I’m hardly a fan of racing, this
Non ego nobilium sedeo st
will entertain you for a while, but
cui tamen ipsa faves, vincat
the fool’s opinion on the

While on the breeze the boy
A gwaedd y bechgyn lond
The rain blends with the blo
A’u gwaed yn gymysg efo

Wulf on one island
wulf is on iegastic on òperre
this fastness encircled
fæst is þæt eglond

for poetry in translation
Winner of the 14-and-under prize

Henry Miller
*Amores 3.2* by Ovid
(Latin)

Commended

Dominic Hand
‘Spleen’ by Baudelaire
(French)

Sam Peters
‘Poem 27’ by Catullus
(Latin)

Winner of the 18-and-under category

First

Patrick Heaton
*Heroides 1*
by Ovid (Latin)

Joint second

Iona Hannagan Lewis
‘Rhyfel’
by Hedd Wyn
(Welsh)

Amelia Hassard
‘Get Drunk’
by Baudelaire
(French)

Commended

Emily Carpenter
‘The Erl King’ by Goethe
(German)

Henry Edwards
*Elegies 1.3* by Propertius
(Latin)

Claire Ewbank
‘Grodek’ by Georg Trakl
(German)

Ben Pope
*Metamorphoses 8* by Ovid
(Latin)

Winners of the Open category

First

John Richmond
‘The Retreat from Moscow’
by Victor Hugo
(French)

Second

Duncan Forbes
‘Confession’
by the Archpoet
(Latin)

Third

Jane Draycott
‘Song for Wulf’
(Anglo-Saxon)

Commended

Chen Dandan
‘Strawberry Pie’ by Xia Yu
(Chinese)

Michael Foley
‘Poets Aged Seven’ by Arthur Rimbaud
(French)

James Knox Whittet
‘Hallaig’ by Sorley Maclean
(Gaelic)

Mario Petrucci
‘History’ by Eugenio Montale
(Italian)

Carol Rumens
‘Canto 27’ from Dante’s *Purgatorio*
(Italian)
This year saw forty-three languages represented, with Gurmukhi and Romansch making their first appearances and Polish and modern Chinese creeping up the chart. It will be interesting to see if our Primary Translation project, described at the back of this booklet, results in a spate of translations from community languages in the 14-and-under category in 2011.

My thanks, as ever, to the judges – Susan Bassnett, Edith Hall, Karen Leeder and George Szirtes – who cheerfully took delivery of a wine box of entries at the beginning of their summer holidays and then came together two months later, having read and made intelligent notes on every single translation; to the scholars we consulted when a language was not known to us; and to The Times for having faithfully promoted the prize since it began life seven years ago.

Our sponsors this year were the Eranda Foundation and The Old Possum’s Practical Trust. At a time when all charitable trusts are having to cut back on their grant-giving, we couldn’t be more grateful for their support.

Robina Pelham Burn
Director of the Stephen Spender Trust

Judges’ comments

Judging this prize is a great pleasure because the entries are so diverse and one never quite knows what to expect. This year, as ever, the range of poems chosen by translators was vast, and included familiar works and writing by poets who were completely new to me. The commentaries are often illuminating, and I was struck by the fact that two translators compared translating poetry to Sudoku, highlighting the problemsolving aspect of the task. A number of translators highlighted their own involvement with a particular poem or poet, often describing how they had first encountered certain poems, sometimes years before, and why those poems had a particular resonance for them. Close personal engagement with a poem and empathy with a poet can result in powerful translations.

Translating poetry is a complex task; you have first to acquaint yourself thoroughly with the poem, to understand its structures, its rhythms, its wordplay, all its different patterns, and then seek to reproduce the poem for readers in a totally different culture. Reproducing a poem in its entirety is impossible. Shelley compared the process to transplanting a seed in new soil, so that a similar yet different plant will grow elsewhere. James Holmes, who both translated poetry and wrote about translation, suggested that the translator of a poem establishes in his or her own mind what he called a ‘hierarchy of correspondences’, in other words, a set of priorities of what to keep and what to discard. The priorities of many of the translators in this competition could often be clearly seen: in some cases colloquial language was used to render the colloquialisms evident in a Latin poem, in other cases the translator explained why a decision had been taken to alter patterns of rhyme. Some of the fine Welsh translators acknowledged the impossibility of rendering the ancient Welsh form cynghannedd, others wrestled with Dante’s terza rima and produced some very good unhymed translations of difficult passages from The Divine Comedy.

Some translators opted to produce poems with heavy rhyme schemes. Sometimes this works, but unless a writer feels at ease with rhyme, the result can appear stilted or even come across as doggerel. The winning entry, a version of Victor Hugo’s ‘The Retreat from Moscow’ uses rhyme very skilfully, and impressed us all. Indeed, we found ourselves in agreement on the winners in all three sections, and only disagreed as to which poems to commend. I particularly liked Anita Debska’s translation of a poem by the Polish Nobel laureate, Wislawa Szymborska, ‘Love at First Sight’, and Ian Crockatt’s translation from Old Norse of a passage from the ‘Orkneyinga Saga’.

