NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS FOR TEACHERS, STUDENTS AND POETS IN GENERAL, APPEAR IN EVERY ISSUE OF *AGENDA* (since Patricia McCarthy took over as Editor).
They can also be accessed online at this site.

William Cookson (founding editor)'s Preface to Notes for Broadsheet Poets:

'GISTS CONCERNING THE MAKING OF POETRY':

A great poem must remain a mystery. In every age, it is a rare event. To take a few random examples: it is impossible to say why, 'You do look, my son, in a mov'd sort….', 'As you came from the holy land of Walsingham', Landor's 'Circe' or Pound's 'Canto 115' shake the reader to the roots on each re-reading, but it is poetry of this voltage that we seek.

'No man can read Hardy's poems collected but that his own life, and forgotten moments of it, will come back to him, a flash here and an hour there. Have you a better test of true poetry?' (Pound). The Muses ' "are" as Uncle William said, "the daughters of memory" ' (Pound quoting Yeats).

Imagination is the tap root, but, a poet's 'data' must be 'accurate, experiential and contractual….The imagination must work through what is known and known by a kind of touch. Like the Yggdrasil of northern myth, the roots must be in hard material though the leaves be conceptual and in the clouds; otherwise we can have fancy but hardly imagination' (David Jones).

The 'knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade, all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem…' (Keats).

'Writing poetry is like juggling with conflicting forces in a tiny unit' (Geoffrey Hill).

The 'workman must be dead to himself while engaged upon the work, otherwise we have that sort of "self-expression" which is as undesirable in the painter or the writer as in the carpenter, the cantor, the half-back or the cook' (David Jones).

There are no rules that a genius cannot break, but 'originality precisely the *not* to be desired, unless it happens…..' (Pound).

'*The Divine Comedy* is a constant reminder to the poet of the obligation to explore, **to find words for the inarticulate, to capture those feelings which people can hardly ever feel, because they have no words for them**. (Eliot).

One use of poetry is to enlarge our experience, 'if it …. reveals to us something of which we are unconscious, it feeds us with its energy' (Pound). Rather than expressing the predictable, **poems should 'seek to carve out a shape in the unknown'** (Peter Dale on Geoffrey Hill).

NOTES FOR YOUR OWN 'PECULIAR MUSIC'

by Patricia McCarthy

The poet **Emily Dickinson** (b 1830) said, '**If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry**.'

You might well agree with Emily Dickinson that a lot depends upon gut reaction. Charlotte Bronte said something similar about her sister, the loner Emily's poems when she first came upon them.

Emily Bronte's poems stirred Charlotte's heart 'like the sound of a trumpet'. She admired the way they were: 'condensed and terse, vigorous and genuine. They also had a **peculiar music** – wild melancholy and elevating . . . a condensed energy.'

Is this not what every poet seeks? That '**peculiar music**' which means finding a voice of your own.

YOUR OWN VOICE

In *Finders Keepers* (Faber and Faber, £20 hardback), **Seamus Heaney** explains that **you will know you have found your own voice if 'you can get your own feeling into your own words and your words have the feel of you about them'**.

How to start, then, using your words to 'bring to silence what the great Gothic cathedrals did to light', as Peter Abbs suggests in his recently published book *Against The Flow*?

Auguste Rodin certainly managed to use his hands to bring to stone what these great cathedrals did to light, infusing life into the lifeless maybe because he used his own experience – his passions, losses, hardships, celebrations. Indeed, '**the wound may well be the best hurting place to start from' (P. Abbs**) in attempting to communicate, through poetry, what cannot be conveyed in normal speech.

Rainer Maria Rilke in *Letters to a Young Poet* pre-empts Abbs: 'Our sadnesses are special – for they are the moments when something new has entered into us, something unknown. We have changed as a house changes into which a guest has entered. . .'

Geoffrey Hill, in a radio broadcast, stated likewise: '**A poem is a sad and angry consolation.'**

YOUR THEMES

We all write best about what we have experienced and about what we know, even if we distance that experience from ourselves through the craft or form of the poem, or place the veil of mythology over it. Many of Yeats' poems addressed directly to Maud Gonne on the subject of his unrequited love were written as very personal poems. Some he left in their raw state to transcend the merely personal because they were so deeply lived; others he clothed almost apologetically in Classical or Irish mythology as a kind of mask for his vulnerable self. It must be remembered that many poems deeply felt expand beyond mere personal utterance and become universal e.g. Thomas Hardy's 1912–13 poems written on the sudden death of his wife expand into anyone's shocked bereavement, anyone's sense of irrevocable loss. It does not matter that the main drive behind them was guilt, for Hardy had not got on with his wife at all for most of their marriage (see John Montague's poem on this subject in this issue). The poems stand on their own, with a life of their own.

The American poet, **Robert Frost**, said: **'A poem begins as a lump in the throat, a homesickness, a lovesickness.** It finds the thought and the thought finds the words.'

Rainer Maria Rilke, in his ***Letters to a Young Poet*** urged the uncertain young poet he was addressing: '**Seek themes your own everyday life offers you: describe your sorrows and desires, passing thoughts and the belief in some sort of beauty and use, to express yourself, the things in your environment, the images from your dreams, and the objects of your memory. If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it. Blame yourself; tell yourself you are not poet enough to call forth its riches; for to the creator there is no poverty and no poor indifferent place . . . Go into yourself and test the deeps in which your life takes rise.'**

Rilke continues: **'Live your life like a painful and beautiful day in the history of a great gestation**. For everything that happens keeps on being a beginning . . . and beginning in itself is always so beautiful'.

