

BRIAN HENRY

Translation as Summoning: Christian Hawkey's *Ventrakl*

Ventrakl, by Christian Hawkey. Brooklyn, New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2010.

"Always, when I went looking for him, he was there."

The neologistic title of Christian Hawkey's *Ventrakl* combines "ventricle" and the surname of German poet Georg Trakl, while also gesturing toward "ventriloquy," combining heart and voice in a simultaneously inspired and problematic attempt to reach the dead poet. Throughout *Ventrakl*, Hawkey summons Trakl, "interviews" him, and works "with" him while engaging with Trakl's poems, photographs, and biography. Despite its fashionable references (Walter Benjamin, George Oppen, Jack Spicer) and multigenretude, *Ventrakl* ultimately emerges as a deeply sad, deeply felt book: Hawkey's attempt at friendship necessarily remains a futile one, however hard he tries to bring Trakl into the room. Identified as "a collaboration," *Ventrakl* cannot be a true collaboration between (near-)equals, but is one in which the only active and willing participant (the living poet) manipulates various aspects of the work and life of the passive participant (the dead poet). Trakl's solitary nature, his addictions, his difficult family life, and his attraction to (and ultimate success at) suicide make him an unlikely collaborator—certainly less likely than Spicer's Lorca, the most salient precursor to Hawkey's Trakl. Because Hawkey approaches Trakl less as a professional translator seeking a source than as a poet seeking a kindred spirit, this lack of actual connection becomes both a point of regret and a driving force for Hawkey. *Ventrakl* emerges as a complex seance as well as a significant work of "transwriting."

Four epigraphs follow Hawkey's preface, which itself includes two epigraphs (by Pound and Mallarmé). These four epigraphs speak to various aims of *Ventrakl*. Oppen's ("Possible / To use / Words provided one treat them / As enemies. / Not enemies—Ghosts.") alludes here to the ghosting that Hawkey would have Trakl do throughout this book. Henri Michaux's ("Grasp: translate. And everything is translation at

every level, in every direction.") embraces the multivalent possibilities of translation, as well as the desperation of the act, and clears a space of permission for Hawkey's project. Trakl's own epigraph ("Golden cloud and time. In a lonely room / You often ask the dead to visit you") seems to speak directly to Hawkey, initiator of this seance. (It would seem fitting for Hawkey to have an epigraph, then, given the book's self-identification with collaboration.) Robert Walser's epigraph, from his poem "To Georg Trakl" ("In any strange land I would / read you, even at home") almost seems to stand in for Hawkey, who attempts to make a "strange land" of "home" by fusing Trakl's world and his own to create a between-space. Because these quotes are epigraphs, they attain a particular kind of visibility within the book, governing the page between Hawkey's preface and the book's second title page. But other quotes—from Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Spicer, Robert Duncan—are scattered throughout the book, each on its own page, expanding the conversation enacted by and within the book—a compellingly morbid conversation among Hawkey and the dead.

Ventrakl's first "chapter," "Neither of Us Is Powerless," offers a hopeful assertion but also, finally, an impossible one. The impossibility of Hawkey's aim here is a large part of what makes *Ventrakl* so fascinating and troubling—the inevitable futility of, yet Hawkey's persistence in, calling to Trakl in these pages. The title appears at the end of Hawkey's meditation on a photograph of Trakl:

You seem and do not seem to be holding a cigarette, the
chewed end of a cigar, a shell. It seems to me a small camera
pointed at the one taking the photograph, the one for whom
you pretend not to be posing.

I see you, you seem to say. Neither of us is powerless.

But Trakl's "power" is illusory, projected by Hawkey even if felt by him. Trakl is not, cannot be, holding a small camera. He cannot be turning a lens back onto the photographer. Hawkey's gesture here, his desire to animate Trakl, transfer authority to Trakl, or at least share authority with him, is bound to fail, yet does so poignantly.

"Neither of Us Is Powerless" opens with a direct address to Trakl in that photograph: "You are, clearly, on a beach." The word "clearly," which here means something like "evidently" or "obviously" (since it's obvious that Trakl is standing on a beach), acquires additional resonance, because in *Ventrakl* so little is actually clear. By beginning with an irrefutable statement, Hawkey seems to be preparing himself, and

us, for the numerous irresolvabilities that follow. It's as if Hawkey needs to begin on firm ground before moving into the murk.