We were impressed by the bold choices and translation skills of the younger entrants, though this year we noted with regret that the demise of grammar teaching in modern language classrooms means that often a potentially good translation was marred by basic errors due to inadequate understanding of the language. Once again, we discussed the disparity of quality between translations of poetry in classical languages with translations of poetry in modern languages, which appears to reflect the way in which those languages are taught. Failure to understand exactly how a poet has structured a sentence means that a translator is likely to misread what that poet is seeking to achieve.

Carping about grammar aside, the quality of the entries was impressive and our final list of winners and commended entries is only the tip of an iceberg. What this competition shows is that there are some very talented translators and some fine poets of all ages engaging actively with the complexities of translating poetry. Long may they continue!

Susan Bassnett
It was the greater variety of the translations in the Open category which made judging it such a delight this year. When I opened the plain cardboard box of stapled sheets of A4, I heard the rival voices of poets from archaic Greece to modern Korea, in forms from the epigram (there was a touching version of Martial’s funereal 5.34 by Jason Warren) to the acidic prose poetry of Francis Ponge translated by Conor Kelly. An almost uncanny unanimity greeted the winning entry, ‘The Retreat from Moscow’; its driving rhythms powerfully suggested the chaos of retreat and the rattling horses’ hooves. It is no slur to record that my ten-year-old, coerced into hearing me recite my longlist, instantly identified Hugo as the winner and asked to hear him again. Nineteenth-century narrative poems are not today the most fashionable medium; it is wonderful that they can still produce a version of such genuine conviction and style.

For me it was a close call for second place. In his witty version of the Archpoet’s ‘Confession’, Duncan Forbes conveyed the wry individual humour underneath the near-doggerel of the insistent mediaeval Latin rhyme scheme. But I am haunted by the mysterious grief in Jane Draycott’s extract from Wulf and Eadwacer, where she achieved a near-perfect marriage of emotion, content and form. Indeed, poems from the Middle Ages and in the languages of northern Europe made a great impression this year: my own shortlist included a tight, pungent rendering of ‘Rognvaldr’s year: my own shortlist included a tight, pungent rendering of ‘Rognvaldr’s year’ by Baudelaire which, after a slightly slow start, found a wonderfully confident voice: ‘time to get drunk […] on wine, on poetry, on virtue, on whatever’.

One of the great pleasures of this section was a strong showing in German which demonstrated a metrical and lexical confidence often lacking in the entries from modern foreign languages. I was also taken with Iona Hannagan Lewis’ emotional version of ‘Rhyfel’ by Hedd Wyn, which tried to recreate the complex Welsh rhyme scheme in English; and enjoyed Amelia Hassard’s ‘Get Drunk’ by Baudelaire which, after a slightly slow start, found a wonderfully confident voice: ‘time to get drunk […] on wine, on poetry, on virtue, on whatever’. The 4-and-under category was dominated by entries in French and Latin and we arrived quickly at our winner: Henry Miller’s assured and witty translation of Ovid’s Amores 3.2, ‘Ovid in love’ in the 14-and-under category, it was the turn of an Ovidian woman in love, in the first of his ‘Letters from Heroines’, where Penelope addresses Ulysses. The intelligent commentary increased my admiration for this authoritative, elegant reading of an important poem (the earliest ever reading of the Odyssey in which Penelope is actually allowed to express anger with her wandering spouse). It is a sign of the times that I wrongly assumed that its advanced gender politics must mean that the translator was female!

The most successful poems, as ever, were strikingly independent in their creation of a new artwork, while simultaneously disciplined in their thinking about metre, rhythm and structure. This year’s most recurrent fault was hyperbaton – word order in the English translation so distorted as to be off-putting. Translators in all categories need to trust in their own languages and literary sensibility, even when dealing with the greatest poets who have ever lived.

*Edith Hall*

This year, again, there was a large degree of immediate unanimity among the judges. The 4-and-under category was dominated by entries in French and Latin and we arrived quickly at our winner: Henry Miller’s assured and witty translation of Ovid’s Amores 3.2, ‘Ovid at the Races’, which showed an admirable grasp of the technical business of metre and a real feeling for the dynamics of the poem. I was delighted to see that, even where there were sometimes mistakes in comprehension, contestants were responding to the spirit of the poem. There was a fine rendering of Catullus, for example by Sam Peters, that had the lyric subject sipping not just any wine but ‘M&S wine’; and Dominic Hand’s beautiful version of Baudelaire’s ‘Spleen IV’ with its dense use of masculine rhymes was memorably lyrical.

