

READING TRANSLATIONS OF POETRY

JONAS ZDANYS
Yale University

During the past few years, in a number of articles and other forums, I have sought to encourage the exploration of some of the aesthetic principles which might be helpful in the formulation of a unified, though unfolding, theory of poetic translation. For example, I have written and spoken about the processes of poetic translation, the difficulty of working with languages which are structurally and hence aesthetically dissimilar, the role of the translator as interpretive artist, the ways in which an undergraduate course on theory and practice of translation might be structured, and other related topics which lie at the core of my interest in the field and which serve as springboards for further discussion.¹

An area of interest that I have been thinking about at some length of late, but which I have not yet had the opportunity to explore at any significant depth, is the way which translations might best be read, both by the general reader and by scholars interested in the specific elements of translation as they apply to individual poems and to general theories of translation. A review of my most recent book in this journal (*Lituanus* 34:2, pp. 73-77) has raised several interesting issues which might help to elucidate the process of reading translations, so in this set of notes and comments I would like to offer for consideration some guidelines which might help focus consideration of the creative act of reading translations. My work as a poet as well as a translator in recent years has sought to direct the reader's ear and eye in fairly specific ways — though I am always aware of the power and the difficulties posed by connotation and subjectivity in such a process — so these issues are of special concern to me also in light of my interest in poetic translation as an art form that plays off and gives perspective to my work as a poet.

By way of general comment, I would like to propose that reading translations is a process little different than reading original poetry, for each involves response to metaphor and image and to the music of the poem's (the translation's) and the poet's (the translator's) time and place. Readers of translations should above all else keep in mind that the purpose of poetic translation is poetry and not the verbal definitions in dictionaries. That is, the translator, through the authority of the new aesthetic whole he or she creates, relieves the reader of the burden of speculating about the shades of connotative meaning of specific words in the original poem, and in the translation directs the reader in much the same way as a poet writing original poetry does. The creation of a "translation," thus, I would venture to say, has less to do with transcribing from what is called the "source language" into a "target language" than it does with acts of original creation. In this light, translation is a creative process, the composing of a new poem which has a life of its own and which is given that life by the voice of the translator. The poem the translator is writing, as I have proposed in other essays, is the translator's poem and in it the translator is obliged to make his creative will felt.

The reader of a translation must therefore take the translator on trust, granting him — as Dudley Fitts defines it in his essay "The Poetic Nuance" — a kind of "vatic authority" just as the reader grants the original poet such authority. The reader must of course bear in mind that he or she is reading a "translation," but the reader must also understand that translation is an interpretive art, the product of the transposition of the aesthetic processes of the original poet by the translator into the key of his own aesthetic interests and preoccupations. The presumption that the translator has any less power or authority reduces the creative art of translation to the making of a crib notes or glosses and subjects it to unwarranted and shortsighted charges of "mistranslation."

There are a few other points of consideration I think readers of translations of poetry might keep in mind. First, translations of poetry should not be printed facing the original poems on which they are modeled. My earliest collections of translations included originals and translations in *en face* editions, but over the years I discovered that readers who had some facility with both languages — especially those for whom English was not their native tongue — would exhaust their energies making word-for-word comparisons and then make pronouncements of "error" in those cases in which their interpretations

or aesthetic predilections differed from mine. Bilingual printing arrangements open the translations to all sorts of misreadings and the translations cannot get the sort of independent reading they deserve as freely-standing poems.

Second, translations are not word for word transcriptions, even if there should be a marked fidelity to the original, and so should not be expected to say *exactly* what the original says. Translators are not taxidermists and do not in their work go about recreating duplicates, stuffed though pretty, of living poetry. They create living poetry. As poets as diverse as Ezra Pound and John Hollander have written, translators should work with daring and freedom in translation, including a conscious violation of meaning, if it helps the English version, for the excellent English poem is the goal.

And third, it is the translator's duty to make natural in his or her own language — the "target language," if I must use that term — that which is natural in the language of the original. Such an effort may mean making substantial shifts in tone, changing word-for-word meaning, transposing lines, and working through other aspects of the original, with such changes being motivated by the translator's aesthetic sensibility and by his conviction not to make a carbon copy of the original poem but rather a readable and enjoyable English poem. The translator in this process is modulator and interpreter of text, a shaper, a sound giver, in his translation following Eliot's command to use the music of the language common to his own time and place to create a text of sufficient depth and complexity to embody the thrust of the meaning of the original.

The review in question raises some interesting issues which highlight some of the ways in which translations can be read, and I am grateful to have this opportunity to engage in a dialogue, which can provide insights into the richness of aesthetic questions as a whole and the many dimensions of poetic translation. Though I am trained as a literary scholar, I believe that the best reviewers of poetry and of translation are other writers and translators and not scholars. In this instance, however, scholars and writers might be able to learn from one another, so I try to be sensitive to both perspectives.

The review makes a few introductory observations before making comments about the translations themselves, and some of these provide some insight in how translations — indeed all texts — can be read and misread. For example, despite the reviewer's insistence to the contrary, the Introduction to the book does not say that Lithuanian is closer to Sanskrit "than to any other living tongue." The reviewer introduces the word "to" into the sentence and then proceeds to use that misrepresentation to make a joke about my statement about the ancient character of the Lithuanian language. To provide an accurate representation of what I actually wrote — though by doing so to lose the potential for a joke — the reviewer might have quoted from the immediately preceding sentence, in which I mentioned the "unique, closely-related, conservative languages and cultures" of the Balts.

