

TICONTRE

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THE COMPLEXITIES OF TRANSLATING POETRY

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This essay considers some of the long-standing debates about translating poetry, and explores the strategies used to bring about creative transposition through a series of examples, including translations from Persian, Korean and Welsh. The author draws upon her own experiences both as a translator and translation scholar, also as one of the judges of the prestigious Stephen Spender poetry in translation prize for the last decade. The essay argues that the translator of a poem is both its rewriter and its recreator, and highlights the organic metaphor used by poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley proposing that the translation of poetry necessarily involves transplantation into new soil. The essay concludes by pointing out that the two crucial elements in translating poetry are joyfulness and playfulness, which gives the lie to the old negative idea of poetry being what is lost in translation. The translation of poetry is therefore a creative act, since it results in the blossoming of a new poem in a new language.

Il saggio prende in esame una parte del dibattito di lunga data sulla traduzione della poesia e analizza le strategie utilizzate per trasporre la creatività attraverso una serie di esempi, tra i quali anche versioni dal persiano, coreano e gallese. L'autrice attinge alla propria esperienza di traduttrice e di studiosa della traduzione, anche in qualità di giudice nel corso dell'ultimo decennio del prestigioso premio per la traduzione poetica Stephen Spender. L'articolo sostiene che il traduttore di poesia è contemporaneamente ri-scrittore e ri-creatore della stessa, e sottolinea la metafora biologica impiegata da poeti quali Percy Bysshe Shelley secondo la quale la traduzione di poesia implica necessariamente il trapianto in un nuovo terreno. Il saggio si conclude mostrando come i due elementi cruciali nella traduzione di poesia siano la gioia e la giocosità, le quali sconfiggono l'antica concezione della poesia come di qualcosa che si perde nella traduzione. Tradurre la poesia è perciò un atto creativo, che sboccia in un poesia nuova in una nuova lingua.

A great deal has been written about the complexities of translating poetry, in many languages and over many centuries, yet the debates continue in every new generation. The American poet Robert Frost is famously credited as having declared that poetry is lost in translation, an absurd generalisation but a powerful one nevertheless, while the English Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, using an organic metaphor that has often been quoted, wrote the following:

It were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as to seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed or it will bear no flower- and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel.¹

What Shelley is saying here is *not* that all is lost in translation, nor that translation of poetry is impossible; rather he is saying that a crudely literal approach to translation is bound to fail, and he compares such translation to the absurd task of seeking to demonstrate through science what constitutes the colour and scent of a flower. For Shelley, colour and scent need to be experienced by the perceiver of the flower, and he continues the gardening metaphor when he suggests that a plant must 'spring again from its seed', that is, whatever constitutes the 'seed' of a poem must somehow be transplanted into

¹ SUSAN BASSNETT, *Translation Studies*, 4th ed., London-New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 71.

new soil, in a new environment. Only through this process of planting anew can a new plant grow and blossom.

The question, though, is how to determine what the 'seed' of a poem actually is. Discussions have raged over this: some have suggested that there is a 'spirit' or 'essence' of a poem that the translator must discover and seek in some way to recapture in the new version, others totally reject the idea of an indefinable essence that resists concrete analysis. Moreover, since reading is culturally determined and the way in which we approach poetry changes as aesthetic tastes change, it becomes impossible to insist that there might be any single right way to read any poem. We need only consider a case such as the ancient Greek poet, Sappho, to see how widely interpretations of her poetry have varied over time, as attitudes to female sexuality have also varied and hence have conditioned the ways in which we read her texts.