In the 18-and-under category the judges wrestled with a more diverse longlist of contenders. As in the 14-and-under category many had outstanding qualities but failed to sustain the tone across the poem as a whole or lost grammatical confidence here and there. In Patrick Heaton’s ‘Penelope Ulixii’ from Ovid’s *Heroïdes* we found a worthy winner, which took inspiration from Carol Ann Duffy’s treatment of the figure of Penelope but found a voice of his own. This poem headed up a very impressive list of entries from Classical languages which demonstrated a metrical and lexical confidence often lacking in the entries from modern foreign languages. I was also taken with Iona Hannagan Lewis’ emotional version of ‘Rhyfel’ by Hedd Wyn, which tried to recreate the complex Welsh rhyme scheme in English; and enjoyed Amelia Hassard’s ‘Get Drunk’ by Baudelaire which, after a slightly slow start, found a wonderfully confident voice: ‘time to get drunk […] on wine, on poetry, on virtue, on whatever’.

One of the great pleasures of this section was a strong showing in German which showed students engaging with the whole range of what is on offer: from the classics of the eighteenth century, including an assured version of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff’s ‘In the Grass’ by Lucy Garrett, to modernist icons like Gottfried Benn or Hermann Hesse and contemporary work by poets still to make a name for themselves in English. Emily Carpenter’s version of ‘The Erl King’ did a great job of capturing the eeriness of Goethe’s poem in taut masculine rhymes without becoming doggerel in English and Claire Ewbanks’s ‘Grodëk’ by Georg Trakl had the confidence to stick close to the poet’s dark assonance and disjointed syntax without trying to smooth it over.
In the Open category all the judges were immediately impressed by a clutch of translations and after that it was a matter of teasing out their particular strengths and weighing up different approaches and solutions. John Richmond’s ‘The Retreat from Moscow’ by Victor Hugo is not the kind of poem I generally like; but his was a bravura performance, whose rich vocabulary and unobtrusive couplets won me over with their sheer sweep and pace. Striking this year were a number of poems translated from Chinese which brought welcome interventions from quite different traditions. Here, as a reader without Chinese, I was looking out for voices that persuaded of themselves, no matter how strange, and in a haunting version of Xia Yu’s ‘Strawberry Pie’ Chen Dandan created a voice I could trust.

Beyond the shortlist and commended poems we also discussed quite a range of other entries which did not quite make the final cut. There were impressive versions of old favorites, including John Turner’s colloquial version of Verlaine’s ‘Streets 2’, or the strong angular version of Baudelaire’s ‘Albatross’ by Cedric Watts. But I was delighted to see new poets like Ulrike Draesner’s tricksily demotic ‘Twin Spin’, a version of Shakespeare’s sonnets for the age of gene manipulation, brilliantly brought to life in Tom Cheesman’s versions. And this year there were new languages too: Peider Lansel’s ‘Tamangur’ in Iain Galbraith’s memorable version from Romansch.

This is my last year on the panel. I have enjoyed my time hugely and learned a good deal about the way different poets – and even different languages – respond to the challenges of translation. I have also learned a good deal more about the strength and versatility of English as a poetic language. I come away heartened by the energy and verve I have seen among the translators over the last four years and bowled over once again by the way English stretches and flexes to accommodate different traditions and allow different voices to sing within it.

Karen Leeder

Reading translations of poems is not very different from reading poems. If it isn’t a poem we seem to be reading, the chances are the translator has missed something. Questions of fidelity to the original are supposedly at the core of the matter, and in many ways are so, but reading a translation by a poet we don’t know is like reading an entirely new poem, and we are or are not captivated by it. The poem in the receiving language has to make itself a poetic space so that, while undoubtedly not of it, it is nevertheless in it.

In the 14-and-under section it was fascinating to see last year’s favourite original poet, La Fontaine, being overtaken by this year’s, Catullus, who produced surprisingly sophisticated elegance in some and exhorted others to experiment with tone. It is also quite something for someone under fourteen to come to terms with Baudelaire’s ‘Spleen’ (what became of childhood boredom or listlessness?) but at fourteen, perhaps, you are not a child any more and the translation by Dominic Hand felt mature and authoritative. If it was beaten by Henry Miller’s translation ‘Ovid at the Races’, it was by a short head. The verse here gallops along in firm Victorian manner and Sam Peters’s commanding, contemporary-sounding Catullus 27 was a length or so behind it.

The 18-and-under section was not quite as bright as it was last year. More Baudelaire here in Amelia Hassard’s translation of ‘Get Drunk’, which certainly got some of Baudelaire’s dark brio and a welcome translation from the Welsh of Hedd Wyn’s ‘Rhyfel’ by Ioana Hannagan Lewis, but the winner was out of Ovid again, from the Heroides, by Patrick Heaton. The best, as before, were very good, but there were fewer of them.

