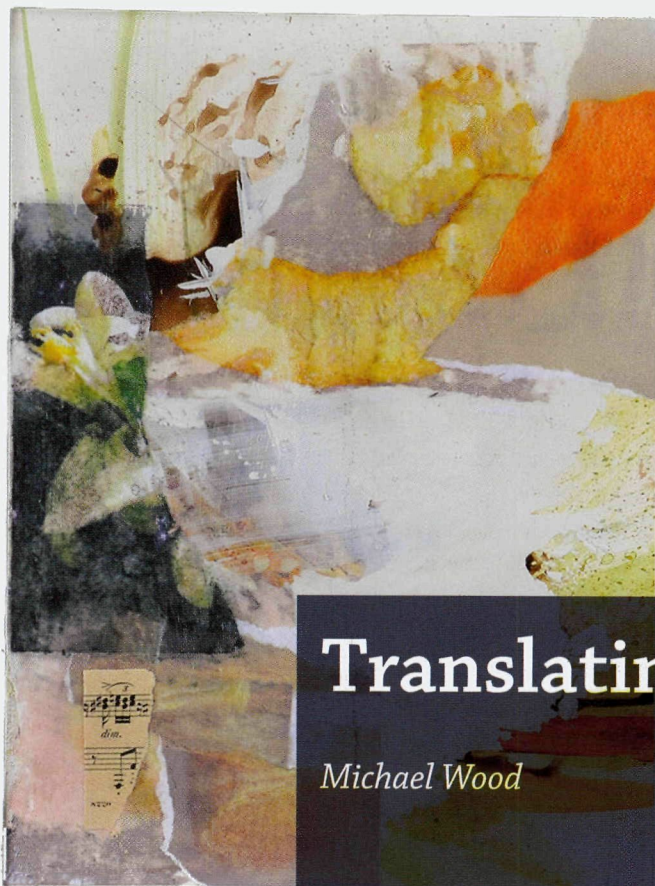




Translating Rilke

Michael Wood

Translating turns out to be only a more intense and demanding form of what we do whenever we read. – J. M. Coetzee

No literary work corresponds more closely than Rilke's to the definition Barbara Cassin offers of the untranslatable: "ce qu'on ne cesse pas de (ne pas) traduire" (what one keeps on [not] translating). By the combined count of William Gass's book, J. M. Coetzee's additions, and the Princeton University Library catalog, there seem to be at least twenty-four different translations into English of the *Duino Elegies* alone. Of other works by Rilke, including selections, there have been ten new translations since 2000. What drives this activity? What makes new translators so unhappy with their predecessors' work? Martyn Crucefix puts the matter well in his note to a new version. He was asked to read the ninth elegy in public and "felt uncomfortable with the available translations." Others have felt uncomfortable for other reasons. This discomfort is not exactly a complaint, or doesn't have to be. It represents

a sense of loss that one would like to repair, and can't. Or can, but only partially. What's to be done, or what are we doing?

My first answer is a negative recommendation. Let's not reach for the ineffable, the notion of something mystically secreted in Rilke's language and not available anywhere else. As David Bellos remarks, "everything is effable," and the untranslatable does not exist in a literal sense. We can always translate, however badly or wildly. Barbara Cassin says the same before arriving at the definition I quoted above: "parler d'intraduisibles n'implique nullement que les termes en question . . . ne soient pas traduits et ne puissent pas l'être" (to speak of untranslatables in no way implies that the terms in question . . . are not and cannot be translated). But Bellos does suggest that poetry in general, and Rilke in particular, are special cases. He quotes the opening lines of the first *Duino Elegy*:

ABOVE London Noe, *Dance the Orange*, based on Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, (mixed media), reproduced courtesy of the artist.

Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn
aus der Engel Ordnungen?
und gesetzt selbst es nähme
einer mich plötzlich ans Herz:
ich verginge von seinem
stärkeren Dasein

He goes on to say that no translation can capture what these lines mean for him; they are part of his past, and what they say to him cannot be shared: “no English translation can have the same weight or familiarity or perfection or mystery—nor can any paraphrase in German.” He adds, “What cannot be shared can’t be translated, obviously. But that doesn’t make the poem untranslatable for anyone else.” And he gives us an English version:

Who, if I cried, would hear me among the
angel’s hierarchies?
And even if one would take me suddenly
to his heart
I would die of his stronger existence.

