

Translating Poetry

The Double Labyrinth

Edited by

DANIEL WEISSBORT

*Professor of English and Comparative Literature
University of Iowa*

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dedicated to the memory of

JAMES S HOLMES
(1924–1986)

Preface

The contributions to this volume all have to do with the 'poetic' translation of poetry. My brief comments in this Preface, therefore, also revolve around that most problematical and challenging mode of translation. The collection originated in a series of articles, under the general title of 'Approaches to Translation', which was published in the magazine *Modern Poetry in Translation*. The intention was to provide a platform for translators to convey more specific information about their craft than they are generally encouraged to do, to communicate more directly with their readers (in the pious hope that this collection of papers would be the first in a series) and thus to help to raise the general and even professional level of literary consciousness, which as reviews of translations for the most part demonstrate is exceedingly limited.

What is presented here, then, is a number of engagements with the translation of poetry, focusing, as it were, on the pragmatics. There is of course a huge and diverse literature on and about translation, but there are relatively few narrations which attempt to render an account of the actual process, what happens while the translator is about his or her business. And yet it is precisely such first-hand evidence (as George Steiner remarks in *After Babel*) that is needed. Theory proliferates, whereas the data remain more or less undisclosed.

One effect of this is that translation theorists increasingly address each other rather than a wider public, which might benefit from some of these discussions, insofar as they bear on the *quiddity* of the translation product. And within the 'discipline' itself the distance between critics and practitioners seems, if anything, to be growing. The exclusiveness of some of the jargon invented by translation critics (ironically, since translation has to do with transcending barriers) springs partly, no doubt, from a justifiable exasperation with the vagueness of most writing by translators on translation. The belletristic nature of much of this writing – usually in the form of introductions to books or that of papers presented at translation conferences – does not finally advance our understanding of the process very much, tending to be repetitious and clichéd, however stylishly cobbled together, though some wonder-

fully insightful and illuminating pieces have of course been published from time to time. But while it is thus possible to sympathise with contemporary theorists (and even with the perpetrators of what André Lefevere has called 'semantic terrorism'), one can also find excuses for the translators, whose publishers have led them to believe that readers want to be lulled rather than informed, and that nobody is interested in what happens privately – both assumed to be consenting – between translator and translated.

After all, it was once not unusual to omit the translator's name from published works, the assumption perhaps being that his contribution, as a slightly more glorified copier or transcriber, was not really worth mentioning, since the original text virtually dictated its own rendering in another language. Yet even if, from a certain point of view and in certain cases, this may appear to be so, the most rudimentary understanding of the ways in which languages function would seem to require a more serious estimation of the intermediary's role. The point is that in recent times translators, feeling themselves undervalued, have tended to take refuge either in silence or in a great deal of sound and fury signifying very little. Thus the confidence, or at least the assertiveness and querulousness, of the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century translators in their prefaces has been replaced by diffidence, defensiveness or (at best) irony.

But zestful as many of the Tudor and Jacobean prefaces indeed are, they too provide us with comparatively little specific information about the actual work of translation, the purpose of the preface being simply to deter or placate potential opponents or rivals, to trounce former denigrators, to propitiate patrons and so forth. Yet, as Ezra Pound remarked, translation is also a form of criticism, the highest in his view, since it represents a fusion of the creative and the critical. Who has lived more closely with a text than its translator, arguably closer even than the original author, since the latter – after bringing as much verbal order to non-verbal or pre-verbal chaos as he can – must abandon his project, whereas the former is, for the duration, wedded to it? Having penetrated, he hopes, to the heart of a work, he has, then, to find his way out again – the double-labyrinthine process referred to in the subtitle of this volume. At the same time every translator knows that compromise is implicit – a tissue of compromises, in fact, even if this can itself be the source of much fresh creativity. And how can it be otherwise, if the translation is to remain in contact with an

irreducible original, if in other words it is to remain a translation? Since the translator is writing something which must also 'stand on its own' as an artifact, to a large extent unsupported by glosses or commentary, either in the form of footnotes or embodied in the text, it is inevitable that many of the hard-earned insights and perceptions will, for all practical purposes, go unrepresented in the 'final' version.

