Poetry Translation for Newcomers

(Revised and updated for Open entry 2022)
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Introduction

The **Stephen Spender Prize** is **open to everyone**, regardless of age or language skills. Maybe you only have vague memories of French lessons from your schooldays, or wish you had learned your grandparents’ native tongue, or perhaps you’ve never even considered learning another language…but anyone can take part!

Every year, we award three **special commendations for first-time entrants** in the Open category. The names of all first-time entrant commendees are printed in our prize booklet, and their commended translations are also featured at our Celebration Event in the autumn and published on our website.

And as a first-time entrant you could still become one of the three overall winners in the Open category, and benefit from:

- Cash prizes (£1000 for 1st; £500 for 2nd; £250 for 3rd).
- The publication of your winning translation in our prize booklet.
- Eternal fame! Many previous winners have gone on to become award-winning poets and translators.

“My best gift from the Stephen Spender Prize is self-belief. Translation freed me from years of writer's block, renewed my confidence, and led to the publication of my first book...”

Jane Tozer, 2006 winner
Why translate poetry?

In 2017, this year’s Romanian Spotlight judge Gabi Reigh won First prize in the Open category for her translation from Romanian of 'The Traveller' by Marin Sorescu. Not only was she a first-time entrant, but this was also her very first poem translation.

“I actually first read [The Traveller] in translation 15 years ago, and I started to think about it again after I came back from walking the Camino de Santiago last year. I wanted to show it to the friends who had accompanied me on that walk, as I felt that so much of what we had experienced was echoed there, and because I couldn’t find that translation anymore, I translated it myself. To me, translating comes from the same desire that I have when teaching English literature, to bring something that I think is beautiful to someone who hasn’t read before, as if to say: 'Isn't this amazing? Isn't this exactly what tiredness feels like, isn't this exactly what trees look like out of a train window?' [...] Taking part in this competition has created for me a real desire to bring Romanian poetry to those who haven’t read it before and to help other bilingual young people discover their native country’s literary culture, and then share it with others.”
Translation can seem a daunting and mysterious process when you’re new to it, and poetry translation even more so. But here’s the thing: **There is no right or wrong way to translate**, and no such thing as one perfect translation. If you were to give the same text to ten different people, the translations they’d produce would all be very different.

What matters is being **playful with language**, and **enjoying the process** of bringing the poem into English. So, whether you’ve never translated before – be it poetry or prose – or you already have translation experience but would like some extra encouragement, read on for some tips to get you started...
Choosing a poem

Try to choose a poem which speaks to you in some way – one that will both inspire and challenge you.

If you have access to poetry books at home, look through these. If not, browse online: there are websites dedicated to poetry in all the languages you can imagine. Try the Poetry Translation Centre and Modern Poetry in Translation websites, or explore our booklets of suggested poems in the Prize Resources section of our website. Here you’ll find a wide selection of poems in several languages, both contemporary and classic. It doesn’t matter if the poem has been translated before; your version will be unique. Just make sure that, if you look at other translations, you mention this in your commentary.

In 2021, we received translations from more than 80 languages, and we hope to top this in 2022. Why not surprise us with one we haven’t encountered before? The poem you choose can be from any language, ancient or modern, and we also welcome translations from British Sign Language.

When it comes to genre, the prize pays tribute to poetry in all its forms – from traditional rhymed forms to free verse, concrete poems, rap, spoken word and slam poetry. In the words of judge Daljit Nagra (writing in the 2021 prize booklet), “there are many types of poems in the house of poetry, and as judges we’re keen to celebrate all types of poetry presented to us.” The only proviso is that whatever the original genre or language, the translation itself should still be submitted in written form.

If you find a poem you like, but aren’t sure if it will be eligible, drop us a line at prize@stephen-spender.org — in all likelihood it will be!

If you want to find poems in a particular language, you can also try a simple Google search in the language in question. For example, to find contemporary Brazilian poetry, search for: ‘poesia brasileira contemporânea’.

You don’t need permission from the original rightsholder (often the poet or publisher) to translate the poem of your choosing, but SST will seek permission to publish it if you win – it’s therefore helpful to include the name of the volume in which the poem was published, or the URL if it’s an online publication.
The practical bit: Entry guidelines

To enter, we invite you to submit your English translation of a published poem from any language (with the exception of modern English), together with the original poem and a commentary of no more than 300 words (guidelines for the commentary are given below).

