Stephen Spender Prize 2013

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

Noah Norman
Cyrano’s speech from *Cyrano de Bergerac* by Edmond Rostand (French)

Winners of the 18-and-under category

Joint first

Anna Leader
‘The approaching winter’ by Jules Laforgue
(French)

Joint first

Ephraim Levinson
‘Abishag’ by Rainer Maria Rilke
(German)

Third

Harry Sellen
‘A down-to-earth affair’ by Erich Kästner
(German)

Commended

Zélée Everest
‘King Midas’s donkey ears’ from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Latin)

Takis Galatis
‘Toothache’ by Wilhelm Busch (German)

Ludovica di Vincenzo
‘Death will come and she’ll have your eyes’ by Cesare Pavese (Italian)

Commended

Daina Auzins
‘While I loved you’ by Juris Kronbergs (Latvian)

Claudia Habergham
‘The Eiffel Tower’ by Guillaume Apollinaire (French)

Sam Norman
‘Life after death’ by Pindar (ancient Greek)

Clio Takas
‘The third man’ by Yiannis Ritsos (modern Greek)

Winners of the Open category

First

Karen Leeder
‘Childhood in the Diorama’ by Durs Grünbein (German)

Second

Alistair Elliot
‘Venice’ by Mihai Eminescu (Romanian)

Joint third

Jane Tozer
‘Wulf my Wulf’ by anon (Anglo-Saxon)

Joint third

John RG Turner
‘Hell’s ante-room’ from Dante’s *Inferno* (Italian)

Commended

Ken Cockburn
‘Bullbars’ by Thomas Rosenlöcher (German)

Ian Crockatt
‘The terrible loss of his sons’ by Egil Skallagrimsson (Old Norse)

Antoinette Fawcett
‘Safeguard’ by Ed Leeflang (Dutch)

Jane Tozer
from ‘Dame Sirith’, anon (Middle English)

Ben Williams
‘The killing game’ by M C Solaar (French)
Faced with 53 languages, from Alemannic to Yoruba, via Georgian, Punjabi and Slovenian, and poems that ranged from those written 2,500 years ago to contemporary French rap, the judges had a tough job this summer. As ever, they tackled it with rigour and an enthusiasm seemingly undimmed by reading 11 versions of ‘Le dormeur du val’. My thanks to Susan Bassnett, Edith Hall, Patrick McGuinness and George Szirtes for their hard work, erudition and unfailing good humour. Farewell to Patrick and George, who step down this year, and welcome to Bill Herbert and Stephen Romer who will take their place.

It was a year that saw an unprecedented number of entries in the 14-and-under and 18-and-under categories, some in the youngest group done as a class exercise or set as homework.

From the commentaries it was clear that this was not only the first time many had attempted to translate from French or Spanish but also the first time they had read a poem in another language; I hope that the diversion from writing about ‘Les vacances’ was enjoyable as well as enlightening.

Since its launch in 2004, the prize has been promoted by The Times and championed by Erica Wagner, its Literary Editor until earlier this year. From all at the Stephen Spender Trust, heartfelt thanks to Erica and our wonderful sponsors, the Old Possum’s Trust and the Dr Mortimer and Theresa Sackler Foundation, who have generously agreed to sponsor the prize for the next three years.

Robina Pelham Burn
Director of the Stephen Spender Trust

This year the judges were so closely in agreement in all categories that we were all astonished. Usually there is some lively discussion as we each make a case for the winning entries, but this year we seemed only to debate quite how many additional entries we could add to the commended list, which shows that the quality of what we received was exceptionally high. We had no hesitation in judging the lively version of a speech from Cyrano de Bergerac as the winner of the 14-and-under category, and as can be seen from the 18-and-under category, we all felt so strongly about the translations of poems by Laforgue and Rilke that we awarded a joint first prize. In the Open category, our only issue was which of the five beautiful translations of the contemporary German poet Durs Grünbein should be deemed the winner, as they were all so strong.

We read all entries without knowing anything about the translator other than what he or she may tell us in the commentary. The commentaries offer fascinating insights into the process of translation, and differ widely. Some tell us about the original poet, some give details of how the translation came to be made, and this year we had moving stories about translations being undertaken as a tribute to a long dead parent, as a gift for a monolingual child, as a way of going back to recapture special memories. Several commentaries showed how the translator was making connections between poetic traditions in different languages, and I was particularly intrigued by Pippa Little’s commentary on a Lorca poem, in which she linked his work to her readings of Border Reiver ballads, with the shared theme of the outsider and the strong incantatory rhythms.

Not all our individual choices made the commended list, and among my favourites that just missed are Brian O’Connor’s translation of the tiny Irish lyric, ‘Enviable the Tiny Birds’, Martin Bennett’s version of Leopardi’s ‘Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd’ and Micha Meyers’ translation of the Dutch poet Willem van Toorn’s ‘His Mind’s Eye’. In the under-18 section, I loved David Meijer’s playful rhymed translation from the Dutch of Annie Schmidt’s ‘Isabella Caramella’, one of whose pets is ‘a gallant gaudy guinea pig’, and which surely deserves to be published as an illustrated children’s book.

The pedant in me notes with dismay how many linguistic errors there are in some of the entries, further evidence of the disastrous policy of abandoning the teaching of grammar and syntax in the teaching of foreign languages. I also felt, odd though this might seem, that in some cases more attention had been paid to translation as a kind of exercise than to the production of a good English poem. What the judges are always in search of are translations that are also good poems, that do justice to the original creator. Maintaining this delicate balance is what makes the translation of poetry so challenging and, when it works well, so fulfilling. Interestingly, this year there were quite a lot of commentaries in which the translator admitted to never having translated poetry before, though putting a positive spin on this means that quite a few entrants took their courage in both hands and attempted something quite new.

