

The Masque beneath the Mask



Peter Hughes

When you're starting out as a person there are lots of words that don't mean anything except their rhythm and texture and the patterns they make with each other and with those few words, people and noises you do already know. Mum, Dad, dirty, love, kiss, goodnight etc. It's a bit disappointing when things like nursery rhymes come along so you modify them with a few rude words and the names of various kinds of imaginary fish almost without realising it. Before you know it it's time to go to school where you line up at various holes and practice sitting quietly in groups of different sizes. Soon you will be invited to write a poem about the remnants of a weasel on the nature table. Certain clues have been provided over the previous months about how the poem should be written. It's going to have a Sunday-best tone and will basically be about how the weasel can't do any weaseling any more. This poignancy has already been institutionalised, stuffed and mounted and is deeply exemplary. The tone can now be applied to cake, days, seasons, holidays, relationships, faith and youth. They don't last but they leave all this litter. Let's put some in a magazine.

One day you might want to write a poem for yourself away from institutions and the templates you have absorbed don't really fit your sense of purposelessness but you have a go anyway and your poems are like translations from your own language but maybe with some extra body parts and fish. Or they feel like someone has dug up a piece of discarded Thomas Hardy. You don't care because what you really want to do is write a pop song. Well, not so much write it as enact it in your own film which is monochrome and has a driving soundtrack and involves cigarettes, moody brunettes and sunglasses.

All poems are translations including those which enact an orgasmic exclamation or savage yelp. You're translating all the poems you ever heard into two minutes of 'your name here'. You might want to show people how wild or tidy you are and this is the birth of style. Everyone knows you're not really that wild or tidy and also no-one cares. You enact this process a few times and it gets embedded, your facility increases and it feels more natural. Editors like this and call it your distinctive voice. This is the point when many poets stop developing. But you don't want to stop here. You want to get all Picasso and try something new. You haven't, for example, had a Green Period yet (although you have been told you can't vote in the Labour leadership elections because you like the idea of solar power and clicked on something to that effect once) or made any ugly ceramics with crabs on.

We're nearly ready to make that distinction between writing a translation that helps a reader figure out what the original poem means and using an original poem as a trampoline to see over a completely different wall. Good to get that out of the way. Then we have to say that every translation, even ones that claim to be straight, are creative and interpretive acts.

My own preferred approach is to read the original and also some versions of it in Englishes. I don't want to replace any of those versions – I want to do something different. This can be refreshing for all kinds of reasons. The idea of improvising on an old tune instead of just playing the same tune again with added bongos is one we should be pretty familiar with at this stage in the history of jazz.

Anyway, when I returned to Cambridge from Italy in the early 90s Stephen Rodefer was in town and I met him after a reading he'd done, probably at the Dark Room Gallery at the top of Gwydir Street. That was a good reading space. As I recall it was a little exhibition space mainly for black and white photographs. I remember at one stage Stephen had the text of 'Four Lectures' projected on the white wall and he and his shadows moved about in front of it.

Now I'd stopped writing horrid songs for little bands I was in by the time I was about 18 so I decided to tinker with Heine and Schumann instead. Then I messed about with Paul Klee's Diaries as if I were the (moody) hero of an imagined film version set in County Clare. But one of the main effects of moving back from Italy for me was a stronger impulse to keep reading Italian, to maintain contact with that language, to keep a plate or two still spinning. I decided to read Petrarch's sonnets to see if they really were that boring. By the time I'd finished the third I knew I was going to have to regroup, adjust the lighting, put on some contemporary music and pour a stiffer drink. 317 sonnets! So now sitting more comfortably I thought I'd make some notes as I read and these turned into English 'versions' of the first couple of dozen sonnets. They were as much to do with the experience of reading this work in 21st-century Norfolk as anything else. The project gathered momentum, as things do, and I gradually settled into a stricter mode of patterning (14 lines, 10 syllables per line) partly as a nod to Wyatt and other early transformers of Petrarch in the English sonnet tradition. I found a few new and enjoyable things happening including the emergence of fresh patterns, and the reappearance of the words 'the end of the line', and also bits of pop lyric creeping in. It wasn't until I was about half-way through that I remembered Stephen Rodefer's wonderful versions of Villon and wondered just how much they had influenced my own efforts behind the scenes and whether the influence was greater than that of Roy Orbison.

So what was special about Rodefer's Villon? Here's an example.

Car Elle Sans Moy

Fuck she makes it elsewhere

all the time but I don't get
heated up behind it –
how could I?

Anyway things used to be
a whole lot worse before:
plus I'm not the stick
man I used to be.

You got to step aside sooner
or later for all those up
and coming fuckers
who gather reputation in the neighborhood

quickly enough, prized for love
and fatally hung,
making it in the aisles at church,
supple and sincere.

Rodefer shifts the setting to his own contemporary America and employs an earthy, street tone that would not be out of place in a Lou Reed song. He also foregrounds his own presence between the original text and the modern reader by using a series of footnotes, one of the greatest pleasures of this project. He seems to have borrowed this idea from Jack Spicer's 'Heads of the Town up to the Aether' and in Rodefer's hands the device becomes an exquisitely wry delight. Here's one small sample.

If you try hard you can hear the sound of the earth turning.
To some it's a whirring sort of noise, to others it sounds more
like grinding. No one has been able to explain this difference
but some scientists speculate it may have something to do
with breakfast cereal.

Rodefer is not the only creative translator of classic texts of course. Readers will have their own favourites and these might include Blaser's Nerval, Spicer's Lorca (and Blackburn's), Tim Atkins' Petrarch and Philip Terry's Dante. And I wouldn't want to finish these reflections without mentioning the wonderful version of Petrarch's 'Li

Angeli eletti et l'anime beate' by John Millington Synge, who gives it an Irish lilt that might have surprised the original author.

The first day she passed up and down through the Heavens, gentle and simple were left standing, and they in great wonder, saying one to the other:
 'What new light is that? What new beauty at all? The like of herself hasn't risen up these long years from the common world.'
 And herself, well pleased with the Heavens, was going forward,
 matching herself with the most perfect that were before her, yet one time, and another, waiting a little, and turning her head back to see if myself was coming after her. It's for that I'm lifting up all my thoughts and will into the Heavens, because I do hear her praying that I should be making haste for ever.

When I finished my own versions of Petrarch's sonnets I started on Cavalcanti because I couldn't bear to stop. When I finished Cavalcanti I started on Leopardi for the same reason but also because I was scared of Dante and thought Leopardi was probably impossible anyway for a myriad of reasons including his back problems and general air of hopelessness. I thought Leopardi would help me quit. No, Montale, no. And everyone knows you can't mess with Pasolini.

Are we all just rewriting Petrarch anyway? Or being plainclothes troubadours amongst the shrubs in Tesco carpark. Well, no and yes and no. Of course the thing still needs to be a song even if the lute is now a stage prop made of mdf. I'm all for foregrounding the poem's participation in the various histories of song, especially since the time we all got transistor radios and generally went wireless. As for future projects I've decided to postpone my versions of Dante until at least 35 years after my death and I'm still wondering if there's time to learn German. I have a hankering to return to Heine. Is there anything finer?