

THE  TIMES

Stephen Spender Prize 2012

Secoués par le bec avide des cornes
Tornured by the greedy beaks of horns

সে বোধদর হতে চয়ে ছেলি।
He wanted to be the sunsh


Toma-me, o noite eterna, no
Take me, eternal night, into y

portapipiolo zinnasole impazzito di l
Bring me that flower delirious

Die Kirche stürzt in Gra
Our church fears these rosary-grapp

a smaointe ambail neantóga
where her thoughts lash her like net

for poetry in translation

THE  TIMES Stephen Spender Prize 2012
for poetry in translation

Winners of the 14-and-under category



First

David Meijer
‘The Lion Is Loose!’
by Annie MG Schmidt
(Dutch)



Joint second

Damayanti Chatterjee
‘Omolkaanthi’
by Nirendranath Chakraborty
(Bengali)



Joint second

Thomas Franchi
‘To a Nose’
by Francisco de Quevedo
(Spanish)

Commended

Max Birkin
‘Thinking of Holland’ by Hendrik Marsman (Dutch)

Emelia Lavender
‘If It Rained Tears’ by Boris Vian (French)

Isobel Lowe and Chloe Baker
‘The Fox and the Crow’ by Jean de la Fontaine (French)

Joint winners of the 18-and-under category



James Martin
‘Night Impression’
by Paul Verlaine
(French)



Francis Scarr
‘The Destruction of Magdeburg’
by Goethe
(German)



Amanda Thomas
‘Abdication’ by
Fernando Pessoa
(Portuguese)

Commended

Sarah Fletcher
‘You Want Me Pale’ by Alfonsina Storni (Spanish)

Ryan Frost
‘Moments’ by Jorge Luis Borges (Spanish)

James Martin
‘Untitled’ by Anna Akhmatova (Russian)

Jack Newman
‘To the Princess Ulrique of Prussia’ by Voltaire (French)

Winners of the Open category



First

Kaarina Hollo
'Stillborn 1943: Calling Limbo'
by Derry O'Sullivan
(Irish)



Second

Patricia Hann
'The Sunflower'
by Eugenio Montale
(Italian)



Third

Jane Tozer
'The Gibbet'
by François Villon
(French)

Commended

Antoinette Fawcett
'Alcyone' by Ed Leeflang (Dutch)

Margot Harrison
from 'The Lament for Art O'Leary' by Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonail (Irish)

Seán Hewitt
'A Jackeen Keens for the Basket' by Brendan Behan (Irish)

Brian Holton
'Spring Sun on the Watterside Clachan' by Du Fu (Classical Chinese)

John RG Turner
'Classical Walpurgisnacht' by Paul Verlaine (French)

Peter Whale
'A Woman's Love, Rime 208' Gáspara Stampa (Italian)

Introduction

This has been a very good year: more entries than ever; more languages than ever (51 – smashing last year’s record of 43); and entrants ranging in age from 8 to 86. This was the year in which, not content with having an unprecedented three winners in the 14-and-under category, the judges asked me whether we couldn’t have five winners in the Open category. I apologise here to Seán Hewitt and John RG Turner for saying ‘no’ and cruelly insisting on a vote to decide the top three.

Susan Bassnett, Edith Hall, Patrick McGuinness and George Szirtes are the most enthusiastic of judges, seemingly relishing the difficult task of comparing apples and pears (not to mention lychees and kiwis) in order to agree the Best Fruit in Show. I thank the four of them, Erica Wagner at *The Times* for her promotion of the prize, and, lastly, the Dr Mortimer and Theresa Sackler Foundation and the Old Possum’s Trust for their generous sponsorship.

Robina Pelham Burn
Director of the Stephen Spender Trust

Judges’ comments



Judging this prize is always a pleasure, partly because of the great range of work submitted, partly also because of the interaction between the judging panel. This year our decisive meeting lasted longer than usual, not because there were major disagreements but because we had difficulty singling out winners from a particularly strong crop of entries. Our decision to award the Open prize to an Irish poem was unanimous, but we were also deeply impressed by two other Irish entries, a beautiful short poem by Brendan Behan translated by Seán Hewitt and Margot Harrison’s version of the famous ‘Lament for Art O’Leary’.

How does a panel reach its conclusions is a question often asked. There is no simple answer, for all sorts of criteria come into play: crucial of course is the effectiveness of the poem in English, along with evidence of the strategies employed by the translator in creating that poem. We also consider the difficulties facing a translator, which is not to suggest that the more problems posed by a poem, the more likely it is to win, but rather that it is clear that in some cases the translator has had to work very hard indeed to find creative solutions. It was interesting to see how many extremely difficult poems were attempted this year in all categories, and it was also notable that many commentaries referred to personal encounters with poems and poets, often through hearing a poet read at a literary festival or through

a return to a piece that held special memories.

We admired translations of very well known poems, such as Montale’s ‘The Sunflower’, and translations of poets whose work is very difficult to translate well, such as Gáspara Stampa and Paul Verlaine. High on my personal list of fine translations was Peter Mullins’ superb rendering of nine short poems from the *Orkeneyinga Saga* and a comic poem I did not know by the Mexican poet Renato Leduc, ‘Epistle to a Lady who has never seen an Elephant’, translated by Annie McDermott. I also admired a sequence of poems by Georg Heym on the French Revolution, shockingly violent but very powerfully rendered by Gilbert Carr.

The same ambitious choice of poems was also evident in the 14-and-under category. We had no hesitation in choosing the winner, and were impressed by the confidence with which some very young translators demonstrated their skills and obviously enjoyed the experience of translating, particularly of comic poems. We found two Dutch poems in our final list, both excellent: Max Birkin’s ‘Thinking of Holland’ did not win, but is a fine translation that impressed me greatly.

There were many commentaries in the 18-and-under category about the process of translating, often stressing the difficulties encountered, particularly with complex grammatical structures. Interestingly there were fewer classical language entries this time, though some difficult modern language poems were attempted, and one young translator wrote that

motivation had been ‘a desire to stretch myself outside of the syllabus’, which I would guess motivated several others as well. Many translators in all sections wrote about the various stages of their translating, often starting with a word-for-word rendering and then moving on to shape a new poem in English, which of course is how many of the greatest poetry translators have also worked.

Poetry transcends all kinds of boundaries and speaks to readers across cultures and generations, as this prize continues to demonstrate. We had a huge range of languages this year, and our winners include poems from Dutch, Bengali, Spanish, German, French, Italian and Irish, with our youngest winning translator being 12, and our oldest 86, a fact which only adds to the pleasure and privilege of serving as a judge for this important prize.

Susan Bassnett



I read all the entries this year against the backdrop of the Olympics. This turned out to be a wonderfully appropriate context – it was not just that so many different world languages were to be heard in British sports venues, but that so many British athletes were revealed to have roots or ancestry in other lands. It was heartening to feel this inspiring hybridity reflected in translations from Bengali and Yoruba, Tamil and Sicilian, Ukrainian and Chinese. Amongst this year’s translators,

moreover, the intensity of the competition seemed to mirror the rivalry on the running track and in the velodrome. In the Open competition, at least: although deciding who should appear on the final shortlist was not difficult, choosing between these finalists proved virtually impossible.

A great translation must fulfil several criteria: technical cleverness needs to be combined with emotional authenticity, daring image with rhythmic discipline. Kaarina Hollo's translation of Derry O'Sullivan won because, in the end, we privileged her gut-wrenching evocation of past tragedy, with its implicit social commentary, over the dazzling verbal artistry of Patricia Hann's take on Montale's 'Sunflower' and the grim Gallic humour, perfectly welded to metre, in Jane Tozer's 'Gibbet' by Villon.

