

THE  TIMES

# Stephen Spender Prize 2009

And they gathered the bones and  
καὶ τὰ γε χουσεῖην ἐς λαονα  
Having enveloped them with soft  
πορφυρέοις πέπλοισι καλύψ

Rosy tender hands, rich fine

紅酥手，黃藤酒，

The whole city blossomed with

滿城春色宮牆柳。

black as slag and water

schwarz wie Schlacke. Wo das Wasser to

stares up, deathlike, at warch

Speichern stiert, die morsch und im Ver

for poetry in translation



# THE TIMES Stephen Spender Prize 2009

for poetry in translation

## Winner of the 14-and-under prize



**Johanna Reimann-Dubbers**  
'The Cricket  
and the Ant'  
by La Fontaine  
(French)

## Winners of the 18-and-under category



**FIRST**  
**Naomi Ackerman**  
from *The Iliad*, Book 24,  
by Homer  
(Ancient Greek)



**SECOND**  
**Clara Yick Kay Fung**  
'Phoenix Hairpin'  
by Lu You  
(Classical Chinese)



**THIRD**  
**Jennifer Cearns**  
'Dead in the Water'  
by Georg Heym  
(German)

## Winners of the Open category



**FIRST**  
**Paul Batchelor**  
'The Damned'  
from *Inferno*, Canto V,  
by Dante Alighieri  
(Italian)



**SECOND**  
**Michael Swan**  
'God, My Good  
Neighbour'  
by Rainer Maria Rilke  
(German)



**THIRD**  
**Jane Tozer**  
'Leper' from *Tristan*  
by Bérout  
(Medieval French)

## Commended

**Maddy Cummins**  
'Atalanta'  
by Ovid  
(Latin)

**Charlie Dowding**  
'The Miracles of Our Lady'  
by Gonzalo de Berceo  
(Spanish)

**Marwin Kalo**  
'The Aral Sea'  
by Raim Farkhadi  
(Russian)

**Robert Longman**  
'If My Voice Dies on Land'  
by Rafael Alberti  
(Spanish)

**William Yates**  
'The Horse and the Wolf'  
by La Fontaine  
(French)

## Commended

**Claire Ewbank**  
'The Rats'  
by Georg Trakl  
(German)

**Nadan Hadzic**  
'Sarajevo's Prayer'  
by Abdulah Sidran  
(Bosnian)

**Christina Macsween**  
from *Metamorphoses* XII  
by Ovid  
(Latin)

**Caitlin Spencer**  
*Amores* 1.12  
by Ovid  
(Latin)

**Saskia Volhard Dearman**  
'Ode to Coastal Flowers'  
by Pablo Neruda  
(Spanish)

## Commended

**A. C. Clarke**  
'The Double Room'  
by Charles Baudelaire  
(French)

**Timothy Taylor**  
'Corpse Washing'  
by Rainer Maria Rilke  
(German)

**John Turner**  
'Sonnet for Autumn'  
by Sully Prudhomme  
(French)

**Stefanie Van de Peer**  
'Psalm'  
by Herman de Coninck  
(Flemish)

**Mary Weatherburn**  
'A Small Garden'  
by Rin Ishigaki  
(Japanese)

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## Introduction

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Once again, over 40 languages were represented, the new boys on the block this year being Akkadian and Nepali. There are no prizes for guessing that French, Spanish and German (in that order) dominated but we were pleasantly surprised by the number of entries from Portuguese this year and by the unprecedented volume of entries in the 14-and-under category. If the judges' enthusiasm faltered after the eleventh version of the same La Fontaine fable, they gave no sign of it – and it was very interesting to see how different those versions could be. All the winning entries from this and past years, as well as the commended entries from 2008 and 2009, can be read on the Trust's website at [www.stephen-spender.org](http://www.stephen-spender.org)

My thanks to judges Susan Bassnett, Edith Hall, Karen Leeder and George Szirtes, who considered every entry before debating the shortlist with an abundance of wisdom

and good humour; to Erica Wagner, Literary Editor of *The Times*, for not only publicising the prize in the Books section but also continuing to give work experience to some of the eighteen-year-old winners (a more enduring reward, I suspect, than the cash prizes they are given); and to Mrs Drue Heinz, whose Hawthornden Castle has for the fourth time hosted a gathering of Spender Prize-winning translators – it is fitting that Jane Tozer's rollicking translation of *Tristan*, an extract from which won third prize in the Open category, began life there.

The final vote of thanks goes, as always, to our sponsors. The Eranda Foundation has been a generous supporter of the Trust and its work and we are indebted to it.

*Robina Pelham Burn*

*Director of the Stephen Spender Memorial Trust*

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## Judges' comments

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Judging this prize is a great challenge and also a great pleasure. There was a wide range of poems submitted this year, in ancient and modern languages, some very well known, others translated for the first time. As judges, we have the difficult task of narrowing down the entries to a short list; this year we all agreed before we came together on the winning entry for the 14-and-under category, a charming rendering of a well known poem by La Fontaine, and on the winner of the Open category, a fresh, new version of Francesca's address to Dante when he meets her on his journey through Hell.

But although we reached consensus on those poems and on our final list, we had some lively discussion about many of the other entries, and, as is to be expected, sometimes we had to agree to disagree. One poem I particularly liked was a translation by Marwin Kalo of one of his grandfather's poems about the Aral Sea, which we all agreed merited a commendation. I also admired Richard Harris' translation of St John of the Cross's 'Verses Written in Ecstasy from Deep Contemplation',

in which the translator has managed to find superb solutions to a deceptively simple poem full of complex layers of meaning and formal devices.

