

Ciaran Carson

**FROM
ELSEWHERE**



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for my students

Apropos
L'autre: The Other

This book consists of translations from the French poet Jean Follain, faced by 'original' poems inspired by those translations: spins or takes on them in other words. Translations of the translations as it were.

I came upon Follain by chance. Some time ago, while working on translating some of the prose poems of Francis Ponge into verse, I discovered that Ponge was a friend of Follain, whom I'd never heard of until then. When I looked him up on the internet one of the first things I found was a version of the first poem in this present book, 'Soulie renouée: Shoelace Tied'. Such a humble poem, yet how resonant, how mysterious. I was immediately taken by it, and proceeded to immerse myself in Follain's work.

When one translates one cannot avoid taking liberties of one kind or another; and perhaps one takes a special liberty in translating Follain, whose attachment to his native language was such that he declared himself unable to learn any other. At the age of sixteen he was sent to Leeds to learn English, and spent much of his time in his boarding-house reading whatever French newspapers he could find to console himself in his exile. *Le mot fait corps avec la chose*, he said, the word makes body with the thing, or the word embodies the thing, as one might say in English; and no other word but the French would do him. The only word for 'bread' was *le pain*; his friend, the Breton poet Guillevic, recounts how Follain, with a playful glint in his eye, would insist that no other word could possibly exist for such a thing, and in a manner of speaking he is of course correct, since French bread is another matter to English bread. *Le pain* belongs to a system of very different semantic weights, textures and measures; like wine, or rather *le vin*, it is rooted in the culture of France, in its linguistic *terroir*. It is often said that translation is impossible; yet it is done, and needs to be

done. It has also been said that poetry itself is a kind of translation.

I'm not sure at what point it occurred to me to double the book. Perhaps it has something to do with the format of my book *For All We Know* (2008), which is divided into two parts, with the titles of the poems in Part Two repeating the titles of the poems in Part One, in the same order, each of the titles thus being revisited from a different point of view. I do know that the word 'fetch', which is used in several contexts in that book, was in my mind throughout the writing of *From Elsewhere*. It is a word that has long fascinated me, and many of the definitions in the lengthy entry in the Oxford English Dictionary seem relevant to what I thought I might be doing. A fetch is the act of fetching, bringing from a distance, or reaching after: it is something brought from elsewhere, an act of translation in other words. To fetch is to draw or 'borrow' from a source. It is to derive etymologically. It is to go in quest of. In sailing, it is an act of tacking, and also to get into the wake of a vessel, as I fetched myself into the wake of Follain, and hence fetched my course, like a sailor who after a long fetch at sea comes home with a farfetched tale. A fetch is the apparition, double, or wraith of a living person. A shadowy counterpart, as my poems might be to those of Follain.

Follain very rarely uses the first person in his poetry, yet we cannot doubt the personal experience that lies behind many of the poems. Guillevic remarks that if Rimbaud said *Je est un autre* (I is another), then in Follain — *chez Follain*, as the French has it — the 'other' is indispensable in discovering the 'I'. So I find myself in the other of Follain, questing and fetching the poems from another language, from the elsewhere of his territory.



Jean Follain was born in the home of his paternal grandmother in the village of Canisy in Normandy in 1903. His father was a teacher in the nearby city of Saint-Lô, and Follain attended school there, spending the holidays in Canisy, the inspiration for many of his poems. He was aged eleven when war broke out in 1914, and says that had he been born just a year later his poetry would not have been that which it was, a memorial to a lost world. And when he came to view Saint-Lô in the aftermath of its almost complete destruction by Allied bombing in 1944, he declared that the power of things to endure had been effectively annihilated; yet they abided in the memory, and through poetry might exist in an eternal present.

In 1921 he went to study law at the university of Caen, and in 1927 was admitted to the bar in Paris. During the Second World War he adopted a passive neutrality, while discreetly supporting those writers who opposed the Vichy regime. He immersed himself in writing. His prose memoir *Canisy* was published in 1942, his book of poems *Usage du Temps* in 1943. In 1951 he left the bar to practise as a magistrate in Charleville, the home town of Rimbaud. Still resident in Paris in the rambling apartment in Place des Vosges which he shared with his wife, the painter Madeleine Dinès, he would commute to Charleville by train.

Follain was devoted to ceremony and ritual to an almost sacramental degree. Noncommittal in his religious beliefs, he was nevertheless fascinated by the offices and rubrics of the Roman Catholic church, and was known to have rebuked several priests, including the celebrant of the Christmas Day Mass in Notre Dame, and the archbishop of Rouen, for neglecting to wear the correct vestments for the liturgy. He liked to ponder such questions as the consequences of an insect happening to fall into the chalice at the moment of transubstantiation, or the accidental vomiting of the sacred host. He was a member of several dinner clubs

PART ONE

associated with the arts, the legal profession and the wider world of politics, where he was known for the wit and erudition of his table talk. Gourmand or gourmet according to circumstance, he extolled the virtues of the peasant cooking of his childhood, and wrote a treatise on the potato, *Célébration de la pomme de terre*, published in a little volume some fifteen centimetres square, appropriately bound in sackcloth. He was invariably properly dressed for every occasion.

The last entry in his diary, dated 9th March 1971, reads ‘*Dîner Vieux-Papier*’. *Le Vieux Papier* is an association devoted to the study of paper ephemera such as menus, playing cards, railway tickets, cheese labels, school exercise books, holy pictures, wine labels, theatre programmes, greeting cards, board games, diaries and the like. Returning home from the dinner shortly after midnight on the 10th, Jean Follain was knocked down and killed by a car on Place de la Concorde. His book *Espaces d’instant* was in press at the time and was published a few days later. He was a firm believer that poems, after being written, should be *mise en cave*, that is, laid down like wine in the cellar, and sampled in due course to see if they were up to the mark. Hence a good many of his books have been fetched from the cellar and published posthumously, having passed the test of time.

Il vit, il voit le temps comme des fractions de l'éternité.
— Guillevic, 1993

He saw, he sees time as fractions of eternity.

*Ciaran Carson,
Belfast, August 2014*

Soulier renoué: Shoelace Tied

When evening waves
its bank of clouds
one sees the grass fires
raise their smoke
flowers grow in the sunken lanes
there's still a glimpse of daylight
and a boy in an iron-grey smock
bows to a rut
to tie his shoelace
no slack in his life
no trace of absence.

Out

Thinking
the end of the world to be
at the horizon the boy walked
for hours; after his people
scoured the fields for miles around
crying his name
to the four winds
to no reply
at twilight they found him
where he'd last been seen
standing in the stable yard
unable to say anything
about where he had been
in that full circle he had walked
beyond 'out'
having no words
for what he had seen
beyond those that were of home.

Sans le langage: Without Language

The sadness of voice without language
under a sky of racing clouds
wearies the body
going on endlessly
talking every which where
when noises have made their silences
and substance languishes.
Bunches of keys in their pockets
those that live with death
return home.

In Memory

As he told it
when the boy
he was stumbled
on the well
in the derelict brickyard
deep as a brick mill chimney
leaning over the rim
he shouted
the two syllables
of his name
deep down into it
to hear his echo.
Now that the man
he would become
is dead
that unfathomable
darkness
echoes
still.