
“I am a survivor from a different culture” An Interview with Michael Hamburger

Lidia Vianu (Bucharest, Romania)

Lidia Vianu: *In 1980 Romania was still under communism. Foreign books were out of our reach. We were cut off from anything published in England. Somehow I managed to read your volume *Real Estate*, and have been teaching it ever since. You struck me as a deeply physical and also metaphysical poet at once. Both body and soul, and both moving in some way towards dissolution. Are you a tragic poet, do you think?*

Michael Hamburger: It is impossible for a poet to characterize his own work. From other people I gather that I am a gloomy poet, if not a tragic one. The reasons for that are in my biography, which I cannot trace here; but I wrote a book of memoirs, *A Mug's Game* (1975, second version *String of Beginnings* [1991]), about my early years only.

*You have translated Marin Sorescu, the Romanian poet who used his own deathbed as a table for poetry in *The Bridge*. Have you ever been to Romania?*

I met Marin Sorescu repeatedly at international poetry festivals, and it was he who asked me to translate his poems, which I knew only from German translations. I do not know Romanian, but the language is not totally unintelligible to me as Hungarian is, for instance – because of the Latin components of the language. I was fortunate enough to have Oskar Pastior's permission to draw on his excellent German versions, but could at least read Sorescu's poems in the original Romanian, so that their rhythms and sounds were accessible to me.

I was invited to Romania at least once, but was warned that I should not be free to travel where I pleased in the country, but should be more or

less confined to the Writers' Union. Because I ceased long ago to be an urban poet and feel claustrophobic in literary conferences, I could not accept such an invitation. I did meet many Romanian poets in England and elsewhere, but failed to meet the poet Doinas, who translated one of my long poems, 'Travelling'.

Why did you choose Sorescu to translate?

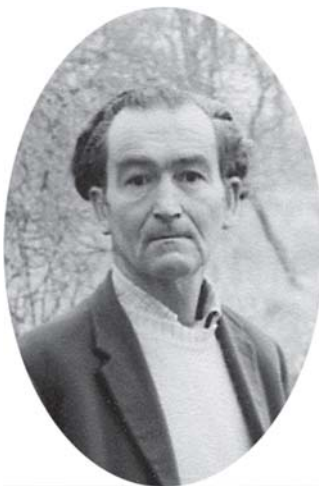
I was attracted to Marin Sorescu's subversive wit. If he was a tragic poet also, fundamentally, he had a black humour that objectivized and allegorized his personal malaise. His kind of invention could also be appreciated by English readers with no direct experience of the pressures to which they were a response – thanks, in part, to an English tradition of nonsense verse.

You are a well-known translator and your major source is German literature. You have translated Büchner, Celan, Enzensberger, Goethe, Grass, Hölderlin, Huchel, Rilke, and Trakl. Is translation of poetry creation as well?

Translation came naturally to me because as a child I was translated from Germany to Britain. So I

began to translate when I was still at school, also choosing to specialize in what was called Modern Languages and amounted to French and German. One of my earliest translations was of the prose poems of Baudelaire, and as a soldier in Italy I also taught myself Italian, so as to be able to read Dante. Though I specialized more and more in German, from time to time I continued to translate from other languages.

Translation, to me, was an activity separate from the writing of my own poems – rather as, for musicians, composition is separate from performance or the interpretation of other



people's music. I don't ask myself whether my translations are creative. It's enough for me if they serve a useful purpose. Some of them were important enough to me to occupy me almost throughout my long life – like Hölderlin, with successive editions from 1943 to 2005. Towards the end of my life, though, I had to give up translating, so as to be able to concentrate entirely on my own poems.

Your poetry is very earnest in tone. You ignore the ironic fervour of your contemporaries. You hate mocking at the words or at the reader's expectations. You mean what you say. Every line is heavy with profound sadness at the way of all flesh. What do you think of the jesting air and the undeniable shallowness of some contemporary poets?

Yes, I suppose that I am a very serious poet – except for satirical verse, which I have also been compelled to write, though much of it may be inferior to my more serious poems – perhaps because I am not playful enough by nature, and even my satirical or polemical verse is not entertaining. Now I find myself very much out of sympathy with most of the poetry of my younger contemporaries, but am aware that I am a survivor from a different culture.

Do you read much poetry these days? Whom do you prefer of your contemporaries and of the younger poets that you know?

For that reason I read mainly classics and dead authors now – with very few exceptions. Since I have given up literary criticism also, which I practised for decades, I can't presume to judge my younger contemporaries. Both literally and metaphorically, in old age I have had to content myself with the cultivation of my own garden; and even as a gardener I am a grower of mainly obsolete or obsolescent fruit.

