

Editorial

by Paul Stubbs

On January 15th, 1967, in one of a series of letters exchanged between the poets W.H. Auden and Michael Hamburger concerning the translations of German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, Auden wrote that he was trying ‘to account for what I’m sure you’ll agree with me is a fact, namely that Hölderlin is easier to get across in translation than say, Goethe.’ Such a declaration celebrates only linguistic limitation and accepts it as its one most *expansive* idea. The necessary visionary delirium to create an upheaval in perception in *any* language was always lost on Auden of course, the odour of egoism being much too strong. Yet this casual ‘get across’ says more about the English estrangement in a foreign language than it does about any accurate attempt to translate the great German poet. Larkin likewise, when responding to a question put to him by acerbic British critic Ian Hamilton on whether or not he read European literature replied ‘No! foreign languages are irrelevant!’, and while the comments of both poets, like their poetry, remain as imaginatively ineffectual as a weather-report, the apathetic way in which they dealt with translation has, for a certain category of English-speaking translators, continued to have grave consequences to this day.

The history of English-speaking translators, like a vast mistimed geological age, continues to make giant fossil-errors, but in *words*, failing to excavate huge vistas of the original language to locate the necessary word-size, and thus allowing too many imaginary-fractures to occur in the strata of the ‘host’ language. In a recent review of *Flies and Monkeys* by the French poet Jacques Dupin (Bitter Oleander Press, 2011, excellently translated by John Taylor) I wrote of the fatal dangers of this continuous attempt by some English-speaking translators to ‘anglicise’ European languages: ‘...a most repugnant activity currently practiced by far too many writers/translators who sometimes even have no real or thorough knowledge of the original language they ‘translate’. The word ‘version’ (versus ‘translation’) of course has opened up the door for any ‘hack’ to give it a go, hence we are forced to endure the barbarous and elongated CVs of poets who claim they can translate in around 10 to 15 different languages.’

What is true though is that no matter what language is in the process of being ‘carried’ over into an alien structure/meaning, the writer cannot at any cost afford to drop the notion of ‘seeing to the edge of language’ (Wittgenstein). And while the phenomenal preposterousness of *any* language produced so easily through pedagogical error (i.e., the creative workshop) does not deserve much more contempt or derision within these pages, it is still to be hoped that when one language is being mutated into another the irreversible sensibility of any truly original writer is allowed to remain, is left open to engage with a three-dimensional synthesis to *everything*, that which manages to solidify the splintering of any two

opposing worlds. Only at the level of the soul can an idea by a writer be deemed worthy; he must in fact endeavour to offer up any of the *foreign* bodies of the universe onto the spit of his own 'I' and watch them turn slowly in the fires of his imagination. 'Meaning', whether *heard* upon the edge of the froth and the pulp of an epileptic's never-to-be-spoken language, or from the mouth of say Hölderlin's *other* personality 'Scardanelli', must be allowed to sing in its *own* tongue. The mind and voice likewise to survive in antiphonal and antithetical opposition; the translator must therefore create for himself something approaching a neuter-self, shedding only syntactical solutions, with personality as something *solved*. For one truth always remains: semantic solutions are not to be found in the disharmony between a translator's 'intent' and the original language, and certainly not from the giant generalisations of a great number of modern English translations. Not until the translator, mirroring *nothing*, begins to evade or overthrow his own ego and to free himself of his own fictive concepts of it, will he be able to self-correct the distances between *any* two antithetical languages.

The grammar of the *mystery* of the mind, or that of a near-impenetrable one requires a non-ontological plain in which to project the mind anew; and likewise the shadow of any future understanding. When Rimbaud's biographer, Edgell Rickwood, wrote 'his last poems are the babblings of a wisdom so deep and clear that they escape continuously the grasp of formal expression' (*Rimbaud—The Boy And The Poet*), he struck upon a salient point in the semantic conflict between what constitutes 'babble' and what constitutes 'truth'. For visionary babblings *are* a literary form in themselves, possessing their own anti-formulistic and irreducible advantages: when all literary trimmings have been reduced to the one single organism of language that *cries*, we sometimes locate a language, as in Rimbaud, that correlates only to the time-zones of its own archaeology of thought—'What is to be understood from my words? / They flee and fly!' (*Ô Saisons, Ô châteaux*). The Romanian-born philosopher E.M. Cioran wrote 'In the life of the mind, there occurs a moment when style, transforming itself into an autonomous principle, becomes fate'. A truth that finds no remedy in *itself*, is no willed metamorphosis, merely an *aggressive* originality, as if expressiveness and disorder, like blood and bacteria, were *inventing* for themselves a new disease. It was of course Hölderlin who decided to address such oracular acts of self-transcendence by 'going directly to the source', he who also endeavoured to locate 'a single mind, a single imagination, to embrace them all.' (Hamburger). The 'oneness' that he sought out was an infinitely complex entity, a subcutaneous compass that twitched at his core with eternal *opposites*... Which neither perfected or destroyed him, but continually re-birthed his imagination and allowed his own blood to rush to the heads of as-yet-unborn Gods. Hölderlin, like Rimbaud, János Pilinszky, Mina Loy, W.S. Graham, Cummings, Dickinson, Celan, among others, wrote a poetry that quite rightly *excluded* the reader. The sober truth of course being that poets in themselves are not important, and it is their *irrelevance* that makes them so interesting. The anaesthetic of 'personality' of any writer should have worn off long before he or she decides to pick up the pen. And so today if any kind of a radical originality is to be re-found then the

writer should first eradicate at once the idiotic superfluity of accepting the modern workshop ethos of ‘meeting the reader half-way...’. To even allow the idea of a possible future reader to enter into the creative process is to spectacularly sabotage the work at hand. Only the non-creative publisher, critic and teacher can afford such an ideological luxury; so let it be said for the *last* time that the reader, in the writer’s mind, is nothing but an abstract aggravation, an untimely statistic, and should be nailed to the cross of his own quite incurable dissatisfactions.

