Stephen Spender Prize 2005

How wretchedly on ice-I weathered winters on-
Absent of friends

for Poetry in Translation
14 and Under Prizewinner

Amelia Penny
‘The Seafarer’
(Anglo-Saxon)

18 and Under Prizewinners

FIRST
James Potts
‘Orpheus and Eurydice’
by Virgil
(Latin)

SECOND
Alistair Gale
‘Poem XX’
by Pablo Neruda
(Spanish)

THIRD
Anna Thornton
‘Amores 1.5’
by Ovid
(Latin)

Commended
Chloë Stopa-Hunt
‘Ophélie’
by Arthur Rimbaud
(French)

Adrian Pascu
‘Death of a Traveller’
by Ion Minulescu
(Romanian)

Naomi Ishiguro
‘Metamorphoses XI’
by Ovid
(Latin)

Open Category Prizewinners

FIRST
Anonymous translation
of ‘Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes’
by Rainer Maria Rilke
(German)

SECOND
Neil Croll
‘The Schoolhouse’
by T H Parry-Williams
(Welsh)

THIRD
Jane Tozer
‘Lanval’ (Lai V)
by Marie de France
(Old French)

Commended
Okumora Yoshihiro
‘Morning Relay’ by Shuntaro Tanigawa
(Japanese)

John R G Turner
‘She and Her Cat’ by Paul Verlaine
(French)

Harry Lopinski
‘The Ballad of Fat Marge’
by François Villon
(Medieval French)

Emily Troscianko
‘Duino Elegies: Number Eight’ by Rilke
(German)

With thanks to the Drue Heinz Charitable Trust for sponsoring the Prize in 2005
Introduction

The Prize got off to a flying start last year when one of the younger winners was approached by a publisher at the prizewinners' party and three others were awarded fellowships to spend a month at Hawthornden Castle, described by one beneficiary as the most productive four weeks of his life. Whatever happens to the 2005 winners, we hope that everyone who entered has found it an enjoyable experience.

There were some surprises this year: not just the age range of the entrants (10–94) or the number of languages offered (27) but the sheer enthusiasm of many of the commentaries. Having to write a commentary as well as produce a translation may deter some potential entrants, particularly in the younger category, but a large number clearly relished being able to explain and justify their approach to the task.

Although the languages ranged from Anglo-Saxon to Urdu, via Bulgarian, Danish, Esperanto, Persian and Tagalog (to list just a few), French, predictably, dominated. German, Spanish, Russian and Latin were, in that order, the next most popular languages in the Open category, while Spanish ousted German for second place in the younger group – something which will come as no surprise to those who are involved in language teaching in secondary schools.

I am very grateful to the four judges – Professor Susan Bassnett, Alan Jenkins, Ewald Osers and Professor Daniel Weissbort – who managed to find time over the summer to scrutinise the 400 entries, and who met in September for a lengthy but amiable debate to decide the winners. Huge thanks must also go to Mrs Drue Heinz, without whose generosity the Prize would not have run in this its second year, and to Matthew Spender for providing a special award for the best entry from someone aged 14 or under.

Robina Pelham Burn, Director of the Stephen Spender Memorial Trust

The Judges’ Comments

This is the second year of *The Times* Stephen Spender Prize for poetry in translation, and as the entries poured in, it became apparent that there are a lot of people with a passionate interest in translation. I use the word ‘passionate’ advisedly, for in the commentaries provided by the translators often a sense of genuine engagement with a poem or with a poet shone through. Some of the entrants were very young, some had little knowledge of poetry other than that suggested by an inspirational teacher, others were long retired but still as enthusiastic about literature as ever.

The process of judging a prize such as this is quite arduous. Reading hundreds of entries carefully, examining the strategies employed by each translator, as we set the original alongside the translation and read each commentary, takes a long time. In the end, though, we came together and found to our satisfaction that a number of poems featured in all our short-lists. Obviously, we each had poems about which we felt we wanted to argue for inclusion, and through the good-natured debate we arrived at what I believe is a splendid result. This year, thanks to the generosity of Matthew Spender, we had a new category, awarding a prize to the best poem by a translator aged under 14. That the winner should have chosen to translate from Anglo-Saxon was particularly impressive.

As with last year’s entries, the quality of translations from classical languages was outstanding. Two of the winners in the under-18 class are translations from Latin, with another in the commended category. My personal view is that this reflects the quality of teaching in classical languages; there have been prominent public debates about the lack of grammar teaching in modern language courses and the emphasis on oral skills rather than on written, and this appears to be reflected in the entries we received for this competition. In contrast, pupils working on classical texts are taught the rudiments of poetics and they have a grasp of grammar and syntax which stands them in good stead when they start to translate. We debated, for example, the problem of one translation from a modern European language that read nicely in English but where the young translator had clearly never been taught anything about the use of the subjunctive. This may seem a pedantic point, but when dealing with
It is of course complete coincidence, but a very satisfying one, that our winning poems in both categories offer versions – immeasurably different – of the Orpheus and Eurydice story. This is surely the most heartbreaking of Classical stories; James Potts’s rendering of Virgil has all the original’s dignity and pathos and startling transitions between the worlds of death and life, and retains something of its oddness, its ‘otherness’, too. (My fellow-judges, better qualified than I on this point, all remark on the generally high quality of Classical translation this year; but Potts’s Virgil stood out clearly for all of us.) As I write this the identity of the he or she who has so convincingly translated Rilke’s ‘Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes’ remains unknown, and his or her moving rendition of this much-translated poem wreathed in tantalising mystery. Is this, for example, the fruit of many years’ patient application to Rilke, or an inspired first shot? The translator’s commentary starts ‘I think I like this the best of Rilke’s poems’, and I think I agree, amazing as so many of those poems are. Either way, this version seems, again, tremendously responsive to the absolutely unsentimental yet heartbreaking feel of the original, the figures utterly human (‘She who was so much loved’) and forever transcending the human, the manner grave, unfussy, timeless, full of touches that are preferable, to my ear, to J B Leishman, from whose version many will already know this beautiful work.

