Notes for Broadsheet Poets 8

For number 8 of this ongoing series, two important manuals for poets young and old come immediately to mind. The first, which was already alluded to in **Notes for Broadsheet Poets 1**, is **Rilke**'s not enough known ***Letters to a Young Poet*** originally translated by M.D. Herter Norton (Norton, New York), and, more recently by **Stephen Cohn** (Carcanet, £9.95) who features in this issue. Quotations from this text in the ensuing pages are from Cohn. The second manual very well worth purchasing is the 'Afterword' and 'Appendix: Fourteen Notes on the Version' at the end of **Don Paterson's *Orpheus: A Version of Rainer Maria Rilke*** which has recently been published by Faber (£12.99 hardback) and will soon appear in paperback. Hannah Salt, who teaches at the University of Vienna, stated in her review of the latter book in *Magma 37* (Spring, 2007): 'Paterson's 'Afterword' is a permanent contribution to Rilkean studies and will, I suspect, be read long after his versions of the Sonnets'. Thanks, then, to Faber and to Carcanet for allowing us to quote from the two above texts here.

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The ten letters which comprise the manual (interestingly the same in number as the *Duino Elegies*) are what the aspiring young poet, Franz Xavier Kappus, calls the ten 'important' letters saved from his correspondence with Rilke about his own poetic strivings. In them, as Kappus attests, 'a great and unique man' speaks. There is no doubt that Rilke was a purist and uncompromising in his approach to his role as a poet. He believed that one's personal life should be sacrificed for dedication to the art, and that a profound, questing approach to life was as important for the aspiring poet to have as inspiration and a grasp of craft and technique.

In Letter One, written from Paris, 17 February 1903, Rilke advises Kappus: 'There is only one way. *You must go inside yourself*. You must seek for whatever it is that obliges you to write. You must discover if its roots reach down to the very depths of your heart. You must confess to yourself whether you would truly die if writing were forbidden to you'. He continues to tell him to choose subjects which his daily experience offers him: his sorrows, hopes and preoccupations; the images in his dreams and the objects held in his memory. He adds: 'If your daily life seems mean to you – do not find fault with it; rather chide yourself that you are not poet enough to evoke its riches; if one is truly

creative there is no such thing as poverty, and no place that is poor or meaningless'.

In Letter Three, written from Viareggio, near Pisa on 23 April 1903, Rilke gives more wisdom. 'To be an artist means that you cannot enumerate or calculate but must grow as the trees grow – letting the sap flow at its own pace, standing firm through the gales of spring, never fearing that there will be no summer. For there *will* be summer'. He continues to impress on the young poet the painful lesson he himself has to learn every day: '*patience* is everything!'

In this same letter, Rilke compares the experience of the artist to sexual experience: 'they are really only different manifestations of the same longing and of the same fulfilment.' The poetic force, he says, is 'strong as a primal urge'. Here Rilke is talking about 'sexual' 'in its largest and purest and most generous meaning' which means loving as 'a human creature', and not only as a male when love can become 'disfigured'.

In Letter Four, written at Worpswede bei Bremen on 16th July 1903, he recommends the young poet to stay close to Nature – 'to the small things which scarcely anyone notices and which can for that very reason invisibly lead to what is great, what is immeasurable'. He urges: 'What matters is to live everything. For just now, live the questions. Maybe you will little by little, almost without noticing, one distant day live your way into the answers'.

He asserts that 'the principle of motherhood is to be found in the male as well, corporeally as well as abstractly, for the act of begetting is a kind of giving birth, and surely, man also gives birth to whatever things he may create out of his inner riches'. His rumination here links back to what he said in the previous letter about the similarity between sex and composing a poem.

'And if what is close to you is distant', he urges, 'it means that your own distance reaches out beneath the stars and is very great…'

In Letter Six written in Rome, 23rd December 1903, he talks about the poet's necessity for the right kind of solitude. 'There is only *one* kind of loneliness, and it is great and is not easy to bear… What is required is this: solitariness, great inner solitariness… To be as lonely as we were when we were children'.