The commentaries are an important aspect of this prize, shedding light on the strategies employed by the translator and often reflecting the reasons for choosing a particular poet or poem. This year a lot of entrants stressed how much they had enjoyed the process and also how much they felt they had learned, which is, after all, what the prize was established to achieve. Interestingly, there were some very thoughtful commentaries about rather weak poems, though it was wonderful to note how many times translators said they felt 'passionate' about the poem they had chosen.

As in previous years, there were some splendid translations of classical poetry, which again reflects the high quality of teaching in this field. Sadly, and no doubt a reflection of the decline of modern language learning in schools, a low level of linguistic competence was apparent in some poems. I would not want to impose on today's pupils the rote learning of irregular verbs that my generation was forced to undergo, but without some knowledge of grammar

and syntax it becomes impossible to understand a poem, let alone translate it. Many of the young translators openly admitted in their commentaries that they were at sea with the poems they had chosen, even though they enjoyed the struggle.

In contrast to previous years, a great many entries used rhymed verse forms. Sometimes it was used brilliantly, but sometimes it descended into doggerel. Rhyme in English is very tricky, because it can seem deceptively easy but actually requires great skill and a lot of practice. The extent of the use of rhyme raised the question of how much contemporary poetry some of the translators are reading. The best advice I was ever given about writing and translating was to read, and read and read, advice that I pass on to my students. The more one reads, the more one opens doors to possibilities for one's own writing.

I learned a great deal from reading these poems, and have noted several poets whose work I now intend to seek out. Reading the entries has also raised some interesting questions: why do some great poets fail to come across in another language, why have certain writers such as Baudelaire become

unfashionable to a degree that they are almost untranslatable, why does surrealist poetry read so awkwardly in much English translation, what intrinsic qualities in a poem enable a translator to bring it back to life hundreds, if not thousands, of years after it was composed? Perhaps the simple answer to such questions is that what makes a poem translatable ultimately is the skill of the translator, its re-creator, the person, young or old, who can excite, move or entertain a new world of readers. This prize demonstrates annually how many people are capable of doing just that.

*Susan Bassnett*



As a first-timer on the judges' panel I was delighted to be taken on a roller-coaster through poetry from Japan to Mexico, Chile to the Caspian Sea, and metres from the classical elegiac to the most avant-garde free verse forms. In the fascinating commentaries, I learned about Chinese rhyme conventions, Polish portmanteau words, and Arabic sibilance. I was reminded of the intense melancholy of Rilke and the pungency of Jacques Prévert. I discovered, with astonishment, that Leo Tolstoy was beaten by Sully Prudhomme to the Nobel Prize for Literature.

A huge fan of the Aesopic tradition of animal fables, I loved several of the versions of La Fontaine found in the youngest age group, although the prize-winning 'The Cricket and the Ant' stood out for its excellent rhyming and intuitive sense of the sardonic and taut French original. In the adult category, I was in no doubt that my favourite translation, on every criterion, was 'The Damned' from Dante's *Inferno*, Canto 5; what most impressed me was the interplay between the brilliantly chosen restraint of the six-line stanza and the accelerating emotional and physical contact between the couple suffering punishment for adultery. The week after the judges met, I visited Dante's tomb in Ravenna, and found

that the opening stanza of the prize-winning translation had stuck in my memory.

Despite the prize going this year to a translator of one of the world's acknowledged greats, I would still encourage entrants to consider less well known works, and to use the required commentary in order to explain their significance to the judges. There were almost too many versions of works by some poets, especially in French (all that Baudelaire!), and it would be wonderful to see more attempts to translate from, for example, African-language poets or modern Greek: there was not a Cavafy in sight.

When it came to translations from Latin and Greek in the adult category, I was just a little disappointed. The suave, upwardly mobile Horace was an unlikely choice for someone wanting to write in the idiom of Eminem. The lyrics of Sappho and the theatre verse of Aeschylus are two of the most difficult types of poetry in literary history; a rather different challenge is posed by the often indigestible hexameters of Hesiod's *Works and Days* and the mysterious archaic *Battle of the Frogs and Mice*. The less recherché authors Homer and Ovid, on the other hand, produced some fine work in the 15–18 age group. Teenagers hear the playfulness of Ovid loud and clear, although are less sensitive to his sorrowful undercurrents and the lapidary concision of his *Amores*. It was sensitivity to both tone and metre that won the day for the translation of the closing lines of *The Iliad*. Here the sombre content – the funeral of Hector – was beautifully conveyed in the ineluctable roll of the dactylic hexameters, one of the most difficult metres for young translators. The decision to separate the lines into groups successfully conveyed the sequential stages of the funeral. The selection of this passage could scarcely have been more ambitious, and yet the power and pathos of the original rings through the translation authentically.

*Edith Hall*



This year, remarkably, there was a large degree of immediate unanimity among the judges. In the 14-and-under category we were delighted to see a larger entry than ever before and arrived quickly at our winner: Johanna Reimann-Dubbers' translation from French of 'The Cricket and the Ant' by La Fontaine. It is tricky to catch the playful tone of these fables, and in keeping the lines taut and the rhyme scheme buoyant, without being over obtrusive, Johanna arrived at some wonderfully poised solutions. Her concluding couplet, 'I sang whenever I had the chance.' / 'You sang did you? That's nice. Now dance.' was one of my favorites in the competition as a whole. I was particularly struck by Robert Longman's beautifully simple rendering from Spanish of 'If My Voice Dies on Land', and his modest commentary gave a good insight into the real work, as well as the enjoyment, involved in the process of translation.

