

Twenty Poems of Georg Trakl

Translated and Chosen

by

James Wright and Robert Bly

The Silence of Georg Trakl

The poems of Georg Trakl have a magnificent silence in them. It is very rare that he himself talks—for the most part he allows the images to speak for him. Most of the images, anyway, are images of silent things.

In a good poem made by Trakl images follow one another in a way that is somehow stately. The images have a mysterious connection with each other. The rhythm is slow and heavy, like the mood of someone in a dream. Wings of dragonflies, toads, the gravestones of cemeteries, leaves, and war helmets give off strange colors, brilliant and sombre colors—they live in too deep a joy to be gay. At the same time they live surrounded by a darkness without roads. Everywhere there is the suggestion of this dark silence:

The yellow flowers
Bend without words over the blue pond

The silence is the silence of things that could speak, but choose not to. The German language has a word for deliberately keeping silence, which English does not have. Trakl uses this word “schweigen” often. When he says “the flowers/Bend without words over the blue pond”, we realise that the flowers have a voice, and that Trakl hears it. They keep their silence in the poems. Since he doesn’t put false speeches into the mouths of plants, nature has more and more confidence in him. As his poems grow, more and more creatures live in his poems—first it was only wild ducks and rats, but then oak trees, deer, decaying wall-paper, ponds, herds of sheep, trumpets, and finally steel helmets, armies, wounded men, battlefield nurses, and the blood that had run from the wounds that day.

Yet a red cloud, in which a furious god,
The spilled blood itself, has its home, silently
Gathers, a moonlike coolness in the willow bottoms

Before he died, he even allowed his own approaching death to appear in the poems, as in the late poem “Mourning”.

Trakl died when he was 27. He was born in Salzburg in 1887, the son of a hardware dealer. The family was partially Czech, but spoke German. He took a degree in Pharmacy in Vienna, and became a corpsman in the army, stationed at Innsbruck. He left the service after a short time, and spent a year writing and visiting friends. In August of 1914, at the outbreak of war, he returned to the army, and served in the field near Galizia. He felt the hopelessness of the badly wounded more than most men, and his work brought him into great depressions. After the battle of Grodek, ninety badly wounded men were left in a barn for him to care for. That night he attempted to kill himself, but was prevented by friends. The last poems in this selection were written during this time, and the sense of his own approaching death is clear, and set down with astonishing courage. His poem called “Grodek”, which is thought to be his last work, is a ferocious poem. It is constructed with great care. A short passage suggesting the whole German Romantic poetry of the nineteenth century will appear, and be followed instantly by a passage evoking the mechanical violence of the German twentieth century. This alternation, so strong that it can even be felt slightly in the translation, gives the poem great strength and fiber.

After the crisis at Grodek, Trakl went on serving in his post for several months, meanwhile using the drugs obtained from his pharmacy supplies. He was transferred to the hospital at Krakow, and assigned, to his surprise, not as a corpsman, but as a patient. There, a few days later, in November of 1914, he committed suicide with an overdose sufficient to be poisonous.

His poems were edited after his death, and his work is now available in three volumes *Aus Goldenem Kelch* (the early poems), *Die Dichtungen* (the later poems), and *Erinnerung An Georg Trakl* (letters and reminiscences). These volumes are published by Otto Muller Verlag in Salzburg, to whom we are indebted for permission to publish the poems. Most of the poems in the volume called *Die Dichtungen* are of equal quality with the twenty from that volume we have chosen.

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Robert Bly

A Note on Trakl

In the autumn of 1952, I wandered into the wrong classroom at the University of Vienna. According to my instructions, the professor was supposed to be a German, whose name I forget. I also forget what course I had expected. But the lecturer who actually appeared was a short swarthy man; and he spoke soft, clear German, clinging to his Italian accent. His name was Professor Susini. The only other persons in that unheated room were a few old men, who resembled Bowery bums in America.

He stood still, peering into the dusk where we sat. Then he read a poem called "Verfall", the first poem in Georg Trakl's *Die Dichtungen*. It was as though the sea had entered the class at the last moment. For this poem was not like any poem I had ever recognized: the poet, at a sign from the evening bells, followed the wings of birds that became a train of pious pilgrims who were continually vanishing into the clear autumn of distances; beyond the distances there were black horses leaping in red maple trees, in a world where seeing and hearing are not two actions, but one.

I returned to that darkening room every afternoon for months, through autumn and winter, while Professor Susini summoned every poem out of Trakl's three volumes. I always went back to that strange room of twilight, where Susini peered for long silences into the darkness until he discovered the poem he sought; and then he spoke it with the voice of a resurrected blackbird.

