rivista di poesia comparata semicerchio

Rassegna di poesia internazionale

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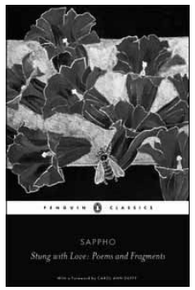
They sang «beyond the reach of Envy». Callimachus and Sappho



In the final lines of Callimachus' short hymn, «To Apollo,» the poet imagines a voice, which he calls «Envy,» whispering in the god's ear in derogation of the hymn that Apollo – and we – have just heard. «I don't like a poet who doesn't sing like the sea», hisses Envy, meaning by «sea» grand epic composition. Apollo responds, in a counter image, that the Euphrates is a mighty river, yet in it flows «mainly silt and garbage»; on Parnassus, however, run «pure» crystal springs, which the holy Bees of Demeter sip and carry to the goddess herself as drink.

One sips the poets Callimachus and Sappho slowly, sampling now this, now that. If one has a smattering of Greek and a bit of time, one opens the *Loeb* with Greek and English side by side, a copy of *Liddell &Scott* at one's elbow, so as to catch the beauty of the verse, the liquid sounds, the subtle word order, and the grammatical nuance. Next best are Frank Nisetich's witty and careful translations in *The Poems of Callimachus* (OUP, 2001) and Aaron Poochigian's musically attentive renderings in *Sappho: Stung with Love. Poems and fragments* (Penguin Books, 2010).

Callimachus was a poet and librarian, a kind of early-day Philip Larkin, and spent much time at the great library of Alexandria, where he created what seems to have been the first comprehensive library catalogue. He is credited with over 800 poems, and, like Sappho of Lesbos, influenced the course of poetry for generations to come.

Sappho is hard to read because so many of her lines are fragments and thus Poochigian has done a great service by relying on his own poetic instincts. His decision, for example, to rhyme throughout the volume—Greek verse does not rhyme—is a good one: it gives fragments and elliptical passages shape and form. The rhyme is rarely intrusive, and the syntax of the verse plays against the rhyme to create lyrical flow. Poochigian's scholarship, too, is worn lightly. The volume contains an excellent introduction, divides the poems into subject categories, and on the facing page for each poem places notes both historical and literary. Under the subheading of «Troy» we find the poem that begins,

> Some call ships, infantry or horsemen
> The greatest beauty earth can offer;
> I say it is whatever a person
> Most lusts after.

Sappho likens Helen, who occupies the two middle stanzas of the poem, to Anaktoria, an unidentified but longed for girl, who also goes «far away».

> And I would rather watch her body
> Sway, her glistening face flash dalliance
> Than Lydian war cars at the ready
> And armed battalions.

Poochigian's close rhyming of «dalliance» and «battalions,» the end syllable echoed in «Lydian,» the recurring vowel and consonant sounds of the stanza's second line – all invest his translation with a fine musicality. His decision to set aside fragments uncertainly associated with this lyric so that it is framed on either end with military images is wise. And although I miss Sappho's «black» (*melainan*) before «earth» in line two, Poochigian is right to give priority to rhythm in an already tight line.

Sappho's two best-known hymns to Aphrodite appear at the front of the volume, with the more sensuous first. In it Sappho lures Aphrodite to «this blest temple», set in a grove of apple trees. The translation of stanza two is a rich interplay of sound, pace, and sensory beauty:

> Here under boughs a bracing spring
> Percolates, roses without number
> Umber the earth and, rustling,
> The leaves drip slumber.