One problem that translators of poetry wrestle with every year is the enormous difficulty of translating poems that seem to be very straightforward and easily understandable in the source language, but which all too often end up as banal in English. Translating the apparently simple is, in a different way, as tough as translating a very complex text, for the effect of simplicity is only achievable with considerable skill, and a translator needs comparable skills. Judges too need skills, and one of the questions we consider is the difficulty of translating something that has not been translated before as against the difficulty of creating a new translation of a poem that has been translated many times. There is no easy answer and this year, as we have done previously, we sought to focus on each
poem as a new independent creation in its own right.

This year too, not only did I have the privilege of reading some terrific translations, but I also discovered some new poets I had never encountered before, for the variety of choices of poems to translate matches the variety of languages in which they are written. This prize really does reveal how much talent there is at all ages when it comes to translating poetry, and I feel privileged to be involved as a judge.

Susan Bassnett

This year I was lucky enough to read most of the entries within sight of Apollo’s mountain, Parnassus, on the north coast of the Gulf of Corinth. At Delphi, Apollo’s cult centre high on the mountain, ancient poets and musicians competed for prizes at his festivals. One of my personal favourites in the adult category this year, Jessica Wright’s refreshingly accessible rendition of Pindar’s twelfth Pythian Ode, was actually first performed at Delphi in 490BC to celebrate the victory of a pipe-player.

Near the site of the ancient oracle I saw Byron’s graffito and the grave of the Greek Modernist poet Angelos Sikelianos. And this year’s crop of entries included a generous selection of poems in both ancient and modern Greek – by Aeschylus, Alcaeus, Anacreon, Sappho and Cavafy as well as another impressive Pindar, in the 18-and-under category: Sam Norman’s sophisticated rendering of Pindar’s mellifluous fragment of an ancient dirge describing Elysium.

The Greek theme was also present in several excellent versions of Ovid’s Latin retelling of myth in Metamorphoses, such as Zélie Everest’s ‘Midas’ episode in the youngest category. The Odyssey also haunts the poems by Durs Grünbein, especially ‘Calypso’ and ‘Island without Sirens’, which Karen Leeder translated with such dazzling skill and sensitivity. As one of four judges I am often asked how on earth we agree on a winner from hundreds of entries: this year, every single one of us had independently decided before conferring that Leeder’s entries outshone all others.

It was heartening to read translations of poems in so many world languages. I was delighted by the range of African poets this year – we had translations from Swahili, Amharic, Yoruba, and siNdebele. Another conspicuous feature was a pleasing increase in contemporary poems and in poems which first originated or first became famous as the lyrics of songs (including, of course Pindar and the other Greek lyric poets). From the Welsh national anthem to Ben Williams’ brilliantly trenchant and dexterous ‘Killing Game’ from the French rap of MC Solaar, we were taken on an extensive tour of the interface between sung and spoken verse.

Yet in the adult category, at least, despite a dozen brilliant entries, including the heartrending ‘Terrible Loss of His Sons’, translated from Old Norse by Ian Crockett, I felt there were fewer outstanding translations than in the previous two years. What we are looking for is not just a translation of basic lexical content and information, but the birth of a new text that works its artistic magic as a poem in its own right. Many fascinating translations of authors I have not before encountered did not fully succeed in convincing me that the original poems consisted of words arranged in ways which marked them out definitely as poetry rather than somewhat everyday prose. I think that some of this year’s entrants have been too frightened of inaccuracy and not committed enough to sensory effect and aural felicity. I wait next year’s developments with excitement!

Edith Hall

As always, the range of languages entered this year was remarkably diverse. What disappointed us was the way in which many of the poems from Arabic, Kurdish, Chinese, Hindi and other languages from faraway cultures that are now established here seemed not to work in English. I thought about why this was, since, surely, one of the merits of this competition is that it reflects the multicultural aspects of the world we now live in. We found many of these poems, however excellent they might be in their originals, to be, somehow, untranslatable. I say ‘untranslatable’ not in terms of the words themselves, but in terms, perhaps, of conveying the traditions that lie behind them, the kinds of national histories that caused them to be made, and the forms of address that the poems relied on to reach their original publics. This might be worrying, since one of the advantages of poetry is that it is held to transcend such contexts. I don’t know – there’s no answer, or if there is, the answer is in the individual translations, which, when they work, show it to be possible. But there weren’t many. In any case, the problem is ours too: we come to translations with our own cultural bearings, our own sense of what works and what doesn’t. Many of the poems we read freely used grand words like ‘Soul’, ‘Presence’, ‘the People’, ‘the Self’, words that are so big that they threaten to mean too little, words that are raw and abstract at the same time. On the European side, to counterbalance this, we found what are by now becoming the usual suspects: Prévert, Rimbaud’s ‘Dormeur du val’, Reverdy, Hugo, etc.

The class-exercise feeling we got when we read these is explained by the fact that they were often class exercises.

The best of the translations, underscored by subtle and resourceful commentaries, were excellent, and the commentary part of the exercise, while not (for me) being a tie-breaker, continues to be one of the competition’s best features. Translators can explore and test out their hypotheses, and reveal their passion for the poem at the same time. They make connections between the poems, often hundreds of years old, and the lives we lead today. They recognise in the poems sentiments or expressions that remain relevant. Love and war dominate here, as they seem to do always and everywhere.

I continue to admire translations that are inventive, that convey the spirit of the poem while understanding that adjustments need to be made, that translating is more like changing currencies than just carrying some-
Judges’ comments

Patrick McGuinness

It is my last report as judge after five years. My first report in 2009 proposed that translation ‘can draw the poet out of someone who may not have realised the poet in themselves. The response to poetry is in us all but it takes an extra talent to turn response to invention, to hear and speak echo in a fresh voice.’

Echoes and freshness have remained of the essence. There was one outstanding, very ambitious piece in the 14-and-under category. The sophistication, assurance, and indeed freshness of Noah Norman’s rendering of one of Cyrano’s speeches from Rostand’s Cyrano de Bergerac was striking. It was at home with lines like ‘Play the lounge lizard in the salon’. There were not too many lounge lizards in my fourteen-year-old vocabulary. The whole had the right kind of glitter. The three commended poems all had the same confidence. Cesare Pavese’s poem ‘Death will come...’ is difficult but great credit to Ludovica di Vincenzo for her excellent work with a demanding text, so beautifully balanced in English.

