'*Subrisio Saltat.*':

Translating the acrobat in Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*

> Acrobatics are at work whenever it is a question of making the impossible look like mere gentle exercise. So it is not enough to walk on the tightrope and execute the *salto mortale* at great height. The acrobat's crucial message to the world lies in the smile with which he bows at the end of his performance.[1]

Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, completed in 1922, contain very few elements that are not German – occasional French and Italian place names, classical references, the figure of 'Madame Lamort'. Of the untranslated elements in modernist poetry that are the focus of this volume, the *Duino Elegies* offer only scant examples: their idiom, while it has been described as 'cryptic'[2] and 'elevated',[3] is thoroughly German, and almost never involves the juxtaposition of different linguistic codes. Yet through their preoccupation with speaking, naming, the sayable, and the voice, the *Elegies* do circle

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[1] 'Akrobatik ist überall im Spiel, wo es darum geht, das Unmögliche wie eine leichte Übung erscheinen zu lassen. Es genügt also nicht, auf dem Seil zu gehen und in der Höhe den salto mortale zu schlagen. Die entscheidende Botschaft des Akrobaten an die Mitwelt liegt in dem Lächeln, mit dem er sich nach dem Auftritt verbeugt'.
Peter Sloterdijk, *Du musst dein Leben ändern: Über Anthropotechnik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009, p. 307. The translation is my own (CND).

[2] Karen Leeder, introduction to Rainer Maria Rilke: *Duino Elegies*, trans. by Martyn Crucefix. London: Enitharmon, 2006, p. 13.

[3] Helen Bridge, 'Duino Elegies: A New Translation with Parallel Text and Commentary (by Martyn Crucefix); Sonnets to Orpheus by (M. D. Herter Norton); Orpheus: A Version of Rilke's Sonette an Orpheus (by Don Paterson),' (review), *Translation and Literature* 16:2 (2007), 258-65 (here 260).

around intractable problems of language and translatability. At the level of composition they may feature few instances of non-translation, but at the thematic level they persistently engage the question of how experience itself – particularly the experience of loss – may or may not be translated into language and poetic expression.

Examining a rare moment of non-German in the *Duino Elegies* – '*Subrisio Saltat.*', the smile of the acrobat in the fifth elegy – I propose to trace its passage through the apparatuses of commentary, interpretation, and translation that have grown up around this work. Within the text, the 'foreign body' of '*Subrisio Saltat.*' has a clearly imaginable function: it appears as an ornate inscription on an urn. This image is immediately preceded by a passage which describes an acrobat performing, heart racing, soles burning, tears shooting into his eyes, but still blindly smiling. The smiling acrobat of the fifth elegy is one of a procession of figures – angels, lovers, dolls, animals – who populate the elegies; he belongs to a troupe of street acrobats, drawn after Pablo Picasso's 1905 painting *Les saltimbanques*.[4] In what follows, I compare several English translations of the *Elegies*, focussing on their handling of the passage in which '*Subrisio saltat.*' occurs, with a view to identifying the different readings and approaches that underlie the various solutions. Alongside the discussion of the English translations, I also refer to the recently published first Irish-language version by Máire Mhac an tSaoi,[5] noting the implications for translation of the wider linguistic gulf between Irish and German. A focussed comparative analysis of multiple translations, concentrating on a relatively brief moment of text, opens out

[4] Pablo Picasso: Family of Saltimbanques (1905). National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

[5] Rainer Maria Rilke: *Marbhnaí Duino*, translated into Irish by Máire Mhac an tSaoi. Indreabhán: Leabhar Breac, 2013.

onto the possibility that translation is itself a theme of the *Elegies*. Examining the relationship between Rilke's poem and Picasso's painting, I discuss the extent to which the acrobat passages in the fifth elegy constitute a particular kind of translation – not between one language and another, but a translation from the visual to the verbal medium. Within the poem, the acrobat's smile itself furthermore 'translates', in the sense of transforms, experience into form, thereby engaging the crucial question of *Verwandlung*, transformation from visible to invisible and from transient to enduring, that the *Elegies* relentlessly pursue. The discussion is ultimately concerned with the analogies between the difficult task of translating this poetry from one language into another and the difficulties that inhere in the translation of experience into (any) language. These latter difficulties are, of course, among the foremost concerns of the *Duino Elegies*.

Translating poetry: a 'ludicrous enterprise'

In a seminar on translating Rilke held at Oxford in May 2013, the Scottish poet Don Paterson, whose *Orpheus* reworks Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* into English in a way that cannot exactly be called translation, claimed emphatically that 'You can't translate poetry. It's a ludicrous enterprise'.[6] At the same event, Paterson spoke of his experience of 'translating something you don't understand in German into something you don't understand in English'. Paterson's characterisation of the endeavour of translation as absurd and doomed to failure, and as taking place at or beyond the limits of comprehension, points to the strain modernist poetry places on the

[6] 'Voicing the Singing God', with Martyn Crucefix, Don Paterson, Patrick McGuinness, and Karen Leeder. Taylor Institution, Oxford University, 15 May 2013.

