

*Impossible Cruxes and Happy Coincidences*

Thoughts on and around Translation

A new series of *Cahiers* – in themselves works of art in their beauty of design – from Paris prompts us to think anew about translation, translation not only from one language to another but also in the rather more inchoate sense of conveying or introducing ideas from one art-form to another. Not, of course, that there is consensus about the feasibility of translation in itself. Richard Pevear, in the very first of this series, quotes Voltaire: ‘To translate poetry is impossible. Can one translate music?’ And certainly the issue is at its most acute in poetry, though the Voltairian qualm can equally apply to artistic prose.

Translation is very much a serendipitous business, and it is hard to lay down any general principles that will not at one time or other meet exceptions, but Pevear offers some wise precepts. He stresses the historical situation of the translator. He sees translation as taking place ‘in a space between two languages and most often between two historical moments’. In translating Tolstoy, for example, we should remember that we are reading a nineteenth-century novel: ‘it should not read as if it had been written yesterday’. To go for a simply idiomatic translation is not to be true to the text. He cites a translation that has one of the characters saying ‘Oh, he’s got his head screwed on has old Kutuzov. What a character!’ In fact the speaker is a prissy Russian aristocrat and what he says approximates more closely to: ‘Oh, he’s an intelligent man, Prince Kutuzov, et quel caractère!’ Here authenticity has been sacrificed to immediacy. (In general Pevear argues that Tolstoy’s idiosyncrasies of style have often been poorly served by translators: it is all too easy to go for the idiomatic rather than the idiolectic. Not least because the idiomatic, being supposedly ‘reader-friendly’, is more commercially attractive to publishers.)

Pevear’s point may equally be made of a recent translation of Kierkegaard which has him speaking of someone as ‘a weirdo’: here the melancholy Dane is anachronistically ‘translated’ from nineteenth-century Copenhagen to twenty-first-century London. Something similar may be said of Alan Jenkins’s otherwise magnificent translation – in another of these cahiers – of Rimbaud’s ‘Le Bateau Ivre’: where Rimbaud has simply ‘Mais vrai, j’ai trop pleuré’ Jenkins has ‘true, fuck it, I’ve wept buckets’. It is not that Rimbaud was incapable of uttering the Gallic equivalent of ‘fuck it’, but the fact is that he didn’t in this poem, and the translation feels anachronistic, forced, in going against the ‘decorum’ of a – by nineteenth-century standards – not overly decorous nineteenth-century poem.

Lydia Davis, writing on Proust, notes both his ‘elegant syntactical structures’ and his sparing use of commas. In translating him she aims to reproduce (when she can) ‘even the sounds and punctuation of the original, and in the process often exploring the remote history of a single word’. One admires here the scrupulosity of the translator, but the principle in question is not one that is generally transferable

– indeed, it is a luxury that is only possible because of a shared Latinate vocabulary and enough rhythmic and grammatical congruities between French and English to allow such luxuries. It must be quite otherwise with translation from a language like Hungarian where the sound-patterns of an agglutinative language and the lexis of a non-Indo-European one do not allow the possibilities of parallelism that Davis finds in translating Proust. Nor are they necessary for a translation to be authentic: for example, I have had the experience of reading translations of two different novels by the Hungarian Sándor Márai, one in English and the other in German, and have had no reason to suppose that both are not faithful to the original and no feeling that, because of the two different languages, a different writer is speaking to me. Rather, it is the case that the Hungarian Márai is speaking to me in English in the one case, in German in the other. Of course, due to my innocence with regard to Hungarian I will have missed whatever the two translators have missed – which prompts the paradox that the reader can only be sure that a translation is complete when he knows enough of the other language not to need a translation in the first place.

In translating from Rachel Shihor’s Hebrew *Ornan Rotem*, noting her precise and idiosyncratic use of that language, like Davis attempts a close fidelity. Rotem tries to retain the syntax and punctuation of the original, whilst noting that her occasional use of paragraph-long sentences fits better with Hebrew grammar than with English. Shihor is undoubtedly a writer of significance, often plangent in her expression: ‘I learned about old age later on,’ she tells us, ‘and in this manner also learned about childhood.’ Rotem’s translation reads for the most part convincingly, and is clearly a labour of love. But I wonder if there is not something quixotic about trying to preserve all of Shihor’s mammoth sentences in their entirety – one of them at least left me defeated even after several attempts. And there are passages which simply leave one wondering. For example, we are told: ‘I knew that my parents were supposed to return and that they would return. But I did not know this with certainty.’ But, of course, in ordinary English it is precisely certainty that marks the difference between knowing and believing. Is Shihor here playing with the concept of ‘knowing’ or is the Hebrew verb more conceptually flexible than the English one? Rotem comes up against the crux of untranslatability in the case of the Hebrew word *vatik* which roughly means ‘one who has been around longer’ but for which English terms such as ‘veteran’, ‘old-timer’ and ‘elder’ all, for various reasons, have the wrong connotation. Not everything exists to be translated into English after all, as many anthropologists have found, and there come points when even the most assiduous of translators must hit her head against the wall. As Lydia Davis reminds us, the life of the translator is one that alternates

between 'impossible cruxes' and 'happy coincidences'. Sometimes, of course, there is no option but to import the foreign word wholesale: the concept of *Schadenfreude* is an inescapable one, yet there is no way of saying it in English except in some clumsy noun-phrase as 'joy in another's suffering'. Yet the importation widens the possibilities of expression of the language into which it is imported.

