

Don Paterson: Excerpt for an interview with Atilla Dosa

*John Burnside said that in Spanish poems the ideas are 'shining through a muddy pool and you can see a glimmer down there, many of which is being lost in translation'. Do you agree?*

Yes, I think it is probably true, but that's true for everything in translation. In any real poem you *only* have a glimmer of the truth, and that's the first thing which is likely to go in translation. Because, for me at least, much of the truth in poetry resides on the surface of the language and not in the depths. The surface is the one that's impossible to translate, because those things of which we're most proud as poets depends wholly on idiomatic circumstances, tiny acoustic resonances, tiny shades of meaning and association, that can have no direct equivalent in the host language. Therefore I'm very sceptical about the possibilities of translation. But I think there are various subterfuges, and those subterfuges have to change, depending on the poet you translate. You must be prepared to change them from one poem to the next poem, from one line to the next line. Your strategy has to be absolutely fluid, if your trying to catch the snake of a wholly subjective truth. Though I think the whole process is impossibly subjective, and actually that has to be the premise. There's no method, no operation, just a messy procedure, but that's what writing any kind of poem should feel like, so at least the translation has a better chance of being a real poem that way. In some poets like Machado or Borges the ideas come through partly because of the absolute clarity of thought, and partly because so many of the concerns of their poems are primarily philosophical, and there's a clear argumentative structure, so at least these *are* things for which you can find an analogue. But particular images, etymological histories ... You can *never* find an equivalent; it's a waste of time even looking for them. You just have to find something else which might have the same *effect* on the reader in the host tongue, which might be a very different thing. It's really interesting. I'm trying to version

Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, which is a very different kind of poetry, and finding that so much of what I thought I'd learnt in the process of versioning the Machado poems is absolutely useless when it comes to Rilke. So you learn a lot. Or maybe nothing.

*Is that why you call poems in The Eyes 'versions'?*

Certainly. Some of them are quite close, some of them are pretty far away, and some don't exist in the original text at all. There are a couple of poems in the book that Machado didn't write, ones that I just threw in because that voice was coming through at the time. I wouldn't say it was ... enigmatic dictation or anything like that, they just wouldn't have belonged in my own book.

*Apparently, then you don't agree with Edwin Morgan, who says that everything can be translated...*

I *always* agree with Edwin Morgan, because he's so clever and usually turns out to be right anyway, so it saves time. [Laughs.] It depends on what you mean, doesn't it? Everything is translatable, of course it is, but into what? Everything can find an incarnation in another culture and in another language, but it's a different, new one. I believe that all the old truths are the same as the new truths and they just have to find their incarnation in the culture of the age, so they can be useful again. Similarly *a* truth in a language could conceivably be represented in another. But the whole process is so subjective that you can't possibly verify it. If it works for the reader - that's the only test that exists. But Eddie is your perfect translator. He translated *Gilgamesh*. Everyone else who translates *Gilgamesh* work from cribs, but Eddie sits down with an Akkadian grammar [laughs]. Now *that's* serious. And when he translates from the Hungarian, he uses his own crib. That's *serious* translation, so you have to respect that. At the same time, I think there might conceivably be only two stages of grace in translation: either you are

bilingual and you know both languages, or you know next to nothing. And if you know next to nothing, at least you approach the whole project with an utterly resigned humility... [Laughs.] It's just not a bad approach. Anything in the middle, a little knowledge - might be very dangerous. As you can see when you compare, as I always have to, several literal cribs of the original poem written by people who are very good translators, and know the language intimately - they are *never* the same. I mean they are *wildly* different. And you think: if *these* guys can't agree on the meaning of a line, well, what can you say?