The Open section, however, was very good and I had many more poems marked as excellent than could possibly be accommodated on an agreed list. For lack of space I can do no more than mention some of them. Cedric Watts’s version of Baudelaire’s (Baudelaire again!) ‘The Albatross’, A. Franklinos’s version from the Greek of George Seferis’s ‘Interlude of Joy’, Leonard Lavery’s translation of Robert Desnos’s ‘The Voice’, two translations of Léopold Senghor by William Oxley, Patricia Hann’s Jules Supervieille, a group of poems from the Yiddish translated by Norbert Hirschhorn, John Turner’s Verlaine (so hard to do!), Joanne Cooper’s Noriko Ibaragi from the Japanese, A.C. Clarke with Baudelaire’s ‘U-Turn’ (another original take by her, as I remember from last year), Michael Swan’s version of Hendrik Nordbrandt’s Norwegian poem, ‘A Dream about My Mother’, two excellent Rilkes by Ian Crockatt, a lovely ironic Cavafy by Sylvia Moody. And a lovely translation from the Romansh of Peider Lansel by Iain Galbraith.

The winners and commended are all marvellous pieces of work and it was very hard deciding the top three. As implied at the beginning, it helps to have a proper poet’s ear for what is telling. I am delighted for John Richmond, Duncan Forbes and Jane Draycott. These are serious works. Close behind them come poets like Michael Foley, Mario Petrucci and Carol Rumens, all major figures.

We don’t know the names of the translators when we read of course, nor can we tell a translator by his or her style, but poetry will out. And so it has. It is also very good to see translations from the so-called minor languages. More of these please. We know the poetry is there.

George Szirtes
Henry Miller's commentary

I chose to translate this particular poem because I see two sides to it. One of them portrays Ovid as calm and collected: he's not interested in the races, preferring to accompany a girl he admires who is in love with a racing driver. He daydreams of himself as a racer, so that she might love him instead – these meanings are quite obvious. However, I can see the poem also describing Ovid the lover as nervous: he wants to tell her how he feels but is afraid she will not be impressed by him. His day-dream is a metaphor for the immensity of the task he has set himself of speaking to her, but he knows he is unequal to both tasks – speaking to her and the racing – for as soon as she looked at him, he knows he will ‘drop his reins’, and fail. I think Ovid meant to combine both the obvious and underlying meanings here to try and express a complex mix of emotions.

The most prominent issue I faced when translating this poem was which form to use: a spondaic form of long and short syllables, or a more English stressed metre, which, as well as conveying Ovid’s (in the story) nervousness and the excitement of chariot racing, would also be more interesting to a modern English audience.

In the end, I chose the latter, but only after an original attempt which followed the former option. This original draft was sluggish and less interesting, but more closely matched the meanings and phrases in Ovid’s original poem.

When rewriting my draft I also had to consider whether to match exactly Ovid’s meanings to convey the poem or to expand on the story to better convey Ovid’s meaning to a modern audience. Again, I chose the latter, which made my translation longer, but at the same time more engaging as an English translation of the poem.
Penelope Ulixi
Heroides 1 (lines 1–50)

haec tua Penelope lento tibi mittit, Ulixe; nil mihi rescribas attinet: ipse veni!
Troia iacet certe, Danais invisa puellis; vix Priamus tanti totaque Troia fuit.
o utinam tum, cum Lacedaemona classe petebat, obturus insanis esset adulter aquis!
non ego deserto iacuissem frigida lecto, nec quereret tardos ire relicta dies;
ec mihi quærenti spatiosam fallere noctem lassaret viduas pendula tela manus.
quando ego non timui graviora pericula veris? res est solliciti plena timoris amor.
in te fingebam violentos Troas ituros; nomine in Hectoreo pallida semper eram.
sive quis Antilochum narrabat ab hoste revictum, Antilochus nostri causa timoris erat;
sive Menoetiaen falsis ecce disse sub armis, flebam successu posse carere dolos.
sanguine Tlepolemus Lyciam tepefcerat hastam; Tlepolemi leto cura novata mea est.
denique, quisquis erat castris iugulatus Achivis, sed bene consuluit casto deus aequus amori.
versa est in cineres sospite Troia viro.
Argolici rediere duces, altaria fumant;
ponitur ad patrios barbara praeda deos.
grata ferunt nymphae pro salvis dona maritis; illi victa suis Troica fata canunt.
mirantur iustique senes trepideaque puellae; narrantis coniunx pendet ab ore viri.

Penelope to Odysseus
Heroides 1 (lines 1–50)

Another page of paper wasted on you, slow Odysseus, Not a word I’ve heard: Come home!
You’ve certainly razed Troy, the enemy of so many girls. But Priam and Troy were never even of any concern to me!
If only when that philanderer went sailing to Sparta, Mad waves had covered him!
Then I wouldn’t have stayed in this frigid bed, Then I wouldn’t have had reason to complain about the sluggish days,
Then I wouldn’t have had to waste what little energy remained on brushing away cobwebs,
While I whirled away the dark hours.

Always fearful of the worst, I was.

Love was the cause of this fear, invading my mind, Whilst the shadows of violent Trojans surround your memory, And Hector chases the colour from my cheeks.
If someone unwittingly told me of the death of Antilochus, I grew faint with this new worry;
Or if Patroclus fell in selfish armour, I prayed that lightning never struck twice.
When Tlepolemus warmed Sarpedon’s blooded spear, My pacing resumed.
You get the picture, whenever news of a death filtered through, My heart skipped a beat.

