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Wings Into Darkness
by
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Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing

School of Languages and Literatures
Faculty of the Humanities
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Compulsory Declaration

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signed: Philippa Mary Beckerling

Date: 4 June 2003
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On the Grass

On the grass they sit entwined, facing each other.
Her face, this earth.
Elsewhere autumn passes, like a train.

On the water, birds gather, cormorants, ducks, and gulls,
at once they rise, and sweep up outwards over the water, wide as cloud,
slow and settle far out, over the pulsing schools, to feed.

On the grass, they sit entwined, facing each other.
Intent, he holds her gaze.
His hand is spread on the green nylon of her shoulder -
he thinks it's love. She wonders, will it do.
One night’s drive

One night’s drive from here, no more, the ribbon road unrolled between us for the taking

One night’s drive, but you chose to hire someone’s body

for increasing of your knowledge of the underworld, where god is.

Did you remember in her embrace our enactment of the usual rite?

You never gave me more than your body. I would have been content with as much.
I can see when she thinks of him

I can see when she thinks of him. 
Her face softens, and lightens, 
blurring her hawk look 
in a wholly distracted bloom 
deserting what’s present 
as though their eyes were meeting.

But behind the clear abstraction of that look 
who but she can say 
what warmth, what confusion of desire 
imagined or remembered 
wells at the ribbed confines 
of her heart’s flexive cage.
My Father

My father was a man who denied himself too much
who ransacked his mind and left his heart unopened
who passed by again as much as he explored,
who was harried, where loitering could have been profitable.
But was a true religious man,
if that means compulsion to find God.
Like poets before him, he said love whet his will.
In love as well, he didn't measure what he gave.

We would wonder what he saw in her, when we were children;
abstracted mostly, he would start out of a reverie
and fix my mother with a gaze, so grateful and amazed,
she might have been the virgin herself, refleshed.
and she would stolidly drink it in, as her due.
Conflict would bring on tears or illness,
and he would champion her.
We left, of course. Twenty years on she thinks nothing of it.

And I am clear eyed, freed, but diminished,
knowing there's no victory in the knowing.
Friends, at their fathers' graves, weep not to have known them
before it was too late. However many years I have to know him
will be too many, and too few;
His curtain has long been drawn to keep us out
and his own private darkness in. If I am to weep
for my father, I'd as well to do it now.
Sloop

Needing a harbour, an entry, for calm,
distance having grown between us,
you toss on this sea-bed
poor upturned sloop, mast down.
All passion gone, mere mechanicals
disturb your sleep, even so,
with rhythms circadean, like tides.
Animals

Easter Sunday night in the suburbs, and three days of drinking are starting to show. They're out in the street, shouting and brawling, heaving bottles at the Victoria League. Nathan's half undressed, half stupored, reclining in the road. Dave's at the wheel of the Torana, pushing it to the hilt doing bog laps of the block. Scrapes by Nathan on the home straight, gets his knees. Nathan lifts his voice. It's at the end of its tether, so much rage, nowhere to take it.

The girls are getting fed up now. Geez, they shout. take a look at yourself, you dumb bastards. But Nathan's not looking. He's leafing through his portfolio of fucks and cunts, voice high and loud and plaintive, filling the sky.

Three am. Family men are getting restive now, up and down the street. Someone calls the cops. They take an age. Nathan hasn't quietened down. He and Dave are in a lock, yelling like wounded, dying, furious bison with bad vocabularies.

Then, a hush. The street is suddenly alight with the high beams of the slow cruising cop car. For an ominous minute or two, it's quiet. Then Nathan runs to tell them what Dave did, once, twice, more. Each time louder, more decorative. Dave's gone.

Things settle a bit. It looks as though the street can sleep again. No need to guard the car, or the letter box, from vomit, or breakage. The family men turn away from the scene. They're animals, someone mutters, going back inside in his pajamas. No better than bloody animals. Animals don't behave like that, his wife says. Don't insult animals.

On Discovery, it's lions. A year, probably, shortened and sharpened to one hour's narrative, beginning, middle, end. A Serengeti soap, but Neighbours never had this much blood in it. The pride's expelled its patriarch. He's old. No good anymore, so he has to go. He stumbles off into the grass, to a miserable lonely old age. Short, but.

You can hear his daughters - well, if you spend your whole life fighting and being a complete bastard, what can you expect?

So now, it's the lionesses and the cubs. The pride is vulnerable. No one's defending them. A big male enters the frame. We see the women hide the children in the long yellow grass. We see them all watching, dead still, in silence. He walks up and down, looking around, smelling what's up, moving on soft ominous feet, all nose and muscle. The cubs haven't moved. They seem to know what's at stake. The tension is awful. Will he just move away again, so the idyll can resume? Babies lolling around, squirming in bliss under their mothers' rough tongues? Lying on their backs under the open sky, fat bellies, no cares?
He's stopped pacing. He's still.
He's smelled them. They're in his nose and in his head.
Next shot, he's got one of them in his mouth.
He's looking out over it, somewhere else.
The cub hangs down from his mouth. It could be
in its mother's gentle hold, being carried somewhere,
but it's not, it's not the right living shape. It's limp,
misshapen, and the blood lies on it like dirt.
Now he's dropped it. Looking into the middle distance,
he begins to eat.
He doesn't seem to be enjoying it particularly.
You can hear him saying, this isn't what I would have chosen,
believe me. But he does it anyway.
He holds it in place with one foot for purchase.

Cut to a springtime scene.
The two of them are alone. No kids.
She's feeling clumsily flirtatious. In heat, the voice tells us.
She lunges and withdraws, backside first,
sinuous as an otter, luring his reluctant attention.
He turns his great yellow carpet head towards her.
She throws herself onto the ground. He mounts,
her neck is in his teeth. She throws her head back
in a grimace that would scare anyone else to death.

It starts over.

That's animals.
Amazon

Palpate the soft breast with the flat of the hand
fearing to find stone
do it swiftly, mind averted, fearing to find stone
fearing to find the other there
enlisting your body
against your self

Leave it, and the Amazonian space
they make you, will not empower.
There’s no bow can arm you
against this absence
or shore up your courage
that there’s not worse to come

You know it’s not your breasts
that make you whole, or mother.
You also know, like hands or eyes,
they do.

Strange – I lacked the will
to search before, for fear of finding.
Now I stand bare breasted at the glass
unflinching at the lightning gash - so white
it seems backlit by filtered neon.
My beating heart, a thin skin away
pulses on,
provisioning both sides.

You know it’s not your breasts
that make you whole, or lover.
You also know, like breath,
you do.
The Shepherd on the Rock

Fills the empty room, stripped for painting.
I plant my roller, still for a moment, to listen,
overcome, unaccountably, with tears.
My voice buckles, won't rise to sing -

Standing high, at nightfall, above the throat of the gorge,
rocks like steel, glinting cold with seepage from the high ground.
Behind me, the light's withdrawing, leaving the air thick with silence.
The place throbs as if I've been moving, but I'm still,
watching my heart pulse in the long valley, down to the narrowing sea.

Es zieht die Herzen zum Himmel an
Mit wunderbarer Macht

From the south the hadedas fly home across the krantz,
slashing the spores of darkness
with the hard despair of their cries.
Dreams

I dreamt we slept in curtained booths
far apart in the market. I left my bed
and came to you. You leaned out
and drew me in. We lay together
till dawn. You would not raise yourself
and lie above me, but lay below,
your sweat a sheen on your skin
while we made love. At dawn I left you
and went away, because we could be seen.
You dreamed we walked up a green hill
and lay together, taking our ease.
We disturbed a woman, who abused us;
you spoke reasonably to her, I did not.
I dreamed I came to your house
in an old garden, stone stairs and violets.
Your house had only a library and
a dining room. You sat at a rich old table
and I longed for you and I couldn't reach you.
You dreamed you came to me
but could find only my sisters.
All this is true, and makes no difference.
This is my food

Ave Maria sung high and clear, pure as parsley,
eyes up, light strained through sun blessed blue and red

the fat chef is making risotto in the land of his birth
seeking out wild sorrel on the banks of the ancient stream
ur risotto

He stirs the grains, adds cinnamon, parmesan,
silence as he lifts the spoon
eyes elsewhere, reverence in the room
the sigh, the heart's core
Ave Maria

This is my food.
Take it and eat it all of you
this is my food which will be given up for you
these my fingers twitching it into place
a little pile, a little pyre
for your delectation,
a little mignonette, wild rocket
a rare fungus, poached breast, a tryst
of lime and coriander, a crack of pepper.
The final look, standing back.
It's taken through, carried high
and pure, eyes elsewhere.