A similar misrepresentation follows in the review's next paragraph, where the reviewer says that I have built in my Introduction an "interpretation of Lithuanian prosody" on the "wobbly foundation" of declensional case endings. I certainly would not presume to build such a foundation and there is no attempt in the Introduction to do so. I engage in no discussion of prosody in the Introduction much beyond a simple explanation of why it was difficult for me as a translator to try to replicate the rhythmic patterns and rhyme schemes of the originals in my translations. That's all. The gratuitous comment that my observation about the pool of words which share similar endings in English should be "best left for specialists to ponder over" ignores the plain fact that the English language indeed does not offer the kinds of "expansive opportunities for linguistic combination" that Lithuanian offers.

Some of the points the reviewer mentions about the choice of words used in various translations provide an interesting look at the many complexities of translation's interpretive dimension. The reviewer, for example, says that some of the choices I made in my translated poems are based on "ignorance" or "conscious mistranslation." While it would be possible to offer explanations for each of the points the review raises — many of which, it seems to me, can be viewed as the work of the stereotypical academic reviewer Gregory Rabassa describes, the Professor Horren-do who fetches his dictionary to go nit-picking after so-called inaccuracies — it might be of interest to look at two specific examples quoted in the review, one the product of what the reviewer calls "ignorance" and the other the product of what the reviewer calls "conscious mistranslation." They are the word "akcijos" and a line from the poem "Sunday" which talks of cuckoos and stabbings.

"Akcijos/" as the reviewer accurately writes, does mean "shares of stock." But that is only one of its definitions. "Akcijos" also means "actions," and that is actually the preferred meaning in dictionaries published both in Chicago and in Vilnius. Obviously, it is not enough to know that a word can mean both. It is the context in which the word is used that is important and which should dictate to the translator which meaning best captures the implications of the original poem.

The word in question — "akcijos" — is in the poem "Star, Sun, Moon," my version of which is as follows:

Cabaret star Viola D'Amore (Violet Dam), who has never heard of Vivaldi, walks out onto the stage clothed in smoke and scales — into a cloud heated by applause and drinking, actions in a kerosene halo. Turning into screams, which dim the mirror lights, she grabs onto the spotlight's thick beam with both hands to keep from collapsing. The sun and the moon pray in the heavens, worried about her future.

The word in question appears in the phrase "actions in a kerosene halo." The Lithuanian phrase is "žibalinių akcijų aureolė." Granted, we can translate that phrase the way the reviewer would prefer, to wit: "in a kerosene shares of stock halo" or "in a halo of kerosene shares of stock" or some other configuration. And in early versions of the poem I tried a variety of similar combinations. But there seems to me to be no internal consistency which dictates the use of that meaning. The poem is filled with images of light, and the "actions in a kerosene halo" — that is, the glow of light cast by a kerosene lamp — are the applause and drinking of the preceding phrase. To introduce "shares of stock" here would

negate the unity of metaphor and image in the poem because it would involve the use of a superfluous detail not central to the sense of the poem. Ambiguity of meaning is always present in good poetry and I have obviously had to make an aesthetic choice here based on a reading of the entire poem. I believe, however, that an *ad hominem* upbraiding by a reviewer is the wrong response, predicated on a misreading, so I will gladly accept the proffered mantle of ignorance in this instance.

The "conscious mistranslation" of which the reviewer says I am guilty might be approached in a similar vein. That is, as the result of a decision to affirm a certain integrity of the poem or to make the poem work best in English. It is the result of judgment born of the aesthetic sensibility of the translator — as are all translations — and is thus a product of interpretation rather than mistranslation. Its unfolding also offers a look at ways in which we can read and misread translations.

The line in question is "Gegutė nutilo, svečią nudūrė smuklėj." In an early version of my translation, which I published in *Lituanus* 23:1 (1977), I translated that line as follows: "The cuckoo quiets, a guest is stabbed in the inn." In the version published in the book, I changed verb tense and defined the relationship of the elements in the two phrases: "The cuckoo quieted, stabbed a guest in the inn." The change comes not as the result of mistranslation, conscious or otherwise, but because the poem resonates with what my colleague Audronė Willeke once described as "shimmering ambiguity." There is an odd relationship between those two phrases, a relationship affirmed by the strong surrealism of the poem: in it, violins carry bloody hearts, Saturn splinters into lines on a woman's palm, walls are filled with ducats and bones, and so on. For these reasons, I thought that the linking of murder and bird played off that strong surrealism and off the many other interesting linkages of elements and actions in the rest of the poem. It is, of course, grammatically possible that the two phrases are simultaneously connected and not connected — as my two versions of this poem indicate. Unfortunately, it is difficult fully to convey that sense of "shimmering ambiguity" in the English version, though the reviewer, in his comment, does mention that there is an ambiguity in my rendered line. If I managed to convey that sense to him, then perhaps I might have partially succeeded.

All translation is a question of choice, an attempt to capture the sense of the connotative power of the original while facing the fact that such a creative capturing can happen only rarely. Reading a poem involves constant interpretation and re-construction of relationships among its many elements. Translating a poem involves the imposition of another set of requirements and expectations on what is already an extremely complicated process. Reading a translation sensitively should involve entering the world of the translation itself and not into some twilight zone between original and translation where, flashlight in hand, we seek to find if the signposts point in the right direction. Reading and judging a translation should involve an understanding of what the translation does on its own and not in comparison to what the original does, for that is the only way in which a translation can get a whole hearing for itself. And that is the only way in which translation will be recognized and accepted as an integral and genuine art form whose aesthetic responsibility and success lie in its ability to enrich the literary tradition creatively and in assimilative ways.

¹ See, for example, essays in *Lituanus* 28:4, *Poetry* 132:6, *Translation Review* 23:1987, and various prefaces in collections of translations.