

**John Woodman is an English painter who has exhibited across the United Kingdom and internationally. His most recent solo show took place at the Milton Gallery in London in 2013. Ben Jasnow is a Classicist and poet based at the University of Virginia. In this interview conducted via Skype in August of 2013, Woodman and Jasnow talk about their ongoing project to illustrate and translate the *Idylls* of Theocritus, an ancient Greek poet from Sicily (3rd century BC), credited with the invention of pastoral poetry. Each verse translation is paired with several of Woodman's contemporary, interpretive illustrations. In April of 2013 they exhibited a selection of their work at the Bridge PAI in Charlottesville, VA, and hope to publish an edition of their illustrated translation in the near future.**

**An illustrated version of this conversation is available on the *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies* website:  
<http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2014/jasnow-woodman>**

**JW.** What drew you to Theocritus, and how did you come up with the idea for a collaborative approach?

**BJ.** Theocritus was so different from anything I'd ever encountered. I didn't know what to make of him, especially his bucolic poems. The bucolic, or pastoral, world has this special type of physical beauty that's charged with divinity and danger. The shepherds always sing in a shady spot, beside a spring or a brook, enclosed by lush vegetation. But lurking in the background is the threat of angering Pan, or being snatched away by the Nymphs. I was attracted to this from the beginning.

And then there's the incredible difficulty of the poems—I can't figure them out so I can't let them go. The *Idylls* are so complex in their tone—grotesque and sublime, funny and dead serious. The ambiguity of the *Idylls*, the way that Theocritus is able to approach a topic from different angles, that's one of the real pleasures of his poetry.

This complexity is one reason I thought illustration would suit Theocritus well. There are so many different sides to his poetry that no translation is going to be able to pick up every angle. But with you as a visual translator, making pictures and approaching the poems from your own perspective, then someone who reads our translation might get a fuller experience of the *Idylls*. Having pictures and words together broadens the interpretive context. Theocritus can be really difficult, since he's full of unfamiliar names, places and situations. I hope that your images will catch the attention of people who wouldn't otherwise have been interested in Theocritus, or in Ancient Greek poetry. And then they'll get trapped like I did.

How about you? What was your first reaction to Theocritus?

**JW.** I didn't know anything about Theocritus when you suggested this idea to me. As you say, not knowing the context in which Theocritus is writing or the references that he is making can be alienating. We began with *Idyll 7*, and I remember reading it with my sketchbook and being amazed by the description of the yearning for a boy felt by

Simichidas' male friend. It is shocking that it could be described without any kind of judgment or moral implication as would happen now. It suggested some very potent images.

It's amazing how much I have sympathised with the characters Theocritus describes. When reading the *Idylls*, the context slips away and the situations in which these characters find themselves take precedence. These situations feel very natural and are just the kind of things that we deal with every day. For example, Polyphemus in *Idyll 6* is a really moving character. His deluded speech perfectly describes the perverse mixture of loneliness and pride that one can see so often in single men. Similarly the jilted young girl in *Idyll 2* is remarkable. She feels the abandonment so keenly and gets caught up in it with just the right level of intensity for someone of that age. There is a wonderful naivety about her which most people will recognise from their own experience. That Theocritus was able to inhabit the mind of the girl so convincingly is amazing.

**BJ.** So what have been your biggest artistic influences for this project?

**JW.** There are lots of artists that influence all of my work, but for this project I particularly had in mind the silhouette work of Kara Walker, and *The Eraser* and *Amok* album artwork by Stanley Donwood. I love their approach to monochrome work and thought it was just the right method for the *Idylls*. People often mention Aubrey Beardsley to me when they see the pictures but I actually do not know his work very well.

The way I use colour in my painting is very hard to replicate in printed form. As such black and white images really do make a lot of sense. I also wanted something that would force me to work quickly. When I paint I can be a bit pedantic and this would require lots of images for each *Idyll*: it had to be a quick method! This has been one of the nicest elements of this project. Making so many pictures has allowed me to dip into lots of different ways of making images and this is feeding back into the painting.

**BJ.** So there are practical advantages to using black and white. What types of artistic concerns went into that decision?

**JW.** Practical issues are always important in such decision-making. That said, it is not the only concern. There is a kind of jarring sensation that happens when you look at a silhouetted image: it takes time for the image to clarify and it is rather akin to my experience of reading Theocritus. When it clicks, it's hard to shake. Originally I wanted to only use silhouettes but as more images are made it becomes clear just how many things one can do with black and white. It is really exciting.