Judging from the response of many translators to requests for materials for the present collection, there is, however, a strong feeling that whatever remains unsaid in a translation is best left unsaid. In any case, translators themselves are generally more interested in getting on with the next task than in rehearsing an old one. Nevertheless, in view of the still widespread failure to appreciate the complexities of translation, it seemed worth persevering with the effort to persuade practitioners to allow us into their workshop. Translation, as a specialised branch of practical criticism, of concentrated reading, is well worth exploring. And while detailed commentaries or monographs by translators, such as John Felstiner's recent book *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu* (Stanford University Press, 1980), may well be on the way to becoming an accepted critical genre, there is a continuing need for further sharing by a variety of translators of the kinds of insights that are not necessarily accommodated in the final text.

We therefore asked translators if they would eavesdrop, as it were, on themselves, jot down thoughts and preserve drafts as they translated, or failing that try to reconstruct after the event, though as undefensively as possible, what had happened. The first is clearly preferable, as there is less likelihood of self-censorship. On the other hand few can be so detached that they are able to function creatively and to observe and comment on themselves at the same time. Still – perhaps as an exercise in self-awareness – our project did commend itself to a number of translators, though it must be admitted that it deterred rather more of them, some evidently finding unpalatable what they took to be a mechanistic approach. For what it is worth, British translators reacted more negatively than Americans, which may or may not say something about our respective national characteristics!

This seems a convenient point to interject that there are those who regard the whole enterprise treated in this volume as dubious. Most of the contributors here would probably agree with the present writer that, from an absolutist standpoint, the poetic

translation of poetry is an impossible task. Nonetheless they clearly think it worth attempting, even if crises of faith are quite frequent. Robert Frost's assertion, quoted gleefully by some and defensively by others, that in the translation of poetry it is the poetry that gets left out cannot satisfactorily be answered, since it is both true and false. Nor is it my purpose here to meditate upon it.

I feel, though, that I should at least mention another approach to the translation of poetry, an approach well exemplified in the work of Stanley Burnshaw in his two anthologies, *The Poem Itself* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960) and *The Hebrew Poem Itself* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966). In the preface to the former it is claimed that, since poetry cannot be poetically translated, the most satisfactory procedure is to provide the non-linguist reader with a lexical and contextual commentary and an *ad verbum*, non-literary translation alongside the original, thereby enabling him to experience the source text for himself. In any case, whatever distance he is able to travel, it will at least be in the right direction. There will have been substantive gain. Nabokov too, in the introduction to his translation of *Evgeny Onegin* (and elsewhere), subscribes to a similar view, eloquently insisting on an exhaustive commentary and a rigorous word-for-word translation, though how far his own practice substantiates this theory is problematical. Not surprisingly, this view of things translational is reflected, or implied, in some of the remarks made by contributors to the present volume too. Of particular interest in this respect are Ted Hughes' observations about his work with János Csokits, whose 'literal renderings, very often, are all one could desire in a final version'. Again, he attests to the substantive gain, the contact with something real, distinct, that a literal translation seems sometimes able to establish, when made by the right person, of course: 'I am certain I would never have become as interested in Pilinszky as I eventually did, if my curiosity had not been caught in the first place by Csokits' swift word-for-word translations from the page.'

Given the relative novelty of the present venture it was probably inevitable that most of our contributions would, in fact, be reconstructions some time after the event. In any case it is clear that the complexity of the process permits only a fraction of the conscious material to be got down, not to speak of the unconscious material that might be recovered through analysis. In fairness to the translators it must be emphasised that the whole business is far more

arduous and intensive than most of these papers suggest. This will of course come as no surprise to anyone who has taught or attended a translation workshop, where typically an entire session will be devoted to, say, two or three short poems.

While, therefore, it was usually hard to persuade translators to comment on work in hand, since quite understandably they preferred to carry on with it undisturbed, there was not always so much resistance to the alternative suggestion that they present, with at most a few brief introductory remarks, several drafts of a translation, together with the original and the version finally printed (or until now unprinted, as in the case of those by James Kirkup and one by C.H. Sisson).

