



Translations and trans/mit/mut/a/tions of poems by Emmy Hennings

MORFIN

Wir warten auf ein letztes Abenteuer
Was kümmert uns der Sonnenschein?
Hochaufgetürmte Tage stürzen ein
Unruhige Nächte - Gebet im Fegefeuer.

Wir lesen auch nicht mehr die Tagespost
Nur manchmal lächeln wir still in die Kissen,
Weil wir alles wissen, und gerissen
Fliegen wir hin und her im Fieberfrost.

Mögen Menschen eilen und streben
Heut fällt der Regen noch trüber
Wir treiben haltlos durchs Leben
Und schlafen, verwirrt, hinüber...

MORPHIN

We're waiting for one last great adventure
What do we care for the light of the sun?
High-towered days collapse in ruins
In troubled nights and purgatory prayers.

We no longer read our post when it comes
We smile into our pillows, though not often,
Because we know it all – we're just so smart -
And we fly here and there in the fever-frost.

Let other people rush and strive,
Today is overcast and the rain still falls;
Our life is an aimless drifting along,
And through it we sleepwalk confused...

MORFIN

We're waiting for the last great adventure. For more *fin*
 de whatever
to depict that which is scarcely graspable
 any more, the unknown
illogical side of life
 to enact & gesture to not
produce timelessness it
 is a working not an art

WORK

it is timely & what do we care
 for the light of your official sun?

High-
towered
days
coll
apse
tran
sept
ruins
in
long
hard
nights'
purg
atorial
prayer
fires

We don't check our inboxes any more, no –
 we grin into our pillows but not that often
 because we know we know everything we're as sly
 as a fox we fly hitherandthithering in fever-frost

 shivers we say let the others strive & run about
 like blue-arsed flies this is our end overcast day rain
rain rain our life an aimless drifting morphing
into what sleep nothing confused yes over there ...

JG

TÄNZERIN

Dir ist als ob ich schon gezeichnet wäre
Und auf der Totenliste stünde.
Es hält mich ab von mancher Sünde.
Wie langsam ich am Leben zehre.
Und ängstlich sind oft meine Schritte,
Mein Herz hat einen kranken Schlag
Und schwächer wird's mit jedem Tag.
Ein Todesengel steht in meines Zimmers Mitte.
Doch tanz ich bis zur Atemnot.
Bald werde ich im Grabe liegen
Und niemand wird sich an mich schmiegen.
Ach, küssen will ich bis zum Tod.

DANCER

To you, it's as if I were marked out already
And numbered in the lists of the dead
(*That* would save me great deal of sinning!).
But how slowly, even so, my life drags out.
And my steps are often dogged by pain.
My heart has a sickly, feeble beat
And it falters, deteriorates, by the day.
A death-angel stands in the middle of my room.
Yet I'll dance until I gasp for breath.
Soon they'll be sticking me six feet under
And no-one will ever hug me again.
Ah – to kiss right up to the moment of death!

DANCER

I'm dead to you as good as as bad as &
the dead live on their tod
& the living are lonelier still ignored

(Though how much sinning death would save me
how much time down at Sin City
laying disco meat in the boyly scene)

So slow I live life bored so slowly it consumes
me step by agonising step often
& the labouring heart's simply an ache

affixed to a pulse time hanging heavy
hypertrophy around the old wound
I staunch with *lifestyle*

again and again daily weakening
& the Angel of Death has planted
herself palely fair & square harp & pinions

like unto a tomb at the heart of my room and yet
I leap vault still dance
myself breathless in frenetic

ecstasy The dancer is the dance they would
say But soon I'll be pushing up the daisies
& no-one will ever *catch* me again -

so rigorously exclude all dullness & let rip
the bliss & let me snuff
die my death on a FIN a final kiss!