Ruth Padel endorses what Rilke says in picking, for her detailed analyses, modern poems that 'were made from all the textures of life around us, from what we all see in newspapers and the home, on TV, on the street.' Her palatable, articulate book, ***52 Ways of Looking at a Poem*** (Chatto and Windus 20002 , £12.99) is an attempt to make modern poetry accessible to

those locked out of it, and to show how poetry can 'transform real life imaginatively so we understand our lives newpaintedly, more fully; to make familiar things look strange so you see them new'. The poems she chooses for inclusion are on 'subjects that matter to all of us: memory, childhood, embarrassment; war, illness, death, love; dreams, art, jealousy, betrayal, loss. They are about cooking, rain at the bus stop, parents, defloration; about being unable to drive, being misunderstood. About cruelty . . . identity, origin, landscape, home and hope, inequality and immigration; ambition, incest and failure, slavery and exile. . .'

THE MAGIC OF POETRY

Some poems, of course, can surprise even their creator when they take off as if with a life of their own and communicate, somehow, without being fully understood. As **Don Cupitt** suggests in ***After God*****: 'Language speaks us** … **It makes us; it makes the world; it makes and unmakes all things**.'

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889), who burnt all his early poetry and went on to be innovative with his sprung rhythm, along with his definitions of *inscape* and *instress*, said: '**Sometimes one admires and enjoys the very lines one cannot understand**', **especially if one reads, as he advocated, 'with the ears, not with the eyes.**'

Borrowing from other writers, painters or musicians, even tangentially, is no crime either (viz Pound and Eliot); and it is true that **many good poets are kleptomaniacs**, even subconscious ones.

Hopkins said more than a hundred years ago: 'that nothing should be old or borrowed . . . cannot be.'

VERSIONS

Drafting and re-drafting poems is often an essential part of the process, as is the discarding of them in order, perhaps, to return to them with a fresher, lighter touch. After all, only very few poems arrive as special gifts, all of a piece, and these belong to what Hopkins called 'the highest (and rarest) kind of poetry'. The Welsh poet, **Dylan Thomas**, who recited his poems out loud while composing them, did not worry about having to 'grope', like Hopkins, 'for the tune' in order to thrum 'the sweetest and most secret catgut of the mind'. It is often precisely this 'groping' that perfects the final draft of the poem.

THE NECESSARY POEM

In aiming for the indispensable poem, the poem that is

written because it has to be, because it is wrung out of the depths of your experience in whatever form, and has, as Rilke says, 'sprung from necessity', it is worth recalling **Dylan Thomas's words of warning** to the aspiring poet, Vernon Watkins, who was then only twenty-three: '**The words are lovely but they seem so chosen, not struck out** … I cannot see the strong inevitable pulling that makes the poem an event, a happening, an action perhaps, not a still life or an experience put down . . .'

CRAFT

'An experience put down' . . . Transforming that raw experience into a poem means learning to use the technique and craft of poetry. Of course, unconscious effects can happen in a poem and be successful, especially if the poet has a natural, musical ear. Ruth Padel asserts: 'The poems chosen are carefully crafted and structured, but not all of the ways they get their effects will have been put there consciously by the poet. Some will have been, some won't. How conscious they were does not matter, and the same goes for the reader . . . Responding is what matters . . .'

Heaney defines craft as 'what you can learn from other verse: **the skill of making**' and he continues: '**Learning the craft is learning to turn the windlass at the well of poetry**', using, often innovatively, the tools of the trade that concern pattern and sound. **Ruth Padel** lays down the simple ground rules to follow even before these tools are taken up: **show, don't tell** and, 'at the end, **frisk every word to make sure it's necessary**, **that it's pulling its weight**.' Then for the 'tools' that have evolved from poetry-making, the oldest of the literary arts, she adds: 'Part of the art is making the way you use these tools as invisible as possible in the finished product'. A fine example is Hardy's poem *The Haunter* in which he gives his dead wife the voice that he did not allow her to have while she was alive. In each verse, every alternate line ends with 'know', 'go', 'do', 'thereto' so that the lines haunt one another throughout just as she haunts him, although when reading the poem, this pattern is so subtle that the rhyme and repetition can hardly be discerned.

Rilke might well add to Heaney's definition of craft that learning the craft is learning to turn the windlass at the well of your self. He advises the young poet: **'Works of art are of an infinite loneliness** . . . What goes on in your innermost being is worthy of your whole love.'
'Your innermost being' consists of your multiple selves, your instinct, your psyche, your subconscious as well as your conscious mind, your own experiences, the experiences of others you know, of previous generations, of the land, and of words themselves as 'bearers of history and mystery'.

TECHNIQUE

Technique, however, as Heaney puts it, 'entails the watermarking of your essential patterns of perception, voice and thought into the touch and texture of your lines'. Technique comprises 'that whole creative effort to bring the meaning of experience within the jurisdiction of form.' This 'form' need not be a daunting, tight corset around the content of the poem. It can entail free verse, (as Ruth Padel states, while allowing that – in modern poetry – free and formal methods are at work side by side – both of which she explains clearly and in context, with a useful, short glossary of poetic terms at the end of her book: 'There is a long and shining history of poetry that does not rhyme. Homer did not rhyme, nor did classical Greek or Latin poetry – rhymed poetry in Greek or Latin is late classical and medieval'), but somehow the style of the poem needs to match or illuminate its content. For example, if the poem describes a jarring relationship between a mother and daughter, then the form to illuminate this might well be free verse, with broken lines within a line, enjambement and no rhyme since the mother and daughter are not rhyming with each other.