The emphasis, then, is on translation practice. The texts in this collection do not constitute a handbook on translating, since there are as many approaches as there are translators, and as W.S. Merwin points out, 'there is no perfect way to do it, and much of it must be found for each particular poem, as we go'. Nor are they intended to serve as exemplary texts for beginners. But of course certain tendencies – not to say principles or norms – do emerge. Rather than comment redundantly on these texts in the preface it seemed better to let individual users of this book form their own conclusions. Nevertheless it would be churlish of me not to pay tribute to the particular dedication of translators to their originals. If we learn anything from observing them at work, it is about reading. In comparison with them, so many only *seem* to read. At the same time, the translator-reader, who necessarily makes a critical estimate of the text, is not in the nature of things as detached as the literary critic, so that the latter, however perceptive, need not be an effective translator. Similarly the practising poet, as has been frequently observed, will not always be the best translator of verse, though there are a number of fine poets who are also major translators (viz. the poet-translators represented in the present volume). The balance of meticulous observation, linguistic skill and critical acumen, of rapt attention and boldness in expression, is unique to translation. Translators do many things and here we see them at some of these.

The short answer to the question 'Why do you do it?' – a question which we did not ask our contributors, but on which a number of them comment wryly – is 'Because it is there to be done!' To be truly enjoyed, the world of literature has to be shared. The translator, however guarded, is in essence a sharer, an

enthusiast . . . But let us leave it at that before we are drawn still further down historical, sociological and psychological byways.

It remains only for me to thank the contributors to this volume, who indulged me, responding to my importunate requests for material; my two research assistants at the University of Iowa, Margitt Lehbort and Elizabeth Floyd, talented young translators of poetry themselves; Scott Rollins of Bridges Books, Amsterdam, whose enthusiasm for this project never flagged; all my students, over more than a decade of enjoyable and stimulating interaction, in the University of Iowa Translation Workshop; and last, but also principally, Jim Holmes, of whom more below.

Daniel Weissbort
London and Iowa City

Acknowledgements

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Translating La Ceppède

'To conquering monarchs the red coat of arms' from *The Theorems of Master Jean de la Ceppède: LXX Sonnets*, translated by Keith Bosley (MidNAG and Carcanet New Press, 1983).

János Pilinszky's 'Desert of Love': A Note and Postscript

'The Desert of Love' from János Pilinszky, *Selected Poems*, translated by Ted Hughes and János Csokits (Carcanet New Press, 1976).

'Egy KZ-Láger Falára' from *Harmadnapon* (Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1959), reprinted by permission of Artisjus, Budapest.

'On the Wall of a KZ-Lager' from János Pilinszky, *Selected Poems* (Carcanet New Press, 1976).

'Van Gogh Imája' from *Szálkák* (Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1972), reprinted by permission of Artisjus, Budapest.

Kafka and the Golem

This essay is reprinted from *Prooftexts*, May 1986, Volume 6, Number 12 (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore). All quotations are acknowledged in the notes to the essay.

A poem by Paul Celan, 'Einem, der vor der Tür stand', from *Die Niemandsrose*, © S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1963, is reprinted by permission.

Brief Afterthoughts on Versions of a Poem by Hölderlin

This essay is reprinted from *Modern Poetry in Translation* Nos 41–2, edited by Daniel Weissbort (London, March 1981).

'The Middle of Life', translated by Michael Hamburger, from

Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

'Hälfte des Lebens' from Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart, 1951).

Translating Nerval

This is reprinted from *Gérard de Nerval, The Chimeras*, translated by Peter Jay, with an essay by Richard Holmes (Anvil Press Poetry, London, 1984).

Translating Penna and Cernuda

'Sera nel giardino', 'Il mio amore e furtivo', 'Quando tornai al mare di una volta', 'Ma se ognuno dormiva il treno e io' from Sandro Penna, *Tutte le poesie* (Garzanti, 1970).

'Adónde Fueron Despeñadas' from *La realidad y el deseo* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 1970).

Revising Brodsky

This is reprinted from *Modern Poetry in Translation: 1983*, edited by Daniel Weissbort (Carcanet Press UK, Persea Books USA, 1983).

'Vtoroye Rozhdestvo na beregu' from *Konets Prekrasnoi Epokhi* (Ardis, Ann Arbor, 1977).

'Nature Morte' and 'Pisma Russkomu drugu' from *Chast' Rechi* (Ardis, 1977).

'Razvivaya Platona' from *Urania* (Ardis, 1987).

