



LITERARY TRANSLATION IN AMERICA

FOUR EXPERTS TALK ABOUT THEIR ART

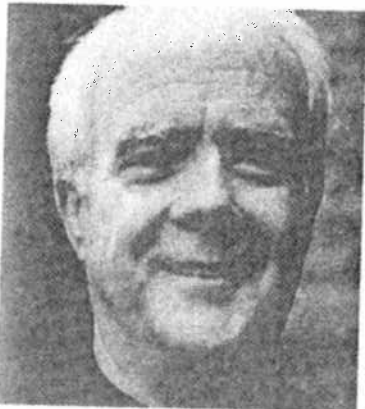
BY AVIYA KUSHNER

CHARLES MARTIN

Translator of Latin, primarily the works of Catullus (87 B.C.E.–54 B.C.E.) and Ovid (43 B.C.E.–17 C.E.)

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Martin, twice a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in poetry, has published *The Poems of Catullus* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), *Catullus* (Yale University Press, 1992), and four books of poems, including *Starting From Sleep: New and Selected Poems*, published as part of the Overlook Press Sewanee Writers' Series in July 2002. His new translation of *Ovid's Metamorphoses* will be out in 2003, from Norton. He lives in New York City.



How did you first become interested in Catullus?

I first ran into him as a freshman in college, and what attracted me to him was that after four years of Latin in high school, this guy really excited me. Up until then it was Caesar and Cicero, and they weren't terribly thrilling to me. Catullus's voice was clear, accessible, and

transgressive. There were certain poems we weren't allowed to read—and of course, we delved into those immediately.

Catullus was first love, on and off for me. I began in college in the 1960s, and sometime around 1968 or 1969 it occurred to me to do the whole thing seriously. It took ten years.

Catullus has a depth to him. There's a surface that's as attractive and sophisticated as a Cole Porter lyric, but underneath there are complications that kept me interested for a long time and led to the book about Catullus, which came later.

There are some wonderful ironies in Catullus. You're never quite sure what side he's on. He's a part of a group of Roman poets who were free to express their personal lives for the first time—their loves, their hates.

In your books, you discuss the influence Catullus has had on later poets. Which American poets were most affected by his work, and where do you see that influence? Auden and Frost were the two poets who were most influenced by Catullus. Auden's influence on American poetry has been enormous.

For American poets who read Latin poetry, the influence tends to come in the rhythms. When you think of Frost, you think of conversation in poetry, and getting that spoken rhythm into poetry. A lot of that comes from Latin poetry, and it could certainly have been Catullus, and maybe Horace as well.

Auden does mention Catullus in the "New Year's Letter." But overall, you can see the influence of Latin poetry in the rhythm, and in the expanded

sense of the possibilities of poetic rhythm, and in phatic poetry, which really means *chaty*.

How has your work as a translator affected your work as a poet?

I'm pretty much aware of it in terms of rhythm. Latin poetry has been a part of my reading since I began to think of myself as a poet.

What are some of the problems—metrical issues and general issues moving Latin into English—that you encountered with Catullus?

Catullus writes in the hendecasyllabic line, or the eleven-syllable line, and it's actually possible to write in the hendecasyllabic line in English. It's blank verse with one more syllable. He also writes sapphic meter, which can be done in English too. You substitute stresses for syllables, so it's possible to find an equivalent in the meter. For the elegiac couplets, I did what Auden did—got a couplet that in its accent sounded like it incorporated the length of the syllable.

There are different approaches to take with translating poetry, and you really have to decide what your mode of translation will be. Dryden describes three modes—metaphrase, paraphrase, and imitation [see Resources].

What draws you to your current project?

