

## John Montague

### The Challenges of Translation

I have been involved in, engaged with, translation for all of my creative life. Sometimes it has been a respite, a rest from my own work, but more often a challenge: how could this or that poem be made over into English? The great fertility of the Elizabethan period seems to me to partly come from that flow of other languages, Latin, French, Italian, into English. And of course when it comes to the Romantics, it is the German language, with even Wordsworth composing the most exciting passage of *The Prelude* in Goslar.

The obvious challenge for an Irish poet is the older language in which most of our earlier poetry was composed. I remember the Armagh afternoon when our Irish teacher, Sean O Baoill (Sean O'Boyle) began to sing in class, chanting harshly beautiful songs that were actually poems from South Armagh. That region is now known to the outside world as 'Bandit Country' but it was originally the site or seat of a Court of Poetry.

These were very formal poems, a bit like the contemporaneous verses of eighteenth century England, Grey's *The Bard* or the more Scottish poems of James Thomson. But I was totally bowled over by the *Lament for Art O'Leary*, a wake song for a murdered man. Not until I read Lorca's dirge for his bullfighter friend would I meet its equal. Peter Levi declared *Ag Caoineadh Art O Laoghaire* one of the great poems of the world. I felt I had to hammer out my own version, though always halting over the very first line. Should '*Mo gradh go daingean tu*' be 'My steadfast love', 'My stalwart love, 'My love, my stronghold'?

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Translating from the French was based upon a different impulse. Dazzled and dazed by the achievement of Joyce and the not yet acclaimed Beckett, I found my way to France after the Second World War. I had only had a few classes in French during my last year at school, but I was fascinated by the drama of nineteenth century French poetry, which seemed more glamorous to an eager adolescent than the poets of Victorian England. After a *vendange* along the Marne, harvesting the pale grapes for champagne, I descended on Paris on my bicycle, like Rimbaud swooping down from Charleville. I had his complete works in my rucksack, with a daft introduction by Paul Claudel claiming that Rimbaud was an embryonic mystic. I had also begun to read Baudelaire's condemned poems, perhaps hoping that I, too, would find an exotic mistress, and I also sported the black flag of Nerval's melancholy. As I have said, Both Baudelaire and Nerval seemed much more exciting than their English counterparts, the former drinking *absinthe* and black coffee and working all night until daybreak when he was not making love to his sultry mistress, the latter sauntering through Paris with his lobster on a lead before hanging himself from a lamppost!

I did not really try to translate *les poètes maudits*, these 'blighted bards' since many better hands had been there before me. But I became conscious that when the Modern Movement was beginning, France was a major influence, Flaubert on Joyce, LaFontaine on Eliot, Gautier on Pound, and so on. Then quite suddenly there was a halt in the dialogue, and even a growing distrust. For instance, when I broached, to Charles Monteith (the famous editor who fostered Golding and Heaney), a proposal for a *Faber Book of French Verse*, to follow the success of my Irish one, his off-the-cuff dismissal was memorably succinct: 'I am afraid French poetry does not go down well in England.'

It would sell even less than Welsh.’ And when, at his request, I sent a shoal of poems by my French poet pals to Alan Ross at the *London Magazine*, he commented dryly: ‘The French really have peculiar poets.’

The initial problem is that the French expect the poet to be supremely intelligent. The marmoreal perfection of Mallarme is an obvious example, but there is also Valery’s cry for clarity in his “Complete Poem” (1903). ‘The sky is bare. The smoke floats. The wall shines. / Oh! How I should like to think clearly!’ Rising at dawn to examine your own mind is a strenuous idea of the poetic vocation.

I should reveal a prejudice. It seems to me that the great generation of French poets born on the hinge of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, from writers like Jouve, Eluard, Aragon, Michaux, Ponge, to Follan, Char and Guillevic, are much more powerful than their contemporaries in English, aspiring to Plato’s ideal of the Philosopher Kings. (It is in this company that Beckett found a natural place, translating Eluard and producing a belated prose poem of his own, ‘A Fizzle,’ in which he declares morosely, ‘I gave up before birth.’) Surely they deserve a major bilingual anthology of their own? Stephen Romer, an English poet who teaches at Tours, has made a handsome start with his Faber anthology, and I have done my bit as well, contributing to the two translation series, *Wake Forest* in America and *Bloodaxe* in England, which have been trying to cross the divide.

For instance, there is the fascinating problem of the prose poem, a form beloved of the French since Baudelaire, but seldom found in English. It gave me great pleasure to translate some of Ponge’s most endearing *pieces*, like ‘The Horse’ where that sly old Huguenot compares the Pope on his throne to an equine posterior, or in other words, a

horse's ass. And his marvellous meditation on 'The Nuptial Habits of Dogs' makes me cry with laughter. Those translations, together with C. K. Williams's versions of *Le Partis Pris de Choses* are reprinted in a Faber paperback, which seems, alas, to have received very little notice in England.

And then of course there is Guillevic's *Carnac*, that gnomic masterpiece by someone who was brought up amongst those mysterious standing stones, which I translated for the Bloodaxe series. I have also done his *Les Murs*, or *Walls*, for a recent exhibition of Dubuffet. The erotic complexity of Jouve, the rustic terseness of Follain, the Burgundian gloom of Frenaud, I have tried from time to time to translate or transfer their qualities into English, and will continue to do so, as well as translating my near contemporaries, like Michel Deguy, Robert Marteau, Claude Esteban.