

ANTHONY'S ANTONYMS

Anthony Barnett. *Poems of Samuel Wood* (translated from Louis-René Des Forêts). Allardyce Books. 2011; *Antonyms & Others*. Allardyce Books. 2012.

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Poèmes de Samuel Wood was published by Bruno Roy's Fata Morgana press on October 19th 1988 and, typically, was a work of art in form as well as in content. In the notes for a 1992 exhibition of work in Cambridge which included some of Bruno Roy's editions David Kelley noted that it would be difficult to think of a precise equivalent of Editions Fata Morgana in English publishing terms:

It is very much a one-man show. Bruno Roy is reader, designer, copy-editor, proof-reader and makes up the parcels of books to send off to the booksellers himself. Yet if his books are "home-made", it is in the very best sense of the term. The volumes appearing in his current list at prices equivalent to the English paperback show a quality of paper, typography and design probably unequalled in the English-speaking publishing world.

With Anthony Barnett's translation of Des Forêts's poem of an old man who is preparing to die, that is, to enter silence, Allardyce Books has risen to that publishing challenge and produced a work of art in form as well as content. Barnett has been a distinguished translator of poetry for many years now and his procedure takes seriously the words of Yves Bonnefoy who said that 'You must realize that the poem is nothing and that translation is possible—which is not to say that it's easy; it is merely poetry re-begun.' In an article on the art of translation, published in *Grosseteste Review* in 1979, Bernard Dubourg (who had already engaged with the translation of some of J.H. Prynne's poems as well a section of Barnett's *Blood Flow* sequence) suggested that to translate is to find yourself a twin, 'to light upon a twin to which you can forthwith claim the minority'. After all, the original poem is already there and the task of the translator is 'to get stuck into this original':

The technique of translation, of which no one can properly define the items, serves to conceal the fact that a good translation contains a greater number of possible senses than the original, being the result of two labours instead of one, and it's for the reader to profit by it.

A perfect example of this appears early on in Barnett's translation where

a section of Des Forêts's original poem presents the reader with an old actor, in his declining years, choosing to withdraw from the lime-light. Barnett associates the image here with lines from *Macbeth* and concludes the section

Do not tremble with anxiety before the threshold
 You have ill-prepared yourself to cross,
 Approach non-being with no compassion for yourself
 And as a man of good faith, salute this life
 You are losing with its burden of sorrows and desires,
 Its sets too beautiful for the short time you have spent playing here
 Strutting the boards, fretting ineffectual words
 Like a ham cut short when the curtain falls.

The only other translation into English of *Poèmes de Samuel Wood* was Ann Smock's hand-out accompaniment to that Cambridge exhibition and in that version the actor is seen as 'swaggering in the limelight, declaiming blustery speeches'. Barnett's art is to combine the verbs 'strutting' and 'fretting' which call to the reader's mind the echo of emptiness that haunts the failing Macbeth who understands all too well the sense of ineffectuality he has been compelled to recognise. Barnett's awareness of Shakespeare appears elsewhere throughout *Poems of Samuel Wood* and the echo of Lear's injunction to Cordelia acts as a prologue to a section dealing with the limitations of language: 'United with nothing, nothing engenders nothing' pushes us forward to the 'pitfalls of language' which can in turn lead us astray with their 'immoderately beautiful harmonies' and 'ritual of deception'. Similar to a figure from Beckett, contemplating the need to communicate whilst at the same time recognising the frustrating shortfalls of all verbal communication, Barnett's Samuel Wood recognises that taking shape is contrary to the nature of words

They breathe only freely within ourselves
 Who are there to protect them from the outside
 Though destined to disappear with them
 It is hard on the living to have to stay quiet
 As if, prisoners of a long-standing mistrust,
 They had lost the memory of the heart
 Forgotten even what goes by the name forgetting
 Which everyone needs in order to survive.

Writing about *Poèmes de Samuel Wood* in 1992, Maurice Blanchot was struck by certain calm moments during which the negative does not triumph and he refers to the closing lines of the poem which, in Anthony

Barnett's translation, are so striking:

If making a voice heard from somewhere
 Inaccessible to time and erosion
 Proves no less illusory than a dream
 There is nonetheless something in it that endures
 Even after it has lost its meaning
 Its timbre still resonates in the distance like a storm
 No one can tell is approaching or passing.