If such cruxes occur in translating prose, they are more frequent still with lyric poetry, where Voltaire's question regarding 'music' comes more insistently into play. Of course, in poetry the translator is granted greater freedom – so much so that it becomes a question of whether what we have is properly a translation of the original, rather than a version, or an imitation, or something more. A translation of *War and Peace* is inevitably a translation of that nineteenth-century novel *War and Peace*; a translation of a poem may instead result in another poem. Alan Jenkins here is enviably robust: introducing his translation of Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau Ivre', he states that he read it as a schoolboy, and that he has been trying to translate it for the last fifteen years, though not what impelled him to undertake the translation in the first place. I too read it as a schoolboy, and was overwhelmed by it, but had no desire to see it 'Englished', which I thought would be too much a second-best – a thought confirmed when I came upon Beckett's somewhat harum-scarum attempt. Yet Jenkins has largely succeeded where Beckett (and Lowell) have largely failed – in offering a text that is worthy of the original, and still reads in English as a poem of indubitable greatness. He retains the alexandrines and the rhyme-scheme of the original, albeit at the cost of playing a little fast and loose with the ordering of the original stanzas, and having some lines a little fatter than they need be: certainly there are some redundant definite articles. But there is an excitement in the opening stanza that captures well the energies of the original:

As I nosed down the placid river I could feel  
The towropes slacken – screaming redskins had made off  
With the boatmen and nailed them naked, hand and heel,  
To painted stakes for target practice.

So too with the ultimate stanza:

Steeped in the languorous swell, I can't, any more,  
Tack in the big barges' wake, lift the clipper's prize  
Or breast the proud flags and the flapping pennants; nor  
Drift past the prison hulks, beneath their hollow eyes.

True, one misses the 'porteurs de cottons', and 'les yeux horribles des pontons' is somehow more resonant than Jenkins' 'hollow eyes'. Along the way there are some lines that seem forced: 'I was gull-winged through a storm of shit and screeches.' And Rimbaud's 'J'étais insoucieux de tous les équipages' is more rhythmically buoyant than Jenkins' too-assertive 'I no longer gave a toss for them, that gang'. But overall there is no doubt that the translation is a major achievement.

The virtues of Jenkins's two original seafaring poems that flank the translation are more questionable – they take off, as it were, from Rimbaud, but it is uncertain quite where they land. 'Le Bateau Ivre' is a triumph of imagination over experience – the seventeen-year-old Rimbaud had never seen the

sea. Similarly, Coleridge's seafaring experiences when he wrote 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' were limited to the Chepstow ferry. Jenkins's poems, by comparison richer in experience, leave less to the imagination. Sometimes they strike one as all too knowing with their cultural overload: we have references to the 'chansons of Chausson', to Debussy, to Conrad. There are nods to Rimbaud – he rhymes 'ithyphallic' with 'Gallic' – but we are reminded as often of Byron in such rhymes as 'Durban / suburban' and 'Europe / threw up'. These are enjoyable pieces – to a degree – but for all their virtuosity there is a sense of linguistic exuberance that is in excess of the occasion. Inevitably, they are dwarfed by the Rimbaud poem set in their midst.

Paul Muldoon's cahier is, by comparison, for all of its heterogeneity, more sustained. We are offered a number of translations, versions, or imitations – that is, there are varying degrees of linguistic fidelity to the originals – of an Irish song, the Greek of Kostos Palamos, the medieval Welsh of Dafydd ap Gwilym, the Anglo-Saxon of 'Wulf and Eadwacer', and the Latin of Ovid. All of these read fluently enough – though one wonders why the Ovid needs to close with the clumsy 'If only more afternoons would turn out this way' rather than, say, 'More afternoons should be like this.' Here, however, it is the original poetry that is most compelling. I had been afraid that Muldoon – like so many of his compères – had been entering a Parnassian phase, but not on the evidence offered here. For example, the poem 'Balls' is in Muldoon's best manner both serious and hilarious. Here I shall say nothing of it other than that one shouldn't believe everything one's cutter tells one – in this case that 'the left ball hangs lower than the right as a general rule'.

