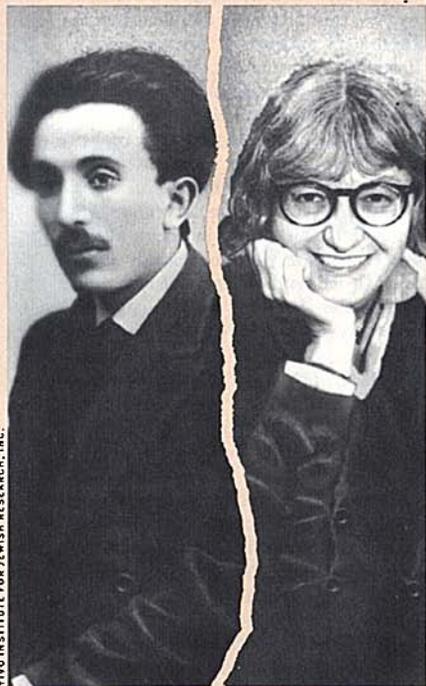# The Translator B

CYNTHIA OZICK

I have found, in an old box in the attic, a great helter-skelter heap of papers. In sorting them out, I came upon 22 sheets relating to a single line of a single poem. These 22 pages are the ones that turned up; for all I know, there may have been many more. The line was the first line, and also the title, of a poem by Dovid Einhorn: *Geshtorbn der Letster Bal-Tfileh*—"The Last *Bal-Tfileh* Is Dead." And if I fail at this moment to translate *bal-tfileh*, the reason for it will soon be clear.

The Einhorn poem was among the earliest in the various groups of poems I had translated as a contributor to an anthology of Yiddish poetry, and I came to it as a novice. One of my many errors at that time was to see the translator as a being in thrall to the editor. If the editor offered a suggestion, I took it as an irreversible command. But meanwhile, behind the scenes, I developed a kind of translator's cunning. It wasn't the cunning of brains; I couldn't outwit the editor, who was smarter than I was. But I could outcry him. So in letter after letter I raised clamorous laments. I pleaded, I implored, I whined and I wheedled. And as I wheedled the editor toward what I conceived to be the poem's needs, I discovered at last that the poem, all on its own, could make unreasonable demands; for example, it was the poem's assumption that, quite apart from the translator's being in thrall to the editor, English ought to be in thrall to the poem. Or, in other words, that a pretty good, workable English equivalent was all that was requisite, rather than an exactly nuanced representation.

Gradually, through a series of feverish letters, the line evolved—from the editor's

Poet Dovid Einhorn, left, and translator Cynthia Ozick, right. Einhorn wrote his earliest poems in Hebrew, but turned to Yiddish because of socialist ideals—Yiddish was the language of the people. Born in Byelorussia in 1886, Einhorn published his first volume of poetry in 1912, the same year he was imprisoned for suspected revolutionary association. After six months in jail, Einhorn went into exile. He ended up in Paris, where he composed poems and wrote regularly for the Yiddish daily *Forward* in New York. From 1920 to 1940, Einhorn published four volumes of poetry, several books, children's stories and essays on life in America, using traditional Jewish motifs in both his poetry and his critical writings. During World War II he fled Nazi-occupied Paris, and lived in New York from 1940 to his death in 1973.

◆
ecoming the Poet

suggested line, to the poem's "English equivalent" line, but then to that stage where the translator was ready to assume moral authority over the poem. In that final stage the translated line became not a line of a translated poem, but the line of a *poem*.

The original text contained the word *Shekhina*, which presents no difficulty to the English reader. It is a word both in the English dictionary and in the vocabulary of Western philosophy. But the perplexity lay in the term *bal-tfileh*. For *bal-tfileh*, the editor proposed "prayer leader."

I dispatched the following moan:

> If it has to be "prayer leader," it has to be "prayer leader." Only this: my spirit drops at the thought of that thin phrase. I have been trying all week with real despair to get at some *oblique* way of suggesting the role without naming it. The chief trouble with "prayer leader" is that it isn't poetry. I've tried it on the line and it looks grotesque: "The last prayer leader is dead." It trivializes an awesome idea. It lacks even the smallest redolence of the original. It's empty-sounding. To one who knows nothing of synagogue practice, it illumines nothing; to one who knows everything, it points to nothing—who will guess *bal-tfileh* from "prayer leader"? Isn't this a case of "correct" translation resulting in falseness, in violation? "The last prayer leader is dead" sounds to me exactly as fake, as flat, and as silly as an equally data-ridden term would sound, e.g., "The last underpaid secondary cantor is dead." It moves the poem out of majesty and into personnel. But for the moment I can offer only wails, no solutions.