The next stanza also begins with «Here,» replicating the anaphora of the original *en d'* and offering, again, rhyme and syntax in counterpoint:

> Here budding flowers possess a sunny
> Pasture where steeds could graze their fill,
> And the breeze feels as gentle as honey…

Sappho is very much the poet of erotic desire, but she is also a polished and elegant stylist. In a May 2007 *AbleMuse* interview, Poochigian explains that Sappho «mixes registers» and cites, as example, the other well-known hymn to Aphrodite, a hymn that begins in formal invocation as befits public utterance, and then shifts into private, teasing dialogue between petitioner and goddess. Aphrodite, summoned yet again, comes «smiling»:

> … and you, sublime
> And smiling with immortal mirth,
> Asked what was wrong? Why I, this time,
> Called you to earth?
>
> What was my mad heart dreaming of? –
> «Who, Sappho, at a word, must grow
> Again receptive to your love?…»

Poochigian captures yet another mixed register here – longing wedded to self-mockery. Thus he translates *meidiaisais' athanato prosopo* («smiling immortal face») as «smiling with immortal mirth», turning, as he believes Sappho intends, Aphrodite's traditional epithet, «smiling», into a bemused and indulgent dramatic response to her votary's frequent and very urgent petitions.

The hymn tradition in which both Sappho and Callimachus work is very old, at least as old as Homer. We have six extant hymns by Callimachus, wonderfully varied in their approach to the feats of the gods and, like Sappho's, less formal than the earlier *Homeric Hymns*. In translating «To Apollo» and «To Artemis», Nisetich captures Callimachus' immediacy, wit and energy.

«To Apollo» begins with movement and tension already at breaking point as everything, both living and man-made, reacts to the imminent coming of the god. The lines, literally rendered, are:

> How Apollo's laurel sapling trembled,
> how the whole temple. Far off, far off
> who is sinful!
> Surely, the door with his lovely foot
> Apollo strikes;
> Do you not see? Nodded sweetly the
> date palm of Delos,
> suddenly, and the swan in the high
> air, lovely, [suddenly] sings.

It is a beautiful passage, but the translation of Lombardo and Rayor (*Callimachus: Hymns, Epigrams, Select Fragments,* Johns Hopkins, 1988), good in many respects, falters here:

> Vibrations from Apollo's laurel branch
> stir tremors through the temple.
> Depart from here, O you sinners,
> Phoibos taps the door with lovely foot,
> Don't you see, the Delian
> palm tree nodded,
> a sudden sweetness, the swan sings
> in the air,

The verse turns drama into narrative with its unwarranted cause-effect attribution in lines one and two, whereas Callimachus presents everything as simultaneous movement, stirred solely by the god himself. Lombardo and Rayor eliminate the exclamations («How … how«) and the repetitions, both actual («Far off, far off,») and implied («trembled»; «suddenly»). Callimachus' «Far off, Far off who is sinful!» becomes «Depart from here, O you sinners», oddly echoing some sour Puritan divine. The substitution of the weaker «taps» for «strikes» or even «rattles and splits» dissipates the force of the god's coming, while the placement of «Delian» produces a brief moment of confusion – is the line, we wonder, talking about the god rather than the tree? Nisetich's translation, on the other hand, is clear, true to the text, and full of energy:

> How Apollo's laurel sapling shook,
> how the whole
> Temple shook with it. Back, *back*, all
> who have sinned![1]
> The doors are rattling: it must be
> Apollo striking them with his gleaming foot.
> Can't you see? All of a sudden
> The Delian palm nodded with joy, and
> now
> The swan is singing, high in the air,
> his lovely song.

How much better, for example, is «Can't you see?» than «Don't you see?» or than my even stiffer, «Do you not see?» Nor is Nisetich's addition of «high» in the last line an indulgence – swans are aquatic birds, and «high» makes us fully aware of Callimachus' point – ecstatic flight. Even Nisetich's retention of the Greek possessive «his» animates the line and the moment. In an ample introduction to the volume, Nisetich points out that Callimachus, rather than describe the arrival of the god, simply assumes his presence through the music of the swan, the movement of palm, temple, door and laurel, and the beauty of the verse itself. Like Poochigian, Nisetich is excellent at seeing the problems a poet faces in the process of composition, those «moments of maximum poetic risk.» The translation retains the lovely repetitions of the original: «Gold is Apollo's cloak, gold his clasp … golden too /his sandals. Apollo basks in gold, basks /in possessions», and so with other lists as well. Callimachus ends this jewel of a hymn with the same immediacy with which it began – Apollo himself speaks to commend the poem, and Nisetich renders that complex passage with wit and clarity.

