

WEI-YUN LIN-GÓRECKA 林蔚昀

索拉力車站

‘The Solaris Stop’

(non-fiction)

Translated by Darryl Sterk

When I was living in London, a friend of mine returned from Warsaw, eager to tell me about everything she'd seen and heard in Poland. We chatted and chatted and suddenly she exclaimed: "You know what? There's a bus stop in Warsaw called Solaris. You know, just like the star in the Andrei Tarkovsky film."

At the time I'd never been to Poland, and my only impressions were from books, film, music, and posters. I knew that Solaris was based on the novel by Stanislaw Lem, but did the planet in Lem's sci-fi novel really exist? It was too much like a movie plot.

"Really? Are you sure that's what you saw?" "No mistake. It was on the bus marquee. A coworker of mine didn't believe me and even went online to check, and said it's the name of a bus company. But how could the name of a bus company end up on a marquee? It must have been the name of a stop..."

When I got to Poland I made a point of keeping my eyes peeled whenever I took the bus to see if there actually was a Solaris stop. After looking for a long time, I think I have figured out the origins of her beautiful mistake. Solaris is indeed the name of a bus company. I've seen it on the front and back of buses, and I've also seen it above the marquee (unmoving, as it's just a sign). Maybe my friend was simply so happy to see Solaris and superimposed the word upon the marquee. Maybe it really appeared on the marquee, even though it is actually just the name of a bus manufacturer.

Fantastic film plots don't happen in real life, but in its own way my friend's story is fantastic. It is a story that would only happen to a stranger in a strange land. It is the story of a stranger who is about to enter into a relationship with a language or a culture, to exist in an ambiguous state, so close but yet so far.

The process of going from strange to familiar is like falling in love. People make the most mistakes early on, but this is also the period in which miracles abound. I'll always remember a story an English

friend told to me about a Polish girl studying English who mentioned that her favorite novel was *The Quietness of the Sheep*. No one could figure out what book she was talking about. She finally took it out to show everyone, and it turned out to be *The Silence of the Lambs*.

It was a clumsy error, yet so cute, so poetic. I experienced the same kind of poetry when I first arrived in Poland. At the time I liked to take a SLR camera along with me on my strolls around Kraków, using black and white film to record the everyday things I saw. One time I saw a sign on a wall. The sunlight shining on the sign had such a texture that I clicked the shutter. The picture I developed was a frigging work of art. I felt so proud of myself for the longest time. Only when my Polish got a bit better did I discover that the sign said, “Post No Bills.”

Beautiful scenes result from misunderstanding, and disillusionment is inevitable when misunderstanding is cleared up. Misreadings sometimes produce unexpected surprises, maybe even poetry. One time I was translating the Polish poet Andrzej Bursa’s “Paramecium.” One stanza goes like this:

A child is more friendly than an adult
An animal is more friendly than a child
You say, “In that case”
I would say
Most friendly is the paramecium or the protozoa—in the wild

But for some reason the first time I translated it I misinterpreted the comparative *milszy* (more friendly) as “more silent,” *milczyacy*, so I translated it as:

A child is more silent than an adult
An animal is more silent than a child
You say, “In that case”
I would say
Most silent is the paramecium or the protozoa—in the wild

The second version is an obvious misreading and betrayal, but it created a new poem. It's a fresher formulation, which nobody would ever think to say, except maybe a child learning how to speak for the first time or a foreigner learning a second language.

Yoko Tawada, the Japanese writer who lives in Germany, once said something like: "When people use correct grammar they often aren't saying anything interesting. To me, broken language is more interesting. I think 'talking funny' can be powerfully artistic." This is true for me, totally. When my Polish was still poor, the essays I wrote were awkward, but there were many interesting sentence structures, usages, and metaphors (because I didn't know the right word and had to use figures to get people to understand). When my Polish improved, some of the freshness and innocence gradually disappeared.

I know I've passed the point of no return, that I can never go back to that time many years ago when Polish was so unfamiliar to me, so magical, when could I feel happy a whole afternoon just because a barista in a London café told me how to say flamingo flower (which in Chinese we call a "fire crane") in Polish. I am lucky that my Polish is good enough for me to survive in this world, and to explore, but not so good that I am overly used to it, so used to it that I lose the ability to surprise—and be surprised.

I hope that ten or twenty years from now I'll still be able to find the Solaris Stop in Polish.