Maintenance of Landscape

Selected Poems
MIA LECOMTE

Maintenance for the Landscape

Selected Poems

Translated from the Italian by Johanna Bishop & Brenda Porster

(An English-Italian Bilingual Edition)
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The problem with writing a preface for Mia Lecomte’s *Selected Poems* is simultaneously its pleasure: I haven’t read anything like this. Most contemporary poets wear their cultural and artistic influences on their sleeve. Picking up a book in an English language bookstore, it is easy to see where the poet is coming from, either geographically, or culturally (ironic and formal; confessional and free etc). This may seem reductive until you read a book like the one you have in your hands. Put simply, Mia Lecomte is a quietly dazzling poet on her own terms. She is fed by multiple cultures, she is widely read, but her writing is unique and absolutely genuine. You won’t have read anything like this.

French, born in Milan, educated in Switzerland, Lecomte has lived in Italy since she was nineteen, but has also spent periods in France, Britain and the United States. It could be that, unconsciously, she has taken what she values from all places and all schools. She doesn’t value the personal, the use of “I”, and that’s plain to see. The narrators of these poems are just that: narrators skillful enough to shoulder the emotional, philosophical, and imagistic vision that Lecomte offers. This is the most striking aspect of Lecomte’s work: in an age of self-regard, beginning with the confessional poets and taking us through to Facebook status updates, Lecomte, quite naturally, has no quibbling or grandiose ego. In fact, the ego is all but absent.

*Life is what is left when all else is lost*

begins the first poem of this book, and the pared down style, the courageous and well-earned right to pronounce for everyone, not just herself, is echoed throughout. To a North American readership this type of openly philosophical writing, without the mask of intense subjectivity, is relatively unfamiliar. We have our philosophical poets, but often philosophies are rendered by stealth through anecdote, or buried in lavish metaphor. Lecomte makes no bones; she says and conveys with great precision.

Lecomte professes not to be a follower of the Haiku form (and in fact her poems are nowhere near so short), yet there is
something Japanese in her clean, concise images, her incisive observations. Like the birds from Asuni,

_three little birds hanging on the line I find you_
_each time I leave and continually return_

which she uses to evoke a helpless sense of movement, of time, by emphasizing the continuity of these pointedly ephemeral creatures.

But I suspect that it is as a poet of outsiders and observers that Lecomte will be read. The landscapes within the poems are from the U.S., France, Britain, Switzerland and Italy. They have a way of seeing anew:

_My Rome of interiors_
_all the nested boxes_
_to open up repose,_
_all the simple spaces_
_from silence to silence_

And for detail:

_The ibex, the chamois, the marmot_
_silhouettes three-quarters cragged_
_still bear in their bristly poses_
_the semblance of here-nothing-has-changed_

And of a cool, devastating acceptance of eternal exile:

_you can fool yourself up at this height_
_in return, the most anonymous haven_
_a refuge that is never a home._

Mia Lecomte is a poet who must be read, for her counter-cultural self-effacement; her boldness; her succinctness; and the resulting beauty of her language. The publication of her work in the English language is something to be celebrated.

—Sally Read
Clockface

*It just takes rain to spark a war we get listless and the sneezing agony. Inside time cheek to cheek like twin fruit*

Rarely

*The days when there are no days the nights get tired early and you can sip yourself slowly, slowly over and over. The silence curled up at your feet jingles a quake of glass. Then all that’s left is a somewhat tinny echo and ice that has melted its cup*

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1. **Quadrante** Che poi piove / è già guerra / ci si annoia / lo starnuto / agonia. / Dentro al tempo / guancia a guancia / come frutti