In «To Artemis» Callimachus does something entirely different. Instead of the moment of the god's coming, he opens with nine-year-old Artemis, perched on her father's knee, asking Zeus for presents like the ones he gave her brother:

> … a girl still,
> she climbed her father's knees, and said to him,
> «Daddy, let me stay a virgin for ever
> and let me be very famous, more than Phoibos,
> and give me a bow and arrows – no, wait,
> Father, I won't ask *you*
> for a quiver and a big bow: the Kyklopes
> will make them for me, right away,
> arrows and a bow, a pretty crescent –
> but let me carry the torch and wear
> my blouse broidered on the edge and reaching
> To the knee, so I can kill wild beasts.
> And give me sixty Oceanids, all
> nine-year-olds, all still girls too young
> for marriage, to be my dancing partners …
> And give me all the mountains to roam –
> whatever *city* you want me to have
> is fine with me …» And when
> she had said all this, the child, eager
> to grasp her father's beard, reached
> again and again, trying
> to touch it without success.

She's too little to reach his chin from his lap. Zeus is utterly charmed and grants her everything, and we have a beloved child, secure in her father's adoration, charmingly acquisitive, in an intimate scene culminating in comic physical action. Nisetich captures the breathless rhythms, the awkward grammar, the clipped word and idioms of childhood.

We hear next of how scary Kyklopes are to little children – mothers tell their daughters that if they're not good the Kyklopes will come get them – but plucky little Artemis goes off to get the Cyclopes to make arrows for her, and is frightened by no one, not even by bearded Pan, whom she visits next to collect a full complement of hunting dogs. The hymn's rounding up of presents is a novel way of celebrating a god's power, and one could not wish for a better translation.

Nisetich's auditory gift is so fine, and his scholarship and immersion in the sensibility of Callimachus so complete, that he hears grammatical and semantic nuances that other translators miss. At the end of «To Delos», Leto, bearing Apollo in her womb and desperately searching for a birth site for him, passes the tiny floating island of Delos; Apollo, oracle-to-be, cries out, «'Attention, now, Mother! . . . give birth to me on her, for she will welcome you!'» The last line of the hymn, following the poet's traditional «farewell» to Delos, is *chairoi d'Apollon te kai haen elocheusato Laeto*. *Haen* is a feminine singular pronoun meaning «whom», *elocheusato* is a third person singular verb, meaning either «he [or] she gave birth to», and *Laeto* (Leto) can be either nominative or accusative – subject or direct object[2]. The default translation is «Farewell Apollo and [she] whom Leto bore» – in other words, Artemis. Yet Artemis has nothing whatsoever to do with this hymn and Callimachus is too great a poet to toss away an ending. Nisetich knows that Callimachus has already turned the earlier «Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo» on its head[3], and finds in the grammatical ambiguities of the final line an echo of the poem's own turns: if a masculine subject is assumed for *elocheusato* and if *Laeto* is taken to be accusative, then the last line not only makes perfect sense and ends with a delicious ironic turn, but also reminds us, through Nisetich's pun on «deliver,» of the power of Apollo.

> Farewell, flourishing hearth
> of islands, farewell to you,
> and Apollo and Leto whom *he* delivered![4]

The concluding word of epigram 32 presents a similar turn, although in a very different register[5]. *Chaeron,* from the verb *chaereuo,* means «to widow, bereave or make desolate». Nisetich stops, thinks, and heightens the tragedy of the epigram by substituting the ironically evocative «orphaned» for its near neighbor, «made desolate».

> At dawn we buried Melanippos, and
> while the sun
> was setting the maiden Basilo died
> by her own hand, unable to live once
> she had placed
> her brother on the pyre. The house
> of their father
> Aristippos looked upon evil doubled,
> and all Cyrene plunged
> in grief, seeing that home of noble
> children orphaned.