Thank the god who values such pure love as ours!

Troy is dust, and the victor lives. All the others have returned:
The sweet smell of sacrifices fills the air: Exotic booty is offered to the gods of our lands:
Wives add to the piles in thanks for their safe husbands: Victory songs fill the air:
All, young to old, male and female, are amazed:
A wife hangs on the narration of her husband.
I decided to translate one of Ovid’s *Heroides* for several reasons. For English Literature GCSE I had to read some poems by Carol Ann Duffy, many of which came from her book *The World’s Wife*. The poems from this book take their lead from Ovid’s *Heroides*, in that they talk of a tale, often a mythical one, from the point of view of the woman in the story. I wanted to translate one of the *Heroides* to see the similarities and differences between the approach of Duffy and Ovid. I therefore decided to translate *Heroides* 1 because Duffy had written a poem called ‘Penelope’ in the same vein.

I chose to break the structure of my translation up by leaving several lines separate from the rest of the text. I did this as I feel these phrases need to be emphasised and stood well as separate sentences.

I use colloquial language in my translation in parts. An example of this is during the speech in lines 33–36. I wanted to vary the language used in the translation and felt that this was an effective place to do it.

Penelope is often thought of as the perfect wife. She waited 20 years for her husband to return from Troy, and stayed faithful the whole time, refusing to remarry. Although she is thought of as being a patient individual, I wanted to translate this poem in a way that portrayed her as both patient and faithful but also annoyed, worried and tired. I translated the opening in a way that suggests that Penelope is fed up of waiting, translating *missit* as ‘wasted’, implying her frustration. I varied this style from line 12. Here I wanted to suggest Penelope’s fear, and so stuck close to the structure of the Latin, which I thought was particularly evocative of her distress by the use of parallel structure.

From line 25 I use short clauses to suggest Penelope’s longing for her husband to return – she is saying how all the other couples and women are reacting, but she has nothing to be thankful for. At the end I return to the feeling of the beginning of my translation, one of disappointment and anger.
Hedd Wyn’s ‘Rhyfel’ is one of my favourite Welsh poems. The allusions to God and nature lend the poem a myth-like quality reminiscent of Celtic war poetry, yet the poet damns war instead of glorifying it.

It was also very interesting to translate. The Welsh has an inherent rhythm, and while translating I realised that if I was going to try to capture the power of the original, I would have to respect its metre. This proved to be quite difficult – the differences in syntax between the languages meant it was hard to maintain the exact up-beat, down-beat pattern, though I have tried to do so whenever possible.

It was important that I remained as faithful as possible to the original imagery used, yet sometimes I have had to make small concessions. For example, I couldn't think of a way to fit *Yn codi ei awdurddod bell* – which translates literally as ‘Raises his vile authority’ – into the rhyme scheme. In the context of the poem I felt it fair to assume that ‘vile authority’ pertained to the corrupt authority of war, and so I hope I have remained close to the spirit of the poem. Also, I chose to translate *Gwae fi* as ‘Cursed am I’, since I felt the more correct ‘Woe is me’ to be too archaic.

For the last stanza, I wondered whether or not to use a more faithful version:

```
... Hang silent now in grove and wood.
... The rain pours, mixing with their blood.
... The rain blends with the blood of men.
```

However, I finally decided to keep the version I have submitted. Though the addition of ‘men’ changes the meaning slightly, the final image is so horrific that, in order to underline its potency, I felt I had to end on a perfect rhyme.
I chose to translate ‘Enivrez-Vous’ by French poet, author and leading figure of the Decadent movement, Baudelaire. This poem is a favourite of mine for its meaning and feel, but I ultimately chose the poem for its unconventional structure and idiomatic sentences, which I felt would be a challenge to translate into a foreign language as many phrases are unique constructions.

In translating from French into English I found that problems arose when translating conjugated verbs which were conveying a habitual action, as the English equivalent is often clumsy. For example:

-enivrez-vous;  
-enivrez-vous sans cesse!  
-de vin, de poésie, de vertu, à votre guise.

I tried to keep the same metre in the poem as it is fundamental to its strength. Baudelaire’s poem is prose, without formal metre or rhyme, but its charming cadence is still maintained through repetition of words and phrases, which speeds up the poem into a gallop.
The Retreat from Moscow

It snowed. Their very victory had brought on their defeat.
For once, the eagle bowed its head. Dark days! In slow retreat from smoking Moscow, emperor and men recrossed terrain whose only feature now was snow: white plain, then more white plain.

A brief thaw, and an avalanche of water. In the spate none knew his leader nor his flag; no-one could separate the army’s centre from its flanks. How had it come to pass that yesterday’s proud columns were today’s disordered mass?

The opened bellies of dead horses sheltered wounded men: the only refuge on the road. The snow set in again.
Beside deserted bivouacs, the silent, frozen ghosts of buglers, upright in the saddle, occupied their posts, their copper instruments glued fast to mouths of stone. The sky dropped cannon-ball and shell, mixed with its own artillery of snowflakes, deathly white, which settled on the grenadiers, who trembled as they marched, absorbed in private thoughts and fears, their grey moustaches trimmed with ice.

