

Dear Reader,

Many thanks to all of you who have subscribed to our monthly e-newsletter, and welcome to our first edition. Inside you will find news, articles, reviews, interviews and special offers. We hope you enjoy reading this as much as we did writing and compiling it.

Your comment and feedback is always appreciated – so, if you've any suggestions or criticisms, please let us know by contacting us on info@oneworldclassics.com

Best wishes, as ever,
The Oneworld Classics Team

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ONEWORLD CLASSICS E-NEWSLETTER



TRANSLATOR, TRAITOR?

J.G. Nichols



Literary translation is often disparaged. By this I do not necessarily mean any particular translation, but simply the process itself. How often have we heard quoted the witty, and in some ways perceptive, comment of Robert Frost that “poetry is what gets lost in translation”? And there is of course an Italian saying which puts the objection more tersely still: “traduttore – traditore”. This saying deserves to be better known in England; for that it needs (irony of ironies) to be translated, and – to compound the irony – it turns out to be that rare thing, a phrase which virtually translates itself (“translator – traitor”), with the translation using the same number of words as the original and even echoing the rhyme of the original! Such a direct rendering is occasionally possible: it is the rarity of such renderings that leads to the notion that to translate is somehow to profane the original, or at least do something to it which is “not quite nice”.

Any literature which is worth the considerable effort required to translate it is able to look after itself: after all, it still exists in its original form after translation, indeed often *en face* in the same book. So we can, I think, discount any idea of irreverence, pollution, or lack of respect. Nevertheless, it is clear that, when we consider just a few of the problems a translator has to deal with, the task may well seem impossible. Perhaps it is worth adding that something similar might be said – although it never is – of the writing of any poetry. How can anyone write in metre and rhyme and yet say exactly what he wants to say? The various requirements are bound to clash, and some must inevitably suffer, so that in theory the composition of poetry is simply impossible. But poetry does get composed, and has been composed from time immemorial: and so persuasive theory must give way to hard fact. May we not expect something similar to be the case with translation, even of poetry?

Support is lent to this notion by another hard fact: those whom we call “original” poets have often been also, and even at the very same moment, translators. Much of Spenser’s poetry is translation, sometimes acknowledged and sometimes not, but never with any attempt to hide it; and the same may be said of Ben Jonson. We may recall too that Dryden, when he was in a position to write whatever he wanted after a lifetime of writing for a living, chose to devote his maturity – and what he must have known were the last few years of his life – to translation, with astonishing results. T.S. Eliot has even suggested that Dryden’s versions of Lucretius may well be better than the originals. One sees what he means, even though it must be admitted (and this is important) that only an ancient Roman who was also a native speaker of late seventeenth-century English could pronounce with authority on the matter.

At the very least Eliot’s remark is a timely reminder that it is an error to presume that the differences between an original and its translation must always be to the disadvantage of the latter. That is what is usually presumed; but Goethe, when asked, “What relation should a translation bear to its original?” answered simply, “Schöner” (“more beautiful”). As a very brief illustration of how this can happen, think of the famous opening of a sonnet by Ronsard:

“Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir à la chandelle,
Assise auprès du feu...”

(lit: When you are very old, in the evening by candlelight, / sitting beside the fire...)

That is turned by Yeats in this fashion:

“When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire...”

In this short extract only – ignoring the rest of the poem where Yeats gets lost in a Celtic mist, while Ronsard grows stronger and stronger – it is hard to doubt Yeats’s superiority.

Yeats’s success here could hardly have been achieved without Ronsard; and there is nothing unusual about that. Poets are, and always have been, plunderers of other poets: the true patron of poetry is, or certainly ought to be, Hermes, the god of thieves. To vary the metaphor, poets feed off each other like cannibals, or, to vary the metaphor once again, they live in a welter of incestuous relationships. This is something to which a blind eye is often turned in our squeamish Romantic or post-Romantic age; but it has always been a fact of life for a poet and also, although often less obviously, for the writer of prose too.

Imaginative writers form a network we might call the Communion of Sinners, world-wide and age-old, and if they are by their nature promiscuous and incestuous, need we complain of a little miscegenation? This is often unacknowledged nowadays, but poets once were inclined to shout it from the rooftops: Gray, for instance, sometimes included notes with his poems to alert the reader to his “borrowings” (our euphemistic modern term for poetic theft).