Translating Anna Akhmatova

This is reprinted from *Modern Poetry in Translation: 1983*, edited by Daniel Weissbort (Carcanet Press UK, Persea Books USA, 1983).

'We're all drunkards' and 'Boris Pasternak', translated by Stanley Kunitz and Max Hayward, from *The Poems of Anna Akhmatova* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1973).

Voice; Landscape; Violence

'Sommaren har nu vänt' from *Dikter utan ordning* (Bonniers, Stockholm, 1983).

Translating Juarroz and Noren

'Los rostros que has ido abandonando' by Roberto Juarroz from *Vertical Poetry*.

'Idag är allting' by Lars Noren, quoted from 'W.S. Merwin, Translator Poet' by Michael Gormon, *Translation Review*, No. 9 (Dallas, 1982).

Playing Scrabble without a Board

'Kannick' by Esaias Tegnér, from *Samlade Skrifter* (P.A. Norstedt, Stockholm, 1923).

'The Voice Inside'

'At the Stone of Losses', 'Song of Thanks', 'I say "love"', 'My Beloved is Mine and I am His', 'In a Flash', 'Eve Knew' from T. Carmi, *At the Stone of Losses*, translated by Grace Schulman (Jewish Publications Society of America, Philadelphia, 1983).

Working at Someone Else's Poem

Part of this is reprinted from *Modern Poetry in Translation* Nos 41–2, edited by Daniel Weissbort (London, March 1981).

Hebrew text and transliteration and prose translation of 'Joshua's Face / Pney Yehusua' from *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself*, edited by Stanley Burnshaw, T. Carmi, Ezra Spicehardler (Schocken Books, New York, 1966).

Translating Horace

Horace I, ii, translated by C.H. Sisson, from *In the Trojan Ditch*, by C.H. Sisson (Carcanet Press, 1974).

Horace I, ii and IV, vii and prose versions of these poems from Horace, *The Odes and Epodes*, edited by C.E. Bennett (Heinemann, 1914).

Finding the Proper Equivalent

'Lodka na beregu' from *Ten' zvuka* (Moscow, 1970).

'Oza', original and translation, from *Anti Worlds and the Fifth Ace* by

Andrei Voznesensky, edited by Patricia Blake and Max Hayward (Basic Books, New York, 1966).

'Saga' from *Nostalgia for the Present*, edited by Vera Dunham and Max Hayward (Doubleday, New York, 1978).

'Derzhavin' from *Metropol* (Moscow, 1979).

Translating Brodsky

'Shorokh Akatsii' from *Urania* (Ardis, Ann Arbor, 1987).

'The Rustle of Acacias' from *The Iowa Review*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Iowa City, Fall 1978).

Notes on the Contributors

Keith Bosley was born in Thames Valley, England, in 1937. Educated at the universities of Reading, Paris and Caen, he has had various jobs at the BBC External Services since 1961. Since 1980 he has been a Corresponding Member of the Finnish Literature Society. He has published five collections of his own poetry, most recently *A Chiltern Hundred* (1987), and very many translations of poetry from Russian, French, Vietnamese, Finnish, Polish and other languages, including *Mallarmé: The Poems* (1977) and *Finnish Folk Poetry: Epic* (1977), for which he was awarded the Finnish State Prize. He is now translating the *Kalevala*. *From the Theorems of Master Jean de la Ceppède* appeared in 1983.

János Csokits was born in Budapest in 1928. In 1944 he took part in the resistance movement against the German occupation and the Hungarian Nazi government. After the siege of Budapest he joined the New Democratic Army against the Nazis. He read law at the Pazmány Péter University, Budapest (1946–9). He was a member of the short-lived Freedom Party and fled to the West as a political refugee in May 1949. Since then he has lived mainly in Paris, Munich and London, and most recently in Andorra. He is now a British subject. His poems, essays and radio plays have appeared in Hungarian literary magazines in the West. His *Selected Poems* is to be published in the near future. *Selected Poems of János Pilinszky*, translated by Ted Hughes and János Csokits, was published in 1977.

John Felstiner is Professor of English at Stanford University. His books include *The Lies of Art: Max Beerbohm's Parody and Caricature* and *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu* (1980). He is writing a book on Paul Celan.