In the 18-and-under category the judges wrestled with a more diverse long list of contenders from classical and modern languages. 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 Naomi Ackerman's translation from Ancient Greek of an extract from *The Iliad*, we found a worthy winner; but I was very taken by the discipline of Yick Kay Fung's translation from Classical Chinese of 'Phoenix Hairpin' by Lu You and Jennifer Cearn's rich translation of the German Expressionist classic 'Dead in the Water' by Georg Heym. Among the commended entries let me single out Saskia Volhard Dearman's translation from Spanish of 'Ode to Coastal Flowers' by Pablo Neruda. Neruda is such a difficult poet to translate; the mixture of rhetorical pathos and simplicity sits uneasily in English but this version is a spirited attempt and has some beautiful lines. The lightning as 'a citric spark' will stay with me for a long time.

In the Open category all the judges were immediately impressed by Paul Batchelor's translation from Italian of Dante's 'The Damned'. Last year in my report I wrote about the importance of finding some way to account for the metre and rhyme scheme of the original in a translation. However, English simply does not rhyme with the same facility and unobtrusiveness as many other languages, so it is not often that a translation can work with a one-to-one correspondence in this regard. Half rhymes are often a good solution (a glance at good contemporary poetry in English is instructive here) and blank verse is a possible option, though the muscularity and musicality of good blank verse is much harder to achieve than many entrants seemed to think. Paul Batchelor's was a persuasive solution to this problem. In exchanging Dante's terza rima for a form borrowed from George Herbert's 'Easter Wings' and often used in English by Derek Mahon he showed sympathy with the original and a good sense of what English can do well. I was also pleased to see two Rilke translations make it through to the final deliberations. Rilke is another poet who can too easily sound overblown or shrill in English on account of his intricate rhymes; and Michael Swan and Timothy Taylor demonstrated very well the different routes one can take. Once again I was delighted to discover new poets: the Belgian poet Herman de Coninck in Stefanie Van de Peer's subtle translation from Flemish and the young Portuguese poet Daniel Jonas in Ana Hudson's translations, though in the final whittling down I was unable to persuade my fellow judges. A voice to watch, however. There were also versions of old favorites including A. C. Clarke's brilliantly audacious rendering of 'The Double Room' by Baudelaire into Scots (which missed out on a prize by a whisker) and John Turner's moody version of Prudhomme's 'Sonnet for Autumn', which demonstrated the richness and economy that can make English truly sing: 'What the sap has willed, the sap achieves'.

*Karen Leeder*



Never will a writer be read more closely than by his or her translator. The best translators seem to *have* an extra ear – indeed have to have an extra ear – for the literary dimensions and possibilities of their own language. 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.

There will always remain the question of the faithful translation. The difficulty is deciding what it is one should be faithful to. A poem is a complex whole made up of many elements, not one of which has an exact equivalent in another language. Yet we hope for recognition, for some ideal combination of surface and depth fidelities. The ideal doesn't exist. But living translations do: echo on echo on echo.

As a first-time judge of this competition I was immediately struck by the sheer sophistication and skill of some of the youngest entries though there were many variations on a theme among them. Grasshoppers hopped and ants crawled everywhere in regulation La Fontainean fashion. Some of the translations had real wit and sharpness, the winner of the class, Johanna Reimann-Dubbers, above all. And there was much beside La Fontaine from Latin and Spanish and Russian. The best had an ambitious period-feel verging on pastiche and almost carried it off, form and all.

The middle-category of 14–18 was a little disappointing as the judges' discussion showed. Promise everywhere but rather less fulfilment, rather less sheer *élan*. Rather less bite. One could be charmed, however, by versions of Ovid (who, like La Fontaine gets in everywhere) and I personally was taken by versions of Neruda (by Saskia Volhard Dearman), George Heym (by Jennifer Cearns) and the classical Chinese poet, Lu Yu, whose 'Phoenix Hairpin' was translated gracefully but

not over-pretily by Clara Yick Kay Fung. The winner thundered up on the inside, a splendidly ambitious Homer from *The Iliad*, the very end of the book, by Naomi Ackermann.

The greatest range was, as might be expected, in the Open category where the shortlist tended to be dominated by French and German poets, though the winner turned out to be Paul Batchelor's marvellous new take – not terza rima – on Dante, via George Herbert's 'Easter Wings'. Novelty isn't the point. New life is: the way a text swings into the ear with all the sense of discovery. This worked. Some good, welcome Dutch too, and a robust, brilliantly larky Bérroul. Rilke, as ever, fascinates and shines through. As did, for me, another original take, this time on Baudelaire's prose poem, 'The Double Room', slapped and tickled into broad Scots Burns measure by A. C. Clarke, an act of such verve and imagination that it delighted and moved me. Not orthodox translation, of course, and maybe a little far out at the edge of the field, but I'd walk there any time.

*George Szirtes*

### La Cigale et la Fourmi

---

La Cigale, ayant chanté  
Tout l'été,  
Se trouva fort dépourvue  
Quand la bise fut venue:  
Pas un seul petit morceau  
De mouche ou de vermisseau.  
Elle alla crier famine  
Chez la Fourmi sa voisine,  
La priant de lui prêter  
Quelque grain pour subsister  
Jusqu'à la saison nouvelle.  
'Je vous paierai,' lui dit-elle,  
'Avant l'Août, foi d'animal,  
Intérêt et principal.'  
La Fourmi n'est pas prêteuse:  
C'est là son moindre défaut.  
'Que faisiez-vous au temps chaud?'  
Dit-elle à cette emprunteuse.  
'- Nuit et jour à tout venant  
Je chantais, ne vous déplaîse.'  
'- Vous chantiez? J'en suis fort aise.  
Eh bien ! Dansez maintenant.'