How do you approach translating the poems? Who are your influences?

**BJ.** My approach changes poem by poem, and that's by design. The first thing I do is sit down with an *Idyll* and reread the Greek carefully, letting the poem do its work on me. I try to assemble a reaction to the work, more of a feeling than anything I can articulate at first, although I'm sure my scholarly work also ends up influencing this type of aesthetic response. Then I begin to consider issues of poetic form, like rhythm

and verse length, that might help me convey my impressions. My chief concern throughout a translation is to try to come up with verse that is in keeping with this impression I've formed, and will hopefully come close to replicating that emotional reaction in my readers.

So, literal linguistic accuracy is not always of first importance. I'm hoping instead for a different kind of accuracy, something more like aesthetic accuracy. I want to replicate the types of sounds and rhythms that Theocritus uses, his tone and linguistic register. In many cases a totally 'literal' translation would really be far less accurate, because it wouldn't satisfy any of the aesthetic concerns of the poem. *Idyll 1* is a good example, since it uses a refrain. I needed to convey the rhythmic, religious force of the refrain, which is calling on the Muses to inspire—to conjure up—an entire mode of poetry. This one repeated line bears a huge amount of poetic weight. And that's how it feels in the Greek. But a literal translation into English just couldn't convey all this. It would have gone something like this: 'Begin, dear Muses, begin the bucolic song.' Instead, I wanted something that sounded a bit like a magic spell and had the rhythmic force of an incantation, and also felt somewhat like a folk song. To achieve that, I had to make some changes to the original. I made the refrain two lines instead of one, and changed the language. 'Begin, my Muses, my Muses bring, / Begin the song the herders sing.'

An important influence in this regard has been British and American folk poetry and folk song. I like to sing and play a little Appalachian music, which has its roots in Britain. Since the bucolic poems (at least ostensibly) claim a heritage in folk poetry, I try to think of those rhythms when I'm translating, where it's appropriate. Of course a major influence has been Theocritus himself, and Homer, since they both used Dactylic Hexameter. And then there are English language poets who, like Theocritus and Homer, have a rhythmic power combined with grace: Whitman, Hopkins, Thomas, Pound.

**JW.** What makes *Idyll 1* such an important and meaningful poem?

**BJ.** *Idyll 1* is positioned as the first poem in the collection, but it is also the 'first poem' in a more metaphorical sense. Theocritus was supposedly the inventor of Greek bucolic poetry, the first author to take this kind of folk song and raise it to a high literary level. *Idyll 1* initiates this new mode of poetry, almost literally: it calls on the Muses to 'begin bucolic song'. The poem dramatises the creation of this new type of poetry, but also the creation of art and culture in general. Two shepherds meet on a beautiful, deserted mountain side, and they agree to exchange works of art, a beautiful goblet for a beautiful song. The topic of the song is the death of Daphnis, the legendary first singer of bucolic poetry. Within that song, Daphnis himself is portrayed as singing, lamenting his own death. So the poem is very much about the creation of art—art from chance encounter, art from beauty, from other art, from suffering.

How did you come up with the images for *Idyll 1*?

**JW.** We both took a long time to work on *Idyll 1*. When I first read it, some vivid descriptions in the poem suggested images such as the old fisherman or the setting sun. These were very easy and quick to make. I then got stuck trying to depict

Daphnis. I tried to do what had worked so well with the fisherman and sun images and be quite literal in my depiction: even having confused conversations with my Dad who was translating specific words for me trying to help me work out what was going on. I only found out how to depict *Daphnis Dying* after you and I spoke in Charlottesville about him. You tried to explain who Daphnis was and did an impression of what you imagined his death looked like: wading into the water all the time melting into droplets. This had a massive impact and made the picture very clear in my mind.

Do you feel a pressure trying to do justice to Theocritus' poems?

**BJ.** Oh God, yes. I have stayed up at night, worrying about the translations. It's a fine line to walk, to make the translation poetically satisfying, yet also convey the sense of the original. I don't want to do Theocritus a disservice.

How about you?

**JW.** I don't really feel a pressure in that way. It is different for me working in another medium. I feel an obligation to our efforts and want to make images for each *Idyll* that feel like a complete set. It is important too that both of us are in pulling in the same direction. I normally start working from Verity's translation and later as your translation arrives in my inbox change to that one. It is amazing how different they tend to be. It always makes me rethink my understanding of the writing and thus my approach to the drawing. Over time we both bounce off each other and eventually end up with something which tends to be quite surprising. *Idyll 1* is a great example of the clarity your writing brings to my work. The end of that poem is quite convoluted and hard to interpret. It is wonderful but finding the right images for it was very tough. It took a long time and the final image is almost an abstract response.

