

### Notes For Broadsheet Poets 3

#### Further, more elementary, Notes for Broadsheet poets/translators by Patricia McCarthy

We are all translators of a sort, as Brian Friel shows in his articulate, analytical play *Translations*. We translate/interpret ourselves, others, experiences, places by many means such as by parody, mime, repetition, imitation, body language, mood, tone, as well as by the language we use. Friel suggests that language is not necessarily the most accurate way to translate what we wish to communicate. Each language, he suggests, is too full of its own history whether recorded or oral, and too full of tradition and change ever to be able to be translated satisfactorily. He implies that strong emotions, such as love which dispenses with the need for words, and the poetic language of metaphor convey the most accurate forms of translation.

In starting out to translate a poem from a poem, then, we all have a head start, since we have the original in our hands. But does this get us anywhere? I have only ever tried two translations in my life: one a poem written in French by Rilke which I was not very satisfied with, and the other a poem I wrote in English upon the sudden death of a French friend whom I had not seen for a long time. I needed to translate it from my source language into French so that it could comfort his family who were not very well versed in English and were not particularly used to poetry. It recalls a time in my early twenties and a smattering of a shy relationship that was never fully acknowledged.

This is the poem as I wrote it in English:

#### Rememberings

(for Gerard Benoist, 1943-97)

I remember you as the shutters opening –  
from blindfolding darks of a foreign room –  
onto a sunlit courtyard forever at noon  
where harnesses and hooves clanked to rhythms  
of Percherons on the cobbles pawing a tune.

I remember you as the land's infinities  
that stretched as I rode, each horizon the fence  
for the racehorse heading towards galaxies.  
Your coolest gaze, so strangely intimate,  
lassoed, with envy, my lunacies.

I remember you as a smiling presence  
gentling me into your slang and jokes,  
claiming me everywhere: from party and chasse,  
from sugar-beet fields where I pulled up weeds  
and called you 'le patron' as a peasant lass.

I remember your handsomeness fizzing the air  
while we spun round each other with quick repartee,  
no nerve for the serious, except at the time  
when, slipping suddenly on leftover straw,  
the horse initiated your intensity.

I remember the steel shoe upon my ribs  
turning slowly into your curve of luck,  
your low resonant voice at the end of my stay:  
“Je serai foutu sans toi” as the Percherons bucked  
and I vanished from those carrouselling days.

Too late to tell these rememberingings now:  
of longago songs which never dared sing.  
You are elsewhere than a land’s golds and greens;  
beyond the bright vision your shutters disclosed,  
not bothered any more by what might have been.

It was probably an unwise way to translate: the wrong way around, into the foreign language, though I had been fairly fluent at French after having spent quite some time in France. However as I was rusty, I asked the Head of French at the school in which I was teaching to do a literal translation first for me so that I could check it against my own. What became obvious was that this literal translation simply did not work in French. French was a different idiom, had a different way of saying things and I found myself needing to change, not just the grammar and flow of the lines, but the images also, to get across the original impression and feel of the poem I had written in English. I decided in the end to dispense with the rhyme in the French version as I simply could not manage it without it sounding false and forced. This was a learning curve for me and demonstrated the difficulty and complexity of translation. It made me wonder at the mastery of well-known translators such as Michael Hamburger, Peter Dale, examples of whose work, and that of others, you have in the ‘Translation as Metemorphosis’ issue (vol 40, no 4).

My French version went like this (I include both poems only as an illustration of a student translator such as myself and the problems thrown up in the act of translating):

### **Souvenances**

(pour Gerard Benoist 1943-87)

Je me souviens de toi qui ouvrit les volets -  
de l’aveuglante obscurité d’une chambre étrangère-  
sur une cour ensoleillée ou sonnait toujours midi,  
où le claquement des sabots et des harnais résonnait  
au rythme des Percherons qui piaffaient sur le pavé.

Je me souviens de toi comme de la terre infinie  
s’élargissant, à mesure que je courais sautant  
chaque horizon sur le cheval de course qui se dirigeait  
vers les galaxies. Ton plus froid regard paraissait

intime comme si tu ne voulais pas apprivoiser mes folies.

Je me souviens de ta présence souriante  
qui m'initiait doucement à ton argot, ton humour –  
venant partout à ma recherche dans les soirées, la chasse  
dans les champs des betteraves ou j'arrachais les belles dames,  
te traitant de 'patron' comme une vraie paysanne.