*Jean de la Fontaine*

### The Cricket and the Ant

---

The cricket having sung her song  
all summer long  
found her provisions too few  
when the icy winds blew.  
Nowhere could she spy  
a single morsel of worm or fly.  
  
Her neighbour, the ant, might,  
she thought, help her in her plight,  
and so she begged her for a little grain,  
promised to repay her when summer came again.  
  
'By next summer I'll repay you both  
interest and loan; animal's oath.'  
  
Now the ant may have a fault or two  
But lending is not something she will do.  
She asked what the cricket did all summer.  
  
'By day and night, to any comer  
I sang whenever I had the chance.'  
'You sang, did you? That's nice. Now dance.'

*Translated from the French  
by Johanna Reimann-Dubbers*

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### Johanna Reimann-Dubbers' commentary

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This poem caught my eye when I first read it because it was an interesting and flowing poem. I was also very excited at the concept of translating it into English, as I love studying poems in depth. Although some of the words were hard to translate so that they would fit in with the poem, it was nice to set a challenge for myself. I enjoyed reading and thinking about this poem; it

really did make me think and consider some things in life. It showed me that there is little more important in this world than sharing with others and helping those who are less fortunate than us.

The most difficult part of the translation was, I think, the ends of the lines that rhymed. As I translated from French into English, it became clear that

I would not only have to find words that fitted the storyline of the poem, but also words that rhymed in the correct places.

The dialogue was also quite challenging in some parts, but once I had the basics of it sorted out, it flowed quite nicely.

In conclusion, I really did love reading and translating this poem and it taught me a lot.

**The Funeral of Hector, Horse-tamer,  
from The Iliad XXIV (lines 782–804)**

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ὡς ἔφαθ', οἱ δ' ὑπ' ἀμάξῃσιν βόας ἡμίονους τε  
ζεύγνυσαν, αἶψα δ' ἔπειτα πρὸ ἄστεος ἠγερέθοντο.  
ἐννήμαρ μὲν τοί γε ἀγίνεον ἄσπετον ὕλην:  
ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ δεκάτη ἐφάνη φασείμβροτος ἠώς,  
καὶ τότε ἄρ' ἐξέφερον θρασὺν Ἴκτορα δάκρυ χέοντες,  
ἐν δὲ πυρῇ ὑπάτη νεκρὸν θέσαν, ἐν δ' ἔβαλον πῦρ.  
ἦμος δ' ἠριγένεια φάνη ῥοδοδάκτυλος Ἥως,  
τῆμος ἄρ' ἀμφὶ πυρὴν κλυτοῦ Ἴκτορος ἔγχετο λαός.  
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ ῥ' ἠγερθεν ὀμηγερέες τ' ἐγένοντο  
πρῶτον μὲν κατὰ πυρκαϊῆν σβέσαν αἶθοπι οἴνῳ  
πάσαν, ὅπόσσον ἐπέσχε πυρὸς μένος: αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα  
ὄστέα λευκὰ λέγοντο κασίγνητοὶ θ' ἔταροί τε  
μυρόμενοι, θαλερὸν δὲ κατεΐβετο δάκρυ παρειῶν.  
καὶ τά γε χρυσεῖην ἐς λάρνακα θῆκαν ἐλόντες  
πορφυρέεις πέπλοισι καλύψαντες μαλακοῖσιν.  
αἶψα δ' ἄρ' ἐς κοίλην κάπετον θέσαν, αὐτὰρ ὑπερθε  
πυκνοῖσιν λάεσσι κατεστόρεσαν μεγάλοισι:  
ῥίμφα δὲ σῆμ' ἔχεαν, περὶ δὲ σκοποὶ ἦατο πάντη,  
μὴ πρὶν ἐφορμηθεῖεν εὐκνήμιδες Ἀχαιοί.  
χεύαντες δὲ τὸ σῆμα πάλιν κίον: αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα  
εὖ συναγειρόμενοι δαίνυντ' ἐρικυδέα δαῖτα  
δώμασιν ἐν Πριάμοιο διοτρεφέος βασιλῆος.  
ὡς οἱ γ' ἀμφίεπον τάφον Ἴκτορος ἵπποδάμοιο.

*Homer*

**The Funeral of Hector, Horse-tamer, from *The Iliad*  
XXIV (lines 782–804)**

---

And so he spoke, and they yoked oxen and mules to their wagons,  
And then they gathered with speed before the city.  
For nine days indeed they brought a store of wood beyond measure.

But then the tenth light of day appeared, shining on mortals,  
And shedding tears they carried out courageous Hector  
And they placed his corpse on the very top of the funeral pyre, and threw fire  
upon it.

When early-born light of day appeared with rosy fingers,  
Then the people gathered around the pyre of renowned Hector.  
And when they gathered together and had assembled  
First, with gleaming wine they quenched all the funeral-pyre,  
As much as the force of the fire had taken hold of.

And then his blood relatives and companions picked up the brilliant-white bones,  
Melting into tears, and copious tears trickled down from their cheeks.  
And they gathered the bones and placed them in a golden urn  
Having enveloped them with soft purple woven cloths.

And with speed they placed it in a hollow grave,  
And they covered it above with great, close-packed stones.  
And swiftly they raised a grave-mound over it; and look outs were set all around,  
Lest the well-greaved Achaeans should make an early attack.

And having raised the grave-mound they went back again;  
Then having gathered together according to custom, they held a banquet  
And gave a glorious feast in the house of Priam, god-cherished king.

In this way they took care of the burial of Hector, horse-tamer.

*Translated from the Ancient Greek  
by Naomi Ackerman*

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**Naomi Ackerman's commentary**

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When deciding what to translate, I searched for a poignant extract which would transcend the barriers of time, and touch both the classicist and the modern reader. I feel the last part of *The Iliad* does exactly this. A communal focus on the funeral of one person, rather than on feats of strength or heroism, takes the poem to a universal level as readers throughout time can empathise with the ongoing pain of loss and grief.