That was written in April. In August, I find another letter still embroiled in *Geshtorbn der Letster Bal-Tfileh.* Apparently I had just discarded the phrase "singer in the pulpit."

> Singer in the pulpit [I wrote], though metrically nice (which is why it lured me), wears churchly robes, and is hardly *bal-tfileh*. "Singer before the Ark" came next—at least it describes a synagogue— but the *bal-tfileh* is usually not much of a singer, and used in the line it has too many accented syllables anyhow. "Reader of the Law" would suggest that the original is *bal-krieh* rather than *bal-tfileh*. You will say that the obvious thing to settle on, then, is "prayer leader," which is accurate and neutral enough to come out not entirely Quakerish or Christian Scientist. But it is too bland, I think, just *because* of its neutrality, so I have taken the risk and stayed with "reader of the Law." It is, as "translation," wrong, but in English it is more right than any other alternative. Or so it seems to me now.
>
> To someone not familiar with synagogue practice and personnel, "reader of the Law" is completely in context and holds the poem together. And this would also be true of one familiar with the synagogue, even though he might think *bal-krieh*. If he *does* think that (though a reader of a poem should stick with the poem and not try to translate back in his head), not an iota of violence is done to the poem anyhow. (Einhorn's shade rises before me and says: "Well, as a matter of fact, I was going to say *bal-krieh*, and it was only an accident I said *bal-tfileh*.")

At this juncture in the struggle, I believed not that the poem is a law over the translator— that would mean "prayer leader"—but that the poem is a law over English, that what is suitable in English will have to do, no matter

how mistaken in substance. I was unsympathetic to the poet and was quite willing to call up the poet's ghost in order to get his approval for a workable English, even if it made him recast his poem. When I insisted to the editor that "not an iota of violence is done to the poem," I was clearly an advocate of doing violence.

That was August. In September the editor answered as follows: "I agree that 'prayer leader' is no good."

So what had I accomplished? I had wheedled him out of one mistake into a new mistake, this one of my own coinage.

By the next month we were skirting *bal-tfileh*, letting it lie fallow, and were now embrangled in the word "dolor."

I had rendered a stanza this way:

And soundless on the steps of the Ark
the abandoned Shekhina rests,
her head bowed down in dolor,
black as night her dress.

The editor wanted "Jewish Spirit," instead of "Shekhina"; he wanted "grief" instead of "dolor."

I answered:

As for "Jewish Spirit," isn't the Shekhina here a concrete figure, like Heine's occasional Virgin? The poet *will* have his Astarte, no matter what. To keep faith with the ballad-feel of the poem, I've indulged in an old ballad-word, dolor.

Apparently I managed to wheedle out "Shekhina," but not "dolor," because my next letter is still at work.

I guess I did choose "dolor" for its archaic feel, so you mustn't object that it's archaic; I meant to reinforce the ballad-quality. But if you prefer another word, I can part with "dolor." What would you think, though, of "sorrow" instead of "grief"? Like "dolor," "sorrow" carried out all those open vowels of the rest of the line: "head," "bowed," "down," whereas "grief" bites the line off rather too quickly, almost as though the stanza were ready to end too soon. Do let your own preference rule, however.

So he let me keep "sorrow."

Very soon afterward, though, we were back at *bal-tfileh*. Now I was writing hopelessly:

So what's to be done? Capitulate to literalness, and remove the phrase from poetry and into data? One last-ditch idea, which I throw down on the page in desperation: How about a still more reckless literalness? How about a direct and wholesale translation from the original? How about "master of prayer"? At least it sounds suitably ancient; at least it doesn't sound Protestant. It has rather a Buberian dignity, a bit of authority, a drop of majesty: "The last master of prayer is dead." It comes out, if not poetry, a bit closer to poetry. But what I put under the head of dignity, authority, and majesty—not that the person of the *bal-tfileh* has all that; it's the liturgy I'm thinking of—what I put under that head, you may pronounce pretentious. Well, if it has to be "prayer leader," it has to be "prayer leader."

ג*ע*שטאָרבן דער לעצטער בעל־תּפֿילה

ג'ע'שטאָרבן דער לעצטער בעל־תּפֿילה.
פֿאַרשלאָסן שטײט איינזאַם די שול,
די פֿענצטער פֿאַרשלאָגן, און שאָטנס
פֿאַרשענעטמע, זײ מאַכן זי פֿול.