In both categories this year the translations ranged from the slavishly literal to the slightly unhinged – Horace redone as

by Noel Coward sticks in the memory. A rash of Verlaine translations initially impressed but on closer inspection my feeling was that he remains – pace my fellow judge Danny Weissbort – secure in his untranslatableness. There was a special pleasure for me in the judges’ unanimous appreciation of the ‘The Schoolhouse’, a sonnet from the Welsh – since it came from what is, however distantly in time, the land of my fathers too. It is lovely, unassuming, saving its mighty charge of unspoken grief for the final couplet. I hope its placing here encourages more translation from modern Welsh. I was knocked out by the play of reiteration and variation in Alistair Gale’s ‘Poem XX’ from Pablo Neruda, a poet who has never hitherto had any appeal for me. And I was only sorry that I couldn’t convince anyone that Okumura Yoshihiro’s rendering of Tanigawa’s ‘Morning Relay’ was more than charmingly quirky – it’s an unforgettable little poem in English, whatever else it is or is not in the original Japanese.

It was indeed heartening that removing last year’s upper age-limit brought a hugely increased volume of entries, and that we were reading the work of translators in their teens and their nineties. Principles? Rather, as last year, some rules of thumb: that total fidelity to both sense and shape is an impossible (and maybe undesirable) ideal, but a degree of fidelity isn’t. That there is a thin line between inventiveness and travesty (and some of our translators walked it rather unsteadily). The competition would now seem to have established itself in the literary calendar. Long may it continue to encourage young and old alike to try their hands.

Susan Bassnett

Alan Jenkins
I think we were all rather surprised at the number of persuasive translations of Classical poetry, since it had incorrectly been assumed by some of us that Latin and Greek were in terminal decline. Impressed, as in the first year, by the cogency and honesty of many of the commentaries, especially those to do with the translation of Classical verse, I asked myself why the Classics seemed to fare so well. It occurred to me that perhaps, faced by a famous piece from the Classical past, translators felt simultaneously more bound to the source text, because of its status, and more free, due its distance in time, this ambivalence apparently being a fruitful one.

We are now able to include a prize for translators under 14. Curiously, I found that many of my choices in this category were also among my choices in the 18 and Under category. Is it that translators are born rather than made? Skills useful in translation may be learnt or encouraged, but certain admirable qualities of character seem necessary as well.

As before, I found judging a rather invidious task, probably because so much of the work is commendable. In the end one picks what seems most accomplished, most coherent, but also what makes the greater impact upon one. This must have as much to do with one’s own tastes as regards source text authors; so, if one doesn’t like Prévert in French (I do), one will probably not like him in English, however exemplary the translation. I tried to remain aware of these personal quirks of taste, but there is the opposite danger of overcompensation!

The winners are all thoroughly deserving, but there were quite a few others I should like to mention as well. The task was not rendered easier for me by the fact that my approach to translation is eclectic. If I favour anything it is translation which displays a willingness to allow English to be modified by the source language. This does not necessarily mean – although it might – that metre or rhyme, if there, must be closely imitated. In this eclectic spirit, I am also prepared to regard parody as a form of translation, although it is rarely offered, even if some translations resort to it here and there. Other judges evidently felt differently about this and other matters, and yet there was a good deal of agreement, suggesting that whatever one’s principles or predilections, we tend to find what we are looking for in the same places. That this is no more than a tendency, however, is shown by the lengthy but enjoyable discussion that we had.

Among those translations that I would like to mention, which do not appear in the final listing, are Richard Abbott’s commentary on and version of Psalm 39, and the several versions of Verlaine (by John Turner, Richard Ingham, Norma Rinsler, Mary Lowerson, Ralph Scrine and Jane Fraser Esson), a famously ‘untranslatable’ poet. I also liked some of the brave attempts to render epic verse: Homer (Roland Lloyd Parry), ‘The Song of Roland’ (Charles de Salis) and ‘The Seafarer’ (Amelia Penny), the latter managing not to be influenced by Pound’s celebrated version. I was impressed, too, by the translation from the Dutch by Gillian Healey of Annie Schmidt’s ‘Koekerlootje’.

Agreeing on the winners and runners-up required some give-and-take among the judges – but if we’d been asked to pick out the top twenty, which is about five per cent of the entries, we’d probably have found ourselves in complete agreement.

While in the under-18 category some of the contenders had evidently been told by their language teacher which poem to translate and found it hard going, several of them showed a marked talent for poetry translation and clearly regarded their task as something they enjoyed doing rather than as imposed homework, a project, or a chore. One would hope that they would continue to practise their newly discovered skill.

Interestingly enough, both in the under-18s and in the open competition, translations from Latin seemed significantly better than those from modern languages. Even though Latin imposes a number of linguistic and prosodic constraints, the translators seemed to be more comfortable in it than – often – in the modern languages. Needless to say, this is a generalisation and there were some outstanding translations from living languages.

Ewald Osers

Daniel Weissbort
The Seafarer

Mæg ic be mē sylfum sōgied wrecan,
sīpas seegan, hū ic geswincdagum
carfoðhwīle oft þrōwade,
bītre brēcostceare gebiden hæbbe,

gecunnad in cēole cearselda fela,
atol þyga gewealc, þær mec oft bigeat
nearo nihtwaco æt nanac stefnan,
þonne hē be clīfum cnoxtað Calde geðrungen
wæron mīne fēt, forste gebunden,

caldum clommum, þær þā ceare seofedun
hāt ymb heortan; hungor innan slāt
merewērges mōd. þæt se mon ne wāt
þe him on foldan fēcgrost līmpeð,
hū ic earnmearig īscaldne sæ

winter wunade wrǣccan lastum,
winemǣgum bidroen,
bihongen hrīmgicelum; hægl sūrum flēag.
þær ic ne gehyrde būtan hlīmman sæ,
īscaldne wāg. Hwilum ylfete song

dyde ic mē tō gomene, ganetes hēoðor
ond hūilpan swēg fore hleahtor wera,
mǣw singende fore medodrīnce.
Stormas þær stānclefe bēotan, þær him stearn oncwāð
īsigfeþera; ful oft þæt earn bigeal,
ūrigfeþra