However, even if a form of translation is inveterate and inevitable, its difficulties should not be ignored. Every translator lives in fear of perpetrating, either from momentary inattention or longlasting ignorance, some dreadful howler. I recall a review, generally favourable, of a translation of some poems by Georg Trakl, where such a lapse was noted. The German word Heim means “home”, and the German suffix *chen* is normally used as a diminutive. So it is perhaps not altogether surprising that the translator rendered the word Heimchen as “little home”: unfortunately Heimchen means “cricket” (the insect, not the game)! When I read the review, my initial shudder of sympathy for the translator quickly gave way to another thought: if an otherwise competent translator could think that a word meant “little home” when it really meant “cricket”, what does this tell us of the context of that word, of the kind of poetry that Trakl wrote? Translation, we see, can often illuminate the original, or in this case reveal its obscurity. Nevertheless, that was a howler. Translators are lucky if they know someone whose native tongue is the source language, and who can check what they write, and not just for howlers but with more subtle considerations also in mind.

It is possible for a translator to be in a sense completely right and accurate, and yet ultimately wrong. One of the most famous books in post-war Italy is Carlo Levi’s *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* – that vivid account of appalling living conditions in Italy’s far south in the 1930s. The accepted title in English, now hallowed by years of use, is *Christ stopped at Eboli*. This is grammatically accurate, and utterly misleading. The English title makes us think of Christ paying a visit to the town of Eboli, somewhat on the lines of “Queen Elizabeth slept here”. However, the true significance of the Italian is that Christ’s influence never went beyond Eboli; His influence did not reach to the far south, where the inhabitants do not, or apparently did not when Levi was writing, think of themselves as cristiani (which in Italian means of course both Christians and human beings). The title should be rendered quite differently; although I confess I have never come up with an alternative that is both brief and accurate.

Even the simplest sentences usually undergo considerable change when translated. I can illustrate this best by a personal reminiscence. One day some years ago, when I was translating Leopardi, I came to the point at the end of the day where I realised that I was too tired to go on, but also, as can easily happen, too tired to switch my computer off and walk away. In something of a daze I looked at the title of one of Leopardi’s poems, ‘Sopra il monumento di Dante che si preparava in Firenze’, and deliberately translated it completely literally:

‘On the monument of Dante which was being prepared in Florence’.

Then the old habit reasserted itself, and I found I was putting the title through five other versions, as follows:

‘On the monument to Dante which was in preparation in Florence’,

‘On the preparation of a/the monument to Dante in Florence’,

‘On the preparation of Dante’s monument in Florence’,

‘On the provision of a monument to Dante in Florence’

and, at long last,

‘On the proposed monument to Dante in Florence’.

All this normally happens much more quickly, and of course happens only in the mind: life would be impossible otherwise. But if this is, in slow motion, the sort of process a simple title has to undergo, then one can readily imagine the complications involved in the translation of poetry.

The very simplicity, indeed banality, of Leopardi’s title is a reminder that a translator’s problems need not come from any superiority in the source language. That may at times be so, but seldom. All languages are always superior to other languages in some respects, and inferior in others: the unchanging fact is that they are very different. I remember once suggesting to the late W.G. Sebald

that his language, German, might be particularly suitable as a translator's target language: this thought was suggested to me by personal experiences – a chance reading in a German newspaper of a remarkably neat version of Southey's *After Blenheim*; also another encounter, again by chance, in a German bookshop with a version of Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (which is itself a translation of course); also a happy acquaintance with J.H. Voss's *Odyssey* in German hexameters; and finally some knowledge of the renowned Tieck-Schlegel version of Shakespeare. Sebald rejected my idea immediately, and I am bound to admit that he was much more likely to be right than I was, but I still wonder... What there is no doubt about is that English as the target language has the advantage of a huge vocabulary: where the Greeks had a word for it, the English are likely to have five. This obviously gives the English translator more choice in his search for the right word. Not quite so obviously, it also gives him a greater possibility, particularly when he is constrained by the exigencies of rhyme and metre, of choosing what is in important respects the wrong word: it is possible to have too much choice for comfort. Remember those sinners in Dante's *Inferno* who had used flattery to gain their sinful ends? They are shown weltering in human excrement, they are now literally "in the shit", and they are so filthy that Dante cannot make out which of them are clerics and which lay people. This has been translated thus:

"And as my searching gaze I downward bent,
I saw the head of one, but whether lay
Or clerk appeared not, 'twas so shit-besprent."