What in your life led you to poetry? Like all writers, I am sure you have a secret story, a story of your sensibility. How did you become a poet and also a translator?

Among the arts, music was my first love; but the pressures of education did not allow me to attain proficiency in that art. Poetry was close

enough to music to become an alternative ever since my adolescence – though I was a late developer as a poet, partly because I had to spend four years as a soldier, during which formative years writing, most of the time, was physic-ally and practically impossible for me.

My MA students (in the English Department at Bucharest University we have just started an MA that translates contemporary literary texts from and into English) are in the process of translating your poems into Romanian. What would you advise them, both as the author and as a translator?

I can offer no advice to translators of my poems. I have had too many different kinds of translators, from the pedantically literal to the so-called 'imitators' whose real wish was to produce poems of their own. All I can say is that as a translator I have tried to get as close as possible not only to the semantics of the work translated, but to its way of breathing – which, to me, is the most essential characteristic of any poetic text.

When one asks for an interview, one secretly hopes to find a very intimate area of the interviewee which nobody has ever put their finger on. You have been amply interviewed, and I cannot hope for much. But I must tell you that reading your poems has made me find a secret area of my being I never knew existed. You made me perceive mortality with a new strength. Has that ever been your poetic aim?

I have never been able to reveal the mainsprings of my poetry. If I knew what they are, it could well have been impossible or unnecessary to write my poems, because poems are adventures that take me into unpredictable regions – even if they begin with recognizable persons, things or scenes. I have learnt more about my constant concerns and themes from other people's responses to my work than from a self-analysis I do not practise. That, incidentally, is the justification of good criticism – as distinct from the hyperbole of praise or malice that has almost replaced such good criticism in my own country. But I recognize the truth of what you write about my obsession with time and mortality.

I remember teaching you under Ceausescu, in icy cold classrooms, to freezing students, who never failed to understand the pain in your lines, even though they were engrossed in their own tragedy, which was totally different. You have a very compelling gift of communicating moods. Is there a feature of your work that you would have liked critics to comment on, yet no one has noticed?

It is good to know that your students could respond to my work under Ceausescu. I had no direct experience of that dictatorship, but lived for a short time under the dictatorship of Hitler and, in my military service, experienced the consequences of a world war when serving in Italy, Austria, and on a brief visit to my surviving relatives in Berlin. Though I was not a mainly political poet, I was always conscious of what was going on under the conflicting dictatorships before, during and after that war. Personally, I was fortunate enough to find a new home in what was a highly civilized country, but could never forget that any civilization is a frail structure easily destroyed. Again, I can't tell critics what to notice in my work. Lately my work has received more searching attention in the German-speaking countries than in the English-speaking – as in a book by my Austrian translator Peter Waterhouse, who had an English father and remains a British subject, though he writes in German.

Condemned to reading almost nothing written abroad in the 1980s, a young teacher

of contemporary British literature (if that is what I was, considering I could not find any contemporary books to read) at the English Department of Bucharest University, I discovered you, and the enthusiasm of that discovery – I had no idea who you were, what your poetic status was – has been with me for more than two decades. It was mere chance that I happened to find your book. But it gave me a standard for poetry. Is poetry your calling? Or is it translation?

So I, too, cannot know what my poetic status is. In earlier decades I was included among the outstanding poets in British and American anthologies, in recent decades my work has been omitted from such anthologies and my books of poems no longer appear in the USA. I attribute this to a shift in the literary culture, which I can do nothing to change. What matters to me is that I have been able to continue writing my poems in old age, regardless of how they are received or not received. At the moment I am finalizing another book of new poems, though this is likely to be my last, at the age of 82. All a poet can do is to write the poems he or she is impelled to write – just as nearly all my translations were of work that impelled me for one reason or another, since I was never a professional translator dependent on commissions. Once a work is done, it goes out of our control. So it is best for us not to give a thought to questions that must be asked and answered by others.

This interview was conducted in writing, and transcribed by Lidia Vianu on 17 January 2006.

Michael Hamburger
TWO POEMS

British Summer Time Suspended

1

This morning of the day before
We wake to weird penumbra, more
The westering moon's, full-bodied, clear
Than the blurred sun's – as though the very season,
Grown weary, mingled dawn with night,
The generator bleary, not our sight,
A matted, silver-greyish-white
Colour enough for things of earth and air,
Contour enough for tree-crests leaved or bare.

