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New Poems by Rainer Maria Rilke (review)

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ably by Cohen's essay on the social composition of the student body in late imperial Austria, nevertheless may have worked better in tandem with the third volume. The essays in that book lack thematic unity. Taschwer's fascinating investigation of anti-Semitism at the University and Fleck's look at Austrian fellows of the Rockefeller Foundation enrich the social considerations of the second volume but do not connect well to Arens's exploration of representations of the university in Austrian literature. Essays on *Balkanforschung* and the Campus Vienna Biocenter, while adding international considerations to the overall picture, add to the scattershot feel.

For anyone interested in the University of Vienna, *650 Jahre* is an indispensable resource. Despite its shortcomings, they do not invalidate its strengths. The work presents a conceptually sophisticated and historically diverse portrait of Austria's flagship institution of higher education. The impressive list of contributors attests to the current state of scientific research in Austria itself, and the essays provide a needed introduction to many subjects. While better read selectively than cover to cover, the project succeeds as a reference work and as a critical reflection on the meaning of the university—both historically and in the contemporary world.

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Rainer Maria Rilke, *New Poems*. Translation by Len Krisak. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2015. 392 pp.

Len Krisak's new translation of Rilke's *New Poems* consists of the translator's preface, George Schoolfield's introduction, and, of course, the poems themselves.

In his preface, Krisak tells readers he came to Rilke's *New Poems* when he was asked to translate "The Archaic Torso of Apollo" for a class assignment. With no previous knowledge of the German language, he armed himself with a German-English dictionary and the work of earlier translators, including J. B. Leishman and Edward Snow, and, as he was instructed, "figured it out." Over the course of nearly two decades, Krisak taught himself the German language by translating Rilke's *Neue Gedichte*. Although not an ordinary strategy for learning a major European language, Krisak's technique (eventually) resulted in the current volume. With the aim of "poetry above all" in this

new publication, Krisak brought “Rilke’s *New Poems* over into English” (xi). In choosing the word “over,” Krisak suggests a crossing over of some border or divide. Paul Riceour might invoke the words of Friedrich Schleiermacher to describe this process as “bringing the author to the reader.” It is now up to the reader to come to the author.

Schoolfield’s introduction helps the reader do just that—to come to Rilke. By beginning with a simple count of the translations of Rilke’s *New Poems*—Krisak’s is the fifth—Schoolfield reminds readers that these poems are not easy to translate. (By comparison, for example, more than twenty-five separate translations of Rilke’s *Duineser Elegien* exist.) Thus readers know from the outset that Krisak faced and dealt with the technical challenges of bringing Rilke’s *New Poems* poems “over” into English. Schoolfield takes only eighteen lines to identify the importance of Krisak’s translation. In a word: vitality. As Schoolfield puts it, “Krisak’s translation [. . .] comes closest to replicating Rilke’s poems’ vitality and their subtleties of diction and form” (xvii).

Schoolfield’s talent for providing knowledgeable background is everywhere evident in his introduction to these *New Poems*. He provides helpful insights into the events and people that informed Rilke before and during his writing of the *New Poems*. In particular, he calls attention to Rilke’s time in Paris, his travels and correspondence with Lou Salomé, his boyhood education, and Rilke’s ability to “squirrel” away poems until just the right moment (xxi). Schoolfield’s narrative takes into account the two books Rilke always kept in his possession and the influence of Cezanne, especially on the poems in the second half of Part Two. Schoolfield also provides a helpful tour through the volume (xxv–xxx). Schoolfield unearths a letter from Rilke to his publisher outlining plans for a *third* volume of *Neue Gedichte*. These scattered fragments appeared in later works of Rilke.

Now to the real gems of the volume, Rilke’s poems themselves. A comparison of Krisak’s translation of the final two stanzas of Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” the opening poem of Part 2, which includes the well-known half-line “Du mußt dein Leben ändern,” reveals what Schoolfield refers to as Krisak’s “advantage in the naturalness of his diction and the vitality of his verse” (xvii).

Rilke:

Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz
unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz
und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle

und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern
 aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
 die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.

J.B. Leishman:

Or else this stone would not stand so intact
 beneath the shoulders' through-seen cataract
 and would not glisten like a wild beast's skin;

 and would not keep from all its contours giving
 light like a star: for there's no place therein
 that does not see you. You must change your living.

Snow:

Otherwise this stone would stand deformed and curt
 under the shoulders' invisible plunge
 and not glisten just like wild beasts' fur;

 and not burst forth from all its contours
 like a star: for there is no place
 that does not see you. You must change your life.

Krisak:

This stone would stand like something maimed and lopped-
 off under shoulders lucent as they dropped.
 It would not glimmer like a panther skin,

 or from what holds it in, burst like a star.
 For there's no place from which you can't be seen.
 Begin now: you must change the life you are. (173)

Krisak argues that his translation stems from Rilke's sonnet form, which requires the last line to rhyme with the line two above it. It is, perhaps, as Krisak suggests, "time for a new beginning" (xii). Whether the reader takes Krisak's translation at face value or in comparison with other translators, the freshness of his translation is apparent.

Krisak's translation of "Spanish Dancer," for example, highlights Rilke's keen ability to interweave ideas as in a tapestry. After linking the ideas of the flare of a match and a dance in the first seven lines of the poem, Rilke writes:

Mit einem Blick entzündet sie ihr Haar
 und dreht auf einmal mit gewagter Kunst
 ihr ganzes Kleid in diese Feuersbrunst,
 aus welcher sich, wie Schlangen die erschrecken,
 die nackten Arme wach und klappernd strecken.

Krisak translates:

With just a glance, she touches off her hair.
 And all at once, with darting art, she turns
 her dress entirely to fire. It burns,
 and from it comes—each one a writhing snake—
 two naked, stretching arms, clapping awake (129).

The Spanish dancer is not the only one with darting art. Krisak allows Rilke to guide the reader's attention from hair to fire to snake to arms. This stanza illustrates how images evolve naturally in Rilke's *New Poems*. The "vitality" of Krisak's translation is everywhere present in these five lines, along with more than a hint of a fiery-spirited Rilke.

In the end, then, Krisak's translation of the *New Poems* offers readers a fresh opportunity to consider not only Rilke's poetry but also Rilke himself. Lou Salomé, for one, was looking for him in these poems. "I am still searching for you in them [*New Poems*]," Salomé wrote to Rilke on June 17, 1909, "as in a very dense forest that contains many hiding places. And I am enjoying both finding and seeking." Echoing F. J. Sheed's thoughts on Augustine and his *Confessions*, Rilke gives us his poems and he gives us himself in the process. It is up to readers to find him. Krisak's translation of the *New Poems* will help.

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