

ÁRNI IBSEN
A DIFFERENT SILENCE
SELECTED POEMS

Translated by Árni Ibsen and Pétur Knútsson



harwood academic publishers

Australia • Canada • France • Germany • India • Japan • Luxembourg
Malaysia • The Netherlands • Russia • Singapore • Switzerland

Copyright © 2000 Árni Ibsen. Published by license under the Harwood Academic Publishers imprint, part of The Gordon and Breach Publishing Group.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. Printed in Singapore.

Amsteldijk 166
1st Floor
1079 LH Amsterdam
The Netherlands

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Ibsen, Árni

A different silence: selected poems. – (Poets' voices; v. 2)

1. Ibsen, Árni – Translations into English

I. Title II. Knútsson, Pétur

839.6'914

ISBN 90-5755-125-X

Cover illustration: detail from *Sólarátt* (*Sunwards*), oil on canvas (180 × 200 cm)
1995, by Eiríkur Smith

Preface: on textual equality

Regretfully, the eye travels from left to right. This is the carrier signal, the fundamental bias of the medium, the ever-present noise. It is the thunder in the ear of the translator.

The Icelandic text is printed on the left-hand page, the position of authority. And never, as Árne and I bounced words and phrases in English and Icelandic back and forth to each other across the table, did we manage to shake this authority; not by a careless comma could we restitch the Icelandic text. It was inviolate, canonical, charted in the amino acids of our textuality. The translation, to which the eye travels painfully over the spine, was always constructed in this feudal space.

Or so the story goes. And those who are happy with this preface so far should stop reading now, and turn straight to the translations, confident that since the poet himself had a hand in their making they must be faithful renditions, with here and there perhaps a hint of Icelandic behind the dapper English: in a word, *authoritative* translations.

Others will want to raise at least one question: can a poem ever remain unchanged by its translation? Surely not, at any rate, in such proximity. For most of its life, this book will stand on the shelf, each poem pressed close to its translation in full frontal embrace. This is of course a trivial figure, but it is trivial only because, closed on the shelf, the printed page is meaningless: the text does not begin to exist until deciphered by a competent reader, who knows the language and can interpret the symbols. And then, when the book lies open on the reader's knees, the real cohabitation of poem and translation begins, each text basking in the bright gaze of its opposite like two right-angled mirrors exchanging twinned realities. No poem is an island; without its swarming native community of poems and translations of poems it would not be a poem, but an oddity, an artefact of unknown function. Its significance, even its existence (*pace* Louis MacNeice), relies on its context. A poem cannot *be*; it can only *be part of something*; and in a bilingual edition such as this one, the closest partner of every poem is its immediate translation.

These days, such partnerships are based on true equality: neither wears the trousers, the feudal code is broken. At times, Árni and I found ourselves at a loss in this equalitarian society, our discourse foundering on the proper forms of address. The complexity was overwhelming. Words have at least four different properties which are activated in the translation process: they have lexical meaning, which is their weakest attribute; they have shape and form, which is their physical and most palpable attribute; they have immediate context, in that they are closely linked to their present company in the text; and they have their own preferred context, the words they choose to consort with, companions of their free choice. The first two properties, lexical meaning and form, are those which explicitly migrate between languages, and power the visible machinery of translation. Traditionally, meaning is the nobler of these two, and form is the poorer companion whose rude but necessary presence may not be allowed to intrude upon the meaning and so upset the sensibilities of the critics. We are, of course, a little shy of the critics.

The other two properties, immediate and preferred context, are those which spawn the thick and variegated undergrowth in which we the translators begin to lose our bearings, staggering with each swish of the machete, forever plunging into new metaphors. This is the Forest of Non-Direction, the Broceliande where the traveller risks wandering out of the text; here we wrestle with words and contexts, blundering into new uncharted regions, bewildered by the flashing synapses of the trailing creepers. Here is where the curled margins of the text break open and reform, where the directionality of left and right becomes meaningless. In the diffused light of the forest it is not always easy to distinguish the mirror from its reflection: instead of the authorial structures of the original poem on the left, and the tangled uncertainties of the translation on the right, we find a new order asserting itself. Again and again we find it is the translation, with its coarse echoes and facile detours, which stands unshaken, incontestable, asserting its own authority: not disputing, not argumentative, but not always compliant.

The two texts in the twinned mirrors regard each other with a new-found respect. And for a brief while, the thunder is silenced.

Pétur Knútsson