We encourage you to enter through our online submissions platform if possible, although entries can still be submitted by post (sent to Stephen Spender Trust, 41 Wellington Square, Oxford, OX4 2JF). The entry fee is £9 per translated poem for over 18s, payable via PayPal when completing the online submission form. This is the preferred payment method, but we can accept cheques by post (sent to the same address as above) if you are unable to pay online.

The submitted translation should be no more than 60 lines long, but you can submit an extract if your chosen poem is longer. Each translation must be your own original work and not a copy or substantial copy of someone else’s translation, and your translation must not have been previously published or broadcast.

The entry and commentary guidelines differ slightly for the Open category (over 18s) and youth categories, so please read these carefully on the relevant Open Entry and Youth Prize pages of our website, together with our FAQs and Terms and Conditions.
The creative bit

Translating your poem

Once you have chosen your poem, read it through, both on the page and out loud – or listen to it, if your source text is spoken word or rap – exploring it from all angles. It’s generally agreed that there is no closer reader than a translator.

How does it make you feel? Consider the tone and the atmosphere it depicts. Think of some adjectives that come to mind when you read it: is it joyful, sad, contemplative?

Listen to how the words and lines sound in the original. Is the poem smooth and flowing, or does it have an abrupt, staccato rhythm? Does it build up to a crescendo, or start with intensity and settle into calm?

Circle and look up any words you don’t know (if the source language is new to you, this could be most of them!) in a physical or online dictionary. If you can’t find them there, and you know a native speaker, consider asking them to explain the word to you.

“I would encourage you to spend ample time on hearing the original poem speak, especially if it is in a language that you know. As a creative writer, your task is then to see how best to translate not just the meaning of the source text, but also its musicality, its cadences, its rhythms of speech. Draft the translation boldly; the meticulous editing process can come afterwards.”

Mary Jean Chan, Poet and former Prize judge

Are there any cultural references in the original which would be unfamiliar to an English-language reader? How do you feel these could be best conveyed? Perhaps they can be retained, giving the reader a sense of something new and previously unknown. Or maybe it will serve your translation better to re-imagine these, creating an equivalent feeling in the English language.
Look at the form. Does it have a regular metre? Consider how you might like to approach its form as you translate. Do you feel that the original form should be retained? Perhaps free verse would better serve the poem in English, or maybe you could swap the form for another, like a sonnet? Is it a rhyming poem? Depending upon the language of your source poem, it may be trickier to reproduce the rhyme in English, and if you try to grip onto it too tightly, you may find that the essence and mood of the poem slips away. Rhyming can sound forced; if you choose to use rhyme in your translation, try to make it sound as natural as possible. Rhyming dictionaries can be found online, try RhymeZone or Rhymer.

One could say that the aim is to recreate the poem in a way which prompts similar feelings in the English-language reader to those experienced by the source-language reader. It may help to think to yourself: If the poet’s native language were English, how might they have expressed this?

Making a first draft

Now you’ve familiarised yourself with the inner workings of your poem, it’s time to make your first draft! Approaches to this vary; some people prefer to get a very rough, literal draft down quickly, while others take it slow, turning over the word choices in their mind before putting pen to paper. Feel into it and see what works best for you; whenever you’re new to something, it takes time to figure out which approach suits you best.

You may want to start by making a literal translation, then taking a more creative, freer approach as you edit. If you encounter tricky words or sections during your first draft, it’s okay to leave them to come back to later – often the time and space will help a solution arise, and it’s better not to spend ages stuck on one part.

Editing

Well done, you now have a draft translation of your poem! The next stage – to edit – is an essential part of any translation and creative writing process, revising and polishing to make sure the text reads well in English in its own right. It’s always advisable to give yourself time for this: try to set aside your translation for a day or two before coming back to it with fresh eyes. You’ll be surprised how
solutions to tricky problems can come to you in the most unlikely moments, after you’ve given your mind a much-needed break.

Once you’re ready, look at your translation again. **Read it out loud to yourself.** How does it sound? Are there any sections that sound awkward? (**Top tip:** try to save each version as you edit, so you can easily go back to a previous one).

> *Sometimes that raw, fresh draft can be the best one.*

**Daljit Nagra, poet and Stephen Spender Prize judge**

**Translating is about making choices,** delving into each word, examining it from all angles. When you edit, question whether each word is working as hard as it can; is there perhaps a better choice? Is the image being vividly conveyed? Assume that, unlike you, the reader won’t see the original poem, so it’s important to make sure the translation stands alone as a good poem. Does it sound as though it could have been written in English originally? This doesn’t mean you have to remove all elements of ‘otherness’, or echoes of the other culture, but rather that it prompts equivalent reactions and emotions to those a reader would have had from the original.
How to write the commentary

One of the aims of the Stephen Spender Prize is to shine a light on translators and the translation process. In your commentary of no more than 300 words, which will be judged on content rather than style or expression, you can tell us about your approach: for example, why you chose to translate this particular poem, and about any challenges you encountered translating between the source language and English. This could be about a cultural reference which is very specific to the source language and culture. How did you approach this and what was your solution? Or it could be about a particularly tricky word, or an element of wordplay. Or was the original in a particular form which you felt needed adapting in order to convey the core message and feeling of the poem in English? Please note that the commentary guidelines are slightly different for the youth categories, and can be found on the Youth Prize page of our website.