His entire manner was one of enormous patience, and he read Trakl's poems very slowly. I believe that patience is the clue to the understanding of Trakl's poems. One does not so much read them as explore them. They are not objects which he constructed, but quiet places at the edge of a dark forest where one has to sit still for a long time and listen very carefully. Then, after all one's patience is exhausted, and it seems as though nothing inside the poem will ever make sense in the ways to which one has become accustomed by previous reading, all sorts of images and sounds come out of the trees, or the ponds, or the meadows, or the lonely roads—those places of awful stillness that seem at the centre of nearly every poem Trakl ever wrote.

In the poems which we have translated, there are frequent references to silence and speechlessness. But even where Trakl does not mention these conditions of the spirit by name, they exist as the very nourishment without which one cannot even enter his poems, much less understand them.

We are used to reading poems whose rules of traditional construction we can memorize and quickly apply. Trakl's poems, on the other hand, though they are shaped with the most beautiful delicacy and care, are molded from within. He did not write according to any "rules of construction", traditional or other, but rather waited patiently and silently for the worlds of his poems to reveal their own natural laws. The result, in my experience at least, is a poetry from which all shrillness and clutter have been banished. A single red maple leaf in a poem by Trakl is an inexhaustibly rich and wonderful thing, simply because he has had the patience to look at it and the bravery to resist all distraction from it. It is so with all of his small animals, his trees, his human names. Each one contains an interior universe of shapes and sounds that have never been touched or heard before, and before a reader can explore these universes he must do as this courageous and happy poet did: he must learn to open his eyes, to listen, to be silent, and to wait patiently for the inward bodies of things to emerge, for the inward voices to whisper. I cannot imagine any more difficult tasks than these, either for a poet or for a reader of poetry. They are, ultimately, attempts to enter and to recognize one's very self. To memorize quickly applicable rules is only one more escape into the clutter of the outside world.

Trakl is a supreme example of patience and bravery, and the worlds which these virtues enabled him to explore, and whose inhabitants he so faithfully describes, are places of great fullness and depth. His poems are not objects to be used and then cast aside, but entrances into places where deer, silent labors go

on.

James Wright

The Twenty Poems

Summer

At evening the complaint of the cuckoo
Grows still in the wood.
The grain bends its head deeper,
The red poppy.

Darkening thunder drives
Over the hill.
The old song of the cricket
Dies in the field.

The leaves of the chestnut tree
Stir no more.
Your clothes rustle
On the winding stair.

The candle gleams silently
In the dark room;
A silver hand
Puts the light out;

Windless, starless night.

Trumpets

Under the trimmed willows, where brown children
 are playing
And leaves tumbling, the trumpets blow. A quaking
 of cemeteries.
Banners of scarlet rattle through a sadness of maple
 trees,
Riders along rye-fields, empty mills.

Or shepherds sing during the night, and stags step
 delicately
Into the circle of their fire, the grove's sorrow
 immensely old,
Dancing, they loom up from one black wall;
Banners of scarlet, laughter, insanity, trumpets.

The Sun

Each day the gold sun comes over the hill.
The woods are beautiful, also the dark animals,
Also man; hunter or farmer.

The fish rises with a red body in the green pond.
Under the arch of heaven
The fisherman travels smoothly in his blue skiff.

The grain, the cluster of grapes, ripens slowly.
When the still day comes to an end,
Both evil and good have been prepared.

When the; night has come,
Easily the pilgrim lifts his heavy eyelids;
The sun breaks from gloomy ravines.

Song of The Western Countries

Oh the nighttime beating of the soul's wings:
Herders of sheep once, we walked along the forests
 that were growing dark,
And the red deer, the green flower and the speaking
 river followed us
In humility. Oh the old old note of the cricket,
Blood blooming on the altarstone,
And the cry of the lonely bird over the green silence
 of the pool.

And you Crusades, and glowing punishment
Of the flesh, purple fruits that fell to earth
In the garden at dusk, where young and holy men
 walked,
Enlisted men of war now, waking up out of wounds
 and dreams about stars.
Oh the soft cornflowers of the night.

And you long ages of tranquillity and golden
 harvests,
When as peaceful monks we pressed out the purple
 grapes;
And around us the hill and forest shone strangely.
The hunts for wild beasts, the castles, and at night,
 the rest,
When man in his room sat thinking justice,
And in noiseless prayer fought for the living head
 of God.

And this bitter hour of defeat,
When we behold a stony face in the black waters.
But radiating light, the lovers lift their silver eyelids:
They are one body. Incense streams from rose-
 colored pillows
And the sweet song of those risen from the dead.