He comments, “I might have translated the lines that way when I was learning German by learning Rilke. The English says pretty much what the German says. Is it poetry? . . . This one wasn’t done by a poet or a translator. It was done (with a little help from a friend) by a machine translation service available for free on the Internet.” There is a fine challenge here. Let’s look at what some poets and translators have offered.

Who, if I shouted, among the hierarchy of
angels
would hear me? And supposing one of them
took me suddenly to his heart, I would perish
before his stronger existence. [MacIntyre]

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among
the angels’
hierarchies? and even if one of them
pressed me
suddenly against his heart: I would be
consumed
in that overwhelming existence. [Mitchell]

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among
the ranks
of the angels? Even if one of them clasped me

suddenly to his heart, I’d wither in the face
of his more fierce existence. [Crucefix]

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among
the orders
of Angels? and even if one should suddenly
hold me to his heart I would fade back,
touching
his intenser existence. [Ranson]

The machine, understandably, doesn’t get the difference between “cries” and “cries out,” but then some human translators don’t get it either. MacIntyre’s “shouted” seems pretty far from the feeling of the German, even if etymologically and phonologically the notion of a shriek lurks there (and Norris and Keele do opt for “screamed”). What I find impressive is that everyone, including the machine, respects the word order of the opening. Most translators do—the two exceptions I have seen are A. Poulin and Gary Miranda. More problematically, everyone translates *Dasein* as “existence.” Shouldn’t we be looking for something more inventive here? Beyond that, we can take our pick among “would take,” “took,” “pressed,” “clasped” “should . . . hold”; among “die,” “perish,” “be consumed,” “wither,” “fade back”; among “stronger” (twice), “overwhelming,” “more fierce,” “intenser.” And as we make these choices, or feel we can’t make them, we begin to sense something of the genuine disappointments of translation, our reasons for keeping on, for searching not for a final or better version but something else, something closer to a sharing of what can’t be shared.

We don’t have to translate—Rilke or anyone else. We can read him in German or get along without him. But there is a temptation to translate that is not a need or a requirement but a mode of curiosity. What we want to know is what our language can do with the intimate structures and suggestions of another language. And here is a second answer to our question. Quite often we are not translating writers but languages. Malarmé puts it with impeccable, ironic concision, evoking the continuing legacy of the lesson of Babel: “les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs.” Languages are imperfect because there is more than one of them. This is why we so often feel that our problem is not Rilke but German.

As we make these choices, or feel we can’t make them, we begin to sense something of the genuine disappointments of translation, our reasons for keeping on, for searching not for a final or better version but something else, something closer to a sharing of what can’t be shared.

A good case to study here is the (relatively) early poem “The Swan.” Take Rilke’s definition of dying:

dieses Nichtmehrfassen / jenes
Grunds, auf dem wir täglich stehn

to let go, no longer feel / the solid
ground we stand on every day
[Mitchell]

this abandonment / of the ground
on which we daily stand [Cadorna]