2. **Raramente** Nei giorni / dove giorni non ci sono / le notti si stan-cano presto / e tu puoi sorreggiarti / piano, piano / ancora / ed ancora. / Il silenzio / accucciato ai tuoi piedi / tintinna / un sus-sultato di vetro. / Poi non resta / che un’eco un po’ acuta / e del ghiaccio / che ha fuso il bicchiere
From Unlived Autobiographies / Autobiografie non vissute
(2004)
translation by Johanna Bishop
Life is what is left
when all else is lost.
It’s a three-legged dog
all three legs straight and strong,
and a fourth one torn off at the groin,
it is the fourth leg of the dog
that no other dog would take
and it never stops aching for the groin
and the other three, all straight and strong.
Life, when all else is lost
and there is a clear price in cast stones
on the guiltless head, the blind man
who without that single leg
the one torn off at the groin
in spite of the others, all three straight and strong
will never get his dog back again.

Vita è quello che rimane
quando si è perduto tutto.
È il cane a tre zampe
tutte e tre dritte e forti
e una quarta strappata dall’inguine,
è la quarta zampa del cane
che nessun altro cane ha voluto
e non smette di piangere l’inguine
e tutte e tre quelle altre, dritte e forti.
Vita, quando si è perduto tutto
e ovvia è la taglia sull’incolpevole
della pietra scagliata, il cieco
che senza quell’unica gamba
la gamba strappata dall’inguine
malgrado le altre, tutte e tre dritte e forti,
non può più far tornare il suo cane.
Engadine Metamorphoses (Metamorfosi engadinesi)
Chasté

The peninsula is the perfect compromise between prerogative and absence, it is what is left of land once it has run out of reasons for being so intensely land, the intra-Alpine impasse of the soul unwilling to risk another try at the rush and the surrender. And it spreads out, dissolves turning itself into water, sluggish teardrop engrossed in seeping back into the eye. It has never been an ark huddled against the mountainside and has no familiarity with floods. The festering disagreement of each and all its days lies in the tiniest of gaps between geography and history an engrossed mapping of self and the time never regained, between body and its gesture desire still submerged and a squandering of tenderness.

La penisola è il compromesso ideale fra prerogativa e assenza, è quello che rimane della terra che ha finito le ragioni per essere tanto intensamente terra, l’impasse intralpina dell’anima che non osa tentare da capo lo slancio e l’arresa. E si sparge, si disfa nel rendersi acqua da sé, lacrima lenta compresa a riassorbirsi nell’occhio. Non è mai stata arca stretta a ridosso del monte e non può riconoscere diluvi. Il conflitto insanato di tutti i suoi giorni sta in un piccolissimo scarto fra la geografia e la storia, una mappatura compresa di sé e quel tempo mai ritrovato, tra il corpo e il suo gesto il desiderio ancora sommerso e uno spreco di tenerezza.
Author-Translator Bios

Mia Lecomte was born in 1966 and now lives in Rome. Poet, author of children’s books and plays, among her most recent poetry collections are Autobiografie non vissute (2004) and Terra di risulta (2009). She is an honorary member of the French Association “Confluences poétiques.” Her poems have been translated and published in Italy and abroad, in poetry magazines and anthologies, including Italian Poets in Translation (John Cabot — University of Delaware 2008). She is creator and member of the International “Company of Women Poets” (Compagnia delle poete: www.compagniadellepoete.com), a theatre group made up of foreign poets living in Italy that stages plays involving the superimposition in poetry of languages/cultures and different artistic languages. She is also a critic and editor in the field of comparative literature, especially as regards the literature of migration. She has edited the anthologies Ai confini dei verso — Poesia della migrazione in italiano (2006), Sempre ai confini del verso — Dispatri poetici in italiano (2011) and, with Luigi Bonaffini, A New Map — The Poetry of Migrant Writers in Italy (2011), and she frequently lectures on this subject in Italy and abroad. She is on the editorial board of the bi-annual journal of comparative poetry Semicerchio and of various online literary sites, including the trimonthly El-Ghibli, dedicated to the literature of migration. She is a contributor to the Italian version of Le Monde Diplomatique.

