THE TIMES

STEPHEN SPENDER PRIZE

for poetry in translation

2004

ABC
**The Times Stephen Spender Prize 2004**

**18 AND UNDER**

**Winners**
FIRST J. C. H. Potts: ‘Poem 63’ by Catullus (Latin)
SECOND Adrian Pascu: ‘Dead Man’s Ballad’ by Ion Minulescu (Romanian)
THIRD Holly Hughes: ‘Tomorrow at Dawn’ by Victor Hugo (French)

**Commended**
Nicholas Langley: ‘The Lilacs and the Roses’ by Louis Aragon (French)
Viral Kantaria: ‘Explaining Some Things’ by Pablo Neruda (Spanish)
Ana-Sofia O’Shaugnessey Gutierrez (aged 9): ‘Serious Verses’
   by Gloria Fuertes (Spanish)

**OVER 18**

**Winners**
FIRST Mark Leech: ‘The Dream of the Rood’ (Anglo-Saxon)
JOINT SECOND Sasha Dugdale: ‘Memory’s Sideways Glance’ by Elena Shvarts (Russian)
JOINT SECOND Paul Howard: ‘The Good Life’ by G. G. Belli (Italian)

**Commended**
Kit Pan: ‘Wartime’ by Ya Hsien (Chinese)
Timothy Wastell: ‘The Lay of Volund’ (Old Norse)
Ben Robson: ‘Wulf and Eadwacer’ (Anglo-Saxon)
Introduction

Universities closing or halving their language departments, fewer and fewer schools offering language A levels, newspapers reluctant to review translated literature, school libraries disposing of their foreign-language books... Out of one such despondent conversation was this poetry translation prize born. The idea was to encourage and stimulate a new generation of literary translators.

In 2004, the first year of the Prize, only British residents aged 30 or under were eligible to enter (there will be no age limit in 2005). Entrants were invited to translate a poem from any language, modern or classical, and comment on their translation. We wanted to know why they had chosen a particular poem; the problems encountered in translating between the language of the original and English; the problems encountered in translating their chosen poem; how they had approached it (had they tried to preserve the original rhyme or metre, for instance); and what pleased or displeased them about their translation. As Susan Bassnett testifies below, the commentaries were as interesting and as revelatory as we had hoped.

There were three winners in each category. All deserve congratulations and praise, but so too do the other participants, who despite school, university and work commitments made the time to put together such thoughtful entries. Our thanks to them and to the four judges – Professor Susan Bassnett, Alan Jenkins, Ewald Osers and Daniel Weissbort – who brought to the judging table knowledge of sixteen languages and many more years of experience as poets, translators, editors and lecturers. Having produced four disparate shortlists, they chose the winners with exceptional good humour and wisdom. We are also grateful to The Times for promoting the Prize and Arts Council England, East for funding it in its first year.

Robina Pelham Burn, Director of the Stephen Spender Memorial Trust

The Judges’ Comments

Judging a poetry competition is a tricky task, for it is never easy to distinguish between styles of writing, and personal taste must also, inevitably, play a part. Judging a poetry in translation competition is even trickier, for now the judges must weigh the finished product with the original poem and assess what has gone on during the actual translation process, considering what strategies the translator may have used to achieve a result and to what extent the translation may be said to be an authentic rendering of the poet’s work. Judging this competition was particularly challenging, for there was such a broad range of languages and styles and so many entries of merit.

The judgement we reached was surprisingly consensual, and only after we had concluded our discussion did we realise that we had selected poems in six different languages, both ancient and modern. Latin, Anglo-Saxon, French, Russian, Italian and Romanian are the languages of our winning entries, and we discussed poems translated from Chinese, Old Norse, and German as well before coming to the final verdict. Many of the translators were in their GCSE year, one exceptionally was only 9 years old, and despite their own admission in some cases that they had not spent many years studying their language of choice, the quality of entries was tremendous. At a time when there is so much anxiety about the future of foreign language learning in Britain, when so many young people are opting not to study any languages at all, the number of entries for this competition, the range of poems selected and the overall quality sends a very positive message of hope to beleaguered language teachers everywhere.

The commentaries that accompanied the entries were also excellent. Some showed great sensitivity and awareness of the structure, language and tone of the original. Many discussed the difficulties they had encountered and some, very honestly, acknowledged the weaknesses of their endeavours. Interestingly, some of the best commentaries were those that accompanied translations from Latin and
from Russian; one wonders here whether this is due to the fact that the teaching of those languages involves more explicit study of grammar and poetics.

Each of the judges had personal favourites. I was impressed by the creative solutions found by Timothy Wastell in rendering oral poetic devices in the Old Norse poem, ‘The Lay of Volund’, by the lovely, simple Spanish poems translated by the young Ana-Sofia O’Shaunessy Gutierrez and by Ben Robson’s clever rendering of the Anglo-Saxon poem, ‘Wulf and Eadwacer’. I admired the bravery (if not foolhardiness) of young translators who attempted poems by Catullus or Leopardi or Neruda which have been translated many many times and who still managed to find some original, rather beautiful solutions to poems with which well-known translators have endlessly wrestled. Kit Fan’s translation of poems by Ya Hsien enabled me for the first time to read work by this important contemporary Chinese poet.

