FOREWORD

Books are generally the result of a certain design, a certain deliberation. This book, however, is less the fulfilment of an intention than a fortuitous accident, less a book than a wavelength, and I feel less disposed to introducing it formally than to celebrating its existence, wistfully, for it obliges me to write about Victor Proetz in the past tense when, of all the dead people I know, he is the most vividly alive—I am able to hear his voice at whim, and to read him or think of him generates a continuing conversation. But even those who are reading him for the first time will make something of the same discovery—his writing is idiosyncratically personal, funny, outrageous, and his subject less of a crystallization than a discovery which properly belongs to whoever wants to take it over and translate it into his own curiosity.

I first met Victor Proetz in Scotland in 1948, and knew him from that point until he died in 1966, yet I find it hard to isolate single occasions from that time, for in fact we embarked on an endless conversation which paid little regard to place and time, perhaps because whatever the substance of our conversation, we were always talking about words, trying them out, exploring their possibilities. But it was not that he was interested in words to the exclusion of what they were used to say—it was precisely the oddness of words as a vehicle that absorbed him endlessly, and he could not see how anybody should use them without astonishment, could take them for granted. Words astounded him by their very existence. He looked on them as a separate race, small Martians with their own nature, and with a changing existence much more durable than that of us who used

them. He did not throw words about so much as use them as though they would stay in the air. He turned words over in his head, he listened to them, he unraveled them, he looked them up, he played with them, he passed them on like presents, all with an unjadeable astonishment. I think most of his friendships were founded on this wavelength, on a disposition to talk for the pleasure of talking, to explore language-astonishments, to play games seriously. The practice of architecture, his professional life, he kept meticulously private; but his friendships were spun out around that curious, outrageous, probing, affecting wit of his, which became a kind of web these friends grew to inhabit, so that they could meet one another on VP's wavelength. I have often seen him begin to talk to someone he had just met, with great attention and meticulous politeness until he found a thread of humor; from that point on, he quite simply enwound whoever-it-was with words. He realized all this, of course, and in time he came to refer to this web of his own winding as the Games. We all played the Games. It was what his friendship demanded, and it was he who either set the games in motion, or codified them, or ran them even when absent, like a ghostly and outrageous Marquis of Queensbury. I think VP found the game-context to be the easiest one to inhabit. His own taste was absolute, arrogantly so; but to connect with people on the level of humor and wit and words bypassed any complexities of confrontation. But his web wound in a great variety of people, and it remains in the atmosphere. His round way of saying, his ripe voice, his *style* hung on in the air and lore of every house he visited; the Games themselves we keep on playing and being.

One of these Games is this book. (The other Games might easily have been books, but they remained unwritten because they already existed, and were always being changed, adapted, added to, and played.) This particular Game began just as VP describes it, a question mark that crossed his mind and stayed there. Just what do other languages make of the quirky idioms of English, and of those texts which embed themselves in our language-memory below the level of meaning? Are nursery rhymes translatable? (I was recently tracking down the idiom 'once in a blue moon' in Spanish, and found it rendered in one dictionary as *a cada muerte de obispo*—every time

a bishop dies.) VP seized on the behemoth with a cry of joy, and his conversations from then on were punctuated with the discoveries that follow in this text. And yet he did not set out to write a book, but saw his notes as a by-product of a continuing curiosity, and saw quite correctly that no book would ever take care of the subject, but would rather set it in motion. Games belong to no one but the players. The present book, in fact, is probably not at all what VP would have published had he been alive to do the editing himself, and had he ever envisioned an end or even a stopping place in his investigations. He despised deadlines and specifications—there was, or there ought to be, all the time in the world. What he did do was to outline a list of poems and texts with the intention of exploring their fates in translation. Some of these would have led nowhere, but others would have yielded him more of those oblique, whimsical, and brilliant notes which he added by way of commentary. It might have taken him even further, for he talked of reversing the process and following French and German texts through their consequences in English; and I had sent him some Spanish versions of T. S. Eliot which led him to consider adding Spanish to his investigations. He combed the language-memories of those he met, and his projected list of contents grew much faster than his finished commentaries. For him, the work was ancient, useless, and timeless—in short, a Game; and he might have resisted finishing it, for that would have meant putting a frame round what was an endless, random activity. To some, books and deadlines are useful allies, to others, enemies to be outwitted. The present volume is a fragment, a residue, an accretion, a work of salvage, containing only those comparative translations which VP had tracked down and provided with a written commentary—but it is obvious that the book itself could have become an endless series. There is nothing particularly new in discovering the vagaries of comparative translation, but what VP adds is the dimension of awe, the astonishment that translation is possible at all. VP disavowed explicitly and respectfully any claim to being a scholar, and yet his is precisely the kind of enthusiastic curiosity which gives scholarship its pointers. But his commentaries are marvelous pieces of writing in themselves, cranky, laconic, outrageous, subtle, and very funny, so

close to his way of talking, so infectious in their tone, that the reader quickly becomes an addict and finds himself wondering over the fate of texts as diverse as Tennyson in Serbo-Croat or *My Fair Lady* in Russian. The book instinctively translates itself back into active curiosity.

Anyone who moves between languages discovers a whole nether world inhabited by translators, interpreters, crossers of frontiers, a world whose realities are often in doubt, a kind of limbo which quivers in the relativity of languages. Through knowing more than one language, we become aware that the words we fasten to the visible world are totally arbitrary; and a vast gulf opens between words and what is beyond them. This has the effect of setting free the words themselves, of making us more conscious of their odd nature, more disposed to play and take risks with them. I think that it also increases our awe over both the act of saying and the unsayable. I would quite often send to VP instances of both dazzling translation and appalling mistranslation, which he would match in reply. Even now when I come across other instances, he comes immediately to mind. I remember calling on him more than once and finding him at his writing table, spectacles on the end of his nose, fingers in three dictionaries at once, rumbling out in lieu of a greeting, "Wouldn't you have thought that somebody would have thought of a thoroughly English way to say *vice versa* instead of just *vice versa*? I've prepared three candidate-phrases. Listen . . ."

VP was the center of a charmed and word-struck circle into which this book invites its readers. I doubt that anyone who reads it will be able to resist going on writing it, nudged by its attendant spirit. Even now, as I write, I am acutely aware, not only of VP's voice and wavelength, but emphatically of the fact that none of us who were his friends would use words with the same keen pleasure, the same meticulous care, the same astonishment, had we not known him.

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