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Jean Boase-Beier. *Translating the Poetry of the Holocaust: Translation, Style and the Reader*. London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. 182+viii pp.

Dan Pagis's poem "Written on a Sealed Railway Car" is a fragmentary text that reimagines the first biblical family in the context of the Holocaust.¹ In this spare poem—it consists of no more than six lines, seven if you include the title—mother Eve, accompanied by Abel, leaves a message for her son Cain, letting him know that she is—Alive? Dead? Heading somewhere? Like so many messages from this past, the poem leaves this part of their story unrecorded. And yet, the poem's unfinished quality makes it an ideal text for considerations of the poetics of fragmentation and displacement that characterizes so much of Holocaust literature, and its poetry in particular. It is also a text that has been translated into many languages. One notable example is a memorial at Belzec, the site of a Nazi death camp, where the poem appears in its original Hebrew alongside (uncredited) Polish and English translations. It goes without saying that each translation presents its own challenges, but the silences, fissures and breaks that shape Pagis's poem and its language require particular attention, not only because what lies between the lines is also essential to how we read a poem, but also because of the legacy of the Holocaust and the question of how, and with what language, a poet—and translator—invokes that history.

Jean Boase-Beier, Emeritus Professor of Literature at the University of East Anglia, raises these questions in her study *Translating the Poetry of the Holocaust*, one of several outputs of a research project on the topic funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council Leadership Fellowship (AHRC). One of the central claims of her study is that Holocaust poetry presents exceptional challenges that go over and beyond those that typically comprise the translation process. Specifically, she contends, Holocaust poetry communicates an emotional experience of real events that the reader of these texts is meant to engage and also experience to a degree. In other words, the reader of a Holocaust poem is meant to *feel* something in the act of reading this text, the problem being that as time goes on, readers of these texts are increasingly distanced from this historical period, an estrangement translation can aggravate further.

For Boase-Beier, the field of cognitive poetics provides an apt framework for this investigation, and through the lens of cognitive poetics, and its emphasis on emotional experience (63), she proposes that translators working on Holocaust poetry be more attentive to their readers and their (lack of) preparation for reading these poems. At the same time, she calls for readers to read these texts as translations and to be mindful of the choices and strategies that translators employ in the act of translation. These reflections are developed through her reading of a

¹ Dan Pagis, "Katuv ba-'iparon ba-karon he-chatum," in *Gilgul* (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1970): 22.

selection of Holocaust poetry, primarily composed in German, and through a comparative and philological analysis of multiple translations of the same text (again, mostly drawn from the German). Boase-Beier is a German-English translator herself (of the poets Ernst Meister, Rose Auslaender, among others), and some of the most persuasive moments in this book come when she makes her own interventions known. While she makes clear her disagreement with the approaches and choices of other translators, she nonetheless considers closely what a translation tells us about the ways in which a translator reads and experiences a text. What emerges in the process is an appreciation for the multiplicity of poetic language, which offers a translator numerous, viable options for bringing these texts into another language. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but find that what she marked as exceptional to Holocaust poetry, namely "its silences, gaps and indirections" (44), can apply to a great deal of poetry and that many of the translation issues that she highlighted are also common to translation in general.

Chapter 1 discusses the application of cognitive studies to this present study. According to Boase-Beier, "cognitive poetics...is simply a development that puts more emphasis on the mind, on cognitive context, on cognitive effects and on what we know about patterns of thought and feeling, than does traditional stylistics" (17). In this context, poetics refers, in her words, "to a theory or a view of poetry held by a poet, a reader, a critic, a scholar or a translator" (14). This loose definition of poetics notwithstanding, what Boase-Beier offers here is a reader-centered understanding of poetics, one which asserts that the meaning and interpretation of a text has much to do with emotional responses and how authors employ various techniques and strategies to provoke feelings and emotional reactions from their readers. A reader's emotional engagement with a text is integral to the cognitive process—in other words, how we think and feel about a text are mutually inclusive. It is here where the role of translation is particularly vexed, Boase-Beier contends, because a translator not only must engage in linguistic translation, but also translate the text in a way that reproduces the "cognitive effects" (47) that it (presumably) had on readers of the original. The thrust of this study is that these considerations are especially fraught when it comes to the translation of Holocaust poetry for a variety of reasons, principally among them the distance in time and place from these events, but also, because readers of Holocaust poetry in English translation "do not, in general, seem to be conscious of [the] fact" (52) that they are reading poetry in translation. Boase-Beier does not offer any sort of support for this claim, but it recurs throughout the study as part of a general portrait of the ill-equipped (English language) reader, alongside the charge that translators of Holocaust poetry often fail to "communicate" what is vital and meaningful about these texts.