translation process. To think translation in relation to such poetry is to think translation's limits, impossibilities, and failures. Translation generally entails a rendering comprehensible, a carrying over of the source text into the target language (to use the ungainly metaphoric pairing commonly found in translation theory),[7] but the translation of poetry, particularly modernist poetry, calls for a different set of metaphors: here, the 'target' is inevitably missed and the 'source' often substantially re-imagined. Paterson has spoken of the flight or gesture a poem makes in the mind, and of the translation of the poem as an emulation of that gesture.[8] In an afterword to *Orpheus*, his rendition of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, entitled 'Fourteen Notes on the Version', Paterson notes the alternative lexis often found in the critical literature on English-language versions of Rilke's works. Resistance to, or suspicion of, the enterprise of translation is frequently expressed through terms such as 'version', 'rendering', 'filtering', 'transmutation', 'transposition' or 'poetic equivalent', all used in preference to the term translation itself.[9] One critic writes – affirmatively – of the 'ongoing transformation of [Rilke's] poetry into ever new incarnations',[10] another – more cautiously – of 'get[ting] it differently wrong'.[11]

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[7] See Rainer Guldin, *Translation as Metaphor*, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 22. In many publications in translation studies, the 'source / target' pairing is introduced as standard terminology, with no reflection on its status as metaphor and little background information offered as to when it entered circulation. See, for example, Basil Hatim and Jeremy Munday, *Translation: An Advanced Resource Book*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2004, p. xx.

[8] 'Voicing the Singing God'.

[9] Don Paterson, 'Fourteen Notes on the Version', in Paterson, *Orpheus: A Version of Rilke's Die Sonette an Orpheus*. London: Faber, 2006, pp. 73-84.

[10] Bridge, Duino Elegies: A New Translation (review), p. 259.

[11] Charlie Louth, review of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (translated by Martyn Crucefix) and Don Paterson's *Orpheus: A Version of Rilke's Die Sonette an Orpheus*. *Modern Poetry in Translation* 3:8 (2007), 134-142 (138).

Theorists of translation, and of poetry, have long insisted that the translation of a poem is in fact an act of productive reception, one that inevitably complicates the evaluative criteria of adherence, accuracy, or fidelity that are used to judge the success or merits of translations of other text-types.[12] If modernist poetry forces us to confront the limits and losses of translation, it also and by the same token helps us to arrive at a richer sense of what *non*-translation, the negation of translation, might mean. Non-translation and non-translatability may come to be seen not as the breakdown of meaning and communication, but as deliberate aesthetic choices, instances of willed opacity that communicate *about* or *beyond*, rather than through, language. Non-translated elements in modernist poetry draw attention to translation itself as a high-wire balancing act over abysses of nonsense, distortion, and communicative failure. The unassimilated 'foreign body' introduced earlier, the untranslated and abbreviated Latin phrase '*Subrisio Saltat.*' that concludes the sixth stanza of Rilke's fifth *Duino Elegy*, is offered here as test case against which some of these ideas may be explored in more depth. As well as comparing the ways in which different translators have dealt with this moment, I consider the impact of the Latin phrase within the original German text, retrace its itinerary through the critical literature on the *Elegies*, and unpack some of its interpretative possibilities in the context of the fifth elegy and the cycle as a whole.

[12] Walter Benjamin, 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', in: Benjamin: *Kleine Prosa. Baudelaire-Übertragungen. Gesammelte Schriften IV:1*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972, pp. 9-21; Don Paterson, 'Fourteen Notes on the Version' (see note 9 above); Francis R. Jones, 'The Translation of Poetry', in Kirsten Malmkjaer and Kevin Windle (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 169-182.

Unabbreviated, the phrase would read either 'Subrisio saltatoris' or 'saltatorum', depending on whether one reads it as singular, 'smile of the acrobat', or plural, 'smile of the acrobats'. (The context suggests the singular, as we shall see.) These two, more precisely one-and-a-half, words of Latin in an otherwise exclusively German text provide a specific – one might say, overly specific – instance of non-translation in modernist literature. My hope is that sustained attention to the phrase, both in its immediate context and through its reception and translation history, will help to ground some broader questions concerning translation and translatability, within and beyond the context of the *Elegies*. The discussion proceeds under the following headings: 1. Why Latin? 2. Prose paraphrase; 3. Ekphrasis as translation; 4. Interpretation as (re-)translation (following Hans-Georg Gadamer).

1. Why Latin?

The obvious answer to the question 'why Latin?' in this particular case – '*Subrisio Saltat.*' – is that Latin is demanded by the logic of the image. The phrase is in Latin because it designates the contents of an apothecary's jar. While it may seem a leap from acrobat to apothecary (via angel, in this case), the image belongs firmly within the *Elegies*' wider thematic complex of healing and consolation in the face of suffering and loss. The metaphor grants the acrobat's smile the qualities of a herbal balm. Following the depiction of the young acrobat smiling through his tears 'spite of all' (as Leishman and Spender have it; 'dennoch' – 'nevertheless' – in the original),[13] the lyric voice addresses the angel (already a familiar figure from the earlier elegies) as follows:

[13] Leishman and Spender, p. 59; Rilke, p. 35.