JG

UNTITLED

Und nachts in tiefer Dunkelheit,
Da fallen Bilder von den Wänden,
Und jemand lacht so frech und breit,
Man greift nach mir mit langen Händen.
Und eine Frau mit grünem Haar,
Die sieht mich traurig an
Und sagt, daß sie einst Mutter war,
Ihr Leid nicht tragen kann.
(Ich presse Dornen in mein Herz
Und halte ruhig still,
Und leiden will ich jeden Schmerz,
Weil man es von mir will.

And at night, in deeper darkness,
Pictures drop from the walls,
Someone laughs boldly, drunk,
I'm grabbed at by long hands.
And a woman with green hair
Gazes at me, sorrowing,
And tells me she was a mother once,
Her grief just can't be borne.
(I press thorns into my heart
And just keep calm and still,
And I want to suffer every sorrow
Because they want it of me.)

pressed viced prest

14.7 psi the tonnage we all bear as if of men's stare
rationalised naturalised & normalised as if

760mm Hg a column to be lashed to
my mercuric spirit not free to run & burn flare flake in cinnabar

Thorns I press puncturing heart

AHH

thorns IN! the heart's meat fibres part

AHH tear red tears tear &

IN!

again spurt fat gloss drops as if Christ's bared
fingered vulvic slash appropriated ours
softish merkin-beard under-lit
by the reddish ghoul-glow of the Sacred Heart

AHH quiet the screaming quit it
pain & bare

AHHH –

to bear to digest every whip blow boot
broken orifice pus calm all hurt
cur to cure with my coeur turn
the other see & bless each Schmerz

because it is what one / man / weil man wills of from upon me

JG

EIN TRAUM

Wir liegen in einem tiefen See
Und wissen nichts von Leid und Weh.
Wir halten uns umfassen
Und Wasserrosen rings um uns her.
Wir streben und wünschen und wollen nichts mehr.
Wir haben kein Verlangen.
Geliebter, etwas fehlt mir doch,
Einen Wunsch, den hab ich noch:
Die Sehnsucht nach der Sehnsucht.

A DREAM

We lie in a deep lake
And know nothing of suffering and pain.
We embrace each other,
And waterlilies all around us go.
We strive and wish and want for nothing.
We are free from all desire.
And yet, my love, I miss one thing,
I have just one wish more:
A longing for longing.

A DREAM

Airy German 'Leid und Weh'
assonants easy make ringed a ring a 'Wasserrosen'
(that word itself a flare of Ascona esses)
dispersing
in lengthening eleven-syllables waver: 'Wir-', 'wünsch-', 'woll-'
doppelt u's ripples,
we lie *deep* or *in a deep* lake dreaming,
embracing but free of desire? all gone but
a longing for longing recurring
the one 'den hab ich noch'
music of which is a sudden box's
monosyllable knock;
desire is that opposing
pulse inside the clearing rills
echoing back
insistent
'ladylike' &
'lid'
inside lake idyll.

DA

SCHON ZWEIMAL WURDE ICH GEBOREN

Schon zweimal wurde ich geboren,
Und damals sang ich auch für Geld,
Doch sonniger schien mir die Welt,
Und meine Munterkeit hab ich verloren.
Irgendwo in der Ferne vergeht die Zeit,
In meinem Arme fühl ich sie entrinnen.
Ich denke an mein erstes Beginnen.
Wie tief verwirrt mich die Unendlichkeit!

I have been born twice already,
And back then I sang for money, too
Yet the world seemed sunnier to me,
And I've mislaid my cheerfulness.
Somewhere, far off, time passes by,
I feel it slipping from my embrace.
I think of when I first set out.
How bewildered I was by the infinite!

SCHON ZWEIMAL WURDE ICH GEBOREN

I have been born twice already.
bewildered was I by the infinite
I and I and, notionally
this speaking third person:
singing for Geld; these reincarnations are how I live;
time's receding
and slips
from sunny hugs
so's remote -
feel, mislaid
'sang ich'
in English is 'cashing' or 'chasing'.
counting the roles within roles
'erstes Beginnen'
self-birth and self-propagation
wave
Calibracoa's flower called 'Cabaret'
is
all you forged
fired
from shards
sculpted
free

DA

DIE VIELLEICHT LETZTE FLUCHT

Tiefe Nacht. Still. In einer fremden Stadt ein steiles Zimmer. Eckig.
Mattes Kerzenlicht flackert.

