

Bethell's "Leaves of Gold": an unpublished poem

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Some years ago, when reviewing Vincent O'Sullivan's second edition of the collected poetry of Ursula Bethell, Hugh Roberts speculated about the extent and quality of unpublished poems by Bethell that he assumed to exist. Her well-known habit of including poems in letters to friends, both in New Zealand and abroad, seemed to invite such speculation; and the possibility of a treasure trove of unknown poems was indeed tantalising. Regrettably, however, the evidence for such a store of poems is slight;¹ and if they ever existed, they appear now to be lost. The unpublished poems that do exist, in the archive of her papers held in the Macmillan Brown Library at the University of Canterbury, are sadly fewer than Roberts had hoped, and of less consequence than he imagined. Although there are some twenty-five or thirty unpublished poems in the archive, their worth is indicated by Bethell's own gathering of them in envelopes that are labelled, for example, "Poetry rubbish heap", "Rejects" or "Bits I can't be bothered with".

One piece that is of some interest – not least because, although a translation, it predates by at least twenty years the poetry she wrote at Rise Cottage – is reproduced below. It is extant in two copies, each in Bethell's hand, one a pencilled draft, on the back of a luncheon bill from a Midlands Railway refreshment room, the other a fair copy in ink on plain paper. The copies of the poem are both contained in an envelope in MB 558, Box 9, Folder 5, on the back of which Bethell has written: "These Westminster Gazette competitions were fun. I did one of these in train to Scotland on back of lunch bill. I was told they didn't take any notice of entries not typewritten & that was long before I was intimate with typescript." In addition to the two copies of the poem to be discussed, the envelope contains two cuttings from *The Westminster Gazette*. One of them is the report quoted below; the other is a similar report on competitors' efforts to translate Sully-Prudhomme's "L'Etranger".²

The Westminster Gazette was a London-based Liberal newspaper that began publishing in January 1893. Despite a limited circulation of somewhere between 20,000 and 25,000, it became, as Stephen Koss notes, a highly influential newspaper, particularly under the twenty-five year editorship of its second editor, J. A. Spender (1896-1921). "As a political organ," Koss remarks, "it was peerless" (1981, 336) and was soon preferred by Liberal readers to the long-established *Pall Mall Gazette*. However, the paper was seriously affected by the post-war fragmentation of the Liberal party, and did not long survive Spender's subsequent departure as editor, merging with the *Daily News* in 1928. Whatever its significance in political terms (and Spender's leaders were reputed to be required reading), its importance for the purpose of this essay is literary rather than political.

In addition to its prominence as part of an emerging political press, *The Westminster Gazette* was also well known for publishing short stories and sketches, and its reviews were highly regarded. In the early years of the twentieth century in particular, it featured the work of several major writers: T. S. Eliot reviewed for it, Rupert Brooke contributed travel writing, Raymond Chandler wrote sketches and some political satire, Middleton Murry was for a time its art critic, and Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" had its first publication there. And as part, no doubt, of the same broad interest in the world of letters, between the years 1904 and 1909 the *Gazette* ran a Saturday "Problem Page".

Typically, the page consisted of a series of literary problems or exercises, with not insignificant monetary prizes for those who won the various sections of the competition. The problems set on October 22, 1904, for example, offered "a Prize of *Three Guineas* for the best new and original *Fairy Tale for Children* of all ages ... *One Guinea* for the best Sonnet to Burne-Jones's picture 'Cophetua and the Beggar-Maid' ... [and] *Two Guineas* for the best rendering of the following passage into Greek iambics". The passage set for translation is the first section of Browning's "Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli". In other weeks, readers were asked to compose in Latin hexameters, or in elegiacs.³ Each week, a prize was offered for the best quotation from Shakespeare illustrating or commenting on a "topic of the day"; and another section provided an unidentified quotation for each day of the week, and invited readers to identify them. The range of quotations was extensive, and not restricted to English sources: Coleridge, Dickens, Swinburne, Tennyson, and Spenser

featured, and might have been identified quite quickly, but the passages from Bacon's 'Regimen of Health' or More's *Utopia*, or from Hugo's *Feuilles d'automne*, Villon's 'J'ay ung arbre de la plante d'amours', or Rückert's 'Lohn der Freigebigkeit' must have stretched the paper's readers rather more.