Rooks in the vines, the winter lines
wine, oil, vinegar, bread,
these are our life, our sacrament.
This is my wine that will be given up for you.
Take this and drink it all of you
I like to see it drunk with food
Hawk

She carries him out of her stone house
hooded on her hand, restless, feeling the air,
and lets him go, unblinded, and she stands below,
the jesses hanging from her fingers
as he wheels away and out of simple human sight.
But will swoop back, feet braced against the wind
to land on her wrist, take meat from her fingers,
pick at the flesh of her heart, through her ribs,
with inquisitive eyes, intent on feeding,
his beak scalpel delicate. She watches
as he leans in through the cage, his head angled,
to accommodate the limitations of his eyes,
the line of his neck sinuous and slow.
She caresses it as he picks at her heart.
Australian Story

Caroline Jones on ABC, our guide and mediator, our TV link with the meaningful, stands, angled oddly, her face ethereal and sweetened. She's got our story for the week. Our Sunday lift, us first worlders, sitting wine in hand, to drink it in.

Set about with sacred suggestions, a kind of suppressed glory in the air, reverence for what's greater than us, than the ordinary of our little lives, a young man, full of promise, gifted in his hands with music is dying, tumours in his head. The camera looks upwards, to high ceilings, soaring of various kinds, vignettes, tearful memories from loved ones. Now it stares stolidly as these good people gulp, stares bald-eyed as they struggle to compose themselves, when anyone decent would look away, go away - should be private, grief, we're not America.

The well-oiled machinery of care kicks in - nothing is spared. He has his operation and survives. We knew he would. He plays a sweet and solemn Mozart - a little jape in the cadenza. His mother says he's the same, but sad. He's been to death and come out the side door. He's ordinary now, the light's changed, like us.

That's our story for the week. Caroline's back to point up the meaning in case we didn't understand.

***

On the other channel, over in the other world we're not sure where starving children are gathered at the hospitals, and food relief points. Still and silent, no one wants to see so many, or the way they look away but not at anything.

Even their mothers are silent as they hold the small arms limply that once had life, watch while the children who should be walking are hoisted into slings for weighing and scarcely move the scales, not fed, starved, dying, still, still and silent, but no one wants to see so many, do we.
Demons

The demons are small black pellets like seeds that lie heavy and sullen in the pit of your heart's cage, like droppings.

Mostly they're inert, but sometimes the wind blows in a certain way the angle of your view falls a certain way and then you hear the everyday voices in a minor key, like a discordant blow against the bone of your mind your clothes bunch and catch against the skin of your back your throat is thick with undigested food your heart and liver lie flat and heavy your hands are stiff and clamped the people you thought you loved seem to be hatching plots against you the ones you don't like are plainly malevolent. Like the day Glamis rode home with Banquo the air is thick, and you breathe it and so do the demons, and it inspires them they fatten as you watch, shift, and twitch into life, they grow until they're as big as scarabs, shells hard as shellac, legs attenuated. They test them and stand up and begin to move and multiply breathing the air of a world that is greasy, bilious, slick. They move on the walls of your heart's cage and crawl up them. The walls are black with them until you can't bear it and you yell out

If somebody loves you they might hold you and let you rage against them, until you sleep, and your heart's cage begins to repel them and they fall off the walls onto their backs and twitch, and shrink, and you'll be quiet again and the world won't be so awful and things can go on.
Cerberus

Cold wind, the tide out on the wide river mouth,
sand rippled as a cerebrum.
My father leads, in shorts.
We are going on an expedition.
A small channel runs down from the river
where Charon punts the silent dead to hell.
We walk on. The sand is hard,
it's only my father's boots that show.
We have cakes in a bag, one for each of the heads of Cerberus,
keeper of hell's gate. He has eyes like saucers and teeth like knives,
snakes around his neck.
Perhaps a boat loaded high with corpses will come.
I look upstream and at my father.
My brother is skimming stones across the water,
trying to make them jump.

On the other side we lean against rocks and look out to sea,
and eat the cakes ourselves, rock cakes, hard, with big old raisins staring,
cakes for hell. My father eats heartily, crumbs falling on his chest,
his eyes alight with whatever he's thinking, late sunlight
catching in the tangles of his hedgerow eyebrows.
Sleep

Racked on the glass surface of sleep
I cannot submerge. Words and images
hard as stones bounce and refract
on the walls of my bone mind, and in its hollows,
that foreign fingers and slow drills occupy.

At last the will marshalls stillness
the glass renders to sand, receives my contours,
I recede

Now the inexplicable currents inform and abuse me
in landscapes someone else constructed
that I am not able to colonise
in sleep or waking.

I wake bruised from another world.
Consider the Buttock

Consider the buttock
how its thingness alters

with emphasis.
America has forsaken its rotund charms

globalised it
into hard rude butt.

The English are less likely to make free
with syllables, or heirlooms.

In pronouncing, careful balance is maintained
between the two sections of the word

and a certain anonymous respectability is thus conferred
upon the sometimes startlingly white orb.

Stress the latter part of the word, though,
and Chaucer comes in,

hair and wind and fabliaux,
lips and coulters and the gassy breach,

and then we see how the buttock rollicks
just behind the flimsy drape.
Harpsichord

How do you pin someone to a page,
how filter through facts, and who you were,
to set him down whole, round, solid,
satisfactory?
Outside, at the foot of the south
high rain beats in from the sea
and I try to set down my father;
choose one thing, one stone, and cut it,
so its oneness is a thousand lights.

He built a harpsichord
in the evenings, after duties,
at moments he was free.
He shaped it, strung it, polished it,
found keys and set them.
The first one wasn't right.
He built another. This time he was satisfied
or as close as he could be.
It played true, well tempered.
He listened closely, eyes elsewhere,
as my sister sightread briskly though the sheets.
He didn't talk much about the ordinary
we oil our lives with.
He stood near, but was always apart.

He gave the first away. The second
stood in his laboratory, with his lithographs
of the Cape, old photos of the mountain, on a cold floor.

Someone broke in and stole it,
along with an antique camera, and a leg of lamb.
Insured, he had to estimate the value.
the hours, the cost, the thing itself.
It exercised his mind. No one sells harpsichords.
No shopkeeper would know or care.
It wasn't an antique. More a devotion.
How much are they?
Mahogany ply, one hundred and fifty metres of steel string,
keys, second hand, a lot of stuff no one wanted.
Eighty dollars is what it cost him,
discounting inflation, labour costs,
one thousand hours, and a kind of obeisance to the past.

That's what he claimed.

Someone must have thought it was a keyboard,
that it was worth something.
It's probably been burnt for warmth.
The Venerable Bede and the Firetail

Somewhere in the unfrequented places of our minds we remember the sparrow, how the pagan priest, Coifi, embracing the Word (for what had the old gods done for him?) tells of life in the old ways, a sparrow, entering from the dark, suddenly, the lighted hall, and as quickly leaving through the other door, flying straight and fast back into the cold dark night. That brief light, warmth, and joy of friends, feasting at the long tables, fires stacked massive against the wind, dogs, swords, wine, and time taking care of itself, our life. Before and after, the dark, utterly unknown.

A red-eared firetail, a hedgerow-dweller, red about the ears and tail, its underside a clutch of gentle spots of gray and white, came flying to our hall, out of darkness, into the great glass window, with a thump, bounced back, stiff, legs up, parodying without humour the death of birds. We gathered it up, wrapped it, placed it near the stove for warmth and quiet, to recover. a few hours later it flew up, revived, to a roof beam - we couldn't reach it. Suddenly it launched itself off, ready to go, with speed. Into the glass, other way this time. on its back, legs up, so adorned, for what? Back in its box, surely dead this time, covered for the night. Next morning the box is empty. It's resurrected, hopping from one high place to another, looking more circumspectly for the exit. We open doors and windows to let it out, it doesn't seem to see them. Then, a thump. It isn't on its back, legs up, but against the wall, head down, looking utterly done in. We gather it up once more, in its sheets, and put the box outside. Three hours later it's gone.

The lighted hall, warmth, and feasting, sure, but the Venerable Bede was easy on the detail. If only birth were flying into light. If only doors were open to death, and leaving this life no more than a beating of wings into darkness.
Plumules

Once still and settled in this place
my vegetable soul sends out plumules
that eke a path upwards to find the light,
feeling out the softer parts
which give way and let them through.
Here and there in the clay and stone,
there is a looseness, which can be gentled aside
as a shoot makes its quiet way without turning back,
trying not to die.
Birdcages

They mostly have one, the old men, who are abandoned, in pajamas, to pass the days on concrete ledges beneath greying blocks while the family is at work.