**BJ.** That reminds me. I hadn't yet received any images from you when I completed my first draft of *Idyll 7*. But then I got your pictures, which were so visceral, and I realised I had not done my job well enough. I scrapped my draft and began again.

**JW.** When there is a famous section of a poem, or a particularly important portion, do you approach it differently?

**BJ.** I wouldn't say so. I take a careful approach to every passage, and try to strike the right tone. That's my goal in every case.

I do feel a pressure to live up to Theocritus, like I said before. And I suppose part of that pressure, to me, is capturing the complexity of the characters he portrays. There has been some tendency, I think, to belittle or dismiss certain figures from the *Idylls*, and I do try to stick up for them. The end of *Idyll 7* comes to mind. People have tended to think of that poem's narrator as somewhat ridiculous. But at the end of the poem he has this incredible communion with the natural world, at a festival to Demeter in her sacred grove. It was important to me that I convey the beauty and gravity of that moment. Earlier you mentioned the Cyclops, from *Idyll 6*. I really wanted to capture the humor of his speech, much of which lies in what you might call his lack of self-awareness, while also communicating the pathos of his situation.

Many of your images are very funny, and a lot of this humour is sexual. Can you explain the role of sexuality in your illustrations?

**JW.** The sex in *Idyll 1* and in *Idyll 7* is described pretty clearly in the text. The description of the shepherd being jealous of the ram mounting the sheep is an amazing section and the imagery it conjures is at once very funny and very sad. The sexual element in the image of *Daphnis Dying* is there in part to explain why it is he is dying. He says it himself:

‘...I am lost at the hands of Love,  
Drawn already into Hades.’

I also really liked the other implications it brings when included in this picture. It complicates the feelings he might be having. It is important that it be relatively hidden. The viewer tends to read the title and take in the rest of the picture, then this element can come as something of a shock and cast doubt over their earlier impressions.

**BJ.** What about the illustrations for *Idyll 6*?

**JW.** *Idyll 6* was an extremely difficult one to get right. The poem is quite short but touches on lots of different themes and tones. The first image I had in mind was Polyphemus blowing on a pipe while someone danced along a trunk of a fallen tree. I could see the image really clearly and felt that it would do justice to the serene elements described towards the start of the poem. However the drawing would not work no matter how many different approaches I tried. Whenever this happens it means that there is some fundamental mistake in what you are trying to do. In this case I was sticking too closely to the text. Instead the best way to tackle this *Idyll* was to use the fact that I sympathised so much with the Cyclops. Cyclopes have been very badly depicted in art. There are terrible examples of human beings with a single eye in the middle of their foreheads, and yet two hollows where human eyes would be as well along with random floating eyebrows. The only good examples I can think of are those by Redon and Turner – and Turner did it by turning it into something of an abstraction. If you imagine drawing a Cyclops there is a very clear danger that the head will look phallic, which could undermine the story you are trying to tell. However the proud manner that Polyphemus has and the shortsighted way he interprets his situation suggested that you could use the phallic imagery when drawing his head quite directly: you can turn it into something else entirely. Once this decision was made I imagined a huge number of situations which I could draw, most of which were quite humorous. That said I find these drawings of Polyphemus are the most moving ones for me. Polyphemus is a tragic and very recognisable figure, so the important thing for me was to find a way of showing these things. Although these pictures could be interpreted as poking fun at him (as could Theocritus’ poem) I rather hope that the empathy I feel for the character will come across most of all. None of the Cyclops images are described in the poem. But in some cases sticking very literally to depictions of the text does not actually give you an accurate response to the poetry.

How do you bridge the gap between translation and poetry?

**BJ.** I think that's true of the poetry, too, that being too dogmatic about the literal meaning of the text may lead to a less accurate translation overall. But still, I almost envy your position as a visual artist. I am bound to the text—I'm not entirely free in my response. The translations are very much filtered through my own aesthetic vision, but, in the end, I am doing my best to convey what is on the page. There's always an element of failure in that effort, since what's on the page is so complex. But often your images develop the themes of an *Idyll* that wouldn't be in the foreground otherwise. That's why our project is best viewed as a whole, and why an illustrated translation is so appropriate to this poet. Viewing both of our individual responses to the *Idylls* at the same time makes for a richer interpretive experience, hopefully giving access to Theocritus' genius, but also making something new.

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