עס ליגט, װי אַן אײביקער טרױער
אַריבער די נאָקעטע װענט
און אונטער דער קרױן פֿון כּהונה
פֿאַרבראָקענע רױען צװײ הענט.

געשטאָרבן דער לעצטער בעל־תּפֿילה,
ניטאָ װער צום עמוד זאָל גײן.
עס לעשט זיך אױן צאַנקט דער נר־תּמיד
בײ זיך אין זײן װינקל אַליין.

און שטיל אױף די טרעפּעלעך פֿון אָרון
די שכינה אַן עלנטע שטײט;
איר קאָפּ איז געבױגן אין טרױער
און שװאַרץ, װי די נאַכט, איז איר קלײד.

און ס'דוכט, ס'ערע ליפּן זײ מורמלען
אַ שטילע, אַ לעצטע געבעט,
און ס'הערט זיך אַ שטים פֿון פּרוכת:
צו שפּעט, מײן געטרײע, צו שפּעט!

Nearly a year later—but I have no documents to show how this came about—I had abandoned the ordeal of the imprecise precision. I had abandoned my trust in English as offering a solution of workable equivalence, and the opening stanza read as follows:

The last to sing before the Ark is dead.
Padlocks hang in the house of the Jews.
The windows are boarded, and shadows
huddle in shame in the pews.

"Pews" seems to me now very bad. But what of "The last to sing before the Ark is dead"? Will that do for *Geshtorbn der Letster Bal-Tfileh?* Has the Pre-Existent Poem been uncovered? If 70 translators went into 70 separate rooms, would they all come out word-for-word with this very line? Or would they all come out with "prayer leader"?

What I did not understand then was that I was not wheedling the editor, but educating myself; that I was not exhorting the editor, but beginning dimly to perceive the terrible complexities of the craft of translation. My trials with *Geshtorbn der Letster Bal-Tfileh* reveal the problem of translation at its most elementary and primitive stages—a tyro's tale. For a long time I did not comprehend that a translator, though continuing to quail before the idea of translation, must nevertheless not be afraid of the poem that awaits; that the translator must dare to be equal master of the poem together with the poet. I did not sympathize with Einhorn because I did not yet know that I was obliged to become Einhorn. I did not have authority over the poem because I did not believe it was already there; I thought I had to jerry-build it myself, in makeshift ways. I did not yet see that the poem had a blueprint of its own, a meticulous blueprint as singular as the whorl on a fingertip; what I had to do was not look for the ink to reproduce the print, but look for the inexorable lines of the print itself.

By the time I had acquired some experience—by then I was concentrating on the poet H. Leivick—I had learned to trust the doctrine of the Pre-Existent Poem. I was a believer; it seemed to me I was becoming Leivick. With a poem called *Tateh-Legende* (Father Legend) I was surely Leivick, and one of my letters to the editor records how that extraordinary realization opened itself out:

Meanwhile, as you suggested, I've gone ahead with *Tateh-Legende.* An extremely affecting poem, clear-eyed, sinuous, unsentimental. I toiled over it with a kind of calculating joy—I have about sixteen pages of crowded work-sheets, filled with calculated alternatives. I imagine I keep saying "calculate" because I took risks here and there to seize the tone. I am just now too much devoted to the poem to tell whether it all works, but you will tell me that.

One very, very still night, coming to the words *yingl du mayner, / ikh bin dayn tateh der roiter* [oh my child, my child, I am your red-haired father], I all at once felt Leivick's father's ghost enter me. Through the ribs and throat.

You can hear in that last paragraph how "calculation" and "risk" suddenly fly away, replaced by becoming. Ⓜ

The Last To Sing

The last to sing before the Ark is dead.
Padlocks hang in the house of the Jews.
The windows are boarded, and shadows
huddle in shame in the pews.

Bereavement without end
creeps on the naked walls,
and blazoned crown and priestly hands
lie broken above the Scrolls.

The last to sing before the Law is dead.
There is no one now to go up to the Ark.
The eternal flame, alone in its nook,
struggles and sputters to dark.

And soundless on the steps of the Ark
the abandoned Shekhina *rests,*
her head bowed down in sorrow,
black as night her dress.

And her lips seem to shudder
a last hushed plea,
as if the Ark from its arras had spoken:
Too late, too late, O you who are faithful to Me!

by Dovid Einhorn
translated by Cynthia Ozick