In Letter Seven, also written in Rome on 14 May 1904, interestingly, he writes about having copied out, in his own handwriting, one of Franz Xaver Kappus's best poems, a sonnet, and Rilke returns it to Franz as a present 'for I know that it is important and can be a new experience to rediscover a work of one's own in another's handwriting. You must read the poem as if it were a stranger to you: you will feel at the deepest level how very much it is your own'.This is something well worth trying

for every poet, to read one's own poem as if it were somebody else's and in that way distance it from oneself, which enables one to appraise it more objectively.

In Letter Eight, written from Sweden on 12 August 1904, Rilke claims that it is our griefs which, if we properly let them into us, enable us to grow. Wrongly dealt with, 'we may die of them', but we can turn the negatives around, for Rilke believes 'that virtually all our griefs are moments of energy' – 'even sorrow is transitory; the new thing that has supervened has entered into our heart, has occupied its innermost chamber and is no longer even there – it has already entered our blood… We have been changed as a house changes when a guest enters it. We cannot say who has come, we shall perhaps never know. But there are many indications that it is the future that enters into us in this way, in order to be transformed within ourselves, long before it actually occurs. And that is why it is so essential to stay solitary and attentive when in the midst of sorrow'.

He then continues to ruminate upon our destiny. 'We must accept our destiny however far it may chance to take us: everything, including the inconceivable, must be acceptable within it. In the end this is the only valour that is asked of us: to be brave in the face of the most unheard-of, the most marvellous, the most inexplicable things that we may possibly encounter'… 'For if we can imagine each individual destiny as a greater or lesser space, we shall see that few people come to know more than a corner of their room – a window-seat, a strip of carpet to pace up and down. And this gives them security of a kind. And yet, a perilous uncertainty is so very much more human…'

In Letter Nine, also written from Sweden on 4 November 1904, he speaks of the impact of his letters not only on Franz Xaver Kappus but potentially, also, on us. He wonders whether his *letters* really have been of assistance. But he quickly adds: 'You must not answer: Yes, of course they are. Instead, receive them quietly and with not too many thanks, and let us, please, wait and see what may come of them'. He hopes that Franz 'may more and more come to have faith in whatever is hard and in your solitariness even among other people. And for the rest – you must let life have its way with you. Life is right in any event, believe me… As regards your emotions: every emotion that concentrates and exalts you is pure. What is impure is an emotion that takes hold of only one side of your nature, and will in consequence distort it… Whatever makes more of you than you have ever been before, even at your best times, is all that it should be. Every heightened moment is good if it suffuses all your blood, if it is not dark or drunken, if it is transparent and unclouded even in its depths'.

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In the 'Appendix: Fourteen Notes on the Version' to his ***Orpheus: A Version of Rainer Maria Rilke*** (Faber, £12.99 hardback), **Don Paterson** talks very articulately and refreshingly about the difference between translations and versions. This Appendix is a highly interesting, inspiring manual for all would-be translators and version-makers. It analyses humbly, provocatively, originally and amusingly the whole process, with the complications involved, of attempting translations/versions. All translators/version makers/poets are advised to buy this useful little book to keep for reference on their shelves. The following extracts are intended to whet your appetite for the complete piece in the original.

He speaks of the attempted fidelity to the original, its main aim being 'one of stylistic elegance (meaning, essentially, the smooth elimination of syntactic and idiomatic artefacts from the original tongue: a far more subtle project than it sounds)... It glosses the original but does not try to replace it'.

Versions, however, he claims, attempt to be poems in their own right. 'While they have the original to serve as detailed ground-plan and elevation, they are trying to build themselves a robust home in a new country, in its vernacular architecture, with local words for its brick and local music for its mortar'. Concomitant with this, he admits that they will have 'their *own* pattern of error and lyric felicity'.