In the 18-and-under group two poems stood out and in the end the prize was shared between Anna Leader’s ‘The approaching winter’ from Jules Laforgue and Ephraim Levinson’s translation of Rilke’s ‘Abishag’. Two very different poems and approaches. The Laforgue is enormously demanding in terms of tone, presenting us with a unique mixture of the romantic gesture and the ironic undertone. The Rilke translation is more formal, more statuesque, but offers proper substance with some lovely touches.

The Open category was particularly strong this year, but one set of entries took everyone’s breath away. Any one of Karen Leeder’s translations from Durs Grünbein might have won. The specific poem was decided by consensus. I really hope these translations will build into a book. Not that it puts other work in the shade. Jane Tozer is a dazzling, quite virtuosic translator. Her work, this time from Middle English, shows her range: ‘Wulf my Wulf’ is broken into cries, while her ‘Dame Sirith’ is in vigorous, high-profile rhyme. Alistair Elliot’s double version of Eminescu gives us echo on echo. It goes to the heart of translation-as-project. John RG Turner’s Dante is another example of virtuosity, maintaining the original’s terza rima with great skill and conviction of tone. I was also fond of Antoinette Fawcett’s Ed Leeflang translations. Good to have translations from other than the ‘major’ languages.

The enterprise of translation depends on our willingness and capacity to listen and to hear. We don’t all hear the same thing but that is of the essence in poetry. Each poem is its own echo chamber, each echo generating its own meanings. That is why it is so important to us. To hear a poem is to hear a fresh truth about meaning, a meaning that springs out of all our senses, emotions and powers of thought, and a truth about meaning is also a truth about experience which is why the best poetry can so thrill us.

I hope to expand on these comments at georgeszirtes.blogspot.com.

George Szirtes
Act 2, Scene VIII, Cyrano de Bergerac

CYRANO: Please tell me, dear sir, what you want me to do?

Look for a mighty protector, take a sugar daddy,
And like the shadowy ivy, which creeps round a trunk,
Winning the tree's support by licking its bark,
Suck my way up by stealth instead of rising through force?

Hell no. Dedicate like the others,
Some lines of verse to sponsors? Play the fool,
In the vile hope of at last teasing out
A pleasing smile from some minister's lips?

Hell no. Eat a crow every day? Slither along
Like a snake, with its stomach all dirty and worn?
Writhing and bending my spine with flexible turns?

Hell no. Keep the goat and cabbage apart,
While handily pleasing them both,
Hand out laxatives to those tight-arses,
While wafting my own censer, up in some beard?

Hell no! Thrust myself from bosom to bosom,
Play the lounge lizard in the salon,
Set my course with love songs for oars,
And fill my sails with old ladies' adoring sighs?

Hell no! Pay Sercy the editor to edit my verse?

Hell no! Get myself made pope by a confederacy of dunces?

Hell no! Chisel out a name for myself
From just one sonnet, and not a life of work?

Hell no! Vow never to reveal my art except to those asses?
Flee in terror from poor reviews?

And claim incessantly: “Yes, but at least
I was mentioned in the Notes and Queries”?

Hell no! Look over my shoulder in fear and dismay,
Enjoy social visits more than poetry,
And write begging letters, put myself on show?

from Cyrano de Bergerac
Non, merci! non, merci! non, merci! Mais…chanter,
Rêver, rire, passer, être seul, être libre,
Avoir l’œil qui regarde bien, la voix qui vibre,
Mettre, quand il vous plaît, son feutre de travers,
Pour un oui, pour un non, se battre, – ou faire un vers!
Travailler sans souci de gloire ou de fortune,
A tel voyage, auquel on pense, dans la lune!
N’écrire jamais rien qui de soi ne sortît,
Et modestes d’ailleurs, se dire: mon petit,
Si c’est dans ton jardin à toi que tu les cueilles!
Puis, s’il advient d’un peu triompher, par hasard,
Ne pas être obligé d’en rien rendre à César,
Vis-à-vis de soi-même en garder le mérite,
Bref, dédaignant d’être le lierre parasite,
Ne pas monter bien haut, peut-être, mais tout seul!

Edmond Rostand

Hell no! Hell no! And once more, HELL NO!
To sing, and dream, and laugh, be free, make my own way,
And with a clear eye, a resonating voice,
I’ll wear, at will, a crooked, cocked felt hat,
To go to war for a yes, or a no, or make poetry,
And work without a care for fame or thrall,
Always aiming to shoot at the moon!
And never write a word not from my heart,
And modest besides, to say to myself: old man,
Be satisfied with flowers, fruits, even thorns,
As long as it’s from my garden they come!
And then, to grant myself a little gloat,
Know that I do not owe anyone anything,
So I’ll keep some honour for myself, no one else.

In short, I disdain to play the parasite,
I know I’m neither oak tree, nor lime,
I may not climb high, but what I do is mine.

Translated from the French
by Noah Norman

I chose a speech from Cyrano de Bergerac because I’ve loved Gérard Depardieu in Rappeneau’s film ever since I can remember. Even when I couldn’t understand the French, I was mesmerised by the fluency and beauty of Cyrano’s speeches when he is arguing with someone, especially when he is about to die. I chose this soliloquy because it shows Cyrano’s amazing way with words, but it is also the only speech that has such a big change in temper, from angry and sarcastic to realistic and hopeful.

This speech was difficult because of the different moods and language, which are complicated to understand even in English, and certainly include several obscure French words and phrases. For example, the part about stroking the goat and rhubarb – ‘et donneur de séné par désir de rhubarbe…’ didn’t make much sense to me. I found this harder as it is all French idiomatic language of the 17th century with all its metaphors (déjeuner… d’un crapaud…s’en fait un tuteur… etc.). I tried to get the sense of Cyrano’s rage about these people in my own words.