But there were at least thirty other outstanding, cogent translations in this year's Open category. The phrase that ran repeatedly round my head was the great Latin poet Horace's advice to all who would express themselves in verse: *ars est celare artem*, 'the art lies in concealing the art'. Horace was the greatest of all the ancient Latin writers at creative adoption of Greek metre to his own tongue, camouflaging the arduous process of rhythmical assimilation under a sheen of effortless grace and style. Particular favourites of mine from the metrical standpoint included Peter Mullins' translations from the *Orkneyinga Saga*, and Peter Whale's 'A Woman's Love, Rime 208' by Gáspara Stampa.

There were some fine attempts at translating from ancient Greek and Latin authors, especially Paul Batchelor's other-worldly version of Lucan's witch-scene and Ruth Muttelbury's adroit take on Theocritus. It was refreshing for me to be treated to less well known ancient poets, including Solon the archaic Athenian singer-lawgiver, and Aratus who made polished poetry out of the stars he saw in the night-sky.

Brilliance at concealing technical effort was what for me distinguished Amanda Thomas' deceptively simple 'Abdication' by Fernando Pessoa in the 18-and-under category, although it was impossible to make a qualitative judgement between her translation and those of the other two winners. In the youngest group, David Meijer's version of 'The Lion Is Loose!' by Annie M.G. Schmidt seemed to me to combine precociously mature wry humour with a Dutch lilting rhythm and atmosphere.

Perhaps it was the Olympic flame which lit up this year's entries. More poets, more languages, and more far flung parts of the world were represented than I can remember. But more importantly, many more translators showed a willingness to take risks – to speak from the heart as much as the head, to remember that a linguistic conversion needs to convey the *clout* and outlook-transforming potential of the original as well as its inventiveness. After all, Horace's other great dictum was that the very best art is not only intensely pleasurable but ethically and socially worthwhile.

Edith Hall



This was my second year as a Spender Prize judge, and I continue to be impressed by the range – the widening range, I think – of languages entered. This year we read translations not just from the European languages we might have expected to see, but from Bengali, Romanian, Bulgarian, Polish, Russian, Chinese, Norwegian, Kurdish and more. It's hardly surprising, since the Spender competition postbag must inevitably, despite poetry's marginalised status, reflect something of the diversity of the world we inhabit. It reflects, too (as the poems from the Kurdish, Arabic and other languages testify), the less comfortable realities which make that world diverse: forced and often violent migration, exile,

refuge-seeking and the consequences of war and revolution.

The presence of Britain and Ireland's oldest indigenous languages – Welsh, Irish, and Scottish Gaelic – in a competition like this is especially heartening, and we saw both classic and contemporary poems in those languages translated with exceptional skill and imaginative sympathy. There were also some marvellously creative translations from the Chinese into Scots by Brian Holton, an act which, leaving aside the quite excellent results, challenges us to define what we take to mean by 'English'. In any case, the presence of these languages, carrying over their riches into English, seems to me to enlarge our sense of what a British literary heritage might be, and made me think that if we in the UK wanted to go beyond Anglocentrism, we could start by seeing the riches within our shores. This was for me, this year at any rate, the competition's greatest pleasure.

Thinking and talking about translation can be exhausting and repetitive. This is because it's inconclusive, which is a good thing. It is in fact as inconclusive as thinking and talking about poetry itself. As with poetry, the thinking and the talking, the theorising and the postulating, bear no relation to the final product. You can go to all the translation conferences in the world, read all the books, write essay after essay on 'method' and 'theory', but in the end it's just you and the text. What makes the best of these entries so good is the way each translator had understood that, like the acrobat in the circus, when the lights go out it's just them and the tightrope (let's leave aside the question of safety net for the moment). I read translations which were better and more inventive, subtler and more nuanced, than anything I could do myself. Some of the translators here are so good it's a wonder they don't have books out. All seem to have come to the poems they worked on with a mix of complete creative freshness and deep knowledge not just of the text

but of its eco-system of allusion and reference, its place in its own culture as well as the place it might have in ours once it had made it across into English.

What makes this prize unique is that it requires a translator to write a commentary explaining her or his choices and decisions. This is no mere addendum to the competition: it's a chance for the judges to get an insight into the process of art itself. I recommend the commentaries to you with almost as much enthusiasm as I recommend the translations themselves. The best of these commentaries – and there were many dazzlingly clever and penetrating ones – understood that translation is a mix of critical and creative engagement with the original. The translators tested out their ideas, scrutinised their approaches, but they also played with their interpretations in ways that directly fed into the final product. The process of reflection itself added to the translations and made them better, and we should think of translation in the way it is presented to us in this brochure and demonstrated by this competition: as a symbiotic process where creativity and reflection work together to make something that, quite simply, would not otherwise exist.

Patrick McGuinness



Having been a judge for the past few years it has been fascinating to see tides come and go. The wave of La Fontaine among the youngest group for example, was nudged aside by Prévert, and now, goodness knows, it is replaced by Rimbaud, Verlaine and Catullus – the young mature ever earlier! In terms of numbers the major European languages – Spanish, French, German and Italian – continue to dominate all three groups, so it is a great delight this year that the 14-and-under category has been won by a remarkably nimble translation from the Dutch of Annie M. G. Schmidt. David Meijer's 'The Lion Is Loose' even manages to transplant the location

of the poem to London without any judder on the rails though it was run close by Damayanti Chatterjee's version of Chakraborty from the Bengali – another pleasure.

Not that translating from unusual languages was an advantage of course and Thomas Franchi's version of Quevedo's gorgeous tease of a poem, 'To a Nose', was joint second in the same section, and the joint winners of the 18-and under category – unusually, it was impossible to split them this year – are three very different poems, translated from French (Verlaine), German (Goethe) and Portuguese (Pessoa). I don't think this was the best year for this age group but all three winners – James Martin, Francis Scarr and Amanda Thomas – took on difficult tasks and made energetic, convincing poems from the material.

It was, however, a deep and rich year for the Open category and the list of winners and commended could easily have been double the length. It was here that the various strategies of translation were fully explored. Because there are many strategies, I thought about these in some detail on a blog that people might care to read: <http://georgeszirtes.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/judging-translations.html>. Translation is not a simple act. The conclusion of the blog is that the translation of a first-rate poem should be 'apprehended as a first-rate poem in itself'. The poem is the business in this case, not the exhaustive exegetics of a given text. That exegesis is assimilated in the act of creating the shadow poem we call the translation.

It took ages to decide the winner. Sometimes it is the sheer spell of subject matter as treated by the original poem, quietly and subtly conveyed by the translation that takes our breath away; sometimes it is the grace of the original poem as it is applied to a particular subject, rendered into grace in English; sometimes it is the appropriate virtuosity of the translation against high odds. Kaarina Hollo from the Irish, Patricia Hann from the Italian of Montale, and Jane

Tozer from the French of Villon all left me breathless in admiration, each in an entirely different way. But the commended poems too were a delight. Antoinette Fawcett, Margot Harrison, Seán Hewitt, Brian Holton, John Turner, Peter Whale, and more... I wish I could publish them all. Marvellous.

George Szirtes

De leeuw is los!

De leeuw is los! De leeuw is los!
Hij wandelt al door de straten.
Hij wil naar 't Amsterdamse bos,
Dat heb ik wel in de gaten.
Hij broemt en hij briest en hij brult
en iedereen schrikt zich een bult.

Daar is ie al op de Postzegelmarkt,
daar loopt ie al over het Singel!
De tram blijft staan en klingelt hard
van klingeldeklingeldeklingel.
Het hele verkeer staat stil...
en de tramconductor geeft een gil!

