

METAMORPHOSES

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REVIEW: NIELS FRANK, *PICTURE WORLD*. TRANSLATED BY ROGER GREENWALD. TORONTO: BOOK THUG, 2011. 72 PP. ISBN 9781897388853.

Niels Frank was born in the small East Jutland town of Brædstrup in 1963. He published his first poetry collection in 1985, while still a student at Aarhus University. After obtaining his master's in literary history he joined the faculty of the newly established Copenhagen writers' workshop, where he served as director from 1996 to 2002 after its founder died. He has published seven volumes of poetry, one book of photographs, one of art-historical essays, and four other prose collections. Just this year he published the novel, *Nellies bog*. Apart from a medal and three prizes, the poet was awarded a life-long stipend in 2008. His work attracted the attention of Roger Greenwald, one of the best translators of Scandinavian poetry in the U.S. and winner of too many prizes to list here. In 2011, Greenwald made Frank's multifaceted poem *En Vej* (2005), available in English under the title *Picture World*. The translator has done a superb job. Greenwald's poetry reads like good English poetry, and can stand alone. Yet, it is also remarkably close, or faithful--to use a term it is now fashionable to question--to the source text.

Frank's work is not easy to understand in either Danish or English. He reminds me of T. S. Eliot; in fact, *Picture World* is similar in length to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but divided into twenty-four parts rather than only five. Written in open form, it is a dramatic monologue in one voice like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," As in that Eliot poem, the monologue is aimed at one listener and confidante, a "you." Unlike *The Waste Land*, which has been called a depiction of post-WWI society, *Picture World* is more modest in scope. Its ambition does not extend beyond showing the speaker's subjective world. While mood, topics and opinions restlessly change, and we do find occasional humor, there is nevertheless an overall tone of mid-life weariness very similar to that in "Prufrock."

Like its Danish source, the translation begins abruptly without a preface. Because it is the first publication in English of any of Niels Frank's work and also because the text is not immediately accessible, an introduction would have been very helpful. Such an introduction or preface might also have explained why Greenwald decided not to translate Frank's title "En Vej" as "One Way," but named the poem "Picture

World.” However, the more I read, the more I had to admit that he chose well. In fact, by the end of the first of the 24 parts, we are told that the world the speaker describes is an image, a depiction. While he begins his address by pointing out road signs, and these are a recurring motif, other images, including travel photographs, increase in importance as the speaker reveals his disillusionment with language.

The poem touches on so many subjects that it’s difficult at first to determine what it is about. However, in one of the first lines, the speaker says, “I’d very much like to show you a world / or at least, *my* world.” This intention would justify packing everything the “I” sees, feels, and thinks into the poem. What stands out very clearly is the speaker’s continuous, earnest effort to convey all these experiences to a listener. At the same time he often despairs of the task because he can’t assume common ground: “There is a lot to say about it / but no way to say it... You see / I don’t understand what the world looks like / to someone who has never traveled it.” In addition, words seem inadequate. He starts over several times: “Let me try again.” Pictures, which the speaker sees as conflicting with words, provide a surer way of communication. In short, the poem seems to be about the speaker’s private, “inner” world and his efforts to share it with someone else.

As with T.S. Eliot’s “Prufrock,” just who this companion and listener is remains an enigma. The last lines tell us that he died “that morning,” but don’t reveal if he was more than a device, a sounding board without response, who dies a symbolic death when he is no longer needed. As he frequently addresses this companion, the speaker draws us in as listeners and readers who feel equally addressed. As he pours out what often seems like a stream of consciousness of his waking hours and dreams between one summer and the next in a register more informal than Eliot’s, to someone who has never lived in his personal world, the poet creates a sense of intimacy.

Only a bilingual example can give an idea of Greenwald’s achievement. Although it is not possible, much of the time, to reproduce the Danish word order in English, Greenwald has come as close as he can in idiomatic English that reads smoothly, with no hint of translationalness. He has reproduced the end-stopped lines, the number of beats per line, alliteration, and where possible, has substituted verb with verb and noun with noun, as in the second-last and last lines—note also the word play. Nearly the entire translation reads as well as this.