The Seafarer (an extract)

I tell of my tales, recount the true story
Of my hardship-laden life,
Often bearing bitter worry
Woven through days of toil.
I have known on the keel many a house of care,
And monstrous waves. I was often held
On troubled night-watch at the prow,
And saw her dashed against the cliffs.
While I felt the cold weave chains
Around my feet, frost-bound
My burning worries blazed about my heart
And hunger bruised my wave-weary spirit.
Those living most contentedly on the land could not know
How wretchedly on ice-cold sea
I weathered winters on my exiled way.
Absent of friends,
Hung round by icicles,
While hail rattles past in storms,
Hearing nothing but the booming sea,
The chilling waves.
Sometimes I found solace in the wild swan’s song,
The gannet’s cry, or made the din of curlews merriment,
The singing gull my draught of mead.
The storms berated rugged cliffs. The tern
With frosted wings replied.
The horn-beaked eagle shrieked.

Anon

Translated from the Anglo-Saxon by Amelia Penny

Amelia Penny’s commentary

I have chosen to translate this poem partly because of the language in which it was originally written but mostly because I like it as a poem, particularly the descriptions of the calls of the sea birds. This extract seems to have a strong theme of the seafarer’s lonely alienation, and allows questions to be asked about how he has come to be in his current state.

In translating this extract, I have tried to stick as far as possible to the original text. In some places I have changed the meanings slightly in order to fit the words together more neatly, but I have tried to retain the sense of the poem while doing this. I also tried to use alliteration whenever I could, since it was such a central part of Anglo-Saxon poetry and was used instead of rhyme.

There have been a few problems with translating this extract into English, the main one being making the original text make sense in English while remaining true to it. Another problem was that Old English reference books were not always easy to find, and some of the phrases used in this poem do not seem to have an English equivalent that would fit. However, I have tried to change the text as little as possible, and I believe that my translation reflects the true spirit of the original poem.
Orpheus et Eurydice

ipse cava solans aegrum testudine amorem
te, dulcis coniunx, te solo in litore secum,
te veniente die, te decedente canebat.
Taenarias etiam fauces, alta ostia Ditis,
et caligantem nigra formidinque lucum
ingressus, manesque adiit regemque tremendum
nesciaque humanis precibus manuecere corda.

at cantu commotae Erebi de sedibus imis
umbrae ibant tenues simulacraque luce carentum,
quam multa in foliis avium se milia condunt,
vesper ubi aut hibernus agit de montibus imber,
matres atque viri defunctaque corpora vita
magnanimum heroum, pueri innuptaeque puellae,
impositique rogis iuvenes ante ora parentum,
quos circum limus niger et deformis harundo
Cocyti tardaque palus inamabilis unda
alligat et novies Styx interfusa coercet.
quin ipsae stupuere domus atque intima Leti
Tartara caeruleosque impexae crinibus angues
Eumenides, tenuitque inhians tria Cerberus ora,
atque Ixionii vento rota constitit orbis.

iamque pedem referens casus evaserat omnes
reditattaque Eurydice superas veniebat ad auras
pone sequens (namque hanc dederat Proserpina legem),
cum subita incatum dementia cepit amantem,
ignoscenda quidem, scirent is ignoscere manes:
restitit, Eurydicensque suam iam luce sub ipsa
immemor heu! victusque animi respexit. ibi omnis

effusus labor atque immittis rupta tyranni
foedera, terque fragor stagnis auditus Averni.
illa ‘quis et me’ inquit ‘miseram et te perditid, Orpheu,
quis tantus furo? en iterum crudelia retro
fata vocant, conditque natantia lumina somnus.
iamque vale: feror ingenti circumdata nocte
invalidasque tibi tendens, heu non tua, palmas.’

Orpheus and Eurydice

(Soothing his sick heart with hollow lyre, of you,
dear wife, he sang; of you alone on lonely shore,
you at the sun’s coming, you at the sun’s setting.)
Entering Taenarus’ very jaws – deepest mouth
of Dis – and through black horror the misty woods,
to the spirits of the dead and their terrible king
he came: hearts not known to soften to human prayers.

But at his song unsettled shades from Erebus’
lowest resting-places streamed, and the lightless
insubstantial phantoms, many as the thousand birds
hidden in the leaves, when evening or a wintry shower
stirs them from the mountains: mothers and husbands
and brave heroes’ life-worn bodies; boys, unmarried girls,
youths placed before parent’s faces on the pyre,

whom all about black mud, ugly reeds and the
sluggish waves of Cocytus’ hateful marsh hem in,
and whom nine times the interweaving Styx confines.
Spell-bound, indeed, were those in the house of Death,
innermost Tartarus, and the Furies with blue-green snakes
entwined in their hair; Cerberus’ three mouths gaping silent;
and still in the wind stood Ixion’s revolving wheel.

Now after all her misfortunes retracing her steps,
Eurydice – restored – had escaped, was coming
to the upper air, following behind (this Persephone
had decreed), when sudden madness seized her heedless lover,
one to be forgiven, if ghosts know how; he stopped –
 alas forgetful soul! – and resolve lost, looked back
at his Eurydice, now on the verge of daylight.

