

# Editing Modern Poetry in Translation

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EDITING any 'little' magazine, that is (usually) a magazine whose finances are inadequate, is rather like trying to ride two horses at once. The editor has to be his own business-manager, and the business-manager his own editor. When I was asked to write about *Modern Poetry in Translation* for this issue of *Ariel*, I happened to be engaged upon the largest subscription campaign we had ever undertaken. I was told that *Ariel's* readers might be as interested in the mechanics of editing or even of selling *MPT*, as in its editors' views on translation. As this fits in with my present preoccupations, I shall start from the point at which every magazine does start — after the vision, the excitement, the discussions, the doubts and the realization finally that one has somehow or other committed oneself to publishing a magazine — namely the selling of the damned thing; for it is at that point of confrontation with the maybe unready, maybe indifferent public that both the agony and the ecstasy start. I could elaborate on this common experience, but it will take me too far from the subject: *MPT*. Returning to my somewhat unoriginal metaphor; the two horses, in practice, turn out to be one, which is maybe why 'little' magazines have often had such distinct personalities and been influential beyond their actual size.

Selling a magazine is, one suspects, very much like selling any other product. One tries to identify those sections of the public that are potential consumers and one then tries to reach them in the most effective and, at the same time, economical manner. With a magazine as specialized as *MPT*, bookshop sales are not particularly significant, though they cannot be ignored. Bookshops, it must be said, are generally inhospitable to literary magazines — it's not hard to see why — and this, together with the fact that they must be given a third or more discount on sales of magazines that are usually on 'sale-or-return' anyway, reduces

their usefulness as an outlet. It is my experience that the effort that goes into persuading unenthusiastic booksellers to stock a few magazines is better devoted to devising means of reaching the potential readership directly. Direct mail seems to smack of big business and that is precisely what it is. This does not mean, however, that 'little' magazines, or 'littles', as they are unflatteringly called, should not contemplate it. On the contrary, if they are to survive financially — and by that I mean, to float themselves and not be floated on their editors' overdrafts or entirely on subsidies — little magazines have to adapt or 'parody' big-business methods.

Of course this needs some money. Publicity material has to be printed or duplicated and either sent to individuals, which is very expensive, or placed in other magazines whose readership might be interested, and this must be done on a sufficiently large scale to generate an appreciable response. The kind of scale that is needed may be gauged from the fact that a return of say 7% on letters mailed to individuals is very good, while a return of 2-3% on matter placed in other publications is also good. The campaign that *MPT* is undertaking, involving the distribution, by one means or another, of 25,000 printed leaflets and different duplicated letters addressed to various classes of reader (librarians, writers, academics, etc.) has cost in the region of £500. However, despite the effort and the cost of such an enterprise, it is arguably preferable to the slow financial attrition over a period of years maybe to which most little magazines are condemned. But you do have to find the money, and whoever's money it is, but particularly if it happens to be your own, a good deal of faith is needed — so the whole process is not quite as soulless as it might seem! It is also rather exciting — it appeals to the gambler, the crazy optimist; though as the subscriptions start trickling in — and trickle they do, though one may sometimes persuade oneself that it's a flood — one is again confronted with reality, one learns 'on one's own skin', as the Russians have it, just how small is the interested public. One also learns, of course, how large it is.

With magazines, as with life, one cannot really remember the beginning nor foresee the end. Furthermore, with the seemingly ever more rapid turnover of events, those that occurred no more

than a year or so back seem 'historical', i.e. not really remembered, merely 'recorded'. In this sense, I can 'remember' that at a New Year's party, 1964/5, Ted Hughes tossed in my direction an idea he had been ventilating for some time, both here and in the States, for starting a kind of broadsheet devoted *solely* to modern poetry in translation: no criticism, lots and lots of straight translation. And why do it? I can't 'remember' why, though I could reconstruct the reasons that suggested themselves at that time; they might sound pretty commonplace now. It should be remembered, however, that when *MPT* first appeared it was, in the words of the *TLS* reviewer, 'at least a novelty'. 'An imaginative effort towards cultural internationalism', *The New Statesman* put it rather more kindly, and though that is not the way I would have put it myself, I suppose it does, in a sense, describe what was going on.