One of our winners chose to translate a poem by the Italian dialect poet Giacomo Belli into English dialect, managing by a series of skilful, creative tactics to provide an equivalent in English for Belli’s humour. Paul Howard also chose to alter the form of the original from the Petrarchan sonnet to the Shakespearean sonnet, a clever and yet totally appropriate way to anglicise the text and to pay tribute to the history of the sonnet and to its transition from Italian into English in the early Renaissance.

What do the entries for this competition tell us about the state of translation in Britain today and about the future? On the basis of the entries that I read, all 134 of them, I would say that there is cause for optimism, something I did not believe I would find myself saying just a few months ago. There are clearly some talented writers out there, some dedicated teachers and some young people with a genuine interest in the language of poetry. The winners have all produced work of exceptional quality, but the extent of the judges’ discussions and the long list we each had of poems that we believed showed evidence of merit confirm that much good work is being undertaken by writers with expertise in both ancient and modern languages.  

Susan Bassnett

Because I can’t pretend to real competence in any foreign language other than French, finding the winners of these excellent awards was never going to be, for me, a matter of judging their language – competence, in Latin or Greek or German – or Romanian – but their poetic instincts and abilities.

This isn’t the place to expound a theory of translation, but my rule of thumb is that fidelity to an original – especially an original poem – is not the same as unthinking attachment to its every feature, semantic or structural. Literalism, in a word, will only take you so far. Many of the translators, in their commentaries, elaborated on this very thought in instructive and arresting ways. Too often, though, their translations fell into the very trap they believed they had avoided. I began to fall hungrily on translations that showed some verbal flair and élan, some flicker of imagination or invention, a sense of rhythm, of meaning business – the attributes, in other words, one would look for in a poem written originally in English. In translations that had any of these, I hoped to find (and depended on my fellow-judges to confirm) a real engagement with the original, a submission to it that was not just a slavish obedience to its rules. In the winning poems in both categories – long, ambitious translations of complex and highly wrought works, both containing lines and touches that I and I think any poet would have been pleased to produce – I found all the above, in abundance.

It was a special pleasure for me to come upon the translations by Adrian Pascu of the early twentieth-century Romanian poet, Ion Minulescu. For a few moments I breathed again the heady atmosphere of the early Eliot and his masters Jules Laforgue and Baudelaire, a
Parisian atmosphere of Symbolist fogs, laughing corpses and solitary flaneurs; and I heard an unmistakeable echo of the fin de siècle in a voice that was, as Mr Pascu describes it, ‘sonorous and musical, witty, sophisticated and ironic’. I hope Mr Pascu and all the young translators whose achievements are recognised here will feel encouraged to persevere in their difficult, scandalously under-valued art. For, while everyone knows Robert Frost’s ‘Poetry is what gets lost in translation’, how many also know the late, lamented D. J. Enright’s rejoinder, ‘Yes, but not nearly as much as would get lost if no one translated it’?

Alan Jenkins

I suppose it would be unrealistic to expect four judges from different corners of the translation scene to come up with identical winners’ lists. Nevertheless we found a surprising measure of consensus – at least to the extent that none of us violently opposed anyone else’s candidates. English literature, and poetry in particular, has, over the centuries, greatly benefited from translations of foreign literature. It is to be hoped, therefore, that those who participated in this competition – not just the winners – will continue to develop and hone their translation skills and, even more important, derive pleasure and satisfaction from this activity.

Ewald Osers

I found the translators’ comments particularly interesting. Anything translators say tends to be ignored and partly for that reason they rarely comment at all on their work. The commentary provided here was illuminating and often challenging. It attested to an evident willingness to discuss the work, to defend it, in a spirited but generally un-defensive way. The need for and usefulness of a discussion forum, such as the one electronically organised by the British Centre for Literary Translation and the British Council, is evident. Literature teachers, literary journalists or critics, often seem unaware how complex literary translation is, especially when it comes to the translation of poetry, which is sometimes simply assumed to be impossible.

But of course nothing is impossible! Those who submitted work here showed that, however specifically language-bound a source text may be, attempt to match it with or in another language will often reveal what has perhaps been taken for granted or has not even been noticed in the source text. The commentaries eloquently attest to the potentially revelatory nature – not too strong a way of putting it – of translation, the process as well as the results.

Again, particularly encouraging for me was the openness of translators, their willingness to try out various approaches, ranging from the formally mimetic to free-verse representation of formal verse, from domestication to quite radical foreignisation. In the latter connection, I cannot resist mentioning what for me was a delicious translation, Ben Robson’s version of ‘Wulf and Eadwacer’, from the Anglo-Saxon, as audacious, in its way, as for instance Ezra Pound’s celebrated rendering of ‘The Seafarer’. There was unanimity of opinion as to the excellence and professionalism of Sasha Dugdale’s translation of the leading contemporary Russian poet Elena Schvarts. The range of languages, too, at a time when the importance of foreign language teaching is so little appreciated – even if, surely, it was never so needed – was also impressive, including translations up from earlier forms of English itself, from Old Norse, Classical Greek and Latin, Romanian, Chinese, Russian, as well as the more familiar contemporary, Spanish, Italian, German and French.