On translating, I started off with a very literal translation, so I could understand the basic speech, and then I put the entire thing into iambic pentameter to give it some metre, as the original is rhyming couplets. I found this quite constraining as there was too much to put into 10 syllables. I also did a very modern, urban translation with slang words, but as this was the polar opposite of Rostand’s original beauty, I did not use it.

Finally, I decided to use a freer translation that allowed more movement and contrast in different stages of the poem.

I have enjoyed translating Rostand so much, my goal this summer is to translate the entire play.
L'hiver qui vient

Blocus sentimental! Messageries du Levant!...
Oh, tombée de la pluie! Oh! tombée de la nuit,
Oh! le vent!...
La Toussaint, la Noël et la Nouvelle Année,
Oh, dans les bruines, toutes mes cheminées!...
D’usines...

On ne peut plus s’asseoir, tous les bancs sont mouillés;
Crois-moi, c’est bien fini jusqu’à l’année prochaine,
Tant les bancs sont mouillés, tant les bois sont rouillés,
Et tant les cors ont fait ton ton, ont fait ton taine!...

Ah, nuées accourues des côtes de la Manche,
Vous nous avez gâté notre dernier dimanche.

Il bruine;
Dans la forêt mouillée, les toiles d’araignées
Ploient sous les gouttes d’eau, et c’est leur ruine.

C’est la saison, c’est la saison, la rouille envahit les masses,
La rouille ronge en leurs spleens kilométriques
Les fils télégraphiques des grandes routes où nul ne passe.
Les cors, les cors, les cors – mélancoliques!...
Mélancoliques!...

Je ne puis quitter ce ton: que d’échos!...
C’est la saison, c’est la saison, adieu vendanges!...
Voici venir les pluies d’une patience d’ange,
Adieu vendanges, et adieu tous les paniers,
Tous les paniers Watteau des bourrées sous les marronniers,
C’est la toux dans les dortoirs du lycée qui rentre,
C’est la tisane sans le foyer,
La phtisie pulmonaire attristant le quartier,
Et toute la misère des grands centres.

The approaching winter

emotions blocked! bring me news from the med –
oh, rainfall! oh! nightfall,
oh! the wind, instead…!
all saints’, christmas day, and then the new year,
oh, behind drizzle, my factory chimneys
disappear!...

the benches are drenched – no one sits here,
trust me: it’s over until the start of next year,
(the benches so wet, so much rust in the groves)
and the horns always blasting, calling out: tally-ho!...

ah, english clouds, rushing in from the west,
you have ruined our last day of rest.

it’s drizzling;
in the waterlogged woods, the spider webs bend
and give way under raindrops, sealing their end.

it’s the season, it’s the season, rust feeds on the masses,
gnawing away at the miles of depression
of telegraph lines on long roads where no one passes.
and the horns, the horns, the horns – how forlorn!... forlorn!...
i cannot get rid of their sound: it echoes!...
it’s the season, it’s the season, goodbye fields of grain!...
here come the rains with the patience of saints;
farewell, harvests, and farewell full baskets,
the rococo bundles of twigs under trees.
now coughing breeds in the dormitories
(no comforting hearth by which to drink tea),
the neighborhood’s stricken with a consumptive disease,
and all the big cities’ miseries.
but linens, waterproofs, medicines, dreams,
curtains drawn back from the high balconies
which overlook rooftops, spread out like the sea;
lamps, etchings, cakes and tea –
won’t you be the only lovers for me?

(oh, and something else: do you know
– besides the neighbours’ tinkling at the pianos –
the weekly newspapers’ statistics
and their solemn evening prose?)

no, no! this is the dullest of seasons and days!
let a wind from the south, a pyrenees breeze
fray at the slippers which Time crochets!
it’s the season, oh heartbreak! it’s the season in which
every year every year
i cannot match pitch.

Jules Laforgue

Anna Leader’s commentary

I fell swiftly in love with the writing
of Jules Laforgue, which is at times
humorous, at times morose, and always
beautifully and effortlessly executed. This
particular poem spoke to me because the
moi poétique laments the onset of winter
as if the end of the world was approaching
– I also tend to take the weather too
personally because it has such an impact
on my mood. No good translation of this
poem was available online, so I decided to
try one myself. I had to cut at least half of
what is a very long poem in the original,
but I think these stanzas are representative
of the whole.

‘L’hiver qui vient’ is both splendid and
splendidly difficult: there were many words
I did not know and cultural references
I needed to research. (Where does the
Autan wind originate? What are ‘sanitary
statistics’? What is the English equivalent
of French hunting cries?) Certain references
which I thought were difficult for an English
reader – Watteau, for example, or the use
of spleen as a symbol for melancholia –
I replaced with more general descriptions
of what the words were intended to evoke.
I think the translating process expanded my
vocabulary and made me more aware of
the nuances of French poetry. (It also made
me endlessly jealous of French rhyming
possibilities.)

I decided not to focus on the placement
but rather the frequency of the rhymes:
it is their denseness, not their position,
which thickens and enriches the poem,
and there isn’t one consistent rhyme
scheme throughout the original. I rhymed
whenever possible, not always in the same
places as in the French, but I tried to keep
Laforgue’s punctuation: the wistful ellipses
and melodramatic exclamation marks are
essential in creating the tone and the mood.

Translated from the French
by Anna Leader
I chose this poem because its story had been the Haftarah portion at my Bar-Mitzvah. I was struck by how odd the tale was, of King David and the beautiful woman with whom he did not have sexual relations (1 Kings 1:3-4, Bill Clinton eat your heart out).

The main challenge of translating from German was the use of compound words, for example *Kinderarme*, which in the context of the line became like children’s arms, and *küsselosen*, which I transliterated as kissless to retain the sibilance, and because Rilke highlights in that word the sexual isolation of the king so perfectly it would be foolish to change it.

