Twice Under the Sun
ANNA GLAZOVA

Twice Under the Sun

Translated by Anna Khasin

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The initial thing that strikes one about this work is its consistency. There is no wavering, searching for a register: from the very first poem we are thrown into a type of writing which is sustained, with very little deviation or let up, until the last: something that is immediately identifiable and which quickly becomes so familiar as to seem inevitable, even natural. There are of course some variations in the substance and form of the poems, reflecting no doubt changes over the period of seven years’ work represented here, but in the end it is the unity and integrity of the whole that leaves the lasting impression.

That consistency must also have something to do with the translation. I have seen some other translations of Glazova’s work which actually seemed to me more fluent and easier to read, but I suspect that Anna Khasin has preserved a necessary obduracy and jaggedness in the writing. These are mainly short poems, consisting of short lines, often with syntactic breaks within them; so that when occasionally one does come across a long, fluid line, the effect is all the more lapidary:

like those waves were breaking in you not in the sea you swam

(p.73)

So what kind of consistency is it? Loosely, one might call it a unity of style, except that this implies some kind of space between intention and execution, a matter of writerly choices, whereas here it seems to pertain to the very constitution of the poems. It is hard to imagine them otherwise. The very dislocations within them are part of them, part of what they ‘say’; one has the sense that they necessarily came out this way. They are also very dense, compressed: miss a line and you’ve had it.

So what about ‘voice’? In some of the poems, certainly, there is the expression of a self, the conventional subject and source of the personal lyric. That emerges typically as a sudden, abrupt comment or question
so are we alive (p.17)

right, let’s go (p.49)

what, what time is it, now? (p.60)

There is also sometimes an explicit or palpable ‘you’, and some of the poems imply dialogue, relationships of tenderness, anger, closeness, dismay, complexity:

the way I hear you, you hear.
lay fingers on my mouth
i will
lay fingers on your fingers (p.40)

blue.
like the sky like the sea like the sound wave
i am silent with, i have agreed not to sing
as we talk (p.39)

hiding hands in the glove of each other (p.27)

listen, all right, lie, lie, but at least with feeling (p.69)

The personal pronoun is complicated in some cases by compounds which apparently come more easily to Russian than to English: she-i, he-i, it-her, not-you. This points to fissures in identity, and while there a pervasive sense of self in the work, unlike in much post-modernist writing where the very idea of the agentic subject has dissolved into language itself, it is a complex, intermittent, transient sense, which can disappear the very moment it materializes: ‘to erase yourself after yourself’ (p.21). The personal voice typically functions as intrusion or interpolation in something else:

me, I’m kind of not here. dust. (p.69)
The texture of the writing is so close and compressed that it is difficult if not impossible to separate out the conventional elements of self, object, situation; what we have is a cognitive process, a highly distinctive consciousness, both embodied and disembodied, which cuts across the usual distinctions and categories, and where one word or image often leads directly on to another, without reference to what preceded it, in a kind of weirdly logical, sometimes dreamlike (or nightmarish) progression. This consciousness is grounded in a strong physical, material and organic sense of the world (which is even more evident in the prose pieces at the end of the book): there are frequent references to the body (hands, eyes, throat, skin, pores) to food and the vegetable (oil, honey, apples, figs, berries, pods) to rocks, metals, fish, insects, animals or beasts. Sometimes these occur as blank, random, factual lists:

from it fall
wool, feather, salt
ash, nitre. (p.66)

At other times, there is a surreal mixing of forms:

a fish standing in a flood changes,
grows hooves in the fins maybe
or maybe its body abates (p.65)

Or a sensuous blending of elements, though the gaps and disjunctions are as important as the substances:

heavy oil unglowing honey
you tell me in my skin and mouth: “the nape” and the fingers are in the hair

i hold the shy bunch
berries maybe or silent beasts

if they fall, will they break?—silence (p.30)
There is also frequently a sense of minute detail, as if the level of magnification had been turned sharply up:

terrible to hold to the light
in the index and thumb
of a skinned grape
a small heart.

