

## Interview with Christian Hawkey by Bill Martin

**Bill Martin: What are some things that you think are important for readers to know about the book? (If anything.) Were you thinking about your readers, or about any kind of reader, when you wrote *Ventrakl*?**

Christian Hawkey: *Ventrakl* is, in a weird way, an intensely private book—intimate is a better word. However I'm also working within this idea of translation as being a conversation or dialogue—and this means one is already entering a constructed, communal space, and so I hope such a space allows any reader to drop into it.

**The various approaches to translation are generally concerned not only with appropriation but with appropriateness, but your book seems more concerned with what you refer to as “inappropriate tones,” and with a kind of radical mistranslation.**

This larger idea of community becomes a question of tradition. I see translation as being this multi- or trans-lingual network of appropriation and reappropriation and misappropriation and mistranslation. The gap between languages is a generative space, obviously; mistranslation, mishearing, misappropriation zero in on that gap, or intensify it; all these things inhabit an alternate, or other, or counter translation tradition—from Luis and Celia Zukofsky's *Catullus* or Spicer's *After Lorca*—that pushes back against the idea of translation you describe.

**Why Trakl, and not Rilke for example, or Celan? And why German, and not, say, Mallarmé? What makes Trakl so interesting for you?**

This book was started during the build up to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I was trying to find some way of dealing with my emotional and intellectual despair at the fact that the largest worldwide anti-war protests in history had very little effect. I was, like a lot of global citizens, totally disoriented—and this is usually when I start reading around and digging around and trying to find something that helps make sense of this feeling. I didn't turn to Rilke, and his faux, grandiose wisdom. I didn't turn to Mallarmé. I turned to Trakl, and I kept going back to him again and again. I wasn't even sure why. One of his poems that I kept reading is titled “Decline of the West.” It occurred to me that maybe the sense of foreboding that can be found in his work prefigures—tracks—the build-up to WWI, and that if you folded the past 100 years in half, roughly speaking, Trakl's time and my time would overlap. I don't want to posit any kind of equivalence, but the psychic, cognitive, and literal landscape in Trakl's poems, and in which Trakl was writing his poems, mirrors in an odd way similar threads of anxiety. His own sustained melancholy gave me courage to feel what I was feeling, which was something that I didn't—we don't—have a language for, and so I looked for some kind of tone-rhyme, or harmonic support. When we're not allowed to mourn we become haunted by this dissonance. That's what ghosts are. This also connects to Derrida's idea of “hauntology”—and it's especially great, by the way, that this word itself is a sound pun in French with the word “ontology,” and so I wanted to open this up into some kind of larger dialogue, larger collaboration, even though I didn't know any German at the time. That's how the book started. A kind of disinterment of Trakl! I just heard, here in Berlin, Cole Swensen read from a new project about ghosts and it deals with similar links between grief and ghosts.

**Are all of the poems in the book based on specific Trakl poems?**

Yes, except for the color poems, which are selective remixes of his work. Some are more direct homophonic translations. Others are poems that began with a sounded draft and were then re-worked through a process of editing and rearranging. There were moments where I became entirely stuck and I would then

often turn to English translations and lift out a line, just to keep going. And so there are Trakl lines embedded or inlaid throughout the poems. In short, some are strictly homophonic, and others are a kind of in-between poem.

**Some of the poems do things that I found quite alarming in connection to my own relationship to Trakl's work. For example, in "Mention It To The Furious Lungs" you have "Under cracked sternums, verse-flung, Ashcroft with his round, condom-colored eyes." It's so striking, it makes me want to laugh.**

Well, I think that's good. Part of the Rorschach aspect of the homophonic device is to, in some way, take the pulse of the language you're writing in—not German, but English, although there's so much German in English that it loops back and opens back up into German, too. Our English is infused with the syntax and lexicons of perpetual warfare, not to mention the lexicons of consumerism, pornography, finance, the entertainment industry, labels, brands, brand-names, etc., and this was/is my unavoidable language, ours—something like a transversal slice of a given language-moment. The poems contain traces of humor, but it's an uncomfortable humor, for this exact reason. However I was mainly interested in the fact that there was still this melancholic tone that carries through all the poems, which is the same tone that Trakl's poems have—all of them. The homophonic translation procedure still carried over into the English a certain tone, or pitch, or paralinguistic inflection, and that surprised me. The word "tone" itself implies tension: the Latin *tonus*, which literally means "stretching," and this might be one aspect of how you responded to some of the poems.