The problems of poetry translation are indeed multiple: there are linguistic issues, of course, there are issues about how to transpose poetic forms and techniques, issues of reader expectations, issues of the status of poetry in different literary systems, huge issues of cultural knowledge. If we take two recent examples of English translations of poets little known outside Europe, we can discern a number of problems that the translators have bravely tackled in their endeavours to transpose poetry from two completely different literary systems. Parvin Loloi and William Oxley, the translators of a recent collection of poems by the Persian poet Hafez,² a contemporary of Chaucer and Petrarca discuss in their preface the problems of translating a poet renowned as a master of the *ghazal*, a form that does not have any counterpart in English. Quite apart from the obvious formal poetic problems posed, they raise a number of other significant issues. Firstly, there is the question of the reliability of the source texts: Hafez himself never collected his own poems and a succession of commentators and editors over the centuries have amended the poems in accordance with their own subjective opinions. This is a problem for all translators of early texts, of course; we need only think of the controversies around the authenticity of the poetry of Catullus for example, as different versions of manuscripts have been copied and handed down to us. This raises an important point about what constitutes an *original text* in such cases, something we shall return to later in this essay.

Loloi and Hoxley highlight another problem for translators of Hafez which is inherently linguistic but has important connections with meaning and context: the ambiguity of gender in Persian. As they explain:

In Persian there is only one word to express the third person singular (he, she, it). This ambiguity of pronoun is, in fact, one important element in that strategy of simultaneous levels of meaning which is the hallmark of some of the most beautiful and profound of medieval Persian poems.³

The translators opt for a non-gender specific noun rather than a pronoun, referring to 'the Beloved' throughout their collection. Faced with the problem of form, they opt for what they term a 'quasi sonnet', arguing that perhaps the European sonnet form

² *Poems from the Divan of Hafez*, trans. by Parvin Loloi and William Oxley, Brixham, Acumen, 2013.

³ *Ivi*, p. XX.

comes closest to the unreproducible Persian *ghazal*. Their introductory comments acknowledge the difficulties they face, and stress also the fact that they worked together to produce their volume. Loloi and Oxley write in a language that is highly stylised and with a tendency towards archaising; so in *The Song of the Saki* we read the opening lines:

Come, Saki, fetch the wine that brings on ecstasy:
That bestows such excellence and generosity-
Bring me that wine for I am much dispirited,
Deprived of its bounties and not uplifted.

They also make no concessions in the poem for source cultural knowledge:

Come Saki, that wine whose cupped reflection can
Send messages even to Kay-khusrau and Jam.⁴

However they do provide a glossary of proper names at the end of the book, where we can learn that Kay-khusrau was a legendary king and Jamshid had a magical cup in which he could see the whole world. Their technique, in the terminology popularised by Lawrence Venuti, borrowing from Friedrich Schleiermacher, is one of foreignising. No concessions are made to the lack of familiarity a contemporary reader may have with Hafez and his world, and readers must therefore engage with the scholarly introduction and use the glossary in order to obtain a fuller reading of the Persian poet's work. The poems appear strange, the archaic language adding to that effect, reminding readers that they are reading poems originally composed some seven hundred years ago in a world that has long since vanished.

A completely different set of problems arise in the recent translation of the contemporary Korean poet, Lee Si-Young, whose work as described by his English language translators, Brother Anthony of Taizé and Yoo Hui-sok is «a unique combination of lyrical evocation and historical consciousness, Zen-like meditation and mundane colloquialism, poignant memories and satirical vignettes».⁵ Lee Si-Young writes very accessible poetry that is often humorous or satirical, but with an awareness of the troubled political history of his country. In the 1970s and 1980s he was imprisoned several times for political activism, but the translators suggest that even without detailed knowledge of the Korean cultural context and historical circumstances, English readers will 'easily understand' his poetry because it is rooted in the reality of everyday human experience. Accordingly, they use accessible English and free verse form. One short poem will illustrate his subject matter and their technique:

In today's sound of wind blowing in the pine trees
is the sound of my red-cheeked, five-year-old
brother's breathing.

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 74.

⁵ SI-YOUNG LEE, *Patterns*, trans. by Anthony Brother and Yoo Hui-Sok, Copenhagen-Los Angeles, Green Integer, 2014, p. 25.

