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THE BODY AND SOUL OF POETRY

Discussion of Judith Moffett's Paper "On Formal Translation"

What Judith Moffet is saying in her paper is, basically, that when translating poetry one should try to be as true as possible to the original, even — or especially — when this original is composed according to a strict prosodic pattern, including meter and rhyme. For some people — such as Robert Bly — this approach appears disastrous and leads to "massacre". To me it has always been a great challenge, and if I believed that the endeavour would inevitably result in a "massacre", it wouldn't be worth trying.

It *might*, of course, end in a "massacre", but only if one tries to do the undoable, to translate the untranslatable; here, the translator's feeling for his own language is crucial. With a dead author, one can always choose how one wishes to mutilate his work — by rhyming or not rhyming — but with a living poet who demands that one keep all the formal elements in translation, there is little choice. I will say a few words about this, too, and am sorry if doing so anticipates the discussion of Eliot Weinberger's paper.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, I want to make it clear from the outset that I use the expression "formal poetry" in the same sense as Judith Moffett, i.e., to refer to metric and/or rhymed poetry. I am fully aware that all poetry, all good poetry at least, is formal in the sense that it is highly structured, that there is in fact no such thing as "free verse".

I would also like to mention that I have all my life been involved in Russian poetry (both as a scholar and as a translator), translating mainly three poets — Mandelstam, Mayakovsky, and Brodsky — and this background will no doubt tinge my exposition.

1

Judith Moffett's first proposition is that one of the reasons why "formal" translation is often disrespected is that poets themselves, not only translators, no longer adhere to the formal rules once compulsory when writing verse.

Now, this is true in Sweden, and it is true in the larger part of the Western world. The liberation from (or onslaught on) formal poetry began, on a wider scale, in this century, and the victory (or defeat) was a fact around the Second World War.

But it certainly is not true in one of the great poetry nations of the world, Russia. The Russian tradition is quite different from ours, for a variety of reasons. One is that the movement towards freer verse that took place in Russia in the tens and the twenties never came to fruition. The aesthetic dogma proclaimed by the Soviet State was conservative, and virtually no formal experimentation was allowed after around 1930.

It would, however, be wrong to attribute this development, or lack of such, to the socio-political situation only. There is little reason to believe that formal poetry would have disappeared in Russian had the political system been different. We would have had "free verse", of course, but we would also have had a vigorous "traditional" or "formal" poetry alongside.

The viability of formal poetry in Russian has to do with the language itself. Russian is an extremely flexible language, not least concerning word order, which is virtually free: much like in Latin, you can put the words in any order you like without breaking the limits of what is grammatically possible and correct; it leads to semantic and stylistic shifts, no more. To find a rhyme is thus simple, especially since the language is at least as rich in words as English.

Furthermore, unstressed last syllables are reduced phonetically, which means that words that do not rhyme in writing, rhyme when spoken. Russian is also a highly inflected language, in which a word may be

identical at one level but differ at another — the word 'rússkoy', for example, is a feminine singular adjective or adjectival noun in the genitive, dative, locative or instrumental case, but it is spelt and pronounced the same way in all four. Adjectives, nouns, pronouns, etc., may thus be identical at the morphological and phonetical levels but carry different grammatical and semantic information.

To tell a Russian translator that he should not try to rhyme is thus pointless. As a matter of fact, the problem for (and with) Russian translators is quite the opposite. Since in Russia unrhymed poetry is often not conceived as poetry at all, a Russian translator is prone to translate even unrhymed poetry into rhymed Russian. This means that the unrhymed verse of, for example, the Swedish poets Karl Vennberg and Göran Sonnevi is rhymed (and metered) in Russian. The results are quite horrifying.

Please forgive this excursion into the mysteries of the Russian language, but it does have some bearing on my further reasoning.

2

Judith Moffett's second proposition is that the "meaning" of a poem is "inherent in the poem's form fused with its content". This, one would think, is self-evident. But if one consults a much sold American dictionary of poetics, one can read: "Form in poetry, simply defined, is the manner in which a poem is composed as distinct from what the poem is about."

This is not a very satisfying definition: "form" is supposed to be one thing, and "content" or "meaning" another. Of course, there is no opposition here, these notions are not antitheses: there is no form without content, and no content without form. What we are talking about is an organic whole. The poet says it this way: "The formal structure of a poem is not something distinct from its meaning but as intimately bound up with the latter as the body is with the soul."

In the course of poetic history, we have seen examples of poetry being more or less formal, paying more or less attention to form, sometimes taking its strength from the "message", sometimes — in latter days, especially — being formal to the point of becoming meaningless.

