

Contemporary Translation in Transition:
Forms of Interaction, English, German, and Russian Poetry
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Harvard University

Concept

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Our team has been planning for the last year a gathering of scholars, translators, and poets working with English, German, and Russian material to discuss some of the challenges and pleasures of translation in contemporary poetry. We will convene in March, 2020 at Harvard with some twenty presenters and discussants at a symposium that we hope will energize and redirect an ongoing conversation about translation and poetry.

Translation theory has had something of a problem when it comes to poetry, perhaps because of a lingering view that poetry translation is not possible, or that poetry translations are reductive, with too much emphasis placed on semantic or lexical equivalency. But a more positive view of translation has also gained some currency recently, recognizing that poetry translations have played a significant, in some cases transformative role in literary innovation.

Poetry translation is also experiencing a strong upswing in the contemporary period, both by recognized authors and by some who are making their reputation as translators. Many have concentrated their efforts on translating their contemporaries, in some cases because of fortuitous meetings or because of perceived aesthetic affinities. Because contemporary poetry is characterized by hybridization and by a multiplicity of cultural references, the boundaries between original and target language are not always stable. Translation, in other words, can help one to study what exactly counts as an original, and how national languages change in contact and collision.

The moment is ripe to study this cultural context, and we are keen to hear from our symposium participants about the impact of political and social conditions on translations, and to study together the aesthetic mechanisms whereby poetic functions and formal devices can cross linguistic boundaries.

Our symposium zeroes in on three languages (German, English and Russian), where the interactions have been intense and productive. We hope to answer some of the following questions:

-- Is a typology of poetry translation possible?

- How do poets understand poetic translation and what role does it play for their own poetics?
- How do poets decide to translate their peers? How does poetic self-translation work?
Collaborative translation?
- What peculiarities of a linguistic, poetic and literary-historical nature characterize translations among German, English, Russian and possibly other languages? And how to translate poems written in "ausbau languages" (such as Scottish English or Lëtzebuergesch) without altering their distanced relationship to standard language?