when suspended from every finger
swings a world. (p.18)

This physical or material sense of the world is counterbalanced by something which I can only call an abstract imagination, a capacity to express what is not:

lamplight falls into no hand (p.62)

you measure air with your back (p.48)

It is this alliance of sensuous and abstract, present and absent that makes these poems so distinctive, giving an almost tactile sense of void, of what is not. Sometimes the very process of perception is thrown into doubt: ‘the black sea the blue sea’; ‘without a mirror with one’ (p.28). One can take nothing for granted, and in this perhaps one can see a shadow of Heidegger’s Unheimlichkeit, literally not-at-homeness. There is an alternating sense of location and dis-location, familiarity and strangeness, ease and unease. There is also a recurring preoccupation with the internal, with being inside, containment of various kinds:

we have bent the wall so
that all doors are outside
and inside is the sea (p.37)

if the inside of the fog is soft
let’s fall there (p.63)
which blurs the boundary between the inner and outer worlds.
And the very categories of perception are at issue:

the eye which I remember by ear (p.67)

All through there is the effort to articulate, the over-riding need
to speak but the struggle of syntax and the difficulty of words:

Tikhon, I can’t speak, you kept saying
I cannot speak (p.80)

This contains one of the few purely Russian references in the
text which westerners will be unlikely to know: Tikhon was the
last patriarch of the Orthodox church who tried unsuccessfully
to mediate between the church and the new communist regime;
the reference to the hundred-headed city in another poem (p.24)
is to the church council or synod which reduced the power of
the patriarch in the 18th century. There are perhaps some other
allusions to her native country, such as the ‘white nights’ in one
poem, but in general Glazova’s work does not depend on under-
standing location or geographical or cultural setting in the way
that some other poets’ does.

The compression of the writing, however, borders on the
unsayable. Sometimes, for me, a line or phrase simply does not
come across: for example ‘a ringing stream in the knee jar’ (p.25)
or ‘how we mixed’ (p.29). This may be just me, or the inescap-
able import tariff one pays on translation, though I suspect it is
actually a function of the compression of the original, the push-
ing up to a certain limit. But at other times that compression
works superbly, as in one of her finest short poems:

will come and raise up
the broken in stone
the greek to me
and hang it on the wind
what: the unfurlgrass

*
It is not just the density of the imagery that is striking here, but the abrupt halts: (what; will not) and a reflexivity so entwined with the objects of reflection as to be almost inseparable.

It is difficult to place Glazova’s work, but one striking feature is its imagery. To understand the nature of images, we have to go back to Aristotle’s distinction between essential and accidental attributes. Essential attributes are those which are necessary to the definition or identity of something; accidental ones are non-essential or additional. Few philosophers now espouse this kind of essentialism, but we can substitute the idea of habitual use or meaning found in the later Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*: ‘what we call descriptions are instruments for particular purposes’.

Images involve accidental attributes; they highlight aspects of and links between things that we do not usually notice or consider. In this way they enrich our world, and give it a much more associative, complex texture than that of everyday functionality. They create a kind of delicate, often elusive filigree of meaning, providing a surprising and even reassuring sense of the connectedness of things. Some of Glazova’s images are of this kind

the white cloth of a wave at rest (p.46)

and the shadow stretches from the staff (p.19)

cooled on the moist
inside or to be precise with the precision
of a coincidence you look in that direction (p.20)

However, such images typically leave in place the essences or identities of things, the world we recognise, and in that sense are ultimately representational. Glazova’s work goes beyond this, creating a world of pure attributes and qualities: in a word, abstraction.
a ringing stream in the knee jar
a ringing
not heard by a silver hammer
on a gold anvil,

the ringing,
the knee,
not heard

from the golden apple of real summer (p.25)

we have so bent the clear sea
that only night is inside, so we can,
in the dark, in the neon light,
see air and light (p.37)