Whatever our preferences, the poet — his name is W. H. Auden — is, of course, right; we cannot imagine a poem without either form or content; a "formless" poem is also a poem with a poorly planned argument. A form is not a mould, or a vessel, into which one can pour a "content". If you turn Shakespearean blank verse into rhymed iambic pentameters, what you get is not Shakespeare's "content" plus rhymes. What you get is something qualitatively different.

By the same token, if a poet writes a poem in a certain meter, he does so partly because or though he knows it will provoke associations in the reader: this metre echoes the poetry of, say, Donne or Marvell. Sometimes the echo is so strong and so intentional that a translation of the poem without keeping the formal aspects would distort the so-called message. In Russian poetry, for instance, the iambic tetrameter is forever associated with Alexander Pushkin, and no Russian poet can use the trochaic pentameter without the reader hearing a distinct echo from Mikhail Lermontov's poem "Vykhozhu odin ia na dorogu...".

When Brodsky wrote a poem dedicated to the war in Bosnia, "Bosnia Tune" (one of his few topical poems), he cast it in a form (trochaic tetrameter) that associated to a well-known poem: the third part of Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats". Auden's famous lines:

> Time that is intolerant
> Of the brave and innocent,
> And indifferent in a week
> To a beautiful physique ...

are echoed by Brodsky in:

> Time, whose sharp blood-thirsty quill
> parts the killed from those who kill,
> will pronounce the latter band
> as your brand.

I was asked by several newspapers to translate this poem into Swedish, but I refused. First of all, because it is very tightly knit semantically, and, as Judith Moffett says, the shorter the poem, the less room for the interpreter. And, secondly, because of the semantic and formal references with which the poem is imbued. With this poem, Brodsky wanted not only to comment on the war in Bosnia, but also to send a metapoetic signal which would be totally lost in translation.

The resounding of this echo, this poetic interplay, continued after Joseph Brodsky's death, when Seamus Heaney wrote a tribute to the poet, in the same metre. It is called "Audenesque": a double allusion — to Auden through Brodsky, who adored the English poet. And this is really an "Audenesque" poem, which we would recognise as such even if the author had chosen to give it another title. If one (for the sake of simplicity rather than of accuracy, given my objections to the very terms) tries to picture a scale showing two extremes, "form" and "content", the needle will in this case no doubt oscillate heavily towards the former. Anyway, in this case it is impossible to imagine the poem cast in another form.

3

This brings us to another question, the question of translatability. The poem I mentioned, "Bosnia Tune", is, to my mind, a good example of a poem that cannot be translated, where too much is lost in translation. But where do we draw the line? I agree with Judith Moffett (and Richard Wilbur) that a poet has the right not to be "levelled down", and with her statement that a good translator should know when to "abandon the effort". In any case, you can never transpose all relevant elements into another language: you always have to sacrifice something. What is sacrificed depends on the poet or the poem being translated.

If I am allowed to stick to my Russian guns, I will continue with a few words about this, about rhyming especially.

As I said, in Russian poetry rhyme is not a marked feature, whereas the absence of rhyme is. But this does not mean that one can or should refrain from rhyming when translating from Russian. For even with Russian poets, the rhyme is a more or less stressed or significant element, and the poets are more or less good at it.

With a poet such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, both rhyme and rhythm (not metre) are strongly marked, since he broke with the old Russian tradition and introduced a new verse form, where the separate word is the dominating element of the line. In this *accentual* verse, the rhyme word has the greatest semantic weight but is only the first among equals. When translating Mayakovsky into another language, therefore, it is essential to keep both rhythm and rhyme (or half rhymes), since these are dominant elements in his poetry.

In the case of Osip Mandelstam, both metre and rhyme are rather conventional, i.e., they add little to the poem, semantically or euphonically. Here the complicated imagery is the dominant trait. Discarding the rhyme here, therefore, could perhaps be regarded as a lesser offence. That in any case is what I did when I translated Mandelstam together with the Swedish poet Göran Sonnevi almost twenty years ago: we didn't rhyme but we kept Mandelstam's rhyme words in the rhyming position, at the end of each line. I am not sure I would choose the same method again, but that was one way of trying to solve the formal problem.

4

I have translated both living and dead poets. To work on Brodsky's poetry, being able to consult him, was a great experience, especially since we were often working on the same poems at the same time: he was translating his poems into English, I into Swedish.