The popularity of the page can be judged in part from the number of contributions received (for which see below), but also by the almost contemporaneous publication of some of the winning results in book form. In 1906, B. H. Blackwell brought out *Westminster Versions: Renderings into Greek and Latin Verse, repr. from the 'Westminster Gazette'* edited by H. F. Fox. Two years later, in 1908, Methuen published *The Westminster Problems Book. Prose and Verse* compiled by N. G. Royde Smith from competitions run from 1904-1908; and the following year a further edition was brought out, with the same compiler, this time with a slightly more elaborate title: *The Second Problems Book. Prizes and Proximes from the Westminster Gazette 1908-1909*. On this occasion, the publisher was Sidgwick and Jackson. Royde Smith's compilations omit the Greek and Latin compositions, observing that they had been published earlier; her introduction also notes that "verse and prose translations from French and German have been omitted as not of general interest" (1908, v). Among the contributors whose names appear in Royde Smith's compilations is Frank Sidgwick, who twenty-five years later was to publish Bethell's *From a Garden in the Antipodes* and so begin a correspondence with her that lasted until his death in 1939. Sidgwick's contributions are very much in the spirit and style of pieces that he later sent to Bethell (the exchange of verses between them went both ways): one is a macaronic piece entitled "Bankolidaid, Lib. I" which begins "Charmer virumque I sing, Jack plumigeramque Arabellam" (1908, 274); and another is a Chaucerian rendition of "Sing a Song of Sixpence" which begins "Lordinges, I wol you singen of a grotë / And of a pouch of rye also by rotë (1908, 203)."

The Problem Page that is of interest here is that of October 29, 1904, and (*pace* Naomi Royde Smith) involves a French translation. As the first of its problems, it proposed the following (p. 13):⁴

A. We offer a Prize of *Two Guineas* for the best English version of the following poem:

LES FEUILLES D'OR

Les feuilles d'or, les feuilles mortes,
toutes les feuilles de l'été,
tombent au vent qui les emporte,
tombent au vent qui les escorte
d'un appel sans fins répété.

Parmi l'averse qui crépite
et vers l'hiver qu'on sent venir
leur vol épars se précipite;
les rameaux frileux qui s'agitent
semblent vouloir les retenir.

Tout l'été succombe avec elles
et l'espoir de tous les printemps;
dans l'ouragan qui les flagelle
les arbres déserts se rappellent
et se font signe en sanglotant.

Mais les arbres n'ont plus de sève,
les cœurs pleurent d'avoir chanté,
et le vent pourchasse et soulève,
les feuilles d'or, les feuilles brèves,
toutes les feuilles de l'été.

– From “Le Silence des Heures”

Readers were given slightly over a week to make their submissions, which were then reported on the following Saturday (that is, a fortnight after the problem was originally set). Rules were strict, and promised disqualification to any entries which failed to meet deadlines, or which sought to circumvent them. As an illustration, “competitors residing abroad” were given a little extra time to make their submissions, which would be accepted “until noon on the Wednesday following the closing date” provided that the envelope was marked “*Late – Foreign*”. But woe betide any local who tried to use this provision: “envelopes so marked and bearing an English stamp and postmark will be destroyed unopened”.

Reports varied in length: some were little more than a brief note, but others were fuller, and it was not beyond the editor to adopt a censorious tone, criticizing contributors who flagrantly exceeded the word length, or ignored the topic, or submitted as sonnets poems that had more than fourteen lines, or fewer. Equally, as we witness below, the editor was not above making some fairly acerbic remarks on the quality of submissions.⁵ However, the report on the translation of “Les feuilles d'or” was longer than was usual, reflecting no doubt the popularity of this particular

problem. The report (which is what Bethell kept in her envelope, rather than the original problem) is quoted in full:

REPORT ON PROBLEMS SET OCTOBER 29.

We have had more translations of this than of any other poem that has been set in these competitions, but not one of them has been entirely successful.

The chief difficulty lay, of course, in reproducing the rhythmic effects of the original, whose excellence is almost entirely technical, and no writer has noticed the change of accent in the final verse, carrying on the "sanglotant" of the third stanza.