**So you're really working not only between two languages but two very different affective orders. There's one moment when you write: "even this association only lends itself to ironic contrast." I guess what I'm trying to figure out is my surprise, and my own laughter, at the ironic contrast between Trakl's melancholic, practically symbolist language—which is so muted and sad and energetic in a very curious and singular way in the German—and your language in the book, which is negotiating an ambivalent, actually a quite volatile space, between Trakl on the one hand and the lifeworld of contemporary political, popular culture in the US on the other. Is the relationship between this kind of laughter-producing disjunct and the political reality we're living in now something you're consciously exploring in the book? I mean, the difference between Trakl's line "die ungeborenen Enkel" [the unborn grandchildren], which involves a kind of realism and registers the tragedy of Grodek, and your line "Ashcroft with his condom-colored eyes," is—what is that doing?**

The distinctions you're making are, for me, much more fluid. If there is anything funny in the poems it is, as I said above, an uncomfortable humor—not an easy, slap-stick jokiness, but a weird and distorted and amplified strangeness, a version of a reality that is itself, in our particular moment, deeply strange and uncomfortable. Part of what I was doing was simply allowing the poems—through this language experiment—to track that, mark that, be marked by that. This doesn't seem to me too far off from the haunting sadness and strangeness of Trakl's verses, of lines like "A gentle orphan gathers sparse corn. // On their way home / The shepherds found her sweet body / Rotting in the thorn bushes." When I sounded out the lines, in another poem, "breathing / militarized by sight," they struck me as right, and true. And I'm not so sure that irony isn't inherently melancholic. But the book struggles with these issues as it goes along—it's a record, or scrapbook, of how I tried to approach some of these questions. As I moved forward, utilizing various forms and various ways of reading and thinking and experimental translation procedures to generate poems—and even using this form, the "author interview"—I suddenly encountered a poem like "Grodek." There was something about that poem that resisted using a same-sound translation device. It's one of the few Trakl poems that has a proper noun in the title. Grodek of course was the name for, and the site of, one of the first battles of WWI, and one of the bloodiest. The procedure of homophonic translation collided with an actual historic event as well as with a poem that attempts, with courage and enormous integrity, to deal with that. And it was also the last poem Trakl wrote before he killed himself. The encounter with this poem meant, for me, that I couldn't only just write a book of homophonic translations—that I had to deal with this, this poem. As I write in the book, it was the moment where I started thinking I really have to learn German and I have to translate this poem. The poem can be read

within a poetics of witness, and his suicide is connected with this—“no one bears witness for the witness,” as Celan wrote—and it demands to be read this way, it demands to be translated in a certain way, and I just folded all this thinking—how this thinking evolved—into the evolution of the book itself. But I’m curious: is there a specific author photograph or portrait that you have been obsessed with?

I don’t know. I have this exact relationship to photographs I have of different ancestors and relatives, because I feel a genetic connection to them, but I never know them... I have pictures of my grandmother’s grandparents and I remember stories about them from my grandmother. Also I have this amazing photograph of my great, great, great, great grandfather, Seth Smith, who was born in 1773 and died in 1868, and I’ve researched various details about him, like the fact that he was a Quaker and basically emigrated from one Quaker meeting in Rhode Island to another in Columbia County, New York:



I’m able to reconstruct their lives but it’s a reconstruction that will never actually match the photograph, like there’s something in the photograph of a person that is always in excess of what you can know about him or her.

