The Last Drop

Versions of August Stramm

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Also by Alistair Noon:

At the Emptying of Dustbins (Oystercatcher Press)
In People's Park (Penumbra; forthcoming)
Across the Water (Mimesis; e-chapbook)
Swamp Area (Intercapillary Editions; e-chapbook)

As translator:
Monika Rinck: Sixteen Poems (Barque; forthcoming)

As editor:
Seán Rafferty: A Revue (Intercapillary Editions; e-book)

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VERSIONS OF AUGUST STRAMM

0500

The night exhales kisses
around dozing foreheads.
The thud of equipment dulls.
Aggression grasps
and slurs dreams through ruts.
Rumbles grind.
Houses skewer shadows.
Stars well
into eyes
and drown.

Area of Operation

Steel crushes dustily to sleep.
Crimsons fur the sprawled stains.
Rusts run to soil
tissue sheds its membrane
and amputations wink to the worms.
In adolescent eyes
the squint
of killing beyond killing.

Injury

The earth haemorraghes beneath your helmet.
Stars plummet.
A universe gropes around.
Shivers thud
and lonelinesses reel.
Fog
sweats
your eyes
distant.

Devastation

The sky is wind
and bodies march
march
on a thousand
bootsoles.

The sky is wind
and bodies advance
advance
onto a thousand
automatics.

The sky is wind
and bodies crack
crack
into a thousand
fragments.

The sky is wind
but bodies prevail
prevail
from a thousand
positions.

The sky is wind
and bodies tense
tense
into a thousand
black sacks.

The sky is wind
and heartbeats halt
halt
on a thousand
operations.

Evening

Tiredness stitches.
Dullness dims.
Prayers press down.
The wounding sun
caresses you.

Casualty

The sky feathers your eye.
The earth claws your hand.
Air murmurs
mourns
and twines
a widow's statement
through straggle hair.

Frostfire

Toes deaden.
Breath smelts to lead.
Hot needles rummage in fingers.
Your spine snails.
Ears hum coffee.
The fire
swaggers with logs
and
from high in the sky
your simmer heart
shrivelling
cracking
warming
sips a seething sleep.

Watch

The night weighs on the eyelids.
Tiredness flicks and teases.
The enemy snuggles off.
The cigarette glows a drag
lost
and
each room
shivers
shrivelling
small.

Shrapnel

The sky pitches clouds
and ratters to smoke.
Sparks, then spikes.
Feet tap gravel scatterly.
Eyes giggle into confusion
and crave apart.

Patrol

The stones bristle.
Window grins betrayal.
Branches choke.
Ridges bushes rustle brashly.
Yells.
Death.

Wargrave

Sticks plead crossing arms.
Writing shuns pale unidentified.
Flowers brazen.
The dusts are shy.
Glimmer
waters
glazes
forgotten.

Guard Duty

The moon on the minaret scares a star.
A mule gasps for smoke.
Iron jangles dozily.
Fog wafts
a shudder.
Stiffen
to frost,
rub
hush
you.

BLOOD, FLESH AND A PACKET OF TISSUES: PUTTING AUGUST STRAMM INTO ENGLISH

Born in 1874, August Stramm was an idiosyncratic figure in German poetry. An employee of the Berlin post office whose first major piece of writing was a doctoral thesis on the introduction of worldwide postal charges, he came to literature relatively late in life. In the second decade of the twentieth century two important events were to give his writing new impetus. The first was contact with Herwath Walden, who as publisher of the magazine *Der Sturm* was a key mover in early 20th century literary Berlin. Publication and interaction provided Stramm with confirmation that other artists were thinking along similarly radical lines to him. The second event was his mobilization as an infantry reserve officer in 1914. This brought about a decisive shift of subject matter: most of Stramm's anthologized pieces are war poems. He died on the Eastern Front, in Galicia, in 1915.

His work covers four short dramas, some short prose, letters and around seventy mostly very short poems. It isn't a lot, and some of it is now more or less indigestible. I first came across his poetry in an anthology of German Expressionism. Stramm's poetry from, say, 1912/13 certainly jams along some of the same riffs as the other Expressionists, including Georg Heym, Jakob von Hoddis and Georg Trakl, with a strong sense of impending catastrophe (World War I was just around the corner). And Stramm's war poetry employs in part a vocabulary that now seems full of poeticisms: death, blood, flesh…. There are a lot of exclamation marks!

What sets him off from these poets, however, is the very different form he developed. His coining of words, distortion of syntax, weird morphology, shifting of word class, dislocation of meaning and use of synaesthesia in fact owe virtually nothing to Expressionism and much to the Futurism of Marinetti (though without the latter's glorification of First World War combat as a means of creating protofascist Future Man). Stramm was also a starting point for the German, and in particular Austrian experimental literary tradition. Both his significance in the canon and his biography are summed up in a poem by Ernst Jandl, which begins: 'he august stramm / abridged very / the german poem // him august stramm / the first world war / abridged …' (my rough translation: the unusual syntax is a feature of the original).