Daniel Weissbort
The Dream of the Rood

Hwæt! Ic swefna cyst secgan wylle,
hwæt me gemætte to midre nihtæ,
syðpan reordberend reste wunedon!
þuhic me þæt ic gesawe sylycres treow

on lyft lædan, leohete bewunden,
beama beorhtost. Eall þæt beacen wæs
begoten mid golde. Gimmas stodon
fægere æt foldan sceatum, swylce þær fife wæron
uppe on þam eaxlegespanne. Beheoldon þær engel dryhtnes ealle,

fægere þurh forðgesceaft. Ne wæs ðær huru fracodes gealgæ,
ac hine þær beheoldon halige gastas,
men ofer moldan, ond eall þeos ðære gesceaft.
Syllic wæs se sigebeam, ond ic synnum fah,
forwunded mid woomnum. Gesæah ic wuldres treow;

wædum geweorðode, wynnum scinan,
gegyred mid golde; gimmas hæfdon
bewrigene weordlice wealdendes treow.
Hwædre ic þurh þæt gold ongytan meahce
earmra ærgewin, þæt hit ærest ongan

swætan on þa swiðran healfe. Eall ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed,
forht ic wæs for þære fægran gesyðhe. Gesæah ic þæt fusce beacen
wendan wædum ond bleom; hwilum hit wæs mid wætan bestemed,
beswyld mid swates gange, hwilum mid since gegyrwed.
Hwædre ic þær liegende lange hwile

beheold hrowweard ælendes treow,
oððæt ic gehyrde þæt hit hleoðrode.
Ongan þa word sprecean wudu selesta:

“þæt wæs geara iu, (ic þæt gyta geman),
þæt ic wæs aheawan holtes on ende,
astyred of steafe minum. Genaman me ðær strange feondas,
geworhton him þær to waefsynæ, heton me heora wergas hebban.
Bæron me ðær beornas on eaxllum, ðoddæt hie me on beorg asetton,
gæftændon me þær feondas genoge. Gesæah ic þa frean mæncynnes
esfan elne mycel þæt he me wolde on gestigan.
þær ic þa ne dorste ofer dryhtnes word
bugan œðde berstan, þa ic bijfan gesæah
eorðan sceatas. Ealle ic mihte
feondas gefyllan, hwædre ic fæste stod.
Ongyrede hine þa geong hælde, (þæt wæs god ælmhihtig),
strang ond stiðmod. Gestah he on gealgæn heanne,
modig on manigra gesyðhe, þa he wolde mancyn lysan.”

Anon

The Dream of the Rood, an extract

Listen, the best of dreams let me tell you
that I met with near midnight
when the spear-bearers were sleeping.
I thought I saw a sparkling tree
lifted on high, laden with light,
the brightest of trees. All the beacon was
gilded with gold; gems gripped it
gleaming across all earth, and five of them
were on the cross-beam. I saw an angel chorus,
men throughout the world and this wondrous creation.

Sublime, the tree was, and I was foul with sin,
wounded and filthy. I saw the wondrous tree
become more beautiful, bound with streamers,
wound with gold; gems gathered
nobly covering the King’s tree.
But through the gold I could glimpse,
though buried by sinfulness, that it began
to bleed on its right side. I was racked with sorrow;
afraid before that fair sight; I saw that fine beacon
change its colours; it was moisture coated,
furled in flows of blood, then folded in treasure.

So I lay there a long while
sorrowfully staring at the sacred tree,
until I heard how it spoke;
the celestial wood was saying these words:

'It was years ago, or so I remember,
that I was torn from the trees’ edge,
ripped from my root. Strong enemies gripped me,
made me a spectacle, swung my criminals from me;
I carried men on my crossbeam until I was fixed on a crag;
many enemies set me there. I saw mankind’s Lord
walk boldly, quickly, eager to climb up.
There I could not, against the Creator’s will,
quiver or fall, though I saw quake
the earth’s surface. I was able
to slaughter all the enemies, but I stood firm.
The young man, Heaven’s King, cast off his clothes,
strong and firm spirited; he stood on the gallows
bravely, beheld by many, to break mankind free.’

Translator’s commentary

I translated ‘The Dream of the Rood’ because I wanted to make its beautiful and striking imagery available to as many readers as possible, without destroying its mystery. I am also very interested in the culture from which it came.

I have therefore tried to remain as faithful as possible to the original – retaining the metrical ‘half line’ unit, and broadly sticking to a direct translation of the words. I have also tried to keep something of the original alliterative scheme. To have kept rigidly to the original poem’s pattern of two main stresses per half line, with three main-stress alliterations in each whole line, would have been almost impossible. I adopted a diluted version, with two alliterative stresses in each whole line, one in each half.