He's buried in the kids' graveyard to the west of the village I used to pass through as a child.⁶

Two of the most intelligent comments on the problems posed for the translator of poetry are, in my opinion, to be found in the writings of Ezra Pound and Octavio Paz, published in 1929 and 1971 respectively. Pound's essay, *How to Read* appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune* and was later reprinted in his *Literary Essays* edited by T.S. Eliot in 1968. In this essay, Pound sets out his theory of poetic translation. He urges us to «chunk out the classifications which apply to the outer shape of the work», that is, the identifiable formal aspects, and to look at what is actually going on in a poem. He then goes on to identify what he calls 'three kinds of poetry' - I would prefer to term these as three 'aspects' of poetry. The first is *melopoeia*, which refers to the musical properties of words and which adds a dimension «over and above their plain meaning». This can be appreciated by a foreign reader «with a sensitive ear» but is practically impossible to translate, «save perhaps by divine accident or for half a line at a time».

His second aspect is *phanopoeia*, «the casting of images upon the visual imagination». This, he claims can be translated «almost, or wholly intact», adding that it is almost impossible for a translator to destroy, unless the translator is incompetent or ignorant.

But the third aspect, *logopoeia* «does not translate». For this is the use of words beyond their direct meaning, and which «holds the aesthetic content of which is peculiarly the domain of verbal manifestation». Under this we might include word play, double meanings, puns, culturally specific words, allusions etc. which can only be translated, as Pound puts it, when a translator, having «determined the original author's state of mind» may or may not be able to find «a derivative or an equivalent».⁷ Pound was a founder of the Imagist movement, so it is perhaps unsurprising that he should appear to be arguing that the casting of images on the visual imagination is the easiest aspect of poetry to translate, but his suggestions are sound. The translation of multidimensional words used by a poet in specific ways beyond what he calls their direct meaning is pretty well impossible, as is the reproduction of meaningful musical properties. What he seems to be suggesting here comes close to Shelley's idea of transplanting a seed: the translator's task is to find a solution that works in the target language based on his or her assessment of what the original text was trying to do, something that today might be termed a functionalist approach. With some poetry, Pound declares, the solution will always be a compromise; he was of the view that there were no adequate translations of Ancient Greek in English, for example, but in his own translation practice he tried out all kinds of experiments, always with the aim of creating a good poem in English that bore, in some way or another, a resemblance to the original. Whenever I read Pound's essays I am struck by the combination of boldness and erudition in his work. However much his translations have been criticised for being inaccurate (a terminology of which he was deeply contemptuous) what comes across is the amount of time he spent researching the

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 123.

⁷ EZRA POUND, *How to read* [1929], in *Translation – Theory and Practice. A Historical Reader*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort and Astradur Eysteinnsson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 285.

poets whose work he chose to translate. His essay on Cavalcanti,⁸ for example, is an extraordinarily sensitive work of scholarship and shows the extent of his grasp of medieval Italian and of the medieval world more generally. It is also self-critical, in that he points out that his own earliest translations of Cavalcanti were too heavily influenced by Victorian poets such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, noting that he had not yet found his own language, a language for his own time, for Pound understood that a translator of poetry must aspire principally to create a poem for a new generation of readers and in so doing to give those readers a sense of what the original might have been like.