The photograph of Trakl appears, ostensibly in full, on the following page (18), with two details—highly pixellated enlargements of a mother and two children in the water behind Trakl and of Trakl's hand, holding the impossible camera—appearing on pages 20 and 22. This hyper-focus appears again in the book, albeit in a more abstract and memorably bizarre fashion, when Hawkey stares his way into Trakl's ear, via a portrait, until he is using the stapes of the ear as a swing, holding the "tiny bones" of the ear to "try to swing within inches of [Trakl's] brain."

In his musings on the beach scene, Hawkey connects what he sees behind Trakl—"the mother and two children in the background . . . standing (it seems) on the surface of the mineral-heavy water; the mother lowers a string into the depths, the boy tilts toward her, the girl stands one step back from the hole"—to Trakl's seemingly benign but suddenly fraught posture in the photograph: "you, leaning forward as if running—or falling—into the hole, the chloroform hole, the cigarette hole, the opium hole, the morphine hole, the veronal hole, the cocaine hole, the mouth hole, the nose hole, the vein hole, the food hole, the language hole, breathing hole, word hole." "Here," Hawkey writes, "a history of holes and what we put inside them, lose inside them." *Ventrakl*, then, is a book of holes—holes in biography, holes in the poems' transference from one language to another, holes in the poems themselves (as when Hawkey apparently prepares a translation with a shotgun).

This intense seeing with the photographs also transfers to Hawkey's practice of reading. Homophonic and homographonic translations form a major current of *Ventrakl*, as a living American poet makes poems by Englishing a dead German poet's work, recalling the "Impossible Effigies" chapter in Daniel Tiffany's *Radio Corpse*, which examines the fetishistic, haunted, "phantasmatic," cryptic, zombie-esque, channeling, and even "abusive" aspects of translating the dead. Hawkey himself remarks on "the singular performances of decay and decomposition" in *Ventrakl*, and muses, "perhaps when I leave this room I should see myself as a corpse, a zombie, a limb thudding onto the floor . . ." Hawkey's strategy here also nods to George Steiner's notion of translation as "interanimation," which is "a process of totally attentive interpenetration" that leads to "the establishment of mutual identity through conjunction."

Within the context of *Ventrakl*, some of Hawkey's homophonic translations of Trakl seem curious if not questionable. They present

the reader with a unique challenge, since Hawkey employs different translation techniques but never specifically identifies them. The reader, then, does not know how to read many of the poems in relation to the originals. This is, of course, intentional, and Hawkey clearly wants the reader to feel a certain level of discomfort, or at least uncertainty. (At one point, Hawkey claims that he wanted "to trouble Benjamin's distinctions between poet and translator," and elsewhere he asks "Who is writing then?") In a way, he is illuminating the slippage of translation itself, challenging the conventions of what a poem, a translation, and a collaboration should be, working to stretch—not satisfy—the reader's expectations. Just as the reader of *Ventrakl* cannot tell how faithfully rendered a particular translation is, how much is Hawkey and how much is Trakl, any poem translated from one language into another, however faithfully, presents a similar problem: the translator's involvement, or encroachment. At times, Hawkey uses phrases that reflect upon rather than emanate from Trakl's poems: "Only sounds, dissected, profit you." Such moments offer fleeting interpretations dependent on Hawkey's time and culture, Trakl's time, and Hawkey's understanding of Trakl's poetry and knowledge of Trakl's life. Sometimes, though, Hawkey's creative translations unnecessarily obscure or outshine the original.

Consider "Dust Rounds," a homophonic version of Trakl's "Das Grauen," or "The Horror," which in the original reads:

Das Grauen

Ich sah mich durch verlass'ne Zimmer gehn.
 Die Sterne tanzten irr auf blauem Grunde,
 Und auf den Feldern heulten laut die Hunde,
 Und in den Wipfeln wühlte wild der föhn.

Doch plötzlich: Stille! Dumpfe Fieberglut
 Läßt giftige Blumen blühn aus meinem Munde,
 Aus dem Geäst fällt wie aus einer Wunde
 Blaß schimmernd Tau, und fällt, und fällt wie Blut.

Aus eines Spiegels trügerischer Leere
 Hebt langsam sich, und wie ins Ungefähre
 Aus Graun und Finsternis ein Antlitz: Kain!

Sehr leise rauscht die samtene Portiere,
 Durchs Fenster schaut der Mond gleichwie ins Leere,
 Da bin mit meinem Mörder ich allein.

Here is a conventional translation of the poem:

The Horror

I watched myself walk through abandoned rooms.
Stars were dancing madly on the blue ground,
And in the fields dogs howled loud,
And in the treetops the wind moved wild.

But suddenly: silence! A dull feverglow
Makes poisonous flowers bloom from my mouth,
Pale shimmering dew falls from the branches
As from a wound, and falls, and falls like blood.

