

Sonnevi, Göran. 2009. *Mozart's Third Brain*. Trans. Rika Lesser. New Haven: Yale University Press. 240 pages. ISBN: 978-0300145809.

Even outside the rich world of poetry, Göran Sonnevi, one of the most esteemed poets and translators in contemporary Sweden, is known to almost every Swede. When his thirteenth book, *Mozart's Tredje Hjärna* was published by Bonniers, Stockholm, in 1996, several Swedish critics mentioned the powerful combination of beauty and terror in his lyrics, and the fact that the poems also consisted of moments of simplicity with a stunning beauty, drawing the reader into big questions about our existence. "The reader is in a room where time is a mass in which the whole is constantly accessible, he simultaneously tells about then and now, mixes personal memories with daily news and the historical ..." (Arne Johnsson, *Bonniers Litterära Magasin*, 65.6 [1996], 44).

The English translation, *Mozart's Third Brain*, translated by Rika Lesser, was published by Yale University Press in 2009. The title poem consists of 144 sections marked by Roman numerals and stretches from July 3, 1992, to June 12, 1996. As Rosanna Warren points out in the "Foreword," Sonnevi has "fanned out in long lines" these 144 sections that break "almost every poetic convention" (ix).

*Mozart's Third Brain* is, on the one hand, an encompassing overview of the political unrest and social terror in Africa and the Former Yugoslavia in the first half of the 1990s. But, in another way, it is a conversation with himself and beloved friends, both living and dead.

The poems, a journey in time, are often open-ended, with many significant themes such as our existence, politics, social reality, nature, music, language, and friendship. They keep coming back to Mozart, his music, and his genius. Sonnevi describes the way we merge into the infinite world of music, a world without time, without beginning or end—the speaker says "the song alone does not sing" (XXVIII). Images of social reality and music come together: "We are that language also that music," the speaker says in VI. In regard to the situation in Rwanda, the speaker continues: "oil of genocide on our hands, in our society" (XXVII). The speaker declares that "we enter into the infinite brain" (XXXII), a place where not only the political situation in Rwanda is discussed, but also Sarajevo and Srebrenica, and even nature, philosophy, and everyday life. In despair he asks "what holds us together? Only the impossible vision" (XXXII). The speaker in *Mozart's Third Brain* is tormented by social reality, a dark world, and the loss of dear friends. Music and nature alone provide some comfort from this harsh reality.

In contrast to the ugliness in a world filled with violence and its despair, Sonnevi's language provides plenty of solace: for example, "the crocus opens its petals to the stars," as the speaker says in LIII. Some of the poems are conversations with friends who are ill and soon to pass away. To Bengt, after his passing, the speaker says "Now you are in the highest music" (XXXVI). In LXII

the speaker shows how time is open-ended, with no beginning and no end, by saying to the dead Anna “I’ll be there, in the new interpretation.”

The character “I” successfully links all these poems together with their different themes, a series of poems that, without Sonnevi’s mastery of language, could have been disjointed and hard to follow. Sonnevi manages to combine the natural world, the political world, the human conscience, friendship, love, eroticism, food and household chores, in such a way that the reader experiences the series of poems as one long conversation. The widening of topics, the interplay between themes, and the poetic language engage the reader in continuing this conversation with the “I.” The richness of the language, with its movements in time and space, makes the poems alive and trembling. As one Swedish critic pointed out “to read them is to watch and let one be touched by the ugliness and the beauty in an open being” (Arne Johnsson, *BLM*, 65.6 [1996], 44).

It is a huge task to translate this conversation of 144 poems with an extraordinary range of themes that are colourfully expressed. Rika Lesser’s translation beautifully conveys the variety in phrasing and imagery. It must be difficult for a non-native speaker of Swedish to translate words such as: “skitsyllogismerna rör sig: symaskinsartat” [the syllogisms of shit stitch, like a sewing machine]. Sonnevi is constantly playing with words, making new ones up, like “syrsande ljuden” [cricket-like sounds], and “himmelsbävning” [sky quake]. The translator has successfully captured the meanings of these words. Very little is wrong, only a few words with cultural connotations, for example, “butterkaka” [butter cake] (II), is something that would make any Swede immediately think about the long *fika* [coffee break] with this delicious cardamom bread with custard on top. A butter cake is something slightly different.

Colours can be difficult to translate when they are used to illustrate a feeling, a thought, or an image: “smutsröd helvetsfärg” [dirt red colour from hell] (XIII) is one example and “rödbrunn uppror” [red-brown uprising] (XXXV) is an image of soldiers and demonstrators clashing in Moscow. Lesser captures both the atmosphere and imagery in these lines.

Overall, the translation is independent, and the translator has taken risks in conveying the feeling and content of Sonnevi’s poetic language. In this series of 144 poems, the poetry is intact, and it “speaks English.”

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