Pound would, I am sure, have been very much impressed by Octavio Paz's views about translation, which appeared in *Traducción: Literatura y Literalidad*. An extract from this book was published in English translation in an important anthology of writings about translation, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1992. Here Paz sets out his famous theory about translation as a creative act. Translation, he argues, is paradoxical, because although it seeks to overcome the differences between languages, at the same time it reveals those differences more fully. This leads him to propose that all texts are, in a way, translations of other texts, 'translations of translations of translations:

No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation-first from the nonverbal world, and then, because each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase. However, the inverse of this reasoning is entirely valid. All texts are originals because each translation has its own distinctive character. Up to a point, each translation is a creation and thus constitutes a unique text.⁹

«Up to a point», as he says, translation is a creation, and he goes on to clarify this. The task of the poet and the task of the translator are inverted processes of poetic creation. The poet constructs a poem «a verbal object of irreplaceable and immovable characters», then the translator takes that verbal object «dismantling the elements of the text, freeing the signs into circulation, then returning them to language».¹⁰ This image of the translator as liberator is very empowering, a far cry from the old images of the translator as copier or imitator. Paz points out that when a poet sits down to compose a poem, he or she is not sure where the poem will lead, whereas when a translator sits down with that poem the task is to reproduce it somehow for readers unable to access the original: «The result is the reproduction of the original poem in another poem that is...less a copy than a transmutation. The ideal of poetic translation, as Valery once superbly defined it, consists of producing analogous effects with different implements».¹¹

Both Pound and Paz viewed translation as a creative act; both also pointed out that the first step in the translation process is reading; reading not only the poem that is to be

8 GUIDO CAVALCANTI, *Sonnets and ballate*, with translations of them and an introduction by Ezra Pound, London, S. Swift, 1912.

9 OCTAVIO PAZ, *Translation, Literature and Letters* [1971], in *Theories of Translation from Dryden to Derrida*, ed. by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, trans. by Irene del Corral, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1996, pp. 152-162, p. 154.

10 *Ivi*, p. 159.

11 *Ivi*, pp. 159-160.

translated with great care, but reading as much as possible around the poem. In short, the translator needs to have an understanding not only of the mechanics of an individual poem, but also to try to understand how that poem might have worked in its original context. Such reading can involve reading previous translations, if they exist, reading other work by the same poet, reading work by contemporaries of the chosen poet and reading to understand more about the poet's world. At the same time, a translator needs to be aware of the norms prevailing in his or her own time, hence needs to have an understanding of how language and aesthetics are changing at any given time. This is what Pound means when he says that his first translations of Cavalcanti were inadequate because he had not yet discovered his own poetic translatorial voice and so was held back by his over-reliance on the language and poetic conventions of a previous generation.

2

Last year, in 2014 I stood down as one of the judges of the Stephen Spender Poetry in Translation Prize. I did so with some regret, but 10 years is long enough to serve as literary judge and it was time to step aside. I had been instrumental in setting up this prize, with the late Daniel Weissbort and the wonderful administrator of the Stephen Spender Foundation, Robina Pelham-Burne, following the request of the trustees to 'do something for translation'. Spender, one of the great English poets of the first half of the twentieth century had been interested in translation, and his family wanted to honour him by creating a prize. The year the prize came into being was significant in another way: in 2004 the British government under Tony Blair took the astonishingly backward step of abolishing compulsory foreign language teaching in English secondary schools. This led, inevitably, to a catastrophic decline in foreign language learning, and to the closure of a number of university language programmes across the country. Modern Languages, it seemed had become as threatened as classical languages had been in the 1980s. The dominance of English as a world language was leading to a new kind of cultural imperialism, whereby knowledge of other languages was viewed as a luxury at best, irrelevant at worst.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the effects of that policy, though thankfully there has been some small reversal and the aim now is to reinstate language teaching from primary school onwards. When we met to discuss how best to continue the legacy of Stephen Spender's interest in poetry translation, we devised a prize that would be open to young people at school and university, hence below the age of 25, with the hope that this might send an encouraging message to beleaguered teachers. The judging panel, besides myself and Daniel Weissbort, consisted of a well-known translator and the then editor of the literary pages of *The Times*, since that newspaper had also agreed to contribute some funding.