Several translators have attempted to convey the observations of the original in much simpler verse form. The result has always been thin, though "Smetana" has done well in a version spoiled by a clumsy first verse:

The dead, gold leaves, in scattered flight,
Flee in the loud insistent wind,
Whose voiceless wail and cry remind
That summer leaves have no respite.

The naked branches stretch, in vain,
Their shiv'ring arms to hold them back;
The wind, that sweeps them down the track,
Is deaf as Life to cries of pain.

With their dead gold the summer dies,
All hopes of spring died with their green,
And the loud rain beats down between
The sapless trees' lone, sobbing sighs.

For all their life is gone. They keep
A hopeless vigil – e'en as we
Whose hearts once throbbed with melody.
And therefore, having sung, must weep.

And all in vain we weep – they sigh,
For all is vain; and it is cold.
And the rough wind flies ceaseless by
Toward Winter, with the leaves of gold.

A great many sonnets have been sent in, but the poem is not, in subject or in treatment, in the least suitable for translation into sonnet form, and the delicate, minor lyric, with its melodious cadences, is of course a more difficult achievement than the smugly correct sonnet.

There has been some confusion as to the exact meaning of “se rappellent” and the line “les cœurs pleurent d’avoir chanté.” “Se rappeler” is of course “to remember,” but the line has been taken as either “hearts weep because they can no longer sing,” or because they were once frivolous enough to sing, not foreseeing winter and calamity.

The Prize of *Two Guineas* is awarded to Mr. E. R. BEVAN, Savile Club, Piccadilly, whose verse, though lacking the finish of the original, comes nearest to it in point of accuracy:

The leaves of gold, dead leaves and arid,
 The glory of summer days gone by,
 Fall, hunted of the wind and harried,
 Fall, of the fierce wind caught and carried
 To the weird burden of his cry.

Mid ruinous beat of rain unsparing,
 To that dark hour that we foreknow,
 They fly forth, each at his wild faring,
 The unshelter'd branches labour, bearing
 But grievously to let them go.

All summer dies when these are taken,
 And all the hope of all the springs;
 Lo, in the trees tornado-shaken,
 The stark trees, memories awaken;
 Sobbing, they commune of strange things.

Trees, no sap more with green indues them;
 Hearts, for old singing, only sigh;
 Leaves, the wind lifts them and pursues them,
 Leaves of red gold – how soon we lose them! –
 The glory of summer days gone by.

We also print what might be described as an imaginative translation by Mr. Henry L. Stuart:⁶

Withered gold that the seasons squander!
 Outcasts wan that the sun lets die!
 Evening strips you and herds together;
 Morn shall scatter, and who says whither
 Storms may hurry you, winds bid wander
 Down the furrow and past the sky?

Showers shatter that once were kind to you,
 Harsh winds threaten that spoke you fair;
 Boughs a-tremble and fain to keep you,
 Droop their heads for the storm to reap you,
 And the shadowless earth is blind to you
 In the season of your despair.

Ruined pride of the Summer's passion!
 Tender hopes of a Spring found vain!
 When your branches writhe to remember
 That it was not always November,
 Is the pang that their memories fashion
 Most of pity or most of pain?

Leaves must fall if the tree be sapless;
 Songs must cease in a heart drained dry.
 Leaves and songs with the wind behind you,
 Who shall follow you? Who shall find you?
 Short-lived sojourners! pilgrims hapless!
 Outcasts wan that the sun lets die!

One of the most interesting features of this competition is the number of foreign MSS. we have received.

Many French writers have bravely attempted English verse, often with very creditable results. Of these Mademoiselle B. Sautter writes fluent and correct English, but, curiously enough, has failed in her grasp of the French poem.

Charingthay, Westaway, H. Evoy, Grasshopper, Walter Sichel, C. J. Shawcross, Red Tape, Chrysolite, R. Leetham Jones, G. D. Rowe, J. W. C., Ursula Jeans, Vauria Grania, A. C. Knight, George T. Ried, Ragged Robin, Bernard Pitt, H. J. Silverlock, Pompilia, Jim, M. C. D., and about two hundred others deserve mention.