Nu is hij op de Overtoom!
We worden hoe langer hoe banger...
En iedereen klimt in z'n eigen boom,
de timmerman en de behanger.
O! Roept de pianostemmer,
waar blijft nou die leeuwentemmer!

O kijk, daar komt een jongetje aan,
o, zou z'n moeder dat weten?
Tjee, kijk dat jongetje daar eens staan!
Straks wordt ie opgevreten!
Wie is dat jongetje dan?
Werempel, het is onze Jan...!

Hij haalt een klontje uit z'n zak,
Wat gaat hij toch beginnen?
De leeuw wordt mak! De leeuw wordt mak!

De leeuw begint te spinnen!
Hij aait hem eens over zijn rug
en brengt hem naar 't circus terug. Hoi!
En brengt hem naar het circus terug.
Hoera!!!!

Annie M.G. Schmidt

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The Lion Is Loose!

The lion is loose! The lion is loose!
He's strolling down the street.
He wants to go to London's woods,
and look for something to eat.
He growls and grumbles and grunts
at everyone that he confronts.

There he is on Wimbledon lawn,
there walks on Downing Street!
The bus has to stop and beeps its horn
like beepedybeepedybeep.
The whole lane comes to a halt...
and prepares for the lion's assault!

Now he's there in Bloomsbury!
The longer we're here the more afraid...
And everyone hides in his or her tree,
the carpenter and the kitchen maid.
Oh! shouts the picture framer,
where on earth is that lion tamer!

Oh look, there comes a boy,
what a brave young soul.
Do you think his mother knows,
that lion could swallow him whole?!
Who is that young boy then?
Oh my, that's little Ben...!

He takes a yarn ball from his bag,
and with an anxious shriek...
The lion's gone meek! The lion's gone meek!

The lion starts to purr!
He even strokes his fur
and returns him to the circus. Hurray!
And returns him to the circus. Hurrah!!!!

*Translated from the Dutch
by David Meijer*

David Meijer's commentary

I have chosen to translate this particular poem because Annie M.G. Schmidt's stories play a large role in the childhood of any Dutch boy. There are very few Dutch children who have never heard of 'Jip en Janneke' or 'Pluk van de Petteflat'. I myself was always read poems by her when I was young, and therefore thought it was most appropriate to use her as a representative for Dutch poetry here in England.

Because they are children's stories, the rhyming of the sentences plays an important part in the flow of the poem, so I simply couldn't afford not to have the poem rhyme in the translation. It is very difficult however to keep the balance between keeping the rhymes and keeping the storyline. Sometimes I resorted to changing the rhyme scheme to avoid such problems, sometimes I had to change the original meaning of the

words. It was simply a question of trial and error, to make sure I kept the right balance.

One other thing I translated was the place the poem was set in. The place names featured in the original are well known throughout the Netherlands but are virtually unheard of in England. I therefore replaced the place names in Amsterdam with place names in London to make the poem more relatable.

অমলকান্তি

অমলকান্তি আমার বন্ধু,
ইস্কুলে আমরা একসঙ্গে পড়তাম।
রোজ দেরি করে ক্লাসে আসতো, পড়া পারতো না,
শব্দরূপ জিজ্ঞাসে করলে
এমন অবাক হয়ে জানলার দিকে তাকিয়ে থাকতো যে
দেখে ভারী কষ্ট হত আমাদের।

আমরা কডে মাষ্টার হতে চেয়েছিলাম, কডে ডাক্তার, কডে উকলি।
অমলকান্তি সে সব কিছু হতে চায়নি।
সে রোদদূর হতে চেয়েছিলি!
ক্যান্টবরণে কাক ডাকা বকিলেরে সেই লাজুক রোদদূর,
জাম আর জামফলেরে পাতায়
যা নাকি অল্প একটু হাসির মতন লগে থাকে।

আমরা কডে মাষ্টার হয়েছি, কডে ডাক্তার, কডে উকলি।
অমলকান্তি রোদদূর হতে পারেনি।
সে এখন অন্ধকার একটা ছাপাখানায় কাজ করে।
মাঝে মাঝে আমার সঙ্গে দেখা করতে আসে,
চা খায়, এটা ওটা গল্প করে, তারপর বলে, 'উঠা হলে'।
আমি ওকে দরজা পর্যন্ত এগিয়ে দিই আসি।

আমাদের মাঝে যে এখন মাষ্টারি করে,
অন্যসে সে ডাক্তার হতে পারত,
যে ডাক্তার হতে চেয়েছিলি,
উকলি হলে তার এমন কিছু কষ্ট হত না।
অথচ সকলরে ইচ্ছাপূরণ হল, এক অমলকান্তি ছাড়া।
অমলকান্তি রোদদূর হতে পারেনি।
সেই অমলকান্তি, রোদদূরের কথা ভাবতে ভাবতে
যে একদিন রোদদূর হতে চেয়েছিলি।

Nirendranath Chakraborty

Omolkaanthi

Omolkaanthi, my friend,
We went to school together,
He always arrived late,
And he never tested well,
When asked about Sanskrit declensions,
He stared so dumbfounded out of the window,
It was painful to watch,

Some of us wanted to be teachers,
Some doctors,
Some lawyers,
Omolkaanthi didn't want any of that,
He wanted to be the sunshine!
The type of sunshine, that
On rainbowed afternoons filled with birdsong,
Lingers like a shy smile,
On the leaves of tropical trees.

Some of us became teachers,
Some doctors,
Some lawyers,
But Omolkaanthi didn't become the sunshine,
He now works in a dark printing shop,
From time to time he visits,
Drinks tea,
Makes small talk,
Then says 'I'll be rising then',
I show him to the door,

The one amidst us who became a teacher,
Could have easily been a doctor,
The one that became a doctor,
Wouldn't have lost out by becoming a lawyer,
However, their dreams all came true,
But not Omolkaanthi's,
He couldn't become the sunshine,
That same Omolkaanthi,
Who, every day, was enchanted by the sun,
wanting nothing but to be it
Couldn't.

*Translated from the Bengali
by Damayanti Chatterjee*

Damayanti Chatterjee's commentary

I chose this poem because the original is simple, with no rhyme or metre, but still conveys a profound message. If I chose a poem like this, I could focus on getting the message and emotion of the poet across, which I believe is the most important part of any poem. It's about an ordinary person, who wanted to do something extraordinary. And when all the other ordinary people got their ordinary wish, he, Omolkaanthi, was left without his extraordinary dream. The poet leaves us without an explanation for this, so we're left coming up with our own

reasons why and how. Most of all, the poet leaves us thinking about the injustice of it, and makes us want to change it somehow.

When approaching this poem, I decided to twist some of the exact translations to get the emotion across because I felt this was more important than a word-for-word translation. For example, the phrase 'rainbowed afternoon' was a problem as, in the Bengali, one word was used to describe this, which exactly meant 'a summery afternoon just after the rain stops and the sun peeks out just before

setting'. I felt I should keep the translation to one word to follow the poetry of the original, so I chose 'rainbowed', as this word has similar connotations.

Another tricky bit is the line 'Then says "I'll be rising then";' – the natural verb to use there is 'getting up', however in the Bengali, the verb for 'getting up' is also the one used to say the sun is 'rising' – and this is a direct reference to Omolkaanthi's dream of becoming the sunshine. But in English, the pun's lost if I use 'getting up', so I used 'rising' as this is the verb we use for the sun.

A una nariz

Érase un hombre a una nariz pegado,
érase una nariz superlativa,
érase una nariz sayón y escriba,
érase un peje espada muy barbado.