Engel! o nimms, pflücks, das kleinblütige Heilkraut.
Schaff eine Vase, verwahrs! Stells unter jene, uns *noch* nicht
offenen Freuden; in lieblicher Urne
rühms mit blumiger schwungiger Aufschrift: '*Subrisio Saltat.*'.[14]

To bring home the question of translation's difficulty, it is worth comparing several English versions of this passage:

Angel, oh take it, gather it, that small-flowered heal-wort.
Find some vase to preserve it! Store it among those pleasures
not yet open to us; on its lovely urn
celebrate it in words, with a flourish: *Subrisio Saltat*.[15]

Angel! o pluck that herb with its small blossoms
and fetch a vase for it, safeguard it well. Set it
among those other treasures we must wait for
and do it honour with a precious jar, and with
the florid, bold inscription: *Subrisio Saltat.*[16]

Angel! oh, take it, pluck it, that small-flowered herb of healing!

[14] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duineser Elegien* [1923]. Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1975, p. 35.
[15] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. by Susan Ranson, in: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems*, trans. by Susan Ranson and Marielle Sutherland. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 153.
[16] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. by Stephen Cohn. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012, p. 47.

Shape a vase to preserve it. Set it among those joys
not yet open to us: in a graceful urn
praise it, with florally soaring inscription: *'Subrisio Saltat.'*.[17]

To these versions one could add many others – at least seven English translations or versions of the *Duino Elegies* were published in the first decade of the twenty-first century alone. To ask (as a publisher reasonably might) whether or why we need quite so many is to miss the point that to translate a work of modernist poetry is a way of reading it. I return to this idea below via the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, for whom, conversely, reading – and particularly the effortful kind of reading called forth by complex poetic and mythopoietic texts like the *Duino Elegies* – itself involves a process of *re*translation. (The concept of mythopoiesis, central to Gadamer's reading of the *Elegies*, is explored in more detail below.) Gadamer maintains that the *Duino Elegies* project subjective content – what he calls 'the world of the heart' – onto a mythical world in a process he names 'mythopoietic inversion'; the reader's task is to reverse this process through a complementary act of 'hermeneutic inversion' which translates the mythic content back into the subjective reality which gave rise to it, without, however, compromising the level of reflection or reflexivity ('das Reflexionsniveau') achieved and demanded by the text.[18] Thus, in Gadamer's hermeneutic model, a process of translation – albeit not in the interlingual sense that is our first concern here – is fundamental to the encounter between reader

[17] Rainer Maria Rilke: *Duino Elegies. The German text, with an English translation, introduction, and commentary*, trans. by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender. London: Hogarth Press, 1939, p. 59.

[18] Hans-Georg Gadamer: 'Mythopoietische Umkehrung in Rilkes Duineser Elegien' [1967]. In: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 9, Tübingen: Mohr, 1993, pp. 289-305 (p. 290-91).

and poem. But this is to anticipate. The point of examining multiple English translations side by side is to establish, first of all, what options translators of modernist poetry have when faced with a moment of non-translation.

What becomes of the Latin, and of its context, in the various translations? The 'foreign body' seems at first sight to be a moment when the translator's labour is eased: preservation of the original code-switch requires merely for the Latin to stay as it is in the English version, much in the same way as translators of Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*) from German to English have the option of simply leaving the passages of French dialogue in French.[19] This is the solution adopted by most, but interestingly not all, translators of the *Duino Elegies*. One of the most recent English versions of the *Duino Elegies*, that of Martyn Crucefix (2006), takes the following approach:

> Angel – oh, pluck it, gather its small-flowering, healing herb.
> Conjure a vase and preserve it. Set it there with the other
> pleasures *not* yet open to us and give it
> a precious jar and praise it
> with a bold and flowing inscription:

[19] See Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* [1924], trans. by H.T. Lowe-Porter [1927], Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, pp. 335-343; compare Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. by John E. Woods [1995], New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005, pp. 396-408, which translates the French dialogue into English (italicised, and leaving only the first French sentence in this long bilingual sequence in italicised French). Reading knowledge of French, assumed in an educated Anglophone readership in 1927, is no longer taken for granted by 1995, and the only residue of the original moment of non-translation is typographical.

Acrobat, smile of[20]

Crucefix domesticates this moment in the text, rendering the Latin 'foreign body' less foreign; his solution allows him to dispense with the footnote or gloss that this moment usually requires,[21] but at the price of transforming the apothecary's jar-label into some other genre of microtext – an entry in an index or reference work, perhaps.

'*Subrisio saltat.*' does not stand alone: it is the culminating moment of its stanza, and needs to be read as such. It may be set apart *linguistically* from the text that surrounds it, but in terms of the unfolding of the metaphor, the poetic argument, and the metrical disposition of the poem, it forms an integral part of a continuous whole. Thus, the persuasiveness of the translators' solution depends in each case on the overall approach to this whole, and on the ways in which the relationships between its component parts are handled. With regard to the visible – and perhaps more importantly, audible – differences between the versions by Ranson, Leishman and Spender, Cohn, and Crucefix quoted so far, the most striking and problematic is the metrical choice made by Cohn, for iambs over the rolling elegiac dactyls. In the original cycle, Rilke reserves iambs for the fourth and eighth elegies, for reasons and with effects that are significant enough to warrant separate discussion.[22] In terms of how individual elements are rendered, 'das kleinblütige Heilkraut', the key image of the passage and the one which translates, in the sense of transmutes, the fleeting smile

[20] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. by Martyn Crucefix. London: Enitharmon Press, 2006, pp. 45-47.