Then all his work was wasted, the cruel king’s conditions
broken, and three times a thunder-crash was heard
by Avernus’ swamps. ‘What tide of madness ruins us both,
Orpheus?’ she called. ‘See the cruel Fates call me back
again, and sleep closes my swimming eyes. Now farewell:
I am carried away, surrounded by great darkness –
no longer yours! – and to you stretching my weak palms.’
dixit et ex oculis subito, ceu fumus in auras
commixtus tenues, fugit diversa, neque illum
prensantem nequiquam umbras et multa volentem
dicere praeterea vidit; nec portor Orci
amplius obiectam passus transire paludem.
quid faceret? quo se rapta bis coniuge ferret?
quo fletu manes, quae numina voce moveret?
illa quidem Stygia nabit iam frigida cuba.
septem illum totos perhibent ex ordine menses
rupe sub ariae deserti ad Strymonis undam
flevisse et gelidis haec evolvisse et sub antris
mulcentem tigres et agentem carmine quercus;

qualis populea maerens philomela sub umbra
amissos queritur fetus, quos durus arator
observans nido implumes detraxit; at illa
flet noctem, ramoque sedens miserabile carmen
integrat, et maestis late loca questibus implet.

nulla Venus, non ulli animum flexere hymenaei:
solus Hyperboreas glacies Tanaimque nivalem
arvaque Riphaeis numquam viduata pruinis
lustrabat, raptam Eurydicen atque irrita Ditis
dona queren. spretae Ciconum quo munere matres
inter sacra deum nocturnique orgia Bacchi
discruptum latos iuvenem sparsere per agros.

tum quoque marmorique caput a cervice revulsum
gurgite cum medio portans Oeagrius Hebrus
volveret, Eurydicen vox ipsa et frigida lingua
a miseram Eurydicen! anima fugiente vocabat:
Eurydicen toto referebant flumine ripae.

And suddenly – like smoke mixed with thin air – she fled
from his eyes, and did not see him grasping shadows in vain,
and wanting to say many more things afterwards;
and the ferryman of the Underworld
suffered him cross the marsh thrown in his path no more.
What could he do, where go, his wife twice seized?
(What ghosts with tears, what gods with words could he move?)
She, cold, was sailing now by Stygian boat.
They say for seven whole months on end under a rock
high in the air he wept at lonely Strymon’s waters,
and under a frosty cavern unrolled this story,
entrancing tigers, moving oak-trees with his song,

just as the nightingale lamenting under a poplar shadow
cries for her lost children, whom some cruel ploughman,
spying the nest, stole unfledged; she weeps all night,
then perched on a branch her mournful song
renews, and with sad laments fills the land far and wide.

No thought of love nor marriage rites swayed his heart:
alone he roamed over the Hyperborean ice-fields, snowy
Taenis, and the Riphaean plains never free from frost,
mourning his stolen Eurydice and the futile gifts
of Dis. Spurned by his devotion, the Thracian women
during the gods’ sacred rites and Bacchus’ night-mysteries
scattered the young man ripped apart over their wide fields.

When, carrying in the middle of its flood the head torn
from marble neck, Oeagrius’ River Hebrus would turn,
then too – breath escaping – his voice and frozen tongue
called again and again ‘Alas my poor Eurydice!’:
‘Eurydice!’ the banks the whole river-long re-echoed.

Translated from the Latin by James Potts
James Potts’s commentary

Orpheus is lover, poet and priest: Homer’s mystic precursor, but also of great religious significance. The Orphic religion that blossomed in the 6th century BC parallels many Asiatic faiths that saw the death of a priest-king play a role in fertility: the worship of Bacchus, whose disciple Orpheus was said to be, and who like Orpheus was ripped apart and scattered; Osiris, a god who ruling on earth taught Man to cultivate the vine, before being chopped into 14 pieces and strewn over Egypt, his wife Isis like Demeter in her aspects of bereavement and corn-goddess; Attis, who castrating himself in the land of the Mother-Goddess Cybele turned into a pine-tree, his blood into violets; Christ, who like one of Frazer’s priest-kings was nailed to a tree by his own people, and whose Resurrection is celebrated at the Pagan spring-rite, Easter.

This passage – from Virgil’s Georgics – develops the theme of humanity struggling while Nature makes things progressively worse that in largely agricultural terms runs throughout the poem, but is very different in tone, one of those flashes of brilliance of which Virgil is capable: the vividness and range of scene, from that terrible first view of Hell to the nightingale’s song, is astonishing, and some of the most tragically beautiful poetry. It also stands out for its air of religious mysticism: themes of life, death, Hell, resurrection, divine punishment, cruel Fates and cult mysteries combine with a numerical symbolism typical of many religions – three thunder-claps, three Furies, Cerberus’ three heads, nine loops of the Styx, seven months by the Strymon.

I have divided into stanzas where I feel the original has fallen naturally – and with surprising regularity – into sections of seven lines. Seven was significant in the ancient world, formed of the lucky numbers four and three most famously important to the Pythagoreans:¹ there are 7 sacred planets among ancient Babylonians and Egyptians, 7 days of Creation, sacraments, divisions in the Lord’s Prayer, 7 candlesticks/stars/trumpets/vials/plagues at the Apocalypse, 7 lucky gods of Japan. Inevitable problems in translation are turning into succinct, natural English – and English that conveys some of its beauty – Virgil’s charged language and incantatory rhythms. In choosing words I tried to highlight the pathos and mystic symbolism of the original; a flexible iambic metre seems best to capture its shifts of rhythm, though sometimes it is more the sound that does this: ‘and whom nine times the interweaving Styx confines’ suggests the Styx’s constricting meanders more by assonance than rhythm.

¹ Indeed Pythagorean religion, with ideas of reincarnation, and ‘flux’ opposed to Plato’s ‘fixity’, is closely allied to the Orphism of the same period, whose followers were also notorious vegetarians.
Poema XX

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.

Escribir, por ejemplo: ‘La noche está estrellada, y tírtinan, azules, los astros, a lo lejos.’

El viento de la noche gira en el cielo y canta.

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche. Yo la quise, y a veces ella también me quiso.

En las noches como ésta la tuve entre mis brazos. La besé tantas veces bajo el cielo infinito.

Ella me quiso, a veces yo también la quería. ¡Cómo no haber amado sus grandes ojos fijos!

Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche. Pensar que no la tengo. Sentir que la he perdido.

Oír la noche inmensa, más inmensa sin ella. Y el verso cae al alma como al pasto el rocío.

¡Qué importa que mi amor no pudiera guardarlalA la noche está estrellada y ella no está conmigo.

Eso es todo. A lo lejos alguien canta. A lo lejos. Mi alma no se contenta con haberla perdido.

Como para acercarla mi mirada la busca. Mi corazón la busca, y ella no está conmigo.

La misma noche que hace blanquear los mismos árboles. Nosotros, los de entonces, ya no somos los mismos.

Yo no la quiero, es cierto, pero cuánto la quise. Mi voz buscaba al viento para tocar su oído.


Ya no la quiero, es cierto, pero tal vez la quiero. Es tan corto el amor, y es tan largo el olvido.

Porque en noches como ésta la tuve entre mis brazos, mi alma no se contenta con haberla perdido.

Aunque éste sea el último dolor que ella me causa, y éstos sean los últimos versos que yo le escribo.

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Pablo Neruda

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Poem XX

I can write the saddest verses tonight.

Writing, for instance, ‘The night is starry, and the stars shiver, blue, in the distance.’

The wind of the night whirls in the sky and sings.

I can write the saddest verses tonight.

I loved her and sometimes she loved me too.

On nights like this I held her in my arms.

I kissed her so many times under the never ending sky.

She loved me, at times I used to love her too.

How could you not have loved her large staring eyes?

I can write the saddest verses tonight.

Thinking that I do not have her, feeling that I have lost her.

Hearing the immense night, more immense without her.

And the verse falls on the soul like dew on the grass.

What does it matter that my love could not keep her!

The night is starry and she is not with me.

That is all. In the distance someone sings. In the distance.

My soul is not content with having lost her.

As if to be near her, my gaze searches for her.

My heart searches for her, and she is not with me.

The same night that makes the same trees white.

We, people of that time, we are no longer the same.

I no longer love her, it is true, but how I once loved her.

My voice searched the winds to reach her ear.

Someone else’s. She will be someone else’s. As before my kisses.

Her voice, her fair body, her infinite eyes.

I no longer love her, it is true, but perhaps I do love her.

Love is so short and oblivion is so long.

Because on nights like this, I held her in my arms,

my soul is not content with having lost her.

Although this may be the final pain that she causes me,

and these may be the last verses that I write to her.

Translated from the Spanish by Alistair Gale
I first came across ‘Poem XX’ by Pablo Neruda when my Spanish teacher suggested it as a focus for some A Level coursework. Not having a very literary mind, I immediately dismissed her suggestion, however she urged me at least to read it, which I did. It immediately captivated me with its heart-felt honesty and its indecision between loving. Because of this it reminded me of a very short poem by Catullus, which I had studied in Latin, that I also really liked. It begins with the sentence ‘Odi et amo’, meaning ‘I hate and I love’, where Catullus feels mixed emotions towards his lady friend.

Translating from Spanish to English can sometimes mean that the general feeling is lost. For example, in Spanish the subject pronoun does not have to be used, however it is often used in order to emphasise it – something which cannot easily be done on paper in English. Neruda has used this technique to good effect here, clearly differentiating between ‘him’ and ‘her’. The use of different tenses to indicate different times in the past is an important feature in this poem, so when translating it, I believed it was important to differentiate between them, for example in line 9:

‘Ella me quiso, a veces yo también la quería.’

‘She loved me, at times I used to love her.’

There is the use of the perfect in the first part, indicating that her love was just one action, whereas the imperfect in the second part shows that his love was continuous. Overall when translating this poem, I tried to strike a balance between keeping the meaning faithful to the original whilst trying to use words which fitted the meaning better or that made the translation more vivid.
Amores I.5

aestus erat, mediumque dies exegerat horam;  
apposui medio membra levanda toro. 
 pars adaperta fuit, pars altera clausa fenestrae,  
 quale fere silvae lumen habere solent,  
qualia sublucent fugiente crepuscula Phoebi  
a b aut ubi nox abiti nec tamen orta dies.  
illa verecundus lux est praebenda puellis,  
qua timidus latebras speret habere pudor.  
ecce, Corinna venit tunica velata recincta,  
candida dividua colla tegente coma,  
qualiter in thalamos formosa Sameramis isse  
dicitur et multis Lais amata viris.  
deripui tunicam; nec multum rara nocebat,  
pugnabat tunica sed tamen illa tegi;  
cumque ita pugnaret tamquam quae vincere nollet,  
victa est non aegre proditione sua.  
ut stetit ante oculos posito velamine nostros,  
in toto nusquam corpore menda fuit:  
quos umeros, quales vidi teticique lacertos!  
forma papillarum quam fuit apta premi!  
quam castigato planus sub pectore venter!  
quantum et quale latus! quam iuvenale femur!  
singula quid referam? nil non laudabile vidi,  
et nudam pressi corpus ad usque meum.  
cetera quis nescit? lassi requievimus ambo.  
proveniant mediis sic mihi saepe dies.

Love Poems I.5

A sultry afternoon: I lay and dozed,  
and spread my limbs out, calm, relaxed, at ease.  
My window was half-open and half-closed,  
and cast the dapple light of woodland trees,  
of glowing dusk beneath a dying sun,  
or after dark, when day is not yet clear:  
a light for timid virgins, fearing fun,  
who seek a pretext for their modest fear.  
Here comes Corinna, dressed in loose attire;  
she lowered her hair to her shoulders,  
and her lowered, lovely Lais of the many lovers.  
I ripped her gown off to expose her skin;  
she struggled, but as though she hoped to fail:  
half-hearted fighting with no will to win,  
and conquered by her willing self-betrayal.  
So, nude, my darling stood before my sight,  
perfection in her body’s faultlessness:  
her snowy shoulders and her arms so white;  
hers, which fit so neatly my caress;  
her slender stomach underneath her breast;  
hers tender flank; her youthful thigh divine...  
Why should I lay bare, bit by bit, the rest?  
I hugged her naked body into mine...  
At last we ceased, relaxed in weary bliss.  
May all my days bring pleasure such as this.

