The syntactician's song

MARK FORD


Charles Bernstein at the Inventing Abstraction exhibition, MOMA, New York, April 3, 2013

Thugs from hell have taken freedom's store
The rich get richer, the poor die quicker & the only god that sanction's that
Is no god at all but rhetorical crap

The poem's title is an allusion to Arnold Schwarzenegger, at the 2004 Republican National Convention, denigrating his opponents as "girly men"; re-angling the term somewhat in the manner of gay theorists appropriating the word "gagster": Bernstein applies "girly men" to all those who oppose the war in Iraq:

So be a girly man & sing this girly song
Sissies & proud
That we would never lie our way to war
In such a poem the all-conquering self-consciousness of the syntactician finds its own peculiar ground zero.

Recalculating is Bernstein's first full collection since Girly Man (2006), and reveals him responding to a more personal tragedy, the suicide of his daughter at the age of twenty-three.

"I was the luckiest of fathers in the world / until I turned unlucky", begins one of the pieces written in the aftermath of the death of Emma, who is commemorated in Bernstein's epigraph. Recalculating includes inventive versions of poems by Baudelaire, Mendelsohn, Apollinaire, Celan and Catullus, but the finest of Bernstein's translations is a ravingly simple rendition of Victor Hugo's elegy for his daughter Leon-petite, who drowned in a boating accident on the Seine in 1843. Here is Bernstein's translation of the middle quatrain of "Demain, l'autre..."

I will be walking with my eyes fixed on my thoughts,
Without looking around, without hearing a sound,
Alone and unknown, with back bent, with my hands crossed,
Sad, and the day for me will be like the night.

Almost as affecting is a looser version of the first half of Gerard de Nerval's "El Desdichado", that makes light but deft use of the Oulipian technique of homophonic translation, "Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abfolie" becoming "Smashes in the blackened sun of torn althi", "Recalculating" is the term some sartorial systems use when you have recalculated the journey and has to be repiled. The title poem of the volume is a set of aphorisms and vi- stan, Apollinaire, Celan and Catullus, but the finest of Bernstein's translations is a ravingly simple rendition of Victor Hugo's elegy for his daughter Leon-petite, who drowned in a boating accident on the Seine in 1843. Here is Bernstein's translation of the middle quatrain of "Demain, l'autre..."

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