They hang the birds in trees while they talk, smoke, gamble, and stay outside.

The cages are intricate and polished and inside, little dishes, blue porcelain for water and seed, and toys – mirrors, little harps.

The birds are small and greenish, undistinguished, but they sing, and are cheap.

As I was going down the grey stairs towards the grey station, one came up towards me, covered, in its cage, but singing, and no one seemed to be listening to the piercing isolation of its song.
Isolde

Saturday morning we go in silence
to the hardware shop.
The carpentry saw we buy
lies like a sword between us
on the long seat of the car,
and I think of Isolde.
But I won't be reaching across
for the warmth of your body again,
and I don't care what colour the sails are.
May's Story

My mother told me I was ugly because she loved me. She didn't want me to be hurt when others said it. She told my sister that she'd never achieve anything, because she wanted to save her from the cruelty of others, when it came true.
Burrow

Dark as a burrow,
sleep holds you full of dreams.
They run like a movie on the back of your eyes
and you're in them.

It's too good. It can't last.
A clink of keys far off, above you,
light's coming up the corridor
to get you and march you into day.
Stiff and still as you listen, willing otherwise,
some light gets in
and you lose some darkness.
Movie's slowing, no one's watching.
Eyes front, for day.
Owls

My brother comes down the stairs
walks heavily to a chair and sits,
hands open, palms down, patient,
giving me time.
Well, he says at last.
I can't speak. My throat is full
of tears, of anger, of old things.
I can't speak because there is nothing
to say that won't call him up again,
to patiently set himself out.
There is nothing to say that will
help to change this,
this old thing that tonight is here again
and the moon is two days off full
and the clouds are thick and animate
and three owls are talking fast.
This is our last chance, he says,
the last chance for you and me.
I can keep my body still but my mind races
back and forth looking at the same
old things set out since the small days
never different, usually out of mind,
oceans between us.
He's brought them back in his heavy
shoulders, thick back, deliberate
spread hands, setting out the way
it will be, the only way.
Do you know what I mean, he says,
after silence. No, I say. Not really,
turned away from him,
watching the moon's stillness,
the racing white. I am silent.
I have nothing to say that can ever help shift
these old things between us and
he can't hurt me anymore
and tomorrow he will be gone.
Days of Dying

Most days in my father's house
nothing happens,
the world turns, leaves fall, trees bud,
but he would have marked the days of his dying
though he says nothing.
After eighty years of gathering them
he's giving his books away

Between the sun of the steps
and the shaded gate
nothing happens
the world turns, leaves fall
jacarandas bloom, and bud
but he would have marked the days

the books he's chased down
set around his room
each one a stone in the wall of his dwelling,
in his mind, nerve river and stream,
their thick old covers, pages missal thin.

He knows the story
of growing old and dying.
He can tell you how it's done
in ancient ways,
days turning till the scales are still,
the old heart no heavier than spirit,
a feather outweighs.
Man on the Bus

A man with solitude around him
sitting on the far side of the seat
one cheek, shoulder, cold against the glass
talking to himself in two voices
one emphatic, the other confirming,
soothing and consoling.
All the way through the ordinary chaos
of the town he yelled his observations
and heard what comfort he had to offer,
but remained unconvinced.
Cold mist in the landscape

When my great aunt was dying
she said, I'm cold, and I said
let me pull the blankets up, there, is that better?
She said, no, I'm cold.
The blankets made no difference
nor did a hot water bottle,
or anything else then
outside her scale-thin skin.
She was shaking. One day she said
that the cold was at her knees, now,
at her hips. It was creeping up like mist in the landscape.
When it reached her heart, she said,
her life would be gone.

When the flames are too bright for us,
we lie still
and call silence up through our feet
and ankles, legs, hips, heart and head.
We call up the silence of death, but only for a little while.

I look out over the water tonight
and think about these old things we see and do.
There's mist rising from the still water
of the reservoir and it turns infinitely
slowly in a spiral's secret dance for no one.
The music goes out of my window towards it
and it backs off and swirls while the music
pounds and thrusts and longs and longs and is gone,
and quiet again, and I am tired
and released, as if I've been with you
and want only to sleep
and you're not there, but I turn to you
anyway, and I hold you and you hold me
and we sleep.
Poems are like dreams

Poems are like dreams, worth
nothing on paper, markers on the road
we take from the dark,
white stones, that catch the light
and show the way we've taken
and may need for the way back.
Silence

Silence fall between lovers
who haven't declared themselves,
when a stranger (and everyone is one)
enters the room,
and love is everywhere,
made unmistakable
by the silence between them
My Father's House

I was sixteen when I left my father's house. They'd done what seemed their duty, school and manners. It was time. I was done with caging. Done with that world, that life. I went to find another taking nothing with me, but burning. Leaving no more behind me than an unmade bed.

When I left his house, what could I have known of love? Only this. What I hated, what drew me in. When I left his house he was all I knew of love, eyes that warmed themselves at their own fire and everything else was cold.
Autumn Equinox

Autumn equinox, autumn moon,
days and nights alike, once of twice a year,
neither hot nor cold, not long or short,
grey days and temperate.
We climb the high hill behind the city
and follow the narrow path that disappears
among pines, red rocks and empty pagodas.
On a rock above the valley
we wait and watch the sun go down,
hear only wind and water,
birds and planes above us,
and await the autumn moon.
Across the valley lanterns pulse,
lightning flicks like a snake's tongue,
in a clear sky. Clouds rise above the east ridge
and disperse, while we wait for the world
to turn towards the harvest moon,
which does not come.
We descend through the silence
of paths contrived for humans and without them.
Stray dogs root through litter.
An open view between buildings, as we look back,
waxy in city mist, the lychee moon.
Rebecca

In a town full of plague,
A world at war
I read my journal two years away.
My father was dying. (He didn't, then.)

(It reads:) you don't believe
your eyes will fail you,
your father will die.

But one day you can't read a map in the half light,
and one day your father dies
before you're through with needing him.

(After that, you start to die yourself.
I hope you're ready to leave your children.)

He didn't indulge himself much
except for this one thing -
he imposed his needs, he thought,
(I think) on his wife,
against her first wishes.

And we were the consequences.

It's over now, but I always wanted to be able to call on him.

His great great grandfather was a dreamer,
driven by ideals, by shame at desire, and desire's fruit,
which was pain, travail and loss for his wife,
who took consolation in his arms, and where
does that go, birth again, alone sometimes,
with only him to help, and the babies,
delighting everyone, then sickness and death,
and the dead child and hopelessness, prayers and anger,
and weeping and wanting to give it all up
and just die, but the little ones whose fault it isn't,
and him, no better than one of them, needing
her arms for consolation and sorry to have brought
the misery, and she holds his idiotic loved head
against her chest, and he lifts his face
and she meets his mouth, and he stirs against her
Herz, he says, and his face is wet,
and she is moved by his tenderness and strength.
He builds the houses, the walls,
makes trees bloom, she kisses him, and he enters her
and she knows what she's done, but what can she do.

This is what she has.
She shares what it is.
She has yielded to it.

She expects nothing now
and she gets less.
You know all this. You know who your father has been. You know this but it changes nothing.

When the day comes your father will die and leave you, unprepared and unreprieved, of the sin of being an unloved child
Plague Blues
Hong Kong April 1st, 2003

We go to the poets to make our souls. W.B. Yeats

The town is full of plague
so we stay inside and think,
while the yellow night settles over everything.
The bulky dark bird lifts its throat before dawn
and cries surreal.
A pig-tailed dog gurgles in the undergrowth and
at the corner the woman sifts through
her daily bags of someone else’s discard,
removes papers, rice, bread, an umbrella.

I write to ask my father about poets,
poets he went to to make his soul.
He writes back.
Today the son of the woman
who has worked for us for 40 years
was murdered by robbers.
The woman who does our ironing
was taken to hospital.
These are her last days of Aids.
Last year, the daughter of the woman
who has worked for us for 40 years
died. She was thirty.
Today the woman
was taken away from the house by her only child.
I'm sorry I can’t really think about which poets I went to
to make my soul, now. Forgive me.
You might have to ask Mr Yeats.

Mr Yeats at seventy was still lusting
after avatars of Maud Gonne. Straight back,
harsh appraisals, not really interested
in Mr Yeats. Too soft. He would
rather she had been gentle.
But if she had, he’d have had another Maud.