*Just a few days ago, in his Edinburgh Lecture Alastair Reid defined translation as 'coming up with the same poem in another linguistic form'. Do you agree?*

No, I don't agree that it is possible. Alastair Reid is one of my favourite translators in the whole world, but I don't think I can accept that. I have one of Alastair's versions blu-tacked next to my computer, a translation of Borges, and it's just exquisite. But I think he's wrong. A word in poem is a unique nexus of different linguistic and acoustic and etymological and semantic strands, and it exists as a sort of culture-specific node, and not as a set of co-ordinates that can be imported into another tongue. It sits there like a painting in its paint. I know that as a poet, because as I've said, those things that I'm most proud of in a poem depend on the most vestigial, tiny chimes of music and sense. Basically, these are the things that you read as your biggest success: not the great ideas, but those tiny things that make a good line. It's like trying to translate a piece of music, which is a meaningless thing: it is what it is what it is. If you do something with it, it becomes something else. That's fine. If we accept Alastair's definition we'd be talking about translation as an *operation*. And it can't be. If it's going to be a poem, it has to be a *process*, and this has to be completed by a poet. There are some fantastically bad translations of Rilke, but the best ones are in a sense the worst, because they translate him literally. It's not in English, it's in some kind of horrific translationese, yet something sometimes comes through that's lost in

most of the versified versions. But in order for that to become a poem, there has to be poet. A lot of people, who are translators and not poets, try and versify poems. But you can't write a poem if you're not a poet; you have no sense of how to balance the demands of form and sense and music or indeed the complexity of the calculations involved. You can't fix the cistern if you're not a plumber. The poem is at the complete mercy of the relative skills of the poet writing in the new language, which means that in a project like the Machado you have to approach the poem with some humility. Occasionally, you see these lovely pairings, where you get Philippe Jaccottet translated by Derek Mahon or whatever. They are two heavyweights, you know. You can't judge how close the original and the translation are, but at least you know that they are equivalent talents, they are equivalent literary sensibilities - and *something* good is going to come out of it, because it was also a project born out of a simple enthusiasm.

*What's the difference between the composition of music and the composition of poetry?*

They are very similar, except in the composition of music what you are composing is a blueprint for a performance, and when you are composing a poem it is the performance itself. There is no halfway stage in poetry: your writing is the performance. So that's the main difference, and that's why music is better, I think. Despite the fact that in music the blueprint consists of nothing but a code (dots on a piece of paper), you can verify instantly that Bach, for example, is a vastly superior talent, and you can *see* it by the dots on the page. It's *instantly* verifiable, whereas poetry is very subjective. People can still indulge the fantasy that they are Shakespeare or Milton, because there's no code. You can't do that with Bach. You look at the page and it's absolutely beautiful, just looking at it. Of course, there are grey areas in music as well, but it can be coded because of the stable nature of its material, and even with the stuff that can't be satisfactorily coded, like the mad dance music I listen to these days - it works in pure vibration and their real relationships to one another, relationships they would still have

even if we weren't in the universe. It's a superior art form – a purer art form – to poetry. Poetry is probably the most interesting thing you can do with your consciousness alone, but music goes far deeper into the spirit. When composers take back a line from a dream, and write it down, and wake up in the morning - the line is still beautiful. But if you take back a poem from your dream, and you write it down, when you wake up in the morning it's always rubbish ... poetry doesn't pay its line as deep. Music goes down right through under the threshold of the unconscious and unites the spirit in a way that poetry can't, I think. But in terms of a process - for me, music and poetry are almost identical, which is to do with the relationship between structure and content - they're the same thing in music, and the poem aspires to that, I think - and to do with embellishment, with making sure that every single thing that goes into a poem has some component of forward motion. You can't put in a line just for the sake of pure decoration: it is always, even if very quietly, advancing the plot. So from that point of view, I think there are useful analogies. But the trouble with the whole discussion of poetry is that drowns in a sea of false analogy. We often say: oh, it's just like music, or song, it's just like cinema. Poetry is not like any of these things, although you can elucidate the process of writing by looking at the way other things that are composed. But poetry's just like poetry.

*Once you described poetry as 'the music of consciousness'. What does it mean?*

It wasn't to pay it a particularly big compliment. It was really to describe the limitations of poetry. That is not to say it doesn't affect the unconscious, but it doesn't resonate directly. It resonates mostly sympathetically, at a symbolic level, not on the level of literal vibration, which is how music works. Music can touch the strings of you, poetry has to really work to make the air sing around them. Music affects your whole being, and it shakes you up physically. It makes you dance. 8hz will make your damn *eyeballs* vibrate. Poetry isn't quite like that, it's made a clever compromise between its semantic and physical properties. It

proposes a sort of heretical confusion between sound and sense, it behaves as if they were the same thing; it unites music and language, and we write like that, with the brain leading the ear one minute and the ear leading the brain the next. It's trying to do this impossible thing: uniting the body and brain, the beast and the angel. It is trying to bring these things together, using our unconscious musical intuitions to make up the shortfall between what language can normally articulate, and the real range of our experience and feelings in the world. Metaphor, the dialogue of comparison, gets us so far, attending to the music of words a little further. Maybe that's the best thing you could say about poetry.