Several significant details emerged from the 2004 competition. Firstly, there was great enthusiasm and several hundred entries (these days there are in excess of 700 entries every year) from young people of all ages. Indeed, the beautiful translation of a Spanish poem by a child of 9 led Matthew Spender, in the following year, to endow a prize for entries by children under the age of 14, and here too there are always well over 150 entries every year. We were then urged on all sides to open the competition to people over 25,

and so we did, which meant that in 2005 there were 3 categories: under 14, under 18 and Open, that is, open to anyone over the age of 18. We judge anonymously, of course, but we do have a spread sheet with the date of birth of each entrant. The youngest winner to date is 9 years old, the oldest in her late 80s.

Secondly, we all felt that the decision to insist on a 300 word comment along with each translation was an important part of the process. Contestants therefore submit a poem, or an extract from a longer poem, together with a copy of the original and a 300 word comment. These comments have been invaluable not only in terms of enabling the judges to understand each individual translator's strategy, but also for the translators themselves to reflect on what they have done and why they have done it.

The number of entrants has grown each year, and so has the range of languages. As a judging panel we could manage around 14 languages, ancient and modern, and whenever we needed help we had a team of experts willing to assist. That proved enormously valuable in 2014, when one of the entries that we all liked but which had been translated from a language none of us knew, turned out to have been plagiarised, and it took the expert reader to inform us of this. As an example of the range of languages submitted, in 2014 the winner of the Under 14 category translated a poem by the Belgian poet, Jean Dominique, and we commended poems from Spanish, French and Polish. The winner of the 18 and under category chose a passage from Homer's *Iliad*, with prizes and commendations also given for translations from Anglo-Saxon, German and French. The winner of the Open category produced several superb translations of work by Jan Wagner, and we awarded the second and third prizes to translations of the Welsh poet Dafydd ap Gwilym and the Latin poet Martial, commending several poems from German, Spanish and French. In previous years we have had winning translations from Dutch, Romanian, Irish, Italian, Greek, Chinese, Swedish, Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, Uzbek, Provençal, Old French, Old Norse, and many more. We have had poems in dialect (Belli translated into Yorkshire dialect stays in my mind), fragments from ancient Assyrian texts, comic poems, deeply moving poems, political poems and the solutions presented by translators have been fascinating. We even had a poem by Catullus presented as a text message one year, in Textspeak. This, of course, is where the comments are so valuable. The translator of the winning translation from Martial's *Epigrammata* (number 44, from Book 3) has this to say about his method:

I 'listened' to Martial. My long-lapsed A-level Latin was initially inadequate as a means of resurrecting the sound of the Latin verse. But repeated readings aloud brought me to some sense of the rhythms and textures of Martial's language. I came into some sort of touch with his 'voice', and those of his protagonists here.¹²

Pound would have approved of this strategy, and would also have approved of the comment by the young student translator of an Anglo-Saxon riddle. The poem opens with a repeated word - *Wenne, wenne, wenichenne*, a line which the translator repeats so as to introduce what he terms the chanting folkloric quality of the original. He then

¹² ROBERT HULL, *Commentary*, in *The Stephen Spender Prize Booklet*, 2014, p. 16, http://www.stephen-spender.org/_downloads_general/Stephen_Spender_Prize_2014.pdf.

explains why he has chosen to extend the poem in modern English, building on the incantation effect (the poem is a riddle, a charm against warts) and explains which elements he has chosen to keep, and which he has developed while endeavouring to stay with what he sees as a ‘strange and exciting’ little poem ‘that rarely sees daylight except in fusty academic texts’.

One element that has recurred over and over through the years I have been judging this prize is the desire to give poems a new life, often stated explicitly as resurrection. This reminds us of Walter Benjamin’s ideas about translation acting as a means of ensuring the survival of a text. Today’s translators not only seek to bring texts to life in a new context, but are motivated by the desire to introduce their contemporaries to poems that would otherwise be forgotten.