Dämonisch öffnet sich eine Tür,

Zwei Wesen sitzen einander gegenüber. Ein Mensch und die Frau.

Der Mann: (sich in zwei graue Seen versenkend, die auch unruhig warend spricht): "Ich mochte

Dich ansehen. Immer ansehen – ganz genau ansehen."

Die Frau: (langsam und gedehnt); "Ich glaube man soll nichts genau ansehen. Nur nicht genau ansehen. Ich glaube –"

Der Mann: "Du glaubst, sagst Du?"

Die Frau (zögernd): "Ja. Mir erscheint alles zweifelhaft. Alles fraglich
Vielleicht –"

Er (wie trinkend): "O sprich zu mir — ich höre!"

Sie (verzehrend, mit abgerissener Gebärde): "Nimm mich! Nimm mich!"

Sie fielen ineinander. Sie flog ihm zu . . .

Später griff er sofort nach einer Zigarette.

Sie lachelte leise (ein Lächeln, das unso süßer wirkte, weil es selten war):

"Ah! Du bist einer von denen. Hm. Sofort neue Reize."

Er: "Ein anderes Thema."

Seine Augen blickten kühl. Um die Lippen, boshaft schmal irrte ein graues
Lächeln. Das Lächeln des Mörders.

Sie sah entgeistert auf seinen offenen Mund. Seine Augen kniffen sich
zynisch zusammen.

Da schlug es in sie. Augen brannten in einander. Saugten sich fest. Da
erkanntessie ihn. Hinüber und herüber ein geheintes Zeichnen.

Er: Ja. Ja, ,, Ich bin derjenige – "

Sie zitterte. Sie fiel schüchtern in seine Hände. Und dann zu ihm

aufblickend und hingeworfen gestreckt): "Dir leb ich – Dir sterb ich."

Und wieder dieses graue Mörderlächeln um seinen schmalen Mund.

- Am andern Tage tralen sie sich. Er fragte "Wie geht es Dir?"

Und sie starb, weil sies ich beobachtet fühlte.

Deep night. Silent. In a foreign city, a sloping room. Angular. Dim candlelight flickering.

A door is opened, demonically.

Two beings are sitting opposite each other. A human and the woman.

The man (sunk within his two grey eyes: they, too, speak restlessly): 'I want to look at you. To be looking at you always, very carefully.'

The Woman (slowly stretching out): 'I don't think one should regard anything too closely. Just don't look *at* me like that.'

The Man: 'You feel like that about it do you? Is that what you're saying?'

The Woman (hesitantly): 'Yes. Everything seems doubtful to me. Everything is questionable. Maybe –

He (as he drinks): 'O speak to me – I'm listening!'

She (consumed, with a tearing gesture): 'Take me! Take me!'

They fell into each other's arms. She flew to him.

Then, without pausing, he reached for a cigarette

She smiled softly (a smile all the sweeter for being rare): 'Ah! You're one of them!

Hmm. So, straight away, a new challenge.'

He: 'Change the subject.'

His eyes flicker coolly. A grey smile wanders around his wicked little lips. The murderers' smile.

She looks at his open mouth, astonished. His eyes narrow cynically.

Then it hit her. Eyes burning into each other. Tightly narrowed.

And then she recognized him. Over and over a secret drawing.

He: "Yes. Yes. I am the one –"

She trembled. She fell coyly into his grasp. And then looked up and, stretching out, threw herself to him: "I live for you – I die for you."

And again the grey, murderer's smile on his little mouth.

Next day they calmed down. He asked: "How are you?"