Besides the language in which it was written, the poem itself presented certain challenges, particularly Rilke’s sound-patterning. Take line 14, the consonance of *der Nacht der Nacht nicht erreicht* and the way the weak *i*-sound of *nicht* is strengthened in the harsher *erreicht*. The latter aspect I attempted to reflect through the similar change to the *i*-sound in *nearing night*, while for Rilke’s consonance I substituted alliteration (which also features in the line).

While part I gives Abishag’s perspective and part II David’s, Rilke uses repetition to suggest similarities regardless of the differences demonstrated by, for example, the change of form and metre (I have enjoyed the challenge of retaining this). Hence *Und manchmal* (And sometimes) begins verses in both parts. I have stayed true to this, but at other points I have compromised; the *Sterne* of line 9 and the *Sternbild* of line 23 became constellations and starscape respectively, so to maintain the spirit of the original I followed the astronomical resonances in ‘Abis(h)ag’, by using words like waning. Similarly, while I did not precisely follow Rilke’s metaphor in lines 27–28, I adapted the natural imagery to prioritise form.
Harry Sellen’s commentary

Kästner writes neither with elaboration, nor with an abundance of poetic imagery, yet the near-crudeness of his words conjures a sense of banality which is relatable to the reader. I first began by translating the poem word for word, using both my own knowledge of German and a dictionary. Reading the poem in German proved most useful in order to understand the meaning that lay beneath the words, and, in keeping, I translated ‘Sachliche Romanze’ with indifference to the poetic appeals of figurative embellishment; I do hope I have done justice to his words, for, although rudimentary, they bear a subtle ardency that proved to be most difficult to convey.

Sachliche Romanze

Als sie einander acht Jahre kannten
(und man darf sagen sie kannten sich gut),
kam ihre Liebe plötzlich abhanden.
Wie andern Leuten ein Stock oder Hut.

Sie waren traurig, betrug sich heiter,
versuchten Kässe, als ob nichts sei,
und sahen sich an und wussten nicht weiter.
Da weinte sie schliesslich. Und er stand dabei.

Vom Fenster aus konnte man Schiffern winken.
Er sagt, es wäre schon Viertel nach vier
und Zeit, irgendwo Kaffee zu trinken.
Nebenan übte ein Mensch Klavier.

Sie gingen ins kleinste Café am Ort
und rührten in ihren Tassen.
Am Abend sassen sie immer noch dort.
Sie sassen allein, und sie sprachen kein Wort
und konnten es einfach nicht fassen.

Erich Kästner

Translated from the
German by Harry Sellen

A down-to-earth affair

After they’d known each other for eight years
(And you could say they knew each other well),
They suddenly lost their love
As others lose a stick or a hat.

They were sad, but put on a brave face,
Triied to kiss as if nothing was wrong
And looked at each other, yet were at a loss.
In the end she cried. And he stood there.

You could wave at ships from the window.
He said it was already a quarter past four
And time to have coffee somewhere.
Next door someone was practising the piano.

They went to the smallest cafe in town
And stirred the coffee in their cups.
In the evening they were still sitting there,
Sitting there alone, and they didn’t speak
And just couldn’t take it in.

Erich Kästner

Translated from the
German by Harry Sellen
Karen Leeder’s commentary

Durs Grünbein is one of the most exciting and prolific poets writing in German today. He has published more than twenty books of poetry and won many of the major prizes at home and abroad including the prestigious Büchner prize in 1995. Michael Hofmann’s Ashes for Breakfast brought Grünbein into English for the first time in 2005 and transmits a powerful sense of a certain neurotic urban energy. But Grünbein has written a good deal since then and his tone has changed. Largely gone is his ‘aesthetic of sarcasm’, loose-limbed poems literally stripping things to the bone with his anatomically-inflected cynicism. His recent work has seen a shift to the classical world, new formal constraints, and also a more personal, a more human voice. This has not made the poems any easier to translate; if anything the opposite. One of the challenges is to catch the way different tones, the caustic and the lyrical, rub shoulders, without giving in to the temptation to smooth things out. And Grünbein fetches in all kinds of unlikely images and vocabulary like so many depth charges in the line. Set against this is a strong metrical sense and a soundscape that draws the disparate elements together.

‘Childhood in the Diorama’ is one of his more personal poems, perhaps an allegory of his time in the former East Germany, but also much more than that. For that reason I abandoned the upper-case at the beginnings of the lines. It is so much less common in contemporary English poetry and gave an unwarranted stiffness. The first line was tricky: balancing the surprise of that ‘Seltsam’ at the beginning against the chance of a more rhythmic English line. And each successive draft showed me how not a word of the German was superfluous.

Kindheit im Diorama

Seltsam, als Kind schon zog ihn Erstarrtes an.
In den Museen stand er lange vorm Diorama
Mit den Tieren im Stillstand, natürlich gruppiert
Vor gemalte Fernen, Urwaldszeneren und Himalayas.
Wie im Märchen, verzaubert, horchten die Rehe auf,
Trat man im Neonlicht näher mit stumpfenden Augen.
Am Schädel des Höhlenmenschen gleich nebenan
Sah er das Loch und vergaß den Keulenhieb
Des Rivalen, den Kampf um die Feuerstelle.
Die ägyptische Mumie hielt Jahrtausenden stand
Mit entfernten Gehirn. Erst beim Schmelzen
Des Ewigen Eises kam dieses Mammut ans Licht.
Die schönsten Schmetterlinge, handtellergroß,
Fand er auf Nadeln gespielt. Einmal schien ihm,
Als ob ihre Flügel noch bekamen, wie in Erinnerung
An die gefällten Bäume, den tropischen Wind.
Vielleicht, daß ein Luftzug durch Schaukästen ging.