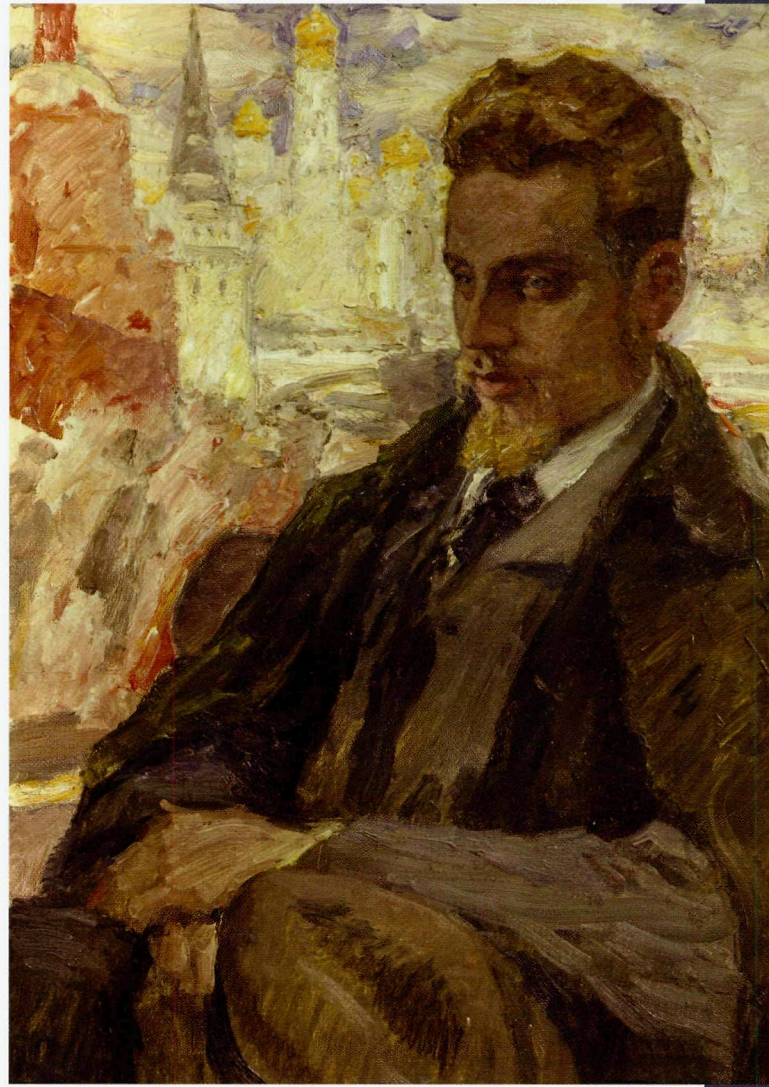
this no longer keeping hold / of the
same ground we stand on every day
[Sutherland]

Sutherland finds an English equivalent for the German verbal noun, and it does, to my ear, feel less contorted than the other choices. Leishman, interestingly, goes to town on this effect, perhaps thereby turning translation into commentary: “that no more hold-providing / by the ground we daily trusted to.” Both *fassen* and *Grund* have additional meanings quite different from “keeping hold” and “solid ground,” “grasp” and “reason,” for example, and there ought to be something one could do with the other sense of “ground.” Even the word *stehn* has for me a curious ambiguity that only lots of invention could get across in another language: stand physically on the literal earth, but also stand up, endure, continue, stand for something—as in the phrase “stand one’s ground,” for example, or the idiom “stand by,” so brilliantly used by Geoffrey Hill in *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Peguy*:

Must men stand by what they write
as by their camp-beds or their weaponry
or shell-shocked comrades . . . ?

Good instances of similar difficulties and shortfalls arise with translations of the end of the fourth *Duino Elegy*. Here are two recent published versions and my own rough sketch.

Mörder sind
leicht einzusehen. Aber dies: den Tod,



den ganzen Tod, noch *vor* dem Leben so
sanft zu enthalten und nicht böse zu sein,
ist unbeschreiblich.

. . . Murderers are easy to understand.

But this –
to be so possessed by death, the whole of
death,
even before life has really begun – to take in
the fact, but gently, so as not to refuse in
anger –
is unspeakable. [Crucefix]

Murderers are easy
to understand. But death, entire death:
to take it in so meekly, gently, even
before the start of life, and feel no anger,
that is unspeakable. [Ranson]

Murderers
are easy to understand. But this: to
accept death itself,

ABOVE Leonid Osipovic
Pasternak (1862–1945),
Rilke in Moscow, ca. 1930
(oil on canvas) / Private
Collection / The Bridgeman
Art Library.

death entire, even before life begins, so very gently and not lose patience or temper, cannot be described. [Wood]

We all have “understand” for *einsehen*, but why can’t we do better? The German verb literally has us seeing into the murderer’s mind. Some translators have tried to get this effect, but only by going perhaps too far: “A murderer’s mind is easy to understand” (Miranda), “minds of murderers are easily divined” (Leishman/Spender), “murderers are easily recognized” (Garmey/Wilson). The last attempt seems just wrong, but any attempt here is interesting. My choice of “patience or temper” is perhaps interpretation rather than translation, an attempt to cram meanings into a line rather than find a word that will do the work. However, *böse* is a genuine untranslatable in Cassin’s sense. It means “angry” but also “evil,” “naughty,” “petulant.” One uses the word of Satan and of misbehaving children. Of course Rilke wants the range of meanings; wants us to think of the nursery and somewhere in our minds remember Satan.