*You speak with a Scottish accent, you use the occasional Scots and Gaelic words, and you have written poems in Scots (for example 'Homesick Paterson'). Do you see yourself as a Scottish poet? I know there are two problematic terms involved...*

Well, it comes up, you now. No, I wouldn't mind if someone called me a Scottish poet. It's absolutely accurate, it's one of the ways you might fairly be described - male, Dundonian, heterosexual, anarcho-Buddhist, whatever. But I don't *feel* Scottish. One of the reasons why I wanted to move back to Scotland was that I didn't want to feel Scottish any more. I came back here because I was sick of the sound of my own accent, and this is the only place where you don't hear it. Whereas in London, you know, I did feel like a Scottish poet. Here, no, I don't. It's a nice thing: you become totally unselfconscious about your Scottishness. So if somebody asks you that kind of question in Scotland, it's like: how does it feel to have toenails? 'You know, I don't think about it very much.' [Laughs.]

*Kathleen Jamie says that there's a group of poets based in Fife and St Andrews to whom their 'northernness' or 'marginalness' rather than their Scottishness matters. Would you include yourself in this group?*

Yeah, it's a spiritual thing, a kind of Magnetic North trip. A lot of us that share those concerns in their writing, for some reason, came to live in this part of the world. I don't know why, it's very odd... I think we are all very different kinds of poets, but it is a strand that runs through our work, Robert, Kath, Burnside, John Glenday, almost a Northern European spiritual thing, Calvin meets the Dao, I don't know ... I'm too close to it to understand it.

*Your poem 'Profession of Faith' is included in Scottish Religious Poetry: An Anthology (edited by Meg Bateman, Robert Crawford and James McGonigal in 2000). How important is your religious background to you?*

It is important but not in a good way. I'm not religious, I don't have a religious faith. I don't believe in anything supernatural. But partly because I was brought up a Calvinist, sort of, I had to reject it by a very circuitous route. I rejected it by initially getting *very* religious in my teens, and joined the Pentecostal Church, which is fairly extreme. Then I got very anti-Christian for a while. But it's not like that any more; hopefully I've gone beyond that.

*And Buddhism?*

Yes, Buddhism, other eastern philosophies ... The stuff that has the most resonance and relevance for me has been the Buddhist stuff, though I'm not a Buddhist. I'm convinced by the truth of the dharma as, firstly, a psychological description of the human condition, and as a tool for correcting the worst things about it, and I tend to gravitate towards those things in Western literature that reflect similar concerns - with the present moment, with the paradox of consciousness. Cioran and Machado and Rilke and Borges maybe more than anyone, actually.

*In The Eyes your poems are arranged in alphabetical order, whereas in God's Gift to Women (1997) the titles take the names of railway line stations...*

Nobody noticed that, you're the first person to mention that! [Laughs.] I've had people say: 'it's a very interesting sequence the poems are in...' The alphabet's the best way to randomise a sequence. I think the sequence in which the poems occur in *God's Gift to Women* is the sequence of the stations as you would find them on the old Dundee-Newtyle line. So it's a geographical sequence, but I don't know if it works particularly well, to be honest with you. I think the trouble with sequences is that you'll always find yourself writing two or three poems for no other reason than your contractual obligation to complete the damn sequence, and they're probably not very good, because you wouldn't have written them otherwise. So there are two or three poems in the book that I wish I really hadn't written. I've no idea. I'm afraid to read them again.