Of course, we did not regard ourselves as a variety of unpaid, international, cultural civil servant. Nor did either of us subscribe to any Esperanto-type ethic. Nor did we really have any grand reforming aims. It is just that we were thrown into contact, for one reason and another, with a large amount of foreign poetry in English translation, and were excited by it. We then became increasingly conscious of the rather shameful paucity of space generally allotted foreign poetry, however remarkable, in British magazines, the poetry of only a few of even the major contemporary figures appearing to have secured recognition in this country. In coming into contact with this poetry — and initially it was probably the poetry from Eastern Europe, from behind the 'iron curtain', that impressed us most — we began to become aware of new *possibilities* in poetry. As we put it, rather naïvely no doubt, in our first issue: 'One of the most remarkable features of [this] poetry . . . is its sense of purpose, its confidence in the social as well as private value of poetry, its confidence that it is being heard. This poetry is more universal than ours' etc., etc. When looked at now, this clumsy description seems equally a prescription for the programmatic, utilitarian, official verse of the countries that subscribe to the doctrine of socialist realism! But perhaps, on the other hand, we were groping our way towards an understanding of the social purpose that fired the original radical thinkers, of the need felt increasingly by writers like Chekhov, for instance, to reconcile the demands of art with the demands of

*social and political consciousness. We sensed in the poetry of such men as Holub of Czechoslovakia, Herbert of Poland, Popa of Yugoslavia, and Amichai of Israel, means of dealing with categories of experience, particularly twentieth-century experience, that we, as English writers, did not possess, or, worse, did not even feel the need of possessing. The conditions that had produced these poetic techniques were, in the deepest sense, unenviable, and yet clearly the experiences being confronted in these poems were, to a greater or lesser extent, common to all men in our times. It seemed possible to learn from these poets; we felt, indeed, liberated by the prisoners of totalitarianism, liberated from something that, at first sight, might appear a very un-terrible monster — our 'Englit' culture, that which the creative writer, it seemed to us, had somehow to unlearn before he could begin really to write.*

So perhaps we *were* making an 'effort towards cultural internationalism' after all! Anyway, we were bound to give that impression. Similar was our insistence on literal translations, another attempt to confound the burgher, undertaken in the same fanatical, purist and (even now I say it with reluctance) intolerant spirit. Speaking for myself, it was, in fact, my old-fashioned conviction that poetry was 'untranslatable' that accounted for my attachment to 'literal' translation. By 'untranslatable', I meant of course that the abstract elements — music, form, rhythm — that adhere, as it were, to the conceptual core, or that, through their interaction, 'are' the poem, could not be reproduced in another language. What could be done was the creation of 'another' poem, but — rightly or wrongly — I set my face against that. To quote again from the first editorial: 'The type of translations we are seeking can be described as literal, though not literal in a strict or pedantic sense. Though this may seem at first suspect, it is more apposite to define our criteria negatively, as literalness can only be a deliberate tendency, not a dogma. We feel that as soon as devices extraneous to the original are employed for the purpose of recreating its "spirit", the value of the whole enterprise is called in question.' 'Also "Imitations" like Robert Lowell's, while undeniably beautiful, are the record of the effect of one poet's imagination on another's. They may help in the appreciation of the original, they may simply obscure it. In any case, the original

becomes strangely irrelevant.' The untranslatable had, I felt, in short, to be supplied by the reader; all that the translator could provide was a 'kit' or a set of clues, as it were, consisting of as accurate a rendering of the original as was possible, with as little 'interpretation' or paraphrase as possible. There were even times when I felt the translator might do well to reproduce the syntax, the idiomatic peculiarities of the original language. Everything, or almost everything, was to be left to the poetic intuition of the reader. We were optimistic: 'Poetry inevitably loses hugely in translation but those purists who claim that it is precisely "the poetry" which is lost are speaking as though "the poetry" were some separable ingredient, some additive like the whitening agent in a detergent. We feel that enough of the whole is preservable in some, though by no means in all, poetry.' Such an attitude clearly verges on the extreme at times, and doubtless it sprang, to some extent, from lack of experience; it may also have masked a certain desire — a kind of nihilistic, futuristic passion — to 'throw overboard' the cultural legacy; nevertheless, it did also show that our main interest lay not in the translation as such, but in the original, in what was odd, startling, new for us. We said in the editorial to *MPT* 3: 'The very oddity and struggling dumbness of a word for word version is what makes our own imagination jump. A man who has something really serious to say in a language of which he knows only a few words, manages to say it far more convincingly and effectively than any interpreter, and in translated poetry it is the first-hand contact — however fumbled and broken — with that man and his seriousness which we want.'

This was all highly simplistic, but we edited the magazine with a kind of ferocious inclusiveness. Just as we liked to feel that the translations we published reflected in some unpretentious but proportionate way the original, and provided the sensitive reader with a kit for reconstructing it, so we tried to eliminate any hint of editorial 'personality'. We felt it possible virtually to dispense with an editorial policy, partly because the field was so open, there was so much to be discovered that was clearly worth discovering — it didn't seem to matter much where you began. As editors, we felt our role was to stand guard over two basic principles: literalness and all that it implied for us, and the simple one of ensuring that, as far as possible, poets in the magazine would be

represented by a reasonably large sampling of their work; we were — and still are — allergic to printing the single, short translation. This was all part, as we saw it, of the seriousness of our purpose. We felt it worth building bridges not so much between countries as between individuals and we wanted to know as much and convey as much about the contributors to the magazine as space and the availability of translations permitted.

