HANDOUT FOR THE DISCUSSION ON TRANSLATING POETRY

December 19, 5:30-7:30

Sharon Bryan

I'm looking forward to meeting the group and talking about issues that come up in translating poetry.

I've included here three poems, each followed by two different English translations, so you can see the choices different poets made, and how that affects the poem's tone, sounds, and meaning.

1. "Puedo Escribir," Spanish, Pablo Neruda

translations by W. S. Merwin and Stephen Tapscott

2. "Podziekawanie," by the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska

translations by Magnus J. Krynski and Robert A. Maguire, and by Stanisław Barańczak and

Clare Cavanaugh

3. "Som Ott Vara Barn," by the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer

translations by Robin Fulton, and by Michael McGriff and Mikaela Grassl

We'll begin the discussion by looking at these pairs of translations to see the similarities and differences, and the effects of the different choices.

These are followed by two poems in Spanish:

"La Montaña Rusa," by the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra, and

"Richard trajo su flauta," by the Cuban poet Nancy Morejón

Try out your own translations of one or both, depending on your time, using whatever means you want--including google. This will give us common ground for the second part of the discussion, when we look at your versions of these poems. You should plan to bring enough copies to hand out to the group.

PUEDO ESCRIBIR LOS VERSOS MÀS TRISTE   
  
Escribir, por ejemplo: 'La noche está estrellada,  
y tiritan, azules, los astros, a lo lejos.'  
  
El viento de la noche gira en el cielo y canta.  
  
Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.  
Yo la quise, y a veces ella también me quiso.  
  
En las noches como ésta la tuve entre mis brazos.  
La besé tantas veces bajo el cielo infinito.  
  
Ella me quiso, a veces yo también la quería.  
Cómo no haber amado sus grandes ojos fijos.  
  
Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.  
Pensar que no la tengo. Sentir que la he perdido.  
  
Oir la noche inmensa, más inmnesa sin ella.  
Y el verso cae al alma como al pasto el rocío.  
  
Qué importa que mi amor no pudiera guadarla.  
La noche está estrellada y ella no está conmigo.  
  
Eso es todo. A lo lejos alguien canta. A lo lejos.  
Mi alma no se contenta con haberla perdido.  
  
Como para acercarla mi mirada la busca.  
Mi corazón la busca, y ella no está conmigo.  
  
La misma noche que hace blanquear los mismos árboles.  
Nosotros, los de entonces, ya no somos los mismos.  
  
Ya no la quiero, es cierto, pero cuánto la quise.  
Mi voz buscaba el viento para tocar su oído.  
  
De otro. Será de otro. Como antes de mis besos.  
Su voz, su cuerpo claro. Sus ojos infinitos.  
  
Ya no la quiero, es cierto, pero tal vez la quiero.  
Es tan corto el amor, y es tan largo el olvido.

Porque en noches como ésta la tuve entre mis brazos,  
mi alma no se contenta con haberla perdido.  
  
Aunque éste sea el último dolor que ella me causa,  
y éstos sean los últimos versos que yo le escribo.

Pablo Neruda

\*

TONIGHT I CAN WRITE THE SADDEST LINES

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.

Write, for example, “The night is shattered  
and the blue stars shiver in the distance.”

The night wind revolves in the sky and sings.

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.  
I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too.

Through nights like this one I held her in my arms.  
I kissed her again and again under the endless sky.

She loved me sometimes, and I loved her too.  
How could one not have loved her great still eyes.

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.  
To think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her.

To hear the immense night, still more immense without her.  
And the verse falls to the soul like dew to the pasture.

What does it matter that my love could not keep her.  
The night is starry and she is not with me.

This is all. In the distance someone is singing. In the distance.  
My soul is not satisfied that it has lost her.

My sight searches for her as though to go to her.  
My heart looks for her, and she is not with me.

The same night whitening the same trees.  
We, of that time, are no longer the same.

I no longer love her, that’s certain, but how I loved her.  
My voice tried to find the wind to touch her hearing.