Example commentary

Here is an example commentary written by Harry Man, who won First prize, as a first-time entrant, in the Open category in 2021. You can find more examples of commentaries in the 2021 prize booklet, and in our archive of prize booklets from previous years, downloadable from the bottom of the main Prize page.

Culturally, Norway’s history as a mediator for peace and reconciliation dates back to the Cold War, setting the stage for historic agreements such as the 1993 Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Accords, the civil wars in Mali and the ongoing efforts between FARC EP and the Colombian government. This is in part what made 2011’s attacks so dissonant. On 22 July 2011, a lone wolf terrorist detonated a bomb outside the Government Quarter’s office blocks in Oslo, killing eight people and injuring a further 209, before driving 38km north to Utøya Island and the AUF (the Labour Party Youth) summer camp and committing a mass-shooting, killing 69 people. Afterwards, thousands took to the streets, holding up roses in memory of those who died. The 22 July Commission’s Gjørv Report described what occurred as ‘the most shocking and incomprehensible acts ever experienced in Norway’. Many survivors and victims’ family members continue to suffer with PTSD and prolonged grief even now, including difficulties holding down a job and building new relationships. It has been referred to frequently as the day Norway lost its innocence and was changed forever. In Ruset’s poem, he repeats the word ‘forvandlet’ meaning ‘transform’ or ‘convert’. In English both have an aspect of ongoing mutability; a chest of drawers can be ‘transformed’ by a bold choice of colour, or a barn ‘converted’, though the physical dimensions of both might remain unaltered. The etymology of ‘forvandlet’ in Norwegian shares the English word ‘for’ with the Greek ‘and’ meaning ‘one’ or ‘man’ – so a kind of ‘for-one-ing’. Single or multiple things are ‘changed’ immutably into this one thing. Working closely with Endre Ruset, I inserted the adverb ‘forever’, keeping the labio-dental fricative sounds of ‘f’ and ‘v’ through the word ‘forever’ as well as preserving his desire to painfully echo responses to the events.
Further resources

The London-based Poetry Translation Centre works in collaboration with poets and translators to bring international poetry – in particular from Africa, Asia and Latin America – to English-speaking audiences. Their excellent website holds an archive of international poetry, displaying the final English language version of the poems produced in their workshops, along with the original language text and the literal “bridge” translation used. There are also a number of dual language recordings, so you can listen to versions of the poem in both languages. Their site offers fascinating insights and is a very useful resource, especially to those new to translating poetry.

Another great website is Poetry International. Its archives are filled with poetry from around the world, displaying the poem in its original language and the translation. You can search by country, language or the poet’s name for inspiration, or simply browse those which have been recently added.

Modern Poetry in Translation is dedicated solely to poetry in translation and has a wonderful site filled with inspiring world poetry. You can sign up to their newsletter for regular updates and subscribe to their print editions, published three times a year. They have an extensive online archive of poems which you can simply browse or search by original language, poem author/translator, and also by word or phrase.

The website Lyrikline, created twenty years ago by Literaturwerkstatt Berlin, holds over 13,500 poems in 88 languages, with over 21,000 translations, and has a thriving online community.

Our own Stephen Spender Trust website contains a wealth of poetry translation resources, including a dedicated Prize Resources section where you can browse booklets of suggested poems from several languages. You can also find lots of tips and inspiration in our archive of prize booklets dating back to 2004, which are all available to download at the bottom of the main Prize page.

We also have a YouTube channel, which is home to a wide selection of poetry readings, interviews, tutorials and more. Explore our special Stephen Spender Prize 2021 playlist for reflections and readings from last year’s winning and commended translators, prize judges and original poets, as well as the full recording of the Stephen Spender Prize 2021 Celebration Event, which took place virtually in November 2021.
“It’s heartening to see this evidence of a country engaging with other languages and cultures, and further proof of the intense creativity of translation and its power to build bridges, start conversations and celebrate difference.”

Charlotte Ryland, Director, Stephen Spender Trust

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