Childhood in the Diorama

Strange, as a child he was always drawn to the inert.
In museums he’d stand for ages at the diorama,
its animals ranged in natural groups, stock-still
against the painted backdrops, forests, Himalayas.
Like in a fairy-tale, enchanted, the deer pricked up
its ears as he edged closer in the neon, eyes shining.
In the skull of the caveman right next door he saw
only the gaping hole, couldn’t imagine the blow
of his rival’s club, the struggle for the fire.
The Egyptian mummy had lasted thousands of years
with its brain spooled out. Only with the melting
of the perma-ice had this mammoth come to light.
The most beautiful butterflies, big as your hand,
he found skewered with pins. Once, he thought
he saw their wings still quivering – as if in memory
of the trees that had been felled, the tropical winds.
A draught, perhaps, had blown through the displays.

Translated from the German
by Karen Leeder

Reproduced by kind permission of the poet
and Suhrkamp Verlag
Venetia

S-a stins viața falniciei Venetii,
N-auzi cântări, nu vezi lumini de baluri;
Pe scări de marmură, prin vechi portaluri,
Pătrunde luna, înălțind păretii.

Okeanos se plâng pe canaluri...
El numa-n veci e-n floarea tineretii,
Miresei dulci i-ar da suflarea vieții,
Izbeste-n ziduri vechi, sunînd din valuri.

Ca-n tintirim tacere e-n cetate.
Preot rămâs din a vechimii zile,
San Marc sinistru miezul noptii bate.

Cu glas adînc, cu graiul de Sibile,
Rosteste lin în clipe cadentate:
“Nu-nvie mortii – e-n zadar, copile!”

Mihai Eminescu, 1883

Venice (after Mihai Eminescu)

Life is extinct in Venice. So pride falls.
Not a breath of song or wink of light, indoors or out. Through ancient portals, over marble stairs the moon pours ghastly whiteness down façades.

Oceanos weeps and sniffs in her canals, the eternal bridegroom, always young, who longs to breathe his kiss of life into her lungs— and parts her dead knees with his watery hands.

Across the city rings of silence spread.
Only one priest remains from the old days— Saint Mark’s—who grimly strikes the midnight bell.

With its dull voice, the language of the Sibyl, It signifies in these repeated blows: ‘The dead, my child, are dead forever. Dead…’

Venezia

Life has gone out here: haughty Venice is finished. You don’t hear singing; or see lights of ballrooms. Down marble stairs, through gateways and old doors The moon floods in, whitewashing floors and walls.

Oceanos mutters, weeping down canals...Doomed to be young forever, he still blooms; To bring back breath and life to his sweet bride He smacks the sides of palaces with his waves.

Inside the city, silence: like a graveyard. One priest left over from the past alive, San Marco grimly tolls the midnight bell.

In that deep voice, in dark speech like the Sibyl’s, It booms in quietly scanning syllables: ‘It’s hopeless, boy – the dead do not revive.’

Translated from the Romanian by Alistair Elliot

Alistair Elliot’s commentary

Recently, while writing a review of an unsatisfactory anthology of Greek poetry, I had the idea of what we might call stereoscopic translation. Rather than a single version that tries to be an accessible modern poem in our language, there should be more than one version given at a time. As with a pair of photographs we can then get an illusion of 3D – a hologram of the absent poem. One got something like this here and there in the Penguin series *Horace* [or Ovid or Homer] *in English* (now alas discontinued and allowed to go out of print). That is what I would like to offer here, if it is permitted.

At first I was thinking like an editor printing together versions by two people, but the same effect can result from multiple versions by one translator: the reader seems to be invited into the poetic space and feel the forces in play as the translator tries to follow the recipe of the original and comes up with slightly different dishes. Such a glimpse into the translator’s kitchen or workshop might give a sense of what went on in the original poet’s workshop too; it would surely at least sharpen the reader’s eye. I hope that my complementary versions of Eminescu’s sonnet show that the idea can work. I note that there is a website that puts together the many versions of the Bible, for comparison.
Wulf and Eadwacer
(from the Exeter Book)

Leodum is minum swylce him mon lac gife; willað hy hine àþecgan, gif he on þreat cynde. Ungelic is us. Wulf is on iège, ic on oþerre.

Fæst is þæt eglond, ñenne biworpen. Sindon wælreowe weras þæt on iège; willað hy hine àþecgan, gif he on þreat cynde. Ungelic is us.

Wulfes ic mines widlastum wenum dogode;
þonne hit wæs renig weder ond ic reotugu sæt, ñonne mec se beaducâfæ bogum bilegde, wæs me wyn to þon, wæs me hwæþre eac lað. Wulf, min Wulf, wena me þine seoce gedydon, þine seldcymas, murnende mod, ñales meteliste.

Gehyrest þu, Eadwacer? Uncerne earne hwelp bireð wulf to wuda. þæt mon eaþe tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad was, uncer giedd géador.

Wulf and Eadwacer
(after Wulf and Eadwacer)

if he flew at them fighting in full array
they’d make slow sport of him
We come of another kind
each on an island
Wulf of far skerries I on this fenland fastness
guarded by blood-greedy brawlers
they’d make slow sport of him
We come of another kind
Wulf I watched you leave
stalking solitary as a heron in the shallows
and away always away
Wulf you would not let me see
the salt on your face that was not sea-foam
the thatch dripped endlessly I stood there spinning
still waiting for you in weeping weather
when that fist-faced girl-taker
bore down and bedded me
a brief release then lifelong loathing
this fear these fevered fantasies

Wulf my Wulf I am thin with love-longing
starved of something that is not food
they sing love seldom seen is soon forgot
it is not so with us
We come of another kind

think on, Eadwacer, Wealth-warder!
you can’t see Wulf
as he comes stalking solitary as a heron in the shallows
hear me, Eadwacer, Wife-miser!
Wulf goes running with our whelp to the forest
you will soon hear us howling

cunning hands may quickly loosen
knots never tied
our unspun yarn together

Translated from the Anglo-Saxon
by Jane Tozer

Jane Tozer’s commentary

As a student I loved Middle English, but declined the Anglo-Saxon option. The so-called Dark Ages just didn’t speak to me. Later, when reading 84 Charing Cross Road, I laughed along with Helene Hanff’s witty friend, ‘The only essay subject you can find enough early Anglo-Saxon words for is How to Slaughter a Thousand Men in a Mead Hall.’ How wrong I was. Once found, Wulf and Eadwacer will haunt you forever, enigmatic and irresistible. My discovery took a long time. Many have translated Wulf, yet the exercise is never a cliché. After more than a thousand years, every new version has something fresh.