And then there is the last line. Rilke’s *ist unbeschreiblich* is very simple and I think deliberately awkward. It really doesn’t mean unspeakable, especially in that word’s most commonly accepted English usage. Various translators (Lamont, Garmey/Wilson, Miranda, Leishman/Spender, Poulin) go for “beyond description.” Hunter has “defies understanding”; Bridgwater has “is impossible.” Snow chooses the quite literal “is indescribable.” This is good but somehow slightly more emphatic than the helpless German. I don’t think “cannot be described” is great, but I had a sense of getting somewhere—and I found I was echoing Norris and Keele.

And then—third answer to our initial question—it is Rilke we are translating, and not just the German language. Poetry and translation represent precisely the meeting ground of *langue et parole*, the resources of language and the individual utterance. A perfect test case here—there are so many in Rilke but one must choose—is the thirteenth of the second set of *Sonnets to Orpheus*.

Sei allem Abschied voran, als wäre er
hinter
dir, wie der Winter, der eben geht.
Denn unter Wintern ist einer so endlos
Winter,

dass, überwinternd, dein Herz überhaupt
übersteht.

Sei immer tot in Eurydike –, singender
steige,
preisender steige zurück in den reinen
Bezug.
Hier, unter Schwindenden, sei, im Reiche der
Neige,
sei ein klingendes Glas, das sich im Klang
schon zerschlug.

Sei – und wisse zugleich des Nicht-Seins
Bedingung,
den unendlichen Grund deiner innigen
Schwingung,
dass du sie völlig vollziehst dieses einzige
Mal.

Zu dem gebrauchten sowohl, wie zum
dumpfen und stummen
Vorrat der vollen Natur, den unsäglichen
Summen,
zähle dich jubelnd hinzu und vernichte
die Zahl.



Keep ahead of all parting, as if it were
behind
you, like the winter that is just now passed.
In winters you are so endlessly winter, you
find
that, getting through winter, your heart on
the whole will last.

Be ever dead in Eurydice – arise singing
with greater praise, rise again to the pure
relation.
Among the fleeting, in the realm of
declination,
be a resonant glass that shatters while it
is ringing.

Be – at the same time, know the terms of
negation,
the infinite basis of your fervent vibration,
that you may completely complete it this
one time.

To teeming nature’s store of used, as of

There is a temptation to translate that is not a need or a requirement but a mode of curiosity. What we want to know is what our language can do with the intimate structures and suggestions of another language.

dumb
and moldy things, to that uncountable
count,
add yourself joyously, and annul the
amount. [MacIntyre]



Be ahead of all parting, as though it already
were
behind you, like the winter that has just
gone by.
For among these winters there is one so
endlessly winter
that only by wintering through it will your
heart survive.

Be forever dead in Eurydice – more gladly
arise
into the seamless life proclaimed in your
song.
Here, in the realm of decline, among
momentary days,
be the crystal cup that shattered even as it
rang.

Be – and yet know the great void where all
things begin,
the infinite source of your own most intense
vibration,
so that, this once, you may give it your
perfect assent.

To all that is used-up, and to all the muffled
and dumb
creatures in the world's full reserve, the
unsayable sums,
joyfully add yourself, and cancel the count.
[Mitchell]



Be ahead of all leaving as though it were
behind you, like the winter as it parts,
for among winters is one so endlessly winter
only through overwintering can your heart
survive. Be dead forever in Eurydice –
rise singing, praising back to pure relation.
Be here among the vanished; near the tree
of death, be ringing glass that shatters even

as it rings. Know conditions of nonbeing,
the endless ground of your vibration down
in you: one day you'll be fully fulfilled.

And to full nature's store of speechless
things,
of worn and everything that's dumb and
muffled,
joyfully add yourself – and end the count.
[Barnstone]



Be ahead of all parting as though you found
it behind
you, like this winter whose passing begins.
For among winters one is so endlessly
winter
that overwintering it the heart also lives.

Be ever dead in Eurydice – climb with more
singing,
climb with more praising back into pure
relation.
Here, among dwindling, be: in the realm of
declining
be a ringing glass shattered in air's oscillation.

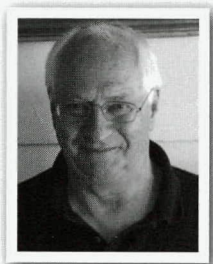
Be – and know also non-being: its one
condition,
the infinite causes of your inner vibration,
so that this time you fulfill it, and it is content.