Callimachus' dedicatory epigrams often give voice to the dedicated object, and thus a conch shell left for Aphrodite speaks in one poem, a tragic mask presented to Dionysus in another. The dead speak too, and none so poignantly as Callimachus' own father. Lombardo and Rayor translate his father's epitaph in this way, in sprightly couplets, with lines a bit too short:

> This is the grave of the father and son
> Of Callimachus. You will know the
> one
> As general of Kyrene's armed might,
> The other's poems prevailed against
> Spite,
>
> Now listen to Nisetich:
>
> You who walk past my tomb, know
> that I am son
> and father of Callimachus of Cyrene.
> You must know both: the one led his
> country's forces once,
> the other sang beyond the reach of
> envy.

For Callimachus to claim greatness is only fitting. Poochigian, whose translations are different from Nisetich's, but whose sense of tone is likewise sure, takes a single-line fragment of Sappho's and turns it into a tiny quatrain whose lines keep lengthening into infinity.

> I declare
> That later on,
> Even in an age unlike our own
> Someone will remember who we are.

Indeed, we do remember. We shall continue to remember because of translators like these, for translation is an act of giving, of laboring without, perhaps, being remembered so that others can be.

(Helaine L. Smith

Note

1 Callimachus' urgent double imperative of «*hekas, hekas, hostis alitros*» («far off, far off, who is sinful»), with its rapid, breathless sounds, is closely replicated in the vowels and pace of Nisetich's monosyllabic line, «Back, *back*, all who sinned».

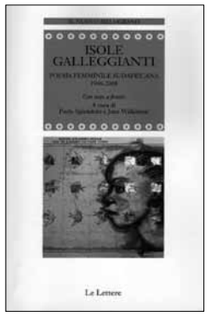
2 Lātō is both nominative and accusative. Allen Rogers Benner, *Selections from Homer's* Iliad, «Nouns and Adjectives,» para. 94. Irvington Publishers, New York 1931.

3 Callimachus replaces fear of Apollo with fear of Hera and makes the helpful Iris vicious.

4 Whether the verb «delivered» is understood to be *elocheusato* (third person singular) or, as Wilamowitz would have it, *elocheusao* (second person singular), the validity, and indeed the brilliance, of Nisetich's direct object reading for Lātō remains, additionally supported by the metrical argument that the *anceps* creates.

5 For readers using the *Loeb* edition, Nisetich's «Epigram 32» appears there as «Epigram 20».

Isole galleggianti. Poesia femminile sudafricana 1948-2008, con testo a fronte a cura di Paola Splendore e Jane Wilkinson, Le Lettere, Firenze, 2011, pp. 242, € 19,00.



'Isole galleggianti' è metafora perfetta per le voci delle autrici sudafricane che si levano da tradizioni linguistiche e regioni geografiche diverse. Non un coro, dunque, propone questa antologia bensì una variegata ma significativa rassegna di poesie in traduzione italiana dall'inglese, lingua veicolare anche quando gli originali erano in afrikaans ma già tradotti in inglese. Sessanta anni di poesia, a partire dall'anno in cui il National Party saliva al potere e cominciava a promulgare l'odiosa legislazione razzista nota come apartheid. Le poesie di impronta sociopolitica non mancano in questa raccolta con la loro semplice e fattuale urgenza – quasi da titolo di cronaca nera – che però trascende la Storia, come per *Il bambino ucciso dai soldati a Nyanga*:

> il bambino che voleva solo giocare al
> sole a Nyanga è dappertutto
> il bambino diventato uomo percorre
> tutta l'Africa
> il bambino diventato gigante viaggia
> in tutto il mondo
> senza il lasciapassare

Nulla è precluso ora, neppure *I Giardini della Biblioteca (Johannesburg)*:

> I gradini sono ombreggiati da scuro
> fogliame.
> E i dorsi in pelle, sugli alti scaffali
> Si ergono regali, mai toccati dai Neri.

In questo caso la rima alterna formata in inglese da «black blades» e «Blacks» non è stata mantenuta, laddove il fogliame sembra formato da «nere lame». E il «nero» e un tono «scuro» di colore prevale in molte poesie: «Stream in which the dark / sees nothing but the dark / with you I can speak / I know you better»; «the sun shall be covered by us / the sun in our eyes for ever covered / with black butterflies»; «a flower / with a face / black as the sun». Allo stesso modo s'insiste su ciò che si trova sottoterra: morti, ossa, vermi, filoni non sfruttati, la terra stessa.