From a mirror's deceptive emptiness
A face rises slow and vague
From the horror and darkness: Cain!

So quiet the velvet curtain's rustling,
The moon gazes through the window as into emptiness,
I am alone there with my murderer.

Hawkey transmutes Trakl's German into

Dust Rounds

I saw dust mites lurch through deserted rooms.
I saw a tungsten-blue blossom on her sternum.

A plot licks stillness. Dumbness fevers
The last albumen effigies of a miniature world.

Only geese with kindness shimmer
And, once blasted, fall in red blurts.

Down a loneliness-stick inner spangles
Issue tears, and we in unguent failure

Are drawn to this spinsterish ant-light.
Note, for example, the red eyes of sumptuous porters.

The orphans shouting at fences. How they glisten,
At night, with the dimwit mien of an alien order.

Clearly, the meaning of the original has been cast aside. That's what homophonic translation does. Homophonic translations (and imitations) generally attempt to create an independent poem in the target language (in this case, English), with the source text serving more as a springboard than as a real source.

Hawkey's vision of dust mites lurching through abandoned rooms is (intentionally) absurd, whereas Trakl's vision is meant to be unsettling. For many contemporary readers, Hawkey's "Dust Rounds" is probably better than Trakl's "The Horror." Hawkey's poem is witty, unpredictable, *au courant*—it applies a patina of archaism in reverse. The poem includes geese, "sumptuous porters," orphans, and spangles; and its ending—"How they glisten, / At night, with the dimwit mien of an alien order."—is stunning. But Hawkey has overshadowed Trakl, recalling Rosmarie Waldrop's claim, "I have long held that translating involves envy, usurpation, and pleasure in destruction" ("Silence, the Devil, and Jabès"), but without Waldrop's later attempt to "make reparation" ("The Joy of the Demiurge"). In a way, *Ventrakl* itself can be seen as an attempt to make reparation for the 19 homophonic translations that use Trakl's poems as a stepping stool, making Trakl the lesser partner in this collaboration, which can seem more appropriation than collaboration. Aesthetically, some of Hawkey's homophonic translations substitute a veneer of strangeness for real strangeness; rather than foreignize, they domesticate; rather than unsettle, they seem quite comfortable within the contemporary American poetic idiom.

The homophonic translations also can seem ethnocentric, as Trakl's poems are "heard" by a U.S. English-language poet preoccupied with the Iraq War. Of course, Trakl's own experience with World War I affects not only his poetry but also any subsequent reading of his poetry. Thus, Hawkey's inclusion of Bush's war in Iraq could serve as a corollary to Trakl's own focus. But where Trakl's war poems tend to be haunting, Hawkey's lean toward the slapstick, as in "A duck fart woke the golden Karen," "Ashcroft with his round, condom-colored eyes," "Nuns wearing Diesel jeans," and "Wild dorks hide in the bushes of Holland." Elsewhere we have Visa, New Balance, Nissan, Starbucks, "Ford-tough," Ewoks, and Aussies. In this kind of "collaboration," Hawkey inevitably will bring his own cultural noise and detritus into the mix. What Hawkey hears and finds depends on the time and place of his listening and looking.

As Lawrence Venuti notes in *The Translator's Invisibility*, "The ethnocentric violence of translation is inevitable: in the translation process, foreign languages, texts, and cultures always undergo some

degree and form of exclusion, reduction, and inscription that reflect the cultural situation in the translating language" (267). The translator's goal, then, should be to minimize or mitigate this violence, not to exacerbate it, even if the translator's own needs (e.g., wanting to respond to the Iraq war) call for it. When viewed in a less generous light, Hawkey's homophonic translations can be seen as the offal of what Serge Gavronsky describes as the "aggressive translator." This kind of translator "seizes possession of the 'original' . . . and truly feeds upon the words" before he then "enunciates them in his own tongue." In the end, "the original is mutilated beyond recognition" ("The Translation: From Piety to Cannibalism," *SubStance* 16 [1977]). In seeking the familiar (domestic) within the strange (foreign), homophonic translation enacts a kind of narcissism, where the reader/perceiver recognizes self in the presence of something other.

However, as André Lefevere notes in an essay on Brecht ("Mother Courage's Cucumbers"), "A writer's work gains exposure and achieves influence mainly through 'misunderstandings and misconceptions,' or, to use a more neutral term, refractions." Another way to consider Hawkey's mistranslations, then, would be as a roundabout attempt to make Trakl more visible through refraction. Rather than being read through World War I, Trakl's work, thanks to Hawkey, can be read against the war in Iraq, albeit in a sometimes disconcerting way. Hawkey himself seems to back away from the translation process when he writes, "not a poem translated from another but a poem woven around another, from another": "transwriting" rather than translating.