When the original problem had been set, readers were given no indication of the identity of the poet, but he was named two weeks later in the report as Henry Spiess. Spiess (1876-1940) was Swiss, and had studied law and literature in Geneva. But it was poetry rather than law that he pursued, publishing some ten substantial volumes between 1901 and 1928. *Le Silence des heures*, his second volume, had been published in Geneva by Eggiman & Cie, in 1904, so the appearance here in the same year of a poem from that volume is quite remarkable. It is difficult to know now how popular his work might have been in England at the time, although *Le silence des heures* did go into a second edition in Geneva, being published "augmentée de cinq nouv. pièces" by V. Pasche around 1910. It is possible that he was chosen here for translation because of his popularity; but it is seems rather more likely that the editor deliberately sought out a little known contemporary poet.⁷ And while the poem is clearly appropriate to late October, it may be that the subject had a particular appeal for the editor of the page, for Hugo's *Feuilles d'automne* is the source of one of the monthly quotations.

Spiess was particularly drawn to and influenced by the French Symbolists; as Marianne Ghirelli remarks (covering all possibilities), “il lit assidument Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Régnier, Moréas, Samain, Rodenbach, Laforgue, Maeterlinck, et Francis Jammes” (361) and their influence, she suggests, can particularly be heard in his first volumes: “Dans les premiers recueils, certains accents rappellent Baudelaire, Verlaine, Laforgue [...] qui se font écho à travers la poésie spiessienne en créant tout un réseau intertextuel de reminiscences (349).” Several of these wrote poems that took autumn as occasion or subject for their verse – Baudelaire’s “Chant d’automne”, Mallarmé’s prose poem “Plainte d’automne”, or Laforgue’s “Les après-midi d’automne” could be noted – but in the poem proposed for translation, it is surely Verlaine’s “Chanson d’automne”, with its sobs, its affected heart, its weeping, its wind, and most obviously its “feuille morte” that is the most immediate forebear, and for which the “réminiscences intertextuel” are most pronounced:

Les sanglots longs
Des violons
De l'automne
Blessent mon coeur
D'une langueur
Monotone.

Tout suffocant
Et blême, quand
Sonne l'heure,
Je me souviens
Des jours anciens
Et je pleure;

Et je m'en vais
Au vent mauvais
Qui m'emporte
Deçà, delà,
Pareil à la
Feuille morte.

Having spent most of 1903 in New Zealand, Bethell left “the Colony” for what she thought was the last time in 1904 (Whiteford 2005, 32), returning to England in the expectation of marrying and settling in the vibrant cultural world that she had so long admired. However, the marriage did not eventuate, and she spent her time working in London, engaged in social work with the Church of England. Clearly, she retained her interest in poetry and the arts, and retained too the facility with French

that she had acquired when studying in Switzerland, and travelling around the Continent. Given that she travelled several times in Switzerland, it is possible that she might have seen something of Spiess's work; but since she was writing almost nothing of her own at the time (at least, nothing that has survived), it is impossible to speak of any influence. The brief note with which she endorses the envelope (quoted above) suggests that the translations are primarily "fun", and they may even have been deliberately undertaken as exercises: that certainly is an inference we might draw from Bethell's use of the reports rather than the original problems as the occasion for her translations. But it is clearly not too much to conclude that this particular poem struck a chord with her, and she set her hand to translate it. The result was the following:

Golden leaves, leaves death-browned,
 All summer's leaves falling
 At the wind's touch to the ground,
 At the wind's touch, at the sound
 Of the wind's ceaseless calling.

Mid the patter of rain,
 Towards winter on-creeping,
 Flit they – Branches, in vain
 Would ye be green again,
 These fugitives keeping.

Summer's self sinks with these
 And spring-hopes past reckoning.
 Ah! when lashing storms seize
 The remembering, bare trees
 They sob & make beckoning.