Era un reloj de sol mal encarado,
érase una alquitara pensativa,
érase un elefante boca arriba,
era Ovidio Nasón más narizado.

Érase un espolón de una galera,
érase una pirámide de Egipto,
las doce Tribus de narices era.

Érase un naricísimo infinito,
muchísimo nariz, nariz tan fiera.

Francisco Quevedo

To a Nose

There was once a man who had a nose.
It was a most impressive nose,
the nose of a killer,
a writer's nose,
a hairy pointed sword of a nose.

It was a like a badly-shaped sundial,
pensive and still,
it was an elephant turned upside down,
it was Ovid's nose, but...nosier.

It was like the breakwater from a galley,
it was an Egyptian pyramid,
it was the twelve tribes of noses.

It was a peach of a nose,
An infinite mass of nose,
A nose
so
fierce.

*Translated from the Spanish
by Thomas Franchi*

Thomas Franchi's commentary

When translating this poem I came to a few hurdles but still had fun and enjoyed the translation. I started by quickly translating the poem, just to get the feel of it and then I read the Spanish over and over again to try and get behind it. Once I had properly understood the poem, I went back to the beginning and went through it very slowly.

The first thing that I noticed about the poem is that it is a sonnet. Although sonnets usually follow iambic-pentameter, this poem doesn't so I didn't translate it using this either. The main problem I found was that I had to find a way of translating the word *érase* in a way so that the emphasis of the poem didn't switch from the nose to *érase*. I had to do this due to the sheer amount of times Francisco Quevedo used this word, nine times in

fact. The second hurdle I hit was when the poem says, '*era Ovidio Nasón más narizado*'. I chose to translate the line as 'it was Ovid's nose, but...nosier' because it replicates Quevedo's word play in the original Spanish. Secondly, I know that the *ón* ending in Spanish can be used as an intensifier, and thought that this could be well expressed by the comparative adjective 'nosier'.

Another challenge which I faced whilst translating this poem was the line '*las doce Tribus de narices era*'. With this line I had to think about either expanding the meaning or changing it due to racial overtones. After thinking about this, I decided to leave it in because it gives some historical context to the poem. This poem was written about one hundred years after the Jews were expelled from Spain,

so the historical context is also important as well as the overall humour side of the poem. The last point which I had to really think about was the penultimate line, '*érase un naricísimo infinito*'. I wanted to really emphasise the superlative in an interesting way and not by just saying 'the biggest nose' or something alike. The way which I found to express the size of the nose was by using the word 'peach' which I think really expresses the bulbous nature of the nose as well as being a good English idiom.

To add to the overall effect of the poem, which is as much for a reader as it is for a listener, I have reshaped the poem and the lines to look like an old man's nose, maybe even Quevedo's? I think that this enhances the poem even more and is a fitting tribute to Quevedo and indeed Ovid.

Effet de nuit

La nuit. La pluie. Un ciel blafard que déchiquette
De flèches et de tours à jour la silhouette
D'une ville gothique éteinte au lointain gris.
La plaine. Un gibet plein de pendus rabougris
Secoués par le bec avide des corneilles
Et dansant dans l'air noir des giges nonpareilles,
Tandis que leurs pieds sont la pâture des loups.
Quelques buissons d'épine épars, et quelques houx
Dressant l'horreur de leur feuillage à droite, à gauche,
Sur le fuligineux fouillis d'un fond d'ébauche.
Et puis, autour de trois livides prisonniers
Qui vont pieds nus, un gros de hauts pertuisaniers
En marche, et leurs fers droits, comme des fers de herse,
Luisent à contresens des lances de l'averse.

Paul Verlaine

Night Impression

Night. Rain. A pale sky serrated
With spires and open towers by the silhouette
Of the tenebrous Gothic city in the distant gloom.
The plain. A gallows teeming with the shrivelled hanged,
Tortured by the greedy beaks of crows
And dancing their inimitable jigs in the black air.
Their feet are the food of wolves.
Some thorn bushes and holly trees,
Standing scattered in all the horror of their foliage,
To the right and to the left,
Against the sooty debris, like the background of a sketch.
Then, surrounding three prisoners – deathly pale and
Barefoot, the body of soldiers
March, and their straight, upright blades, like harrow rods,
Gleam against the lances of the downpour.

*Translated from the French
by James Martin*

James Martin's commentary

I chose this particular poem to translate because its vivid imagery made such an impact on me; in its description of the picture or painting, it reminded me of shots from the old horror movies I used to watch as a child and which gave me nightmares.

The original poem has no regular metre, and thus, although it is technically composed of rhyming couplets, Verlaine deliberately uses the irregularity of the metre to play down the rhyme scheme, and edge even more towards awkward dissonance instead of harmony. In focusing most of my efforts on Verlaine's powerful

images, I decided to do away with the rhyme scheme. I have kept, where possible, the spirit of the irregularity of his sentence length (although more in spirit than in dogged loyalty to each individual line).

At certain points in my translation, I have felt it necessary to translate a word or phrase differently from the literal meaning, to preserve the dark atmosphere of Verlaine's images: for example, translating 'éteinte' (literally 'without light') as 'tenebrous', and 'au lointain gris' as 'in the distant gloom'.

I chose to stress or emphasise some of the most vivid images, if it was possible

to do so while keeping the translation fluent – for instance, in the phrase '*Tandis que leurs pieds sont la pâture des loups*', I have omitted the '*tandis que*' and formed a separate sentence with the rest of the line, emphasising the image. Personally, I found the result and added emphasis more satisfying to read in English than the literal translation.

Finally, I have extended some small phrases towards the end of the poem, either to stress the image, or to make the English read more fluently (while taking into account the dissonance and awkwardness intended by Verlaine at points).

Die Zerstörung Magdeburgs

O Magdeburg, die Stadt,
Die schöne Mädchen hat,
Die schöne Frau'n und Mädchen hat,
O Magdeburg, die Stadt.

Da alles steht im Flor,
Der Tilly zieht davor,
Durch Garten und durch Felder Flor,
Der Tilly zieht davor.

Der Tilly steht davor!
Wer rettet Stadt und Haus?
Geh', Lieber, geh' zum Tor
Hinaus und schlag' dich mit ihm draus!

Es hat noch keine Not,
So sehr er tobt und droht,
ich küsse deine Wänglein rot,
Es hat noch keine Not.

Die Sehnsucht mach mich bleich.
Warum bin ich denn reich?
Dein Vater ist vielleicht schon bleich,
Du, Kind, du machst mich weich.

O Mutter, gib mir Brot!
Ist denn der Vater tod?
O Mutter, gib ein Stückchen Brot!
O welche große Not.

Dein Vater lieb ist hin,
Die Bürger alle fliehn.
Schon fließt das Blut die Straße hin,
Wo fliehn wir hin, wohin?

The Destruction of Magdeburg

Ever been to Magdeburg?
A city of golden girls –
Loaded with top-class women.
You must have heard of it...

...where flowers bloom by the roadsides
Count Tzerclaes is coming.
Trampling the meadows and blossom,
The Count is closing in.

'Christ! He's here!'
'We're done for.'
'Stand up to him!' 'Man up!'
'Go and batter him!'

'There's still time!
He's coming bloody quickly
But we've still got time
For a roll in the hay...'

Listen to them:
Money won't save me now.
Your father's already dead.
Kid, please don't go.

Child 1: Mummy I'm starving.
Child 2: Is Daddy dead?
Child 3: Please, just some bread!
Mother 1: We're stuffed.