Je me souviens de ta beauté qui pétillait  
dans l'air lorsque l'on se dérobait l'un à l'autre  
avec de la répartie, méprisant le sérieux jusqu'au jour  
où mon cheval, glissant sur la paille mouillée,  
découvrait tout d'un coup ton intensité.

Je me souviens du fer sur mes côtes se tournant lentement  
dans la courbe de ton bonheur et, à la fin de mon séjour,  
ta voix basse et sonore, 'Je serai foutu sans toi'  
alors que les Percherons lancaient des ruades  
et que je disparus de ces journées de ribotes.

Désormais il est trop tard pour ces souvenirs fragiles,  
ces chants d'antan que l'on n'osait chanter.  
Tu es ailleurs, loin de tous les ors and verts de la terre.  
Au delà de la lumineuse apparition révélée par tes volets,  
tu n'es plus inquiète par ce qui aurait pu être.

Even if you do not have the inclination, it is a good idea to set yourself a poem to translate, preferably into your own language, because it is only in the attempting of it that you learn the complexities of what you are up against, and can admire all the more successful translations you come across.

At their worst, translations, whether literal, free versions or poor imitations are all five finger exercises in the sharpening of language. At their best, they stand on their own as new works of art, heads held high, transcending the nationality, persona and language of their original creators. It is worth noting that no two people will translate a text exactly the same way. Lines might not even coincide at all, yet no one version will necessarily be superior to another. It must be remembered, too, that even well-known translators, like source poets, cannot always be successful. Michael Hamburger admits in his essay 'On Translation' (see reference in the Introduction to the current issue, Vol 40 no 4): "If I reflect on anything, it is not on problems (of translation) which are the province of the theorists, but on dilemmas, on specific failures either complete or partial."

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The following notes have been compiled from jottings on translating poetry by the well-known translator, **Ruth Christie** and are entitled '**A Purely Personal View**'. They aim to encourage young poets, students and aspiring translators to have a go and even get hooked on translating:

Best to ignore the discouraging, often-repeated comments: ‘poetry is what is lost in translation’, ‘to translate is to betray,’ or ‘poems cannot be translated without losses – best to stick to the originals’...

Better to remember Borges who thought that ‘a text re-created can be better than the original.’ Of course that is often disputed.

The principle of the re-creation of a text is: to READ, READ, and READ the original text until it is absorbed.

In my experience, translating a poem works best when there is empathy between the translator and the original (‘source’ text), although to work on a text for which you feel an affinity can be a good, rewarding exercise.

A ‘word for word’ version can serve only as a basic framework; it is not an imaginative re-creation of the ‘genius’ or spirit of the original.

The translator aims at recapturing the feel of the original by other means (by sensitive phrasing, awareness of rhythm, tone, mood, atmosphere), also at creating a well-achieved poem in the target language. A good translator becomes a translator-poet.

Dryden’s ‘translation with latitude’ will be feared by literalists but the sensitive translator-poet will recognise in his dictum the boundaries of freedom.

This freedom can result in the translation being called a version. Some versions remain close to the original; others are free or only loosely connected to the original.

Absolute fluency in the source language is a gift, and some translators are happily bilingual. However, absolute fluency is less essential than is an ear for natural rhythms and the knowledge to recognize the games a language can play e.g. puns, slang, ambiguities, idioms. The translator who cannot speak the source language fluently needs access to a friendly, knowledgeable reader and speaker of the source language, as well as a consultant guide to the research of references, historical contexts and cultural background. The price of such a guide is above rubies!

Translators must be prepared to do research.

Understanding the original poem – where it is coming from – will direct the vocabulary of everything else in the re-creation.

Recently a collaborator and I have been translating a long contemporary poem based on the Homeric epic, *The Iliad*. In Homer, the Greeks have defeated the Trojans, sacked Troy and put the enemy to flight. But our source-poem, subverting Homer, is written from the point-of-view of the defeated who see the triumphant Greeks as godlike monsters. We discovered that, just before writing this, our poet had been immersed in Greek and Latin poems and had translated several into his own language; and also that he was deeply concerned with the historical and current political situation in his country. We had to find language which mirrored the epic quality of his poem (the epic of the defeated) and his surrealistic imagery of modernity. Our

findings directed – whether successfully or not – the way we approached the source text.

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