But the sap springs all fail
 Erst too gay, we go crying.
 Swept, tossed by the gale,
 Golden leaves, leaves so frail
 All summer's leaves lying.⁸

It is fruitless to speculate how her translation might have fared had it been submitted, but a case might be made that it is at least worthy of comparison with those that were printed in the *Gazette* including with that of the eventual winner, E. R. Bevan. Certainly, I would suggest, it is more accurate than either the first or last of the versions provided in the report, although the last was admittedly "imaginative"; and it seems at least as accurate as that of E. R. Bevan. Bethell's second stanza struggles a little, in

the first she fails to convey the sense of the verbs 'emporter' and 'escorter', and in the last "hearts go crying" might have avoided the intrusive "we"; but for much of the poem her understated language is, I suggest, more faithful than the winning entry.⁹

Introducing the report, the editor comments on the technical excellence of the original, and finds in that a significant part of the poem's effect. What is immediately noticeable is that Bethell's translation and that of the winning entry by Bevan both go to considerable efforts to retain the 5-line form of the original, and its abaab rhyme pattern. It is not a common stanza in English poetry – Christina Rossetti's enigmatic "A Daughter of Eve" (c. 1875) and Robert Frost's later "Road Not Taken" (1916) are two examples, but few others come readily to mind. However, while both have retained the verse form, neither quite duplicates the syllabic pattern of the original – Bevan prefers a slightly longer line than Spiess, and Bethell a slightly shorter. Given that, as the editor's report implies, the desired effect is of delicacy and even fragility, I would venture to suggest that the shorter line, with fewer stresses, is also preferable.

One further way in which Bethell has clearly gone to some trouble to reproduce a particular effect in the original is in her use of repetition (something that, as Mac Jackson has convincingly shown (27), is an integral part of her style when she does come to write her own verse). As an obvious example, the triple repetition of the word "feuilles" in Spiess's first two lines is paralleled by her "leaves", and in the same stanza Spiess's anaphoric "tombent au vent" finds an exact structural parallel in her "At the wind's touch". (However, to do Bevan justice, there is something to admire in his alliterative patterning of "hunted ... and harried" and "caught and carried" in the same stanza, which at least echoes Spiess's deliberate intensification of aural qualities.)

One repetition in particular seems remarkably effective, chiefly because of the slight variation that occurs. Spiess deliberately concludes his poem by repeating the first and second line, with a slight variation from "feuilles mortes" to "feuilles brève"; Bethell follows him in this, "leaves death-browned" becoming "leaves so frail", but she concludes with a further variation whereby "leaves falling" becomes "leaves lying". It is a simple shift, but suggestive of the passage of time that each poet mourns: the autumnal change that had been in process at the beginning of the poem has come to a conclusion by the end. It is, of course, anachronistic to suggest, but there are echoes here of Margaret's "Goldengrove unleaving".

The suggestion here of similarities between Bethell's style and that of Hopkins casts another light on the vexed question of his influence on her work.¹⁰ In that context, it is worth noticing her tendency here to compound words – “death-browned”, “on-creeping” and “spring-hopes”. It is a significant feature of her mature style, and of the poems that she wrote when she did know some Hopkins (for whom it is also a distinctive feature); but it is clearly a device that is already part of her poetic manner.¹¹

One further difference that can be noticed between the two translations has to do with Bethell's preference for a weak rhyme in the 'b' lines, where Bevan has them in the 'a' lines. While each of them is alert to the differing effect of strong and weak rhyme sounds, and each of them exploits this with some subtlety, Bethell's choice of a feminine rhyme in the 'b' lines means that each of her stanzas finishes with a falling away, a dying cadence, and she conveys in that something of the mood of the poem.

As I suggested at the outset, part of the interest of the poem is that it is written so much earlier than the poetry for which we know her, and at a period when the only interest she was otherwise known to have shown in verse can be seen in the two whimsical pieces included in her letters (Whiteford 2005, 11, 32 ff), the second of which antedates this translation by just a few months. With their forced rhymes and jog-trot rhythms (admittedly, part of their humour), there is nothing to suggest the lightness of touch with which she translates this poem. Equally interesting, though, is that the subject and mood of the poem fits so well with what is one of the recurrent elements of her poetry.

