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## The Cahiers Series

Michael Lister

An overview of the Cahiers series published jointly by Sylph Editions and the Center for Writers and Translators, American University of Paris.



When Keats wrote that 'a thing of beauty is a joy forever', he might very well have been anticipating the pamphlet publications of the *Cahiers Series*, the first of which is now complete and represents an achievement that will 'never pass into nothingness'. Already embarked on Book Two, Sylph Editions continues in its new titles to provide for us what Keats described as 'a quiet bower'. The aim of the entire series is 'to make available new explorations in writing and translating, and in the areas linking these two activities.' Sylph Editions can take pride in its *Cahiers*, particularly in the creative complementing of the visual with the textual.

For the first of the series, *Translating Music*, Richard Pevear translates Pushkin's 'The Tale of the Preacher and His Man Bumpkin', a verse-tale dating from the 1830s, here accompanied by reproductions of Pushkin's own doodlings and drawings. In his introduction, Pevear mischievously quotes the wisely sceptical Voltaire, 'to translate poetry is impossible... Can one translate music?', before reminding us (and the shade of Voltaire) that the tradition he belongs to as a poet-translator goes back to Chaucer and earlier. On the art of literary translation, the *Cahier* includes a talk that Pevear gave to a Tolstoy conference in 2006: 'The Translator's Inner Voice'. Here, Pevear defines translation as being 'a dialogue between two languages' which 'takes place in a space between'. Of no encouragement to the faint-hearted, would-be translator, in the second paragraph of his talk, he relates the following anecdote: 'when I mentioned to a Russian friend that we were translating *War and Peace*, he said, Well, that's easier than Dostoevsky. Tolstoy wrote good Russian prose.' If you were thinking of translating Dostoevsky at home, you have been warned...

Muriel Spark's *Walking on Air* comes second in the *Cahiers* series, and might be regarded as the first of her posthumous publications. The nine short works, some of which are fragments and fugitive pieces that evaded publication during Spark's lifetime, include an account of a dream, a poem, a short essay, a short story, the text of an on-line 'blog', and a translation of an Horatian ode. Compiled by the Scottish-born critic and writer Dan Gunn with the assistance of Penelope Jardine, Spark's long-term companion and secretary, *Walking on Air* is a little marvel.

Jonathan Harvey's and Jean-Claude Carrière's *Circle of Silence* marks a new departure for the series, taking us into the world of music proper, and the art of composition. The Mozart aphorism, 'the silence between the notes is as important as the notes themselves' serves as an epigraph to the conversation between the composer Harvey and the librettist Carrière on the subject of *Wagner Dream*, their collaborative opera on the last moments of Wagner's life in which the composer meets the Buddha. Harvey's essay 'Buddhism and the Undecidability of Music' examines his own aesthetic and the way in which it is informed by Buddhist practice.



In *Text on Textile*, we move from the aural to the tactile, as Neapolitan artist Isabella Ducrot considers in cultural, historical and linguistic terms the woven fabric of our lives. While in *Drunken Boats* and *Proust, Blanchot and a Woman in Red*, the accent is on France and the French, where Alan Jenkins takes his own trip on Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau ivre', and Lynne Davis writes about three writers 'who have been very important in her career as translator'. Of her struggles with Proust, Davis has written up 'An Alphabet of Proust Translation Problems', and gives some entries from it. The most troublesome is surely the 'elegant *dont*, that blasted French *dont*', which has scunnered generations of schoolchildren, students and professional literary translators.

The most recent *Cahiers* are Rachel Shihor's *Days Bygone* and Paul Muldoon's *When the Pie Was Opened*. *Days Bygone*, consisting of four extracts from Shihor's second novel *Yankinton*, evokes her childhood Tel Aviv. In his 'Remarks on the translation', Ornan Rotem gives fascinating insights into the translation questions surrounding modern Hebrew. The ink and pen-and-wash drawings reproduced in this *Cahier* are by David Hendler, a Russian-born, Tel Aviv painter. Never part of any salon, Hendler lived a hand-to-mouth existence, and only since his death in 1984 at the age of eighty is his work being given the attention it deserves.

In the preface to *When the Pie Was Opened*, a collection of poems and translations, Paul Muldoon writes about his earliest attempts, when he was encouraged at school to submit to *The Irish Press* his renderings into English of Irish poems, and recalls the sense that brought of being 'translated into writerdom'.

Here, Muldoon translates from the Old English 'Wulf and Eadwacer', a woman's song of loss and longing, and from the mediaeval Welsh of Dafydd ap Gwilym's erotic 'Y Gal', which is both a celebration of and lament for his 'membrum virile', or as Muldoon has it, 'the trouser-problem personified'. Another erotic piece comes from Ovid's *Amores*, Book I, Elegy V - where the poet remembers his post-meridian sport with Corinna in the shade, but takes us only so far down memory lane before leaving 'the rest... to your imagination. We'd soon be/dog-tired, suffice to say,/dead to the world. If only more afternoons would turn/out this way.' And later in the collection, and in a different mood, Muldoon meditates on his balls, in a ball-brooding poem called, quite simply, 'Balls'. Other translations are 'An Spailín Fánach - The Wandering Navvy', which, for Muldoon, is that 'great rollicking Irish song', and 'Gypsies', by Kostis Palamas, the modern Greek patriot. The drawings and engravings that accompany *When The Pie Was Opened* are by the Sicilian artist Lanfranco Quadrio.

Intellectually stimulating, aesthetically delightful and produced to the very highest standards, as well as being at a price that cannot be said to be unaffordable, it is difficult to find fault with any of these *Cahiers*. My only criticism would be that there are not more titles.



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EDITIONS

The *Cahiers Series* to date:

Book One

Cahier 1. Richard Pevear. *Translating Music*

Cahier 2. Muriel Spark. *Walking on Air*

Cahier 3. Jonathan Harvey and Jean-Claude Carrière. *Circles of Silence*

Cahier 4. Alan Jenkins. *Drunken Boats*

Cahier 5. Lydia David. *Proust, Blanchot and a Woman in Red*

Cahier 6. Isabella Ducrot. *Text on Textile*

Book Two

Cahier 7. Rachel Shihor. *Days Bygone*

Cahier 8. Paul Muldoon. *When the Pie Was Opened*

Subscriptions and purchasing details for single copies (£10 per *Cahier*) and boxed editions can be found on the Sylph Editions website: [www.sylpheditions.com](http://www.sylpheditions.com).

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