

“Lost in Translations”

This course is intended to be something like an earnest version of Alain de Botton’s parlor game book, *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (how to impress strangers with your knowledge of Proust without reading it). The difference is, we read it, not Proust, but 20th century world (well, mostly European) poetry in translation. Students graduate with MFAs and worry that they still feel ignorant. Well, you can be my age and still feel ignorant, but this course should help a little, so that if someone says “Chinese poetry” or “Brotsky” or “Szyborska” you’ll have some idea what they’re talking about.

A secondary aim is to take away some of a widely perceived anxiety about translation. That feeling: what am I really reading? Can I depend on it? What part is the translator and what part is the poem? What’s it like in the original? – Relax!

Translation squares impossibility and necessity. Yes, it’s not really possible, but how else can you read other literatures, if you have only English, as most of us do? Besides, if you voluntarily or involuntarily restrict yourself to English-language originals, then not only do you miss out on writing from the rest of the world, you miss out on what other languages do to English. What I called somewhere the “strange bi-authorship of translation”. What happens when English yields to accommodate another vocabulary, another geography and history, different experience of life and civilization, different grammar and timings? How do you signal distance? How does Pound make his language “Chinese”? Or “Latin”? There is something like an intrinsic virtue, I would argue, in translated language. Otherwise, everything becomes one unvarying denim.

The only rule is that there are no rules. Literal, closer to the “target language”, free, adaptation, imitation, phonetic (like Zukofsky’s Horace)... Brecht said something interesting, that most translations failed by attempting to translate too much – too many aspects – of the original. All difficulties are local, and every case is somehow unique.

No two translations are the same, but these are all good in one way or another. Some of the earlier ones – and the earlier poets, too, for that matter – are more like annexations, original works (masks, or “personae”) of Pound’s or Lowell’s. Li Po and Propertius and Rimbaud and Montale are their creations; whereas David Hinton would never claim he had written Bei Dao or Clare Cavanagh Szyborska. In the end these things are a question of feel. You can play all the notes, but it’s not always music. What do you trust? What do you hear? What’s interesting? What hits you? There’s no substitute in your work as readers – and it *is* work, you’ll see that! – for experience. Expose yourselves to as much as you can from other languages, other cultures, other worlds. Hence again, this course.

I see us as spending two weeks each on our “major” translators, then a week each on the later books. It will be a gallop, but an intense one. Not least as I’d like you to bear the brunt of it, presenting or co-presenting most weeks. I look forward to reading and talking with you about your own translations, those of you who are participating in that. I am pleased we have a PhD candidate, a fiction MFA, and poets from all three years, in the class.

Here is how I see us going, broadly chronological, changes/ substitutions always a possibility.

24 August	Introductions. Pound, Ripostes and Provence
31 August	Pound, Propertius (at my house?)
7 September	Pound, Cathay poems
14 September	Lowell, Imitations (Baudelaire, Rimbaud and others)
21 September	Lowell, Imitations (Montale, Pasternak and others)
28 September	Workshop – your show
5 October	Paulin, Inver
12 October	Paulin, Inver
19 October	Bei Dao
26 October	Günter Eich
2 November	Brodsky (Part of Speech, Cape Cod Lullaby, my house?)
9 November	Workshop – your show
16 November	Szyborska
23 November	no class
30 November	Lleshanaku
7 December	last class – my house, bring a favored translation, or bring two, one from class, one from beyond

The books are on order from the not-terribly-diligent university supplier in the Reitz Union. On past showing, they won't have bothered. You may prefer to order your own (lightly used?) copies elsewhere. To recap:

Pound, ed. Sieburth, or Personae: Collected Shorter Poems
Lowell, Imitations
Paulin, The Road to Inver
Bei Dao, The Rose of Time
Eich, Angina Days
Brodsky, the Collected, or a Part of Speech
Szyborska, Poems New and Collected, or the later Map
Lleshanaku, Negative Space

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