Another’s. She will be another’s. As she was before my kisses.  
Her voice, her bright body. Her infinite eyes.

I no longer love her, that’s certain, but maybe I love her.  
Love is so short, forgetting is so long.

Because through nights like this one I held her in my arms  
my soul is not satisfied that it has lost her.

Though this be the last pain that she makes me suffer  
and these the last verses that I write for her.

trans. from the Spanish by W.S. Merwin

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I CAN WRITE THE SADDEST VERSES OF ALL

I can write the saddest verses of all tonight.

Write, for instance: "The night is full of stars,

and the stars, blue, shiver in the distance."

The night wind whirls in the sky and sings.

I can write the saddest verses of all tonight.

I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too.

On nights like this, I held her in my arms.

I kissed her so many times under the infinite sky.

She loved me, sometimes I loved her.

How could I not have loved her large, still eyes?

I can write the saddest poem of all tonight.

To think I don't have her. To feel that I've lost her.

To hear the immense night, more immense without her.

And the poem falls to the dew as grass.

What does it matter that my love couldn't keep her.

The night is full of stars and she is not with me.

That's all. Far away, someone sings. Far away.

My soul is lost without her.

As if to bring her near, my eyes search for her.

My heart searches for her and she is not with me.

The same night that whitens the same trees.

We, we who were, we are the same no longer.

I no longer lover her, true, but how much I loved her.

My voice searched the wind to touch her ear.

Someone else's. She will be someone else's. As she once

belonged to my kisses.

Her voice, her light body. Her infinite eyes.

I no longer love her, true, but perhaps I love her.

Love is so short and oblivion is so long.

Because on nights like this I held her in my arms,

my soul is lost without her.

Although this may be the last pain she causes me,

and these may be the last verses I write for her.

trans. Stephen Tapscott

PODZIĘKOWANIE

Wisława Szymborska

Wiele zawdzięczam

tym, których nie kocham.

Ulgę, z jaka się godzę,

że bliżsi sa komu innemu.

Radość, że nie ja jestem

wilkiem ich owieczek.

Pokój mi z nimi

i wolność mi z nimi,

a tego miłość ani dać nie może,

ani brać nie potrafi.

Nie czekam na nich

od okna do drzwi.

Cierpliwa

prawie jak słoneczny zegar,

rozumiem

czego miłośc nie rozumie,

wybaczam,

czego miłość nie wybaczyłaby nigdy.

Od spotkania do listu

nie wieczność upływa,

ale po prostu kilka dni albo tygodni.

Podróże z nimi zawsze sa udane,

koncerty wysłuchane,

katedry zwiedzone,

krajobrazy wyraźne.

A kiedy nas rozdziela

siedem gór i rzek,

sa to góry i rzeki

dobrze znane z mapy.

Ich jest zasługa,

jeżeli żyję w trzech wymiarach,

w przestrzeni nielirycznej i nieretorycznej,

z prawdziwym, bo ruchomym horyzontem.

Sami nie wiedza,

ile niosa w rękach pustych.

"Nic im nie jestem winna"--

powiedziałaby miłość

na ten otwarty temat.

[Note: the following words should have a tail or ogonek under the a, but my keyboard didn't include that mark: jaka, sa, zasługa, niosa.]

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GRATITUDE

Wisława Szymborska

I owe a great deal

to those I do not love.

The relief with which I accept

they are dearer to someone else.

The joy that it is not I

who am wolf to their sheep.

Peace unto me with them,

and freedom with them unto me,

and that is something that love cannot give

or contrive to take away.

I do not wait for them

from window to door.

Patient

almost like a sundial,

I understand

what love does not understand.

I forgive

what love would never forgive.

From meeting to letter

passes not an eternity

but merely a few days or weeks.

Travels with them are always a success,

concerts heard

cathedrals visited,

landscapes in sharp focus.

And when we are separated

by seven mountains and rivers

they are mountains and rivers

well known from the map.

It is thanks to them

that I live in three dimensions,

in a space non-lyrical and non-rhetorical,

with a horizon real because movable.

