

## Jesper Svenbro: In Translation

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### *An Introduction by Lars-Håkan Svensson*

Translation, both as a concept and a practice, is central to the poetic and critical achievement of Jesper Svenbro (b. 1944). Like Anne Carson, he is a classical scholar as well as a poet, and in both capacities he has concentrated on similar poetological (mainly metafictional) issues: a reader of *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece (Myth and Poetics)* (Cornell University Press, 1992) and *The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Fabric* (with John Scheid; Harvard University Press, 1996) will find that the same concern with metapoetic meanings evinced in these books recurs in the nine volumes of poetry he has written in Swedish, his native tongue. These issues are noticeable in all three of the poems included in this selection, which also illustrates the slyly autobiographical manner adopted in his latest work. Other themes examined in Svenbro's scholarly books—literacy and orality in early Greek society—are also highly relevant to an appreciation of his own poetry.

As Svenbro is himself a distinguished translator, with acclaimed renditions of Sappho, Francis Ponge, and contemporary Italian poetry to his credit, I find it entirely appropriate that this selection is concluded with John

Matthias's amusing account of the particular anxiety he experienced while we cotranslated the volume we are calling, after one of the central pieces to be included, *Three-toed Gull: Selected Poems of Jesper Svenbro*. Svenbro continues to live in France, where he has held a post at the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique for many years.

A note on the poems: "Kit for an Orpheus Poem" ("Byggsats till en Orfeus-dikt") is from *Samisk Apollon och andra dikter* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1993); "Syntagma" ("Syntagma") is from *Vid budet att Santo Bambino di Aracoeli slutligen stullits av maffian* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1996); and "Propertius Mistranslated" ("Propertius felöversatt") is from *Installation med mini-atyrflagga* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1999).

### **Jesper Svenbro**

#### **Kit for an Orpheus Poem**

In Sweden the words "lyre" and "sound" have been terms  
that have given poetry its content during the sighing pine-forest years  
while it was busy licking its wounds in the wilderness:  
faithful to a poetics of the lumber-language poem,  
Orpheus is therefore an Oldforest pine on a clear-cut field  
aching and rent, but still standing upright at dawn  
where furious tractors and chainsaws have razed everything else to the  
ground.

The fog is thick. There's a deadly silence among the stumps.  
He might well be a seed pine, surviving lucky and green,  
after having escaped one terrible forest fire after another,  
an immense loner inhabited by birds and mice,  
appealing to the Apollo who heals both lyre and sound:  
Apollo Terebintheus, turpentine god, pine forest god,  
allow him to play from the Underground today!  
The Argonauts have long since fallen and been floated  
down ink-blue rivers, towards Bothnia or the Pontus—  
once upon a time they rowed their *Schippe on creaking logges*,  
the mast made of fir, its sail a starry sky,  
and the woods resounded with their well-made songs,  
ancient heroes walking towards the white beach of the Baltic.  
There's a deadly silence on the clear-cut field. Brutal, isolated,

Orpheus has already turned his twig eyes inwards—  
 when the sun suddenly creates a clearing through the fog  
 and the sundown slits of his eyes are full of resin:  
 once more Orpheus glances out across the woodland,  
 lets the morning dew glitter in his *Lay about the Sunne*,  
 Oldforest Orpheus with his lyre and overgrazed sound,  
 wild, terrifying, but finally healed and healthy  
 standing forever overgrown with torn lichen  
 and his head flown through by crested tits and buzzards,  
 by willow-tits, crossbills, by owls and hawks  
 while the chars spawn in the brook at his feet.

(Translated from Swedish by John Matthias and Lars-Håkan Svensson)

### Syntagma

About the distinction that linguists make  
 between syntagm and paradigm  
 (and the troublesome difference that exists  
 as to their definition)  
 we didn't have the slightest clue:  
 but there we were, no doubt about it,  
 one of the last days of June 1964  
 on Syntagma in Athens, reading a Swedish paper  
 reporting on how Midsummer celebrations  
 had turned out. Among other things,  
 one article described how an inebriated man at night  
 had walked down to the bank of a Lapland river  
 where he had discovered a steel wire  
 stretching across the rushing waters:  
 hanging by his arms, he had managed to get to the middle  
 where the stream is at its swiftest  
 and the roar had as it were shut him into its room.  
 He was hanging in his own turbulent silence.  
 The fire brigade had been alarmed.  
 They were standing on the bank, shouting and trying  
 to make him see reason: he didn't hear a word!  
 The gnats must have been dancing by the river.  
 Presumably, it was impossible

to row out in a boat and save him by that means.

What was to be done to lure him back?

I have forgotten how the article ends.

(In front of the sentry-boxes of the Royal Palace  
the soldiers suddenly present arms.)

Therefore, in my memory the man is still hanging there  
right over the most turbulent part of the stream

while firemen stand on the bank

trying in agitated voices to find a solution

to the hanging man's dilemma.

What was his problem? Perhaps

he had no other answer to his metaphysical questions  
than to hang there by his arms

while using up all his muscular strength.

