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Translations from Edvard Munch

Conversation

Drachmann lies
in his urn. The
large figure is gathered
up in one
little handful of dust.
We were together
a few months ago
—in the mind's eye
the picture still stands
as if on a photographic plate
—fresh as if he
had just stepped aside.
In my ear I hear
his voice, as

clearly as if the words had just
been spoken, as on a
gramophone.
“Yes, here...
dear friend....”
The words were round
and soft.

"All is fire—and
movement," I said.
“We burn like
trees... and all....”
“Yes, yes,” said he.
“We are flames
which pour out of
the earth.”

[Youth]

He had never kissed before.

Next time he must do it only, only if he dared. We sat opposite each other. Our eyes met. A red glow over it all.

Then she sat up straight in the sofa and leaned her head against the back of the sofa. Now I had to examine a curious pattern in the upholstery, so I leaned down toward her so our cheeks were close and I felt how near to each other we were.

[From Edvard Munch's unpublished journals (Munch 1863-1944). The translations were originally published in the New York journal *Open City* 9 (1999). Holger Drachmann was a Danish author and painter (1846-1908).]

On art

Et kunstverk er en krystall—som krystallen har sjel og vilje, må kunstverket ha det. —Det er ikke nok at kunstverket har riktige ytre planer og linjer. Når der kastes en sten på en flokk gutter, rykker de fra hverandre. Der blir en omgruppering, det er sjedd en handling. Det er en komposisjon. Å gjengi denne omgruppering ved farger, linjer og flater er et kunstnerisk og malerisk motiv.—Det behøver ikke å være “literært”—dette skjellsord mange bruker på malerier som ikke forestiller epler på en duk eller en itubrukken fiolin.

[From Ragna Stang, *Edvard Munch: Mennesket og Kunstneren* (Oslo: H. Aschehoug, 1977), 260]

Translation:

An artwork is a crystal—just as the crystal has soul and will, the artwork must have them too. It is not enough that the artwork has proper exterior planes and lines. When you throw a rock at a bunch of boys, they scatter in all directions. There's a regrouping, an action takes place. That is a composition. To reproduce this regrouping with colours, lines and planes is an artistic and pictorial motif. It doesn't have to be “literary.” This insult many use for paintings which don't present apples on a table cloth or a violin broken in two.

Translator's notes:

What are the choices a translator faces? Consider the two adjectives “kunstnerisk og malerisk” (“artistic and pictorial”) in the next-to-last sentence above. “[K]unstnerisk” is “artistic.” The Norwegian word *malerisk* is translated *artistic*, *picturesque*, or *painterly* in modern Norwegian-English dictionaries. The first adjective, “artistic,”

has been used to translate *kunstnerisk*; the second has special connotations of the “quaintly attractive” (*American Heritage Dictionary*) which Munch is unlikely to have had in mind. The third, “painterly,” has often been used to translate the German *malerisch* since Heinrich Wölfflin gave it a special meaning to distinguish it from the term “linear” in *Principles of Art History* (German ed., 1915; English trans., 1932). Older dictionaries also give “pictorial” as an English equivalent for the Norwegian *malerisk*. Munch’s older “Dano-Norwegian” seems to call for “pictorial” as the right word for *malerisk*.

But surely the conception of throwing a rock (I guess that would be a “stone” in the UK), the scattering and the regrouping—seen as an analogy for the artist’s construction of an artistic and pictorial motif—that is the reason the quotation from Munch is striking, amusing and memorable. Munch’s writing is like that. It is full of surprises and fresh ways of seeing. He does not want anything as conventional as apples on a table cloth or a broken violin on his canvas. And a violin broken in two may even have the effect of Kitsch, the ready-made flavour Munch abhorred. [J.G.H.]