As judges, we have sometimes been criticised for allowing ‘unfaithful’ translations to win prizes. By unfaithful, our critics mean that the translator has deviated from the original in some significant way, - adding, deleting, modernising, changing the context- translators do all kinds of things as they carry out their tasks. Our main criteria were twofold- firstly, that the poem should work as a good poem in English, and secondly that there should be a relationship with an original in another language. Quite what that relationship might be is, in our view, up to the individual translator to determine.

In her comment on her prize-winning translation of Dafydd ap Gwilym’s poem, *The Wind*, Gwyneth Lewis, the distinguished Welsh bilingual poet, notes the extreme difficulty of translating the work of the man who is generally considered to be the greatest of all Welsh medieval poets. She points out that this is in part due to the metrical complexity of the *cywydd*, the measure he invented, which consists of seven-syllable couplets with alternate feminine and masculine rhymes. For her part, she says that she did not attempt to reproduce this in English, and that her aim was «to preserve the brilliance of ap Gwilym’s metaphorical thinking while retaining his metrical lightness of touch». Summing up her translation strategy, she notes that while Welsh poetry is syllabic, English poetry is accentual: «Dafydd ap Gwilym’s extreme concision in Welsh is hard to convey within seven syllables and without a sense of strain. My priority has been to capture the tone of the poet’s wit and his *joie de vivre*». Welsh medieval poetry presents such huge translation problems that the translators of a collection of ap Gwilym’s poetry, H. Idris Bell and David Bell included an introduction of 103 pages to their volume. The Introduction is in two parts, the first of which gives details of Dafydd ap Gwilym’s life and works, while the second is entitled *The Problem of Translation*. The translators identify a range of problems: for a start, there is the problem of the status of the original, since there are conflicts of manuscript evidence. Indeed, not very much is known about his life either; he seems to have been born somewhere between 1315 and 1320 and to have died somewhere between 1350 and 1370. The one thing that is clear is that he was a highly original voice writing innovative poetry that both drew upon the bardic Welsh traditions and adopted aspects of the courtly love poetry which had spread from Provence through the courts of Europe. So with Dafydd ap Gwilym we have a poet about whom little is known, poems that have gone through countless manuscript amendments so that establishing a canon of his writing is extremely difficult, a poet whose bravura in handling

traditional forms in Welsh was combined with formal innovations that made him stand out from his contemporaries. To that we must add the complexity of Welsh poetics more generally (*cynhanedd* for example, exists only in Welsh poetry) and the completely different literary traditions. Given the impossibility of rendering his metrical patterns into English, along with the impossibility of translating some of his words because they do not exist in English either, translators have to take a leap into the abyss as they endeavour to create poems that will function in English. As David Bell puts it:

I believe, personally, that perfect translation would only be possible if the translator could live again the mood of the poet, feeling as it were back through the written page to the first conception, and could then recreate the poem in an idiom, at once his own and consequently vital, and at the same time moulded by the poet's own speech. In this sense a translator is comparable with the dramatic poet who allows himself to be the vehicle through which another speaks. If the most desirable quality in a translation is that it should be a vital, living thing, to be, as we say, "poetry", it is also true that language lives because of the feeling which vivifies it, and its life must come "as easily as the leaves of a tree".¹³

It is significant that this translator also uses organic imagery and insists on the importance of creating something 'vital', that is alive, in terms that take us back to Shelley and to Benjamin in different ways. But the Bell translations aimed for that vitality within the conventions of their own time (the book was published in 1942), when archaising rather than modernising was prevalent. If we compare their version of the poem translated by Gwyneth Lewis we can see how the prevalence of different norms lead the translators down very different paths in their endeavours to recreate a form and a style from another age. The first verse of the Bells version runs as follows:

You nimble wind, come from on high,
With roar and bluster hastening by,
Strange visitant, with your hoarse din,
Footless, wingless paladin,
I marvel how from your heavenly home
Without feet you are hither come,
And how swiftly, even now,
You fly hence o'er yonder brow.