Old English presents several difficulties for a translator. For example, the language is wholly inflected, rather than dependent on word order. This presents syntactical problems for a faithful version although it can also carry the sense along in unusual ways. Poetic Old English also has many synonyms, such as, in this poem, for the Tree itself. This can lead to the opposite dangers of overuse of the same word, or the use of (to modern eyes) alienating circumlocutions. I have tried to steer a path between both rocks.

One distinctive feature of ‘The Dream’ is its longer lines with a large number of unstressed syllables. It was a challenge to ensure that my rendering of these lines did not lose the rhythmic tension of the shorter ones.

I think my translation provides a clear, accessible and faithful version of the poem. My only regret is that the strict rules I set myself prevented me from experimenting more with the verse in order to explore different aspects of its meanings.

Translated from the Anglo-Saxon by Mark Leech
БОКОВОЕ ЗРЕНИЕ ПАМЯТИ

В они дни
Играли мы в войну
На берегу Невы.
Восточный свежий ветер дул,
За белое пальто ее в залив тянул,
И я на это засмотрелась,
Когда мальчишка вдруг, ощерясь,
Метнул
Зазубренный уголь кусок
В высок.
(Висок ведь по-английски - храм).
И сразу кончилась игра.

А может быть, сама Нева
Ленивая приподнялась,
Мне вскрыла сбоку третий глаз
И заплескалась в головах.
О злая! - это ты, Нева,
И ладожская твоя сила
Тот угол с берега схватила
И втерла мне в высок слова.
Кровь пролилась, ручьем, ветвясь,
Сквозь антрацитовую грязь,
Смешались апость с блендной,
И углек перистая тень,
И голова была - закат
В короткий предвечесний день.

Горела долго над Невой
И вдруг, кружась, промчалась мимо,
Вся в клубах сигаретна дымка,
И мимо рук - седым углем
И лейкоцитом серафима.
Смотрела - как сестра летит,
Простая чёрна кость Адамля.
Нева точки о гранит
Свои муаровые сабли.

Memory's Sideways Glance

Once upon a time
We were playing at war
On the bank of the river Neva.
It was blowing a fresh Easterly,
Dragging the river by her white coat to sea,
And I was lost in contemplation of this,
When suddenly a boy, grinding his teeth,
Hurled
A jagged lump of coal
At my temple
(Temple has two meanings in English).
And the game was over.

But perhaps it was the Neva herself
The indolent Neva lifted herself
Came to my side, opened my third eye
And took up lapping in our heads.
Oh evil! Evil you are, Neva
With your might from Ladoga
You seized that coal from the bank
And knocked the words into my temple.
Blood poured in streams and tributaries
Through the anthracite grime,
Pallor mixed with crimson
And the plumed shadow of coal.
And my head was the sun setting
On that short day before spring.

It burnt for a time above the Neva
Then circled, suddenly darted,
Enshrouded in cigarette smoke
Past my hands like ashen coal,
Like a seraph’s white corpuscle.
I saw a branch a rib of Adam,
Charcoaled, flying like a sister.
The Neva whets on granite banks
Its marble-silken sabres.

Translated from the Russian by Sasha Dugdale

Translator’s commentary

I have chosen to translate a living Russian poet because much of Russia’s contemporary literature goes unnoticed by the West, although it is a powerful tool in the understanding of this vast and shadowy country. I have translated Shvarts because her poetry is, in a country of poets, exceptional – full of myth, cosmic landscapes, linguistically dense and challenging for the translator, yet driven by the most compelling energy and full of visual images which burn the retina in any language.

I selected ‘Memory’s Sideways Glance’ because it is about becoming a poet and as such an important statement of intent and poetic imperative. The intricacy with which Shvarts has woven her poetic heritage and her own poetic calling together make this an impressive and complex poem, worth bringing to the English-speaking reader. ‘Memory’s Sideways Glance’ uses and develops the various myths of Russian poetry – predominantly the mythology surrounding St Petersburg. As in Pushkin’s ‘The Bronze Horseman’ the river Neva is a malign and supernatural force, which crushes the poet. Yet the poem also invokes Pushkin’s poem ‘about becoming a poet’, ‘The Prophet’, in which God forces a coal into the poet’s mouth and commands him to light the hearts of men. In Shvarts’s poem the narrator is a woman and a mere boy throws the coal. This is the country, according to another of her poems, where women are beaten by their menfolk on Sundays and so even in her poetic calling it is petty victimisation and not grand mutilation which brings forth creativity.

But even without this knowledge, the poem’s images and colours are vital and shocking. The ‘translatability’ of any element of a poem is always a reason for attempting the poem and here I felt the visual clarity made up for lost references.

I have been as faithful as possible to the language and rhythm of the poem. I have rarely paraphrased, choosing to trust the author’s skill at language and I have copied as far as possible the rhythm – in this case the freer verse of the first stanza and much more regular stanzas following it. There is rhyme in the second and third stanzas and this has been lost in the English, sacrificed to the flow of it, which I felt invoked the Neva’s flow. One place in which I was forced to expand a metaphor was the line opening ‘I saw a branch’. In Russian the phrase ‘Adam’s rib’ means a fossilised tree, but I was loath to lose the ‘Adam’s rib’ which referred to both the biblical and the gender theme.
La bbona famijja

Mi' nonna a un'or de notte che viviè ttata
se leva da filà, ppovera vecchia,
attizza un carboncello, sciappareccia,
e mmaggnamo du' fronne d'inzalata.