The central concerns of Chapters 2 and 3, "Reading Holocaust Poetry in and as Translation" and "Translating Holocaust Poetry," overlap in crucial ways. For Boase-Beier, it is essential that readers of Holocaust poetry apply their critical reading skills to translated texts as they would to original texts. This is not only a question of taking translations seriously, but also an acknowledgment of the extent to which original texts are shaped in and through translation. This consideration is closely related to the call, in Chapter 3, for translators to "read for translation" (87). This sort of reading acknowledges that Holocaust poetry "is almost always written

from a multilingual sensibility” (91), an important observation but hardly one that is exclusive to Holocaust poems. Boase-Beier further observes that “the vast majority of Holocaust poets were themselves translators” (91), but unfortunately does not further elaborate this compelling, and indeed relevant, point. In fact, drawing relations between the original and translated output of the poets she addresses in her study would have extended the scope and stakes of this book, which at times feels like it is retreading the same ground between chapters.

In the final chapter, Boase-Beier proposes a list of guidelines for translators of Holocaust poetry (125-126) that includes the suggestion that translators avail themselves of translation theory, “read more of the books other translators and scholars write, and reflect, publically and in introductions and prefaces, on the links between theory and practice” (126). Throughout the study, Boase-Beier returns to the claim that translators are generally not interested in theory (53), a remark that, in my view, runs counter to contemporary translation culture (this is certainly so for the UK, US and Israel, the contexts I know best) but also amounts to a straw man that allows Boase-Beier to argue on behalf of the relevance of theory to a praxis of translation. Even more mystifying are the prescriptions she suggests for published translations of “Holocaust poets” (a term she uses widely despite cautioning against its overuse, 98). For example, she calls for the inclusion of maps and historical information that would make the historical and cultural contexts of these poems readily available to the reader, as if the Internet and its vast resources were completely unavailable to contemporary readers. Moreover, there is no convincing reason why a poem about the Holocaust demands this apparatus more so than a poem about the global refugee crisis or the American Civil War. Though Boase-Beier qualifies this demand for context with the acknowledgment that too much contextual information can “close off interpretation,” she substantiates these remarks with the vague results of an “informal survey” of students who are “specialists in translation and therefore can be taken as a model to which general readers can aspire if presentation helps them to do so” (133). In other words, it would appear that there are at least two distinct readers for translation, each one making distinct demands from the translator—however, how a translator negotiates between them (if he or she even needs to) remains unclear.

The call for recovering, and translating, works by underrepresented groups of Holocaust victims (15) is also perplexing given that throughout this study Boase-Beier relies heavily on examples drawn from German poetry, the area in which she specializes. Absent from this study is any serious consideration, to name a few examples, of Hebrew and Yiddish poets and their extensive engagements with the Holocaust (Sidra Ezrahi’s work on this topic could have helped her here.); the multilingual poetry of American poets, like Irena Klepfisz, who was born in the Warsaw Ghetto; or French poets of the Holocaust (Gary D. Mole of Bar Ilan University has written about this.). Her claim that “it seems that a lack of literary work is often paralleled by a lack of scholarly work” is an attempt to explain the relative paucity of literary works (original and translated) by Roma, “homosexual” [her term], Jehovah Witnesses, and “Euthanasia” victims of the Holocaust, but Boase-Beier also presents this formulation as a critique of an allegedly deliberate marginalization and even silencing of these voices. Not only does this amount to a

serious overstatement, but even her own study declines to redress this claim, though it is repeated throughout as one of the major lacunae in the field of Holocaust poetry (as Boase-Beier defines it). In a study where Celan's work is heavily cited, it is no wonder that it can start to feel that the field of Holocaust poetry in translation is very narrow. What Boase-Beier's claim underscores, on the contrary, is this study's insufficient consideration of existing scholarship on Holocaust poetry rather than support the argument of gross scholarly neglect.

In this last chapter, though, Boase-Beier offers a personal anecdote that would have made a very persuasive and powerful introduction to this book. She recounts how, as a small child, she observed her father reading the paper and saying "in a sort of despairing voice that I have never forgotten "They did such terrible things to the Jews"" (125). Her father's remark invites questions that clearly energize this present study—she even wonders what article or news item provoked this comment, a question that touches on the issues of context that preoccupy her reading of this poetry. Boase-Beier's inquiry "what does poetry say and do that carries on where the newspaper left off" (125) strikes me as the starting point for a nuanced and complex consideration of the forms of knowledge that poems create, communicate, and translate, and the different kinds of histories that poets write and rewrite. In this question, in particular, lies the potential to expand the stakes of this project and draw in a wealth of criticism and scholarship on trauma, language loss, displacement and memory (as well as post-memory) as it concerns the Holocaust and its literature. We need to have faith, though, that poets and readers can approach each other despite differences in time, place and language, that the translator can mediate that encounter, a movement which, as Boase-Beier herself acknowledges, is also inherent from a poem's very beginning.