Michael Hamburger was born in Berlin in 1924, emigrating with his family to England in 1933. He spent four years in military service during the second world war, after the war attending Oxford University. He was Lecturer and Reader in German at University College, London, and the University of Reading, where

he taught until 1964. He has also been a visiting professor at many universities in the USA. Fourteen volumes of his own poems have appeared, including the recent *Collected Poems* (1984). He has published a number of critical studies and collections of critical essays. As a translator he has concentrated on German poetry, notably the work of Friedrich Hölderlin: *Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments* (1980). He has also edited and largely translated a number of important anthologies, including *German Poetry 1910–1975* (1977).

James S Holmes was born in 1924 and raised on a farm in central Iowa. He was educated at William Penn College, Haverford, and Brown University. In 1949 he went to the Netherlands as a Fulbright exchange teacher and stayed on, working as a freelance editor and translator, and in 1964 becoming Lecturer in Translation Studies at the University of Amsterdam. He retired, in 1985, as Senior Lecturer. He was a founding editor of *Delta*, a literary-cum-cultural review of Dutch life published in English from 1958 to 1974, and has received major awards for his translations of Dutch poetry, including *Dutch Interior: Postwar Poetry of the Netherlands and Flanders* (co-edited with William Jay Smith, 1984). He has also edited a number of important collections of essays, among them *The Nature of Translation* (1970) and *Literature and Translation* (1978). Jim Holmes, who was involved in the planning of the present volume, died in Amsterdam in 1986. His volume of collected essays, *Translated! Essays and Papers on Translation and Translation Studies*, was recently published by Rodopi (Amsterdam).

Ted Hughes was born in the West Riding of Yorkshire in 1930. He has published many collections of poetry. He has also published widely for children and has written radio plays. Besides translating the poetry of János Pilinszky, with János Csokits, he has co-translated poetry by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai. He co-founded the magazine *Modern Poetry in Translation* in 1965 with Daniel Weissbort. In 1985 Ted Hughes succeeded John Betjeman as Poet Laureate.

Peter Jay was born in Chester, England, in 1945 and educated at Oxford University. He is founder-director of the Anvil Press and is well known for his many translations from Greek, Latin, French, Hungarian and Romanian. He edited *The Greek Anthology* (Penguin

Classics, 1981) and has published translations of Gérard de Nerval's *The Chimeras* (1985). His translation of János Pilinszky's *Crater* was published in 1978 and he is currently working on a larger selection from Pilinszky. His own poetry has appeared with Carcanet.

James Kirkup was born in South Shields, England, in 1923. He has taught in Hawaii and since 1976 has been teaching Comparative Literature at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies. He has published many collections of his own poetry, as well as much prose. He has translated poetry and prose from French, German, Spanish, Italian, Catalan, Japanese, Malay and Chinese, and has published many volumes of translations, including, most recently, *Ecce Homo: My Pasolini – Poems and Translations* and *Cold Mountain Poems: Interpretations of the Poems of Han Shan* (produced by his own press, Kyoto Editions) and *Modern Japanese Poetry*.

George L. Kline is Milton C. Nahm Professor of Philosophy at Bryn Mawr College, where he regularly offers graduate seminars (in the Russian Department) on 'The Theory and Practice of Literary Translation'. He is the author of *Religious and Anti-Religious Thought in Russia* (1968), translator of V.V. Zenkovsky's *A History of Russian Philosophy* (1953), *Boris Pasternak: Seven Poems* (1969) and *Joseph Brodsky: Selected Poems* (1973), and co-translator of Brodsky's *A Part of Speech* (1980) and *To Urania* (1988).

Stanley Kunitz was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1905. He studied at Harvard. He has taught widely and published collections of critical essays, as well as many collections of his own poetry. Mr Kunitz received the Senior Fellowship Award of the National Endowment of the Arts in 1984. His publications include *Selected Poems 1928–1958*, for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1959; *Poems of Akhmatova* (with Max Hayward, 1973); *A Kind of Order, A Kind of Folly: Essays and Conversations* (1975); *The Poems of Stanley Kunitz (1928–1978)* (1979); and *The Wellfleet Whale and Companion Poems* (1983).

Rika Lesser was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1953. She was educated at Yale College and Columbia University. She has taught translation workshops at Yale and poetry workshops in New York.