'**Philip Larkin said a poem is a knife and fork partnership**. The fork identifies an emotion: spears it, lands it on the poem's plate. The knife is analytical and technical, wants "to sort out the emotion, chop it up, arrange it and say either thank you or sod the universe for it". The fork is what makes readers (and writers) reach for poetry in a crisis.' (Ruth Padel)

It is this matter of 'technique', to be learnt by long, strict study, sometimes as long as twenty years, and harsh discipline in the ancient Bardic schools, that Caesar reported in his *De Bello Gallico* and Strabo in his *Geographica*. The Celtic Bards were regarded as superior to the Vates or natural philosophers and diviners, and to the Druids. For, as singers and poets, the Bards had 'the mystic import of words' (*The Empty School*), 'The Light of Foresight' (*The Train*) and were seen as guides and judges as Taliesin testifies in his *Riddle Song*.

The danger in over-concentrating on technique is that the technique can, in not very able hands, override the content and become just a technical exercise, reducing the poem's impact. **The master craftsman Peter Dale**, who wrote the invaluable ***An Introduction to Rhyme*** (Agenda/Bellew, £13.95 hardback) has agreed to write on the multiple and complex uses of technique in a future issue of ***AGENDA***. Limited copies of AGENDA, Vol. 28 No. 4**, *A Survey on Rhyme***, are still available.Other regular essays will focus on the art of poetry.

THE READER

In analysing how you write poems – and Ruth Padel emphasises that '**analysing' differs from 'dissecting**' which 'destroys a dead animal's body' while 'analysing a poem is more like turning a spotlight on a living creature', the 'living creature' being the poem – you will need to consider why you read poems and what poems do for you, whether they are cathartic, celebratory or act as mirrors wherein you can see confirmed your own emotional or actual state. Larkin said that poetry begins with emotion in the poet and ends with the same emotion in the reader, the poem being the instrument that puts it there.

The reader's role certainly must not be underestimated, nor your own role as reader/poet. However, I would disagree with Larkin, for, although the reader can be seen to complete the poem once it has been relegated, in its elastic form (stretching different ways in accordance with different interpretations and according to the different experiences and echoes that each reader brings to the poem) to the market place of the page, each reader surely makes that poem specifically his or hers in the light of his or her own unique, hermetic interpretation. **John Luis Borges** seems to endorse this view: '**Poetry lies in the meeting of the poem and reader** . . . **What is essential is the thri**ll, the almost physical emotion that comes with each reading'. 'Each reading' endorses the proposition that one poem can be a hundred thousand poems interpreted in myriad ways by a hundred thousand readers from differing cultures, backgrounds, upbringings, education and influences. Furthermore, at one moment the reader can be highly receptive yet at another moment numb and barely responsive at all to the same poem, the reaction therefore dependent to some extent on the pervading mood of the reader.

Gerard Manley Hopkins recognised this: '**You know well how deadened, as it were, the critical faculties become at times,** when all good poetry alike loses its clear ring and its charm; while in other moods they are so enlivened that things that have lost their freshness strike you with their original definiteness'.

Hence the need to give each poem its chance and to look at it several times, allowing for the variant inadequacies in one's response.

THE ROLE OF POETRY

However, vacillating moods aside, poetry can serve the reader as a **strong life force** in many ways: as a life-saver,

confidant(e), consolation, refuge, interpreter, instructor, tranquiliser, thinker, questioner, challenge, intensifier, goader, chastener, music-maker . . . the list is endless. Iris Murdoch, wife of former long-standing trustee of *Agenda*, John Bayley, who was William Cookson's tutor at New College, Oxford, declared firmly in an essay: 'Art should not console'.

But, as Ruth Padel contests, 'sometimes it is the only thing that can console, and **people often turn to poetry in a crisis**.' There is no doubt that poetry, and poets, help us not to feel so lonely. An example of this happened to me in my twenties when I arrived in Washington DC to take up residence and discovered that my father had been knocked down by a Volkswagon and killed. As an outsider in an alien culture, in a foreign world, a tattered copy of **Rilke's *Duino Elegies*** (Leishmann, Spender translation, with the German on one side and scribbled upon by some anonymous student in smudged, looped writing) fell into my hands in a secondhand bookshop and became my life-support, sustaining me in that traumatic shock, and making Rilke at once, with a flash of recognition, a true, lasting friend.

SOLITUDE

Whether you are a writer or a reader, or both, as Ruth Padel says, 'you have to have time and something like solitude to go in and out of a poem, to turn it over'. . .

Rilke stressed: 'The necessary thing is . . . **great inner solitude.** . . . Works of art are of an infinite loneliness . . . Patience is everything'.

It is within this 'great inner solitude' that **Rilke** urged the young poet he was addressing, Franz Xaver Kappus, and all of us now to **'assume our existence as broadly as we in any way can; everything, even the unheard of, must be possible in it'.** What he goes on to say applies as accurately today as when he wrote the letters from 1902 to 1908, and indeed finds an echo in Peter Abbs' *Against The Flow*: The experiences that are called visions, the whole so-called 'spirit world', death, all those things that are so closely akin to us, have by daily parrying been so crowded out of life that the senses with which we could have grasped them are atrophied.'

THE ROOM OF YOUR LIFE

A memorable image Rilke uses to urge us to be daring and experimental with our lives is 'the room': 'If we think of this existence of the individual as a larger or smaller room, it appears evident that most people learn to know only a corner of their room, a place by the window, a strip of floor on which

they walk up and down . . .'

Rilke's advice to 'let life happen to you . . .' and 'change' ('Everything that makes more of you than you have heretofore been in your best hour is right') is paralleled by **Carol Ann Duffy** in her buoyant poem ***Away and See***. Here, as in many of her poems, she involves the readers directly, making them active participants as she undermines prejudices and closed minds, urging people, with gentle imperatives, not to live dead lives but to be inquisitive, to experiment and to expand. Her avowal of language is epiphanic:

Away and see things that words give a name to, the flight
of syllables, wingspan stretching a noun. Test words
wherever they live; listen and touch, smell, believe.
Spell them with love.

