

Where are your papers?

Banipal No. 13, Spring 2002 - No. 21, Autumn 2004; *Wasafiri* No. 40, Winter 2003 Focus on Translation, No. 42, Summer 2004; *Orient Express* Vol. 5, Spring 2004; *Modern Poetry in Translation*, New Series / No 21 Looking Eastward, Third Series / No 1 Introductions; *PQR Poetry Quarterly Review* No. 20, Summer 2003 Focus on Translation; *Chicago Review* 48: 2/3, Summer 2003 New Writing in German; *Stand* Vol 5 (3) Translation Special Issue

Is it easy to find books of translated poetry in Britain today? No. It is no longer possible to walk into a small provincial bookshop and discover, in a shelf of Penguins, the great Russian poets and contemporary poets of Eastern Europe, a new frontier of the mind. Editors and translators are heroes, inadequately praised. Readers can gain more from Elaine Feinstein's or Michael Hamburger's translations than from original work by many poets. Languages are optional in most schools. How many English speakers will ever learn Hungarian or Arabic? This is Babel. Let us descend from the tower and, gratefully, open the magazines.

First, the specialists. A newly discovered world now, for most English speakers, is Arabic poetry. *Banipal*, named after the last great Assyrian king, now celebrating its twenty-first issue, offers a unique survey of modern Arabic poetry and prose. Appealing and coherent, its issues feature writers by country. Clear introductions tactfully present new readers with insights. Selections of work are generous. Translations, often by the authors, or by other poets, are strikingly well-done. In Marilyn Hacker's translation of the Lebanese poet, Vénus Khoury-Ghata, the landscape strips to shock: "and the tree's bark slit like a raped girl's skirt hid another layer of bark".

The Iraqi feature (Autumn 2003) reveals the power and range of *Banipal*'s poetry. Buland al-Haydari's "Between Two Marks" is an angry elegy:

Baghdad ...
Who said those killed for you have died?
They will return tomorrow
in a feast of lighted candles.

Sargon Boulus's poem "The execution of the hawk" quietly describes "A drunk . . . in the Nevada desert" shooting a hawk, "shabby-feathered and smelling / of long captivity".

But *Banipal* is not bleak. Amongst its writing flashes wit, charm, and humour, enriched by Arab paintings. As a contributor winningly remarks

“*Banipal* has been getting younger and prettier”.

Wasafiri's twentieth anniversary issue emphasises its publication of African, Caribbean, South Asian, and Black British writing, and its concern with “cultural travelling”. Its “Focus on Translation” issue pulls no intellectual punches. Harry Aveling's translations are accompanied by the poems in Indonesian, so that the reader can explore shape and sound, and consider the translating choices described in a detailed prose introduction. This contains the thought-provoking observation that, since Ezra Pound, most poetry translation into English has been in free verse. An interview with the Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o raises the suggestion that post-colonial writers using English are often mentally translating from their own native language, and, more controversially, that a writer's departure from the home country is a form of “translation”.

Wasafiri's translation issue illuminates the poetry in its anniversary number. Lorna Goodison, born in Jamaica, conjures a Lake District witch's petrified cat, defining superstitions underlying English culture with coinages echoing another: “frightspirit rowan trees”. Tabish Khair, born in India, catches a bitter and failed transportation as a stowaway falls from a plane.

Look, Shakuntala, look,
It is raining frozen bodies all over Europe.

Wasafiri startles its readers into thought, and poetry.

Orient Express transports poetry and prose from “Enlargement Europe” in eye-catching compartments, such as “Valium and Tea”. Its survey of Slovenian writing aims, admirably, to respect “inconsistencies, local divergences and excess”. The translators, often distinguished poets, allow readers to forget that the texts are translations. They include Tomaž Šalamun, whose unruly energies effortlessly encompass landscapes: “Shafts of a cart are beautiful”. A darker landscape grips Alojz Ihan's “Apple”, as a terrified sentry watches a “little Albanian girl” throw fruit. Andrej Brvar's “A Little Odyssey” travels back through time, as a child journeys, alone, across post-war Europe by train, past “dark yellow fields to which there is no end.” The body is translated into Brane Mozetič's erotic ecstasies:

– oh, don't ever
get up, don't vanish from above me.

The biographies and bibliographies are immaculate (though, gripping as the translations are, I would have welcomed notes on the form of these poems in the original: the living face behind the ghost). At 200 pages, *Orient Express*

(like *Modern Poetry in Translation* and *Chicago Review*) should be invested in as a book, not a magazine. It is a triumph. Where will this train stop next?

Modern Poetry in Translation, edited for almost forty years by Daniel Weissbort, is the natural first stop for readers wishing to explore translated poetry. Weissbort admits, engagingly, to preferring magazines which are “ragbags”. But a ragbag can produce revelations. His “Looking Eastward” issue rivets the reader with a previously unpublished version of a long Hungarian poem by Ferenc Juhász, re-worked by *MPT*’s original co-editor, Ted Hughes. “The Boy Changed into a Stag” is a poem utterly suited to Hughes, with a savage sense of life’s strangest spaces: “If I should return/ my horns would split you”; “every branch of my antlers is a double-based pylon”. It co-exists with elegant Pushkin, compressed Tsvetaeva, and notes on the liquid Bengali sounds of Tagore.