And it is this which perhaps shows most clearly her deep immersion in phenomenology, because for phenomenologists, the very idea of essence is also to be subjected to its unsparing analysis, and our construction of meaning is just one more feature of the world which has to be de-constructed; after all, how could something so basic be exempt? Glazova does not just enrich the textures of our world; the very urge to relate, construct or associate is caught, held, turned back on itself; the poetic equivalent of Husserl’s ‘presuppositionless philosophy’. And it is this which ultimately places her in a poetics of consciousness rather than a poetics of experience, reflexive rather than reflective, because the very notion of experience contains assumptions which in her writing are themselves exposed and laid bare. There are affinities with abstract painting.

Without knowing Russian, it is difficult to locate her work in terms of what is going on there currently. Glazova’s second language is German, and there are possible connections there too. Certainly, her poetry brings something quite different and even alien into the anglophone bloodstream, and Shearsman is to be congratulated for this opening onto another poetic culture, manifest in some of its other published translations also.
However, it is the individuality of this work that strikes me most; I can think of little other contemporary poetry that is so objective in its concern with things, yet somehow personal, as this.

Geoffrey Squires
TWICE UNDER THE SUN
in the sunflower—
that is: in the sun and in flower—
so are we alive

then only do seeds ripen
when the sun burns their skins,
shields them from the sun with hard night
and no longer milk—
dark-pale oil
fills them.

then only lift my head toward the light
and shield it
with your face
as shade.
* * *

not lighter not farther north
but finer and sharper
flaking away from pain
a little lens, trembling
when held to the light, like a drop
in water.

terrible to hold to the light
in the index and thumb
of a skinned grape
a small heart.

when suspended from every finger
swings a world.
shelled from the pod
in the earth
from rocky pores
and the roe of moles in red shafts

splitting into
rungs a two-tailed
bean whip
climbs the staff of Tiresias
and the face reaches to

stop the sun?

or not separate
the two shoots, but weave
a basket from the stunned snakes.
gather the golden grains
from the dark pods which fall
with a soft thud
to the earth.

and the shadow stretches from the staff.
no lighter than shade
set like a fig
with its ovary
wingless and dry
inside,
coiled on the moist
inside or to be precise: with the precision
of a coincidence you look in that direction,
palms above your head,
and behind the green ribbed wall of your roof
you know one thing.

how he’d set himself free,
if at midnight
the black well of his mind bloomed a hand from his hoof
setting like a fig
or a sky: with the shade inside.
** **

into what one can stay—
it will flow and spill out
and freeze and shiver now steam—
if you stand up and lean stubborn and dip your hot hand
only your tracks will stretch
till there’s no trace.

to stay the hands. to breathe from your palm the print.
to erase yourself after yourself.
Ithaca

turtledoves hide in trees,
hard to breathe without stutter,
like a harpy in a tree sitting
in a shaggy fleece
I have spun and spun
and drawn out what I’d like to forget.

you can’t tell who is brooding
who.

much is born in nests
which none will see in a dream,
and you’ll miss
how winged things turn into ghosts when re-told
like they had never been.

who will teach me to breathe if taken,
not at his word, but at breath;
read this tale of nests in which no one is sailing
and the big eyes of horror
or maybe a child
keep a kernel from being born,
no matter if it’s a nut, a bird or a planet?

and your fear sails inside a whole sphere to Ithaca,
and you sit in it, dimly hoping
that Icarus, wind or a swan
will escape from the knot in your throat.
* * *

go down
careful and light
through the bladder air
through the throat
into the deep breach, the sharp air

a blaze and dust and in the smoke
dig a hole.
keep silent the weight of the worn lung away.
I.
bury it.

in the holehole
horsewhip the smoky wail
of the septagod, pour the ink
and smile with all seven lips—

    sight or unseen

    long story or short

    when is all said or done

—no
the sharp-shooting air
earth.