In a sense, you’re doing the same thing in the book. You have this section where you’re in a kind of epistemological quandary about Trakl, where you ask “What do I really know about Trakl?” Which is always at the same time a sussing out of the limits of what you can know about him. A photograph calls for that epistemological shock, right, because you’re confronted suddenly with someone who is recognizable, you have the face, and it’s like Laplanche’s concept of the enigmatic signifier being

this communication from the mother, to the child, and the first communicant is always the face, it's always like "How do you read the face of someone," so it's interesting to me. That last photograph of Trakl and your focus on the part of the hair is very interesting, because you're sort of fetishizing these particular aspects of the face, maybe as a way of coping with that kind of quandary. There's also the photograph of the children, which is so crazy, and maybe there's something specifically eerie, I mean really uncanny, about photographs of children from the 19th century, because you know they had these lives after that photograph. Benjamin talks about this photograph of Kafka as a child:



You see all the delineations of Kafka's face from his later years, but you know at the same time that this is a very different Kafka, and Benjamin uses it anyway as a point of departure for reading some of Kafka's stories, as if details in the photograph could anachronistically index different themes in them. Anyway, I don't have a specific author photo that I can connect to in the same way. But it occurs to me, given your interrogation of the biographical in this book, and the way that this is always tied to your engagement with his poems, and with this question of translation, would you say that the biographical element necessary for you, for your relationship to Trakl's poems, his work?

This is an important question, because Trakl and his work have been insanely, and even hysterically, over-romanticized—not only his life, and the events leading up to his suicide, not only the kind of stories that are told about him, i.e. he was a drug addict, he was so socially awkward that he was unable to wait on customers while working at a pharmacy and would sweat through multiple changes of his shirt because he was so nervous—on and on and on—and the largest myth, the one that's caused endless speculation, both biographically and in how his poems are read and interpreted, is that he had an incestuous relationship with his sister. So in writing and translating and collaborating—using this last term in a willfully loose way—and wanting to engage and write about his author portraits and photographs, I was, at the same

time, aware of how complicated this all is. I was very ambivalent about this. I wanted to resist reinscribing the same mythology and misperceptions, but then I had to deal with the fact that he himself encouraged the production of the same mythology. He constructed himself as an author—he seemed to know that authorship is performance—and this performance was based on culturally-received notions of genius and it was borrowed wholesale from the idea of the *poète maudit*. I really, through the whole book, couldn't figure out how to deal with the figure of the sister—the real sister, his sister, Greta. I knew it would be absurd to write a book about Trakl—with Trakl—that didn't deal with this question. And it was actually a photograph of her that allowed me entrance—the one in the book where the negative is clearly destroyed and rotting and decayed. I realized it was important to write about her as a person, as opposed to only seeing her through the lens of a) the fiction that Trakl himself created about her, and even with her, and then b) how she was interpreted—and erased by the interpretations—by subsequent biographers and critics. I wanted to basically de-mythologize that aspect of both of their biographies, but not de-value it; give it, perhaps, alternate valuations, viewings. This is also what I was doing with the photographs, why I moved in that direction. I like what you said about photographs always being in excess of themselves. Part of the excess is that they create the illusion of being inscribed with so much meaning and yet at the same time they're simply surfaces. That's part of the spell that they cast. I wanted to explore that—take that magical spell literally, in terms of getting lost in a photograph, really lost, which is also to be lost on a surface, or various macro and micro surface relationships. Enlarging or editing or cropping a photograph generates new relationships, new ways of thinking. Other times I wanted to refuse that spell or that access and read the photograph historically, technically, hermeneutically. Either way the space between viewer and image becomes dense and complicated. The book in general toggles between a sort of method-acting, romantic idea of unseparateness (homophonic translation implicitly suggests this), and more distanced, difference-acknowledging approaches.