[21] See Ranson, p. 309; Cohn, p. 94; Leishman and Spender, p. 127; Mhac an tSaoi, p. 131.

[22] See Werner Schröder, *Der Versbau der Duineser Elegien. Versuch einer metrischen Beschreibung*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1992.

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into something more substantial and essential, immediately presents the translator with the problem of German's greater capacity for forming original compounds of nouns and adjectives. The solutions considered so far opt for a variety of hyphenated combinations, omissions, and paraphrases: 'that small-flowered heal-wort', 'that herb with its small blossoms', 'that small-flowered herb of healing', 'its small-flowering, healing herb'. With the omission of any reference to healing, Cohn misses the botanical dispensary altogether, while the version that is at first sight perhaps the least promising, Ranson's neologistic 'heal-wort', creates the necessary estrangement while keeping some of the rhythmic tightness. But no solution can compensate for the loss of a feature of the original so subtle that it is almost guaranteed to escape the reader's conscious awareness on a first reading: the metrical similarity of the acrobat's smile and the healing herb, a similarity which seals their metaphorical union.

kleinblütige[s] Heilkraut – *Subrisio Saltat.*

Some discrepancies in punctuation of the Latin phrase can be observed between the various English versions. Leishman and Spender, notwithstanding the risk they take with 'florally soaring inscription' (which for the sake of the dactyl makes an adverb, 'florally', of an adjective, thus distorting the relationship between the components of the line), are the most punctilious here in observing the quotation marks and the two full points, the first marking the abbreviation and the second terminating the sentence and stanza. Attention to this level of detail in the punctuation may seem pedantic, but in fact the first of the full points belongs to the inscription on the apothecary's jar and marks it as such. We know that Rilke tried out a number of variants in earlier drafts before arriving at *Subrisio Saltat*., including:

Pulv. risus saltimb.

Sorris. Saltimb.[23]

As the label on the apothecary's jar that contains and preserves the healing herb, '*Subrisio Saltat*.' follows the real-life conventions of such labelling in using abbreviated Latin. In the final published version, the angel is called upon to pluck the herb, but an earlier draft shows us this metaphor emergent, as 'the small-flowered / quickly fading smile' ('das kleinblüthige / rasch eingehende Lächeln').[24]

The terms of comparison the metaphor mobilises are fragility, rarity, preciousness, and restorative power. The image of a rare and precious plant anticipates the gentian of the ninth elegy which can also be read as a figure of translation at its limits. 'Gentian' in the ninth elegy is not primarily the signified flower, but the signifier itself, the acquired word with which the wanderer returns from the mountain, a word gained through the transformative encounter with the unknown:

> Bringt doch der Wanderer auch vom Hange des Bergrands
> nicht eine Hand voll Erde ins Tal, die Allen unsägliche, sondern
> ein erworbenes Wort, reines, den gelben und blaun
> Enzian.[25]

[23] Ulrich Fülleborn and Manfred Engel (eds), *Materialien zu Rainer Maria Rilkes 'Duineser Elegien'*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 3 vols, vol 1, pp. 340-341.

[24] Fülleborn and Engel, vol 1, p. 341.

[25] Rilke 1975, p. 56.

> The traveller brings from the mountain slope to the valley
> no handful of earth, which cannot be said to the world, but instead
> a word he has won, a pure word, the yellow and blue
> gentian.[26]

In its journey from the fifth to the ninth elegy, the motif of the small precious flower has evolved. The 'heal-wort' requires angelic intervention for its preservation; by the time the gentian appears in the ninth elegy, the argument of the poetic cycle has arrived at the conclusion that language itself, acts of naming and speaking, are sufficient to give mortals a sense of belonging, continuity, and meaning in a world marked by change and loss. The smile, which in the earlier elegies was grouped with a range of phenomena marked for disappearance, from the steam off a hot dish to a phrase of live music ('O Lächeln, wohin?' / 'Where do smiles go?'),[27] is transmuted via the flower metaphor into a preservable essence. Of greater significance than the contents of the jar, however, is the writing on its label: '*Subrisio saltat.*' names and marks the capture and distillation of the fleeting moment. Likewise, what remains of the traveller's experience in the ninth elegy is not a material but a verbal trace; while the clod of earth, being speechless and thus unable to transmit meaning, is best left where it is, the name *Enzian* (gentian) can be carried over – translated – from its original context to the wider world. Yet in another sense *Enzian* remains untranslated and untranslatable: it is both the sign of the transformation which the traveller has undergone through his travels, and the verbal foreign body which he introduces into a context that has no direct knowledge of the object it signifies.

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[26] Ranson 2011, p. 171.

[27] Rilke 1975, p. 16.