Quarche vvorta se fàmo una frittata,
che ssi la metti ar lume sce se specchia
come fussi a traverzo d'un'orecchìa:
quattro nosce, e la scena è tterminata.

Poi ner mentre ch'io, tata e Cremenìntina
seguitamo un par d'ora dde sgocchetto,
lei spareccìa e arissetta la cuscìna.

E appena visto er fonno ar bucaletto,
'na pisssiatìn, 'na sarvereggìna,
e, in zanta pasce, sce n'annàmo a lletto.

G. G. Belli

The Good Life

Mi gram when late at neet comes home t'owd man
drops the clothes sh's knittin' us, poor owd pet,
sets us table an' warms room best she can,
an' we eat a few spuds, what we can get.

Nah'n again we'll 'ave us an omèlet,
an' if tha were to 'old it up to t' sun
just like an ear, light'd shine reight thru' it:
a few crusts to nibble on, supper's done.

Then me, wi' t'owd man an' mi sister Grace
a couple o' hours o' suppin' pass,
while gram cleans up an' puts things back in place,
til we can see to t' bottom of us glass.

Next a quick piss and an 'ail mary,
an' straight up to bed in peace an' plenty.

Translated from the Italian by Paul Howard
Translator's commentary

Belli, except through Burgess, is practically unknown to English-speakers. The attraction for the translator is clear: the challenge to represent the structure of the Petrarchan sonnet form and convey the 'rough, dirty, blasphemous dialect of the Roman streets'. This poem, to my knowledge untranslated by Burgess, seems representative of Belli's sonnets, and I wanted to show that his poetry is universal, despite being couched in dialect.

The coarse dialect, stressed by double consonants, is captured in the varied assonance of the Yorkshire dialect. Specific dialectal terms were problematic, such as 'sgoccetto'. 'Suppin' has the dialectal reference to drinking and the implication of moderation and savouring. 'Fronne', equivalent to 'foglie', had to be changed to a more 'English' staple – I hope the dialectal 'spuds' approximate.

Unlike Burgess, I tried to transpose the Petrarchan sonnet form into the Shakespearean: I changed the *abba abba cdedc* rhyme scheme to *abab cdcd efef gg*, and the hendecasyllable to a near iambic pentameter. I acknowledge irregularity, although rhythmically, the original is not strictly regular. The caesura's position differs in lines 2 and 3 for example – I tried to render this (cf lines 2 and 4).

The feeling of the translation pleases me. I believe I haven't sacrificed sense for sound or rhythm. The title is less satisfying since it excludes the idea of the family, though it is conveyed within the poem. Impossible to convey was the polysemous 'bbona'; 'Holy Family' would be too heavy to connote the Biblical family; 'Appy families' would miss the irony. I account for the religious undertones with the name Grace (Crrementina being a diminutive of 'clemente', 'merciful', besides 'clementine') and the Hail Mary, untranslatable as 'prayer' since it alludes to an absent mother figure. 'The good life' does reflect irony; it suggests luxury and contentedness in the face of poverty and hints at a virtuous life.

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1 From the blurb of Anthony Burgess's *ABBA ABBA*, (Vintage Classics, 2000).
2 Defined by Belli himself as 'seguiria a sbavazzare alcun tempo'.
Poem 63

I

super alta vectus Attis celeri rate maria,
Phrygium ut nemus citato cupide pede tetigit,
aditique opaca silvis redimita loca deae,
stimulatus ibi furenti rabie, vagus animis,
devolit ilei acuto sibi pondera silice.

itaque, ut relinquat sensit sibi membra sine viro,
etiam recente terrae sola sanguine maculans,
niveis citata cepit manibus leve typanum,
typanum tuum, Cybebe, tua, mater, initia,
quaternoque terga tauri teneris cava digitis
canere haec suis adortis est tremebunda comitibus.

'agite ite ad alta, Gallae, Cybeles nemora simul,
simul ite, Dindymenae dominae vaga pecora,
alienata quae petentes velut exules loca
sectam meam exspectant ducem mihi comites
rapidum salum tulistis truculentaque pelagi,
et corpus evirastis Veneris nimio odio;
ilarate erae citatis erroribus animum.

mora tarda mente cedat: simul ite, sequimini
Phrygium ad domum Cybebes, Phrygia ad nemora deae,
ubi cymbalum sonat vox, ubi tympana reboant,
tibicen ubi canit Phryx curvo grave calamo,
ubi capita Maenades vi iacunt hederigerae,
ubi sacra sancta acutis ululatibus agitant,
ubi suevit illa divae volitare vaga cohors,
quo nos decet citatis celerare tripudiis.'

Poem 63, part I

Drawn over the deep sea by a fast raft, Attis,
when breathlessly he had sped to the Phrygian forest
and reached the goddess' gloomy wood-crowned groves,
tortured there by raging madness, deranged,
plucked the fruit of his groin with a sharp flint.

