

Olga Sedakova, Acceptance Speech, The Masters Translation Prize, 2011¹

I was delighted and grateful to learn the Masters Guild of Literary Translation has decided to honor me with this prestigious award. There is no recognition dearer than of one's colleagues, masters of their trade. Thank you.

This prize has been awarded to me for the translation of poetry, and so I shall allow myself to say a few words about this dramatic and strange pursuit – the *translation* of poems. A thing that for many reasons is practically impossible: and yet is as ancient as European poetry itself. In any case, starting with the Roman authors (the Greeks made do without it) all poetic traditions have been washed by the sea of translations, transpositions, and imitations of foreign models. And emerging from this sea onto the dry land of the new language we have not only themes and genres but also rhythms and stanzaic forms – all skills acquired from working sound and word.

The image of the sea and dry land came to me not for the metaphor, which is too simple for this occasion. It is not a verbal text that the translator of poems in fact *translates* (recreates); it is not a text made up of words that are organized by certain external, formal principles. The majority of translators most likely translate precisely these kinds of texts. The words in a line, in a poem, are in fact different kinds of words. In them is not only the “dry land” of verbal meaning, but also the free element of the *rhythm* of meaning, the music of meaning, which is what makes poetry – poetry. François Féder, the French philosopher, who translated twelve poems by Hölderlin over thirty years, came up with a wonderful definition for this not entirely linguistic nature of the poetic word. He says: “in the poetic word there is a *virage*, a turn.” It is only in this way that the caesura can be stepped over. And the caesura is there to meet us at every step. Poetic speech, like musical speech, endures time, and, unlike everyday speech, it knows how dramatic time is, and how it can by no means be taken for granted that something will follow on from something else. Between each past and future there is this caesura, a kind of impossibility of continuance, which can be overcome only by taking a “turn” of this kind. The poetic word is not connected to the neighboring word, but to the whole. To the whole line, the whole poem – and, ultimately, to the whole of poetry as such. And I am not talking about a special, rare, or new word, but the simplest, such as “tree” or “light”, which within Rilke's rhythm of meaning are one thing, and in Eliot's music of meaning are quite another. They appear in different places for everyone, taking different turns. And so it is in the faithfulness to this music of meaning that I see the poetry translator's task to lie. We will then hear not the “translated text”, not an imitation, be it successful or not, but a living, open utterance – that which is called the author's voice.

I've always wanted to translate those poets (irrespective of the language in which they write, or the time in which they lived) whose experience of poetry's poetic nature was the tautest. These I love and I want to convey my love for them to Russian readers. I've wanted to *translate* poetry and not put it into

¹ Translated by Caroline Clark. – Olga Sedakova. In Praise of Poetry. Open Letter, 2014, p.210-213.

my own words, observing the meter and rhyme (or lack thereof): that is, to allow the poetry to say what it has to say in Russian, and not replace its heightened language with something more familiar and conventional.

That, to put it very briefly, is my task as a translator.