The final verse shows her affirmation in the wonder of life:

Nothing's the same as anything else. Away and see
for yourself. Walk. Fly. Take a boat til land reappears,
altered forever, ringing its bells, alive. Go on. G'on.
Gon.
Away and see.
(*Selected Poems*, Penguin Poetry, £7.99)

YOUR ROLE

'Nothing's the same as anything else' matches Hopkins' definition of ***inscape*****,** the distinctive quality of every single thing. His other term, ***instress***, that quasi-mystical, Platonic illumination felt by the perceiver in viewing the *inscape*, seems to be what Carol Ann Duffy, in her own 'popular' voice, Ruth Padel and Peter Abbs, despite different standpoints, (e.g. Peter Abbs views irony as an unnecessary block to the spiritual whereas Ruth Padel admires the irony and implication in much poetry today) are all advocating in order that, through poetry, the reader might feel, behind 'the dull, dense world', that deeper pattern, order and unity which gives meaning to external forms. Here you the poet can retain that privileged, shamanic role both of '**walker between the worlds' and 'weaver of spells.'**

The following poem seems particularly appropriate for welcoming young poets to the ***Agenda*** broadsheets:

NANCY SANDARS
To Poets Not Yet Born

Day after day that turns down, folds down leaves,
dry days without creation,
days that are only falling sap. Suns that have risen
because the world has made one revolution
upon imaginary poles, nights that are only shadow
out of a lesser shadow, the backside view of the universe.
Such days the matrix out of which
one is created, sapphire from silicate
such difference between causation and creation,
The jewel is harder than the matrix which
a cunning chemist can annihilate.
The day, the word, created and not made,
other-world felt, otherwise heard.
The long day of the saints
and their absurd lovely miracles
is past, the day of the poets now is passing
soon to be extinct. Their absurdities
equally lovely and obsolete
their anachronistic organs.
Act of faith, jump in the dark
dazzle of hope through drizzle of dispair
Poet, she is dying, your one and only Procris,
dazzling the eyes of death, your Last Duchess,
your sorrowing Eurydice, medium of your common language.
Dear body of your only usage lies on the ground
anaesthetised while the murderers gather round
First the logician with his little scalpel
to lecture on the humorous corpse,
he separates the bundles of the veins
within the body of the old magician
saying it was too inexact to live,
the dearness or the loveliness he does not reckon,
while in the brain the conscientious analyst
probes living matter with a deadly hand.
The man of calculation is the last to come,
when the white sinews are all unstrung,
neatly he removes the tongue and writes an X
upon the bleeding root, a Y upon the quivering heart
and Z upon the guts and with the sum
of each dissected part he formulates fresh form.
Communication must not cease.
Communication conquers all!
Poets, you are not concerned with truth,
laws of the Internet are not for you.
Some have claimed gods, or maidens did inspire,
tongs lifted altar-coals, tongues of fire,
stigmata, words from mountains, birds in flight.

There is no cause in reason why this should be,
but yet it is, therefore turn down this page,
the branch breaks here, upon creation.

NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS:
HAVING A MENTOR

by Patricia McCarthy

Having a mentor could well be very important to you, as it is healthy to have an objective critic upon whom you can test your work and whom you admire sufficiently not to hate when he/she wants you to change your precious (just written) words. A mentor can take the place of time and point out flaws or clumsy lines which you might not

recognise for months or years. A mentor can encourage you and also help you to develop your craft and suggest new themes. Even if you do not agree with what your mentor says, this disagreement can sharpen you and make you reconsider your words, usually for the better. Of course, there is the poem that comes all of a piece, like a gift, the one that can never be tampered with, but these kinds of poems are extremely rare.

I hope **Brendan Kennelly** will not mind me mentioning that he was my major mentor over a number of years when I was in my twenties, back in Dublin for a few months every year, but, in general, living abroad. Having responded most positively to my initial ramblings, never before shown to anybody, he got me to send him every single poem I wrote when I lived in Paris, for example, and he would write back with a warm, detailed, critical commentary which spurred me on and helped me to believe in what I was writing. His own handwriting in a fountain pen has the same flourish to this day. I think Brendan has been, and probably still is, most inspirational for many young poets and he is to be thanked and blessed for his generosity and selflessness in this.

Many aspiring poets today find mentors in increasingly popular schools of creative writing, in poetry societies, teachers or just among friends or relatives.

Dorothy Wellesley, who lived only about ten miles from where I reside, had **Yeats** for her mentor. Thus I would like to present, here, chosen extracts from ***Letters on Poetry from W.B.Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley***, a cover-less rare book I happen to have in my keeping, which offers many useful tips.

Extracts from *Letters on Poetry from W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley:*
(Oxford University Press, 1940)

Yeats: Riversdale, August 11, 1935
When I get to Penns in the Rocks, I would like to go over your last poem, word for word, perhaps to read it out. There may be one or two absurdities in the syntax – I am not sure. You will grow into a great poet.

(Notes from D.Wellesley: ..I was anxious to persuade him to re-consider some of his selections and omissions for *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, and especially his decision to omit nearly all the war poets, including Wilfred Owen. On this point he remained adamant, holding that ‘passive suffering was not a subject for poetry’, just as a passive attitude towards nature did not make fine poetry. The creative man must impose himself upon suffering, as he must also upon Nature.

I agreed in principle; but I did not agree with his application of this theory to certain poets.

He preferred sitting out of doors, even on windy days. In choosing my *Selected Poems*, his method was to collect all the copies of a volume in the house, and then to cut out crooked bits of pages with a large pair of scissors, throwing these scraps of paper to the ground with an impatient hand for others to pursue and paste together. Some of these had to be collected from the Rocks).