The two parts of that last, hyphenated word shout at each other. "Shit" is right in meaning and register: "besprent" belongs to different circumstances altogether. And the reason for the ludicrous lapse of taste is, as often in English, the need for a rhyme.

There are times when a translator cannot be right even in his own eyes. A reviewer of a recent version for Hesperus Press of Giovanni Verga's *Life in the Country* (*Vita dei Campi*) qualified his generally favourable comments by complaining of what he called an "aggressively up-to-the-minute idiomatic style": he instanced a horse having cost its owner "an arm and a leg". His argument was that a certain atmosphere of foreignness needed to be maintained. I am myself still happy with "an arm and a leg" for the Italian "un occhio della testa" (lit: an eye out of his head), since the English expression is, like the Italian, colloquial, and the metaphor in both sayings is physical, while to translate more literally would in English suggest physical violence, as though the buyer had actually had an eye knocked out; but I do see the force of the reviewer's other example ("Whitey" for the name of a horse called Bianca), and can indeed also see the proper names "Windmill Hill" and the "Feast of St John" as phrases which might profitably have been left in Italian. My reasoning had been that the characters and actions in Verga's stories were so very unEnglish that the local colour did not need boosting; moreover, if left in the Italian, they would have needed a note. Nevertheless, I was uncertain at the time, and I am still more uncertain after the reviewer's comments.

I have on other occasions come up with solutions which I would still stand by, but which are wide open to objections. My translation of the poems of Guido Gozzano is littered with reminiscences of English poets, not because Gozzano did this, but because he inlaid his poems with echoes of Italian poets, and I was hoping to create a similar effect in English. Again, some of word-play in Petrarch's Italian poems seems to me to call for bold, or even reckless, solutions. Petrarch loves to pun on Laura's name: it suggests his other main obsession – the laurel wreath which stands for fame; it also suggests (from the Latin aurum) gold, which is the colour of Laura's hair; and it suggests too (from the Italian aura) a breeze or a breath. It was in connection with this last meaning that I translated a line from one of the poems written after Laura's death, "è l'aura mia vital da me partita" (lit: Laura, my vital breath, has gone from me) by "she, l'aura mia, my breath of life has gone". This may possibly in its method be too reminiscent of those leaflets of instructions in many languages for sophisticated pieces of equipment, like watches and videos, those instructions where one looks to another language because the English is incomprehensible; but I still cannot think of a better way.

In all that I have said it will have been obvious that I do not value poetry, or any other branch of literature, as mere self-expression or as a kind of psychotherapy. It may at times be such; but I really do find it hard to be interested in other people's medication. The power of the words themselves is what attracts me. I believe that essentially, if one values translation, one is going back behind Romantic or post-Romantic conceptions of literature to an earlier conception of literature as valuable in itself, without reference to the author, who may well be unknown, or even perhaps would be better unknown.

I should like to suggest that there is a way of looking at translation which fits in with a certain influential, although in many ways regrettable, modern tendency – that is, the insistence on quantifying everything. If Dante, say, has so very much to offer, even to convey only ten per cent of his value is worthwhile. Also, Thomas Mann's books have meant a great deal to me since I was in my teens, and yet I have read only one of them, the short *Tonio Kröger*, in German. The others I have read in the now infamous Lowe-Porter translations. These have become a byword for inaccuracy and infelicity; but they have given pleasure to countless people who had neither the time, nor in most cases the knowledge of German, to enjoy them in the original. If even poor translations can do that, think what a good translation can do!

– J.G. Nichols

POEM OF THE MONTH

Two Boys by Mike Stocks

However it may be that those two boys
decided to explore the disused shaft,
and whether it was someone's taunting laugh
that egged them on, or just their own "ahoy"s

echoing back to them – they went ahead,
and three days later rescue teams went down
and found them curled together underground,
and one was still alive, and one was dead.

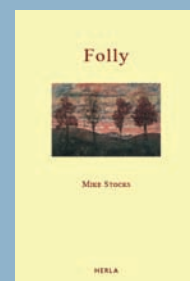
The fathers waiting at the top were told,
but didn't know whose boy was quarry-cold
until the live one was brought out at last,

and when they saw him both of them collapsed
like slaughtered stock. And you will never see
a man held by a man so helplessly.