Maybe as a Jew, I have fairly strong ‘cosmopolitan’ tendencies; even so, the magazine did not represent a deliberate attempt to undermine England’s cultural individuality, to cut contemporary English poetry off from its roots, etc., etc. Without roots in its native soil, literature, I firmly believed, died; and so I was afflicted with a certain unease, embarrassment, when I found myself actually editing an ‘international’ English-language poetry magazine! But how could one deny the truth of the experience? Exposure to foreign poetry *was* a liberating experience, and no amount of contrary dogma could make it otherwise. I too had balked at talk of cultural ‘cross-fertilization’; the internationalism of youth struck me then as an expression of uniformity, standardization rather than anything else, and so on; but I now feel that there must be periods of ‘cross-fertilization’ followed by periods of rooting back into one’s own cultural past — or better still, that the two processes should be simultaneous . . .

To return to the more mundane, I am sometimes asked how I set about contacting all those foreign poets. It is at once a mystery and no mystery at all. Forgetting maybe that the world was now an electronic village, I sent up what I thought to be a pretty faint signal. The response was overwhelming. Within a very short time, indeed before the first number was out, the news of *MPT* had spread to a surprising number of countries as well as to various fierce national groupings in this country and in America. Ill-equipped and unprepared, I found myself having all kinds of information or misinformation hurled at me from various and often mutually antagonistic quarters, though, in my innocence, I was usually unaware of the issues involved.

One of my first, and most naïve, moves was to contact the cultural departments of various embassies. Under the influence of the diplomatic atmosphere or perhaps my own preconceptions

about it, I found myself trying to give the impression that I might, in some obscure way, be of use. I had increasingly the feeling (though I might of course have been projecting) that my various interlocutors believed no more than I in the value of 'cultural exchange' at this official level. The cultural attachés and councillors entertained me (sometimes) and gave me lists of uncontroversial famous writers in their countries; however, they also passed on the addresses of proponents of their countries' literatures here. This latter information was not unuseful, though it did, on too many occasions, lead me into the dustier corners of academia.

One notable exception was the little Cuban embassy off Park Lane which did have, at the time, an actual practising poet, Pablo Amando Fernandez, as cultural councillor. Fernandez wrote to me, along with several old but methodical warhorses in the translation field, when I optimistically (this was about my first definitive action) placed a small announcement about the magazine in the *Statesman*. I went to see him and found him deep in literary negotiations with publishing houses here. He had certainly wasted no time — he seemed to know everyone, or at least he knew their names: and now he knew me. I, of course, was nobody, but Ted Hughes' reputation was enough to make Pablo try to find a slot for me and my magazine. We had a warm exchange of ideas, plans, etc., aided by a liquid lunch towards the end of which he told me, with misting eyes, that if Fidel were to walk into the pub his presence would transform everything! I saw Pablo on several occasions and was constantly amazed at the extent of his knowledge of the English literary and publishing scene. Probably, as its envoy, he benefited from Cuba's somewhat unique position. One felt one was talking to an individual, not just a representative of his country, not that he did not represent his country or that he was capable of disloyalty, but that he represented it *by* his individuality. While the revolutionary impetus lasted, that is while the revolution was still capable of inspiring its children, one felt this would be possible.

For various reasons, the contact with Fernandez produced very little for the magazine, but it did make me aware of the amount of activity going on in the field of literary translation, and specifically of poetry translation. Penguin Books, advised by A. Alvarez, was doing some pioneering work with its various series, notably

the 'Modern European Poets' one, and the magazine could clearly not have come at a better time. Characteristically, there was nothing very systematic about the translation movement in this country, but English writers were turning their hand to translation, even if, on the whole, with a certain amount of condescension. There was a growing realization that something was to be learned, to be gained, from 'acting' (as the famous Israeli poet and translator, Avraham Shlonsky, put it) the 'he', the other writer, the translated one. There is not room here to analyse or speculate about this mood of receptivity, but that it existed at the time was demonstrated to some extent by the lively response we got to the first circulars issued, largely from practising poets.

The literary 'world' here is not very large, though it is not particularly exclusive either. It is, in a way, something of a democracy or rather a private enterprise paradise. Nevertheless, the penetration of England's literary 'world' by foreign elements (that is contemporary foreign elements) was, I found, pretty superficial. To such penetration there was an almost automatic resistance, assuming many forms and adopting many rationales, but, one felt, basically an expression of the old insularity. Of course, there is a lot to be said for 'insularity'; it can be argued that the pleasing homogeneity of English society, accounting for the comparatively easy and still tolerant political and cultural climate that prevails here, is, in its turn, to a large extent, a product of this insularity. However, it can also be argued that the time has come when Britain can no longer be an island unto itself, and that if this insularity is to be breached, it were better breached from within. This is yet another dilemma with which *Modern Poetry in Translation*, like all of us, has to live.