I wished to convey this sense of accessibility and continuity in my translation. I translated 'ἀμάξιον' as 'wagons', which conjures a sense of common domesticity, rather than 'chariots' which conjures an image of

distant war. Past participles in English also have this effect of portraying an ongoing process; therefore I translated most Greek aorist participles in the extract as such. Translation of 'ἐὐκνήμιδες' was problematic, as 'well-greaved' is fairly inaccessible; yet I felt this was needed in order to translate accurately Homer's meaning.

Striking a balance between elegant, accessible English and keeping Homer's unique style and spirit was also important. Although 'αἶθροσι' literally translates as 'fire coloured', 'gleaming' sounded more appropriate in English, whilst still conveying Homer's image of wine reflecting the firelight. Secondly, although

the translation leans towards a modern style of English, I felt the archaism 'lest' was the most appropriate translation of 'μή ποῖν'. Overall I preserved Homer's line structure, yet I felt my short stanzas were effective when reading the translation, as they emphasise both the sequential stages of Hector's burial, and those one experiences following bereavement.

Overall, this extract brings a poem of war and anger to a tragic end. We may take it today as reflective; it is possibly Homer's comment on how, inevitably, the main consequence of war is death. Kudos may be won from it for the few, but for the families and communities of those who die, war ends in grief.

釵頭鳳

紅酥手，黃藤酒，  
滿城春色宮牆柳。  
東風惡，歡情薄，  
一懷愁緒，幾年離  
索。  
錯、錯、錯！  
春如舊，人空瘦，  
淚痕紅邑鮫綃透。  
桃花落，閒池閣。  
山盟雖在，錦書難  
托。  
莫、莫、莫！

陸遊 (Lu You)

Phoenix Hairpin

Rosy tender hands, rich fine wine,  
The whole city blossomed with signs of spring.  
By the palace wall the willow swayed  
To and fro, to and fro.

But the malicious East Wind tore  
At the mother's heart and made her  
Cruel; she dismissed her son's much loved wife  
and  
Brought little joy.

Years went by after the separation  
And melancholy still gripped his heart –  
Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!

Yet spring comes again, scenery  
Unmoved by the sudden encounter.  
Peach blossoms still slide and fall from trees,  
The pavilion floats idly on the lake.

But hollow and frail  
Has the lady become.  
Her silks suck at her red-stained tears,  
And blood streaks her cheeks.

The vow of love is still there,  
But exchanges of love cannot be passed on –  
No! No! No!

*Translated from the classical Chinese  
by Clara Yick Kay Fung*

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Clara Yick Kay Fung's commentary

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In classical Chinese poems it is considered a formidable skill to fit as much meaning as possible into minimal words and in 'Phoenix Hairpin' nearly all the verbs are missed out. Hence it was a challenge to choose suitable words in the translation that not only were close to the original meaning but also conveyed the sense of melancholy prominent in the original poem.

This poem portrays a major issue in traditional Chinese culture with which non-Chinese people might not be familiar. It talks of filial piety, a virtue dominant in Chinese society about 850 years ago.

The poem is a true story. It is said that right after the poet's encounter with his ex-wife at the lake, brimming with stark emotions he impulsively carved the very characters of the poem onto the wall where they had unexpectedly met. Lu You's marriage to his cousin was an arranged one and contrary to expectation they had a loving relationship which was much resented by Lu's mother. She was bitter about how close the couple were and thought that the relationship would only hinder Lu's career. So she ordered his wife to be sent back to her own home and Lu, after making an extremely difficult decision, chose to obey his mother because for him it was a

choice between love and filial piety, which at the time was of the utmost importance. Lu chose to obey his mother out of respect for her, showing the power Chinese parents had over their children.

Another reason why I chose this poem is the depth of emotions expressed in it. The poem is extremely sad and full of pained love and frustration, fully expressed at the end with the repetition 'No! No! No!' when Lu says he cannot even send his lover words of love, even though they still love each other, as they both have families and sending her letters would only create a scandal and ruin her reputation.

### Die Tote im Wasser

---

Die Masten ragen an dem grauen Wall  
Wie ein verbrannter Wald ins frühe Rot,  
So schwarz wie Schlacke. Wo das Wasser tot  
Zu Speichern stiert, die morsch und im Verfall.

Dumpf tönt der Schall, da wiederkehrt die Flut,  
Den Kai entlang. Der Stadtnacht Spülicht treibt  
Wie eine weiße Haut im Strom und reibt  
Sich an dem Dampfer, der im Docke ruht.

Staub, Obst, Papier, in einer dicken Schicht,  
So treibt der Kot aus seinen Röhren ganz.  
Ein weißes Tanzkleid kommt, in fettem Glanz  
Ein nackter Hals und bleiweiß ein Gesicht.

Die Leiche wälzt sich ganz heraus. Es bläht  
Das Kleid sich wie ein weißes Schiff im Wind.  
Die toten Augen starren groß und blind  
Zum Himmel, der voll rosa Wolken steht.

Das lila Wasser bebt von kleiner Welle.  
– Der Wasserratten Fährte, die bemannen  
Das weiße Schiff. Nun treibt es stolz von  
dann, Voll grauer Köpfe und voll schwarzer Felle.

Die Tote segelt froh hinaus, gerissen  
Von Wind und Flut. Ihr dicker Bauch entragt  
Dem Wasser groß, zerhöhlt und fast zernagt.  
Wie eine Grotte dröhnt er von den Bissen.