2. Prose paraphrase

It could be argued that the passage from the fifth elegy under discussion here – with its suffering artiste, fleeting hard-won smile, distillation thereof, all brought together in the metaphor of a healing herb – is grist to the mill of the rather instrumental and non-poetic end of Rilke reception which either co-opts him for a new-age secular spirituality or, in an older tradition, seeks to translate his poetic language back into the wise prose of life lessons concerning forbearance and transience, whether in a theological or post-metaphysical framework. This latter sense of translation – the intralingual, as opposed to interlingual, transposition of the lyrical text into a prose paraphrase –[28] is the chief object of criticism in Hans-Georg Gadamer's essays on the *Duino Elegies*, to which we turn presently. Consider the following:

> So among these jars bearing inscriptions like 'Courage', 'Diligence', 'Triumph', 'Calm', and 'Wisdom', there is a special section in the dispensary of life for remedies which cannot yet be used. Here is the urn with the inscription 'Smile of the Dancer' or 'Dancer's Smile'. Here is kept the 'small-flowered herb of healing', and, as there is no reference here to 'powder', we may assume that it has not been ground in any mill.[29]

[28] See Roman Jakobson, *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation* [1959], in Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3rd edn, New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 126-131 (p. 127), for an explication of the differences between interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic translation.

[29] Romano Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies: An Interpretation*, trans. K.G. Knight, London: Darwen Finlayson, 1961, pp. 148-49.

The acrobat's ability to smile 'spite of all' threatens to shade over into a sort of Rilkean 'Keep Calm and Carry On', in the supposedly non-ideological but in fact deeply and problematically quiescent kind of reading which, as Christa Bürger argued many decades ago, is precisely the risk which the *Duino Elegies* run due to their distinctive mix of opacity and rhetorical grandeur.[30] Kathleen Komar has traced the explosion in recent decades in popular Rilke reception of the *Little Book of Rilke* variety, pitched at stressed neoliberal subjects who may be in need of something stronger than a small-flowered heal-wort.[31] This is not to delegitimise Guardini's on the whole sensitive reading, which, first published in 1941, set an important benchmark in the *Elegies*' reception; his chapter on the second elegy is included in the three-volume Suhrkamp collection of materials edited by Fülleborn and Engel that remains the standard introduction to *Duino* and its reception history.[32] Yet Gadamer, in his unfolding of a hermeneutic practice that would explicate complex poetry while resisting the temptation to translate it into prose, targets Guardini, among others, precisely for their tendency to provide prose paraphrase of the poem's ideas and content.[33]

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[30] Christa Bürger: Textanalyse und Ideologiekritik: Rilkes erste Duineser Elegie. In: Ulrich Fülleborn and Manfred Engel (eds), *Rilkes Duineser Elegien*. 3 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980-82, vol 2, pp. 264-278.

[31] Kathleen L. Komar, 'Rethinking Rilke's *Duineser Elegien* at the End of the Millennium', in *A Companion to the Works of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. by Erica A. Metzger and Michael M. Metzger, Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2001, pp. 188-208.

[32] Romano Guardini, 'Rainer Maria Rilkes Zweite Duineser Elegie: Eine Interpretation' [1941]. In: Ulrich Fülleborn and Manfred Engel (eds), *Rilkes Duineser Elegien*. 3 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980-82, vol 2, pp. 80-104.

[33] Gadamer, 'Mythopoietische Umkehrung', p. 289.

Intralingual translation or paraphrase is, furthermore, historically determined, marking a specific moment in the poem's reception history. In the early twenty-first century, a quizzical or jaded response to Guardini's 'dispensary of life', and to similar readings of the *Duino Elegies* that seek to wrest a 'philosophy' or wisdom from them, perhaps says more about the distance we have travelled in terms of mentality and world history since the first generation of readers. Guardini's reading belongs to an historical context in which the most urgent question many readers confronted in the *Duino Elegies* was that of the possibility or impossibility of transcendence through immanence following widespread demise of faith in any transcendent beneficent God. The question that dominated much discussion of these and other modernist texts was: what sense can be made of life in the absence of an afterlife? Since then, the 'grim insight' ('grimmige Einsicht') that opens the tenth elegy has shifted in contemporary perception from the problems of individual mortality and transcendental homelessness (although these remain present) to a demise and disorientation of rather larger dimensions, more planetary and collectively apocalyptic. Charlie Louth has suggested that what resonates most powerfully with Rilke's readers today is a sort of 'ecological anxiety' running through his work.[34] In the Anthropocene age, the balms of the botanical dispensary have a new sort of healing work to do; they are either co-opted for an ethic of mindful self-optimisation or enlisted for the task of radical, non-

[34] Charlie Louth, review of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (translated by Martyn Crucefix) and Don Paterson's *Orpheus: A version of Rilke's Die Sonette an Orpheus*. *Modern Poetry in Translation*, p. 142. Further explorations of (proto-)ecological themes in Rilke's works can be found in Luke Fischer, *The Poet as Phenomenologist: Rilke and the New Poems* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016); Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006); and John Llewelyn, *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience: A Chiasmic Reading of Responsibility in the Neighborhood of Levinas, Heidegger, and Others* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1991).