Mother 2: Daddy's dead, little one.
Everyone's on the run.
A crimson cascade there already.
Mother 3: Where are we going?

Die Kirche stürzt in Graus,
Da droben brennt das Haus,
Es qualmt das Dach, schon flammt's heraus –
Nur auf die Straß' hinaus!

Ach, keine Rettung mehr
In Straßen rast das Heer,
Mit Flammen rast es hin und her,
Ach keine Rettung mehr!

Die Häuser stürzen ein.
Wo ist das Mein und Dein?
Das Bündelchen, es ist nicht dein,
Du flüchtig Mägdlein.

Die Weiber bangen sehr,
Die Mägdlein noch viel mehr.
Was lebt, ist keine Jungfer mehr.
So raset Tillys Heer.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Our church fears these rosary-grapplers.
The crucifix-clutchers wrapped round that house.
Hell's inferno with fire and brimstone.
Get out of the house!

We're stuffed.
The army dances through the streets,
Here and there amongst the pyres.
Shit! They've left us.

Houses fall everywhere.
Is mine alright?
What's mine isn't yours!
So leave it mate.

Women scream in fear.
The girls scream even more.
They're screwing everything that moves –
And they've raped the town as well.

*Translated from the German
by Francis Scarr*

Francis Scarr's commentary

Having heard about this monumental ravaging of a city on a radio programme, I was interested to discover this poem. The poem is particularly archaic and I found that my literal translation seemed quite stilted and unoriginal. Therefore, I have aimed to create something entirely different from the original in terms of structure yet at the same time to maintain as much of the meaning as possible. I wanted to play with this formality and make the translation a raw expression of the emotions the poem contains.

One particular difficulty I faced in this translation was rendering what seems

to be direct speech into something more creative. This I achieved by using a drama-like appearance which gives the poem a completely different form and captures the variety of voices caught in the onslaught of the Catholic army. Additionally, although Goethe seems to imply the desperation between lovers in the moments before Tilly's army finally besieges the town, he does not actually describe any such ideas in much detail. In order to make this aspect more immediate, I employed the sexual innuendo of 'But we've still got time/ For a roll in the hay' which seemed to

bring out this despair for lovemaking more vividly. As a Lutheran city, Magdeburg was threatened by Tilly's Catholic army and I thought that to convey this anti-Catholic feeling I should play with certain phrases. For example, Goethe shows the church and houses burning, personifying the church as collapsing in horror: '*Die Kirche stürzt in Graus*'. I altered this line to 'Our church fears these rosary-grapplers' which I feel conveys the friction between the Lutheran and Catholic faiths in seventeenth century 'Germany' in a better way to a modern audience.

Abdicação

Toma-me, ó noite eterna, nos teus braços
E chama-me teu filho... eu sou um rei
que voluntariamente abandonei
O meu trono de sonhos e cansaços.
Minha espada, pesada a braços lassos,
Em mão viris e calmas entreguei;
E meu cetro e coroa - eu os deixei
Na antecâmara, feitos em pedaços
Minha cota de malha, tão inútil,
Minhas esporas de um tinir tão fútil,
Deixei-as pela fria escadaria.
Despi a realeza, corpo e alma,
E regressei à noite antiga e calma
Como a paisagem ao morrer do dia.

Fernando Pessoa

Abdication

Take me, eternal night, into your arms,
And call me your son... for I am a king
Who abandoned, quite voluntarily,
My throne of restless dreams and weariness.
That sword, so heavy in my tired arms,
I passed on into stronger, calmer hands
And left my sceptre and my royal crown
Broken in pieces in the anteroom.
My chainmail coat, that useless, worthless thing,
My spurs, with their futile, clanging ring,
I left them outside on the cold stairway.
I stripped my monarchy, body and soul,
And returned to the night, so tranquil, old,
Like landscapes at the dying of the day.

*Translated from the Portuguese
by Amanda Thomas*

Amanda Thomas' commentary

I chose this poem because of the striking imagery and strong emotions that Pessoa describes in his portrayal of the king abandoning his position, all contained in the concise form of a sonnet. I feel that the great linguistic control that the poet demonstrates, using simple syntax and word choice, makes it suited to translation as the ideas can be expressed with the same concentrated images of night and solitude. For example, the sunset of '*ao morrer do dia*' can be replicated by 'the dying of the

day' in English; the idiom has the same connotations of death or surrender in both languages.

I found that the images were relatively easy to recreate in English, but it was harder to get across the idea of movement as the king comes away from the chamber, out of the antechamber and down the stairs.

Pessoa uses the strict rhyme scheme of a Petrarchan sonnet, which is hard to achieve in English if one stays true to the literal meaning and images of the original. I decided

to sacrifice rhyme for fidelity to Pessoa's words, and instead relied on assonance, especially in the sestet, to replicate the stylistic integrity of the poem. Pessoa's lines have a strong rhythmic regularity which I tried to echo using lines of pentameter, although this sometimes meant I had to think of different phrasing in order to have the right numbers of syllables in the lines, such as in line 6 when I chose to use comparatives ('stronger, calmer') rather than simple adjectives (*viris e calmas*).

Marbhghin 1943: Glaoch ar Liombó
(do Nuala McCarthy)

Saolaíodh id bhás thú
is cóiríodh do ghéaga gorma
ar chróchar beo do mháthar
sreang an imleacáin slán eadraibh
amhail line ghutháin as ord.
Dúirt an sagart go rabhais ródhéanach
don uisce baiste rónaofa
a d'éirigh i Loch Bó Finne
is a ghlanadh fíréin Bheantraí.
Gearradh uaithi thú
is filleadh thú gan ní
i bpáipéar *Réalt an Deiscirt*
cinnlínte faoin gCogadh Domhanda le do bhéal.
Deineadh comhrainn duit de bhosca oráistí
is mar *requiem* d'éist do mháthair
le casúireacht amuigh sa phasáiste
is an bhanaltra á rá léi
go raghfá gan stró go Liombó.
Amach as Ospidéal na Trócaire
d'iompair an garraíodóir faoina ascaill thú
i dtafann gadhar de shocraid
go gort neantógach
ar an dtuhtar fós an Coiníneach.

Is ann a cuireadh thú
gan phaidir, gan chloch, gan chrois
i bpoll éadoimhin i dteannta
míle marbhghin gan ainm
gan de chuairteoirí chugat ach na madraí ocracha.
Inniu, daichead bliain níos faide anall,
léas i *Réalt an Deiscirt*
nach gcreideann diagairí a thuilleadh
gur ann do Liombó.

Stillborn 1943: Calling Limbo
(For Nuala McCarthy)

You were born dead
and your blue limbs were folded
on the living bier of your mother
the umbilical cord unbroken between you
like an out-of-service phone line.
The priest said it was too late
for the blessed baptismal water
that arose from Lough Bofinne
and cleansed the elect of Bantry.
So you were cut from her
and wrapped, unwashed,
in a copy of *The Southern Star*,
a headline about the War across your mouth.
An orange box would serve as coffin
and, as requiem, your mother listened
to hammering out in the hallway,
and the nurse saying to her
that you'd make Limbo without any trouble.
Out of the Mercy Hospital
the gardener carried you under his arm
with barking of dogs for a funeral oration
to a nettle-covered field
that they still call the little churchyard.

You were buried there
without cross or prayer
your grave a shallow hole;
one of a thousand without names
with only the hungry dogs for visitors.
Today, forty years on
I read in *The Southern Star* –
theologians have stopped believing
in Limbo.