My Heart at Evening

Toward evening you hear the cry of the bats.
Two black horses bound in the pasture,
The red maple rustles,
The walker along the road sees ahead the small
 tavern.

Nuts and young wine taste delicious,
Delicious: to stagger drunk into the darkening woods.
Village bells, painful to hear, echo through the black
 fir branches,
Dew forms on the face.

The Rats

In the farmyard the white moon of autumn shines.
Fantastic shadows fall from the eaves of the roof.
A silence is living in the empty windows;
Now from it the rats emerge softly

And skitter here and there, squeaking,
And a grey malodorous mist from the latrine
Follows behind them, sniffing:
Through the mist the ghostly moonlight quivers.

And the rats squeak eagerly as if insane
And go out to fill houses and barns
Which are filled full of fruit and grain.
Icy winds quarrel in the darkness.

On The Marshy Pastures

A man who walks in the black wind; the dry reeds
rustle quietly
Through the silence of the marshy pastures. In
the grey skies
A migration of wild birds move in ranks
Catty-corner over dark waters.

Insurgence. In the collapsing houses
Decay is fluttering out with black wings;
Crippled-up birches breathe heavily in the wind.

Evening in empty roadhouses. The longing for home
settles about
The delicate despair of the grazing flocks,
Vision of the night: toads plunge from silver waters.

In Hellbrun

Once more following the blue grief of the evening
Down the hill, to the springtime fishpond—
As if the shadows of those dead for a long time were
 hovering above,
The shadows of church dignitaries, of noble ladies—
Their flowers bloom so soon, the earnest violets
In the earth at evening, and the clear water washes
From the blue spring. The oaks turn green
In such a ghostly way over the forgotten footsteps
 of the dead
The golden clouds over the fishpond.

II

Birth

These mountains: blackness, silence, and snow.
The red hunter climbs down from the forest;
Oh the mossy gaze of the wild thing.

The peace of the mother: under black firs
The sleeping hands open by themselves
When the cold moon seems ready to fall.

The birth of man. Each night
Blue water washes over the rockbase of the cliff;
The fallen angel stares at his reflection with sighs,

Something pale wakes up in a suffocating room.
The eyes
Of the stony old woman shine, two moons.

The cry of the woman in labor. The night troubles
The boy's sleep with black wings,
With snow, which falls with ease out of the purple
clouds.

De Profundis

It is a stubble field, where a black rain is falling.
It is a brown tree, that stands alone.
It is a hissing wind, that encircles empty houses.
How melancholy the evening is.

A while later,
The soft orphan garners the sparse ears of corn.
Her eyes graze, round and golden, in the twilight
And her womb awaits the heavenly bridegroom.

On the way home
The shepherd found the sweet body
Decayed in a bush of thorns.

I am a shadow far from darkening villages.
I drank the silence of God
Out of the stream in the trees.

Cold metal walks on my forehead.
Spiders search for my heart.
It is a light that goes out in my mouth.

At night, I found myself on a pasture,
Covered with rubbish and the dust of stars.
In a hazel thicket
Angels of crystal rang out once more.

Descent and Defeat

To Karl Borromaus Heinrich

Over the white fishpond
The wild birds have blown away.
An icy wind drifts from our stars at evening.

Over our graves
The broken forehead of the night is bending.
Under the oaks we veer in a silver skiff.

The white walls of the city are always giving off
 sound.
Under arching thorns
O my brother blind minute-hands we are climbing
 toward midnight.

The Heart

The wild heart grew white in the forest;
Dark anxiety
Of death, as when the gold
Died in the grey cloud.
An evening in November.
A crowd of needy women stood at the bare gate
Of the slaughterhouse;
Rotten meat and guts fell
Into every basket;
Horrible food.

The blue dove of the evening
Brought no forgiveness.
The dark cry of trumpets
Travelled in the golden branches
Of the soaked elms,
A frayed flag
Smoking with blood,
To which a man listens
In wild despair.
All your days of nobility, buried
In that red evening!

Out of the dark entrance hall
The golden shape
Of the young girl steps
Surrounded by the pale moon,
The prince's court of autumn,
Black fir trees broken
In the night's storm,
The steep fortress.
O heart
Glittering above in the snowy cold.

In Venice

Silence in the rented room.
The candlestick flickers with silver light
Before the singing breath
Of the lonely man;
Enchanted rosecloud.

Black swarms of flies
Darken the stony space,
And the head of the man who has no home
Is numb from the agony
Of the golden day.