And she died because she felt she was being watched.

Zwei Wesen
(DIE VIELLEICHT LETZTE FLUCHT)

Speaking from distance this steiles Zimmer's
ANGularity is Caligari, door's
flap
opening demonically might expose
'beings'
who secretly 'here' face off each other
set apart from 'city' 'foreign', hidden, abstracted
so far more remote than 'alien', the language
[Expressionist stage]
smokes its wicks,
so far into its inner
business: i.e. epitome.
Ein Mensch und die Frau, one Human and *the* Woman;
is *Frau* then in- or un-human, is Human
derelict
anomaly?
He's o so sunk within
his synaesthetic verbal eyes' grey *I want to look at you. To be looking*
always, very carefully' this very greyness known by herz staring at the viewer:
in Christian Schad's 'Self Portrait' (1927) -
the voyeur's fetish, his gaze parting, forming
and shaping 'her' that is really only his gaze-made maiden
enrapt::
"Ich mochte "Ich mochte "Ich mochte - ganz genau ansehen"
the woman's characteristic stretching repeated her only
move, and it's slow, en-bracketed
'I don't---glaube'
I don't think one should
'I don't think one should **regard**' etc, 'anything'
'too' 'closely'
Innuendo in-diminuendo dense as Blocksberg
filling the im-passes:
'The Man: 'You feel like *that* about *it*
do you? Is *that*
what you're saying?'
'You're one of *them*'
so insisting of presences implied pressing in from elsewhere the insinuations
become einander
infra- and intervening poem
of gaps
pushing words apart:

Oh Ab Hm Er Ja Ja
still active in air through players long gone
è all this dis— location of tempo, causation and space:
'Falling into arms flew to him'
embraced still flies the intervening distances
is freeze-frame run backwards
jagged
is Cigarette counter-coital or disinterest a code, a clue.
"Ein anderes Thema."

change the *subject* ζ
'graue Mörderlächeln' or Lustmord
perhaps?
Peter Lorre's mad love Orlac-hands & eyes
His Mackie Messer
stashed behind back,
this intermittent alien face off
mirror gaze-ray fest inanimate/intimate/
intermittent loop
(We must consider
Der Mann und (die Frau) sind ein
dieselbe Person):
"Take me! Take me!"
distance from Speaking
Zimmer's steiles these
grammar phone hiss

Is Caligari' door's

watched being was felt she because died she and

DA

Note

The Cabaret Voltaire had been running for five months, since mid-February 1916, when the first public 'Dada Abend' ('Dada Evening'), with a printed programme, took place at 8.30 p.m. on 14 July 1916. We learn from it that Emmy Hennings had a slot reading a short story and four poems, one of which was 'Gefängnis', and that she made two further contributions with other members of the troupe, appearing in a final 'Dada Tanz' with Ball and Tzara. The extent of her involvement reflects the fact that Hennings, historically marginalised in previous (male-authored) accounts of Dada, was in reality, with Ball, one of its two chief instigators, and that her talents as an actor and creator were crucial to its success. Dada was an essentially performative phenomenon, a response to the senseless slaughter of WWI. Hennings, an accomplished and charismatic actress, dancer and cabaret singer, was the only member of the Dada group with any stage experience, and, as another member, Richard Huelsenbeck, put it: 'When [she] sang "They kill one another with steam and with knives" ... she was voicing our collective hatred of the inhumanity of war'.

In reading Emmy Hennings's poetry it's important to bear in mind the complex sexual and class politics of Dada which, like other bohemian groupings, offered its female members some measure of liberation from patriarchally-determined gender roles, but very often ended up reinscribing them in different forms. In Hennings's case, her insistence from the start on social and sexual autonomy inevitably embroiled her, as a working-class woman of the period, in the underworld and criminality. This was one of the two poles – together with mystical piety – between which she would then oscillate.