What, though, of translation in the wider sense where it embraces music proper and the visual arts? Two of the cahiers – that of Jonathan Harvey and his librettist Carrière on music and that of Isabella Ducrot on textiles – explicitly address these tangled issues. 'Translation' here is inevitably used in a looser sense where sometimes a word like 'analogies' might be more appropriate. Even within music, where a composer like Bartók makes use of folk-music, this is not so much a 'translation' of one idiom into another but of a stylistic appropriation, in the process making something that is new. Nor is descriptive music properly descriptive: if Strauss's tone-poem 'Don Quixote' been given some other title it is doubtful whether anyone would have seen the connection with Cervantes. There is a programme to the music that may or may not be helpful – but it cannot amount to a 'translation' of Cervantes. Here the librettist Jean-Claude Carrière assures us rather grandiosely that 'not only words and music but also space and time need to be translated from one culture to another'. The context is that of Jonathan Harvey's 'Buddhist' opera, *Wagner Dream*. But is it possible to 'translate' Buddhism into music? Rather, one might think that Harvey is attempting to infuse his music with Buddhist elements that might or might not be recognised by its audience.

Ducrot on textiles is informative but she also enters onto dangerous territory. Weaving offers a good many inescapable metaphors; there are rich analogies between weaving and plotting and textile and text. At a very basic level, we may retain or lose the thread of an argument. Yet Ducrot also strips us of some of our illusions – Arachne

cannot be the progenitor of weaving, since a spider's solitary viscous thread is no more than a semblance of cloth: the spider does not *weave* but *glues*. Further, the spider merely repeats the same trick over and over; the weaver makes something that is always new. She dispels an illusion from the dawn of western literature – that of Penelope unweaving by night what she had woven by day to arrest the attention of her suitors. In fact, this is virtually impossible, since it is hard to undo a piece of woven textile without breaking the weft; to unweave a piece of fabric is almost as hopeless, she tells us, as arresting time. Homer, it seems, contrary to Samuel Butler's claim, was clearly not a woman. This, for Ducrot, is just as well, for weaving for her is a female prerogative – and by analogy to weaving (a rather stretched analogy) in human life the infinite chain of bodies issuing from other bodies of which 'males, barren women and women who mother only boys, constitute interruptions'. Weaving, it seems, is not for boys. I like her better for her almost Barthesian observations on the significance of striped clothes and chequered patterns.

Rather than these contestable analogies the true glory of this cahier series lies less in argument than in practice. One of the most evocative is that serving as a memorial to the late Muriel Spark who 'translated' herself from poetry to prose and from Scotland to Italy. The cahier contains excerpts from her diaries, a short memoir, one of her poems, a translation from Horace, a short story, an essay (illustrated by a reproduction of the Piero della Francesca fresco she discusses) and the transcription of a dream (surely you cannot *translate* dreams) together with holographs of her beautifully clear handwriting. It also contains a charmingly eccentric photograph by her showing the torsos of some guests but not their faces, a photograph of the church opposite her house in Italy, and a haunting photograph of an inner room that reminds one of Vermeer. These resonant juxtapositions combine to make a highly satisfying collage, so that in a small space of less than forty pages one has an unforgettable (and in the context poignant) overview of a writer, and a writer's life.

This may seem to take us a good way from the questions of translation proper, and more into a sphere where one art mirrors another, or where one art-form tries to take over or incorporate the elements of another. Rather than translations one may talk instead of translocations, transformations, transpositions. Let me take a recent example. Reading Peter

Maxwell Davies's notes to his Seventh String Quartet I find that he intends it as a tribute to Borromini, each movement taking us to a different Borromini building, and using quite detailed aspects of architecture as the basis for analogous musical structures. One might speak here of music as architecture, somewhat as Donald Davie once saw in Ezra Pound the poet as sculptor. The analogies are suggestive, but it is questionable how far one can take them. Most listeners of Maxwell Davies's new work will (like myself) know little of Borromini and have visited none of his churches. This doesn't, however, make the analogies redundant. They formed the basis for the work, after all, and even if the music in the end must stand or fall on the quality of its music alone, they may still serve the listener heuristically as an entrée to the composer's intentions.

This series of cahiers – elegant with their interwoven (here a nod to Isabella Ducrot) themes and motifs – certainly distance us from the tendency to think in artistic boxes: to see the poem, for example, only in terms of other poems, and not also in relation to prose, music, and the visual arts, out of which it may as much have grown. We are led to a more holistic view of the arts, translation itself of course being an integrative activity in bringing different languages and cultures together. One is grateful too that the originals of the translated poems are provided, so that comparison is possible, reminding us that, if all the translations are into English, English is only one language amongst many, and has no privileges over others. Walter Benjamin reminds us that 'translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages'. Even, he might have added, one's own.

#### Note

This essay looks at the series of Cahiers published jointly by the Center for Writers and Translators at the Arts Arena of the American University of Paris and by Sylph Editions. The aim of the series is 'to make available new explorations in writing, in translating, and in the areas linking these two activities'. The titles available at the time of writing are:

- 1 Richard Pevear, *Translating Music*
- 2 Muriel Spark, *Walking on Air*
- 3 Jonathan Harvey and Jean-Claude Carrière, *Circles of Silence*
- 4 Alan Jenkins, *Drunken Boats*
- 5 Lydia Davis, *Proust, Blanchot and a Woman in Red*
- 6 Isabella Ducrot, *Text on Textile*
- 7 Rachel Shihor, *Days Bygone*
- 8 Paul Muldoon, *When the Pie Was Opened*