TRANSLATING THE POEM:
RE-WRITING VERSE
FOR BETTER OR WORSE

David Connolly

Each visitor has been asked to respond to whatever topics they felt relevant from a suggested rubric, part of which is reproduced here:

- do you habitually make several/many drafts of your poem?
- is your typical method of re-writing to change a line, a word – a 'piece by piece' mode? Or do you often make more wholesale changes?
- how far is your re-drafting impelled by considerations of tone? Or of metrical structure?
- do you have any method of 'ultimate arbitration' – for example, reading the poem aloud after its composition, and making any changes consequent on that?
- how far are your re-writings influenced by the eventual look of the text on the page?
- to what extent are re-drafts driven by the tone and structure of the collection of which the relevant poem is to be a part?
- do you show or read your work to others while it is in the process of construction? If so, how do others' comments influence your re-drafting procedures?
- have your methods of (re)writing changed over the years?
- how far do considerations of audience influence your re-writing?
- in translating, to what extent do you consult other translations of the same poem or poet? And what power do such translations have in your own (re)writing?
- do you come back to abandoned drafts after a longer or a shorter interval?
- what place does accident have in your re-writing?
- do you agree that 'first thoughts are so often better than second thoughts' (C.H. Sisson)
- how far do you agree that 'a poem is never finished, it is only ever abandoned' (Valéry)?

Chris McCully, editor, *Re Writing the Poem.*]

[….] Why in general do translators of poetry exhibit such a passion for rewriting the work of others for a different linguistic and cultural readership? We may translate because we wish to test the capacities of the target language (TL) to express a certain kind of poetry, perhaps enriching and renewing the TL at the same time (as with Seferis and his translations of Yeats and Eliot into Greek), or because we are commissioned by poet or publisher to do so (for financial or other reward), or because we feel an affinity with the poet's work and are inspired to want to appropriate the poem in our own language (for personal reasons). We may use the poem as a starting point for creating a new poem in our own language, through emulation, imitation, adaptation, and all the other extreme forms of free translation (as did Pound and Lowell); or our aim may be to want to make the poet known in the TL culture because we are dealing with a major and original poetic voice that is worth the 'thankless efforts' (according to both Elytis and Seferis) involved in translation.

Perhaps the greater emphasis in recent times on the translator's duty to the author of the source text and *his* literary tradition stems from the fact that foreign authors are often translated today as representative of their literary tradition and culture with the aim to highlight not only the author but the whole of his literary tradition. This is certainly why I translate Greek poets. I do not see it as my role as translator to domesticate, far less to censor, the poetic text. Nor do I use it as a starting point for my own poetic aspirations. People don't read my translations because they are translations by Connolly. People read them (if at all) to find out about Elytis and other Greek poets. As a translator of poetry, I am by definition a rewriter, though I see my duty as being first to the poet and his tradition, and only then to the English reader and his.

Though there are many reasons *why* we re-write others' works, the *how,* i.e. the process involved, is another matter. The why greatly influences the how. The process of translating a poem is, of necessity, a re-writing of the poem and, depending on the translator's aims, a re-writing for a particular purpose. The translator's aims are all-important. The aims will influence the first and all subsequent drafts.

For a translator to actually talk about this process and illustrate the process with examples of draft material is, I feel, a bit like displaying one's dirty linen in public. Practising translators (one of whom I claim to be) tend to write of the specific problems they encounter in translating a particular poet (often it seems in the form of an apology for the translation) and of the solutions they found (often with more than a little self-satisfaction). They rarely reflect on the various stages they pass through in the process, far less on the reasons for the choices they make at each stage. What is stressed continually by practising translators, over and above any particular approach or methodology, is the need for constant reworking and reassessment of the translated text in an attempt to make it correspond to the original poetic text on all levels.

What are these levels? A poem contains information, it conveys the poet's ideas or sentiments and, as such, consists of some statement or message referring to the real world. It functions on a semantic level. However, a poem not only

informs but delights through the *manner* in which it informs. It may not exhibit the traditional verse forms of metre or rhyme, but, insofar as it is successful as a poem, it will be characterised by rhythm and certain formal devices which constitute its orchestration and allow us to talk of a poetic style. It functions, therefore, on a stylistic level. Thirdly, any poem, insofar as it functions as a poem for a particular reader, will have an emotional effect; it will have a communicative impact over and above any message or style it may possess. In other words, it also functions on a pragmatic level. If then a translation of a poem is to be successful, it must function on these three levels, and in ways corresponding to those of the original poem.