Born in the border port of Flensburg, of Danish-German parentage, her father had been a rig-maker, and she had left home at fifteen to work as a servant. Her acting career was not, therefore, a pose, a piece of slumming, but a flight from a life of drudgery with no safety-net to catch her should she fall. Her commitment to the relationship with Ball after 1915 (they had first met five years before) was a consciously self-limiting move. In the post-Dada life she and Ball had together (he died in 1928, she in 1948) she enjoyed some success as a prose writer, but her own account of her leading role in the most explosive avant-garde formation of the twentieth century would be self-erasing, consistently foregrounding Ball and minimising her role, in accordance with the Catholic mysticism which both of them embraced in the late 1910s.

Her search for self-realisation was further complicated by the fact that the 'mother of Dada' was an actual mother, losing an infant son early in life and giving birth to a second child, Annemarie, in 1906, (left her with her mother while she continued her career as a performer.) Annemarie rejoined Emmy, now living with Hugo Ball in Zürich, in March 1916, but the multiple guilts involved in her entanglement in motherhood had by then complicated her story still further.

Emmy Hennings's poems reflect her struggles, then, its costs and its rewards – loneliness, guilt and poverty on the one hand, a sense of freedom and creative self-realisation on the other. Her poetic style was formed in 1910-12 by Georg Heym, Frank Wedekind, Franz Werfel and the other Expressionist writers Hennings encountered when she was working at the *Simplicissimus* nightclub in Munich. It is fully in accord with the work collected in *Menscheitsdämmerung* (1919), the definitive Expressionist anthology: lyrical and intensely personal, its imagery is dark, even apocalyptic, and it displays a taste for the 'primitive'.

While the style and some of the broad themes of Henning's poems might seem conventional at first glance, closer examination reveals complexities derived from the itinerant life and internal conflicts which inform them. These realities give rise to leitmotifs, suggestive of endings and possible new beginnings. Similarly, there are repeated tropes, including that of the gaze (which includes hypnosis), social deprivation, effects of opiates and the abandoned or dead child. It is also worth noting the trance-like, rather labyrinthine quality to some of the poems

where different ironic voices interact giving rise, on occasion, to the sensation of suppressed messages and heavily implied alternative meanings around the words.

In writing-through his choice of these poems, one of the things John tried to reflect, and reflect on, were the social and sexual freedoms Hennings strove for in her uncompromising early way of life. John also tries to unravel the difficulties involved in her strivings, in the poems' switchings between assertion and passivity, between the show of solidarity with women of the street and the more conventional romantic encounters with men, this last also a theme in the poetry Mina Loy, with which it was contemporary and is in some ways comparable. Both John and David also explore the gothic properties of her poems which anticipate the world of Expressionist films such as *Doctor Caligari's Cabinet*).

There are signs that artists in different media are increasingly viewing Henning's work as full of live tensions and therefore as texts which invite participation and innovative creation. Between November 2020 and January 2021, the Swiss Institute, New York, presented a two-person exhibition of Hennings' writings with Sitara Abuzar Ghaznawi's vitrines of lace fabric and decorative materials, conjuring up fetishism and sex. New texts by Ian Wooldrich and Shamiran Istifan have been commissioned to accompany the installation and Ghaznawi's friends also read their poetry dedicated to the display. Mathilda Cullen's ongoing 'Ghosts in the Archive' projects brings dynamic experimentation to translations of Henning's work.

At all times, whilst aware of historicist implications of their 'trans/mit/mut/a/tions' and the linguistic and cultural distances which are brought to bear in their responses, David and John improvise on the originals in ways which might let them reflect upon themselves, to extend and creatively redirect their power and poignancy. We are fascinated by Henning's poems as live events, almost electrically instilled with the power of her questions, anger, irony and forensic attention to sexual relationships. We bring forward these explorations with their closely-focused 'no holds-barred' approaches to textuality to open up a growing sense of how vital her poetry is alongside her ground-breaking achievements in Dada's more visibly performative arts.

John Goodby and David Annwn

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