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Excerpts:

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Through Naked Branches: Selected Poems of Tarjei Vesaas. Translated and edited by Roger Greenwald. Princeton University Press, 2000. xlvii + 149 pages.

Through Naked Branches is a fine translation of poems by the Norwegian Tarjei Vesaas (1897-1970). Paradoxically, Norwegian rural writers using the rural dialect-based Nynorsk version of the Norwegian language are among those most attuned to the European intellectual and literary moods of their times. This has been true of such nineteenth-century writers as Arne Garborg and A. O. Vinje and writers of the mid-twentieth century such as Olav H. Hauge and Tarjei Vesaas. Vesaas lived most of his life on a farm in the Telemark valley of his birth. His fiction and poetry are rooted in this rural environment as seen through the sensibility of a European intellectual.

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A translation may be the meeting place of kindred spirits, as when Robert Bly translates the Norwegian Olav H. Hauge. Bly's translations are unmistakably Bly and yet they are also unmistakably Hauge. I might have made the same observation of Greenwald's translations of Vesaas had it not been for my clear memory of his equally fine translations of the very different Norwegian poet Rolf Jacobsen.... Greenwald is a poet with his own voice and his own perception of the world, yet he does not appear the same in his translations of Vesaas and Jacobsen. Poetry translation for Greenwald is to explore the poetic universe of another poet, intellectually and emotionally, before recreating new poems in English that are as faithful as possible to the language as well as the ethos of the other poet.

This may seem a simple thing to do for a poet with so intimate a knowledge of the Norwegian language and Norwegian poetry. But it is this very intimacy that makes Greenwald realize that things may not be

what they seem to be in another culture, even one that is “apparently similar.” To Greenwald this particular act of translation is a challenge “to confront the issue of modernity and received ideas about its relation to the urban. Likewise, acknowledging Vesaas’s uses of animation and personification for the depth they yield, rather than seeing them as forms of literary naiveté or as anachronisms, as throwbacks to the Romantics, requires us to reconceive the philosophical framework in which we understand the relation of humans to nature.” These quotations are from Greenwald’s excellent introduction where he with the help of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss and his “relational model” of man and nature, gives a thoughtful and challenging analysis of the role, use, and meaning of nature in Tarjei Vesaas. Eco-criticism maybe a current buzzword but Greenwald’s reflections on the meaning of nature in the poetry of Tarjei Vesaas grow out of his own grappling with a modernism apparently at odds with the urban modernism of Vesaas’s Anglo-American contemporaries, not out of any wish to be topical.

One of the great advantages of *Through Naked Branches* is that the original poem and the translation are on facing pages. For readers with some knowledge of the poet’s language, the translation may enable them to approach the original. Even for readers with no knowledge of the other language, however, this arrangement has valuable functions. For me, reading both Vesaas and Greenwald, sometimes the original first, sometimes the translation, made for an experience both of Greenwald’s poems and of Vesaas, who was opened to new ways of reading in the light of Greenwald’s translations. While the best translations – such as Greenwald’s – are new poems, they are also interpretations.

Poetry should be read rather than discussed. A poet’s reading may be a better key than numerous essays on her work. I cannot present all 46 poems here in two languages. One short poem in translation will have to do. It is called “The Boats on the Sand”:

The boats on the sand have drawn together
 as if in a council of elders.
 They stick their snouts together
 and are silent and understand
 (most things),
 as old boats do.

O, how long their bodies are.
Low and sleek on a beach.
Their wood is darkening
and they are quietly decaying.
Made for water,
and to be destroyed by water.
Even now they're three-quarters in it.
What they don't know about the wet
no one knows.

They haven't settled anything
at their council.
All day they've lain there, motionless.
Boats in the home port they love.
Four of them on a stretch of sand.

Reading these verses, I hear the Telemark voice of Vesaas in the American rhythms of Greenwald's poem in English. Most readers of *Through Naked Branches* will of course hear no such thing, but they may read with the assurance that the Norwegian poet has indeed been *translated*.