Across the unknown lands
the north wind and the driving snow chased barefoot, starving bands of former warriors, and broke their hearts. They were a dream they’d wandered into, in the mist; a mystery, a stream of shadows under leaden sky. The utter loneliness!

The sky’s revenge: a mighty army in a wilderness, enwrapped in snow – a silent shroud the elements have sewn.
Each man imagined he was dying; knew he was alone.
Here, in a fateful realm, two enemies pronounced their curse.
The Czar was one; the North another, which was worse.

Gun-carriages chopped up for firewood; cannon thrown away; men lying down to die; this was a mob, confused, astray, in headlong flight, their bleak processions swallowed in the waste.
The folds and bulges where the snow had seemed to drift embraced whole regiments. The fall of Hannibal was on this scale.

Gun-carriages chopped up for firewood; cannon thrown away; men lying down to die; this was a mob, confused, astray, in headlong flight, their bleak processions swallowed in the waste. The folds and bulges where the snow had seemed to drift embraced whole regiments. The fall of Hannibal was on this scale.

Great Marshal Ney, whom once an army followed, ran away.
He haggled with three Cossacks for his watch.

And every night
the French imagined Russian soldiers harrying their flight. They grabbed their weapons. ‘Who goes there?’ In nightmare fantasies came squadrons, whirlwinds of wild men, whose terrifying cries were like the calls of bald-head vultures, harbingers of doom.
In panic one whole army fled, and vanished in the gloom.

continued overleaf
The emperor surveyed the scene, as if he were a tree, a giant oak, about to taste the axe. Catastrophe, the fatal axe man, who had spared his greatness until now, had climbed up on him. Now he shuddered as each severed bough, his officers and men, crashed round him one by one. He watched them die.

He paced inside his tent. A remnant of his company, who’d loved him, trusting in his destiny, stood by outside. Fate had betrayed him, surely. To and fro they saw his shadow stride.

Within, Napoleon was dazed and pale. Perhaps this was not fate? Perhaps – he knew not what to think – he had some sin to expiate? The man of glory trembled as a sudden unaccustomed dread assailed his soul. He turned to God in anguish. ‘Lord of Hosts,’ he said, ‘is this my punishment, to see my legions scattered on the snow?’

He heard his name called in the dark. A voice said, ‘No.’

Victor Hugo wrote this poem while living in the Channel Islands, in exile from Louis Napoleon’s Second Empire, whose most famous critic he had become. ‘L’Expiation’ is long; I have translated only its first section. The poem describes the disasters of the late period of Napoleon Bonaparte’s reign. At the end of each of the first three sections – while retreating from Moscow, after Waterloo and on Saint Helena – Bonaparte asks God whether these are his punishments for some imagined sin. God mysteriously replies, respectively, ‘No,’ ‘No,’ and ‘Not yet.’ There then follow satirical sections in which Hugo castigates the corruption and banality of the Second Empire. In the final section, Bonaparte’s ghost (his corpse having been restored to Paris) surveys the wreckage of his grand designs which the Second Empire represents. God gives him the cruel truth in the last words of the poem. His punishment is for ‘DIX-HUIT BRUMAIRE’, the date (9 November 1799) on which Bonaparte declared himself emperor. Hugo the republican has his revenge.

My skill is not up to mirroring Hugo’s alexandrines. I have made room for myself by using fourteeners, occasionally extending a line to sixteen syllables or shortening it to twelve, for effect. But I have stuck with rhyming couplets. Once or twice, for example in my line 10, I have invented words to fill out a line. But on the whole, this is a pretty close translation.

Hugo is a master of atmospheric narrative. I have nowhere read such an account of the desolation of defeat in a Russian winter, unless it be Antony Beevor’s *Stalingrad*. Hugo never let facts get in the way of a good story; so far as my researches have gone, Marshal Ney was never guilty of the act of dishonourable betrayal of which he is here accused.
What little we presume to know about the Archpoet is gathered from the internal evidence of the poems themselves. This unreliable evidence is also used to date his ‘Confession’ to circa 1162/3 although the poem acquired its title in the 13th century.

What drew me to this celebrated poem was the durable energy and verve of the medieval Latin lyric by the Archipoeta. Described as a tour de force, the original presents a real challenge to the translator. It is written in the ‘goliardic metre’ in verses which use feminine rhymes throughout (four per verse, each on the same sound) which are impossible to match in English, although it’s challenging to try, particularly since half- or off-rhyme can provide an expedient alternative.

This showpiece poem apparently survives in a number of manuscripts. Specialist scholars may speculate by vainly trying to identify a plausible candidate for the Archpoet but what comes across from his Latin words over eight centuries and more are the ironies and energies, the vitality and drive of the Archpoet’s highly individual ‘Confession’ concerning wine, women, gambling, sin and song.