The antinomies between what constitutes ‘difficult’ and ‘accessible’ literature, while showing no signs yet of being resolved, do at least provide us with the crumbs of what once was a tangible argument/discussion. ‘Accessibility’ is still the great semantic immobilizer, proposing a window that is, in truth, already a brick wall; a slow act of mental barbarism caged in by habit, preference and a bungling sociability. Yet what is considered ‘difficult’ writing is in itself only the imagination refined to facts. What irks the ‘broad church’ crowd so much of course is the kind of writing so unformulated by their *own* terrorism of ‘taste’. Only the second-rate and counterfeit reader will fail to understand that what today is considered ‘contrary’ to popular taste is in fact only the universe reduced to the articulations of its most *necessary* sentence. The sometimes disjointed syntax of the visionary poet is, as Michael Hamburger pointed out ‘no longer conscious of anything but the vision’. And thus the latter quickly and succinctly sought to disperse the inevitable confusion felt by the minor reader when encountering such verse by writing: ‘Such poetry is ‘difficult’ only as long as we try to translate it into the conventional logic of prose argument, which lacks the speed and agility required to follow its daring juxtaposition of thought and imagery’. So let us imagine then a future age of the breakdown of the DNA of the ‘traditional’ writer/reader relationship, which will hopefully allow writers to be one day ‘absolutely modern’ (Rimbaud).

When Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote ‘we feel that when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched... of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer’, he probably got closer than most poets so far to a true understanding of human indeterminacy, providing not just a non-empirical and possible *escape* from ‘subject-matter’, but also foreseeing *and* diagnosing what many modern poets still suffer from: hebetude, that or the kind of luxuriant metaphysics that sees the *self* overrun by the by-products of an imagination failing all too often to deliver the writer from the facile literary questions of aesthetics, genre, style etc. Pessoa called Shakespeare ‘the most insincere of all the poets’, a stolid truth, but we could go further and say that writers could become *more* insincere, *more* negative, *more* impersonal, until the choices that they make are as commonplace as their uncertainties, mysteries, doubts. Ambivalence is the most fundamental of all the truths. The mind after all, like the soul, is only one of man’s many interiors ‘against which the whole of being surges and breaks’ (Ernst Meister). Yet the ontology of all mental landscapes is still to be populated with a figure so *fallen* that he might be capable of passing *beyond* the borderlines of meaning itself, to evade presence and the great ‘trinity’ of epistemology:

Knowledge, History, Time. Only the unidentifiable writer out of his mind with *another* mind, while feeling obscurantic, elliptical and beginning to punctuate irrationality has a chance of achieving this, to draw finally the 'I' like a sword from the scabbard of his most *defeated* imaginative body. So if a writer is going to get the geography of his own mind into a work then it can never be any more than a fragment of a map of a questionless centre, a self-effacing gravity in which the body, language and history are hurled. It is to hear what Wallace Stevens depicted as 'The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind'; despite the fact that we do not yet *know* what the mind is, and so to 'evade' it will require the kind of poem-denying idea as penetrating as those very same 'thoughts evaded'.

Thus the daily 'habit' of writing, for me, merely to *aggravate* the need to write, will always remain an anomaly, an alien construction, off-limits to the cosmic trance and bursting of the spheres that constitutes the true necessitous act: to induce the most hidden idea of creation, self, voice, is only to set God aside from space and time and language, and to metaphysically *refuse* the universe, at least for the duration of a word. But we do not necessarily need to believe in the future of metaphysics to understand just what will allow this to happen *naturally*. It is becoming clearer and clearer to me every day. I explained it recently by stating that the next poets to arrive '...will be forced to sling-shot their bodies 'beyond' the reach even of the imagination and/or language (...) For those now operating on a level beyond the nominal association of words the imagination will come to seem like a horrible twin to the biological cell, a new petrified mathematics of sensation that will 'assert' time, while 'disclaiming' history. But if experience is to be antedated by language, then the imagination will be forced to 'give up' the human form and tremble anew, like a volcano, with its bodies-in-the-making...'

And so if for a moment we dare allow ourselves to imagine Heidegger's dictum, 'Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells', to be true, then it would be clear that for the writer of today, tomorrow and beyond, a door to this 'house' will have to be re-imagined. For maybe then the writer will step free of the barricades of ALL individual and syntactical constraints and begin to re-trade once more in guttural noises, whelps, howls and fricative distortions, with any *new* civilization, ideological species or speechless bloodied race that happens to be passing by... And in that way at least the reader, translator, writer, critic can be returned to the purity of a pre-linguistic age, that which Hölderlin himself predicted would occur again when he wrote of the day 'when the silence returns' and the writer, *into* being, finally dissolves.

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