Sie treibt ins Meer. Ihr salutiert Neptun  
Von einem Wrack, da sie das Meer verschlingt,  
Darinnen sie zur grünen Tiefe sinkt,  
Im Arm der feisten Kraken auszuruhen

*Georg Heym*

### Dead in the Water

---

Masts jut over the grey wall;  
a scorched forest against early red,  
black as slag and water  
stares up, deathlike, at warehouses, the rotten, the decay.

A muffled echo along the quay  
with the returning flood. City nightlight penetrates  
through ashen white skin like electricity;  
chafes the steamer resting in the dock.

Dust, fruits, paper in a thick layer,  
and excrement bursts out from its pipes.  
White dance dress is floating on oily sheen,  
a naked throat and lead-white face.

The corpse wallows. The dress swells,  
billows; a white ship tossed in gusts of wind.  
Dead eyes staring widely, blindly to  
Heaven. To pink clouds on high.

Purple water quivers in little waves:  
– a water rat tracks this white human raft.  
It pushes off, full grey head and black fur, launches.

But the corpse sails blithely on, torn by wind and  
flood. Her fat belly bulges over the water's surface;  
a vacuous socket almost gnawed to pieces,  
a cavern booming from the bites.

She drifts out to sea; Neptune saluting her from a wreck  
as she devours the water.  
She sinks.  
Inwards, down to green depths,  
to rest in the arms of a plunging sea monster.

*Translated from the German  
by Jennifer Cearn*

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### Jennifer Cearn's commentary

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I was immediately drawn to this poem for its harsh yet beautiful description. It seemed to me like a more realistic yet almost cruel rendering of the image of Ophelia lying drowned in water. Heym creates a meticulous description of just one snapshot image, and it was this that I set out to achieve in my translation.

The main difficulties I encountered in translating from German were concerned with adjectives that seemed to have no direct equivalent in English. An example of this was *feist* and I eventually decided to move away from the original slightly, instead

using 'plunging'. Similarly the verb *entragen* (to look out) didn't seem to work in English, so I opted for 'bulges' instead. Metaphors also proved difficult, both to understand and translate. Upon realising the 'manned white ship' referred to in stanza 5 was the corpse, I decided instead to use 'raft', as, to me at least, it made the body seem more fragile.

Heym, however, sets this corpse against a harsh industrial backdrop, and I was careful not to move too far away from this with softer imagery. Rather than the direct translation 'rubs', for example, I chose 'chafe', as I felt this word was

more abrasive. I also wanted to retain the feeling I experienced when first reading this poem: being almost submerged in relentless imagery and description. For this reason I decided not to keep the original rhyme scheme, as I felt the actual words and imagery used in English were more important. I also often omitted the definite article or used present participle verbs (a form that does not exist in the original German), and I hope that by my doing this, the poem has retained the sense of immediacy and continuous description that Heym clearly intended to create.

**Inferno**  
**Canto V, lines 121–38**

---

E quella a me: “Nessun maggior dolore  
che ricordarsi del tempo felice  
ne la miseria; e ciò sa ’l tuo dottore.

Ma s’a conoscer la prima radice  
del nostro amor tu hai cotanto affetto,  
dirò come colui che piange e dice.

Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto  
di Lancialotto come amor lo strinse;  
soli eravamo e senza alcun sospetto.

Per più fiate li occhi ci sospinse  
quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso;  
ma solo un punto fu quel che ci vinse.

Quando leggemmo il disiato riso  
esser baciato da cotanto amante,  
questi, che mai da me non fia diviso,

la bocca mi basciò tutto tremante.  
Galeotto fu ’l libro e chi lo scrisse:  
quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante”.

*Dante Alighieri*

**The Damned**  
**after Dante**

---

The bitterest  
sorrow is not regret,  
though that is part of what we suffer –  
the bitterest sorrow lies in happiness rehearsed,  
as when I speak of how  
our fate took root.

It was a poem:  
the ballad of Sir Lancelot  
whom love enslaved – old fashioned stuff,  
pure nonsense really, so where was the danger if  
from time to time our eyes met –  
where was the harm?

We read on  
until we reached the line  
about a kiss both looked-for and unbidden –  
a kiss so long desired and yet so lightly taken –  
that line was our undoing:  
a sidelong

glance – another –  
into each other’s eyes, and we,  
who since that day have never been apart,  
we latecomers to everything within our hearts,  
we put the book away  
and read no further.

*Translated from the Italian  
by Paul Batchelor*

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**Paul Batchelor’s Commentary**

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Dante’s encounter with Paolo and Francesca is one of the most surprising episodes in the *Inferno*. Despite the obvious sincerity of their love for one another, and the sympathy with which they are portrayed, Paolo and Francesca are being punished in hell for the sin of adultery. The episode has been translated many times, but just as it retains its fascination for contemporary readers, I hoped it could withstand another version.

At first, I tried to translate the poem into terza rima, but could not find a satisfactory way of doing so: conveying the tone of the original was my main concern, and this tends

to be compromised if unidiomatic words or expressions are used in order to facilitate a rhyme. Italian is rich in rhyme, but English is relatively poor. I then translated it into blank verse, but this didn’t seem to be the answer either, because Dante’s use of terza rima is so closely connected to the tone and content of what he is saying: his dovetailed stanzas and inter-locking rhymes give us a fuller sense of the orchestrated inevitability of his vision.

In the end, I used a form in which the number of metrical feet per line expand and then contract over a six-line stanza.