Inevitably, I have taken some liberties with the original but I hope the result reflects something of the wit, learning, satire, feeling, humour, self-mockery, knowing self-dramatisation and the skilful versification of the Archipoeta himself.

The metre is like that of ‘Good King Wenceslas’ but the content and style of the ‘Confession’ are surprisingly individual and the sensibility seems to me both of its time and in many ways startlingly fresh. Almost all verse translations of such a lively poem are bound in a sense to be confessions of failure themselves but I hope my version may at least redirect attention to this Archpoem of the anonymous Archpoet.

I’m seething introspectively with angry indignation and in the bitterness of mind I speak my condemnation. I am a lightweight character of slender occupation and like a leaf that scatters I’m a wind-blown recreation.

And since it is appropriate for any man of vision to build his house on solid rock and take a firm position, I must be in my folly like the flowing river’s mission and never underneath one sky but always in transition.

I’m carried like a wayward bird, a ship without a sailor, as through the airy pathways I go wandering inter alia, no chains and fetters binding me, no iron key my jailer, but when I seek my kindred-kind I find a fellow-failure.

I can’t take seriously at all a serious sobriety; I like a joke, the spice of life is honey-sweet variety, and as for Venus’s commands they have my total piety; she never on an evil mind imposes her society.

Thus down the slippery slope I go with all a youth’s defences, I wrap myself in vices so, forgetting virtue’s censors and since the soul is mortified let flesh enjoy the senses: I seek not safe salvation now but pleasures, the intensest.

I beg your pardon, gracious Lord, Archbishop Holy Order, but I’m enjoying this good death and my voluptuous slaughter: I’m suffering a mortal wound from someone’s pretty daughter and if I’m not allowed to touch can’t I in daydreams court her?

It is so very difficult to conquer nature’s urging, be pure in mind and/or refined when looking at a virgin; we are young men and we cannot submit to such harsh purging, or fail to want our bodies to enjoy a lively merging.

Translated from the Latin by Duncan Forbes

Confession

Estuans intrinsecus ira vehementi
in amaritudine loquar mee menti:
factus de materia levis elementi
folio sum similis de quo ludunt venti.

Cum sit enim proprium viro sapienti
supra petram onere sedem fundamenti,
stultus ego comparor fluvii labori
sub eodem aere nuncum permanenti.

Feror ego veluti sine nauta navis,
ut per vias aeris vaga fertur avis.
Non me tenent vincula, non me tenet clavis;
que nuncum in cordibus habitat ignavis.

Mihi cordis gravitas res videtur gravis,
tocus est amabilis dulcioque favis.
Quicquid Venus imperat, labor est suavis;
que nuncum in orthibus curam gero cutis.

Via lata gradior more iuventutis,
implico me vicinis immemor virtutis,
volutpatis avidus quam quam salutis,
mortuis in anima curam gero cutis.

Presul discretissime, veniam te precor:
morte bona morior, dulci nec necor;
meum pectus sauciat puellarum decor,
et quas tacru nequeo, saltem corde mechor.

Res est arduissima vincere naturam,
in aspectu virginis mentem esse puram;
juvenes non possimus legem sequi duram
leviumque corporum non habere curam.

Archipoeta

Duncan Forbes’ commentary

Winners of the Open category
Jane Draycott’s commentary

Described by Donald Fry as ‘the most perplexing poem in the language’, the dramatic intensity of the piece best known as Wulf and Eadwacer, together with the mystery regarding its full meaning, give it something of the quality of a conversation half-heard at night under an open window – enough to feel the full heat of the moment without ever knowing the whole story or even who the speakers are. What no one doubts is the power of the female speaker’s heartfelt cry in her lament for Wulf, trapped twice as she seems to be within the confines of her island and in the arms of a new warrior-lover.

The original manuscript contains more than the usual scattering of unsolved Anglo-Saxon mysteries. Decades of scholarly detective work offer the translator a complex permutational web to consider in relation to almost every line. Standing back a little, I’ve tried to gain a sense of how individual words work not only in syntactical relation to their neighbours but across the whole piece. In an attempt to articulate the poem’s key moments of development, I have inserted stanza breaks and additional indentation, and have in several places played with re-sequencing phrases and ideas. The translation also pushes out a little from the original’s taut metrics towards a more contemporary kind of lyricism, as a way partly of creating more interpretive elbow-room.

The poem contains all the most captivating aspects of Anglo-Saxon literature – the electric mix of brutal and elegiac language, the sense of a world where love and conflict co-exist in equal intensity. What touched me most was what lies buried perhaps in that final image: the woman separated irremediably from her lover, sustained by the thought of her child, made out of love, like the song the poet has left to us.
Stephen Spender – poet, critic, editor and translator – 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 translation programme
The Times Stephen Spender Prize
The aim of this annual prize, launched in 2004, is to draw attention to the art of literary translation and encourage young people to read foreign poetry at a time when literature is no more than an optional module (if that) in A level modern languages. Entrants translate a poem 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 three categories (14- and-under, 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. The prize is promoted by The Times and has been sponsored in 2010 by the Eranda Foundation and the Old Possum’s Practical Trust, to whom the Trust is very grateful.