Ovid is also a very transgressive kind of poet. He was clearly an anti-Augustan, and a pretty rebellious personality. *The Metamorphoses*, I realized as I worked, is really a political poem, in the same sense that Dante's *Commedia* is a political poem. It's a poem in which Augustus



is held up to a great deal of ridicule. I always thought *The Metamorphoses* was the place where myths are kept, but it's a lot more than that. It's an epic poem and a poem about how society has changed under Augustus. It's a fairly coherent and systematic poem dealing with the culture of his time.

You get into these things saying, "I can do that!" And then next thing you know, you have fifteen books to translate into English and your understand-

ing changes. The work seems deeper.

Did you have metrical problems with Ovid that you hadn't seen in Catullus?

The question I was faced with was, "What was I going to translate this into?!" From hexameter? I started off replicating it in English, and I found that it was so slow, that I was beating poor Ovid with a slow club. Ovid is very often funny, and he's willing to sacrifice almost anything to speed, to keep things

going. He likes to have voices interrupting one another, he'll tell jokes where you don't expect them.

As I was going on, I thought the hexameter was too slow, so I cut it to a loose, slow pentameter, but it needed to go faster. Finally I broke it down to blank verse, a ten-syllable line. I settled into a meter that wasn't exactly what he was doing, but was analogous to it.

I got the speed. Once I got that, it made the whole thing easier.

GEOFF BROCK

Translator of Italian, primarily the works of Cesare Pavese (1908–1950)

Geoff Brock's new book of translations of Cesare Pavese's poems, *Disaffections: Complete Poems 1930–1950*, was published by Copper Canyon Press in August 2002. He is currently a Stegner Fellow in poetry at Stanford University. His poems and translations have appeared in *Poetry*, *Hudson Review*, and *Paris Review*.



Your new book, Disaffections: Complete Poems 1930–1950, is a large, ambitious undertaking. How has working on it changed you as a writer, and as a reader? I think of translation as the most intense and intimate form of reading. It influences you in the same way close read-

ing does. It can change the way you read other writers. For example, having spent so much time on Pavese, I read Philip Levine a little differently now.

Levine and Pavese share an interest in plain speech and working people. Pavese writes a lot about blue-collar people, like peasants and laborers, and desperate people, like prostitutes and drunks.

How did you begin translating Pavese?

I just got started as a way of reading him. I found a copy of *Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi* (*Death Will Come and Will Have Your Eyes*) in a bookstore in Florence in the mid-1980s, and I bought it because of its catchy title and—very significant for me at the time—because it was one of the cheapest books there. I ended up writing out English versions as a way of reading. I had no intention of doing anything with them.

Tell me a little bit about Cesare Pavese—the man and the work. I know he spent a lot of time contemplating suicide, and in your introduction you discuss his lifelong struggle to balance his need for isolation and his need for love, and his internal war between the lures of city and country life.

He was an Italian poet, novelist, and diarist who wrote a lot about workingmen and -women in and around Turin during the Fascist years. He was best known as a novelist and then, after he killed himself in the 1950s, his diary was pub-

lished and it became a huge sensation.

It's a great book. It reveals a man torn all his life by conflicting desires for intimacy and solitude; having continually failed at the former, he finally perfected the latter.

In November 1929, when Pavese was twenty-one, two things happened: He declared his resolve "to devote myself fully to the study of American literature," and at the same time he stopped writing his own poetry. This had a deep impact on his work.

Pavese was also an outstanding critic. He wrote a lot of essays about American literature. He translated Melville, Hemingway, and Sherwood Anderson. In translating him, I kind of feel like I'm paying him back in some way. He did so much for American literature in Italy.

Your introduction describes how Pavese's translations of American literature helped function as an alternative to Fascism. Can you explain that?

Well, Pavese was disappointed by the lack of a strong social consciousness in the poetry and fiction of his Italian contemporaries. He found that consciousness in the American literature of the time—Caldwell, Steinbeck, Lewis, and so on.

Some critics, including Pavese, argue that American literature in translation in some ways undermined the prevailing nationalist rhetoric and presented Italians at the time with new cultural

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