Dorothy Wellesley, Penns in the Rocks, Withyham, East Sussex
October 1st, 1935
….My head is full of new verse, singing, pounding even in my ears, but practical affairs must be dealt with. Do you think inspiration can be lost if not born with the first birth-pang? I fear this may be so. But perhaps no inspiration is ever lost, but recurs months, perhaps years later. It seems to me that poetry is begotten of a tune. More and more deeply I feel this, have never really doubted it.

Yeats, Riversdale, October 8th, 1935
….I like what you say about poetry being begotten of a tune. I have just finished an essay on this subject which I will show you. You ask if inspiration can be lost; no, not when creation has started (then it goes on like the child in the womb). One of the two reasons I am going to Majorca is that if I can start a great momentum to write, I can go on even in this turmoil.

Yeats, Riversdale, October 9th, 1935
….It is a queer thing that the folk lilt lost since the time of Burns has been discovered in our time. The essay I told you I was writing on tune and poetry is for the *Cuala Broadsides* and done in collaboration with F.R. Higgins who is a fine folk musician. We show that even the poet who thinks himself ignorant of music will sometime write unconsciously in tune.

Yeats, Riversdale, Monday, November 18th, 1935
….I send you under another cover some Broadsides, songs with their music, that to the traditional songs, mostly never printed before, this to the songs of living poets mostly newly composed. The pictures by Dublin artists are all hand-coloured by my sisters' girls. As I told you we shall follow with a second series of Irish and English poets.

Yeats, Riversdale, November 23rd, 1935
….The version (of 'Fire') is much improved, but I want to suggest two changes. Near the top of page 7 you have an indented line 'And the wind is wild'; I want to leave that line out, it holds up the speed and is too obviously put in to rhyme with 'child' which does quite well as an unrhymed line. The other change is at the beginning: I want to put a mark of exclamation after 'Modern Man!' Without that it looks as if 'Modern Man' was the 'core of life'.

D. Wellesley, Penns in the Rocks, December 10th, 1935
….I flirt with my Muse but she has evidently quarrelled with me. My half-born poem left me and I am dejected. It was crowded out by practical people – the old story.

Yeats, Hotel Terramar, December 21st, 1935
….Force yourself to write, even if you write badly at first. The first verse after long inaction is in my case almost always artificial, and then it branches out.

Yeats, Hotel Terramar, December 22 (I think)
….You get much of your effect from a spare use of adjectives and the using as much as possible of such necessary and usual ones as in 'Modern Man', 'Cheap Jewel', mere statements of fact. It gives your work objectivity.

(Notes from D. Wellesley:….W.B.Y. speaks like Zeus. Within two minutes of our first meeting at my house he said: 'You must sacrifice everything and everyone to your poetry'. I replied: 'I have children and cannot'.

W.B.Y. is forever trying to revise my poems. We have quarrelled about this. I say to him: 'I prefer bad poems written by myself to good poems written by you under my name'. When he has made a suggestion for altering a certain line in my verses and I demur saying: 'I shall make a note saying this line was altered by W.B.Y.; otherwise I am cheating', he says, 'No! It has always been done in a company of poets', which is true. He adds: 'Lady Gregory wrote the end of my "Deirdre" on my fundamental mass'.

However, I shall do as I intend.

….We were sitting in the garden talking of Irish politics when he suddenly said:…..'Poetry is always present in my mind'. We then agreed that great rapidity of mind which gives the average person the impression of disordered thinking, or lack of concentration, is a marked characteristic of the poetic mind. He has it himself most strongly marked).

Yeats, Casa Pastor, Palma-de-Mallorca, Spain, April 6th, 1936
….I may point out to you one or two places where in my selections from your work the thought is good, but the words are not in their natural order – 'the natural words in the natural order' is the formula. I would never alter a fine passage to conform to formula but one gets careless in connecting passages and then formula helps.

Yeats, Casa Pastor, May 3rd, 1936
….Our words must seem to be inevitable.

Yeats, Casa Pastor, May 22, 1936
….We want, not a new technique, but the old passion felt as new.

Riversdale, July 2nd, 1936
My dear, Here you have a masterpiece. (I have just put in the rhymes, made it a ballad)…..This is far better then my laboured livelier verses. This is complete, lovely, lucky, born out of itself, or born out of nothing. My blessing upon you and it.

Yeats, Riversdale, August 5th, 1936
….We all have something within ourselves to batter down and get our power from this fighting. I have never 'produced' a play in verse without showing the actors that the passion of the verse comes from the fact that the speakers are holding down violence or madness – 'down Hysterica passio'. All depends on the completeness of the holding down, on the stirring of the beast underneath. Even my poem 'To D.W.' should give this impression. The moon, the moonless night, the dark velvet, the sensual silence, the silent room and the violent bright Furies. Without this conflict we have no passion, only sentiment and thought.

My wife will send you the Turner poems and their setting and also a poem by Hugh MacDaermid – there are so many ways of spelling that name….

Yeats, Riversdale, Thursday, August 13th, 1936
….My dear, you must be prepared for silly reviews until you are so old that you are beyond caring & then they will only take another form of silliness. For twenty years I never sent a book for review in Ireland knowing that any review here would be an attack. The more alive one is the more one is attacked.

….Write verse, my dear, go on writing, that is the only thing that matters. Beardsley said to me, 'I make a blot & shove it about till something comes'.

Yeats, Riversdale, December 4th, 1936
….I feel that one's verse must be as direct & natural as spoken words. The opening I sent you was not quite natural.

Yeats, Riversdale, December 21st, 1936
….O my dear do not force yourself to write, it should become as natural to you as the movement of your limbs. When I cannot do anything else I take up some old fragment & try to add to it & perfect it. …I have just turned out a thing of joy, just such a fragment.

Yeats, Riversdale, February 8th, 1937
….I am most anxious to see your new poems – all that you need I think to perfect your style is to prevent any departure from the formula 'Music, the natural words in the natural order'. Through that formula

we go back to the people. Music will keep out temporary ideas, for music is the nation’s clothing of what is ancient & deathless….