The rhyming couplets dominate the poem, and seem both over-simplistic and weighty. The wind (in their version it is specified as the *north* wind) is compared to a knight, a paladin. In Gwyneth Lewis' version the wind is a noisy, but wondrous hero:

Sky wind, skilful disorder,
Strong tumult, walking by there,
Wondrous man, rowdy-sounding,

¹³ DAFYDD AP GWILYM, *Fifty Poems*, ed. by H. Idris Bell and David Bell, London, Honorable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1942, p. 71.

Hero with nor foot nor wing.
 Yeast in cloud loaves, who's been thrown out
 Of sky's pantry with not one foot
 How swiftly you run, and so well
 This moment above the high hill.

There is no 'I' persona in this verse, and the 'heavenly home' of the Bell translation is replaced by a new image, 'sky's pantry'. The wind, depicted as the yeast in the cloud loaves, has been thrown out and is on the run. Then as the poem develops, the speaker asks the wind to take a message to his beloved, Morfudd, to tell her that he will always be her loyal slave. The last lines of the poem in the two versions give a very different picture of the wind:

Hence, with fair weather get you gone,
 And you shall see my lovely one;
 Gold-haired Morfudd you shall find-
 Fair befall you, noble wind!

Climb, hold her in your spotlight,
 Then plunge down, heaven's favourite.
 Go to Morfudd Gray the blonde
 Come back safely, holy vagabond.

The Bell translation is in mock-medieval English, the wind is 'noble', Morfudd is 'gold-haired'. In Lewis' translation the wind is a vagabond, continuing the image of mischief established at the start of the poem, Morfudd is referred to colloquially as 'the blonde' and another new image is added, that of the wind turning a spotlight onto the beloved, which adds a contemporary note. When I compared the original Welsh, which is helpfully printed on the facing page of both translations, there were two additional lines in the Bell version that are not present in the Lewis, which reinforces the point about the difficulty of establishing a reliable original.

From this brief comparison of two versions of the 'same' poem we can see how different translators have sought in different ways to bring a long dead poet to a new set of readers. Both have been mindful of the difficulties posed by both form and content, both have endeavoured to avoid over-literalism. The difference between the two is that Lewis has created a much better poem, by steering, as she puts it, 'a middle course' between language consistent with the historical period of the poem and the use of a totally contemporary English vocabulary. In this way, she suggests, her translation will be less likely to become dated. In contrast, the Bell translation, for all its good intentions, does appear dated. It is also less adventurous in terms of both language and imagery. Lewis, one of Wales' leading contemporary poets takes risks that the other, more academic translators avoid, and the result is a much stronger, more individualistic poem.

The translator of a poem is, in my view, its rewriter and recreator, with the responsibility of producing a poem in the target language that will give readers some sense of

what the original is like. The translation will, inevitably, be a completely new poem for, if we continue with Shelley's metaphor, the transplanted seed will have grown into a new version of the original plant. It is therefore absurd to suggest that poetry is what gets lost in translation; rather we should recognise that a translated poem has a life of its own, as it comes in to being in a new context. The years I have spent judging the Stephen Spender poetry translation prize has shown me an astonishing range of creative solutions adopted by translators of all ages and from many different languages. As one of my fellow judges, the poet and translator George Szirtes puts it, for the translator there can be «joy in language and joy in form» and equally, «joy in exploration, particularly when it comes to interpretation».¹⁴ Joyfulness and playfulness are the two crucial elements in translating poetry that are so often overlooked and which give the lie to the negative discourse of loss and betrayal that deserves finally to be dismissed.

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¹⁴ GEORGE SZIRTES, *Dumb Waiters, Speaking Likeness, Spitting Image*, in *One Poem in Search of a Translator. Rewriting 'Les Fenêtres' by Apollinaire*, ed. by Eugenia Loffredo and Manuela Perteghella, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2006, pp. 135-147, p. 146.

NOTIZIE DELL'AUTRICE

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