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## THE UNSUNG HEROES OF POETRY

**"Translators barely receive a mention,  
but they deserve a Nobel prize."**

Not so long ago, it was not unheard of for publishers to issue English translations of foreign-language novels without acknowledging their translators. Such omissions may be infrequent now, but reviews of translated works still rarely refer to their translator, except maybe to commend the translation for not reading like one, or for reading smoothly - fluency being considered a virtue in translations, however craggy the originals. Invisibility, it seems, is still regarded as the ultimate accolade.

Where translators have made their presence felt they have become controversial, with those who characteristically intervene, seeking to domesticate texts, contrasted with those who foreignise, supposedly allowing other languages to alter our own. Of course, a certain kind of invisibility may seem positive, insofar as a translator allows the source text to penetrate the target language precisely by not interposing himself. In his introduction to his translations of the Israeli poet, the late Yehuda Amichai, Ted Hughes noted: "What I wanted to preserve was the tone and cadence of Amichai's own voice speaking in English, which seems to me marvellously true to the poetry in these renderings." Hughes was talking here about Amichai's preliminary English renderings of his own poetry. Hughes's approach was one of "creative non-intervention", since he did no more, as he said, than "correct the more intrusive oddities and errors of grammar and usage", thereby allowing Amichai's English poems to speak for themselves, even if in an English substantially at least of the Israeli poet's own making. As a translator, Hughes listened to Amichai's voice and did not shout it down.

Still, translators, though often ignored by scholars as well as reviewers, are, in fact, far from invisible. While one may easily exaggerate the translator's role or influence, obviously a translation must embody the reading of a text, and no reading can be neutral. So, what the reader of the translation is absorbing is a previous reading. Even if not the originator of a work, the translator is inevitably, to an extent, its re-writer.

This should be fairly obvious, yet few stop to think about it and publishers still tend to pass over the facts when it comes to presenting a translation, unless the translator is a celebrity in his or her own right. This may make commercial sense, but it is not conducive to an awareness of the mediation implicit in the act of translation. That it is untranslatable has sometimes been regarded as a defining characteristic of poetry. In a sense this is true, but without translators we would have had to do without the Bible, Koran, Bhagavad Gita, Homeric epic and so forth. The first issue of the magazine Modern

Poetry in Translation, which I founded with Ted Hughes in the mid-1960s, more or less coincided with the first Poetry International festival in London. In 1967 Hughes wrote: "However rootedly national in detail it may be, poetry is less and less the prisoner of its own language. Perhaps it is only now being heard for what, among other things, it is - a universal language of understanding, coherent behind the many languages in which we can all hope to meet." Implicit is a belief in the translatability of poetry, in some kind of ur-language of human discourse. One is reminded of Walter Benjamin, who in his essay, "The Task of the Translator", contended that "to some degree all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines". However, while we may now be less inclined to express ourselves so optimistically, the fact is that there has been no slackening off in the translation of poetry. Indeed, once again, as in the days of Dryden and Pope, major poets such as Hughes and Heaney have devoted a substantial amount of their creative energy to translation.

The current issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation* (available from Professor Norma Rinsler, School of Humanities, King's College London), guest-edited by Valentina Polukhina, is dedicated to contemporary Russian women's poetry, and coincides with the visit of four leading Russian poets to England. The issue looks further afield than Moscow or St Petersburg to take in provincial centres such as Voronezh, Saratov, Samara, the Urals and Siberia. Some 70 poets are represented, including four who recently toured England: Svetlana Kekova, Vera Pavlova, Tatyana Shcherbina and Tatyana Voltskaya.

In an essay published in *MPT*, Voltskaya suggests "the machine of Soviet ideology damaged women less, because they are more concerned with the private sphere, those areas that it is harder for politics to penetrate", whereas it is precisely concentration on the private sphere "that enables a human being to remain human even in inhuman circumstances". In Soviet times, women wrote far fewer poems to order than did men. Are they therefore less compromised?

The issue contains work by many English-language translators and poets, Ruth Fainlight, Elaine Feinstein, Maura Dooley and Carol Rumens among them. Their counterparts in Russia have already begun to translate their work into Russian. A translation of Ruth Fainlight's poem "Sugar-Paper Blue" is soon to appear in *Inostrannaya Literatura*, a Russian literary journal.

I predict that electronically generated translation papers, drafts and comments will be of considerable value to critics in the near future and will make the translation process more accessible to outsiders. Improved visibility and appreciation of the creative skills required for poetry translation must help raise the status of translators.

Some years ago I was involved in a Nobel symposium on translation in Stockholm, organised by the Swedish Academy. Somewhat cheekily, I proposed that the academy

institute a prize for literary translation. Since even the illustrious academicians could not possibly read all the languages used by potential literature laureates, I suggested, past judgments must have been based, at least in part, on translations. Indeed, the two laureateships might sometimes be bestowed upon the same individual. Objections will still be raised, on the grounds that translation does not merit such prestige and celebrity. On the contrary, I would argue: translation, as a mediation between cultures that requires total attention to primary utterances, and reciprocity rather than subservience, is a model for the traffic between nations.

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Reference: *The Guardian*, Saturday, November 23, 2002.

<http://www.nonduality.com/shankr12.htm>

<http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,844907,00.html>