classical mythology poke through. The ideal of the Golden Age was the form primitivism took in classical culture. Elsewhere, Tibullus referred explicitly to that tacit mythic structure (I, 3; II, 3), and his reader needed no footnotes. According to Hesiod, the Golden Age of Saturn was followed by four others culminating in the Iron Age of Jove, characterized by endless strife and turmoil. Pastoralism was a common Roman literary pose, but Tibullus was the most anti-military poet, the one least entranced by the imperial adventures of the dying Republic. His family had been partially dispossessed of its holdings when the government confiscated land in favour of veterans. The myth of a Golden Age particularly appealed to him and his readers well understood that *divitis hoc vitium est auri, nec bella fuerunt* ("this is the vice of precious gold") was more than another statement of the adage familiar to us as "gold is the root of all evil." Greed for gold motivated Hesiod's Jovian Iron Age, whereas in the Saturnian Golden Age swords would not be turned even upon beast, let alone man. Van Toorn must do some explaining to convey this deep-seated myth, but does it well:

> I suppose brains are to blame —
> of this Age of Iron with its manic drive for
> gold.
> For long ago there were no wars; and no
> weapon-
> makers. Our food was served up in
> beechwood bowls.
> Those days even a herdsman could safely
> bed down
> among his slugcoloured flocks and claim
> day's work
> without reporting to ramparts, forts and
> foxholes.

Beechwood was a token of the simplicity of life in pre-imperial Rome before the advent of metal cups and utensils. The shepherd with his flocks was a commonplace of Latin verse. Van Toorn enlivens it with his bizarre "slugcoloured" sheep, which are "variegated" in the original (*varias oves*). In the next line he adds "foxhole" to Tibullus' list of military paraphernalia, palisades and citadels (*non arces, non vallus erta*).

Up to this point we have translation, loose as it may be. But thirteen lines of English remain, and only four of Latin. They read like a bare synopsis of what is to come:

> *tunc mihi vita foret, vulgi nec tristia*
> *nossem*
> *arma nec audissem corde micante*
> *tubam.*
> *nunc ad bella trahor, et iam quis forsitan*
> *hostis*
> *haesura in nostro tela gerit latere.*

A pedestrian literal translation will show how admirably concise the Latin is, but not entirely why Van Toorn took so many lines to transmit the essence of those four:

> That would have been the life for me,
> having never known
> grim war and vulgar troops, never heard,
> heart pounding, the bugle blare.
> Now I'm drawn off to war and perhaps
> some foe
> already bears the arm that will stick in
> my side.

The thirteen lines which correspond are of a different order than those which precede them. We are treated to an intense visualization of martial life depicted in an idiom much our own and with no antecedents in Tibullus:

> And this insanity — for years on end; stuck
> far from home, only one song in your head:
> your life made lousy by bum gear, piles, pot
> luck
> and the endless bungling of bureaucrats, the
> sweat
> pouring down at the sound of each bugle
> call.

In this passage in fact there are only two images from the Latin, and each plays a pivotal role in an entirely new poetic strategy. Van Toorn lends a new voice to the speaker, and a new temporal frame.

The subject of this monologue was originally the first weapon-maker; then the subject became the rigours and clamour of military life as contrasted with the bucolic calm of the shepherd's. Now, at the bugle call, the scene shifts to the immediate present. The speaker hallucinates a hypothetical weapon-maker behind enemy lines, Tibullus' foe bearing arms (*hostis*). Speculation about the past dissolves at the ominous sound of a bugle "blasting us out for a roll call / right now." The foe bearing arms becomes another ordinary joe caught up in Iron Age logic. The poem concludes:

> Just think of it: some energetic jerk
> on the other side's probably polishing blades.
> Maybe just for the sake of doing some work.
> Chances are one of them is going to stay
> behind and rust away in my guts one of
> these days.

In retrospect, this is on a straight line of thought from the pig-iron sword, but what was precise in the Latin is breath-taking in the English. Each language has its genius. We cannot expect original and even translation to coincide at every point. The distinction between translation and transposition is a matter of degree, but is best defined in terms of total poetic strategy, here the decision to make the bugle call concrete and to have it waken the speaker from his reverie and thought. Van Toorn drew upon the same mould Tibullus used, upon recognizable lines, upon his sequence of ideas and his climactic image. But he altered the temporal frame of the poem and thereby invigorated a model which would have been flat and abstract in direct translation.

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CANADIAN LITERATURE IN ITALY

PERHAPS BECAUSE THEY first encountered Canada in the pages of Marco Polo's *Milione*,[1] the Italians have long regarded it as a land of myth, a snowbound maw into which many of their compatriots have disappeared, "un nuovo minotauro oltremarino" — "a new minotaur beyond the sea," in the words of Mario Praz.[2]

Praz's 1936 essay was long one of the few serious, if brief, considerations of Canadian culture written by an Italian critic, although it is significant that the essay reviewed a travel account with the deadly title *Troppo grano sotto la neve* — "Too Much Grain Beneath the Snow." Not until the mid-1970's, with Raimondo Luraghi's courses on Canadian History at