When she felt her limbs stripped of their manhood,
staining the soil with fresh blood, in her snowy hands
the agile girl took up the light tambourine,
your tambourine, Cybele, your mysteries, mother,
and striking hollow bull-skin with soft fingers,
the trembling girl sang out to her followers:

'Go at once, Gallae, to Cybele's high groves,
go together, Mistress Dindymus' wandering flocks,
who like exiles seeking foreign fields, having
followed my lead, my comrades, led by me,
have borne the tempestuous brine and bullying of the sea,
and reviling Venus have emasculated your bodies;
with quick-footed wanderings delight your mistress' heart.

Free all lingering restraints, go together, follow me
to Cybele's Phrygian groves, the goddess' Phrygian groves,
where cymbals sound, where tambourines resound,
where the Phrygian piper plays deeply on curved reed,
where frantically ivy-clad Maenads toss their heads,
where screeching they celebrate sacred rites,
where the goddess, roaming retinue rush about,
where we should with swift dance speed.'

Translated from the Latin by J. C. H. Potts
Translator’s commentary

The Attis myth is one of psychological sadomasochism, part of a saga of sex, violence and castration. Its dangerous attraction is its exploration of humanity at extremes, the catastrophic results of sexual repression – ‘reviling Venus’¹ – and the self-destructive desire to give in to appetite. The poem’s contrasting speeches show Attis as no mere vehicle for madness: the destruction of individual personality under a tide of atavism – a complete reversal from Attis’ narcissism – is a shared human fantasy. Catullus seems to relish its orgiastic kinkiness, though aware of its destructive effects. To wish for our own dissolution, to become something we are not (different body, job, partner, gender, orientation; being invisible, or a fly on the wall), to give way to hedonism, is as common a dream as flying: the sadomasochism of ‘Poem 63’ is an extreme example, and Catullus touches something universal by showing the tantalising, decadent fantasy while acknowledging it actually happening as far less attractive.

Translation is only ever an interpretation, but for me previous translations fail by making no interpretation at all: they tend to be neither here nor there, trying to be accurate, with a few vague notions of being – the Latinist’s buzzword – ‘idiomatic’ where possible, ending up sounding not like Catullus (the rich and witty language of the poetae novae), not like modern English, but like Latin-translated-into-English. Perhaps to an extent unavoidable, I have tried to avoid incongruous-sounding Latinisms, changing tenses, cases etc, where appropriate, or where Latin takes two or three words when English takes one, and vice versa.

The impact of the original – and the hardest aspect to translate – is the way it recreates through sound and imagery the Bacchic dance, with its interlinked motifs and connotations of frenzied, orgiastic, drugged-up, esoteric rites. The rhythm, too, is difficult to reproduce, sixteen syllable lines unlikely to work well, but as I feel it is very sound-based (Latin metre is based on length not stress), I have chosen to render Catullus’ verbal effects in an alliterative, almost Anglo-Saxon style (Seamus Heaney’s ‘Beowulf’ is an influence), trying to capture some of the frenzy and dislocation of the original with tortured polysyllables, harsh alliteration, and compression from sixteen syllables to the fivesyllable sprung line probably best in English for varying pace and metre, able to expand to six stresses – to some extent picking up on Catullus’ irregular, juddering rhythm – at times of conflict. Stanza divisions of Latin poems being arbitrary, here mostly fall on natural breaks, but I have sought a sense of the verses swelling as the poem’s activity becomes more frantic, becoming more ordered in the quieter atmosphere of Attis’ speech, before the pattern continues in the final verses.

¹Cybele warned Attis he should never marry, wanting him for herself and having to bring him back to Ida from Crete, where he was about to wed; the word ‘handmaid’ is used, an onanistic concept in myth: cf - the handmaids of Amun Ra, an interesting twist on which can be seen in Atwood’s A Handmaid’s Tale.
Romanța mortului

Paznicul mi-a-nchis cavoul
Și-am rămas afară-n ploaie ...
Paznicul mi-a-nchis cavoul
Și-am rămas să-mi plimb scheletul
Pe sub șâlcile ude,
Ce mă cheamă
Și se-ndoai
Să-mi sărute golul negru ce-mi plutește în orbite,
Să-mi sărute alba frunte –
Fruntea ce-mi șția secretul
Aiurărilor trăite –
Și să-mi şteargă de pe oase picăturile de ploaie ...

Paznicul mi-a-nchis cavoul și-am rămas în ploaie-afară.
Și-am rămas să-mi plimb scheletul printre albele cavouri
Unde-ai noștri dorm în paza luminărilor de ceara –
Și-am rămas să-mi plimb scheletul pe potecile pustii
Și pe crucile de piață sa cetesc ce-au scris cei vizi.
Și-am cetit ...

Din depărtare, vintul mi-aducea ecouri
Nențelese, de orchestră
Și de voci ce cînta-n cor –
Ce-i-aveau să moară mine
Beau în cîntea morților! ...