Paterson reminds us that we must not forget the silences waiting to be translated behind every poem; indeed, Rilke's big claim was that he was trying to say the unsayable. He asserts that versions, in order to be real, 'must first reinhabit that extralinguistic silence the original poem once itself enjoyed – which is to say the poem must make a symbolic exit from language altogether. In this meditative space, its pattern of idea and image is reconsumed by its own strangeness, and when it re-emerges into language rediscovers itself in original speech'.

He advises that then allegiance must shift from the original source poem to your own subjective interpretation of them – to that 'wholly personal mandala of idea and image and spirit that floats free of the poem and resides, for a while, only in that symbolic mentalese that functions in an intercessory role in the line's reincarnation'.

An important point worth listening to is this: 'If you believe words to be indivisibly part-sound and part-sense, then lyric must also unite sense. Reciprocally, the words we choose to convey the most urgent sense automatically tend to exhibit a higher level of musical organisation. Lyric presents an additional strategy besides syntax to bind our words together'.

He continues: 'Poetry is just as interested in what words connote,

however, and the overlap between their connotative haloes, their common feel, is often strongly manifest in shared features of their sounds'.

'Lyric unifies meaning as powerfully as does syntax. Indeed, since lyric is part-music, and music can draw sense from thin air, its use supplies the speech-meaning with precisely that additional music-sense'. He goes on to describe this 'music-sense' as 'intransitive', its meaning therefore 'utterly resistant to paraphrase', and concludes: 'Lyric unites the intransitive atmospheric and emotional sense of music with the transitive and paraphrasable senses of speech. Consequently, . . . one can no more translate a poem than one can a piece of music'. This idea of translation being impossible is echoed (see Introduction to '*Translation as Metamorphosis*' issue of *Agenda*, Vol. 40, No. 4) in William Trask's words: 'Nothing is translateable. Therefore I translate'. Michael Hamburger also remarks in his book of essays, *Testimonies*, that translation is 'a heroic and a foolhardy act at the same time'.

Paterson adds to the above, perhaps, heroic approaches to getting on with the job, with his comment about trying to translate a poem which has no obvious plain sense, 'and its merits exist purely in its music, its "vibe" … it cannot be translated other than through an act of faith. No one has agreed an exchange rate. The results might be terrific, but their "fidelity" is totally unverifiable'.

He proposes that 'fidelity' to a translation is as impossible as a translation itself. Trust is what is important, and versions can at least be 'trustworthy'.

He makes interesting points about rhyme and shows the pitfalls in clinging to a rhymed version or translation, particularly when the target language is poor in rhyme and has different rhyme patterns to the source language. As he avers, in an original poem, the form equals the content or subject matter, and vice versa, since 'form and content both are part of the same dynamic process'.

His warning is worth heeding: 'If the content tries to stay fixed, the rhymes will merely be *inflicted*, and will be a disaster. Rhyme is the insertion of a heavily foregrounded word at the end of the line which must usually be naturalised by everything that precedes it'.

In a version, that fluidity of sense implied by the rhyme 'has to be carefully negotiated. If rhymes are to be used … *then some aspect of the content must change*'. Note the italics. Otherwise, he say, 'translationese' results and this is a recipe for failure. In other words, he bravely states (and many purist translators will disagree) that to imitate both form and content leads to disaster.

He cleverly puts in a nutshell: 'in translation, the integrity of the means justifies the end; in the version, the integrity of the end justifies the means'.

He concedes: ‘the translation and the version can be thought of as separate parts of a linear sequence, the first expert operation, the second intuitive process – and they need not be carried out by the same organism’. Humbly, he adds – and I am sure most of us totally agree: ‘the only incontrovertibly superior qualification is held by those who are both *genuinely* bilingual *and* gifted poets, but this skill-set is mere freakish coincidence’ and examples of those with this ‘superior qualification’ are rare.

He concludes about the effect on a poet of writing versions: what it can both add to and subtract from the poet’s own voice: ‘Versioning allows a poet to disown their own voice and try on another. This voice might fit well, or might fit badly. When the poet returns to reclaim their old voice, it either no longer quite fits, or has altered, having apparently kept some strange company of its own in the meantime. Sometimes it has just disappeared. None of this is ever regretted’.