There is, however, a further level: the 'poetic' or normative level, which simply means that in addition to the difficulties involved in accounting for the poem's content, form and effect, the translator of poetry has also to produce a text that will meet the reader's expectation of a poem in the TL culture. The 'poetic' or normative level refers to the fact that if you want to be read, whether as a poet or translator, your poem has to conform to the prevalent poetic norms or sensibility in a given culture. It has to have some intrinsic poetic quality defined in terms of the poetic norms of a particular time, place and tradition. This basically amounts to an acknowledgement of the expectations of the readership for poetry in a specific language or tradition.

It is the attempt to account in the translation for all the levels on which a poem functions that results in so many drafts. How many is 'so many'? I always do the first draft of a poem in pencil. This allows me to write between lines and in the margins, draw arrows over the page, squash in second and third possible solutions in the same space, and respond to the text in a way that I couldn't on the computer. The second draft is the result of typing all this onto the computer and tidying it up, making certain choices as the draft is being typed. The third draft is the use of the pencil on the clean second draft and the classifying and ordering of questions to ask the poet. Many translators today work with or consult the poet they are translating, and the original poet's role in the translation process has grown. Even when the poet does not know the TL well (as was the case with Elytis and English), the poet can be of invaluable help to the translator. For apart from being (if no longer an 'authority', then at least) a reliable source on questions of meaning and interpretations of his work, the poet is also an invaluable source when it comes to rhythm, emphasis and tone. I ought to add, however, that consulting the poet can of course have its disadvantages, particularly when the poet *does* know the TL. Keeley remarks in connection with his collaboration with Seferis that working with the poet was a strong inhibition and talks of Seferis' 'hovering image'. The fourth draft is the re-working of the translation in the light of the 'explanations' given by the poet. The fifth draft is the 'final' polishing.

From the first draft, I'm already trying to account for and balance all the translation factors involved and the successive drafts really reflect various stages of refining and fine-tuning. The first drafts represent more a wrestle with individual words, with word order and syntax, and the later drafts give more attention to the poetic quality of the translated text, so I suppose that generally speaking it's a bottom-up process with a gradual shift in attention from the lexical and phrasal level to the textual level. Or, in terms of the poem's various functions, from the semantic to the stylistic to the pragmatic to the 'poetic' or normative level.*

The Obscure Verb

I am of another language, sadly, and of the Secret Sun so
Those unaware of celestial matters know me not.
                                        Imperceptible
As an angel upon a tomb I trumpet forth white fabrics
That flap in the air and then again in-fold
Revealing something my sated beasts, perhaps, till finally
There remains a sea-bird an orphan over the waves

As happened. Yet for years now in mid-air I've grown
                                        tired
And I've need of earth though this remains shut and sealed
Latches on door bells barely heard; nothing. Ah
Speak to me you believable things! Girls who appeared
                                        from time to time
Out of my breast and you old farmsteads
Forgotten taps left running in slumbering
    gardens
Speak to me! I've need of earth
Though this remains shut and sealed

So, accustomed as I am to shortening i's and
    lengthening o's
Now I'm fashioning a verb; like a burglar his pass-key
A verb ending in -ate or -age or -ise
One to obscure your one side until
Your other side appears. A verb with few vowels yet
Numerous consonants deep-rusted d's or c's or t's
Purchased at bargain prices from Hades' stores
Since from such places it's easier
To emerge like Darius' ghost terrifying
    the living and the dead

Here let heavy music be heard. And lightened let the
                                        mountains
Move. Time to test the key. So saying I;
   d e c r a s t i c a t e
A strange fierceness appears masquerading as spring
With sharp rocks and pointed shrubs everywhere
Next plains riddled with Zeus and Hermes
Finally a sea mute like Asia
All shredded seaweed and Circe's eyelashes

So what we call 'celestial' is not; 'love' not; 'eternal' not.
                                        Not
One thing accords with its name. Nearest to slaughter
Grow dahlias. And the tardy hunter with ethereal game
Returns. And it's always – alas – too soon. Ah
We never suspected how undermined by divineness
The world is; what perpetual rose's gold it needs to

*What follows is the full text of Elytis' 'The Obscure Verb'. Readers will find the translation, in facing page from the original Greek, in Odysseus Elytis, trans. David Connolly, *The Oxopetra Elegies* (Harwood: Amsterdam/ OPA), pp. 64–9).