Vintul mi-aducea ecoul bucuriilor din lume
Iar “regretele eterno” scris-n josul unui nume
Lăcrimau,
Ducînd în albul picăturilor de ploaie
Aurul lipit pe cruce! ...

Printre albele cavouri
De sub șâlcile ude,
Ce mă cheamă și se-ndoai
Să-mi sărute alba frunte,
Rătăcesc de-atîta vreme –
Paznicul mi-a-nchis cavoul
Și-am rămas de-atunci afară! ...

Unde-i paznicul?
Să vină,
Să mă vadă,
Să mă cheme,
Să-mi deschide iar cavoul
Și s-adorm din nou în paza luminărilor de ceara! ...

Ion Minulescu

Dead Man’s Ballad

Ruddy sexton locked the crypt,
Left me out to brave the rain...

Heartless sexton locked the crypt,
Left me to parade my frame
Underneath the dripping willows,
Calling
As they bend in pain,
Creeping down to scoop the darkness past the sockets of my eyes
And caress my wind-blanced forehead
Keeper of my secret shame,
Of my follies, my disguise
And embrace my vanished sinews; cloak me dry against the rain...

Careless sexton locked the crypt, left me out to brave the night,
Left me out to drag my bones round the rows of marbled graves
Where the other chaps lie sleeping watched by rows of dancing light
I was left to tramp the pathways, barren, sodden, fugitive,
Reading to myself applause of the dead, by those who live.

So I read…

As from a distance, premonitions broke like waves
Cacophonous voices singing
All a muddle in my head
Those who wait to die tomorrow
Drink the health of last night’s dead!

And the wind brought forth the echoes of the raptures of the world,
While the smudging ‘Loving Memory’ underneat a name unfurled
Dropped a tear
And licked the colour of the letters on the cross,
Weeping off the gilded writing…

Round the rows of marbled graves
Underneath the streaming willows,
Drooping, weeping, calling, stooping
Down to kiss my gleaming forehead,
Wandered I these past few hours
Callous sexton locked the crypt,
Left me to a sleepless night…

Where’s the ruddy sexton?
Bring him,
Let him see me,
Use his powers
Of reopening my crypt,
Lay me back to sleep in silence, watched by rows of dancing light!

**Translator’s commentary**

Minulescu has been considered one of the minor Romanian poets until lately, perhaps because of his slim œuvre and certainly because of his Symbolist and Parnassian ideals, too decadent to have fitted in with the past political regimes. His concerns lie rather with the craft of the poet; his poetry is sonorous and musical, witty, sophisticated and at times ironic. I was captivated by the musicality of this poem.

The epigraph to Minulescu’s first collection, *Ballads for Later Years (Românte pentru mai târziu)*, 1908, is taken from Baudelaire, with the obvious intention of drawing attention to his desire for perfect—even studied—harmony:

*Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes
Et jamais je ne pleure, et jamais je ne ris.*

One the problems I faced in translating ‘romanţe’, both in the title of the 1908 volume and of the poem ‘Românţa mortului’ (‘Dead Man’s Ballad’), was the loss of the early 1900s’ Romanian ring of the word. ‘Romanţa’ is a sort of *chansonette*, a song about the pains of love. ‘Ballad’ loses the romance allusion—Minulescu uses it ironically—and is rather timeless than of a certain era, but I feel it keeps with the refrain-like repetitions, a feature of almost all poems of that era, and one which lends a song-like quality to the poem.

*Translated from the Romanian by Adrian Pascu*
Demain, dès l’aube

Demain, dès l’aube, à l’heure où blanchit la campagne
Je partirai. Vois tu, je sais que tu m’attends.
J’irai par la forêt, j’irai par la montagne.
Je ne puis demeurer loin de toi plus longtemps.

Je marcherai les yeux fixés sur mes pensées,
Sans rien voir au dehors, sans entendre aucun bruit,
Seul, inconnu, le dos courbé, les mains croisées,
Triste, et le jour sera pour moi comme la nuit.

Je ne regarderai ni l’or du soir qui tombe,
Ni les voiles au loin descendant vers Harfleur,
Et quand j’arriverai, je mettrai sur ta tombe
Un bouquet de houx vert et de bruyère en fleur.

Victor Hugo, Les contemplations, livre IV, 1856

Tomorrow, at Dawn

Tomorrow, at the hour when the land is bleached by daybreak
I will leave. You see, I know that it’s me you wait for.
I will go through forests, I will go by peaks.
I cannot stay away from you anymore.

I will walk with my eyes fixed on my thoughts,
Without hearing anything, without outside sight,
Alone, unknown, back bent, hands folded,
Desolate. And the day, for me, will be like night.

I will not observe the gold of falling dusk,
Nor the sails in distant descent upon Harfleur,
And when I arrive, I will lay on your tomb
A posy of evergreen holly, and heather in bloom.

Translated from the French by Holly Hughes
Translator’s Commentary

I discovered this poem whilst researching Victor Hugo and *Les Misérables* for my French AS oral presentation. The poem was written at a time when Hugo was in exile for expressing his political and personal opinions of the new emperor Louis Napoleon. Hugo was writing on the anniversary of his daughter Leopoldine’s death (she had drowned with her husband).