The motionless sea grows dark.
Star and black voyages
Vanished on the canal.
Child, your sickly smile
Followed me softly in my sleep.

The Mood of Depression

You dark mouth inside me,
You are strong, shape
Composed of autumn cloud,
And golden evening stillness;
In the shadows thrown
By the broken pine trees
A mountain stream turns dark in the green light;
A little town
That piously dies away into brown pictures.

Now the black horses rear
In the foggy pasture.
I think of soldiers!
Down the hill, where the dying sun lumbers,
The laughing blood plunges,
Speechless
Under the oak trees! Oh the hopeless depression
Of an army; a blazing steel helmet
Fell with a clatter from purpled foreheads.

The autumn night comes down so coolly.
With her white habit glittering like the stars
Over the broken human bodies
The convent nurse is silent.

The Evening

With the ghostly shapes of dead heroes
Moon, you fill
The growing silence of the forest,
Sickle-moon—
With the gentle embraces
Of lovers,
And with ghosts of famous ages
All around the crumbling rocks;
The moon shines with such blue light
Upon the city,
Where a decaying generation
Lives, cold and evil—
A dark future prepared
For the pale grandchild.
You shadows swallowed by the moon
Sighing upward in the empty goblet
Of the mountain lake.

III

TWO PROSE FRAGMENTS

I

A Winter Night

It has been snowing. Past midnight, drunk on purple wine, you leave the gloomy shelters of men, and the red fire of their fireplaces. Oh the darkness of night.

Black frost. The ground is hard, the air has a bitter taste. Your stars make unlucky figures.

With a stiff walk, you tramp along the railroad embankment with huge eyes, like a soldier charging a dark machinegun nest. Onward!

Bitter snow and moon.

A red wolf, that an angel is strangling. Your trouser legs rustle, as you walk, like blue ice, and a smile full of suffering and pride petrifies your face, and your forehead is white before the ripe desire of the frost;

or else it bends down silently over the doze of the night watchman, slumped down in his wooden shack.

Frost and smoke. A white shirt of stars burns on your clothed shoulders, and the hawk of God strips flesh out of your hard heart.

Oh the stony hill. The cool body, forgotten and silent, is melting away in the silver snow.

Sleep is black. For a long time the ear follows the motion of the stars deep down in the ice.

When you woke, the churchbells were ringing in the town. Out of the door in the east the rose-colored day walked with silver light.

II

From Revelation and Defeat

On silver soles I climbed down the thorny stairs, and I walked into the white-washed room. A light burned there silently, and without speaking I wrapped my head in purple linen; and the earth threw out a childlike body, a creature of the moon, that slowly stepped out of the darkness of my shadow, with broken arms, stony waterfalls sank away, fluffy snow.

On The Eastern Front

The ominous anger of masses of men
Is like the wild organ of the winter storm,
The purple surge of battle,
Leafless stars.

With broken eyebrows and silver arms
The night waves to dying soldiers.
In the shade of the ash tree of autumn
The souls of the slain are sighing.

A thorny desert surrounds the city.
The moon chases the shocked women
From the bleeding stairways.
Wild wolves have broken through the door.

Mourning

The dark eagles, sleep and death,
Rustle all night around my head:
The golden statue of man
Is swallowed by the icy comber
Of eternity. On the frightening reef
The purple remains go to pieces,
And the dark voice mourns
Over the sea.
Sister in my wild despair
Look, a precarious skiff is sinking
Under the stars,
The face of night whose voice is fading.

Sleep

Not your dark poisons again,
White sleep!
This fantastically strange garden
Of trees in deepening twilight
Fills up with serpents, nightmoths,
Spiders, bats.
Approaching stranger!
Your abandoned shadow
In the red of evening
Is a dark pirate ship
Of the salty oceans of confusion.
White birds from the outskirts of the night
Flutter out over the shuddering cities
Of steel.

Grodek

At evening the woods of autumn are full of the sound
Of the weapons of death, golden fields
And blue lakes, over which the darkening sun
Rolls down; night gathers in
Dying recruits, the animal cries
Of their burst mouths.
Yet a red cloud, in which a furious god,
The spilled blood itself, has its home, silently
Gathers, a moonlike coolness in the willow bottoms;
All the roads spread out into the black mold.
Under the gold branches of the night and stars
The sister's shadow falters through the diminishing
 grove,
To greet the ghosts of the heroes, bleeding heads;
And from the reeds the sound of the dark flutes of
 autumn rises.
O prouder grief! you bronze altars,
The hot flame of the spirit is fed today by a more
 monstrous pain,
The unborn grandchildren.