*Well, I wanted to ask how important is order to you in a metaphysical or social sense?*

That's a huge one! [Laughs.] I think it's absolutely crucial. I think art tends to reveal a secret order: it's not necessarily a hierarchical order, and it's not necessarily a progressive sequence. But poetry is very good at revealing the code of an event or a situation. The point with the Machado book was actually to demonstrate that there *was* no order, so what I wanted to say suggest was that where these matters are concerned, the deeper spiritual ones, it's inappropriate to talk in terms of a progression. Social orders are just problematic. There are certain situations in one's life where democracy should *not* be a guiding principle and there are others where it must be. I think people are crazy when they assert that democracy is a template to which all sorts of order should aspire. You have to admit the complexity of a system, and once you've done that, certain eventualities are met by this strategy, while others are met by that. You should try not to simplify it, you've got to be fluid.

*Poetry is taught in Creative Writing workshops at many Western universities, including St Andrews. It seems to suggest that poetry is a craft or skill that can be acquired in a specific university course that you pay for...*

That's right. It is certainly a craft that could be acquired, but it's useless unless you have talent as a poet. So if you don't have a talent, there's no point in polishing your craft, there's no point in being a competent versifier. On the other hand, you can have people with talent - there's nothing more rewarding than seeing them getting the craft right, and the craft is the difference between being able to make a poem or not. But the idea of folk leaving all these courses as formally accredited poets ... ugh. When I was much younger, I remember Douglas [Dunn] always quoting Frost, saying that 'poet' is a praise word, it's for other people to call you a poet. I dunno if I buy that or not, but at least it suggests there should be a bit of humility involved. But if there is a shamanistic side to the calling ... well, then there can be too many poets. It would make the office redundant. You can't have lots of shamans in a community. That's silly. They could command no attention, no silence. In Canada they started this 'Poets Against The War' movement: I think they got up to about thirteen hundred poets against the war... It renders the designation 'poet' completely meaningless. A *poem* against the war, maybe. Just one great poem would have made a lot more difference. But how would we ever hear it, with twelve hundred and ninety-nine poets drowning it out? No one will listen to a thousand poets. But they might to one poem. Not that *I* wrote it, god only knows.

*Isn't there a certain degree of irony in that having left school at the age of sixteen and having acquired your knowledge in public libraries, you teach now at a famous university?*

Yeah, it's uncomfortable if I stop and think about it. When I was younger I was

quite ... *detained* by the fact that I didn't go to a university. But no, I don't think it's a big deal any more. I really wish I *had* gone, it would have saved me a lot of time: depending on who your teachers are - well, no, I guess, you find your teachers anyway. I regret it, but because I wanted to be a musician and play my guitar, I didn't have time. And you do feel stupid, having railed against the academy for so long ... But it's taken a while to understand it. St Andrews has historically always been one, but the academy is a real refuge for poets now. We should be intensely grateful. It's the one place these days they can be given something useful to do.

*It's a nice thing, though, that you can become an erudite poet without having to go through university education...*

No, it's just a two edged thing. The nice thing is that you take your own route through it, and you end up being fairly at home in some very diverse disciplines. The great cost is that you read quite haphazardly, and there are terrible omissions in your reading, but you *have* read a whole bunch of stuff that you wouldn't have read if you'd gone to university. You know books that other people don't know, because they're not in the canon or their own specialism. Where you're patchy is all the core stuff that you should have read. I still try to catch up. But at the very least, you think, you have an unusual pattern of ignorance ...

*In one of his essays John Burnside has characterised poetry 'as an instrument and a discipline, a means by which I might discover what I knew about myself and the world', and you have also described music and poetry as 'disciplines'. Did you mean it in a similar sense?*

Yeah, in a very similar sense. They are disciplines because they are processes, not operations. Poetry is a discipline: it is a kind of study which you sign up for very

early on in life, when you understand that it is going to be an ongoing education. True disciplines can't be completed. You have to maintain them and you have to continue to study them, because they are open-ended. It is important to stress that - partly because if you don't, a lot of people will continue to sign up, not realising there *is* a discipline. They would hate the connotations of the word. I remember sitting with Sean O'Brien in a pub once. We were both knackered from a day's writing, in which all either of us had accomplished was scrubbing out one line we'd written the day before. He said 'Poetry, Don, is *dead hard*.' With a kind of aphoristic intensity. It wasn't much of an aphorism but I thought aye, you're damn right there. But there has to be that disciplined structure if you're going to bring anything home worth the winning. Another thing Sean said that night was that 'poetry was the best game in the world'. The trick is to be in love with poetry, to stay in love with it, and then it doesn't feel like work.

St Andrews

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