There are four poems in her second volume, the seasonally arranged *Time and Place*, that explicitly take autumn as their subject of which “Showers of Leaves” (*Collected Poems* 35) in particular suggests some echoes of this translation: it describes the leaves as “golden” and “flitting”, notes they are “storm-tarnished” (as here they are “tossed by the gale” after “lashing storms” had “seize[d] / The remembering, bare trees”), and observes the leaf “as it flutters / restwards”, which seems to combine both the “falling” and the “lying” of the leaves in the translation. But beyond the verbal echoes, the later poem's persistent attention to autumn as a season associated with approaching death is equally reminiscent of the earlier translation. In “Showers of Leaves”, as in “Autumn Afternoon” in the same sequence, the motif of approaching death is more consciously presented within a religious context, using variously liturgical or biblical imagery,

none of which (absent from Spiess's original) is to be found in the earlier poem; but the connections between the poems are striking nevertheless.

Equally, there are several poems in her first volume, *From a Garden in the Antiopodes*, that deal with autumn, and do so in a way that is alert to the season as a harbinger of death. It has often been noted that the poems of that first volume, published when Bethell was fifty-five, use careful observation of the natural landscape to reflect on the impermanence of human endeavour. Though she does, from time to time, lift her eyes to the distant mountain ranges, "and muse upon them, muscles relaxing" (*Collected Poems* 2), she is at her best when she concentrates on the small particulars of her garden, conscious of fading flower and falling leaf. Impermanence, evanescence, fugacity – these run through her poetry almost like a leitmotif, and the word "fugitive" that is here attributed to the leaves becomes one of her favourite words. Aprils of the past were green, autumns were golden, but "Everything is for a very short time." (*Collected Poems* 1). What is intriguing, then, about her translation of Spiess's poem, is not just the delicacy with which she captures its mood and its aural qualities, but the way in which it seems to anticipate what was to become, more than twenty years later, one of her own chief poetic concerns.

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ENDNOTES

1. Bethell undoubtedly sent to Frank Sidgwick, for example, more poems than he published in *From a Garden in the Antipodes*, but those additional poems that she sent are all to be found published in one of the newspapers to which she contributed, or in one of the two Caxton publications. It remains possible that other poems were sent to Ruth Head and to Rhoda Bethell, but no correspondence to either of them has survived.
2. The envelope in which these materials are contained has only the two cuttings and the two copies of the translation of Spiess's poem. However, elsewhere in the folder is a loose poem that is clearly Bethell's effort at translating "L'Etranger". Sadly, her effort at translating this poem is much less successful, and the result is stilted in rhythm and archaic in diction. Moreover, in the case of the Sully-Prudhomme poem, her translation is influenced by the comments found in the *Westminster Gazette's* report, as she clearly takes the first rhyme of the octave ("lineage" and "heritage") from there.
3. The Greek and Latin translations provide another interesting connection for New Zealand readers, in that they were set by Middleton Murry's Oxford tutor, H. F. Fox; see Alpers's *Life of Katherine Mansfield* (OUP, 1982), p. 138.
4. I am very grateful to Naomi Bennett who, as my research assistant, transcribed some material from *The Westminster Gazette* at Cambridge University Library, and arranged the copying of several "Problems Pages".
5. The editor's comments in the second cutting that Bethell kept are even more caustic, beginning "We have seldom seen more and we have never seen worse sonnets than those sent in translation of the above poem ... it was with a feeling of pained incredulity that we turned and re-turned the hundreds of pages of manuscript ... in the hope of finding at least one respectable version."
6. Interestingly, both Bevan and Stuart had later careers that involved translation. Stuart translated a number of Italian and French works, including by Blaise Cendrars, Arthur, Comte de Gobineau, and Paul Claudel; Bevan was a prominent historian of the ancient world who published translations of Aeschylus and Leonidas.

7. On the other hand, that can hardly be said of Sully-Prudhomme, who was the Nobel Laureate in 1901.
8. Bethell was not always careful with punctuation (in this respect, the draft is better than the fair copy), and I have lightly emended her manuscript.
9. I am also grateful to two colleagues, Thierry Jutel and Heidi Thomson (both native speakers of French) for their comments on the relative merits of Bethell's translation. They are not responsible, however, for any opinions expressed here.
10. The influence of Hopkins on Bethell's poetry, and her denial of that influence, is a commonplace of criticism of her poetry; see, in particular, "Gerard Manley Hopkins and Ursula Bethell: an Antipodean Influence."
11. I am grateful to the *Kotare* referee who suggested that Bethell's use of compound words deserved mention. The same referee drew my attention to the description of the leaves in "Showers of Leaves" as "golden".