Perhaps he had come to an impasse

in some discussion he'd had with himself or with God.

Perhaps he had suddenly found it impossible  
to "make things cohere."

The article about him could not have an end  
since his inner discussion was as yet unfinished.

Big fir trees were standing serious and silent  
between the road and the river bank.

But the sun was ready to be the sun again just above the horizon:  
it had hardly disappeared before it rose once more.

It shot tracers of light through enormous fog-banks.

The dew was glittering in a cobweb  
stretched across the path.

The world seemed to shine with a shimmering  
belonging only to fairy tales . . .

The music from the dance floor of the people's park  
must have fallen silent by now:

the band members had probably left

while the gnats continued the dance

and the number of people on the bank grew and grew.

There must have been a crowd.

They are standing there in silence, wondering what will happen.

And the man himself is hanging by the steel wire,

hanging by his strong, northern arms

over the most turbulent stream of the river.

Thirty years later I realize  
that such a moment is “paradigmatic.”

(Translated from Swedish by John Matthias and Lars-Håkan Svensson)

### **Propertius Mistranslated**

At first I was totally convinced it wasn't her.  
Coolly telling myself as much,  
I dismissed the very notion from my mind  
as if I wanted nothing so much as to forget about it.  
But now I could see clearly that it was Cynthia and no one else  
who was sitting there on the driver's right  
in the shiny red Ferrari.  
Her sunglasses made her seem deliberately anonymous.  
And it was certainly not in the traffic jam at the Piazza Venezia  
that I expected to see her.  
I search for a while in my memory—  
Was it a year toward the end of the sixties?  
maybe the last of April?  
The driver's wearing glistening sunglasses too.  
I imagine this must be the “Propertius expert”  
whom she mentioned once  
and who had now offered to take her to Lanuvium  
in order to look at the landscape  
near Juno Sospita's temple mentioned in one of the poems:  
Near the shrine, in antiquity, a way led down  
to a cave under the rock  
where a swelling snake had made his home . . .  
The phallic symbolism makes me feel uneasy.  
Suddenly, Cynthia's lipstick is as deep a red as the car  
driven by the expert on Propertius who is  
dressed in a summer suit, driving-gloves, and a tie.  
As for me, I don't even have a license!  
He is rumored to be exceptionally promising  
in his particular field, the Roman love elegy.  
In my view, however, he is merely  
yet another careerist pedant,  
an Italian with an unreserved admiration

for the German philological method.  
What on earth can Cynthia have seen in him?  
Her silk scarf is streaming in the wind  
as they disappear down the via dei Fori Imperiali . . .  
At this point, the Latin original dictates that  
I must be overcome with jealousy  
although in fact I feel nothing more than disappointment.  
The translator is left to himself,  
sitting there all alone with his poem!  
And here I guess he might as well give up  
since he is not blinded by jealousy  
and also cannot summon up  
the almost supernatural determination  
that's required to invite two prostitutes back home  
and revenge himself on Cynthia  
with their help. What an enterprise!  
I lose my breath at the very thought.  
Yet here I am in the dimly lit room of the poem,  
there are palms and draperies,  
the room is untidy as after a party.  
I have doubtless had more wine to drink than is good for me  
while Phyllis and Teia  
—those are the names given in the original—  
are lying naked by me in the bed.  
Phyllis gets up, walks across the floor to the gramophone  
and puts some better background music on.  
Teia clings to me, turns me around,  
and tells me ardently to kiss her breasts . . .  
But I neither hear nor see.  
In my mind's eye what I see is Cynthia  
back in that Ferrari speeding on toward Lanuvium.  
She gesticulates and laughs.  
“The expert” sits self-satisfied at the wheel  
driving very fast due south on the via Appia Nuova.  
Umbrella pines are passing by . . .  
Suddenly I hear a key in the outer door.  
I turn all cold—  
The moment after Cynthia steps in the room  
her silhouette seems immense,

behind her glares the bright light in the hall.  
 She is tall and furious.  
 First she attacks Phyllis and Teia,  
 tearing their hair, scratching them so they bleed,  
 making them flee half-dressed into the night . . .  
 As the street gate closes  
 you can hear the neighbors talking excitedly.  
 After a while silence is restored.  
 Everyone on the block can go back to sleep.  
 Then in the flat the two of us are left alone—  
 Propertius's Swedish translator and the young woman  
 who was to reign supreme in the elegy.  
 We are standing eye to eye in the night.  
 She smacks my face, once, twice . . . As a Swede,  
 I find it difficult to understand her jealousy,  
 theatrical, infantile in the Latin manner . . . By what right  
 does she make these claims on me?  
 It is not I who was unfaithful . . .  
 Oh no! She never was unfaithful, she assures me,  
 pointing to a line in a poem  
 there in the book on my desk.  
 I take her word for it.  
 "Traduttore, traditore!" she adds. As if I . . .  
 Disarmed, I accept my punishment:  
 to make the bed with new sheets in the elegy.  
 She is beautiful. Pale. Her lipstick is gone.  
 At long last we make peace.