<div style="text-align: right;">balance</div>

The void that we leave, hostages all of a different duration
That our minds' shadow conceals. So be it

Friend you who hear, do you hear in the citrons' fragrance
The distant bells? Do you know the garden's corners
<div style="text-align: right;">where</div>
The evening breeze entrusts its new-born? Did you ever
Dream of a vast summer that you might cross
No more encountering Furies? No. That's why I
<div style="text-align: right;">decrasticate</div>
For the heavy bolts creaking give way and the great portals
<div style="text-align: right;">open</div>
To the Secret Sun's light for an instant, that our nature
<div style="text-align: right;">the third may be revealed</div>
There's more. I won't go on. No one accepts what's free
In an evil wind you're lost or peace follows

This much in my language. And more by others in
<div style="text-align: right;">others. Though</div>
Only against death is truth given.

ΡΗΜΑ ΤΟ ΣΚΟΤΕΙΝΟΝ	Title
[VERB THE DARK]	Literal translation
THE OBSCURE VERB	Translation

ΣΚΟΤΕΙΝΟΝ. The obvious translation is 'dark', which would be in keeping with the mysterious and enigmatic quality Elytis wants to give to his poetry in general, and to this verb in particular. The English word 'obscure', however, while retaining all the connotations of 'dark', perhaps better conveys the sense of 'abstruse', 'vague' and 'hidden'. What finally convinced me of the appropriacy of the word 'obscure' was a reference I saw to Heraclitus as the 'σκοτεινοζ' philosopher (Lat. 'obscurus'). The 'obscurity' of many of Heraclitus' sayings is precisely the type of obscurity Elytis wishes to produce with his manufactured verb. I often 'chance on' words I'm looking for in this way, though what we call 'chance' or even 'inspiration' is usually the outcome of all the work that has preceded. I also note with some surprise that I had chosen 'obscure' in my first draft, changing it to 'dark' in the second, and eventually coming back to 'obscure' in the fifth, which perhaps lends some credence to the idea that 'first thoughts are often best'.

One of the main translation problems in this poem is the 'obscure verb' itself, a verb fashioned by Elytis.

Το κλειδι
Μετατοπιζονται. Ωρα να δοκιμάοωά. Λέω: 25
[Be-moved.   Time to test   the key. I-say:
Move. Time to test the key. So saying I:
κ α τ α ρ κ υ θ μ ε ύ ω
k a t a r k y th m e v o
d e c r a s t i c a t e

κ α τ α ρ κ υ θ μ ε ύ ω. The verb in Greek is non-existent and has been fashioned by Elytis in keeping with the guidelines he sets himself in the text of the poem. I have attempted to follow the same guidelines in English and to create a verb which functions in the translation in the same way that Elytis' verb does in the Greek original. I can't enter

into a discussion of this function here, but content myself by referring to something Chris McCully touched on in his contribution to the *Re Writing the Poem* series: '[…] I have often been uncomfortably aware that poems… may often contain subconscious truths to which we have otherwise little access. I've also noticed that accessing these truths – they are mythic truths, but myth itself is an invention about truth – tends to happen when the conscious mind is otherwise unoccupied, or distracted, or weakened…' This is precisely the function of this verb, 'to obscure your one side till your other side appears', i.e. to repress the workings of the logical mind that the poetic apprehension may come into play (see line 38). It cannot be translated as it doesn't exist, and any transliteration of this word into English would have no meaning for the TL reader and also the added disadvantage of being foreign to the linguistic system. (The verb in Greek contains a common prefix and verb-ending and has been fashioned by Elytis in keeping with the norms of the Greek linguistic system.) I re-created *decrasticate,* a verb fashioned in English in accordance with Elytis' specifications and in keeping with the norms of the English linguistic system, reproducing the harsh, rusty sounds of the key turning in a lock.