In 2010 I joined Paul Batchelor’s online translation course for the Poetry School. Our assignments were five great poems from Italian, German, French, Russian, Old English. I know only one of those languages. The challenge was thrilling. It freed me from the absolute, and I began dreaming with the nameless poet.

My version is simple. She pines for her canny lover, then weds a much older man. Long ago, broken-hearted, I watched my young lover turn away in tears. To lose one’s true love is eternal longing. She waits, works, twisting yarn on a drop-spindle. Maybe it’s better than loneliness or servitude. She taunts Eadwacer. Is the hwelp his child, or Wulf’s? There are just two Old English poems in the feminine voice. Anglo-Saxon women were freer than we think, but were still subordinate. How many composed and recited poems? Would a man create a love-lament for a mead feast? There are many theories about poet and story. A riddle; a mother laments her lost son; a caged she-wolf howls for her pack…

I’ve imagined landscape, added detail, improvised kennings, pumped up anguish and rage. Perhaps this allows the lovers a chance of escape. So I hope.
**L’ Inferno Canto III: 1-60**

«PER ME SI VA NE LA CITTA DOLENTE,
PER ME SI VA NE L’ETTERNO DOLORE,
PER ME SI VA NE LA PERDUTA GENTE.

GIUSTIZIA MOSSE IL MIO ALTO FATTORE:
FECEMI LA DIVINA PODESTATE,
LA SOMMA SAPIENZA E ’L PRIMO AMORE.

DINANZI A ME NON FUOR COSE CREATE
SE NON ETTERNE, E IO ETTERNO DURO.
LASCIAIT Eogne SPERANZA, VOI CH’INTRATE».

Queste parole di colore oscuro
vid’io scritte al sommo d’una porta;
per ch’io: «Maestro, il senso lor m’è duro».

Ed elli a me, come persona accorta:
«Qui si convien lasciare ogne sospetto;
ogni viltà convien che qui sia morta.

Noi siam venuti al loco ov’i’ t’ho detto
che tu vedrai le genti dolorose
ch’hanno perduto il ben de l’intelletto».

E poi che la sua mano a la mia puose
con lieto volto, ond’io mi confortai,
mi mise dentro a le segrete cose.

Quivi sospiri, pianti e alti guai
risonavan per l’aere sanza stelle,
per ch’io a cominciar ne lagrimai.

Diverse lingue, orribili favelle,
parole di dolore, accenti d’ira,
voci alte e fioche, e suon di man con elle
facevano un tumulto, il qual s’aggira
sempre in quell’aura sanza tempo tinta,
come la rena quando turbo spira.

E io ch’avea d’error la testa cinta,
dissi: «Maestro, che è quel ch’i’ odo?
e che gent’è che par nel duol si vinta?».

Ed elli a me: «Questo misero modo
tegnon l’anime triste di coloro
che visser sanza ’nfamia e sanza lodo.

Mischiate sono a quel cattivo coro
de li angeli che non furon ribelli
né fur fedeli a Dio, ma per sé fuoro.

Caccianli i ciel per non esser men belli,
né lo profondo inferno li riceve,
ch’alcuna gloria i rei avrebbero d’elli».

**Hell’s ante-room**

*Inferno, canto III, 1–60*

**THIS WAY TO THE METROPOLIS OF GRIEVING.**

**THIS WAY TO SORROW THAT ENDURES FOR EVER.**

**THIS WAY AMONG A PEOPLE LOST AND RAVING.**

**HIGH JUSTICE WAS THE MOTIVE OF MY MOVER:**

**THE POWER DIVINE, THE SUM OF WISDOM MADE ME,**

**THE LOVE THAT WAS AT FIRST AND SHALL NOT WAVE.**

**NO THINGS BUT THE ETERNAL BEINGS PRECEDE ME.**

**I STAND THROUGH ALL OF TIME AND WHAT SHALL FOLLOW.**

**EXTINGUISH EVERY HOPE, AND PASS INSIDE ME.**

This text, its colour dark, its outline hollow,
I read across the lintel of a doorway,
saying ‘Maestro, this is hard to swallow.’

He said, as one accustomed to the sure way,
‘Here it were much the best for you to set aside
all doubts, all chickenheartedness – for your way
as I have said, must be upon the bitter side
of this last barrier, to see how broken
are those who lose the good sense of their better side.’

So with his hand upon my arm, a token
which gave me much encouragement, he cheerfully
led me in there to secrets yet unspoken.

Such sighs, such moaning, and such wailing, tearfully
reverberated in that starless vaulting,
I felt my throat begin to tighten fearfully.

Hollers of anger, or remorseful bleating,
babels of tongues and hoarse yells of bravado,
unlovely oaths, the sound of hands too, smiting,
pumped with the rhythm of a bastinado
in the stained atmosphere time had forsaken,
like sand thrashed in the eye of a tornado.

I cried out, feeling that my head would break in,
‘What am I hearing, and what is this nation
that grief has so entirely overtaken?’

He said ‘This is the bawling congregation
whose lives, devoid of virtues as of vices,
merited neither blame nor commendation;
joined with an angel choir who in the Crisis
battled not for their God nor for the Other Team,
but for themselves and for their own devices.
The beauty of the heavens will not harbour them,
fearing disfigurement; and the pit also,
in case the damned should feel some glory over them.’
John RG Turner’s commentary

Why is translating *Inferno* like playing the piano accordion? Because a real gent is someone who *can* do it, but *doesn’t*. This translation arose, despite the plethora of others, from many years of wanting to have a go at the inscription on Hell Gate, and a personal crisis; eventually coming to fruition when I spotted the happy accident that although Dante’s treatment of the Vestibule of Hell took 69 lines, there was an arresting image at the sixtieth ‘Spender line’.