“Introductions”, the first issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation* edited by David and Helen Constantine, introduces another breathtaking poem, Mahmoud Darwish’s “A State of Siege”, written in Ramallah in 2002. This extraordinarily varied sequence moves from claustrophobia – “Under siege / time is a place” through expansive dreams of freedom’s “sky-blue letters” – to the warmth of daily life

– come in,
and drink Arab coffee with us.

The translation, by Sarah Maguire with Sabry Hafez, is lucid, colloquial, and admirably invisible.

MPT promises a special interest in migration and diaspora, and in classical literature. It offers bilingual texts and introductory essays, such as Sasha Dugdale’s illuminations of Boris Ryzhy’s poems, where the drunks and angels of today’s Russia appear “in an almost Pushkinian classical metre”. Daniel Weissbort has commented that, “Optimism is called for in this business”. There seems every reason to be optimistic about *MPT*.

If you have a passion for poetry, do consider subscribing to one of these (passionate) specialist journals. The other treasury for translated poetry consists of non-specialist magazines’ “special issues”. *Poetry Quarterly Review*’s “Focus on Translation” section appears in an issue which also, admirably, scans small press books and that vast, neglected topic, poetry on the Internet. Works covered range from Icelandic sagas to Homer, and encompass lesser-known poets, such as Turkey’s Cevat Çapan. I admired the boldness of Yann Lovelock’s attack on Evgeny Rein’s “self-indulgent anecdotalism”, but was frustrated by an (uncharacteristic) lack of quotation.

Anne Born’s *PQR* translation review is exemplary, quoting a whole

delicate poem by Claude de Burine (ending “White moon at its fingertips”) supplying expert knowledge of the Danish poet Pia Tafdrup, as backdrop to

the words
that line by line hurl me closer and closer to my death.

Each magazine under review presents previously unknown poets I now wish to read. *PQR* achieves this in the briefest of space, in a perceptive and stimulating selection I hope they will retune, and repeat.

The 300 pages of *Chicago Review’s* “New Writing in German” (poetry and fiction) deliberately omit the most-translated poets, and any German texts, but its selection is immensely rewarding. An invaluable preface compares a German literary reading to “a rock concert” and notes “das Fräuleinwunder”, the sudden prominence of women writers. The poet who sprang to my attention was Ulrike Draesner, in extracts from “Bluish Sphinx” (poems from a miscarriage). Her strange crystalline poems invoke “little root, you / in the corridor, singing”, then transform the lost child, in snow, to “a cyberjewel, on / the blackbird’s feathers”.

A recent discovery for the West is Elke Erb, an East German poet in her sixties, for whom self is

amoeba in
pond’s ear, roar of the sea

The translations are compelling. From Durs Grünbein:

Later then it was the streak of luminous
silver bright filament traced
on the frostclear
sky

I have never associated such visual clarity with German poetry: a reclaimed landscape, new-rinsed from the Flood. *Chicago Review’s* Polish issue is also an enlightenment.

Finally, it is hard to do justice to the riches in *Stand’s* Translation Special Issue. It has bilingual texts to pore over, and generous quotation in its reviews. It bravely re-produces the deservedly well-known, such as Charles d’Orléans’ rondeau for spring, and re-works the undeservedly little known, such as Sandor Marai’s meditation: “I wake up round 3 am . . . I’ve lost the dream”. It traces poets’ conversations with time. The Hungarian poet Péter Kántor replies to a classical Chinese poet who compared breath to a horse:

Dear Yang Tzu-yun ...
before again making off on its endless, twisting path
your horse rubs noses with my horse.

And there is life beyond free verse. Luis de Góngora's Renaissance lament is turned, through rhyme, gracefully:

You ... will turn to earth, to less
Than dust, to smoke, to night, to nothingness.

Voloshin's savage poem of twentieth century Russia is rendered, also through rhyme, brutally:

with blood and sighs.
Easter that year Christ did not arise.

Amongst *Stand's* "ragbag", serenely, is Rilke. Stumbling through his poems on Apollo, I hear, in their flow and check, poetry's own translating power. At the heart of Babel, there is a resolved silence. "Du mußt dein Leben ändern." "You must change your life".

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Banipal www.banipal.co.uk
PO Box 2230, London W13 8ZQ

Chicago Review
website: humanities.uchicago.edu/review

Modern Poetry in Translation
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Orient Express www.writersartists.net
Wythgreen House, Coleshill, Swindon SN6 7PS

Poetry Quarterly Review Email: pqrrev@aol.com
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Stand Email: stand@leeds.ac.uk
World Wide Subscriptions, Unit 4, Gibbs Reed Farm, Ticehurst, Wadhurst, East Sussex TN5 7HE

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For readers of poetry on the internet, I recommend the new website of the Poetry Translation Centre at the School of Oriental and African Studies. This offers translations of poems, information about the poets, their languages, and the original texts, at www.poetrytranslation.soas.ac.uk

