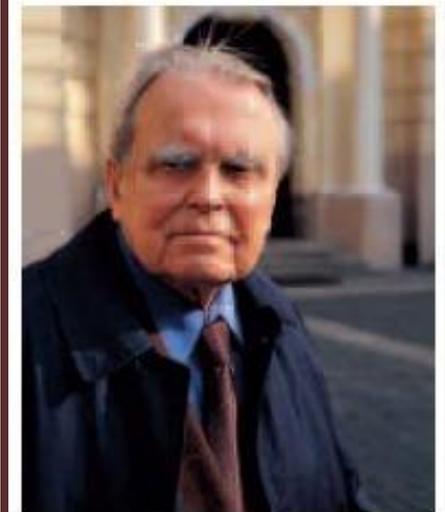
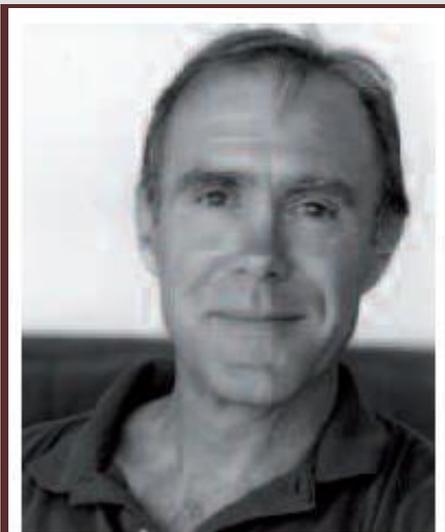


WANTED in ROME

Karl Kirchwey, 03/05/2012

TRANSLATING POETRY

A series of readings and conversations



Robert Hass (William B. Hart Poet-in-Residence at the American Academy - top photo) and leading American translator of the works of Polish Nobel Laureate Czesław Miłosz (below) takes part in a two-day conference in Rome.

The last line of a poem by Italian poet Giovanni Giudici (1924-2011) entitled “Una sera come tante” (“An Evening Like So Many Others”) reads as follows: “C’è più onore in tradire che in essere fedeli a metà” (“There is more honour in betrayal than in being half faithful”). That is to say, sometimes a heartfelt and knowing betrayal is more valuable than a lukewarm fidelity. This sentiment might serve as a motto for the translation of poetry, in which the Italian word for translator – traduttore – is perilously close to the word for traitor (traditore), and in which the difficulties of mediating between languages are sometimes insurmountable. And yet the translation of poetry has been practiced with skill and passion by some of the greatest poets of every country and every age.

Through a series of readings and conversations on 3-4 May at the Villa Aurelia of the American Academy in Rome (AAR) and at the Casa delle Letterature in the historic centre of Rome, an extraordinary gathering of two Polish and ten Italian poets and their translators will read from poems in several languages and discuss the particular challenges of translating poetry.

The Vasari fresco (chosen to illustrate the event and used as the cover on this edition of *Wanted in Rome*), of a man reading peacefully before a barred window, seems a perfect image for the process of translating poetry, which is conveying music and meaning across the barrier that exists between one language and another. Given the rapidity and volatility of communications across cultures and between countries in today’s world, there can be few subjects more complex and fascinating – but also more timely – than that of the translation of modern and contemporary poetry, since poetry in its essence is the most distilled and untranslatable of literary forms.

Robert Hass, the William B. Hart Poet-in-Residence at the AAR for the month of April, is not only an important American poet, but is also the leading American translator of the work of Polish Nobel Laureate poet Czesław Miłosz. His presence at the AAR first suggested the possibility of organising a series of events about the translation of poetry. The

availability of distinguished Polish poets Julia Hartwig and Adam Zagajewski and leading American translator Clare Cavanagh, and the importance of the three titans of 20th-century Polish poetry, Zbigniew Herbert, Miłosz and Wisława Szymborska (the latter two Nobel Laureates) confirmed the logic of devoting one programme to the translation of Polish poetry in particular.

The impending publication of Geoffrey Brock's major new anthology *The FSG Book of Twentieth-Century Italian Poetry*, which includes the work of 73 poets and 147 translators, helped determine that "Translating Poetry" would also – and most appropriately – focus on the translation of modern and contemporary Italian poetry into English. As a poet and translator, and as the first writer to serve as Andrew Heiskell Arts Director at the American Academy in Rome, my particular mandate is to advance public programmes in literature. I am of course intrigued by the culture of poetry in Italy. In the United States, if you tell someone you are a poet, they look at you with uncertainty, as if you had confessed to some private vice. But in Italy they look at you with what can only be described as respect. The translation of literature, and of poetry in particular, is both an underfunded and a marginalised activity in the US, for all of its undeniable cultural importance, because book publishing there is often so market-driven. On the other hand in Italy, and in Europe, where national borders are never far away, my impression is that the translation of poetry is seen as a kind of cultural responsibility for poets, and to some extent by European publishers as well.

Indeed, the fact that a number of contemporary Italian poets have also translated extensively from English into Italian (texts ranging from Shakespeare to Seamus Heaney) suggested that readings and conversations could move not only from Italian into English, but also from English into Italian. The fact that a number of major Italian poets have died in the past few years (for example, Andrea Zanzotto, Luciano Erba, Alda Merini and Giovanni Giudici) lent an element of urgency to the task of assembling a representative group of the best poets in contemporary Italy to read, both from their work and from the work of those poets who are gone. This series of programmes will allow Polish poets and their translators, and Italian poets and their American and British translators (some of whom are also poets), to share works of literature in several languages and to compare notes on the challenges of bringing poetry across into another language, of finding a way past the iron window-grate of cultural and linguistic difference.

3 May. The Academy's William B. Hart Poet-in-Residence Robert Hass will be joined by Polish poets Julia Hartwig and Adam Zagajewski and American translator Clare Cavanagh in a bilingual reading and discussion (in English) of work by poets including Hartwig, Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Wisława Szymborska and Zagajewski.

3-4 May. Two readings from Geoffrey Brock's new anthology *The FSG Book of Twentieth-Century Italian Poetry* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012). Italian poets Edoardo Albinati, Antonella Anedda, Franco Buffoni, Patrizia Cavalli, Franco Loi, Valerio Magrelli, Lucio Mariani, Maria Luisa Spaziani, and AAR Italian Affiliated Fellows Massimo Gezzi and Guido Mazzoni will read from their own work, as well as from work by Italian poets Bartolo Cattafi, Franco Fortini, Eugenio Montale, Giovanni Pascoli, Cesare Pavese, Clemente Rebora, Nelo Risi, Umberto Saba and Andrea Zanzotto. English versions of the Italian originals will be read by translators Damiano Abeni, Sarah Arvio, Geoffrey Brock, Moira Egan, Jamie McKendrick, Anthony Molino and Susan Stewart. Jennifer Scappettone will read from her translations of Amelia Rosselli. Several of these poets and translators will participate in a public conversation (in English) on 4 May about the challenges of translating modern and contemporary poetry from Italian into English.

4 May. There will be a bilingual reading of poems by Lord Byron, John Donne, Anne Carson, Seamus Heaney, John Keats, William Shakespeare and others, translated by Italian poets and translators Damiano Abeni, Antonella Anedda, Franco Buffoni, Patrizia Cavalli, and Massimo Gezzi. Following this reading there will be a public conversation (in Italian) about the process of translating English-language poetry into Italian.
Karl Kirchwey

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