Brodsky was tough on the issue of keeping the formal elements of a poem, more uncompromising, I would think, even than Wilbur (whom, by the way, he appreciated for his attitude in this matter). This had to do, no doubt, with his Russian background, but also with his deep conviction that verse meters are "spiritual magnitudes for which nothing can be substituted", "vessels of time", in fact. And since, according to Brodsky, holding Time back, trying to prevent Time from overtaking Man, is one of the main tasks of the poet, it is essential that these elements be kept in translation as well.

This being his conviction, he once wrote a letter to his Swedish publisher about the principles of translation. It is dated April 27, 1989, and reads as follows:

> In connection with the forthcoming [Swedish] edition of my poems I'd like to outline two or three principles by which the selection of translations should be guided:
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> I would like to insist on preserving [the] formal aspects of the original. By that I mean meter and rhyme. I do realise that in certain

> cases this may prove to be impossible, but I'd rather prefer my poems non-existent in Swedish than misrepresented. The minimal requirement that should be met by any translator is the preservation of the meter. [– – –] Meter is the backbone of a poem, and I'd rather appear stiff than spineless. I am a professional, and I'd like to be treated professionally. No personal philosophy of this or that translator should be paid heed to, regardless of his or her reputation in the country. The aforesaid requirement should be put to any individual who'd volunteer, or be assigned, to translate my work, so that he or she knew from the threshold what is being expected from them. [– – –] It would be nice to make rhymes survive as well: not for my sake but for your readers'.

This is a letter to a publisher, but since Brodsky also worked as a translator, it is also a letter to himself. In this capacity, he faced the same problems as any other translator; especially given such a demanding principal.

Brodsky states that he'd rather see his poems "non-existent" than "misrepresented". This means that he had to make the same kind of choices as I did, between poems that are translatable and those that are not, and he, too, sometimes had to "abandon the effort". What struck me was that we made almost identical choices, independently of one another. Some of the very best poems were never translated into English, just as they were never translated into Swedish. Some, on the other hand, were, but at the cost of being almost rewritten. But that is the author's prerogative.

Judith Moffett writes that long lines are "a great boon to the formal translator". This is certainly true for rhymed *accentual* verse where the length of the lines is not strictly regulated: there are more opportunities, simply. And if you look at Brodsky's poems in English, you will see that the lines in this kind of poem are often longer than in the Russian original. But it is not necessarily "a boon" in poems written in a strict metre, where one may sometimes have to pad to fill out the metric gaps.

That the poet and the translator often face the same problems is shown by the following story. I once explained to Brodsky that in the poem "An Admonition" I had to change the rhyme structure to get a good rhyme in Swedish. I not only moved the Russian rhymeword

"vran'ë" ["lies", "nonsense"] away from the rhyming position but rendered it with two words, "lögner och svekfullhet" ["lies and treacherousness"] — a rhythmically motivated padding. Brodsky smiled and said, "That's all right. In fact, that's exactly what I wanted to say in Russian — but I couldn't because of the rhyme."

The poet and the translator thus are in the same boat, but there is a fundamental difference: while the poet can rock it, the translator has little room for manoeuvring. When the poet and the translator are the same person, the problem is non-existent since in both languages he is the author of the poem.

5

The most common arguments against trying to render the formal aspects of a poem are that it is difficult and that too much has to be sacrificed. It is also said that this kind of poetry is outdated, and that all rhymes are worn out. As for the first argument, it *is* difficult, but the fact that it is difficult is hardly an argument against, but rather for: who wants to do what is simple? As to the other objection, that too much is lost, one can counter and say that too much is lost if you don't.

A third argument, that this kind of poetry is old-fashioned, is simply not true (and probably won't be either, since formal poetry seems to be on its way back); as concerns the objection that the rhyming possibilities have been exhausted, it was perhaps correct at the time when poets abandoned rhymed poetry decades ago, but it is no longer; since most poets have refrained from rhyming for so long, there are hoards of words that have never been rhymed: the vocabulary of technology, science, sport, modern slang, and so on. Needless to say, the amount of unrhymed words will only increase. And this linguistic potential is no doubt worth exploring.

Another argument in favour of "formal translating" is that you are likely to make fewer mistakes, since you will probably work longer on the translation, twisting the meaning in and out until you are satisfied with both the "inner" and the "outer form". If you don't subject the poem to this kind of re-creation in your own language, there is always a risk that you work too fast and miss a nuance or two. By doing so, on the other hand, you may perhaps not grasp the exact meaning of

the poem, if such is to be found, but you usually end up at least knowing what it is *not* about. On top of that, you learn quite a lot not only about the possibilities of the language you translate from but about the potential of your own language as well.