(Translated from Swedish by John Matthias and Lars-Håkan Svensson)

**John Matthias**

### **The Co-Translator's Dilemma**

Again the e-mail draft appears on my screen.  
 I go back to work.  
 Tranströmer's successor speaks aloud from his poem.  
 Sort of, that is. I'm supposed to make such improvements

that everyone in America will recognize at a flash  
the original style & voice, the very personality of this poet  
known up to now only by his most intimate friends.  
I despair. They are waiting in Lund for my version.  
But it's already in English, so what should I do?  
I change an article: "*The* cow in the pasture" would really  
be better written here "*A* cow in the pasture."  
I stare at the screen. Maybe a comma just before the conjunction.  
At just that moment I hear a commotion in the hall.  
I can hear several people questioning students:  
Which is the charlatan's office? I recognize the Swedish accents.  
Suddenly Jesper and Leif, Göran and Lars-Håkan  
all tumble into my room. We're here to help you, they laugh.  
Göran offers me a virtual beer.  
The heart of your problem, Leif says in Swedish,  
Is that you don't know Swedish. What?  
He says in English: The problem is you don't know Swedish.  
Oh, that. Well, I work from this other guy's drafts.  
What do you do? He seems to have a whole list of questions.  
I show him the screen: "*A* cow" was once "*The* cow," I say,  
and commas, or their absence, are very important.  
That's it? he asks. Nothing else?  
Well, there's the issue of prepositions. I find that most  
Of my Swedish colleagues get confused:  
A poet whose head is up in the clouds may appear with  
his head up *around* the clouds, or up *about* the clouds,  
or even up *from* or up *off* the clouds!  
The four Swedes sputter with amusement or contempt.  
So that's all? Articles, prepositions and commas?  
Well, sometimes, if I'm lucky.  
And what if you're not? Not lucky, that is.  
Ah, then—I hesitate—then I have to rewrite the poem.  
You'd rewrite somebody's poem?  
Not in Swedish, of course, I hasten to say. Just in English.  
Ah well, they grumble, that's a relief.  
I mean, what can you do with a poem set entirely in Lapland  
that's full of *yoiks* or *vouilles*? And then he throws in  
classical myths and quotes not only from Sappho but also Rimbaud.  
American readers will never sort it all out.



American readers could learn to yoik for themselves, Jesper insists.  
 In this poem with a cow? I mean, I say,  
 in the poem that appeared on my screen containing *the* cow.  
 The one whose poet had his head up around the clouds.  
 Apollo and Hermes are also, I can see, there on the screen,  
 and what am I to do with words like *Poikilóthronos* and *Boukólos*?  
 Well, Lars-Håkan says, what *will* you do?  
 I'll change the setting entirely, move the lot of them to Texas!  
 But in Texas nobody yoiks, everybody protests.  
 There are plenty of cows, however, and cowboys like to yell & shout  
 while they ride all around saying things like *Yahoo!*  
 But a Yoik is a Lapland poem, it's a chant, an incantation, a song!  
 In my Texas version the cowboys will sing quite a lot:  
*Get along little dogie*, and stuff like that.  
 That's the line in fact that I'll substitute for the quote from Rimbaud.  
 What about Hermes? What about Apollo?  
 I think I'll exchange them for John Wayne & Clint Eastwood.  
 Those are mythic types American readers relate to.  
 All the Swedes have now stopped grinning & laughing  
 and are starting to cry, tearing their hair.  
 In Greek plays lots of people cry and tear their hair.  
 That's another thing that gets into this poem, along with the  
 language itself: the *Poikilóthronoses* and *Boukóloses*.  
 Sounds like some bacteria infecting the meat of the burger.  
 Göran says, darting a knowing glance over at Jesper:  
 The author of this poem is an eminent Hellenist!  
 By God, I thought he was a Swede!  
 Anyway, if you've got to have your Greek go see Ezra Pound.  
 He's long dead, of course, which means  
 you might as well just go on working with me.  
 I've become a little tipsy by this point drinking the virtual beer  
 and suddenly drop the nearly empty virtual bottle onto the keyboard.  
 Yoiks! We're all at once transported off to Amazon.com  
 The Amazon: Now that's better than Texas!  
 The stern-wheeler is sailing upriver from Santarém.  
 Elizabeth Bishop is getting on board, clutching  
 an empty wasp's nest given to her by the druggist  
 in the town's little blue pharmacy. I follow her with my cow  
 which has somehow attracted a herd —

not of cattle exactly, but of sheep, goats, yaks,  
chickens, llamas, cats and yellow dogs.  
What's going on? I'm not exactly sure, but I like it.  
Jesper's shouting in English: Who do you think you are,  
some kind of Hercules? That poem (that golden girdle!) is mine;  
I, I, I, am Tranströmer's successor!  
Not any more, I exclaim, heading into the current  
on the riverboat called *Poikilóthronos Juan*.  
Off in wintry Lund, all the systems start to crash.  
Every screen flickers and goes blank.