Highlighting the words 'voix' and 'timbre' Blanchot raises the question of 'contretemps', (setback or difficulty—literally, a counter-time) and summarises the poem's ability to anticipate looking back through retrospection which gives the illusion of a present that has already been lost, since it never existed.

Anthony Barnett's meticulously presented translation of Des Forêts's poem concludes with a short coda, 'Letter to a Photographer' in which he both distances himself from his work and also allows us an insight into how the work was achieved. Barnett tells us that he has been engaged for many months on this translation of Samuel Wood, 'a meditation on life and language and loss, the loss of others who are loved as well as of the self'. His comments upon the difficulties of translating what he knows into the words that others can read is itself a fine comment on the theme explored by Des Forêts:

He has to write. He has to do what is difficult. Even if he cannot write at all. And here is a conundrum, a double bind: if he does not write, when he cannot write, because he is lazy, which sometimes he certainly is, or because of some more substantial cause, his predisposition to anxiety increases. Yet, when he is writing, when he can write, he is wracked with guilt, unless wracked be too strong a word, because that is not what was supposed to be in store for him, though the very early insistence of others that he should read and read must have given him a head start. A regret?

It is in commentary such as this that one is inevitably reminded of Beckett's comments in an interview with Georges Duthuit where he stated his preference, if it can be called that, for 'The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.'

Commenting upon a drawing that he has made to accompany his translation of *Poèmes de Samuel Wood*, Barnett tells us it is supposed, appropriate-

ly, to be of a tree. However, as he now looks at it prior to publication he is compelled to recognise that ‘it is also an uncanny likeness of its author—or perhaps Samuel Wood’. In this world of translation, conjuring up for us the multiple lairs of personality explored in the novels of Paul Auster, it is impossible not to be reminded of Ben Jonson’s words ‘Language most shewes a man: speake that I may see thee. It springs out of the most retired, and inmost parts of us, and is the Image of the Parent of it, the mind.’

Antonyms & Others is a combination of prose and poetry which opens with six short accounts of writers and artists including Andrea Zanzotto, Robert Musil, Osip Mandlestam, José Saramago, Fernando Pessoa and Edvard Munch. These are short digressive reflections which were produced originally as a column for an English Association journal: Anthony’s meditations on the art of translation and memoir:

I had long harboured thoughts of such a weekly or monthly press column in which I might write about anything—rather in the manner of, for example, Montale, although it was posthumously revealed that such a regularity was too much so that many of the pieces under his byline were ghosted... My weekly or monthly is down to termly but never mind, I shall not need a ghost.

Ghosts do, however, haunt the lines of the second section of this book, ‘Seventeen Poems of Defencelessness’:

Now it is you I pick up.
I have left you untouched, except for a very occasional half-hearted dusting,
for many many years.
Now that I reread you I do not know why it took so long. However, some
of your lines have often resonated with me without, it seems, my
always knowing it.

When Anthony Barnett’s collected poems were published in 1987 under the title *The Resting Bell*, Simon Smith, himself a poet and lecturer, commented that the impressive array of poems ‘registers the interpenetration of all aspects of our experience’:

It renders the complexity of the way in which we order reality around us through a language that is both a speaker’s own and one that comes to him (or her) via the voices, traditions and institutions of others. The poetry Barnett offers us is a place where the speaking voice, and the reader, feel at home and a place where they feel alien. The effect is one of the uncanny: at once comforting and startling.

These new 'Seventeen Poems of Defencelessness' confirm this sense of a quiet and meditative reflection upon who we are in relation to the world around us and they endorse the comments made by J.H. Prynne in a letter written to the poet in 1972 in which he recognised 'a steady note of being-there (Dasein) in each perfected token of speech.' To the close observer these pieces of writing collected in *Antonyms & Others* are intricately interwoven with the means of production, that combination Bruno Roy sought for in *Fata Morgana*, and the opening paragraph of one of the prose pieces sits the words justly upon the page:

The snow will always start off like a blank page as it is now and was in the past, until it is trampled, as it is now. He knows this is far from an original observation and that it is likely to be found fault with. One might say he can sing only one song.

We must now await the publication of an up-dated collected poems, published in a similar immaculate fashion, so that this extraordinary voice of compassion and self-doubt, wry humour and Beckett-like simplicity, can earn the readership it has long deserved.