METAMORPHOSES

Desillusion afledt af illudere: i leg eller i spil.
Og illudere af ludere: at lege eller at spille.
Okay. Så er desillusion legen der ikke længere er helt godt
de glade dage er ikke længere rigtigt glade.
Desillusion som når forhænget er gået ned for sidste gang.
Desillusion: øjeblikket efter at stykket er slut
øjeblikket efter klapsalverne lægger sig
og man kanter sig ud mellem stolerækkerne
vakler tilbage til tilværelsen som ikke længere er til at være i.

3.

Disillusionment derived from illudere: to play in or act in.
And illudere from ludere: to play or to act.
Okay. Then disillusionment is the game that's no longer going well
The happy days that are no longer really happy.
Disillusionment is when the curtain has fallen for the last time.
Disillusionment: the moment after the play is over
The moment after the applause has died down
and you edge your way between the rows
Staggering back to an existence you can no longer exist in.

For the most part, Greenwald has reproduced the everyday speech of an educated man quite well and rarely slips, so when he does, it is all the more noticeable. This sometimes happens with words whose meaning adapts to their context, such as “jamen.” It ranges from a resigned “oh well” to the mild protest of the literal “yes but.” In part 3, following the quoted lines about illusion and disillusionment, “jamen” is not likely to mean “well,” as Greenwald has translated it. What comes right after is the contrasting, very concrete, possibly Latin American scene, with vendors selling food on a railroad platform. In my opinion, that “well” should be replaced by “yes but,” or simply “but.” “Jamen” as “but” also makes sense on p. 19 where Greenwald says, “playing and playing and playing / until, well—until what, actually? / Until it’s time to go home and rest. / And don’t give me any / well / well. / Until it’s time to go home and rest. / I’ll only say it / once.” Here the third and fourth “jamen” ought to express the children’s mild protests in the form of “yes, but”’s or simply “but.” The exclamation “Herregud” shows a similar elasticity of meaning. While it

could be translated as “Oh my,” as Greenwald does, (and, together with “tut tut,” this is one of the suggestions in Gyldendal’s *Winterberg & Bodelsen* dictionary), the translator is not dealing with a shocked society hostess here. “Good Lord.” or “Come on!” are among several other options that suit Frank’s language better.

These are minor slips. A more important issue is the use of the English “you” as an indefinite pronoun here, because, in this long and intense address to an implied conversation partner, the indefinite “you” which includes us readers may be confused with the speaker’s specific companion/listener. Danish makes a clear distinction between second person singular “du” or plural “i” and the indefinite pronoun “man,” which appears in almost every part of the poem. The first instance is in part 1, where the source says, “Der er intet at se og alligevel kan man aldrig få nok af at se intet”—translated as, “There is nothing to see / and still you always want to see more of nothing.” (p. 10) and 9 lines below that, “Så ved man da hvor man skal hen.” At least you know where you’re going.” After addressing his friend or reader as “you,” confusion is sometimes inevitable, especially when both the specific and the indefinite “you” appear close together. Greenwald no doubt sought to avoid using the unambiguous “one,” because it sounds overly formal for this text. A good alternative might be “we”, as in, “at least we know where we’re going,” though in some cases, that substitution can also mislead, as when it seems to unite the speaker and implied listener in a shared undertaking. Without a solution to this dilemma, the correct interpretation of “you” is left to the reader, as in the second-last line of the translation segment quoted above: “and you edge your way between the rows,” where the poet used the indefinite “man.”

A bilingual edition would have been welcome, not only because the reader would enjoy recognizing some of the source words that entered the English language over 1,000 years ago, but also because languages of limited diffusion like Danish need support to keep them alive. That said, it’s a pleasure to listen to the bilingual reading of the three parts of the poem its publisher Book Thug allows us to listen to on its website, precisely because in both Frank’s Danish and Greenwald’s English, the poem is quirky, contradictory, and mind-expanding.