Another interesting comparison for me was the sheer difference in form and tone between Stramm's battlefield poetry and that of his Anglophone contemporaries, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, to say nothing of Rupert Brooke. Instead of sonnets and ironic quotations from Horace ('Dulce et Decorum est…'), we get radically reduced avant-garde poetics. A typical Stramm war poem begins with a multi-word line, gradually disappearing to a single word, and then space: a kind of working back to zero. This represents a quite different approach to that of much

poetic form (such as the sonnet), which works up to a climax roughly half- to two-thirds of the way through the poem, and then gradually releases.

As an example of some of the issues I was facing, I'll briefly discuss my attempt at one of Stramm's best-known pieces (1). My intention in translating this poem was to create an autonomous object which would work on its own terms rather than refer the reader to the original. Some translations of poetry make deliberate use of a slightly antiquated vocabulary in order to draw attention to the original's historical nature: W.G. Shepherd's fine Horace translations in the Penguin Classics series are an example of this. But in the case of Stramm, whose reputation in English is only just beginning to be established, I felt his poetry would be best served by a translation that might pull readers in rather than assume their willingness to make historical allowances. Which is why I'll begin with the translation instead of the original, and why, when giving a title to my set of twelve translations, I took the translator's cop-out by calling them versions.

Area of operation

Steel crushes dustily to sleep.
Crimsons fur the sprawled stains.
Rusts run to soil
tissue sheds its membrane
and amputations wink to the worms.
In adolescent eyes
the squint
of killing beyond killing.

And here's the original Stramm:

Schlachtfeld

Schollenmürbe schläfert ein das Eisen
Blute filzen Sickerflecke
Roste krumen
Fleische schleimen
Saugen brünstet um Zerfallen.
Mordesmorde
Blinzen
Kinderblicke.

Having given myself the brief of making a translation that might show Stramm's best side, I was faced with the problem of what to do with the typically Expressionist flourishes of 'Blut', 'Mord' and 'Kinder'. Blood? Murder? Children? It's starting to sound like Macbeth. Or worse: horror-kitsch. In each of these cases I made a less direct, though contextually possible translation that I hoped wouldn't make Stramm

turn in his grave too much, down in the leafy Berlin suburb of Zehlendorf. I replaced the literal translations with 'crimson', 'killing' and 'adolescent', respectively. 'Fleisch' (in the sense of flesh) also had to go, in favour of 'tissue'. Here I plead the defence of sound effects: 'tissue' allows me an alliteration of 'sh' sounds together with 'sheds', which re-enacts the original's 'Fleische schleimen'. Where I really go off into outer space is line 5 ('Saugen brünstet um Zerfallen'). In a translation that takes something like the historical approach I outlined above, Michael Hamburger has 'sucking lusts around decay' (2). My translation ('…amputations wink to the worms') is associative perhaps to the point of charlatanry, but true, I would hope, to the spirit of Stramm's war poetry and formal technique, if not to the words on the page. I did call it a version.

Elsewhere, I was also concerned to preserve the sheer strangeness of the original, which seems to me a key feature of Stramm's poetic. In the first line, Hamburger plausibly interprets 'das Eisen' as the object of 'einschläfern', and 'schollenmürbe' as a noun and the subject of the phrase, coming up with 'Yielding clod lulls iron off to sleep'. I interpreted 'schollenmürbe' (literally, something like 'clod-crumbly') as a made-up adverb and 'das Eisen' (iron) as a delayed subject (comparison will show that I made further changes in this line too: I discuss my reasons for doing so below). The notion of metal falling asleep seems to me typical of the way that Stramm brings inanimate objects to life, hence, probably, my instinctive parsing of 'Eisen' as the subject. Cross-checking with native speakers didn't get me much further: the line is simply ambiguous, enacting the disorientation of warfare within its syntax.

Smoothness or strangeness: that is the question. In first drafts, I couldn't get the literal meaning of 'Sicker-' (from the verb for 'to seep', line 2) to work with the other words in the line, but I visualized corpses lying around the battlefield, hence 'sprawled'. Stains don't usually sprawl, and if they're sprawled then who did the sprawling, but this dislocation of agency is quite typical of Stramm and an element I wanted to emphasize (subsequent redrafting made the more literal 'seeping' an option again, but I decided to stay with 'sprawled' in order to translate this part of Stramm's technique). I made a stab at getting Stramm's non-standard usage of plurals ('Blute', 'Roste') over into English ('crimsons', 'rusts'), but capitulated at 'tissues' for 'Fleische' because of possible associations with Kleenex.

As part of my effort to create something that lives in its own right, I was also cheeky enough to introduce an anachronism into the title (a literal translation would be 'Battlefield', with associations of 'slaughter', of which 'Schlacht' is a cognate). In the first line I swap iron for steel, and the mud of the trenches for dust. The sum effect of these changes is to transpose the setting of the poem from Flanders or Galicia to some of the present-day locations of violent conflict. In a way, this reflects my motivation for translating Stramm: a reaction to the original which is my own mental

'writing' of the poem in all its aspects: emotional, imagistic, auditory, syntactic and semantic.

NOTES

(1) I'm grateful to Nick Grindell for pointing out a clear mistranslation in my version of Stramm's poem as it appeared on this piece's first publication. Line two has been changed accordingly.
(2) August Stramm, 'Battlefield', trans. Michael Hamburger,
http://www.philipgrae.dabsol.co.uk/war/ww1/battle.htm, accessed 26.09.2006.