Yeats, Riversdale, February 26th, 1937
….Why did you make the poem so difficult to write by rhyming every line instead of alternate lines as in my ballad? This has made you call the lover first ‘knight’ & then ‘squire’, incompatible titles (in one place you call him Lord). I suggest you put the poem aside for a time & then read it when you have forgotten the associations that arose during the act of writing.

D. Wellesley, June, 1938
I think I once wrote in a letter that all man’s life was a rhythm: his waking, his sleeping, his loves, the passing of his loves, his despair, his peace, his acceptance of old age and death. The musicians have understood this. I do not think that the poets have understood in any way to the same degree. Perhaps they are too passionate.

Yeats, Riversdale, 3rd July, 1938
The first poem ‘Love’ is very moving and profound. There are words I would like to change. First there is the old point, never employ two words that mean the same thing.

(Notes from D. Wellesley: Yeats once said to John Sparrow: ‘The tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul’….
I think he hated all his early poems, and ‘Inisfree’ most of all. But one evening I begged him to read it. A look of tortured irritation came into his face, and continued there until the reading was over….His later poems he was always willing to read, also those of other contemporary poets…..The strangest thing concerning his excitement about ‘words for music’ is that he declared himself to be tone-deaf).

Extracts by kind permission of Senator Michael Yeats

NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS/TRANSLATORS

RICHARD McKANE

CONVERSATION ON TRANSLATING POETRY

There are more poets than translators of poetry. Few people read foreign poetry in the original, let alone translate it. Can poetry in a foreign language and in translation go some of the way to uniting peoples as well as languages. Can translation into English be used to point up 'social ills' (one of the purposes of poetry according to the Turkish poet Oktay Rifat) in the target culture in the same way as Boris Pasternak used Shakespeare in Stalin's Russia? What is the status of the poet, let alone the poetry translator in our society? Can we be open to translated poetry if we are not open to our own poetry? Does the great English language still have the ability to express poetry from languages such as Russian that are still predominately using quatrains with masculine and feminine rhymes? Recent translators of Dante and the outstanding translators Francis R. Jones (from the Serbo-Croat of Ivan K. Lalic [Anvil Press]) and Daniel Weissbort in his Zabolotsky (Carcanet) have addressed the form of the poem including rhyme in a remarkable way. There were arguments in the 60s as to 'form and content' – then Nadezhda Mandelstam came up with the claim that in Osip Mandelstam's poetry form and content were unsplittable.

Translating poetry is different from translating prose – a Pushkin translator who cut up a plain prose translation into lines of verse was successfully prosecuted. Why do some free verse translations of rhymed poems with set rhythms work? Why, in the case of Russian, are poets still using rhyme and rhythm schemes that, with certain exceptions, went 'out of fashion' decades ago in English. I think it has something to do with memory and collective memory – and have long believed that Mnesomyne is the Muse of poetry. Perhaps Russians needed and need to carry their poetry by heart in their heads. When poetry is needed – and many Russian poets were unpublished for various reasons – memory takes over above the printed page. The Russian language in the hands or on the lips of the great poets does not become repetitive in its music and rhythms, does not reduce to a jingle. What a wonderful language it is for rhymes: both Leonid Aronzon and Joseph Brodsky, arguably the twin peaks (with an emotional gulf between them) of the second half of 20th Century Russian poetry use rhyme innovatively and as a matter of course. Their rhymes are not pat, not patronising the language – they have an impact that pulls up the line and the reader. But as Joseph Brodsky wrote to me in a card: 'it is important what comes before her' – rhyme in Russian is feminine. It is vital not to fixate in translation on the end of the line. It is obviously impossible wholly to translate a rhyme from one language to another. This said my old Russian Master at Marlborough College, Richard Pollock, apart from his dynamic teaching, famous for his multilingual puns gave me one: 'uchitel' – muchitel': mentor – tormentor. Whereas the snap rhyme for 'love' in English is 'dove', for 'lyubov'' (love in Russian) it is 'krov'' 'blood'. That in itself shows something about the Russian language.

I should add that the vast majority of my own poems rhyme, though the rhythms are varied. I have used rhyme in translation of Okudzhava songs, and as yet unrecorded Akhmatova poems into songs with the singer/songwriter Olga Perry and recently in a book from the Russian of the Azeri poet Negar. I look forward to reading

Daniel Weissbort's memoir of Brodsky (Anvil September 2004) where one of the themes discussed is, as I see it, that translation can be a language in between.

And what of rhythm? Different languages have different speech rhythms, but this does not mean that poetry's rhythms cannot be brought across. Here is an example of mine from Mandelstam's 'I am no longer jealous' where the English is only slightly extended:

'Come back to me the sooner,
I'm frightened without you.
I never felt it stronger,
this hold you have on me.

And all I ever wanted,
I now see clear as day.
I am no longer jealous,
but I am calling you.'

The masculine and feminine endings can hardly be called rhymes but the rhythm is certainly there and it is more than a halfway house. However self-conscious the translator may be, it really helps if she or he reads both the poem aloud, and Russian poetry is a time-honoured stress reliever and also with its stress pattern or meter helps the foreign reader get the stresses (which in Russian are heavier than in English) right. An attempt at an 'equilibristic translation' into English (where rhymes and rhythms are faithfully produced) of Anna Akhmatova's Requiem by the Soviet translator Sergei Roy (Soviet Literature 1989) falls flat on its face – to my mind and ear. This reminds me of Peter Levi's comments in his Preface to my 20th Century Russian Poetry (Kozmik Press 1985, 1990) on two Okudzhava translations in a Soviet anthology of 1967 that he preserved for its curious photographs. 'One is called The Merry Drummer and both appear in verse translations which accurately convey the most rebarbative aspects of Russian verse to English readers, the thumping metre and the genteel elegance. They would have looked old-fashioned in English in 1910.'