The words of Mr Yeats abide.
Maud is relatively silent.
The woman who worked in my father’s house
for 40 years is absolutely quiet,
having nothing left.
Poetry – An Essay
By
Philippa Mary Beckerling (P.M.Brain)

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Arts in Creative Writing

Department of Languages and Literature
Faculty of the Humanities
University of Cape Town
2003

Compulsory Declaration

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signed: [Signature] Date: 18 June 2003
Poetry

Poetry is form and content, mind and body. It starts in the ether but finds a way into words and these compel a physical response. A.E. Housman said: “Experience has taught me, when I am shaving of a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts, because, if a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act.” (Housman, 1990, p.21)

For most poets it is a matter of converting into a made object the energy of a thought that will not go away. Through this process the poet discovers the full content of that thought – he or she doesn’t know what it is until it is written. Auden said: “How can I know what I think until I see what I say? A poet writes ‘the chestnut’s comfortable root’ and then changes it to ‘the chestnut’s customary root’. In this alteration there is no question of replacing one emotion by another, or of strengthening an emotion, but of discovering what the emotion is. The emotion is unchanged, but waiting to be identified.” (Burnshaw, 1970, p.179)

Alberta T. Turner believes that on the nature of the poetic process poets agree: poets cannot create poems, they can only edit them; that the precise moment when the emotional reaction to experience is going to fuse experience into an artefact of words cannot be planned or predicted but only invited, induced; that too much intellectual manipulation may stop the process of creation; that the greatest part of craftsmanship is recognizing what has happened after it has happened. (Turner, 1985, p.2)

Miroslav Holub writes: "The poem starts for me always as a coincidence of an idea, of the basic, or general metaphor in Bly's sense, with the feeling that it can be technically done and that it may work. I make a mind picture of the whole structure days or weeks ahead. When I start writing – i.e. exposing the preconceived structure to the free oscillation of wording – I do it once and almost never do revisions, knowing they would not help when the first attempt had failed" (Ibid., p.90)

It is a process, for Yeats, of creating the self. For Emily Dickenson it is a way to explore the “visions and versions of extreme states, so the knowledge can extend to her own death.” (Gibbons, 1996, p.196)
Writing poems is not an entirely voluntary matter – it is not something that is directed entirely by the will. It comes when, in Philip Larkin’s words, ‘something is grinding its knuckles in my neck, and I think: God, I’ve got to say this somehow, I have to find words.” (Haffenden, 1981, p.116) T.S.Eliot says lyric poetry is the voice of a poet ‘speaking to himself, oppressed by a burden that he must bring to relief.’ (Eliot, 1957, p.107)

A poem, says Peter Porter, is a “made object which is a reaction to a mental node. All the poetry I love is potential energy come to rest.” (Porter, 2001, p.16) What arouses this restless energy? Bronowski says a man becomes creative, whether he is an artist or a scientist, when he finds a new unity in the variety of nature... finding a likeness between things which were not thought alike before. An innovation in either field occurs only when a single mind perceives in disorder a deep new unity.” (Burnshaw, 1970, p.183) It comes into existence as an idea that needs exploration, and bothers at the consciousness until it is worked.

Once it is worked, what makes it a poem rather than a scientific discovery, an aphorism, or an equation? What is a poem? Porter’s definition, a “made object”, could apply to a spanner, a pond or an opera. What makes a poem a poem? It is not just language. According to Stephen Yauser, a poem must be metaphor, myth, pattern or truth, to be worthwhile.(Aleshire, 1996, p.56). Mere confession is not adequate, mere facts of personal experience, separated from any awareness of a greater, more universal meaning. This, in Aleshire’s view, is the stuff of minor poetry. Great poets lose themselves in their poetry, lesser ones do not. A poet like Robert Lowell, in her opinion, focuses on his own factual detail, and this masks any pattern. It contains more gossip than gospel, not enough of Yauser’s metaphor or myth, pattern or truth to make it worthwhile. Facts, in lesser poems, lie, separate and particular on the page – the speaker makes no imaginative entry into his inner world. A poem needs to explore unseen connections which allow readers to participate in the experience of the poem. (Ibid., p.1)

This definition applies most closely to the age that produced it. Poetry was not always primarily lyric, turned in upon itself in a search for personal meaning. Until relatively recently, poetry served a communal purpose. Morton W. Bloomfield, the
eminent medievalist, feels strongly that our age has got things out of perspective in this regard: "We have been too long under the dominion of the notion well expressed by John Middleton Murry when writing of a poem by Sir John Squire; 'It is not really a poem because it did not have its origin in any compulsive emotion, but was the outcome of a desire to write poetry rather than to express a perception.' This attitude, which might be called the evacuation theory of poetry, is, I am convinced, extremely misleading when applied to our oldest poetry and has led to serious distortions of understanding."
(Bloomfield, 1970, p.24)

It must speak to our ancient sense of ritual. Reginald Gibbons says that a poem compels our attention with its highly deliberate organization of language which returns us to the language of song, prayer, chant and all other utterances in which repetition itself becomes a summoning and a fulfillment of meaning.” (Gibbons, 1996, p.196). The truth of the poem has to be contained in a form that recalls rhythms that speak to us in ways we cannot altogether explain. We only know that they speak to us and compel us, even when the meaning of the poem is not clear, or even when we might not agree with the message of the poem, and actively dislike the politics of the poet. The rhythm of a great poem stays with us even when we don’t recall the words – we fill in the gaps with nonsense syllables until the true words return, and are as moved by the half remembered version as by the actual one.

A poem that succeeds in socking us in the gut or silencing us for a moment is a poem that works. It works if it makes us silent in the presence of a complicated truth, something we know but had not seen so well expressed. It is the kind of truth that applies to the poetic situation itself, whatever that might be, to ourselves, and to all things. Robert Graves says that the universal truth that comes forth in all true poetry is the muse, the White Goddess, who is at the heart of all life, in sweet and bitter, in sex and death:

"I can not think of any true poet from Homer onwards who has not independently recorded his experience of her. The test of a poet's vision, we might say, is the accuracy of his portrayal of the White Goddess and of the island over which she rules. The reason why the hairs stand on end, the eyes water, the throat is constricted, the skin crawls and a
shiver runs down the spine when one writes or reads a true poem is that a true poem is necessarily an evocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust, the female spider or the queen bee whose embrace is death." (Graves, 1961, p.24)

Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, Graves could still think or write that only a man be a poet because only men are moved by the power and scorn of the Goddess. Women are not poets, he says, and should not try to be. They must be the Muse, and speak as the muse, preferably, he adds, through serenity and silence. "She should write as a woman, not as if she were an honorary man. It is the imitation of male poetry that causes the false ring in the work of almost all women poets. ... The main theme of poetry is, properly, the relation of man and woman." (Ibid., p.446)

Fifty years later, Graves' views have proved themselves to be sadly inadequate – we know that women can apprehend truth as well as men. Graves was unable to see that poetic truth goes beyond both personifications and gender. It is about time, the human condition, our ancient post-lapsarian obsession with meaninglessness in a contingent universe, where to care passionately on the one hand, and to accept that your passion is of no use to change anything, on the other, is our reality. These contradictions are always co-existent in the poet's mind and the heart, the eyes, ears, nose, mouth and fingers. I believe that poems that work speak at some level about this existential irony, and strangely, work in the sense that they give us consolation for the fact that we must die, and so must everything we love.

Poetry is form and content, music and words. It is a unique combination of the two, and if any element is changed, so is the fundamental identity of the poem. The words that the poet uses to express his or her thoughts and feelings are uniquely suited to the task according to nothing else apart from the instinct of the poet. The rhythm or music is equally unique and suited in a unique way to the poet's expression. Before the advent of free verse, rhythm and rhyme preset the form and the poet found words to cooperate with the iamb, the trochee, or whatever constraints of rhythmic form he or she was working within. Many poets still practice this particular poetic discipline; but nowadays, more do not, choosing to frame their words and their rhythm together in the more natural phrasing of speech patterns, so that whereas poets used to concentrate on beats in the line,
now they tend to listen for the rhythm of a phrase. It is analogous to the rhythmic patterns of music – one can listen to beats in a bar, or *meter*, which is measured by the metronome, or for the longer and more complex *phrase*. The first is simpler and more predictable, working in the same way as a pulse beat in formal poetry, but it is also restricted and restrictive in scope. The second goes beyond the confines of the line.