To nature reserves of the functional, to the
dumb
and to the dull, to the whole unspeakable
sum,
add yourself, jubilant, and then annul the
amount. [Sutherland]



Anticipate all parting – as if it were
behind you already like the winter passed by.
For beneath winters lies one infinite winter
and only by wintering out can your heart
survive.

Be forever dead in Eurydice – by singing
ascend
and give praise, rise into the pure relation.



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(1990), *The Magician's
Doubts* (1994), *Children of
Silence* (1998), *The Road
to Delphi* (2003), *Literature
and the Taste of Knowledge*
(2005), and *Yeats and
Violence* (2010).

Here among fading things in a realm of
decline,
be a ringing glass shattered by its own
sound.

Be – and know the state of Not-Being too,
that infinite source of your innermost
vibration –
so you carry it this once to completion.

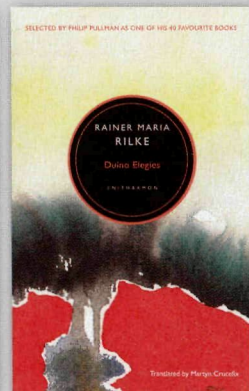
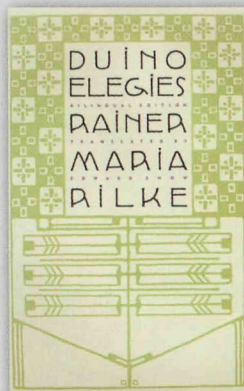
To the used-up – to all Nature's musty and
mute,
its brimming storehouse, its inexpressible
sum –
joyously add yourself and the account's
done. [Crucefix]

Here we really have Rilke's German, with its wonderful mixture of abstraction and immediacy (from *Nicht-Sein* to whatever is *dumpf* and *stumm*), its inventions and deviations of meaning. There is winter as a noun (twice), as an adjective, and as part of a new verb, in quick succession. There is the obscure and lofty "pure relation." Relation to what, we ask, missing the point. If it were a relation to something it wouldn't be pure. But if it's a relation to nothing is it still a relation? It is in Rilke.

All but one of these translators have "part-ing" for *Abschied*—it's a good word and keeps the German's sense of separation. I have a fondness for "farewell" in this context—or rather the plural "Be ahead of all farewells"—since *Abschied* involves the idea of saying goodbye, taking leave as well as leaving. But then such a thought, added to all the interesting decisions that run through these five versions of the sonnet, suggests a view of translation as a realm of opportunities as well as defeat. Every defeat, if it's subtle and intimate enough, creates a new opportunity. Possibility goes hand in hand with impossibility here. There are always lots of choices for translators, and what you can't do is really interesting only in relation to what you can. This is also true of poets and novelists. If you couldn't get fairly close to what you were after, it wouldn't matter how far you fell short of perfection.

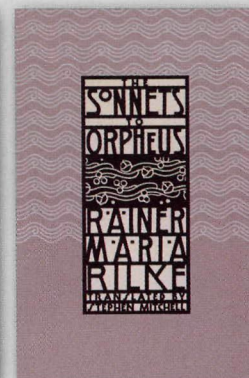
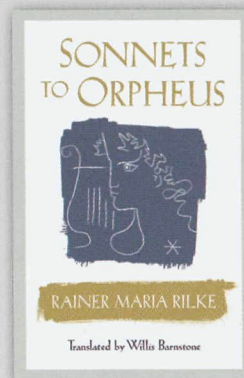
Princeton University

TRANSLATIONS DISCUSSED



Duino Elegies

- Patrick Bridgwater (Menard Press, 1999)
- Martyn Crucefix (Enitharmon Press, 2006)
- Stephen Garney & Jay Wilson (Harper & Row, 1972)
- Robert Hunter (Hulogos, 1977)
- J. B. Leishman & Stephen Spender (Hogarth Press, 1939)
- C. F. MacIntyre (University of California Press, 1961)
- Gary Miranda (Azul Editions, 1996)
- Leslie Norris & Alan Keele (Camden House, 1993)
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Sonnets to Orpheus and other editions

- Willis Barnstone (Shambala, 2004)
- Joseph Cadorna (Copper Canyon, 2014)
- Martyn Crucefix (Enitharmon, 2012)
- Jessie Lamont (Fine Press, 1945)
- J. B. Leishman (Hogarth Press, 1964)
- C. F. MacIntyre (University of California Press, 1960)
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