Questo giro di arcipelago di voci si connota di una esplicita firma di genere, quando figure del mito si stagliano solitarie come *Galatea* di Ruth Miller o *Agar* di Elizabeth Eybers; quando figlie poete si rivolgono alle madri:

> per ritrovare la voce di mia madre
> perché era lei, che per me leggeva
> quando le andava, o a volte cantava
> *(Bilingue*, Elizabeth Eybers*)*
>
> La poesia non è tutto, dicesti
> Il pomeriggio che ne portai una
> A te piegata sulla tinozza
> […]
> La poesia non è tutti
> Nella vita, dicesti
> Col tuo sguardo cerchiato di azzurro.
> (*Poesia per mia madre,* Jennifer Davids)

Come ancora in *Le mani di mia madre* di Yvette Christiansë o *Le lingue delle madri* di Makhosazana Xaba.

Ancora, quando le voci si rivolgono al frutto del loro parto, come in *Donna incinta* di Ingrid Jonker o in *Primo segno di vita* di Antjie Krog, o raccontano la fiaba della buonanotte al loro bimbo, come in *Silenzio arriva l'uomo del buio* di Ingrid Jonker. Infine, il *Rammendo* di Ingrid De Kok e *Lavoro d'ago* di Karen Press sono sinistri poemetti su un'arte manuale che mima scrittura e dolore, tracce e assenza:

> La donna è intenta alla sua antica
> arte.
> L'ago congiunge mentre sfreccia,
> e sfregia, scrive, segna, sutura,
> il rammendo invisibile del cuore.
> (*Rammendo,* Ingrid De Kok)
>
> Accanto a me da un'asta di metallo
> Pendono i tubi di una sacca di plastica
> Spessa e morbida come una libbra
> di fegato:
> il tuo sangue, punti rossi di mezza-
> notte
> dell'ago profondo che ti riempie;
> i miei uccelli splendenti a punto ca-
> tenella.
> (*Lavoro d'ago*, Karen Press)

La Storia del Sudafrica percola dalle parole stillate e dai silenzi interminabili, intraducibili, intrascrivibili delle udienze della Truth and Reconciliation Commission che ha concluso l'era dell'apartheid nella seconda metà degli anni novanta:

> Ma come si trascrive il silenzio del
> nastro?
> Il pianto è una pausa o una parola?
> Quale segno scritto per una gola
> strozzata?
> E il dito puntato della testimone?
> Quello l'ho descritto,
> quando i funzionari hanno identificato
> la direzione e il nome.
> (*Parla il trascrittore*, Ingrid De Kok)
>
> Vorrei solo riprendere il cammino alla
> normale velocità della vita,
> d'ora in poi
> senza più fotografi, avvocati, segre-
> tari, traduttori
> né arcivescovo.
> (*La velocità della vita*, Makhosazana Xaba)

Quel che resta è un elenco di nomi di donne che per dinastia e retaggio, per caso fortuito o per coraggio hanno punteggiato la storia del Sudafrica, come isole galleggianti, da Sarah Baartman alla zia del re Shaka Zulu, alle infermiere, avvocatesse, insegnanti, madri delle poete di oggi e nelle loro poesie, «cose fatte a mano»; «parola per parola per parola»; costantemente «in cerca di parole», di un'identità di genere, di scrittura, di un ruolo, per piccolo che sia, nella Storia di un paese, il cui paesaggio mozzafiato non basta a farne un giardino e a fare di loro, tutte, delle cittadine a pieno titolo orgogliose. La traduzione di Paola Splendore rende merito a queste scrittrici con rispetto ed eleganza, e insieme all'introduzione di Jane Wilkinson offre una chiave esegetica per questa generosa antologia che documenta tutte le contraddizioni di un paese dalla storia tanto controversa come il Sudafrica.

(Carmen Concilio)