anthropocentric re-orientation of the human project. A prominent but controversial (and not always congenial) reader of Rilke, the contemporary German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, attempts a tightrope walk between these alternatives, as indicated in the quote with which this essay began. Sloterdijk's elaboration of an ethics of asceticism and intellectual athleticism in an era of ecological crisis and degradation is certainly a compelling direction in which to think with the acrobat's smile. What Sloterdijk terms *anthropotechnics* – in a book whose title, *You Must Change Your Life*, is taken from the last line of Rilke's sonnet 'Archaic torso of Apollo'[35] – is an attitude or ethic saturated with Rilkean vocabulary and imagery. The belief that we can expand the range of the possible by striving for the impossible; a commitment to the motivating symbolism of the vertical; the insistence that *habit*, whether unconscious or consciously cultivated, is existentially fundamental; the co-optation of the language and iconography of transcendence for a project realisable within, and committed to, the realm of immanence; all of these themes of Sloterdijk's are prose-philosophical echoes and explorations of figures from Rilke's work, particularly the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. A systematic examination of Sloterdijk's Rilke reception lies beyond the scope of the present discussion; it may suffice to recall that Rilke's acrobats introduce imagery that culminates, at the end of the fifth elegy, in the figure of the lovers performing breathtaking feats of the heart to an audience who will finally shower them with the true 'coin of happiness' ('ewig / gültige[] Münzen des Glücks').[36] In a move that recurs throughout the *Duino Elegies*, a banal, somewhat shabby reality – here, that of street performers doing tricks on a threadbare rug under the grey skies of a suburb – is transmuted into a sublime excess

[35] Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Archaïscher Torso Apollos', in: Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke* vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1955), p. 557.

[36] Rilke 1975, p. 36.

of feeling; but the very moment that seems to promise transcendence through its intensity and aliveness remains fully immanent, in the sense of this-worldly, through its inextricability from bodily experience and intersubjective relation. The lovers take up the challenge of the acrobats only to outperform them immeasurably in daring and mastery; the vertiginous figure that Sloterdijk will find so eloquent almost a century after Rilke first composed it, that of ladders that no longer lean on the ground but only on each other,[37] is the striking image with which the fifth elegy ends.

3. Ekphrasis as translation

The quotation from Guardini introduced earlier, concering "the urn with the inscription 'Smile of the Dancer' or 'Dancer's Smile'",[38] calls attention to a disagreement among critics as to the best translation of the Latin phrase. The commentary to Leishman and Spender has 'acrobat's smile', as do many others including Judith Ryan in her book on Rilke;[39] Ranson opts for the plural 'acrobats'; yet Guardini glosses it as 'smile of the dancer'. In either case, it is clear from the poetic context whose smile is meant. For while *saltator* is indeed also the Latin for dancer, here in an abbreviated genitive, the elegy itself tells us that these are acrobats rather than dancers, travelling and transient, performing under the open sky to onlookers in suburbia. To the internal textual evidence can be added the external evidence of biographical context and dedication: there is no doubt as to the identity of the painting, Picasso's *Les saltimbanques*, to which the poem can be read as a

[37] Sloterdijk, *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*, pp. 199-202.

[38] See footnote 32 above.

[39] Judith Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism and Poetic Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 196.

commentary of sorts. We know that *Les saltimbanques* hung on the wall in the home of the fifth elegy's dedicatee, Hertha Koenig, where Rilke stayed in 1915; we know from letters and other texts, including a prose poem of the same title, that the poet's observation of a troupe of actual acrobats in 1906-07 also informed the creation of the figures we encounter in this elegy.[40]

The relation of poem to painting is an ekphrastic one: it involves the verbal representation of a visual representation, hence a representation at two removes. The Picasso reference has generated quite a few problems and confusions for Rilke's translators. Leishman and Spender's commentary speaks at this point of a 'double meaning which cannot be reproduced in translation':

> A glance at Picasso's picture will reveal that the five standing figures might be contained within a large capital D, of which the man in harlequin's dress formed the upright and the little boy the extreme end of the loop: D for *Dasein*.[41]

But the word 'Dasein' does not in fact appear at this point in the text, or indeed anywhere in the fifth elegy. Leishman and Spender's confusion of 'Dastehn' with 'Dasein' sets off a Heideggerian false alarm among the anglophone critics that continues to sound many decades later: Komar, for example, writes of the picture that the 'group of acrobats is arranged roughly in the shape of a capital letter 'D' (to form

[40] See Jacob Steiner, *Rilkes Duineser Elegien*, Bern and Munich: Francke, 1962, pp. 101-127.

[41] Rainer Maria Rilke: *Duino Elegies. The German text, with an English translation, introduction, and commentary*. Translated by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender. London: Hogarth Press, 1939, p. 126.

the beginning of the word 'Dastehn' or 'existence' in line fourteen of the poem)'.[42] Again, the German word for 'existence' is not 'Dastehn', but 'Dasein'; while Jacob Steiner argues that 'Dastehn' is a *part* of 'Dasein', his interpretation at this point leads away from the text towards a speculative paraphrase and cannot serve as a basis for a translator's decision.[43] The confusion between 'Dastehn' and 'Dasein' aside, the main challenge for the translator at this point in the text is the choice of a word whose initial refers through its shape to the grouping of figures in the painting. The translation must opt for loss or distortion:

> Und kaum dort,
> aufrecht, da und gezeigt: des Dastehns
> großer Anfangsbuchstab…[44]

> Scarce have they landed, and there
> revealed is the tall, upright, initial D
> of their standing's Duration…
> (Ranson, p. 151)

> And, barely discernible, yet
> there in its place and revealed, stands Destiny's
> capital letter:

[42] Kathleen L. Komar, 'The *Duino Elegies*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Rilke*, ed. by Karen Leeder and Robert Vilain. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 80-94 (here p. 88).