They themselves do not know

how much they bring in empty hands.

"I owe them nothing,"

love would say

on this open question.

trans. from the Polish by Magnus J. Krynski and Robert A. Maguire

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THANK-YOU NOTE

Wisława Szymborska

I owe so much

to those I don't love.

The relief as I agree

that someone else needs them more.

The happiness that I'm not

the wolf to their sheep.

The peace I feel with them,

the freedom--

love can neither give

nor take that.

I don't wait for them,

as in window-to-door-and-back.

Almost as patient as a sundial,

I understand

what love can't,

and forgive

as love never would.

From a rendezvous to a letter

is just a few days or weeks,

not an eternity.

Trips with them always go smoothly,

concerts are heard,

cathedrals visitied,

scenery is seen.

And when seven hills and rivers

come between us,

the hills and rivers

can be found on any map.

They deserve the credit

if I live in three dimensions,

in nonlyrical, nonrhetorical space

with a genuine, shifting horizon.

They themselves don't realize

how much they hold in their empty hands.

"I don't owe them a thing,"

would be love's answer

to this open question.

trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh

SOM ATT VARA BARN

Som att vara barn och en oerhörd förolämpning

träs över ens huvud som en säck

genom säckens maskor skymtar solen

och man hör körsbärsträden gnola.

Men det hjälper inte, den stora förolämpningen

täcker huvud och torso och knän

och man rör sig sporadiskt

men gläds inte åt våren.

Ja, skimrande mössa drag ner den över ansiktet

stirra genom maskorna.

På fjärden myllrar vattenringarna ljudlöst.

Gröna blad förmörkar jorden.

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LIKE BEING A CHILD

Like being a child, and a sudden insult

is jerked over your head like a sack

through its mesh you catch a glimpse of the sun

and hear the cherry-trees humming.

No help in that--the great insult

covers your head your torso your knees

you can move sporadically

but can't look forward to spring.

Glimmering woolly hand, pull it down over your face

stare through the stitches.

On the straits the water-rings are crowding soundlessly.

Green leaves are darkening the earth.

trans. from the Swedish by Robin Fulton

LIKE BEING A CHILD

Like being a child and a tremendous insult

is slipped over your head like a sack--

glints of sunshine work through the mesh

and the hum of the cherry trees.

But that won't help, the great insult

covers head and torso and knees

and though you can squirm

thoughts of spring bring you nothing.

Yes, shimmering wool cap, pull it down over your face

stare through the stitching.

Water-rings swarm the bay in dead-silence.

Green leaves darken the earth.

trans. Michael McGriff and Mikaela Grassl

Choose one of the following poems (or both) to translate from the Spanish yourself.

LA MONTAÑA RUSA

Durante medio siglo

La poesìa fue

El paraìso del tonto solemne.

Hasta que vine yo

Y me instalé con mí montaña rusa.

Suban, si les parece.

Claro que yo no respondo si bajan

Echando sangre por boca y narices.

Nicanor Parra

\*

RICHARD TRAJO SU FLAUTA

el dia que las dos viejas disecaron dos pájaros en algún sitio de un museo

regresamos vacíos deseosos de escuchar la música del siglo

las felicidad consistía en todo aquel placer de escuchar sometidos a la hegemonía de una magia

para mí era primera vez

primera vez

primera que reconocía un clarinete tan feroz

tan ahumado

caliente

gracias a abuelo Egües aquella era la llegada de una era

para nosotros la infancia revivida

comenzada tan sólo

sólo aquel clarinete como un puente

(y la mirada cobriza de Gladys con unas cuantas libras más)

teníamos necesidad de escuchar cada soplo

el trac de la aguja embadurnada de viejo polvo

Mozart y Europa reían muy lejos

pero también nosotros bailábamos desesperadamente

al escuchar un timbal un bajo una trompeta un guiro una flauta

reunidos en campaña

o al escuchar los golpes de los parches nacidos de mismísimo fuego

era la primera vez la gran primera vez

y todo el silencio se reducía a escuchar a escuchar

Nancy Morejón