Trying to avoid the ‘not another free/blank/terza rima version’ situation, I plumped for feminine (sometimes trisyllabic) endings. These are a completely different animal in English, being associated with either comic or lyrical verse. But, partly by irony, they can develop a nasty bite. I wanted to get close to Dante’s plainness and hardness.

The chief gains over a blank/free verse medium are the extra oomph of rhymes, and the extra impetus for the translator to think imaginatively about what to say, given that the prosody blocks the easy solutions. The necessary periphrases are an opportunity to gloss words with multiplex meanings.

The question of opportunism versus real ethical behaviour feels very modern. It was tempting to fill up the ante-room with merchant bankers, but Dante insists on total anonymity. Except for his hint about the *rifiuto* of Celestine V, whose abdication led to the succession of Boniface VIII, and the transfer of the Papacy to Avignon. Likewise the signing of the *Reichskonkordat* between the German Reich and the Holy See (by Cardinal Pacelli, later Pope Pius XII), which allowed Hitler’s final rise to power. Some readers may find the updating disturbing or offensive. The translation does permit some doubt. Are we really responsible for unintended consequences?

Thanks to Richard Andrews for education on the consequences of the Papal abdication of 1294.
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.

Translators in Schools

Funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and hosted by the Freeword Centre and European Commission, this professional development programme aims to widen the pool of translators with the skills to work in schools. The initial one-day workshop in November 2013 offers a broad introduction and covers translation activities, lesson planning and classroom management. Those who have taken part in the November training day will then be eligible to apply for a longer term training programme involving a workshop with schoolchildren and ongoing mentoring to support participants in developing their own sessions and links with schools. Translators in Schools is curated by Sarah Ardizzone and Sam Holmes.

The Joseph Brodsky/Stephen Spender Prize

This worldwide Russian–English translation prize, celebrating the rich tradition of Russian poetry and commemorating the long friendship between Joseph Brodsky and Stephen Spender, was launched in 2011. Entrants, who may be of any nationality, are required to translate a Russian poem of their choice into English. In June 2013, at Pushkin House, winners Boris Dralyuk and Irina Mashinski talked to Sasha Dugdale about translating Arseny Tarkovsky and Alexandra Berlina discussed translating Joseph Brodsky with Glyn Maxwell. Judged by Sasha Dugdale, Catriona Kelly and Glyn Maxwell, the prize will next run in autumn 2014, subject to 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.

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 Feigel, they were published by Faber in July 2012.

The Stephen Spender archive

A long lifetime’s worth of manuscripts, letters, diaries and other personal papers is now housed in the Bodleian Library and is available to scholars.

Events

Symposium, 2001

The Institute for English Studies hosted a one-day symposium on ‘Stephen Spender and his Circle in the 1930s’.

Queen Elizabeth Hall reading, 2004

Seamus Heaney, Tony Harrison, Harold Pinter, Jill Balcon and Vanessa Redgrave came together to celebrate the publication of Spender’s New Collected Poems.

Auden centenary, 2007

In February 2007 we joined forces with the British Library to mark W. H. Auden’s centenary with a reading of his poetry at the Shaw Theatre by James Fenton, John Fuller, Grey Gowrie, Andrew Motion, Sean O’Brien, Peter Porter and Richard Howard. The programme was devised by Grey Gowrie.

Spender centenary, 2009

The first of the centenary celebrations was a reading in February 2009 in the Royal Institution 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 Valentine Cunningham, Barbara Hardy, Alan Jenkins, Peter McDonald, Mark Rawlinson, Stephen Romer, Michael Scammell and John Sutherland. A second reading, by Fleur Adcock, Grey Gowrie and Craig Raine, took place in October 2009 at University College, Oxford, where Stephen Spender was an undergraduate.

Seminar series

At the October 2011 seminar Lara Feigel, Alan Jenkins, Christopher Reid and John Sutherland explored the relationship between Stephen Spender’s life and work and poetry and prose. In January 2012 Jason Harding, Maren Roth, James Smith, Matthew Spender and Frances Stonor Saunders discussed with some passion Encounter, the CIA, the IRD and the relationship of British intellectuals with the Establishment. This was followed in October by ‘Bernard Spencer: Mystery Poet’ at which Jonathan Barker, Valentine Cunningham and Peter Robinson considered the writer’s life, his work and his contemporaries. In March 2013 Lara Feigel, Elaine Morley and Matthew Spender focused on European Witness, the result of Stephen Spender’s six-month visit to Germany in 1945 to help with the reconstruction of universities and libraries, and in May Sarah Bakewell, Michael Holroyd, Wendy Moffat and Max Saunders discussed the death of literary biography and the growth of ‘life writing’. Presented by the Stephen Spender Trust in partnership with the Institute of English Studies, these seminars are free and open to the public. Details and podcasts can be found on both organisations’ websites.
Contacting the Trust
For more information about the Stephen Spender Trust and its activities, please contact 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, Lois Sieff OBE,
Wole Soyinka

PRESIDENT
Sir Michael Holroyd CBE*

COMMITTEE
Jonathan Barker MBE, Lord Briggs,
Desmond Clarke*, Sasha Dugdale,
Joanna Clarke, Professor Warwick Gould,
Tony Harrison, Harriet Harvey Wood OBE*,
Jonathan Heawood, Barry Humphries,
Christopher MacLehose CBE,
Caroline Moorehead CBE,
Robina Pelham Burn, Prudence Skene CBE³
Lizzie Spender, Matthew Spender,
Philip Spender*, Saskia Spender,
Sir Tom Stoppard OM CBE, Tim Supple,
Professor John Sutherland, Ed Victor

*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