Knowledge of languages is a strange thing. I was once with the Turkish artist and close friend of the poet Nazim Hikmet, Abidine Dino in Paris. I said to him 'Abidin, it's wonderful, we share so many languages: English, Turkish, Russian, French and you speak German and several more languages…' He smiled at me, and paraphrasing T.S. Eliot said in Turkish: 'That is not it, at all.' Knowledge is not enough to communicate, in the same way that a degree in languages from a good University does not necessarily mean you can speak the language. Given syllabus concentration on prose, the graduate is not necessarily equipped to be a poetry translator. It must come from outside the system and inside the person. Of all the apprenticeships that of the poetry translator is the longest – perhaps it even remains as he or she works alongside each subsequent poet. It is a life, not a living – for no poetry translator can make money. Recently Seamus Heaney's 'Beowulf' is the exception that proves the rule. Similar to a poet, the poetry translator must make their living: perhaps for the very few (though rather more in the States) through teaching translation in creative writing courses, or by translating more commercial prose, or by interpreting or by teaching, or by any employment that can live in harmony contrapuntal or otherwise with this passion, for it is that, no less. Grants, Arts Council or from other bodies, are vastly more valuable than publishers' advances, however many publishers prove reluctant to apply for grants for the translator, though the

apparatus exists. Occasionally sponsors in the country of origin of the poet may support a translation or publish in their country. Sometimes the solution may be to live in a country that is cheaper to live in, preferably the country of the language you are translating. This happened to me with Turkey. I got to know many Turkish writers and poets that I translated and worked with.

Translating a poem takes up to twenty times longer than writing a poem of one's own: this is not just a quirky opinion of mine but is borne out by the experience of the late poet and translator Feyyaz Kayacan Fergar. However as time passes one can 'get it right' quicker with experience as less words need to be looked up – Vladimir Nabokov, who has written controversially on translation despised 'dictionary translators', yet good dictionaries remain the best universal tool of the translator.

Cooperation or collaboration with the author has become – mainly with email and the positive aspects of the global village – a thing to be sought after. I know this when the boot was on the other foot and two books of poetry of mine were translated into Turkish. Explanations of what Peter Levi has called the 'quirky' aspects of my poems were very much in order. The presence in UK of so many more 'native speakers' could give a terrific lift to translation, not to speak of the domination of the interpreting scene, which is an indictment to British linguists. Self-translating is also on the increase, especially in exiled poetry. However even the best self-translator requires an English eye to be cast over their translation. This is an area where by collaboration between an 'English' poet and the author the translation can move on apace and both poets can broaden their horizons. Perhaps 'tandem translation' is one of the future ways forward for poetry translation.

I want to finish this rather rambling conversation with a quotation from my friend Moris Farhi's Gypsy Bible: 'Love the stranger in thy midst', and my retort to him: 'Love the stranger in thyself'. I have worked with 'strange' words for over 40 years and when you love them they become friends – and you want to share them.

Further, more elementary, online only Notes for Broadsheet poets/translators

by Patricia McCarthy

We are all translators of a sort, as **Brian Friel** shows in his articulate, analytical play ***Translations***. We translate/interpret ourselves, others, experiences, places by many means such as by parody, mime, repetition, imitation, body language, mood, tone, as well as by the language we use. Friel suggests that language is not necessarily the most accurate way to translate what we wish to communicate. Each language, he suggests, is too full of its own history whether recorded or oral, and too full of tradition and change ever to be able to be translated satisfactorily. He implies that strong emotions, such as love which dispenses with the need for words, and the poetic language of metaphor convey the most accurate forms of translation.

In starting out to translate a poem from a poem, then, we all have a head start, since we have the original in our hands. But does this get us anywhere? I have only ever tried two translations in my life: one a poem written in French by Rilke which I was not very satisfied with, and the other a poem I wrote in English upon the sudden death of a French friend whom I had not seen for a long time. I needed to translate it from my source language into French so that it could comfort his family who were not very well versed in English and were not particularly used to poetry. It recalls a time in my early twenties and a smattering of a shy relationship that was never fully acknowledged.

This is the poem as I wrote it in English:

Rememberings

(for Gerard Benoist, 1943-97)

I remember you as the shutters opening –
from blindfolding darks of a foreign room –
onto a sunlit courtyard forever at noon
where harnesses and hooves clanked to rhythms
of Percherons on the cobbles pawing a tune.

I remember you as the land's infinities
that stretched as I rode, each horizon the fence
for the racehorse heading towards galaxies.
Your coolest gaze, so strangely intimate,
lassooed, with envy, my lunacies.

I remember you as a smiling presence
gentling me into your slang and jokes,
claiming me everywhere: from party and chasse,

from sugar-beet fields where I pulled up weeds
and called you 'le patron' as a peasant lass.

I remember your handsomeness fizzing the air
while we spun round each other with quick repartee,
no nerve for the serious, except at the time
when, slipping suddenly on leftover straw,
the horse initiated your intensity.

I remember the steel shoe upon my ribs
turning slowly into your curve of luck,
your low resonant voice at the end of my stay:
"Je serai foutu sans toi" as the Percherons bucked
and I vanished from those carrouselling days.

Too late to tell these rememberings now:
of longago songs which never dared sing.
You are elsewhere than a land's golds and greens;
beyond the bright vision your shutters disclosed,
not bothered any more by what might have been.