Johanna Bishop was born in Chicago in 1974, grew up in Pennsylvania, and has been living in Tuscany since 1998. She primarily translates texts by contemporary Italian artists, curators and critics. In the field of poetry, her translations of poems by Gherardo Bortolotti, Franco Buffoni, Marco Giovenale, Andrea Inglese, Marina Massenz, Michele Zaffarano and Laura Zanetti have appeared over the years in the bilingual review Here: Notes from the Present. She has also translated works by Maria Grazia Calandrone for the theatrical performances Gernika and Senza bagaglio. In collaboration with Andrea Sirotti, she co-translated Danza del ventre a Tel Aviv / Belly Dancing in Tel Aviv by English-language Israeli poet Karen Alkalay-Gut into Italian (Kolibris, 2010).
Brenda Porster is a native of Philadelphia who has lived most of her adult life in Florence. She is a poet and literary translator. As a poet she writes both in English and Italian and is a member of the international Compagnia delle poete, founded by Mia Lecomte. Her poems appear in numerous literary magazines and websites in Italy (including Le Voci della luna, Pagine, Sagarana, El Ghibli, Forma Fluens) and abroad (The Browne Critique, Calcutta; Gradiva, New York), as well as in many thematic and group anthologies: Furori (2003), Uomini (2004), Genesi (2005), Gatti come angeli (2006), Corporea (2009), HaikuLei (2010), Varianti urbane (2011) and Primi: dispati poetici in Italia (2011). For many years she was Italian-English translator for El Ghibli, a website specialized in immigrant writing in Italian. From Italian into English she has translated Mario Luzi (in Toscana Mater, 2004) and a large number of poets now writing in Italian, including Rosaria Lo Russo, Mia Lecomte, Cristina Annino, Marco Simonelli, Gabriella Musetti, Tito Maniacco, Michele Porsia, Fiorenza Mormile, Loredana Magazzeni. From English into Italian, with Giorgia Sensi, she published a presentation of the English poet Vicki Feaver, Vicki Feaver, La fanciulla che ritrovò le sue mani for Poesia (2006); in 2009, with L. Magazzeni, F. Mormile and A. Robustelli, she translated and edited the anthology Corporea: la poesia femminile contemporanea di lingua inglese.

About Mia Lecomte’s Poetry

Mia Lecomte translates dreams that are dispersed and then re-composed. She makes them — I don’t know how — coherent and also re-versible. I am impressed at how she creates this reversibility without resorting to references that flirt with trendy ideas. In each of the paths she follows, the originality of her style and inspiration are clear: they allow themselves to be followed and revealed. What results is a poetics of intimacy, discreet and disciplined but at the same time harsh, strong, expansive. I admire her concision and her gusto for litotes, her way of taking shortcuts, leaving aside the superfluous and the excessive: her refusal of rhetorical acrobatics and accumulations. Hers is an unmistakable voice.

— Predrag Matvejevic

The “no place” is, paradoxically, the place par excellence in Mia Lecomte’s poetry: it is the line between thresholds that draws two borders closer. Mia Lecomte’s poetical language is both intense and concrete, an authentic utterance of authentic experimentalism, voice and word that are new because born of original contents and substance.

— Vera Lucia de Oliveira

Mia’s is poetry of the threshold, poised between pathos and distance, a sort of countermelody of existence.

— Gabriela Fantato

In the poetry of Mia Lecomte three “epicentres” can be recognized: security of diction, modernity of structure, and the double valence of sentiment ... Everything is written in the instant and for the instant. Without memories or nostalgia. And everything is seen directly, without surprise or wonder.

— Visar Zhiti
Mia Lecomte’s capacity to see what others have not been able to see, to discern, poised between poetry that can never get too much of information or observation and is at the same time language, research and transparent description. Lecomte faces things (places, people, actions performed), constancy and subtraction, presence and absence, caught in their weakness or in their greatest splendour.

—Fabiano Alborghetti