From *Folly* by Mike Stocks

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offer ends 30th June 2007)



MY FAVOURITE CLASSIC

TOM MCCARTHY

reflects on an enduring fascination with
Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*



Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad is a perfect fusion of symbolist aesthetics, first-person confessional narrative, political critique, high Greek tragedy and, most devastating of all, twentieth-century irony. On a yawl moored outside London, the old sea-hand Marlow tells his story of a journey to the African interior in search of wayward ivory station-master and general European visionary Kurtz. As civilisation's trappings peel away, signs, language and meaning itself start drifting and crumbling just like the tin-pot steamer on which Marlow chugs towards his assignation. Mangroves writhe in impotent despair; warships fire cannons at imaginary enemies; the earth seems unearthly; giant trees loom above the river like primordial kings. Kurtz himself, it turns out, has let the jungle whisper to him things about himself – about us – that we're not meant to know. They echo loudly within him, because he's "hollow at the core". He dies, uttering the immortal lines "The horror! The horror!" – and Marlow, having glimpsed the darkness to which Kurtz has succumbed, is faced with a choice: reveal to Kurtz's fiancée and, by extension, Europe, the truth about its heart, or smooth the darkness over with a lie...

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OUR BOOKSELLER RECOMMENDS

Mark Jackson enjoys some of the latest titles from the new Oneworld Classics series

James Hanley (1901–85) is a writer of great power and intensity of vision and it is cause for celebration that Oneworld have reissued *Boy*, one of his most famous novels. Written in 1931 it is the story of a twelve-year old boy who undergoes a terrifying ordeal through stowing away aboard a ship bound for Alexandria. Written in a stark and uncompromising style, *Boy* is a gripping read, which was rightly hailed by William Faulkner and others as one of the best realist novels of the early twentieth century.



Many years in the writing, *Sakhalin Island* is Anton Chekhov's account of his journey to the Sakhalin penal colony in 1890. This is a work of meticulous observation, infused by Chekhov's compassion and despair at the hopelessness of Russian life. It's Chekhov's main work of non-fiction and a brilliant piece of writing. His journey to Sakhalin changed Chekhov for ever; approaching the island from the sea, Chekhov sees smoke coming from the strait and it is as if he is approaching hell itself:



The horrifying scene, compounded of darkness, the silhouettes of mountains, smoke, flames and fiery sparks was fantastic. On my left, monstrous fires were burning, above them the mountains, and beyond the mountains a red glow rose to the sky from remote conflagrations. It seemed that all of Sakhalin was on fire.

This is both a vivid picture of Russia at the end of the nineteenth century and a fascinating snapshot of the imaginative life of one of the world's greatest writers.



Mark Jackson is the Manager of Calder Bookshop at 51 The Cut, London SE1 8LF. Previously he worked for Waterstones in Putney.

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OUT OF THE DUST

Cecco Angiolieri of Siena

No portrait has survived of Cecco Angiolieri of Siena (1260–c.1312), Dante's contemporary and rival, but a long tradition has perpetuated the image of a bohemian poet, a lover of gambling, women and wine. Frustrated by the longevity of his rich but miserly father and his beloved Becchina's constant rebuffing of his advances, Cecco vented his spleen through venomous sonnets in the same language as Dante and Cavalcanti, but in a completely different tone and spirit. In open opposition to the niceties of courtly poetry and the Stil Novo, he favours a more realistic and light-hearted approach. A classic in Italy, where he is widely studied, Cecco is largely unknown in this country. He has been very rarely translated into English – most famously by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the 1870s, and since then only by a handful of Italian academics or enthusiasts.

If few people have heard of Cecco Angiolieri, certainly fewer still have had the privilege to read the beautiful verse translation of Cecco's sonnets by C.H. Scott. Printed originally in 1925 in a limited edition of thirty copies for private circulation, this little gem – clearly a labour of love – remained unnoticed for decades until it was recently unearthed by our publisher. A new edition of Cecco's sonnets in Scott's translation will be available in February 2008 in the Oneworld Classics Connoisseur series, in a limited hardback edition of 250 copies.

If, Dante, I'm a born buffoon...

If, Dante, I'm a born buffoon, I swear
You run a tilt against me quite as hard;
If I with others dine, you supper there,
And if I bite the fat, you suck the lard;

If cloth I shear, the nap on it you raise,
And if I'm dissolute, you're just as free;
If I've the noble, you're the learned ways;
If I'm for Rome – well, you're for Lombardy.