...continued

Ach geallaimse duit, a dheartháirín
nach bhfaca éinne dath do shúl
nach gcreidfead choice iontu arís:
tá Liombó ann chomh cinnte is atá Loch Bó Finne
agus is ann ó shin a mhaireann do mhathair,
a smaointe amhail neantóga á dó,
gach nuachtán ina leabhar urnaí,
ag éisteacht le leanaí neamhnite
i dtafann tráthnóna na madraí.

Derry O'Sullivan

But I'm telling you, little brother
whose eyes never opened
that I've stopped believing in them.
For Limbo is as real as Lough Bofinne:
Limbo is the place your mother never left,
where her thoughts lash her like nettles
and *The Southern Star* in her lap is an unread breviary;
where she strains to hear the names of nameless children
in the barking of dogs, each and every afternoon.

*Translated from the Irish
by Kaarina Hollo*

Kaarina Hollo's commentary

I translated 'Marbhghin 1943' because I wanted to enter as fully as possible into the universe that it creates and share it with others.

O'Sullivan (b. Rochestown, Co. Cork, 1944) lives in Paris. He writes poetry in Irish and Latin, and translates from Irish into English and French. His first language was English, the language in which the Bantry of 1943 was experienced by the mother of the poem. The world in which he grew up, however, was permeated with Irish, in particular through place names and their associations. This linguistic layering challenges the translator. Two examples:

Loch Bó Finne is the Irish name of a small lake a short distance from Bantry. It is transparent to someone with some knowledge of Irish as meaning 'The lake of the White Cow'. One of the many associations with white bovines this raises is *Bealach na Bó Finne*, the Milky Way (lit. 'The Way of the White Cow'). These milky associations in a poem about lost maternity are compelling. They could be brought into English with a literal translation – 'White Cow Lake'; this I dismissed as too exoticising. Michael Davitt gives us 'Milky Way Lake', which seems whimsical and at odds with the overall tone. I decided to

sacrifice that particular emotional charge and recoup it elsewhere.

How to translate *coiníneach*? This is a deformation of *cillíneach*, a variant of *cillín*, 'little church/churchyard'. Unbaptised infants were buried in *cillíní* located at liminal sites – crossroads, cliff-edges, abandoned churches. The form *coiníneach* complicates matters further, as it seems to contain *coinín* ('rabbit'), well suiting a waste area left to the poem's feral dogs. I could have left it untranslated, or alternatively interpreted (eg 'limbo-land'). However, I decided on 'little churchyard' as evocative enough (and short enough to fit the line).

Il girasole

Portami il girasole ch'io lo'trapianti
nel mio terreno bruciato dal salino,
e mostri tutto il giorno agli azzurri specchianti
del cielo l'ansietà del suo volto giallino.

Tendono alla chiarezza le cose oscure,
si esauriscono i corpi in un fluire
di tinte: queste in musiche. Svanire
é dunque la ventura delle venture.

Portami tu la pianta che conduce
dove sorgono bionde trasparenze
e vapora la vita quale essenza;
portami il girasole impazzito di luce.

Eugenio Montale

The Sunflower

Bring me the sunflower here and let me set it
in the parched briny soil of my own place
to turn all day to the heavens that reflect it
the broad gaze of its yellow yearning face.

Things of the dark aspire to all that's bright,
their forms dissolving into a cascade
of tints merging in music. Simply to fade
from view is the great adventure, lost in light.

Bring me the plant that points us to the height
where there's a clearness tinged with the sun's rays
and life itself is thinning to a haze.
Bring me that flower delirious with light.

*Translated from the Italian
by Patricia Hann*

Patricia Hann's commentary

For an English poet the attempt to transplant Montale's 'Sunflower' can seem *la ventura delle venture*. The rhyme scheme, or something very like it, needs to be represented in translation or there will be a loss of cogency, while the choice of vocabulary is a delicate matter. The Italian language is happier than English with abstractions, and there are ambiguities in the original which are not easily resolved without imposing a straitjacket on the meaning or impairing the mystical element. In what sense is the sunflower classed by

implication among *le cose oscure*? Is there a reflection here on Clytia's darkhearted betrayal of her rival or simply on the emergence of the sunflower (and plant life in general) out of the dark? Or does the term embrace both ideas within its wider applications? And does *tendono* imply an urge or simply something that happens?

Fluidity is a keynote of the poem, and the transformation of colours into *musiche*, presented almost as a logical progression, may need to be handled differently in a language where music has no plural. Both

bionde and *trasparenze* pose problems of interpretation. The equivalents in modern English have inconvenient connotations, but *yellow*, *gold* etc seem strong words to describe *trasparenze* and it is hard to know just what Montale had in mind with that word, or how to interpret *essenza*. I decided to take my cue from *vapora* and recast the two lines, feeling that the passionate note at the end reinforced the sense of the poet's identification with the yearning sunflower, his mystical aspiration towards a sort of nirvana.

l'Épitaphe Villon: Ballade des pendus

Freres humains qui après nous vivez,
N'ayez les cuers contre nous endurcis
Car se pitié de nous povres avez
Dieu en aura plus tost de vous mercis.
Vous nous voiez cy attachez cinq, six.
Quant de la chair que trop avons nourrie,
Elle est pieça devorée et pourrie,
Et nous, les os, devenons cendre et pouldre.
De nostre mal personne ne s'en rie
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre.

Se freres vous clamons, pas n'en devez
Avoir desdaing, quoy que fusmes occis
Par justice. Toutesfois, vous sçavez
Que tous hommes n'ont pas bon sens rassis.
Excusez nous, puis que sommes transsis,
Envers le fils de la Vierge Marie
Que sa grace ne soit pour nous tarie
Nous preservant de l'infemale fouldre.
Nous sommes mors; ame ne nous harie
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre.

La pluye nous a debuez et lavez
Et le soleil dessechiez et noircis.
Pies, corbeaulx, nous ont les yeux cavez
Et arrachié la barbe et les sourcis.
Jamais nul temps nous ne sommes assis;
Puis ça, puis la, comme le vent varie
A son plaisir sans cesser nous charie,
Plus becquetez d'oiseaulx que dez a couldre.
Ne soiez donc de nostre confrairie
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre.

Prince Jhesus qui sur tous a maistrise
Garde qu'Enfer n'ait de nous seigneurie.
A lui n'ayons que faire ne que souldre.
Hommes, icy n'a point de mocquerie;
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre.

François Villon

The Gibbet

Everyman. Everyman. Live your life's full span.
Don't turn your heart to stone as you pass by.
If you have pity on your fellow man
Forgiveness might come faster when you die.
You watch us swing, a batch of half a dozen
Hunks of good meat, once sleek and overfed.
Then ravaged, gamey, rotten, dried and wizened
We weathered skeletons are dust, wind-spread.
Nothing to laugh at in our rise and fall.
Pray God's pure mercy rain upon us all.

We are your likeness. Meaning no offence
Here, but for the grace of God... you know the rest.
Rough justice left us hanging in suspense.
All humans make mistakes. From worst to best
We're frail, and we should care for one another.
Friends, forgive us. Bid a kind farewell.
Kneel down and pray to Christ's sweet gentle mother:
Release us from the reeking jaws of hell
And save us from the everlasting fall.
Merciful Mother, smile upon us all.

Harsh rain and hail have drenched us, scrubbed our skin
The sun came out and dried us, tanned our hides.
Fat birds have stitched us up, ripped our beards thin
Magpies pocked flesh and ravens hoiked out eyes.
We're jeered at, sneered at, hangdog, low-down, beat-up
If we could speak, you'd hear our doleful groans
We never have a chance to put our feet up
This way and that, the four winds shake our bones.
Don't join our band. We're Satan's free-for-all.
Christ in compassion, save us one and all.