2

Well, even to pure reason,
To Einstein as to Plato,
Time was a hot potato.
Not so to impure reason, politics
Long wise to nature and her mocking tricks:
Uncertainty is what few minds can bear.
So cut the knot with clocks,
Suppress the paradox.
Just wind back by one hour
Those minute-hands, ignoring that their power,
If microchip-driven, too may lack
Resistance to a two-way track.
The winders then will rise
To serviceable roads and skies
Through which to travel with no need to know
What makes the wheels turn, why they come and go.
In function is their peace,
Their profit, their increase
And by conjunction function is imposed.
So Bob's your uncle and the matter closed.
By dot-com, radio, tabloid, box,

In every type and clef,
To babies, morons, lunatics and crocks,
Alzheimer cases, yes, the blind and deaf
The change must be conveyed:
'All that was given now is made.
Yet as a hand-out we confer
This benefit on him or her,
This abstract panaceic sticking-plaster,
Tiktox, your synchronizing comforter
That will kiss better pains, allay disaster
Throughout the next half-year.'

3

Gobbledygook reigns over nothingness,
Murkier mornings, day's duration less,
No energy saved while in the earlier dark
Lamps glare on workers, flood their crammed car park.

As for disaster, it's such a chronic fare
That without condiments we've ceased to taste or care.
Judgement closed down, 'For Sale' on the gates of Hell,
Science feeds headlines with a parallel,
Global and hyper-global crash
Boosts news consumption, rakes in still more cash,
Eccentric orbit, meteor, eclipse
Whet a cloyed hunger for apocalypse.

4

In natural half-light, though, I strum
This desultory ricer
Through 'were' and 'will-be', 'can-be' back to basic 'are',
Old age that leaves a life's curriculum
As labyrinthine, entrance, exit, end
Dubious, subverts all fixed chronology.

Where am I when I pause from verse to tend,
Still, our wild garden of remembered flowers,
The sown, self-seeded, dormant, posthumous,
The once or not yet 'ours',
Their names dissolved, their provenance forgotten?

In jumble humbled there, I'm free,
While labouring, to let them be
Playthings of mutable light that's lent to them and us;

Return then to this bay, in drift my anchorage,
For words a landing-stage,
The roof about to crack, window-panes rotten –
A place reliable as the winds, the sea
From which, in its old age, it harbours me,
So that with loose anachronistic rhyme
I may defy fictitious time,
Found in the maze a round economy
Of loops, of indirection overcome,
Chime on through summer suspended
With nothing, nothing ended.

(c) Michael Hamburger

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Electronocuted

How Pascal would have shuddered
At this infinitude not of lights in space
Nor Babel tower aspiring to any heaven
But information fungus of our making
That over the global surface spreads so fast,
Ocean water no barrier,
That a global deal can be clinched
Before the board has assembled,
Mass destruction delivered
Before war is declared.
Web indeed, world-wide
Surrogate for the earth we were made for,
Super-Promethean gift to mankind,
Its uses, limitless,
Replacing those of hand, heart, head
Which lag behind, too slow for competition.

Pascal? Does he have a slot
Among the potential billions?
There's one with a forename like Blazes –
Long dead, long redundant,
Notable once because he could *think!*
Electronics do that for us,

Begin as a toy, still wondered at,
Explored with fumbling fingers,
Then whizz us from first to second childhood
So blandly, with so little effort
There'll be nobody here to shudder
At a screen gone blank for good.

(c) Michael Hamburger

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Both poems will be appearing in the Autumn of 2006 in a new anthology
by Michael Hamburger, *Circling the Square* (London: Anvil Press).

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Satire and Apocalypse in the Poems of Michael Hamburger

Peter Lawson (Joensuu, Finland)

In this brief introduction to the oeuvre of Michael Hamburger, I want to consider the satirical and apocalyptic aspects of his poetry, including the two poems published here; and to contextualize these aspects in Hamburger's personal history as a German-Jewish émigré to Britain.

Michael Hamburger was born in Berlin on March 22, 1924. His father, Richard, was a physician and professor; his mother, Lili, a housewife. Although Hamburger escaped the German genocide of European Jewry, he experienced early manifestations of Nazism in the form of institutional racism. In his autobiography *A Mug's Game* (1973), Hamburger describes his desperation as a German-Jewish schoolboy tormented by an "[Aryan] teacher, like others before him, [who] ruled by mockery and intimidation; I was reduced to such despair," he writes, "that I could not go to sleep at night" (*A Mug's Game*, AMG, 22). In November 1933, the family emigrated to Scotland. When they moved to London soon afterwards, Michael studied at Westminster School and, from 1941, Christ Church, Oxford. From 1943 to 1947, Hamburger served in the British Army, attaining the rank of lieutenant. He returned to Oxford the following year, completing an MA in Modern Languages. In 1951 he married the musician and poet Anne Beresford. They have three children: Mary Anne, Richard Benedict and Claire Miranda.