Then, thank the Lord, there's little to be said
Of vantage won for either at this hour:
To want of wit or luck we owe our knocks.

And if you've more to say upon this head,
Dant'Alighier, I've got you in my power:
For I'm the gadfly now, and you're the ox.

FOUND IN TRANSLATION

Vangelis Hatziyannidis, *Stolen Time*
Marion Boyars, March 2007, £7.99

Ismail Kadare, *Chronicle in Stone*
Canongate, May 2007, £7.99

Georges Simenon, *The Engagement*
New York Review, March 2007, \$12.95

This month we would like to highlight three recently published translations: two by contemporary authors and one a modern classic.

The first one is *Stolen Time*, a second novel by Vangelis Hatziyannidis, translated from the Greek by Anne-Marie Stanton-Ife. It is an intense, atmospheric, harrowing tale of a young archeology student who is mysteriously invited by a group of intellectuals to stay in a hotel and be interviewed by them, with surprising and chilling consequences. The novel is at once a compelling exploration of the human psyche and an examination of the dynamics of power and surveillance. Also of interest is the new paperback edition of *Chronicle in Stone* by Prize-winning Albanian writer Ismail Kadare, a beautiful coming-of-age story set in Albania at the onset of the Second World War. *Chronicle in Stone*, originally published in 1971, is one of Kadare's earliest masterpieces, which has long been championed by writers such as John Updike, but has only recently received the recognition it amply deserves. Finally, New York Review of Books has published a new translation, by Anna Moschovakis, of Georges Simenon's classic psychological thriller *The Engagement*, which deals with the fate of an innocent outsider figure wrongly accused of murdering a prostitute. One of Simenon's finest *romans durs*, this gritty existential tale begs to be rediscovered.

THE LAMBASTER

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne

*A broadly acknowledged masterpiece hung, drawn and quartered by
The Lambaster*

It baffles me how Hawthorne's alleged "masterpiece" ranks in anyone's estimation as a good – never mind a great – book. It tells the story of a man working in a "custom house", who discovers an old manuscript in the building, which tells the story of a woman guilty of adultery.

Everyone talks about how it was a pioneering work opening up new possibilities of psychological drama in American fiction: but in fact the psychology described is insultingly simplistic, the only way Hawthorne indicates the profound depths of the soul is by using more exclamation marks, the character portrayal is wafer-thin, and at no point whatsoever does Hawthorne make the reader care about these characters, who bear no resemblance to real human beings.

The best parts of the book in terms of writing are definitely the introductory sections about the "custom house" – however, these sections are mind-numbingly boring, so they hardly make up for the other faults mentioned.

The book has also been praised for its depiction of the lives of the Puritans, but this depiction is so two-dimensional, it hardly counts as a merit. Having read the book quite recently, the only thing I can remember learning from Hawthorne about the Puritans is that they don't like adultery very much, which I believe I could have realized all by myself after a moment's thought.

The personality of the narrator comes across unsympathetically as well, since the narrative voice is so irritating, with the incredible overuse of exclamation marks making the tone downright hysterical.

So please Mr Hawthorne, go back to the custom house, do renovations and refurbishments, and – please please please!!!!!! – don't find any more manuscripts.

(NB: The views expressed in this article are not necessarily shared by the OWC Team)

JUNE EVENTS AT THE CALDER BOOKSHOP

Tuesday 5th June 7pm The Cut Writers Group
New writers discuss their work

Thursday 7th June 6.45pm
The Poetry of TS Eliot
Read by Karin Fernald and Peter Marinker

Tuesday 12th June 7pm
Jane Hawking talks about her new memoir,
Travelling to Infinity: My Life with Stephen Hawking

Thursday 14th June 7pm
Virginia Woolf's Strangest novel: *Orlando*
read by Karin Fernald and other actors

Tuesday 19th June 7pm The Cut Writers Group
New writers discuss their work.

Thursday 21st June 7pm
Witchhunt in America: The Joe McCarthy and
the Unamerican Activities Committee

Sunday 24th June 3pm;
The Cut Reading Group
We will be discussing *The Mystery of the Sardine*
by Stefan Themerson

Thursday 28th June 7pm
Shakespeare's Great Speeches and How to Perform Them.
Readings and discussion

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