Ovid

Translated from the Latin by Anna Thornton
Anna Thornton’s commentary

The chief difficulty of translating from Latin is that language’s unsurpassable brevity. What may be said in three words of Latin may take twice as many of English. Grammatically, it is very concise; and many words have multiple meanings, so that a great deal can be packed into a very short phrase. The first step in my translation was to list every possible meaning or connotation of every word used, so that I could then choose the English term that most precisely captured the essence and emotion of the original.

Poetry is especially challenging to translate because of the gulf between ancient and modern poetry. Latin relies primarily on metre – in this case hendecasyllables, the classic elegiac metre, comprised of a line of hexameter followed by one of pentameter – with no rhyme. I felt that a rhyme scheme would capture the rhythmic flow of the original more effectively than blank verse could, but rhyming couplets seemed more appropriate for the lighter, pithier and wittier of Ovid’s poems. I chose a sonnet-like form (six quatrains of rhyme pattern ABAB, followed by a couplet), in iambic pentameter, as I felt it could best express the beauty and relative seriousness of this deceptively simple poem, and I have avoided enjambment, as Ovid himself avoids it.

Certain lines of this poem transmute very clumsily to English, particularly lines 13–14 and 23, since both sections rely on the conciseness and flexible word order of Latin; I overcame this difficulty by being looser with my translation than elsewhere. I have included plays on the double meanings of certain words (lines 8, 17, 23), which were doubtless appreciated by Ovid; and I hope I have successfully conveyed some of the beauty, intelligence and depth of one of my favourite Latin love-poems.
Voran der slanke Mann im blauen Mantel, der stumm und ungeduldig vor sich aussah. Ohne zu kauen fraß sein Schritt den Weg in großen Bissen; seine Hände hingen schwer und verschlossen aus dem Fall der Falten und wußten nicht mehr von der leichten Leier, die in die Linke eingewachsen war wie Rosenranken in den Ast des Ölbaums. Und seine Sinne waren wie entzwei: indes der Blick ihm wie ein Hund vorauslief, umkehrte, kam und immer wieder weit und wartend an der nächsten Wendung stand, - blieb sein Gehör wie ein Geruch zurück. Manchmal erschien es ihm, als reichte es bis an das Gehen jener beiden andern, die folgen sollten diesem ganzen Aufstieg. Dann wieder war es nur seines Steigens Nachklang und seines Mantels Wind was hinter ihm war. Er aber sagte sich, sie kämen doch; sagte es laut und hörte sich verhallen. Sie kämen doch, nur wären zwei die furchtbar leise gingen. Dürfte er sich einmal wenden (wäre das Zurückschaun nicht die Zersetzung dieses ganzen Werkes, das erst vollbracht wird), müßte er sie sehen, die beiden Leisen, die ihm schweigend nachgehn:

Den Gott des Ganges und der weiten Botschaft, die Reisehaube über hellen Augen, den schlanken Stab hertragend vor dem Leibe und flügelschlagend an den Fußgelenken; und seiner linken Hand gegeben: sie.

Die So-geliebte, daß aus einer Leier mehr Klage kam als je aus Klagefrauen; daß eine Welt aus Klage ward, in der alles noch einmal da war: Wald und Tal und Weg und Ortschaft, Feld und Fluß und Tier; und daß um diese Klage-Welt, ganz so wie um die andre Erde, eine Sonne und ein gestirnter stiller Himmel ging, ein Klage-Himmel mit entstellten Sternen – : Diese So-geliebte.

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The slender man in blue walked first of all, looking ahead with dumb impatient eyes. His stride ate up the road in greedy bites and swallowed each one whole; his hands hung down heavy and tightly-clenched outside his cloak, no longer conscious of the graceful lyre that seemed to have grown into his left hand like briars twining round an olive trunk.

His senses were at odds with one another: for while his eyes, like hounds, ran out in front, turned round, came back, and ran ahead again, then stood and waited for him at the corner – his hearing followed after like a scent. Sometimes he thought it lagged so far behind him that he could hear the footsteps of the others: those two who should be climbing after him. But then his ears caught nothing but the echo of his own progress, and his rustling cloak. He told himself, though, that they were still coming; said so aloud, and heard the echoes die. They were still there, he knew. The trouble was they were so quiet. If only he could turn, just once, and look (except that turning round would bring about disaster, now when the task was almost over), he was sure he’d see them walking behind him quietly, without speaking:

the god of messages, the traveller, holding his staff: wings beating at his ankles; his clear eyes gazing out beneath his hood; and on his left, led by his hand, the woman.

She who was so much loved that one small lyre poured out more grief than countless grieving widows. It made a mirror-world of grief, in which everything had its double: rivers, valleys, roads, hamlets, woods, and fields with grazing cattle; and round this grief-world, just as round the other ordinary world, another sun revolved, another sky with silent constellations, a sky of grief whose stars were out of shape. She who was so much loved.
Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes

Sie aber ging an jenes Gottes Hand,
den Schritt beschränkt von langen Leichenbändern,
unsicher, sanft und ohne Ungeduld.
Sie war in sich... Und ihr Gestorbenstein
erfüllte sie wie Fülle.

... Und als plötzlich jäh
der Gott sie anhielt und mit Schmerz im Ausruf
die Worte sprach: Er hat sich umgewendet —,
begriff sie nichts und sagte leise: Wer?

Fern aber, dunkel vor dem klaren Ausgang,
stand irgend jemand, dessen Angesicht
nicht zu erkennen war. Er stand und sah,
wie auf dem Streifen eines Wiesenpfades
mit trauervollem Blick der Gott der Botschaft
sich schweigend wandte, der Gestalt zu folgen,
die schon zurückging dieses selben Weges,
den Schritt beschränkt von langen Leichenbändern,
unsicher, sanft und ohne Ungeduld.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes (an extract)

And guided by the god she walked the road,
her steps confined by heavy winding-cloths,
uncertain, gentle and without impatience.
She was within herself ... And her new death
Filled her whole being.