With reference to rhythm in music, Robert Jourdain writes, "Phrasing is nothing like meter. For one thing, its markers are more subtle. Where meter presents a regular, mostly predictable succession of emphasized notes, phrasing constantly varies. ... Like meter, phrasing is devoted to mapping the flow of time in music. ... Meter is tyrannical in its regularity. In contrast, phrasing works through the inherent meaning of the sound it contains." (Jourdain, 1997, p.131)

As Jourdain points out with relation to early music, early poetry was generally confined by traditionally accepted rhythmic conventions, and poetic effects were often achieved by variations within that convention. The obedience to convention is something that has only recently been discarded (if it has, which is arguable). Up to the twentieth century, poetic values were not as they are now, and indeed up until Chaucer's time, originality was not even something universally sought by poets and other writers. What was valued was the recasting of traditional material into acceptable forms. This is evident in the limited number of themes and forms one comes across in early English poetry, specifically Anglo-Saxon and Medieval poems, and the conventional treatment of those themes.

Anglo-Saxon poetry, for instance, is confined by strict rhythmic conventions, but they are quite different from the constraints of Chaucer's time. The Anglo-Saxon line was divided into two parts, and each part contained two strong beats, and an irregular number of unstressed syllables, though there were always at least two. The two were divided by a break, or *caesura*. In addition, one of the stressed syllables in the first half line had to alliterate with the first stressed syllable in the second half line. Attempts to reproduce Anglo-Saxon poetry in modern verse form is limited by our impatience with regular rhythmic forms, and the same applies to recent attempts to render Chinese classical poetry into English.
Whatever particular time we live in has its own autocracies regarding verse forms, which means that unless we can read and understand the original languages of the poems, we have no chance of actually reading the same poems. For example, a brief look at some lines from the *Seafarer* will illustrate the point.

Maeg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan
Sîphas secgan, hu ic geswincdagum
earfoðh Îlwe ofi ðrowade
bitre breostceare gebidan haebbe
gecummad in ceole cearselda fela,
atol ytha gewealc, thaer mec oft bigeat
nearo nihtwaco aet nacan stefnan,
thonne he be clifum cnoosath. Calde gethrungen
waeron mine fet, forste gebunden
caldum clommum, thaer tha ceare seafendun
hat’ymb heortan; hungor inman slat
merewerges mod. Thaet se mon ne wat
the him on foldan faegrost limpeth,
hu ic earmcarig isealde sae
winter wunade wraeccan lastum,
winemaegum hidroren.
Bihongen hrimcelum; haegl scurum fleag.
Thaer ic ne gehyrde butan himman sae,
Iscaedle waeg. Hwilum ylfete song
Dyde ic me to gomene, ganetes hleothor
Ond huilpan sweg fore hleahor wera,
Maew singende fore medocrince.

A true rendering of these lines would have to include a close adherence to the rhythm, because that is what makes this poetry distinctive. But, as we will see, our current poetic sensibilities cannot tolerate what the Anglo-Saxons took as gospel. A reasonably close rendition might read:

I can by myself a true poem utter
Expeditions tell how I in days of toil
A time of hardship often endured
Bitter breastcare have experienced,
Known aboard ship many care abodes
Terrible waves welling (where) there often befell me
An anxious nightwatch at vessels's prow
When along cliffs it knocked. By cold pinched
Were my feet, frost bound
By cold fetters (there) where cares sighed
Hot about the heart. Hunger inside gnawed
The seweary spirit. That the man knows not
For whom on shore most fairly it befalls
How I, wretched, ice-cold sea
In winter endured, in tracks of exile
Of hall-companions bereft
Hung with icicles hail flew in gusts
There I did not hear but roaring sea
Ice-cold wave. Sometimes wild swan's song
Did I make for myself as game, gannet's cry
And curlew's music instead of the laughter of men,
Singing sea mew instead of mead drinking.

This almost literal transcription reads just like that, a transcription, not a poem. We have become used to sentences and phrases that run smoothly, and our ear since the early twentieth century has been taught not to tolerate distorted word order unless for a good poetic reason. The alliteration and strict rhythm of the Anglo-Saxon seems too predictable and obvious to our ear.

Sarah Lynn Higley (Higley, 1993) has made a study of the translations of The Seafarer and other Old English and early Welsh poems and the material she has collected prompts some observations about fashions in poetry, and how although we deceive ourselves that our tastes now are "right" and the others from the past that don't conform to these are in some way lacking; it's also plain to see that our tastes are going to be proved transitory as well. A look at some lines from various renderings will make the point clear.

A version from the late Victorian age (1890) by G.R.Merry panders to the lush, sentimental, over-rhythmic taste of the time which came at the cost of any kind of adherence to the spirit of the original. To our taste now it seems cloyingly sweet, almost nauseating:

The thought that is pent in my heart
Is roaming the roaring sea;
It hath sped to the home of the whale,
Where my soul ever yearned to be.
It hath flown to the ends of the earth,
It hath traversed the trackless main,
And back with a ravening swoop
It hath rushed on my heart again. (lines 58-65)

Charles W. Kennedy in 1936 is a lot more restrained, but there is little sense of the original rhythm or the starkness of the minimal observations that the Anglo-Saxon records:

Yet still, even now, my desire outreaches,
My spirit soars over tracts of sea,
O'er the home of the whale, and the world's expanse.
Eager, desirous, the lone sprite returneth;
It cries in my ears and it urges my heart
To launch where the whales plough their paths through the deep.

By far the best known of the versions of the Seafarer is the one by Ezra Pound. When he made his version, in 1915, he was leading a movement in poetry which explicitly rejected the easy rhymes and soft sentiments of the preceding generation, and most of all, the iambic rhythms which in his view had strangled the spontaneous in poetry for too long. The movement aimed to create stark, powerful images in the natural rhythms of speech, rather than those of the metronome. What he did with the Seafarer is interesting for what it reveals about the limitations of any movement or short-term fashion in poetry, because what it sees as important has to by its nature be only one small aspect of the whole experience of poetry, and where it succeeds in changing one thing, it will horribly fail in another, and for succeeding generations, it will be these failings that become the new point of departure and definition.

Here is Ezra Pound's version:

My mood 'mid the mere-flood
Over the whale's acre, would wander wide.
On earth's shelter cometh oft to me,
Eager and ready, the crying lone flyer,
Whets for the whale-path the heart irresistibly,
O'er tracks of ocean;

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Higley's literal transcription shows where Pound has been indulgent at the expense of the original:

Therefore (indeed?) now my mind passes over heart's enclosure
My spirit with flood tide
Over whale's home passes wide
(over) earth's expanse comes back to me
eager and greedy. Lone-flier yells,
whets onto whale-way the heart irresistibly
over sea's lake.

Firstly, he takes the word *mod*, glossed by Ida Gordon in her standard edition of the poem as *heart or spirit*, and imposes a modern English interpretation onto it on the basis of its visual resemblance to our word *mood*. The word could once have borne both meanings but does not now. *Mood* and *mind* do not mean the same thing at all anymore. *Mood* is willful, but *mind or spirit* are receptive and free of the subjective emotional quality that characterises the former. This is typical of his version as a whole and may be seen perhaps even more clearly in his opening lines:

*May I, for my own self, song's truth reckon,*
*Journey's jargon, how I in harsh days*
*Hardship endured oft.*

To us, sharing Higley's politically correct views that the original is more or less sacrosanct, Pound's sins are relatively grave: arguably just as grave as the sins he railed against in his poetic predecessors. He repeatedly makes free with the Anglo-Saxon and imposes an altogether non-faithful interpretation on the words of the original. *Maeg* is not equivalent to our *may*, in the sense of requesting permission, but more to our *can*, in the sense of ability. *Song's truth* is not quite *true poem*, but we can let it go, but *journey's*

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1 The original lines 58-64 are:

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For thon nu min hyge hweorfeþ ofer hreþerlocan,
Min modsefe mid mereflode,
Ofer hwaeles ethel hweorfeþ wide,
Eorþan sceatas, cymeth eft to me
Gifre ond graedig; gielþeþ anflogs,
Hwetþeþ on hwaelweg hreþer unwearnnum
Ofer holma gelagu,
```
jargon is absolutely unacceptable. He is going for a cheap reproduction of the original's alliteration at the expense of meaning. Jargon is not a verb, and a verb is required here to approximate the sense of sithas secgan, journeys tell or say. He is doing the same in his choice of the cute reckon which is meant to render the sense of wrecan, glossed by Gordon as utter or recite. So, in his revolutionary drive to sweep out the old, he commits what are to us, nearly a hundred years later, cardinal, unforgivable errors. For us, sentimental iambbs are mere bagatelles, but insensitivity to the integrity of an historically discrete text is a capital offence. How convenient it is that his subsequent history has borne this out and proved us right - his cultural insensitivity was to be his downfall when he revealed his fascist leanings and broadcast for the Italians during the Second World War. It's easy for us to forget that we too are part of history.

Higley, who speaks from a position of intimate knowledge of the various renderings, singles one out for special mention. She says "One of the most perceptive of the collection is, in my considered opinion, the 1902 version by La Motte Iddings. The correctness of her understanding of The Seafarer as an integrated (if divided) unity with a lucid, lambent meaning, was soon to be obliterated by Pound's "heave to overthrow the iambic"." (Idding's version was to be the crib Pound would use for his version, though, as Higley shows, he took every precaution to disguise the fact.) What is interesting to me is the praise bestowed on the hundred year old version, (and the terms of that praise\(^2\)) because it seems to me that Iddings was demonstrating loyalty to a set of values that were more or less identical to those that are presently in force in modern American poetry; spareness, a refusal to concede to the temptation towards the indulgent, the sentimental, the cute or the soaring.\(^3\) It is easy to forget that all phases in poetry are merely phases, which find their character in some kind of opposition to the phase that went before. It is also easy for us to flatter ourselves that our tastes are not merely tastes, but a learned appreciation of what is "good", based on centuries of poetry that have tuned and educated our ears. We forget that Donne came before Tennyson, and that the taste for intelligent, spare verse that transcended constraints of metre and rhyme with pure intelligence was

\(^2\) The words of praise, lucid, lambent, alliterate and pulse with a poetic energy of their own, in the tradition of cutting edge academic approval – the official welcome to the academy of taste.
superseded repeatedly by the utterly mediocre. The same is true of music. There was a
time when Bach's music was scorned for being "turgid and sophisticated" when it should,
according to the values of the time, have been "simple and natural". (Coetzee, 2001, p.9)
What seems to have its virtue in understatement now is a reaction against overstatement,
and inevitably we will return to it at some point.

The agonies of translation apply universally where language barriers have
to be passed, but methods can vary greatly, as well as views on what is important. I
recently came across a new translation of classical Chinese poems by a professor at
Beijing University, Xu Yuan Zhong, who writes a preface on the subject. His theory is
that translation is a "creative or re-creative work, so a translator should recreate in the
target language what the author of the original creates in the source language. In other
words, a translator should be the author metamorphosed into a foreign poet." Yuan
Xingpei, 1997, p.7) Unlike most Western translators these days, Xu has a principle of
verse translation, which is to make the translated verse as beautiful as the original in
sense, in sound and in form. He uses the "methods" of "equalisation, generalisation, and
particularisation". He gives an example of his methods in operation:

1. He makes a word-for-word translation:
   yellow river enter sea flow
2. He applies equalisation to the bare words:
   The Yellow River seaward flows
3. Another word-for-word translation
   desire exhaust thousand mile view
   more ascend one floor tower
4. And after generalisation
   You will enjoy a grander sight
   By climbing to a greater height
   (here the view over a thousand miles is generalised into a grander sight and one
   floor more into a greater height)

7 For a discussion of current American poetic values see the essay by the former US poet laureate, Robert
Hass "One Body: Some Notes on Form" in Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry, New York,
5. word-for-word translation:

*often sing spring dale in*

6. He applies particularisation

*their fitful twitters fill the dale with spring*

(here "often" is particularised into "fitful", "sing" into "twitters" and "in spring dale" into "fill the dale with spring")

He concludes: "Equalisation, generalisation and particularisation may serve to make the English version read as beautiful as the original in sense. Rhythm and rhyme serve to make it read beautiful in sound. Heroic couplets and alexandrines are used to preserve the original beauty in form." (p.8)

The approach of this Chinese academic is interesting in the context of the earlier discussion about fashions in poetry. Can a non-native speaker of English translate into English adequately? Walter Arndt's argument is that one cannot translate unless one is a native speaker in the original language, and interestingly, his translations of Rilke also insist on maintaining rhyme, which to my ears and eyes, is a serious mistake. (Gass, 1999, p.42) I think most native speakers of English would argue that similarly, these translations from the Chinese have very little resemblance to the apparent meanings of the individual words of the direct translations he uses as a point of departure. There seems to be no point of contact between the two versions, and one has to wonder if this is a fact of all translation, though here it is particularly plain. Chinese poetry is particularly susceptible to differences of interpretation because of the way the language is structured, individual words placed together with no connectives. Current English versions of these poems, produced by native English speakers with or without knowledge of Chinese, tend to be very different, spare, airy, far more so than Ezra Pound's versions. We seem to be drawn to the spaces between the words which evoke the silence and space of Chinese paintings, and what comes across as the remoteness and mystery of the place to our understanding. But whether we are at all close to the literal meaning of the poems, we will not be able to tell, because poetry is more than the words, it is something that comes

Ecco Books, 1984, pp.56-71
out of immersion in a particular world, knowledge of which is, by its nature, largely
denied to a second-language speaker.

I will continue my discussion of poetic fashions and the pitfalls of translation with
a look at the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, and some of the translations that have
appeared since his death in 1926. William Gass has written a book about the problems of
translating Rilke, focusing primarily on the first Duino Elegy, specifically the first
quarter, or about 25 lines. His judgement is that only three established translators have
given acceptable renditions, Leishman, Poulin and Mitchell, though none of these is
without failings. About translators in general he has some harsh words: "Most translators
do not bother to understand their texts. That would interfere with their creativity and their
perception of what the poet ought to have said. .. And they would rather be original than
right; they insist on repainting the stolen horse." (Gass, 1999, p.73) Gass includes his
own attempts in his survey of translations of Rilke, and it is interesting to contrast his
theory of good translation with what he actually does with the German poetry when he
gets a chance. The lines concerned come from the second section of the first Duino elegy:

Und so verhalt ich mich denn und verschlucke den Lockruf
Dunkelen Schluchzens.

Gass sets out eleven versions of these lines, including two of his own. Here are
Leishman, Poulin and Mitchell:

And so I repress myself, and swallow the call-note of depth-dark sobbing
(Leishman)

So I control myself and keep back the lure of my dark sobbing (Poulin)

So I hold myself back and swallow the call-note of my dark sobbing (Mitchell)

Gass is not pleased with any of these. He says:" If we try to stay close to the immediate
English sense of the German words, a nearly vomitous calamity results (consider
Leishman's unfortunate initial effort, for instance), and we must avoid these luring calls, these dark sobs, at all costs." (p.73) The lush language and imagery of Rilke's words are not acceptable to Gass' late twentieth century ear, so he goes elsewhere to find something that will enable him to produce a less cloying line. He finds it in his interpretation of the Third Elegy, and goes on: "The controlling image, which the Third Elegy confirms, is that of the frightened child calling for Mother to remove the darkness with its terror, which, like the absent light, is so alive in it. Thus the cry is an appealing one on two counts, and one which issues from the poet's deepest nature. The cry is held back because the fear itself is a fear we worship out of frightened gratitude: because the cry comes from the child in us; and because it is anyhow pointless, as the famous lines which follow mournfully but selfishly reiterate: alas, who is there we can make use of?

However, what does Rilke say the "call" is like? The idea is that the cry is effective the way a child's sobbing might be, and the notion that the cry is alluring as the mating calls of the bird are meant to be, collide like two trains." (p.73-4)

Having dismissed the possibility of actually translating the words of the poem, Gass produces his own versions, five of them:

*And so I contain myself; choke back the appealing child's cry of my innermost part.*

*And so I master myself and hold back the appealing outcry of my childhood heart*

*So I master myself to stifle an appealing outcry – instinctive as a mating song*

*So I master myself to muffle an appealing heart's cry – instinctive as a mating song*

*So I control myself to cut short an appealing outcry – instinctive as a mating song.*

Of all the translations he cites, none comes anywhere near his in terms of inaccuracy, of imposition of additional meaning, of painting the stolen horse. He has the grace to admit that his first version is about as bad as it can get, but takes refuge in the poverty of the