The homophonic translations, however numerous and prevalent, are in the end not what mark *Ventrakl* as an important book. *Ventrakl*'s achievement consists in its blend of these creative translations with color-coded centos, biographical prose, lyric prose, numbered lists (e.g., "Notes Toward the Translation of Facial Expressions"), discussions of process, italicized prose passages recounting Trakl's and Hawkey's "visits," "interviews" with Trakl, and prose on photographs. Hawkey's eight "interviews" with Trakl throughout the book are, necessarily, interviews with Hawkey handling both Q and A; they're closer to poems, such as Tomaž Šalamun's "Jonah," or flashes of unconventional drama. They average five questions and responses each, and thus do not occupy much space, but they represent Hawkey's most transparent attempt to call forth Trakl. Hawkey's prose meditations on various photographs of Trakl become meditations on absence, and as such are particularly moving, as much for what they reveal of Trakl as for what they show of Hawkey as observer, obsessive, other.

Rilke described the "swelling and fading of music" in Trakl's

poetry as "irretrievably singular," and figures that "even someone close" to Trakl would see things as if through glass, "as one excluded." Hawkey seeks to become a companion but remains an outsider, on the other side of the glass, for "Trakl's experience . . . fills his entire world, which no one can set foot in, like the space of a mirror." This might explain why *Ventrakl* ends not with an interview or a consideration of a photograph or a homophonic translation, but a conventional translation of Trakl's most famous poem, "Grodek"—the only translation of this kind in the book. Hawkey has given up trying to connect with Trakl and has stepped back, "as one excluded," as translator rather than unsuccessful collaborator. Hawkey has realized that "perhaps ['Grodek'] demands a specific category of translation: a faithful one," agreeing to meet Trakl on Trakl's terms, on his terrain.

Grodek

In the evening the autumn woods resound
With deadly weapons, the golden plains
And blue lakes, over which more darkly
The sun rolls; night embraces
The dying warriors, the wild lament
Of their broken mouths.
Yet silently red clouds, inhabited by an angry god,
Gather below the willows
Spilled blood, lunar coolness.
All roads end in black decay.
Under the golden branches of night and stars
The sister's shadow sways through the silent grove
To greet the ghosts of heroes, the bleeding heads;
And the dark flutes of autumn play quietly in the reeds.
O prouder grief! you brazen altars
Today the hot flame of the spirit is fed by a violent pain,
The grandchildren—unborn.

The first line of the poem has been translated similarly by others—"At evening the autumn woods resound" (Alexander Stillmark), "At nightfall the autumn woods resound" (Will Stone)—and deviations are not always improvements, as demonstrated by Robert Firmage's "At evening autumn forests drone" or Margitt Leibert's "At evening the autumnal forests resound." In the six other translations that I have seen, every translator uses "blue lakes" and "dying warriors," five use "golden plains," and four use "the wild lament of their broken mouths"

(Firmage makes "lament" plural and changes "broken" to "shattered"). But then the translations begin to diverge, partly because of vocabulary, partly because of syntax. Lines 7 to 9 are not particularly clear in any of the translations, yet Hawkey's version seems the most economical and visual. And compare Hawkey's (and Daniel Simko's) translation of line 10—"All roads end in black decay" ("Alle Straßen münden in schwarze Verwesung")—to that of the other translators:

All roads flow into black decay. (Alexander Stillmark)

All roads lead to black putrefaction. (Will Stone)

All roads lead to black decay. (Margitt Leibert)

All roads disgorge to black decay. (Robert Firmage)

The paths flow together, into a black decay. (Stephen Tapscott)

Again, Hawkey's, along with Simko's, seems the most faithful and successful in English: unlike "disgorge" and "flow," "end" is a logical action for "roads," but it is less expected than "lead" (cf. "All roads lead to Rome"). And Hawkey's version of the poem's last line ("Die ungeborenen Enkel") introduces an inversion that is absent in the original. In this, Hawkey has company in Stone ("The grandson still unborn"), Stephen Tapscott ("generations not to be born"), and Simko ("The grandsons still unborn"). The other three translators maintain the word order of the original, though they each translate "Enkel" differently: "The unborn generations" (Stillmark), "The unborn descendants" (Leibert), and, the most faithful, "Unborn grandchildren" (Firmage). Hawkey's move, coming as it does at the end of a failed (aborted) collaboration and book-long attempt to reach Trakl, places emphasis on the "unborn," the always and already dead.