... And when, suddenly,
the god threw up his hand and cried in pain:
‘He has turned round to look. We must go back,’
she did not understand, and whispered ‘Who?’

But far away, dark in the opening,
a figure stood outlined against the daylight,
unrecognisable. He stood and watched
as, on the ribbon of a meadow lane,
the courier of the gods, without a word,
turned and went sadly after his companion,
who was already walking back again,
her steps confined by heavy winding-cloths,
uncertain, gentle and without impatience.

Anonymous translation from the German

Translator’s commentary

I think I like this best of all Rilke’s poems. In the ‘Elegies’, great
though they are, the fundamental weirdness of Rilke’s mythology of
death sometimes gets in the way, at least for me – I find myself
thinking: ‘If only he could have deployed this amazing talent in the
service of something that makes a bit more sense.’ In ‘Orpheus...’, on
the other hand, the mythology works beautifully: Eurydice’s
engagement with her own death gives the legend a striking and
consistent new interpretation.

The verse is astonishing: as always, Rilke makes German flow
smoothly and musically like nobody else. That, of course, makes it
hard for a translator; but with no rhyme-scheme to worry about, and
a fair amount of rhythmic freedom, it’s not impossible to get close to
the original at least some of the time.
Tŷ'r Ysgol

Mae’r cyrn yn mygu er pob awel groes,
A rhywun yno weithiau’n sgubo’r llawr
Ac agor y ffenestri, er nad oes
Neb yno’n byw ar ôl y chwalfa fawr;
Dim ond am fis o wythau, mwy neu lai,
Yn Awst, er mwyn cael seibiant bach o’r dre
A throi o gwmpas dipyn, nes bod rhai
Yn synnu’n gweld yn symud hyd y lle;
A phawb yn holi beth sy’n peri o hyd
I ni, sydd wedi colli tad a mam,
Gadw’r hen le, a ninau hyd y byd, –
Ond felly y mae-hi, ac ni wn paham,
Onid rhag ofn i’r ddau sydd yn y gro
Synhwyro rywsut fod y drws ynegho.

T H Parry-Williams

The School House

The chimneys smoke whatever breezes blow
and someone sweeps the floor occasional days
and opens windows wide, though no one now
has lived here since the family went its ways –
save for a month or so in summer heat,
when needing to escape the urban pace
we stay and walk the lanes. Then those we meet,
surprised that people occupy this place,
will ask why we, with father, mother gone,
still feel some obligation to maintain
an old house no one needs now we’ve moved on.
But there it is – and how can I explain?
Perhaps we fear that those two in the ground
Might sense the door was locked the whole year round.

Translated from the Welsh by Neil Croll

Neil Croll’s commentary

I chose this poem partly because it handles so well. After tackling
German Lieder and having difficulty achieving a close rendering in the
same form, I found this sonnet, albeit in a more distantly related
language, surprisingly easy. It is also lean and direct, without the
sentimentality common in popular Welsh poetry.

Nor were there significant problems with the translation, save for
the need to add four final words to complete the metre and rhyme.
Admittedly the original is not in an ancient Welsh poetic form; in fact
it was this author T H Parry-Williams, with his cousin R Williams
Parry, who made sonnets popular in Welsh literature. As a polymath
and polyglot, he was aware of English parlance, and yet his text is
thoroughly Welsh. For example, ‘Ond felly y mae-hi’ translates
literally as ‘But there it is’, yet both are colloquial.

There seemed no choice but to keep to Parry-Williams’ form,
because the poem is nothing if not a Welsh Shakespearean sonnet. The
first part describes the old house and what happens there: the second
raises the why and tries to answer it. Yet, despite this simple approach,
the reader goes away suspecting the real answer to be in our genes and
prehistory: we, like our Bronze Age forebears, can claim our territory
for ever if our ancestors are buried close by.

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The story so far
Lanval, a young penniless knight, is overlooked at King Arthur's court. His fortunes change when he encounters the beautiful Otherworld Lady. She seduces him, and they fall in love. The Lady agrees to visit Lanval, under a cloak of invisibility, whenever he calls for her. However, if he once speaks of her, she will disappear forever. Returning to the court at Carlisle, Lanval finds himself rich. His generosity and charity endear him to all. The Queen is intrigued by his reputation and good looks, and makes a play for him. Lanval is brooding alone in a secluded arbour. The Queen approaches, sits next to him, and speaks:

... ‘Lanval, mut vus ai honoré
E mut cheri e mut amé.
Tute m’amur poëz avere;
Kar me dites vosvre voleir!
Ma druerie vus otrei;
Mut devez estre lié de mei.’
‘Dame,’ fet il, ‘lessez m’ester!
Jeo n’ai cure de vus amer.
Lungement ai servi le rei;
Ne li voil pas mentir ma fei.
Ja pur vus ne pur vosvre amur
Ne mesf[e]rai a mun seignur.’
La reîne s’en curuçà,
Irie fu, si mesparla.
‘Lanval,’ fet ele, ‘bien le quit,
Vuz n’amez gueres cel delit;
Asiz le m’ad hum dit sovent
Que des femmez n’avez talent.
Vallez avez bien afeitiez,
Ensemble od eus vus dedueiz.
Vileins cuarz, mauveis failliz,
Mut est mi sires maubailliz
Que pres de lui vus ad suffert;
Mun escient que Deus en pert!’

... ‘Sir Lanval, greatly I esteem you
Love you, honour you, and deem you
A verry parfit gentil knight.
You may have all for your delight!
Just tell me what you want of me
You have my love.
Make love with me.
It is your privilege to have me
And with due joy, make me your own.’