This form is related to that of George Herbert’s ‘Easter Wings’ and has been used several times by Derek Mahon. The stanza-shape is immediately noticeable and regular, but the rhyme scheme can be varied, so hopefully the form conveys something of the original’s structure, while also being flexible and natural-sounding. I used consonantal rhyme, so ‘regret’ is rhymed with ‘take root’, ‘poem’ with ‘harm’, and ‘read on’ with ‘unbidden’, and so on. I hoped that this would make for a more subtle musical effect, while allowing me to juxtapose some key words.

### Du, Nachbar Gott

---

Du, Nachbar Gott, wenn ich dich manches Mal  
in langer Nacht mit hartem Klopfen störe, –  
so ists, weil ich dich selten atmen höre  
und weiß: Du bist allein im Saal.  
Und wenn du etwas brauchst, ist keiner da,  
um deinem Tasten einen Trank zu reichen:  
ich horche immer. Gib ein kleines Zeichen.  
Ich bin ganz nah.

Nur eine schmale Wand ist zwischen uns,  
durch Zufall; denn es könnte sein:  
ein Rufen deines oder meines Munds –  
und sie bricht ein  
ganz ohne Lärm und Laut.

Aus deinen Bildern ist sie aufgebaut.

Und deine Bilder stehn vor dir wie Namen.  
Und wenn einmal in mir das Licht entbrennt,  
mit welchem meine Tiefe dich erkennt,  
vergeudet sichs als Glanz auf ihren Rahmen.

Und meine Sinne, welche schnell erlahmen,  
sind ohne Heimat und von dir getrennt.

*Reiner Maria Rilke*

### God, My Good Neighbour

---

God, my good neighbour, if you sometimes hear  
me knocking in the dead of night, I'm sorry.  
I can't tell if you're breathing, and I worry:  
I know you're all alone in there.  
There's nobody to watch, or understand  
if you need something – say, a glass of wine.  
I listen day and night. Give me a sign.  
I'm near at hand.

Chance, nothing more, has set this flimsy wall  
between us. And who knows, perhaps  
if you or I could bring ourselves to call  
it might collapse  
quietly, and leave no trace.

The wall is built of pictures of your face.

Your pictures stand in front of you like names.  
And if for once my inner light shines through  
and blazes up, so that it might show who  
and what you are, it's scattered by their frames.

And all my senses die back with the flames,  
and are left homeless, and cut off from you.

*Translated from the German  
by Michael Swan*

### Michael Swan's commentary

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This is an early poem by Rilke, not widely anthologised and scarcely translated. (I have only been able to find one version of it, and that really isn't very good.) I embarked on the translation because I like the poem very much. It's a remarkable piece which stands out in Rilke's work of that period, and I think it deserves to be much better known. It presented a familiar challenge. In Rilke, sound patterning is as important as sense and imagery, and neither can be prioritised at the expense of the other; so one inevitably ends up juggling small compromises in both directions.

## Winners of the Open category

The story so far:

*The lovers are betrayed to King Mark, who arbitrarily pronounces the death sentence. They are to be hurled alive into a blazing pyre. Tristan escapes on the way to the fire-pit. King Mark is obdurate; his wife Yseult must die. The people of Cornwall mourn as their beloved Queen is led to the flames.*

*Yvain the leper approaches Mark, to suggest an even crueller end:  
'... Fierce fires will not outlast the day  
And ash is swiftly blown away.  
She will have little time to ponder –  
My way, the punishment lasts longer...'*

### Tristan

Li rois l'entent, si respondi:  
'Se tu m'enseignes cest, sanz falle,  
Qu'ele vivë et que ne valle,  
Gré t'en savrai, ce saches bien;  
Et se tu veus, si pren du mien.  
Onques ne fu dit tel maniere,  
Tant dolerose ne tant fire,  
Qui orendroit tote la pire  
Seüst, por Deu le roi, eslire,  
Que il n'eüst m'amor tot tens.'  
Ivains respont: 'Si con je pens,  
Je te dirai, asez briment.  
Veez, j'ai ci conpaignons cent:  
Yseut nos done, s'ert commune.  
Païor fin dame n'ot mais une.  
Sire, en nos a si grant ardor  
Soz ciel n'a dame qui un jor  
Peüst souffrir nostre convers:  
Li drap nos sont au cors aers.  
O toi soloit estre a honor,  
O vair, o gris et o baudor;  
Les buens vins i avoit apris  
Et granz soliers de marbre bis.  
Se la donez a nos, meseaus,  
Qant el verra nos bas bordeaus  
Et eslira l'escouellier  
Et l'estovra a nos couchier  
Sire, en leu de tes beaus mengiers  
Avra de pieces, de quartiers  
Que l'en nos envoi'a ces hus,  
Por cel seignor qui maint lasus,  
Qant or verra la nostre cort,  
Adonc verra si desconfort.  
Donc voudroit miex morir que vivre,  
Donc savra bien Yseut la givre  
Que malement avra ovré:  
Mex voudroit estre arse en un ré.'

*Bérout*

### Leper, an extract from Tristan

*Mark:*

...To give your King such shrewd advice  
Entitles you to name your price!  
I ask you now to be my tutor  
As to what punishment would suit her.  
By God! No one has yet devised  
A fate so grim and agonised.  
Lifelong he'll be my friend, who finds  
The worst of cruelties refined.  
By Heaven, I honour such a mind.

*Yvain:*

My mind, Sire, is at your disposal.  
Here is the gist of my proposal:  
One hundred lepers, here we stand –  
Deliver Yseult to our hands  
As common harlot to our band  
Perpetually to be shamed.  
Our lust is by disease inflamed  
And our desires are unrestrained.  
Daily and hourly, she'll be raped.  
To be molested by incurables  
Would render each night unendurable.  
No woman born could tolerate  
Such a humiliating fate.