[43] Steiner, *Duineser Elegien*, p. 106.

[44] Rilke 1975, p. 33.

(Cohn, p. 45)

And hardly there,
upright, shown there: the great initial
letter of Thereness, ----
(Leishman and Spender, p. 55)

These 'solutions' variously illustrate the impossibility of translation. Ranson explains the choice of 'Duration' in her commentary by linking through 'endurance' to 'duration' and suggesting that 'Rilke may be referring to the fleeting yet timeless moment of stillness between tricks',[45] but it is quite a stretch to translate 'Dastehn' with 'endurance', and the emphasis on duration *qua* stillness – which would be appropriate elsewhere in the *Elegies*, for instance where the lovers 'sense pure duration beneath' their embraces in the second elegy, seems at odds with the relentless forward movement that drives the acrobats from one trick to the next in the fifth. Cohn's choice of 'Destiny' (which, uncapitalised, is also Crucefix's choice)[46] involves a word with particular freight in this elegy, which three stanzas later brings us the figure of Madame Lamorte weaving the garishly dyed winter hats of destiny or fate ('die Winterhüte des Schicksals').[47] But again, as a translation of 'Dastehn', it is wide of the mark, even if the matching consonants are phonetically appealing. 'Existence' or 'Being' (the latter is A.S. Kline's choice)[48] could both pass muster as versions of 'Dasein', although Heideggerians tend to avoid them, preferring with

[45] Ranson, p. 309.

[46] Crucefix, p. 43.

[47] Rilke, p. 36.

[48] Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*, trans. by A. S. Kline (2004). Online edition, http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/Rilke.htm, retrieved 27 April 2017.

good reason to retain the German word even when writing in English. Why? Because of the 'da' of 'Dasein', the quality of 'Thereness' that Leishman and Spender choose to prioritise in their version, even at the high price of having three 'theres' in the space of ten words and eliding the small but crucial difference between 'da' and 'dort' (the latter more demonstrative of a particular location than the former). The misreading is compounded in each of the translations: 'Dastehn' simply means 'standing there', and if we look at Picasso's painting we see that this is exactly what the acrobats are doing. Contrary to Guardini's bald assertion that, while *Les saltimbanques* 'probably underlies the descriptive portions of the [fifth] *Elegy*, […] a comparison of the two would not help our understanding of the poem',[49] in fact the confusion which the translations generate *can* be cleared up by looking at the painting. Picasso's acrobats are standing around, taking a break between performances. The demands of the ekphrasis, which calls for a translation that reproduces the capital D of the painting while simultaneously rendering the verbal noun in some recognisable way, faces the translator with an insoluble problem.

That this ekphrastic challenge might be poetically productive is a possibility realised by Máire Mhac an tSaoi's Irish-language version of 2013. Not content with a single solution to this difficult moment of 'Dastehn', Mhac an tSaoi offers three solutions at once (in the third line of the following quotation):

> Ansúd, cé ar éigean, cítear ina choilgsheasamh
> Cinnlitir mhór na marthana,

[49] Guardini, *Rilke's Duino Elegies*, p. 132.

Delta, an dair, an dé…[50]

Delta references the alphabet, with the historical and cultural resonances of ancient Greek and the Bible: the acrobats make no claim to be Alpha or Omega, their condition is one of suspension in the in-between. *An dair*, the oak tree, brings Rilke and Picasso into contact with a symbol that, for Irish, German and other cultures, has familiar connotations of strength and endurance, enhanced in the Celtic context by the druidic association; but this is no mere extraneous addition on Mhac an tSaoi's part. In the Old Irish alphabet, each letter had the name of a different tree of which it was the intial: *an dair* thus enriches the uprightness and *thereness* of 'des Dastehns / großer Anfangsbuchstab' with an arboreal image that already, in the Irish context, stands for the letter D.[51] The third element of Mhac an tSaoi's triad, *an dé*, is the most polysemic; it may denote a breath, glimmer or flame – all of which bear the further connotations of life or life force – while also referring, again, to the letter of the alphabet (*a, bé, cé, dé*). Mhac an tSaoi's multiple solutions remind us of the greater linguistic divide separating source and target languages, while also contrasting a figure of the air with one of the earth, the invisible and moving breath of life with the solid and phallic singularity of *an dair*. (The phallic quality is indisputably present in the original – recall the 'son of a neck and a nun' passage that follows shortly after this one.) Mhac an tSaoi's project is focussed as much on expanding the poetic possibilities of the recipient language as on providing a recognisable rendering of the source text; here, her deliberate refusal to choose from among three alternatives has

[50] Mhac an tSaoi, *Marbhnaí Duino*, p. 49.

[51] On the use of tree names as letter names in Old Irish, see Damian McManus, 'Irish letter-names and their kennings', *Ériu* 39 (1988), 127-168.

the effect of highlighting, and capitalising on, the translational difficulty posed by the ekphrastic moment.

If we accept the idea that ekphrasis is itself a form of translation – the productive reception of an image in words, its interpretative transposition from a visual to a verbal medium – then it seems that this moment in the fifth elegy places particular demands on translators precisely because it involves a double translation, first image to word, then German to target language. Interlingual difference is compounded by intermedial; no wonder, perhaps, that the intralingual efforts of critics and commentators to elucidate this moment in the text are liable to involve or increase confusion.