Primary translation
We are working with Shoreditch-based Eastside Educational Trust on a two-year programme of workshops aimed at raising the profile of community languages and literary translation for children at primary school in years 5 and 6. An online resource for teachers will be produced to ensure a legacy for the project, which is funded by Arts Council England, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Mercers’ Company.

The Joseph Brodsky/Stephen Spender Prize
In the 1960s Stephen Spender knew Joseph Brodsky only by reputation, as a poet imprisoned in the Soviet Union. They met for the first time in 1972 when WH Auden brought Brodsky, who had been expelled a few days earlier from his country, to London to the Poetry International and they stayed with the Spenders. There was an instant connection. The Joseph Brodsky/Stephen Spender Prize, which has the blessing of both poets’ widows, celebrates this thirty-year friendship. Run by the Stephen Spender Trust and judged by Paul Muldoon, Catriona Kelly and Sasha Dugdale, the competition will be open worldwide and entrants will be asked to translate a Russian poem of their choice into English. The prize will be launched in April 2011, subject to our obtaining the necessary funding.

The archive programme
Essays and journalism
In May 2002 the Trust presented the British Library with a collection of Stephen Spender’s published prose. Representing around one million words of mainly essays and journalism, this collection covers 1924–94. 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 New Collected Journals
These journals cover the years from the Second World War to Stephen Spender’s death in 1995. Edited by Natasha Spender, John Sutherland and Lara Feigl, they will be published by Faber.

The Stephen Spender archive, which comprises a long lifetime’s worth of manuscripts, letters, diaries and other personal papers, is now housed in the Bodleian Library where it will be available to scholars from September 2011.

Events
Symposium, 2001
The Institute for English Studies hosted a successful one-day symposium on ‘Stephen Spender and his Circle in the 1930s’ featuring contributions on Edward Upward, Isherwood, Auden, Spender and MacNeice.

Southbank reading, 2004
Seamus Heaney, Tony Harrison, Harold Pinter, Jill Balcon and Vanessa Redgrave came together at the Southbank Centre to celebrate the publication of Spender’s New Collected Poems. The 90-minute programme was devised by Lady Spender and directed by Joe Harmston; all 900 seats of the Queen Elizabeth Hall sold out.

Auden centenary, 2007
In February 2007 we joined forces with the British Library to mark WH Auden’s centenary with a reading of his poetry at the Shaw Theatre. Natasha Spender, who knew Auden well, selected the readers (all poets themselves): James Fenton, John Fuller, Grey Gowrie, Andrew Motion, Sean O’Brien, Peter Porter and – in recognition of the years Auden spent in the United States – American poet and academic Richard Howard. The programme was devised by Grey Gowrie, a founding member of the Stephen Spender Trust and Auden scholar.

Spender centenary, 2009
The first of the centenary celebrations was a reading in February 2009 in the Royal Institution’s Faraday Theatre by Grey Gowrie, Tony Harrison, Seamus Heaney, Barry Humphries, Poet Laureate Andrew Motion and Natasha Spender. A recording of the evening can be downloaded from the Trust’s website. An academic conference was held at the Institute of English Studies the following day, with papers given by John Sutherland, Barbara Hardy, Valentine Cunningham, Peter McDonald, Mark Rawlinson, Alan Jenkins, Stephen Romer and Michael Scammell. A second reading, featuring Fleur Adcock, Grey Gowrie and Craig Raine, took place in October 2009 at University College, Oxford, where Stephen Spender was an undergraduate.

Contacting the Trust
For further information about the Stephen Spender Trust and its activities, please contact the Director of the Trust:
Robina Pelham Burn
3 Old Wish Road,
Eastbourne,
East Sussex BN21 4JX
01323 452294
info@stephenspender.org
www.stephen-spender.org
The Stephen Spender Trust

PATRONS
Lady Antonia Fraser CBE, Lord Gowrie PC,
Drue Heinz DBE, David Hockney CH,
Wole Soyinka

PRESIDENT
Sir Michael Holroyd CBE*

COMMITTEE
Jonathan Barker MBE, Lord Briggs,
Joanna Clarke,
Desmond Clarke, Valerie Eliot®,
Professor Warwick Gould, Tony Harrison,
Harriet Harvey Wood OBE®,
Josephine Hart, Seamus Heaney,
Barry Humphries, Christopher MacLehose,
Caroline Moorehead CBE,
Prudence Skene CBE®, Lizzie Spender,
Matthew Spender, Philip Spender®,
Saskia Spender, Richard Stone®,
Sir Tom Stoppard OM CBE, Tim Supple,
Professor John Sutherland, Ed Victor,
Professor Daniel Weissbort

*Also a Trustee

Registered charity number 1101304
Company limited by guarantee number 4891164
Registered in England at
3 Old Wish Road, Eastbourne, East Sussex, BN21 4JX
Images of Stephen Spender © the Estate of Humphrey Spender