She cannot not bear to look at us;  
Our lesions, with their putrid crust  
Our rags glued to our skin with pus!  
Then she'll recall her life with you  
The elegance that once she knew:  
Garments of soft-textured fur  
Sable, snow-fox, miniver;  
Her access to your royal heritage  
Wines of the very noblest vintage  
Halls of porphyry, alabaster.

Let the lazars be her masters –  
All her once-majestic opulence  
Turns to filthiness and feculence.  
I did not always live in ordure  
Till I succumbed to my disorder.  
She'll learn that there's no turning back  
When dragged into my stinking shack  
And laid down on a teeming mattress  
As befits an outcast's mistress.

Such divinely vengeful drollery!  
We'll share the scrapings of your scullery –  
Old bones and rotten leavings are  
A leprous pauper's caviar.  
She who tore your tender feelings  
Will scabble for stale crusts and peelings  
When she is begging at your gate.

By God, this is a fitting fate!  
When she sees our rooms of state  
So un-luxurious and unloved  
She'll rather she were un-alive.  
When Yseult, the queen of snakes  
Contemplates her grave mistakes  
She'll learn how grievously she's sinned;  
Then her just penance will begin  
With weighty lessons to be learned.  
She'll wish to God that she'd been burned.

*Translated from the medieval French  
by Jane Tozer*

### Jane Tozer's commentary

Years ago, someone dear to me was shunned by the health services as he died of AIDS. Bigots still regard certain afflictions as punitive.

Sex, disease and death. In stories, leprous stigmata may signal an accursed soul. Bérout's audience would know Yvain for a bogeyman. Yet not all lepers were labelled evil. Despite fear of contagion, compassion was shown, and care given, if only to gain heaven-points. There's a complex of attitudes to the mediaeval leper. Many would have been misdiagnosed sufferers of conditions like psoriasis.

Bérout has another baddie who, like Yvain, is differently villainous. Frocin,

*li nain boçuz*, betrayer of the lovers, is a dwarfish hunchback. Googling 'Frocin' yields a student's appeal for clues to the dwarf's 'motivation'. Is the expected answer that a mediaeval poet might imply that malice was a psychological reaction to disability?

I blame standardised teaching. Bérout was observant, but deliberate analysis would be alien to him. 'Motivation' is a very 20th century concept. The question should be: 'Why does Bérout make much of hideously personal descriptions?' Answer: 'To evoke shock and instant emotional response.'

Bérout, the story-maker, is virtually the only writer I allow to tell me what to feel.

He defies subtle interpretation. Here his effects are horribly matter-of-fact: hell in a fresco. Yvain's speech is as unequivocally nasty as playground bullying. He doesn't stoop to weasel words, Guantánamo-style.

Could there be more meticulously protracted cruelty than this fate worse than death? It should be a painful passage to translate, but it's easier to render the dark side than the godly. And *much* more fun. My model is *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

Bérout tells it in 36 briskly mordant lines. His audience was familiar with leprosy. I use 20 lines more, adding colour and rhyme rather than padding.

## About the Stephen Spender Memorial Trust

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

### *The Times* Stephen Spender Prize

The aim of this annual prize, launched in 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 2009 by the Eranda Foundation, to whom the Trust is very grateful.

### Translation grants

Since its inception, the Trust has given approximately £42,000 in grants for the translation of contemporary writers into English. Recipients include *Index on Censorship* for two special issues of creative work, one on banned fiction and the other on banned poetry; *Modern Poetry in Translation*; the Harvill Press, for a bilingual edition of poems by Rutger Kopland; *The Way We Are*, a multilingual anthology of writing by children and young people from Waltham Forest; the Aldeburgh Poetry Trust, to bring to the festival exiled Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti, the Iraqi poet Fadhil Al-Azzawi, and Aharon Shabtai with his translator, the poet Peter Cole; the British Centre for Literary Translation, to bring five Eastern European translators to seminars and the BCLT's summer school; the Great Women Poets tour, which brought translation workshops to schools around the country; and the Children's Bookshow Outside In: Children's Writers in Translation, which saw foreign writers and illustrators taking part in events in seven cities, with workshops in 40 schools.

### The archive programme

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

Lady Spender is currently collating and annotating Stephen Spender's journals, which will be published by Faber in 2010, while Mark Kermode has been digitising the important photographic archive held by Lady Spender, which comprises photographs taken by Stephen Spender and her from the late 1940s up until the 1990s.

### Events

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

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

On 21 February 2007 (the 100th anniversary of W. H. Auden's birth) a reading of Auden's poetry was held at the Shaw Theatre, the result of a collaboration between the Trust and the British Library. Lady 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 Memorial Trust and an Auden scholar, and featured poems predominantly from the 1930s and 40s, as well as 'Auden in Milwaukee', written by Stephen Spender in 1940.

Stephen Spender's centenary in 2009 was marked by a poetry reading on the evening of Thursday 26 February at the Royal Institution's splendid 450-seater Faraday Theatre and a series of seminars and academic debates at the Institute of English Studies the following day. 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.

The readers at the Royal Institution were Grey Gowrie, Tony Harrison, Seamus Heaney, Barry Humphries, Poet Laureate Andrew Motion and Natasha Spender. The 90-minute programme was devised by Grey Gowrie and a recording of the evening is available to download from the Trust's website.

Papers at the conference on 27 February explored Stephen Spender's poetry, fiction and non-fiction, and his relationship to the political and historical developments of his time; they also reassessed his achievement in the light of recent archival research and new critical perspectives. The speakers were John Sutherland, Barbara Hardy, Val Cunningham, Peter McDonald, Mark Rawlinson, Alan Jenkins, Stephen Romer and Michael Scammell.

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## The Stephen Spender Memorial Trust

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