Jesus, staunch champion of the common man
Don't let the devil get the upper hand
To claim poor sinners in his counting hall.
Brothers, don't mock us dead, if laugh you can.
Spirit of mercy, shine upon us all.

*Translated from the French
by Jane Tozer*

Jane Tozer's commentary

Death row, le Châtelet, Paris 1462

Villon was caught on the fringe of a drunken stramash, outside the office of a papal notary, Ferrebouc. The story goes that a scrivener was knifed; no more than a flesh-wound, but still a capital offence. Ferrebouc had influence from Paris to Rome. He pulled rank. Villon was a marked man; an intractable rogue, no friend to the church. Despite a lack of evidence, he was tried and convicted.

His stark death sentence: '*Pendu et étranglé*'. Dangled, strangled. A slow, cruel, humiliating spectacle. Bodies rotted on the gibbet; often at landmarks like

crossroads, places of destiny where you must choose your way. The devil waits, as in *The Soldier's Tale* and Robert Johnson's famous Blues.

'Iconic' is a debased word. 'Ballade des pendus' is a true icon, breathtaking in more ways than one. It evokes woodcuts of plague, war, witch trials, danse macabre, tarantella. This poem is a bleak documentary; cautionary, with dashes of gallows humour. What courage.

'*Frères humains*': wow! *Human brothers*: yawn. *My fellow humans*: Dubya's drawl. When translating, I read the poem last thing each night, until it inhabits my unconscious. It's the 'lightbulb in the head' method.

Everyman was a last-minute flash from an old allegory.

In French, *pecked with more pockmarks than a thimble* is vivid. I left that line out. It makes the crows appear once too often. Thimbles and saddler's palms are museum pieces now.

'Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.' If there's an inferno, it's here, now. Mankind made it. Drug cartels, fanatics, neo-nazis. Honour to Norway's solidarity, principles, dignity, justice.

Villon was clearly stitched up like a kipper. In 1463, his sentence was commuted to ten years' exile from Paris. No one knows what happened afterwards. He was 32.

Jackeen ag Caoineadh na mBlascaod

Beidh an fharrage mhór faoi luí gréine mar ghloine,
Gan bád faoi sheol ná comhartha beo ó dhuine
Ach an t-iolar órga deireanach thuas ar imeall
An domhain, thar an mBlascaod uaigneach luite...

An ghrian ina luí is scáth na hoíche á scaipeadh
Ar ardú ré is í ag taitneamh i bhfuacht trí scamaill,
A méara loma sínte ar thalamh
Ar thithe scriosta briste, truamhar folamh...

Faoi thost ach cleití na n-éan ag cuimilt thar tonna
Buíoch as a bheith fillte, ceann i mbrollach faoi shonas,
Séideadh na gaoithe ag luascadh go bog leathdhórais
Is an teallach fuar fliuch, gan tine, gan teas, gan chosaint.

Brendan Behan

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A Jackeen Keens for the Basket

Sunset, and the wide sea will be laid out like glass,
no sailing boats or signs of life, just a last
eagle that glints on the world's edge, separate,
circling over the lonely, spent Basket...

The sun sunk down, and nightshadows scattered
over the high moon, herself scaling
the ground with bare, outstretched fingers, cold
on the broken houses, the life's scaffold...

All silent but the birds' bellies sliding
over the waves, glad to be home, head tucked
snug in breast, the wind's breath rocking the door,
and the damp hearth, fireless, heatless, unwatched.

*Translated from the Irish
by Seán Hewitt*

Seán Hewitt's commentary

Brendan Behan learnt Irish in prison. He was a Dubliner, a 'jackeen', chiefly remembered for his English works; but this poem shows a gentle longing for an Ireland wildly unlike the poet's own, one removed from him not simply geographically, but also culturally and linguistically. It was written, poignantly, just five years before its prediction was fulfilled: in 1953, the last Blasket islanders were evacuated, and an ancient culture was abandoned, strangled by the ever-encroaching pressures of the modern world.

Last summer, I had the privilege of continuing my study of Irish in West Kerry,

thanks to a generous grant, and my visit to the Blaskets was truly haunting – I will never forget the slow backbone of land rising out of the sea-mist, the cormorants skimming the water and, most incredibly, the sheer, devastating silence.

It is this silence that the poem conveys so well. It doesn't have the sense of being stuffed full of language, and so I have tried to translate the words and syntax simply, giving an ease to the English, which was challenging considering the significant differences between the languages' structures. I have preserved the rhyme and tried to keep some of the word-sounds

(such as the 'sc-' words in the second stanza) in order to replicate the aural softness of the Irish.

William Blake wrote that 'Nature without Man is barren', and Behan gives a similar sense in this poem, with the feminine moon poring gently over the 'signs of life' which are, ironically, lifeless, 'unwatched'. The importance of the personification here convinced me to preserve the moon's gender: she longs like a mother for the island's children, and Behan follows her gaze cinematically to a close-up of the hearth, the telling centrepiece of an oral culture now consigned to history, and to silence.

Nuit du Walpurgis classique

C'est plutôt le sabbat du second Faust que l'autre.
Un rythmique sabbat, rythmique, extrêmement
Rythmique. — Imaginez un jardin de Lenôtre,
Correct, ridicule et charmant.

Des ronds-points ; au milieu, des jets d'eau ; des allées
Toutes droites ; sylvains de marbre ; dieux marins
De bronze ; çà et là, des Vénus étalées ;
Des quinconces, des boulingrins ;

Des châtaigniers ; des plants de fleurs formant la dune ;
Ici, des rosiers nains qu'un goût docte effila ;
Plus loin, des ifs taillés en triangles. La lune
D'un soir d'été sur tout cela.

Minuit sonne, et réveille au fond du parc aulique
Un air mélancolique, un sourd, lent et doux air
De chasse : tel, doux, lent, sourd et mélancolique,
L'air de chasse de Tannhäuser.

Des chants voilés de cors lointains où la tendresse
Des sens étreint l'effroi de l'âme en des accords
Harmonieusement dissonants dans l'ivresse ;
Et voici qu'à l'appel des cors

S'entrelacent soudain des formes toutes blanches,
Diaphanes, et que le clair de lune fait
Opalines parmi l'ombre verte des branches,
— Un Watteau rêvé par Raffet ! —

S'entrelacent parmi l'ombre verte des arbres
D'un geste alangui, plein d'un désespoir profond ;
Puis, autour des massifs, des bronzes et des marbres,
Très lentement dansent en rond.

— Ces spectres agités, sont-ce donc la pensée
Du poète ivre, ou son regret, ou son remords,
Ces spectres agités en tourbe cadencée,
Ou bien tout simplement des morts ?

Classical Walpurgisnacht

Think Sabbath. *Faust*. No, not *Part One*, the other!
A rhythmic, very rhythmic ground, becoming
A garden in the manner of Lenôtre:
Proper, over the top, and charming.

Walks ruler straight. Hubs. Fountains in the middle.
Venus supine at various intersections.
Ocean gods in bronze; woodlanders in marble.
Camomile lawns. Quincunstial junctions.

Dwarf roses, here, sculpted by informed pruning.
Further away, yews coaxed into a cone.
Horse chestnuts. Flowerbeds as landscape. Shining
On all of this, an August moon.

Twelve chimes – From the dynastic park an answer:
A soulful slow sweet melody, the kind
Of sweet slow haunting hunting song Tannhäuser
Heard as he crept from underground.