**Two questions: How has writing this book been different than writing your other books? And: in your interrogation of Trakl's biography you go so far as to resurrect him as a speaking character in the book, as a co-author. What is that about?**

With *Citizen Of I* I wanted to push a little bit at the boundaries of a standard collection of poetry, in part because the book was 150 pages. There were and are so many poetry books clocking in at a neatly digestible, consumable 75ish pages, and I started to find that odd. And then after *Citizen Of I* I couldn't imagine writing that kind of book again; I became more interested in the form of a book itself—this is what happens when you get bored with something: you start thinking about its form, about what makes it boring, which is one reason boredom, active boredom and not deactivated, aimlessly-browsing-for-something-to-consume boredom, is awesome. Rather than create a series of one- or two-page poems that subsequently become gathered into a book, I wanted to consider the book as a container for a larger, more sprawling project. I was also interested in the form of the scrapbook, where various types of texts and essays and images are allowed to accrue, often without connecting exposition. A reader can take part or become a part of the process—create their own relations, links. Derrida, playing himself in the film "Ghost Dance," says that cinema is the art of allowing ghosts to come back. Here're some stills from that film, lifted from the largest global archive of ghosts ever assembled, Youtube:

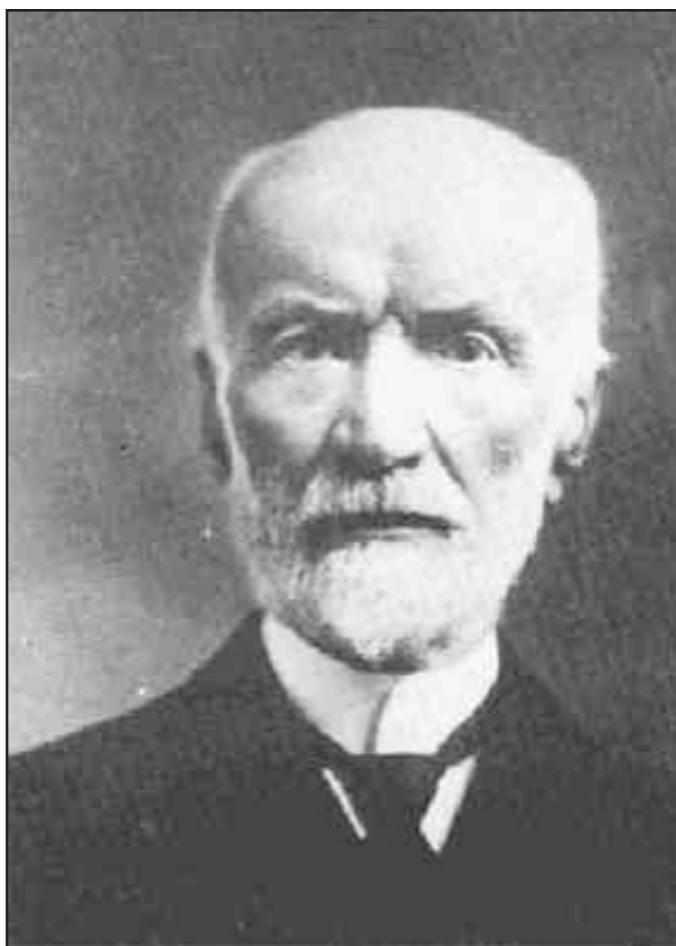




Or is that Mike Myers/Austin Powers, playing Derrida, with a wig?! Maybe this doubled visual quotation speaks to your second question about Trakl's ghost as co-author.

**You mentioned Spicer's *After Lorca* at the beginning. Did you have any other models?**

Sure. There are a number of other books in this alternate or counter translinguistic tradition we were talking about; in addition to Zukofsky or Spicer I would include Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*, for example. All are part of this network—ways to drop into that network. Other books were important peripheral guides, like Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, or Rosmarie Waldrop's *Key into the Language of America*, or Anne Carson's work, the way she moves in a single book between multiple forms, genres, modes of writing, address. Calvino, too. *Invisible Cities*. What else. I was listening to a lot of Sigur Rós at the time—the songs where they make up an entire language by phonetically approximating Icelandic. I was also reading the 19th century French autodidact Jean-Pierre Brisset, who used puns and associations of verbal sound patterns to develop a theory that humans evolved from the water and that the history of speech is connected to the croaking of frogs. He was a big swimmer. He gave swimming lessons. He perfected a sort of frog-like kicking stroke. His portrait is so great!



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