original he is working with: "Shall we permit readers to believe that this great poem contains lines of such pretentious silliness?" he asks (p.75).

Admittedly, in the context of all the translations Gass makes of the Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus, these lines stand out as particularly self-indulgent, but the point seems to have been made that Gass' theory of translation becomes thoroughly lost and forgotten when he is presented with difficult lines like these. He concludes the section with a brief summary of his views on the task and responsibility of the translator: "It may seem perverse, but the translator must, I think, avoid construing. ... Soon, I may know too much for my own good, and offer the reader an apple from my tree of knowledge. One is generally wise to render the poem as the poet wrote it, and let the poet's poem explain itself. Generally ... (p.84)

The jostling for position as the "best" translator goes on. Gass reluctantly gives the spot to J.B.Leishman although one senses that he would really like to claim it for himself. Another American, Robert Hass, former US Poet Laureate, gives it to Stephen Mitchell.

Writing in his book of essays Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry, Hass sets the groundwork for our reception of Mitchell's work:

"Last fall, in Paris, a friend offered to take me to the café, not far from Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, where Rilke was said to have breakfasted in the early years of the century when he was working as Rodin's secretary. I was glad of the pilgrimage because, of all poets, Rilke is the hardest to locate in a place." (Hass, 1984, p.226) He describes Rilke's rootlessness, the sense of suffocation he brought with him into adulthood from his parents' dysfunctional home, and goes on: "All his life Rilke carried that suffocation inside him: and it was very much on my mind because I had just been reading Stephen Mitchell's fresh, startlingly Rilkean translations of the poems. Here, finally, was a Rilke in English that would last for many generations. Walking through European cities with Mitchell's Rilke in my ear, trying to see with Rilke's eyes, I could begin to feel in the new downtowns, in the old city squares like stage sets with their baroque churches by the
rivers and restored fortresses on the hills, the geography of that suffocation; it flares in the brilliant anger of the Duino Elegies - ...." (Ibid., p.227)

This is brilliantly lyrical writing in its own right and was enough to send me to my local Hong Kong bookshop to see if I could get Mitchell, and if he could make Rilke come alive for me as he had for Hass. How more poetic could one be, really, than in a vision like this – the search for a great romantic figure of the early twentieth century, a man in love with solitude, understood by no one, ready to forgo everything in the service of his art. Hass' choice of the word "pilgrimage" is entirely appropriate - he is speaking of a canonized saint of the poetic spirit. Hass's style is ephemeral and attenuated, whimsical and suggestive, the romance of the adolescent overwhelmed with inchoate emotion, walking the streets where others once walked, and so on. Of course, this is the vision of an idealist, and doesn't outlast the acquisition of information; for instance, a brief look into any biography of Rilke will reveal photographs of the castle at Duino and the tower at Muzot, the places where his famous Elegies came to him in such a remarkable way. Place is not something difficult to associate with him. The notion of the poet at breakfast is another nonsense. Rilke always ate sparely, and his breakfast was invariably oats. His life as Rodin's secretary was hardly an artistic communion of poet and sculptor - more a series of scraps and resentments on both sides.

Hass concedes the spirit of this a couple of pages later when practicalities kick in, but his opinion of Mitchell's translation stands. I had read Rilke in a desultory way in other translations but it had never seemed markedly compelling until I read Mitchell. Mitchell's Rilke whispers at you in a way you can't resist. As Hass observes, the matter of the poems quickly becomes secondary in importance to the disturbance it makes in your viscera, the restlessness it invokes, the pure gut poetry of it. This is indubitably true. It flows and surges like the music of Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto, with a dark passionate undercurrent that draws at you. It is compelling to the degree that my absorption has been complete even on a crowded train, so that I missed my station and had to retrace several stages of the journey to get off at the right place. Other translations do not do this, not even the newer one by Edward Snow, which is far more true to the
original. My argument is that Mitchell has rewritten Rilke, not translated him, and introduced an additional element into the mix. His poems are not Rilke.

What are the grounds for a statement like this one? What makes Rilke Rilke, and not someone else? Why is Edward Snow's Rilke more Rilkean than Mitchell's? Of all the Rilke translations, Mitchell's best conveys a sense of restless longing, and compared to the others, some of which are closer to the original, his is by far the most compelling as poetry in its own right. In the following paragraphs I am going to try to say why I think this is true.

The Fourth Duino Elegy begins and ends with short contemplations on the limitations and disappointments inherent in being human: it opens with a consideration of the loss of oneness with nature, and ends observing the paradox of the child who carries its own death within in from the very beginning but is not stunted by it. I am going to look at parts of this elegy, particularly the beginning and the end, to try to identify what makes Rilke Rilkean, and what makes a translation either true to the original or particular to the personality of the translator. What I will try to identify is what makes a poem an individual thing; of all the components of a poem, stress, rhythm, arrangements of words in particular order, selection of particular words and so on, which of these can bear interference and adjustment, and which can not without the loss of the feeling of the original poem.

First of all, of course, there is the matter of content, of what the poem actually says. Gass discusses this at some length and makes sense when he says that a good translation has to follow the immediate meaning of the original as far as possible, and not wander off into interpretation of the words. Gass says this quite clearly and quite clearly does exactly the opposite, as we have seen, because the original is not pleasing to him, even vomitous at times. Other translators are more temperate in their responses and attempt to convey the original at whatever personal cost it may carry. There are some almost totally accurate translations of the Duino Elegies, but as one would imagine, they suffer from the shift from German to English because of the different structures of the languages, and because of the way German nouns are constructed, which differs in many cases from the English way. Because English has a very significant French component, many of our nouns express the essence of an idea, in contrast to the German way of
building meaning by adding elements to words. An example is the word *science*, a French word we have adopted. In German the word is *wissenshaft*, a two syllable, two level word. Although we may have a direct translation for the nouns, in many cases our most accurate word will be shorter, and this leads to all manner of problems for the rhythm and emphasis of the line. The more obvious problem of word order is another hindrance to reproducing the content as well as the original emphasis – the German verbs coming at the end weight the sentences in a very different way. Then there are the frequent instances of words just not having equivalents in English. Look at the beginning of the Fourth Duino Elegy. It begins

\[O\text{ Baume Lebens, o wann winterlich?}\]
\[Wir\text{ sind nicht einig. Sind nicht wie die Zug-Vogel verstandigt.}\]

We have no equivalent adjective for *winterlich* in this context. We could say *wintery* but it doesn’t have the force of the *lich*, and *winterlike* is not available. The force of the line comes in part from the stresses – two strong stresses in each half line, like the Anglo-Saxon line. Like the Anglo-Saxon line, this rhythm recreates the harsh, predictable coming of winter, and is inherent to the meaning of the line. It is probably impossible to do a decent translation of this line, and Edward Snow’s is not inspiring:

O trees of life, how far off is winter?

The next idea is similarly difficult to turn into both a true translation and poetry. *Wir sind nicht einig*. Some attempts at this go like this:

Our nature’s not the same. (A.Poulin Jr.)
We are not of one mind. (Elaine E. Boney)
We’re not in tune / we’re not instinctive (David Young)
We do not agree on this. (Leslie Norris and Alan Keel)
We’re not in accord. (C.F.MacIntyre)
We’re never single-minded, unperplexed, (J.B.Leishman & S.Spender)
Strangers to instinct/we lack the focus and /the harmony. (Robert Hunter)
We are not at one. (J.B. Leishman)

We are not in harmony, (S. Mitchell)

We’re in disarray (Edward Snow)

The original is impossible to capture, it seems. The sense of *einig* is of course present in all of the versions, but the rhythm, four strong beats followed by a weak, creating the sense of falling away, is present in none of them. None of the English versions has the strong beat on the fourth and crucial syllable *ein*, so the intensification of meaning achieved by the confluence of sense and stress in the German does not come through at all. Suddenly we have a different kind of poem, looser, more wordy, less precise. Even Leishman’s *We are not at one*, which is by far the closest in terms of accuracy and rhythm, fails, because the emphasis comes on the last syllable, rather than the preceding one, creating a wholly different feeling.

The Elegy continues:

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Sind nicht wie die Zug-Vogel verstandigt. Überholt und spat,
So drangen wir uns plötzlich Winden auf
Und fallen ein auf teilnahmslosen Teich.
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Mitchell renders the first part as

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Our blood does not forewarn us
Like migratory birds’
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This is plainly a hundred miles away from the original, but it is satisfying nevertheless as poetry. It is interesting, and the rhythm is close enough to the original not to be offensive.

Leishman has:

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We’ve no instinctive knowledge,
Like migratory birds.
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This sounds too prosaic, and is not close enough to the original to score on that point either. Norris and Keel choose understatement:

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We do not know,
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19
As migratory birds know.

Elaine E. Boney has:

Unlike the migrating birds we are not
in accord.

Of these, Norris and Keel seem to be the closest to the original meaning and rhythm, but there is a flatness about it, an over simplicity. In contrast to the earlier phrase, this one does not seem to be able to be translated any more closely than this, but the English versions all fail to convey the meaning of the original unless they expand it, as Mitchell has done. Mitchell's is very loose, really, reading in the things about blood and forewarning into the simple adjective *verstandigt*, but of all the versions, it is only Mitchell’s that is interesting, in my view, the only one that strikes a vein of emotional power. But is it as Rilkean as the others? Let’s go on:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Overtaken und spat, } \\
\text{So drangen wir uns plötzlich Winden auf}
\end{align*}
\]

For the first line we have the following:

Overtaken and belated (Boney)
Outstript and late, (Leishman)
Overtaken and tardy (Hunter)
Outpaced and tardy (Norris and Keel)
Overtaken / overdue (Young)
Late and out of season (Poulin)

And finally, Mitchell:

Late, overtaken,
We force ourselves abruptly onto the wind

Mitchell is the only one to throw out the connective, and to reverse the order of the adjectives, but in spite of this, once again, his is the only interesting half line. Unlike the
others, his creates a sense of unity through assonance and rhythm, and a sense of building despair through the removal of the pause created by the and. The poetry has begun to whisper to us, as Hass says, to call us into the trance. It works in subtle ways. With Mitchell, we want to read more. We are being caught up in a forward moving rhythm and we are losing our desire to hold out against it. The section ends:

Und irgendwo gehn Lowen noch und wissen,
Solang sie herrlich sind, von keiner Ohnmacht.

Once again, Mitchell renders this powerfully:

And somewhere lions still roam and never know,
In their majestic power, of any weakness.

Rilke’s original, directly transcribed, is pretty far from this:

And somewhere lions still go and know,
As long as they are herrlich⁴, of no weakness.

The disposition of positives and negatives is very particular in Rilke’s original, but strangely, not one of the translators follows it in these lines. Mitchell’s strength in these two lines comes through the rhythms he uses, especially in the first line. The repetition of the rhythm in still roam and never know create a wistfulness which is absent from the original, a sense of otherness, and this follows through into the last phrase of any weakness. Rilke’s version is much more straightforward and pragmatic than this. His lions know of no weakness. Mitchell’s never know of any. There is poetic loss in Mitchell’s, a longing that hooks us in. I think Robert Hass admires the poetry of Mitchell.

"We went to the poets to make our souls", Yeats said. Harold Bloom, in his introduction to the best American poetry of the last decade of the twentieth century reminds us of this, and that poetry is a solitary art, and "its proper audience is the deeply

⁴ This word is open to so many interpretations that I will not choose one: some of the choices used in various translations in this line include: lordliness, magnificence, majesty, splendour and powerful.
educated, solitary reader, or that reader sitting within herself in a theatre." (Bloom, 1998, p.20).

The use of poetry is to make our souls. What does this mean, and how does it do it?

To speak like this of course implies a distance from the event it describes. It is a looking back at experiences, and an assigning of meaning to them. Yeats is talking about the making of his soul, undergoing core experiences throughout the course of his life as a human. Making one's soul is the process of forming understanding on a number of levels, not only emotional, not only intellectual, not only spiritual, but all three, and in a medium of the physical, through our ears and eyes, and bodies, where rhythm is felt. By its nature poetry is uniquely suited to this kind of purpose because of the way it combines all of these aspects. When Yeats wrote this, he went on and named the poets, Shelley, Wordsworth, Goethe, Balzac, Flaubert, and Tolstoy. For Harold Bloom, the list would be different, and include Dante, Shakespeare and Whitman. We cannot escape our own time, and for most of my contemporaries, the list would be headed by Yeats and Eliot, though the reputations of both have suffered to some extent with the passing of time, Yeats in the sense of seeming now often precious and whimsical, and Eliot for his right wing politics, specifically anti-semitism, and perceived misogyny based on his behaviour towards his first wife, Vivienne Haigh-Wood. Many poets nowadays suffer a degree of public scrutiny that did not exist before the sixties or seventies, and public opinion makes dramatic shifts based on issues not related to the work. Ted Hughes went through a long period of public opposition, based on what people assumed to be the truth about his role in the suicide of Sylvia Plath. This seems now to have swung back to a more realistic assessment of him as a poet rather than a husband and philanderer, but I don't believe this will happen in the case of Eliot, whose right wing conservatism goes further and will last longer in the public mind. Nevertheless, of all the poets of the twentieth century, Eliot made the strongest impression on me as a young reader. I will try to look at some of the reasons.

My favourite poems were Ash Wednesday, a Song for Simeon, Marina, all for different reasons. As a young woman my concerns were not primarily with an overall meaning which my limited understanding of the world could not provide. It was with
emotional impact, and this as well took place in a space that did not include great understanding. I didn't know why certain statements had great power to move me – I only knew they did. Among them were lines like

*Although I do not wish to turn*
*From the wide window towards the granite shore*
*The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying*
*Unbroken wings*

Looking at it now, it is clearer. It was about Eliot's unsurpassed ability to evoke the Catholic paradox (the same that animates Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*) in poetic terms – here alliteration, rhythm and repetition. A Song for Simeon affected me in a different way. It was the slow deliberate rhythm, the acceptance of the unacceptable, that spoke to me:

*Lord, the Roman hyacinths are blooming in bowls*
*And the winter sun creeps by the snow hills.*
*The stubborn season has made stand.*
*My life is light, waiting for the death wind*
*Like a feather on back of my hand.*
*Dust in sunlight and memory in corners*
*Wait for wind that blows towards the dead land.*
*Grant us thy peace. I have walked many years in this city*
*Kept faith and fast, provided for the poor.*
*There went never any rejected from my door.*
*Where shall live my children's children when the time of sorrow is come.*
*They will take to the goat's path and the foxes' home*
*Fleeing from the foreign faces and the foreign swords.*

Eliot occupied a place where things were meaningful, and I spent a lot of time there. Above the appeal of the electric intellectual charge his lines carried was the rhythm that characterised them, the slow, restrained, controlled, resigned, elegiac rhythm of his lines. In a sense it is the Catholic paradox incarnate again, beauty and sensuality that is not legitimate fare, that is appreciated only to be denied, excess that is glimpsed, set down, and rejected. What we want and what we cannot have, phrased in the terms of that beauty, in the rhythms of that self denial. Sounds crazy, doesn't it. But kids brought up Catholic by parents with spirits withered by the depression, the war and parents themselves embittered, felt like that a lot. Hence the mad release of the sixties and seventies, and the alternate reality we tried to provide for our kids. When, at nineteen, I
was due to produce my own first child, I knew exactly and passionately what I wanted for my child, and predictably enough, it was just the opposite of the fate that was my lot at the hands of my parents.

Yeats was a different entity. I didn't go to Yeats to be stirred intellectually, placated rhythmically, into some kind of acceptance of the ultimately unacceptable. I went to Yeats for his last lines which lifted me into a kind of exhilaration, and for his constancy in love, hopeless, unrequited love that he never gave up even into old age, marriage to another and fatherhood. I loved his disregard of what other people were doing. All he cared about was Maud Gonne, all he saw in other women was her, even in extreme decrepitude he was filled with warmth and sweetness, overwhelmed with inescapable, insuperable love for Maud Gonne, who loved him not at all, or hardly. I loved his faithfulness to that spirit, and of course the poems that told me about it and made it real for me. He is perhaps more present in his poems than any other poet. He has so little of persona, it seems. He doesn't need to restrain it, like Eliot, or compress it like Auden, or make it sour and regretted, like Larkin, or redirect it into the world of nature like Hughes. Like Jack Cope, a totally underrated South African poet who suffered from the same malaise, he let it hang out, and made it sing.

Jack Cope, who died quite recently, was in love with another poet, Ingrid Jonker, who killed herself by drowning at the age of thirty or so, like Virginia Woolf before her. All of Cope's poems are haunted by this loss, but none as lyrically and painfully as his poem *If You Come Back*, which in my experience, captures the essence of loss and beauty like no other poem of the time.

*If you come back ever
if you come back in the smoky Decembers
sweeping out of estranged eyes
all the strange and magnetic stars one by one
and drop them, faint and flawed diamonds,
picked from the waxed velvet of the sorting sky.
If you come again wearing the sun like a burning glass
what shall I say.*

It's not just his loss that pulses in the poem, but also the particular character of Africa.

*If I dance like the tall shy raincloud,
have I not captured the rain?*
The antelope, lifting its eyes into the mouth of the night

Seeking in the grass the secret habiaantjie

And his final evocation of sand and distance:

If you come back ever
it is because of the words
because I have gone silent and distant
bearing the seed of my words

Perhaps once again, the key to the appeal of these poets is in what is common to them all, a sense of being unrequited, of loss, of patience, acceptance, putting into words what can not be experienced in reality. Patience, resignation. Foster child of silence and slow time.

Perhaps this is poetry.
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