‘Madame,’ he begs, ‘Leave me alone!
I feel no stir of love for you –
Nor am I ever likely to.
For a long time I’ve served the King
I never would prove false to him;
Neither for your sake, nor your passion
Would I betray him in this fashion!’

At this, the Queen flies off the handle
Initiating a huge scandal.
She utters the first spiteful thought
That’s in her head:

‘I know your sort!
You’ve other outlets for your sport.
Of course you’ve never fancied women –
You’ve got a bunch of hand-picked yeomen!
You slake your infamous desires
With pretty serving boys and squires.
Why did you ever turn up here
You snivelling, skulking, craven queer!
King Arthur’s spotless reputation
Is tarnished by association.
I even fear for his salvation!
God sees the company he keeps
With such a sinful little creep.’
Lai Lanval

Quant il l’oï, mut fu dolent;  
Del respundre ne fu pas lent.  
Teu chose dist par maltalent  
Dunt il se repenti sovent.  
‘Dame,’ dist il, ‘de cel mestier  
Ne me sai jëo nient aider;  
Mes jo aim, [e] si sui amis  
Cele ke deit aver le pris  
Sur tutes cele que jëo sai.  
E une chose vus dirai,  
Bien le sachez a descouver:  
Une de cele ke la sert,  
Tute la plus pove meschine,  
Vaut meuz de vus, dame reine,  
De cors, de vis e de beaté,  
D’enseignement e de bunté.’  
La reine s’en part atant,  
En sa chambrë en vait pluran.  
Mut fu dolente e curucie  
De ceo k’il [l’]out [si] avilee.  
En sun lit malade cucha;  
Jamés, ceo dit, ne levera,  
Si li reis ne l’en feseit dreit  
De ceo dunt ele se pleindreit...

Marie de France

Lanval, Lai V (the Row Scene)

This outburst shakes him to the heart.  
He snaps back with a quick retort  
But in his anger’s flaming heat  
Says things he later will regret.  
I never saw an uglier scene  
This good knight with this screaming  
Queen.

‘Listen, lady, my activities  
Do not extend to those proclivities  
I don’t indulge forbidden liberties.  
I love, and am loved in return  
By one whose charms and beauties earn  
Honour above all other women  
I have known. I’ll tell you this  
So listen well, and watch my lips –  
Any of her serving wenches,  
Even the one who scrubs the dishes,  
Surpasses you, Queen, in her grace,  
Figure, complexion, pretty face,  
In learning and integrity.’

Barely maintaining dignity  
She flounces off, back to her tower  
And there she weeps for several hours ...  
Such impudent recrimination –  
Time young Lanval was taught his station.  
She takes to her bed, in desperation  
Pleading a strange indisposition:  
She will not rise again, unless  
The King exacts condign redress ...

Translated from the Medieval French  
by Jane Tozer

Jane Tozer’s commentary

In her Prologue, Marie tells us she remembered the tales told by Breton jongleurs, and wished to preserve them for posterity. Lanval is the archetypal Breton lai, a romance of love and adventure, the intersection between this and the otherworld. It has the most satisfying ending of any story I know. Lanval was popular – two Middle English versions survive.

Because of its fame, and the affection it inspires, the prospect of translating Lanval was daunting. I left it almost last, because I wanted to be confident of my voice. As a treat, I left my favourite, Yonel, till the very end. Both these translations are more relaxed in their adherence to form than my earliest efforts; for example, there are more half-rhymes and unresolved couplets.

Rereading, I see Lanval’s hasty, disastrous rage is marked by a string of half-rhymes: return/earn/women, this/lips, wenches/dishes. ‘What a genius had I then’ – except that I did it intuitively.

Marie is explicit in phrasing the Queen’s spiteful accusation of homosexuality: Vallez avez bien afeitiez, / Ensemble od eus vus dedueiez. I imagine that this shocked her audience to the core. I wonder – should a medieval lady even have known about buggery, let alone publicly written of it? It’s like Mary Crawford’s ‘rears and vices’ joke about the navy, in Mansfield Park. Did Jane Austen, of all people, write that?!

They were robust times. The 12th century church was perhaps less intolerant of homosexuality than it later became. Marriage was about begetting heirs, not love. Many knights must have found true solace in the arms of their companions. But I don’t believe the church would have officially condoned this.

How does one now convey the frisson of this slander? I’ve used the language of homophobia, which doesn’t come easily to me. But it shocks – and we know whose side we’re on.
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 – have served as judges for the first two years. The prize is promoted by The Times and received Lottery funding from the Arts Council in 2004. This year’s sponsor is the Drue Heinz Charitable Trust.

Translation Grants
Since its inception, the Trust has given approximately £42,000 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; the Great Women Poets tour, which brought translation workshops to schools around the country; and the Children’s Bookshow Outside In: Children’s Writers in Translation, which will see foreign writers and illustrators taking part in events in seven cities, with workshops in 40 schools.

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 www.stephen-spender.org.

Events
The Institute for English Studies, University of London, hosted a successful one-day symposium in January 2001 on ‘Stephen Spender and his Circle in the 1930s’ with contributions on Edward Upward, Isherwood, Auden, Spender and MacNeice, with an unpublished article on these poets written in the Thirties by Isaiah Berlin; the speakers were a combination of those who knew Spender and his circle at first hand and scholars working on them today.

In May 2004, three of the Trust’s Committee members – Seamus Heaney, Tony Harrison and Harold Pinter – very generously agreed to celebrate the publication of Spender’s New Collected Poems with a reading of his poetry and some of their own. They were joined by Jill Balcon (widow of Stephen Spender’s old friend, C Day Lewis) and Vanessa Redgrave. The 90-minute programme was devised by Lady Spender and directed by Joe Harmston; all 900 seats of the Queen Elizabeth Hall sold out. A reading is planned for 2006 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

Contacting the Trust
For further information about the Stephen Spender Memorial Trust and its activities, please contact the Director of the Trust:

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