A muted choir of horns, lontani, cushion
The vertigo of heart and mind, that turn
To the sweet sorrow of inebriation.
Then, on the blowing of the horn

Pale sudden shapes that couple and uncouple
In the green shade of leafage, interweaving
A lucent whiteness that the moon tints opal
– A Watteausque Raffet engraving –

And now, weaving in the green shade of leafage,
Listlessly round the statuary, round
The plantings, with that unrecovered grief age
Deepens, perform their antique round.

Unsettled spirits, rhythmical as surfers,
Are they the drunken poet's thoughts? Indeed
Are they regrets, or the remorse he suffers?
Or are they just, instead, the dead?

John RG Turner's commentary

As the Duchess of Plaza-Toro has it: 'It's extraordinary what unprepossessing people one can love.' Ditto, poems. I fell in love with this little-known Verlaine while in the out of body state induced by a train journey. The embarrassing bit (and 'it feels almost like confessing to a murder') is that while I can get a poem like this from a straight read (plus a little dictionary research), I seldom do things the right way round: understanding the poem and then preparing a carefully judged translation. Normally, I don't actually understand a poem until I've translated it or, a bit less embarrassing, the

translating and coming to an understanding are part of the same process.

Getting deep into the 'Walpurgisnacht' unearths some problems. In Verlaine's defence, and to use a quotation that he would later employ as an epigraph '[III] *était si jeune*', I maintain that the poem has some enchanting moments, and scholastically it is significant in revealing embryonic themes and techniques that would later become trademarks: almost a dry-run for the *Fêtes Galantes* (*ancien régime* park with figures), and on into much later poems; but instead of the lightly suppressed eroticism, this poem

seems to be about being drunk – a subject he has picked up from Baudelaire, but which considering its importance in his life, is very little represented in his art! Knowing what Tannhäuser had been up to in the Venusberg, the poet must have had one pig of a hangover.

The poem tends to have too many foci, and his celebrated vagueness comes out more as inconsistency. As always with Verlaine the landscape is visually full of self-contradiction (what style of garden is this?); and referencing literature, music, graphic art and landscape design in one poem is, as he says of Lenôtre's designs, just

Sont-ce donc ton remords, ô rêveur qu'invite
L'horreur, ou ton regret, ou ta pensée, — hein ? — tous
Ces spectres qu'un vertige irrésistible agite,
Ou bien des morts qui seraient fous ? —

N'importe ! ils vont toujours, les fébriles fantômes,
Menant leur ronde vaste et morne et tressautant
Comme dans un rayon de soleil des atomes,
Et s'évaporant à l'instant

Humide et blême où l'aube éteint l'un après l'autre
Les cors, en sorte qu'il ne reste absolument
Plus rien — absolument — qu'un jardin de Lenôtre,
Correct, ridicule et charmant.

Paul Verlaine

Your conscience then, my inappropriate dreamer,
These spectral gyres in non-stop motion? Hey!
Remorse, regret and guilt that stake their claim? Or
Are these the dead who would be gay?

Who knows! They never stop, these frantic phantoms,
These lindy-hopping, jitterbugging leapers,
Gnats in the sun, a shaft of dust and atoms,
That instantly revert to vapours

As the damp daylight, one after another
Blots all the horns out. And the mists re-forming
Just nothing. Just a garden by Lenôtre,
Proper, over the top, and charming.

*Translated from the French
by John RG Turner*

a bit over the top. And let's face it, one of the stanzas verges on the dire.

But I still love it! I have used strict metre – the only other modern translation I know is free – because the unexpected short line, along with the rather extreme *enjambement*, produces a slight sense of things being off-balance – much less diatonic at 5:4 feet even than the original at 12:8 syllables – and you can't be 'unexpected' if the metre generates no expectations. I felt slant rhymes went better here than conventional ones, with the exception of one homophone and one that is simply outrageous.

Not a little of the delight comes from the way Verlaine imitates Baudelaire – as often at this stage in his life – but then undercuts him: are these figures the poet's reproachful conscience? Nah, they're just a bunch of old ghosts! The thing being that Verlaine didn't do guilt and remorse. As a psychopath, they were probably outside his capacities. (Reproach though, he could manage, particularly with the much put-on Mathilde, and he did in the end make a convincing fist of repentance.)

Rather than imitating the original Baudelaire imitation, I let the imp of

the perverse insert a few stolen phrases from my elders and betters. Spotting them requires no great scholarship, to put it mildly, though the Yeats is just one word. The double meanings, as in 'ground' and 'ruler', are intended. *Lontano*: the direction for the instrument[s] to be played within earshot from another room. A *quincunx* is an arrangement of five related objects – say a water-god and four naiads – at the centre and corners of a square, like the '5' on the dice. They must have had a wow effect when placed on radiating paths round a hub.



The Times Stephen Spender Prize

This annual prize, launched in 2004, celebrates the art of literary translation and encourages 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. Booklets of winning entries from previous years can be obtained from the Trust or downloaded from its website.

Other translation projects

Translation Nation

Winner of a Euro Talk Primary Languages Prize and a European Label for Language in recognition of the project's innovative qualities, this collaboration between the Stephen Spender Trust and Eastside Education Trust, funded by Arts Council England, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Mercers' Company, has seen translators of French, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, Arabic, Hindi and Gujarati going into 22 primary schools to run three-day translation workshops, reaching some 1,300 children in Years 5 and 6. More information about the project, including film footage and aids for teachers, is available on the Trust's website.

The Joseph Brodsky/Stephen Spender Prize

This worldwide Russian–English translation prize, celebrating the rich tradition of Russian poetry and commemorating the long friendship between Joseph Brodsky and Stephen Spender, was launched in 2011. Entrants,

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

who may be of any nationality, are required to translate a Russian poem of their choice into English. The 2012 judges are Sasha Dugdale, Catriona Kelly and Glyn Maxwell.

The archive programme

Essays and journalism

In May 2002 the Trust presented the British Library with a collection of Stephen Spender's published prose. Representing around one million words of mainly essays and journalism, this collection covers 1924–94.

The New Collected Journals

These journals cover the years from the Second World War to Stephen Spender's death in 1995. Edited by Natasha Spender, John Sutherland and Lara Feigel, they were published by Faber in July 2012.

The Stephen Spender archive

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

Events

Symposium, 2001

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

Queen Elizabeth Hall reading, 2004

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

Auden centenary, 2007

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

Spender centenary, 2009

The first of the centenary celebrations was a reading in February 2009 in the Royal Institution by Grey Gowrie, Tony Harrison, Seamus Heaney, Barry Humphries, Poet Laureate Andrew Motion and Natasha Spender. A recording of the evening can be downloaded from the Trust's website. An academic

conference was held the following day at the Institute of English Studies, with papers given by John Sutherland, Barbara Hardy, Valentine Cunningham, Peter McDonald, Mark Rawlinson, Alan Jenkins, Stephen Romer and Michael Scammell. A second reading, by Fleur Adcock, Grey Gowrie and Craig Raine, took place in October 2009 at University College, Oxford, where Stephen Spender was an undergraduate.

Seminar series

At the October 2011 seminar Lara Feigel, Alan Jenkins, Christopher Reid and John Sutherland explored the relationship between Stephen Spender's life and work and poetry and prose. In January 2012 Jason Harding, Maren Roth, James Smith, Matthew Spender and Frances Stonor Saunders discussed with some passion *Encounter*, the CIA, the IRD and the relationship of British intellectuals with the Establishment. This was followed in October 2012 by 'Bernard Spencer: Mystery Poet' at which Jonathan Barker, Valentine Cunningham and Peter Robinson discussed the writer's life, his work and his contemporaries. Presented by the Stephen Spender Trust in partnership with the Institute of English Studies, these seminars are free and open to the public. Details and podcasts can be found on both organisations' websites.

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