

CAM BRIDGE RELITERARY VIEW.

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here the struggle with texts so resistant to translation th
language crumbles—let alone one’s understanding of another—proves
that translation is *always* possible, i.e. that a record of total failure still
conveys an extraordinary amount of information about the original
text. Yonatan Mendel, in his essay on the refusal of the Israeli press and
academia to translate certain key Arabic terms, shows this clearly: the
choice *not to translate at all* can be a more divisive tactic than even the
most politically suspect and patronising attempts to find parallels, to
domesticate and to bring alien texts into line.

This was thrown into sharp relief when, in the midst of compiling the
issue, we received a copy of Shearsman’s new anthology of women’s
writing, *Infinite Difference*. This volume, edited by Carrie Etter, includes
four of the writers in this issue: Caroline Bergvall, Marianne Morris,
Anne Blonstein and Emily Critchley. Yet, as vital as we found its pages,
as compelling as we found its poems, the most noteworthy review it
received was a back-page snipe in the *TLs*. There, the authors of *Infinite*

Difference were bottled up, prepared in the formaldehyde of witty analysis and labelled with clipped quotes as charmless specimens. The column's author, J.C., proudly proclaimed an absolute failure to comprehend even the most basic aims of the authors he/she took the time to read, yearning instead for a poetry of "shared experience".

But is that really the sole arbiter of validity? Shared experience or its absence is, of course, a crucial component of translation, as elaborated in the discussion of 'foreignization' vs. 'domestication' on pp. 187–96, and qualified by Mendel's localised analysis. And elsewhere shared experience is central to the fine balancing act employed in lyric poetry, between the personal voice and mediation implicit in the ambiguities of 'song'—this is closely related to the topic taken up by Haun Saussy in his treatment of Jean Métellus. But J.C. appears ignorant of these nuances—surely *is* ignorant of the fact that in certain contexts shared experience might be something actively rejected by the poet, undesired by the reader. On occasion, in an anthology that speaks to the many and various facets of women's writing, shared experience might be the one thing that has to be avoided at all costs. The TLS implicitly and explicitly equates poetry *tout court* with the minute personal worlds of its own literary set; nothing more than a parody of the Movement's more quotidian asides. Sporadic attacks on 'difficulty' are attempts at foreclosure: sops for the reactionary, gags for the rest.

The tacit assumption at play here is that shared experience is something that can be communicated plainly, without the mess and trouble of obscurity or convolution. But the act of translating a poem gives the lie to this narrow view of communicative acts. There is a strong analogy between the frustration the translator finds—a frustration articulated in J.H. Prynne's essay—and that which a reader might find grappling with some of the works that follow. They strain the interpretative organs and crackle as they run through the mind. These, perhaps, are the effects being communicated, not just a report of my day at the funfair, the pignancies of autumn, or the decision to *take each day as it comes*. Clichés are not just familiar sentences—they are familiar patterns of thought, familiar tropes, familiar sentiments.

If shared experience is relevant at all, it must as both presence and absence. The writer must be allowed to fail, allowed to attempt too much.

Letters

Dear *Cambridge Literary Review*,

Of course clarity is not socially determined. How could anyone entertain for a moment such a balmy idea? Clarity is fought for. Have we really lost touch so completely in this place with the central message, the “old romantic wisdom” and its offer of reward: support over phases of transition, consolation for tragedy?

O unbewölkets Leben! / So rein und tief und klar. ---

Not only rein and klar but also tief, all three terms interdetermined, and so possibly at last the yearning is stilled, and the “sweet, good old man” settles to his end. And “thousands of stars”! But in Cambridge there is a preference for the clouds that hide them?

Obscurity is a natural condition of poetry. To fail to acknowledge that is a cowardice and an evasion. It is poetry’s song condition which it always fails to renounce. Listen to any song and it is obvious. It speaks in shadow. It has to because it is not alone, it is not free to speak. As a developed faculty obscurity opens the text to far laterality and distant sightings, it shakes off the fetters of sense and relevance. But why, to what point? Surely the ambition must be to pass beyond the pleasures (and pride) of obscurity into the real world without losing the reach, and then possibly total sense, a kind of paradise.

Why Cambridge should become a fortress of shadow I don’t know, blanketing its discourse in all the mechanisms (symbolical, mystical, etymological, psychological, phenomenological, etc.) of undermining, ever evading the question of transfer. Absolutely refusing to move out of the shadow into light, obstinately generation after generation, coddling itself in the ramifications of the undertext, the secret. But the text

of the world, that we work by, is an evidence, it is in front of us and the only way not to see it is to close your eyes.

As if we could rest there. As if that were any kind of road into death. It is necessary to be heard. *Der alte horcht, der alte schweigt. Der Tod hat sich zu ihm geneigt*. What do we offer the old fellow if he can't hear us at all, and sinks into death in a fog of mere language?

And of course, *if* clarity is ... etc. and all the coercive rigmarole of political claim that follows, from step to step until finally the silent reader is criminalised for existing—surely the dirtiest trick ever played on a poetry-reading public in the western world.

Sincerely,
Peter Riley

ps I'm aware, of course, that it is possible to make out a perfectly good case, from a different angle, for clarity as socially determined. But in that case, if it is going to be a real clarity “social” will have to stop being a dirty word, and the poets may not like that, though probably people would.

[The German is Mayrhofer, via Schubert. 1. Der Sieg (The Victory): O unclouded life! So pure and deep and clear! 2. Nachtstück (Nocturne): The old man hears, the old man is silent. Death is inclined towards him.]

Dear *Cambridge Literary Review*,

I was particularly encouraged by the diverse and useful essays in *CLR2*. I have been involved in an extended poetics essay for *Litteraria Pragensia* over the past few weeks, elaborating from earlier essays like *Confidence in lack* and *iDamage*. They are matters clarified or enhanced by what *CLR* addresses. I'm thinking particularly of Simon Jarvis' eloquent attention to the future of dialectics and the function of the opposition between

truth and certainty and Marina Frasca-Spada attention to David Hume's ideas of abstract reasoning and empirical knowledge. All of this in contrast to your editorial's use of Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method*.

My text, Complexity Manifold 2, begins:

Poetry is part of a planned burglary in which theft from consciousness becomes a necessary minimum. There is no requirement to be sure or coherent in the western sense of dialectic logic and certainty. Non-linearity, lack of sequence and discontinuous narrative are immediately part of the cognition that factures this aesthetics and what it manifests. The notebook is already worn and damaged, but it's not as simple as that. This poetics has a diagrammatic set of leads manifestly at once in difference, overlap and in tangible connection. In unexpanded summary the plan initiates a four part process that is both uneven and non-linear, but which permits fragments of linearity or narrative, of sequence, repetition and incongruity.

There is an incongruity, which may well be celebrated, but may not be often articulated, which is that, for all the discussion of non-linear geometries and thought, some of our peers appear to perpetuate dialectic logic as a necessary tool for their aesthetics. I find this immensely intriguing and wondered what *CLR* thought.

Allen Fisher

NOTE

CLR will indeed offer its thoughts, at cambridgeliteraryreview.org, via the blog. In the meantime we have moved the letters section—provocative as it is—from the back to the front of the volume, in the hope of eliciting a wide range of responses and further inquiries.