This verb is an extreme case of what might be termed 'deviant language'. The poem contains many examples of less extreme forms of deviation:

Ωστε λοιπόν, αντό που λέγαμε 'ουρανός' δεν είναι;
    'αγάπη' δεν;   31
[So then,   that which we-called 'sky' not is; 'love' not;
So, what we called 'celestial' is not; 'love' not;
    'αιωνιο' δεν.Δεν
    'eternal' not. Not]
    'eternal' not. Not

δεν είιναι; … δεν; … δεν.Δεν. In the first and last instances, the negative particle is used normally with the verb. In the second and third instances, the verb is omitted. The problem for the translator is to find an English translation for the negative particle that works in all instances, without, of course, normalising the deviation from the unmarked usage present in the Greek.

The other major problem for a translator is, of course, the problem arising from the characteristic stylistic devices employed by Elytis. This particular poem and the collection from which it is taken makes pronounced use of alliteration, assonance and internal rhyming. For example:

Κι έχω ανάγκη από γης που αυτή μένει κλειστή
    και κλειδωμένη   8
[And I-have need of earth that this remains closed and
    locked]
    Though this remains shut and sealed

κλειστή και κλειδωμένη. Care should be taken to reproduce the alliteration of the [k] sound, which is quite easy to do here, through the [s] sound in English. [A solution I did not come up with, however, until the third draft.]

And:

Υστερα πεδιάδες διάτρητες από Δίες κι Ερμήδες 28

[Then plains   perforated by Zeus' and Hermes']
Next plains riddled with Zeus and Hermes

Υστερα πεδιάδες διάτρητες από Δίες κι Ερμήδες.
This line is an example of where the alliteration of the [d]
and [i] sounds cannot be saved, and hence my readiness to
accept gain in translation whenever it occurs – as, for
example, two lines below, in:

Ολο φύκια σχιστά και ματόκλαδα Κιρκης   30
[All seaweed torn and eyelashes   of-Circe]
All shredded seaweed and Circe's eyelashes

where there is an adjustment in word order and a gain in
alliteration, through the repetition of the [s] sound.

However, compensating for stylistic effects lost in one
line by introducing them in some other line is a questionable
procedure. Take, for example, the last lines of the poem:

Αυτά στη γλώσσα τη δική μου. Κι άλλοι άλλα σ'
   αλλως. Αλλ'   48
[These in-the language the my own. And others others in
   others. But]
This much in my language. And more by others in others.
   Though

Η αλήθεια μόνον έναντι θανάτου δίδεται.   49
[The truth only against death   is-given.]
Truth is given only for death

άλλοι άλλα σ' άλλες. Αλλ' Η αλήθεια. Literally, 'Other
[people say] other [things] in other [languages]. But / The
truth…' The problem created in this line is by the five-fold
repetition of the [al] sound. For what strikes the reader more
than the semantic content is the five-fold repetition of the
sounds 'αλ' [al]. An English translation along the lines of
'And o*th*er [things] by o*th*ers [people] in o*th*er [languages].
*Th*ough / Tru*th* is given only for dea*th*' (with the repetition
of the [th] sound) may provide some sort of solution. It is
precisely because of the impossibility of reproducing such
stylistic (and perhaps not only stylistic) effects in many
instances that lead me to compensate by introducing similar
stylistic effects in the English translation in places where
they do not exist in the original.

The translator has to accept, of course, that there are limits
to what can be achieved; these have to do with the capacities
of the TL and the constraints of the TL culture and norms,
but also with the translator's skill. Translation in general
may be a science and a craft, but the translation of poetry is
also an art and requires talent, creativity and inspiration. It is
a combination of these factors which perhaps explains why
the translation of a poem is never finished and why the
translator has eventually to stop somewhere.

Many statements by practising translators testify to the
fact that no matter how long the translator works, no matter
how many drafts are rejected, no matter how many re-
writings are undertaken, no matter how successful the
resulting text may be, there will always be the original
remaining to show that the translation is less than we would
wish it. The difficulty of accounting for all the various
aspects and functions of the original poem has led many
translators and poets alike to declare that translating poetry
is impossible. I side with those who, like Brodsky, see it
rather as 'the art of the impossible'.