4. Interpretation as (re-)translation (following Gadamer).

The usual aim of translation is to render something comprehensible, to carry the source text over into the recipient language. Hans-Georg Gadamer, in one of several essays on Rilke's poetry, writes that the original hermeneutic task is to explain the incomprehensible.[52] In Gadamer's hermeneutic theory, the idea of translation is pivotal. Yet, as noted above, this is not a question of translating the 'message' or 'content' of the poem into non-lyrical language. Rather, translation *as process* is crucial to a hermeneutic model that envisages the interpretation of a poem as the reception and continuation of a movement already begun in the poem itself – recall Paterson's figure, quoted above, of the flight a poem makes in the reader's mind, and

[52] Hans-Georg Gadamer: 'Mythopoietische Umkehrung in Rilkes Duineser Elegien' [1967]. In: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 9, Tübingen: Mohr, 1993, pp. 289-305 (p. 289).

of translation as an emulation of that gesture. Gadamer's 1967 essay on the *Duino Elegies* sets out the process of 'mythopoietic inversion' ('mythopoietische Umkehrung') these poems enact: the world of the heart is projected out onto a mythical world, peopled by figures of acrobats, angels, dolls and other agents (what he calls 'acting beings', 'handelnde Wesen'), and with its own distinctive range of landscapes, from suburbs and city streets through gardens and gorges up to the Mountains of Sorrow in the tenth elegy.[53] The corresponding move on the part of the reader – using Gadamer's terms – is that of hermeneutic inversion: the poetic or mythological statement is translated back into the terms of the reader's own understanding ('zurückübersetzt in die eigenen Begriffe des Verstehens').[54] The methodological difficulty lies in the fact that what is to be translated back – from the lyrical to some other, more prosaic and supposedly comprehensible form – was already something that had itself been translated ('daß das Zurückzuübersetzende selber schon ein Zurückübersetztes war').[55] It is through this process of *re*translation that the text becomes comprehensible and ultimately meaningful to the reader: the goal of the hermeneutic inversion is to make sense of that which had first seemed strange and opaque, to make it speak ('den Text als sinnvoll und sprechend wiederzugewinnen, der sich als fremd und befremdlich zu verbergen schien')[56].

Yet this act of interpretative retranslation does not mark an end to the process set in train by the poem: the hermeneutic inversion does not simply cancel out or reverse the mythopoietic, bringing us in a circular journey from world to text and back to world

[53] Gadamer, 'Mythopoietische Umkehrung', p. 295.

[54] Gadamer, 'Mythopoietische Umkehrung', p. 304.

[55] Gadamer, 'Mythopoietische Umkehrung', p. 295.

[56] Gadamer, 'Mythopoietische Umkehrung', p. 304.

again. Rather, it enables a further stage in the relationship between reader and poem to become imaginable and ultimately attainable: that of co-presence, of the reader's coming into fuller presence of the poem (and thus of themselves) in all its (their) strangeness. All interpretation should lead, not to a translation or prose paraphrase, but to 'an activation of the resonant ground from which the poetic melody is able to sing more strongly into our ears'.[57] The ultimate goal of interpretation, Gadamer urges, is to do away with itself ('sich selbst aufheben'): explanatory effort melts away in the face of the clarity of the poem's self-utterance. 'A translation *back* must always be possible', he writes, 'one which allows that which is present in the poem to become present to us.' [58]

Gadamer's concern is with hermeneutics, the act and art of interpretation. Yet the lexis of translation features prominently in his discussion. This is especially striking given the fact that he nowhere mentions interlingual translation from one language to another in his discussion of Rilke, and also in view of his clearly articulated critical stance concerning the inadequacy of intralingual translation or prose paraphrase as an approach to complex lyrical texts. The back-and-forth movement of transposition, explication, paraphrase, rendering comprehensible, that constitutes the preliminary work of hermeneutic practice is only ever a means to an end – the end of coming into full presence of the poem. Once this end has been achieved, the apparatus and labour of translation can be dispensed with. Here, the hermeneutic process mirrors that of

[57] 'Alle Interpretation kann nur darin münden, daß sie den Resonanzboden in Schwingung versetzt, von dem aus sich die dichterische Melodie uns verstärkt ins Ohr singt'. Gadamer, 'Mythopoietische Umkehrung', p. 304.

[58] 'Immer muß es eine Rückübersetzung geben können, die das in den Versen Gegenwärtige uns gegenwärtig sein läßt'. Gadamer, 'Mythopoietische Umkehrung', pp. 304.

language acquisition: once interlingual proficiency is achieved, the infrastructure and effort required to achieve it become redundant, and the speaker begins to be ever more fully present in the 'target' or acquired language. In this regard, the process of coming into presence – whether of a text or in a language – recalls the hypothetical lovers at the end of the fifth elegy, whose level of attainment or artistry – *Können* – is such that the ladders they ascend no longer rest on the ground. Rilke's acrobat, marked out by the untranslated moment of Latin in the poem, furnishes us with a figure for translation itself – as the leap from source to target that is most effectively executed when it belies the effort it costs.

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