It was probably an unwise way to translate: the wrong way around, into the foreign language, though I had been fairly fluent at French after having spent quite some time in France. However as I was rusty, I asked the Head of French at the school in which I was teaching to do a literal translation first for me so that I could check it against my own. What became obvious was that this literal translation simply did not work in French. French was a different idiom, had a different way of saying things and I found myself needing to change, not just the grammar and flow of the lines, but the images also, to get across the original impression and feel of the poem I had written in English. I decided in the end to dispense with the rhyme in the French version as I simply could not manage it without it sounding false and forced. This was a learning curve for me and demonstrated the difficulty and complexity of translation. It made me wonder at the mastery of well-known translators such as **Michael Hamburger, Peter Dale**, examples of whose work, and that of others, you have in the **'Translation as Metamorphosis' issue (vol 40, no 4).**

My French version went like this (I include both poems only as an illustration of a student translator such as myself and the problems thrown up in the act of translating):

Souvenances
(pour Gerard Benoist 1943-87)

Je me souviens de toi qui ouvrit les volets -
de l'aveuglante obscurité d'une chamber etrangère-
sur une cour ensoleillée ou sonnait toujours midi,
où le claquement des sabots et des harnais résonnait
au rythme des Percherons qui piaffaient sur le pavé.

Je me souviens de toi comme de la terre infinie
s'élargissant, à mesure que je courais sautant

chaque horizon sur le cheval de course qui se dirigeait
vers les galaxies. Ton plus froid regard parâissait
intime comme si tu ne voulais pas apprivoiser mes folies.

Je me souviens de ta presence souriante
qui m'initiait doucement a ton argot, ton humour –
venant partout a ma recherche dans les soirées, la chasse
dans les champs des betteraves ou j'arrachais les belles dames,
te traitant de 'patron' comme une vraie paysanne.

Je me souviens de ta beauté qui pétillait
dans l'air lorsque l'on se dérobait l'un a l'autre
avec de la repartie, méprisant le serieux jusqu'au jour
où mon cheval, glissant sur la paille mouillée,
découvrait tout d'un coup ton intensité.

Je me souviens du fer sur mes côtes se tournant lentement
dans la courbe de ton bonheur et, à la fin de mon séjour,
ta voix basse et sonore, 'Je serai foutu sans toi'
alors que les Percherons lancaient des ruades
et que je disparus de ces journées de ribotes.

Désormais il est trop tard pour ces souvenirs fragiles,
ces chants d'antan que l'on n'osait chanter.
Tu est ailleurs, loin de tous les ors and verts de la terre.
Au delà de la lumineuse apparition revélée par tes volets,
tu n'es plus inquiète par ce qui aurait pu être.

Even if you do not have the inclination, it is a good idea to set yourself a poem to translate, preferably into your own language, because it is only in the attempting of it that you learn the complexities of what you are up against, and can admire all the more successful translations you come across.

At their worst, translations, whether literal, free versions or poor imitations are all **five finger exercises** in the sharpening of language. At their best, they stand on their own as new works of art, heads held high, transcending the nationality, persona and language of their original creators. It is worth noting that **no two people will translate a text exactly the same way**. Lines might not even coincide at all, yet no one version will necessarily be superior to another. It must be remembered, too, that even well-known translators, like source poets, cannot always be successful. Michael Hamburger admits in his essay 'On Translation' (see reference in the Introduction to the current issue, Vol 40 no 4): "If I reflect on anything, it is not on problems (of translation) which are the province of the theorists, but on dilemmas, on specific failures either complete or partial."

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The following notes have been compiled from jottings on translating poetry by the well-known translator, **Ruth Christie** and are entitled '**A Purely Personal View**'.

They aim to encourage young poets, students and aspiring translators to have a go and even get hooked on translating:

Best to ignore the discouraging, often-repeated comments: 'poetry is what is lost in translation', 'to translate is to betray,' or 'poems cannot be translated without losses – best to stick to the originals'…

Better to remember **Borges** who thought that **'a text re-created can be better than the original.**' Of course that is often disputed.

The principle of the re-creation of a text is: to **READ, R**EAD, and **READ** the original text until it is absorbed.

In my experience, translating a poem works best when there is empathy between the translator and the original ('source' text), although to work on a text for which you feel an affinity can be a good, rewarding exercise.

A 'word for word' version can serve only as a basic framework; it is not an imaginative re-creation of the 'genius' or spirit of the original.

The translator aims at recapturing the feel of the original by other means (by sensitive phrasing, awareness of rhythm, tone, mood, atmosphere), also at creating a well-achieved poem in the target language. A good translator becomes a translator-poet.

Dryden's 'translation with latitude' will be feared by literalists but the sensitive translator-poet will recognise in his dictum the boundaries of freedom.

This freedom can result in the translation being called a **version**. Some versions remain close to the original; others are free or only loosely connected to the original.

Absolute fluency in the source language is a gift, and some translators are happily bilingual. However, absolute fluency is less essential than is an ear for natural rhythms and the knowledge to recognize the games a language can play e.g. puns, slang, ambiguities, idioms. The translator who cannot speak the source language fluently needs access to a friendly, knowledgeable reader and speaker of the source language, as well as **a consultant guide** to the research of references, historical contexts and cultural background. The price of such a guide is above rubies!

Translators must be prepared to do research.

Understanding the original poem – where it is coming from – will direct the vocabulary of everything else in the re-creation.

Recently a collaborator and I have been translating a long contemporary poem based on the Homeric epic, ***The Iliad***. In Homer, the Greeks have defeated the Trojans, sacked Troy and put the enemy to flight. But our source-poem, subverting Homer, is written from the point-of-view of the defeated who see the triumphant Greeks as godlike monsters. We discovered that, just before writing this, our poet had been immersed in Greek and Latin poems and had translated several into his own language; and also that he was deeply concerned with the historical and current political

situation in his country. We had to find language which mirrored the epic quality of his poem (the epic of the defeated) and his surrealistic imagery of modernity. Our findings directed – whether successfully or not – the way we approached the source text.

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