My translation is slightly shifted around, sometimes because of how I see the meaning of the lines, sometimes to make the rhythm and flow of the language as beautiful in English as they are in French.

I find it important that line two is translated as: ‘I know that it’s me you wait for’, although past translations tend to say ‘you wait for me’. I think the emphasis has to reflect the certainty, not just that she is waiting, but that she only waits for him. The emphasis has to be on ‘me’. This same desperation and certainty is echoed in the next line, which seems to me to have to be simple, because the emotion is so complex. It entirely expresses Hugo’s desolation, and his need.

The second verse epitomises Hugo and the state of his mind at the time. His mind is focused inwards, concentrating on his inner thoughts and feelings, barely noticing the outside world. This verse probably took the longest, as I searched for equivalents of words like triste, and found a way of fitting a rhyme into the stanza.

The rearrangement of the second line does not detract, especially with the climax coming in the third line and the first word of the fourth. Hugo was a famous political and cultural figure, but in his grief he is no one and everyone. He sees himself as a mourner, stripped of all the trappings of his position and popularity. He is entirely humbled by his grief (‘back bent, hands folded’). The last line of the second verse had to be rearranged, and I think it is, once again, important to draw the emphasis that it is ‘for me’.

The last verse expresses Hugo’s indifference to beauty, and the ever-present, bitter hatred that haunts him throughout his exile. Incidentally ‘le soir qui tombe’ is also the title of Eponine’s song in the musical *Les Misérables*. I changed the present participle to an adjective, and I feel the result is a line which flows better. The double alliteration also gives a dreamy, and of course rhythmic, feel.

The penultimate line is a direct translation, the last line I altered slightly. I used the English word ‘posy’ to replace ‘bouquet’, and I think that that brings more attention to Hugo’s place in a country still strange and foreign. I used ‘evergreen’ instead of simply ‘green’, because I think the holly was used because it stays green. Hugo would have wanted Leopoldine to stay young, perhaps even a child, for ever. Likewise, it is important that the heather is not merely flowering; it is blooming. This is a symbol of life and vitality, not just its biological state.

The poem, for me, encapsulates the weary desolation and resignation of someone who has lost someone too close to move on. Hugo’s losses and conflicting emotions led him to believe in communication with the beyond, and it is entirely possible he wrote this directly to Leopoldine, believing she could hear him.
About the Stephen Spender Memorial Trust

Stephen Spender - poet, critic, editor and translator of poetry - lived from 1909 to 1995. The Trust was set up in his memory to promote literary translation and to widen knowledge of 20th century literature, with particular focus on Stephen Spender's circle of writers.

The Times Stephen Spender Prize

The aim of this annual prize, launched in March 2004, is to draw attention to and encourage the art of literary translation. Entrants translate a poem of any length and from any language - modern or classical - into English, and submit both the original and their translation, together with a commentary of not more than 300 words. There are two categories (18-and-Under and Open) with prizes in each category, the best entries being published in The Times and in a commemorative booklet produced by the Trust. Entrants must be British residents. Four high-profile translators and poets - Professor Susan Bassnett, Alan Jenkins, Ewald Osers and Daniel Weissbort - served as judges in the inaugural year, selecting as the winners poems translated from Latin, Anglo-Saxon, French, Russian, Italian and Romanian. Fifteen languages were represented in total. The prize is promoted by The Times and has received Lottery funding from the Arts Council.

Translation Grants

Since its inception, the Trust has given approximately £37,000 in grants for the translation of contemporary writers into English. Recipients include Index on Censorship for two special issues of creative work, one on banned fiction and the other on banned poetry; Modern Poetry in Translation; the Harvill Press, for a bilingual edition of poems by Rutger Kopland; The Way We Are, a multilingual anthology of writing by children and young people from Waltham Forest; the Aldeburgh Poetry Trust, to bring to the festival exiled Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti and the Iraqi poet Fadhil Al-Azzawi; the British Centre for Literary Translation, to bring five Eastern European translators to seminars and the BCLT's summer school; and the Great Women Poets tour, which brought translation workshops to schools around the country.

The Archive Programme

The Trust aims to set up a central London archive of manuscripts, sound recordings, publications and videos of 20th century English writers, initially of the work of Spender and his contemporaries. The archive programme is directed by Professor John Sutherland (Lord Northcliffe Professor of English at UCL, and Stephen Spender’s authorised biographer), Professor Warwick Gould (Director of the Institute of English Studies) and Lady Spender, Stephen Spender’s widow.

In May 2002 the Trust presented the British Library with a collection of Stephen Spender’s non-fictional, published prose. Representing around one million words of mainly essays and journalism, the archive covered 70 years, from 1924 to 1994. It was compiled by postgraduates, financed by a grant from the British Academy, and was supervised academically by Professor John Sutherland and by Lady Spender. The 821 items, from 79 published sources in Britain, Europe and the USA, are catalogued chronologically and also alphabetically by source. The Trust’s online version can be searched and sorted according to a variety of categories via the Trust’s website: www.stephen-spender.org.
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