Hamburger began a long and distinguished academic career in 1952, initially teaching at University College London, while translating German poetry. Among his many awards are the German Federal Republic's Goethe Medal (1986), and the EC's first European Translation Prize (1990) for his renditions of verse by the Holocaust survivor Paul Celan. He has also translated poetry by Nelly Sachs, "who for many became the poet of the Holocaust" (*A Proliferation of Prophets*, *PoP*, 282). In 1992 he was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE).

Many members of Hamburger's family died in the Holocaust. He laments: "Of my father's family there were no survivors in Germany except a cousin living in Hamburg, with a non-Jewish wife" (AMG 148). Of Berlin, Hamburger states simply: "I'd rather keep away from it" (AMG 145). Hamburger began writing about the Holocaust in 1961, some thirty years after his emigration from the Third Reich to Britain; mindful of the unhealed wound inflicted by Nazism:

Branded in childhood, for thirty years he strove

To hide the scar, and truly to believe
In the true fundamentals of that commonweal
Which once had outlawed him beyond repeal.
("Conformist," *Collected Poems*, 8)

As Hamburger acknowledges elsewhere: "I was marked for life by the racial policies of the Third Reich" (*Private correspondence*, March 3, 2001).

One consequence of these policies is the discernable scorn for heartless administrators which pervades Hamburger's oeuvre. For example, "How to Beat the Bureaucrats" (1975) advises readers to:

Bombard the computers' feeders with more and more paper,
Till from paper and ink a man or woman emerges,
Word is made flesh; and, gasping in piles of paper,
They learn again the first of our needs, to breathe.
(*CP* 199)

After the ruthless bureaucracy of the Nazis, leading to mass dehumanisation, all bureaucracy has become suspect. Hamburger, a German-Jewish survivor, might well appreciate "the first of our needs, to breathe" free of gas chambers.

Journalistic coverage of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem may have spurred the poet to explicitly link bureaucracy with the Holocaust in his 1961 poem "In a Cold Season" (*CP* 109-112). Here he focused on the bureaucratic mind-set of this "exemplary" Nazi: "Adolf Eichmann, civil

servant (retired).” Eichmann is the murderous bureaucrat incarnate,

...whose only zeal was to convert
Real women children men to words and numbers
Added to be subtracted leaving nothing.

Section four of this five-part sequence switches from the perpetrator’s bureaucratic abstractions to consideration of a specific victim, Hamburger’s murdered grandmother, and her bereft family:

They made her write a postcard to her son in
England.
‘Am going on a journey’; and that all those years
She had refused to travel even to save her life.
Too little I know of her life, her death,
Forget my last visit to her at the age of nine,
The goodbye like any other that was the last.

Thus, an ordinary individual is contrasted with inhumane Nazi professionalism. The grandmother’s freedom is cancelled by a bureaucrat intent on administering an apocalyptic genocide of European Jews. It may be no coincidence that Hamburger called a key critical work *After the Second Flood: Essays on Post-War German Literature* (1986), thus evoking both the biblical Flood and the Holocaust which mirrored its apocalyptic immensity.

The apocalyptic is a theme which recurs in both poems printed here. “British Summer Time Suspended” and “Electronocuted” respectively demonstrate a post-Holocaust sensitivity to signs of future “apocalypse” and “mass destruction”.

Complementing such an apocalyptic vision is what one might call a satirical style. Hamburger prefers to classify such debunking attacks on dangerous bureaucrats as “Observations, Ironies, Unpleasanties” (*CP* viii). As he explains in the “Author’s Note” to his *Collected Poems*,

satire that is also poetry can be written only as long as one is conscious of some sort of general or dominant agreement about public values. In the absence of such consciousness, or such agreement, there is no other way than to borrow the verbiage of those matters, so that the verbiage itself would condemn them. (*CP* xvii).

Thus, we are forewarned to pay close attention to the language which Hamburger deploys to debunk the “verbiage” which surrounds, and

encourages, us to lose touch with reality. Ever the Modernist (note the way “Electronocuted” pays homage to Celan’s neologisms), Hamburger is cognisant that shared “public values” can no longer be taken for granted, and that the language of poetry can offer a space for enlightened engagement with such important matters.

Although I do not want to pre-empt readers by offering a close analysis of either poem, it does seem to me that “nature” and a “wild garden” provide a point of “anchorage” for the narrator of “British Summer Time Suspended”; while “the earth” refers to both the world and, quite literally, the soil in “Electronocuted”. What I want to suggest is that Hamburger is also writing in the tradition of pastoral poetry. His *Tree Poems* (1978-1990), similarly, consist of pastoral meditations. Hamburger has written verse on, for instance, the beech, hawthorn, birch and elder. He has also considered the oak, together with its English associations:

How by oak-beams, worm-eaten,
This cottage stands, when brick and plaster have
crumbled,
In casements of oak the leaded panes rest
Where new frames, new doors, mere deal, again
and again have rotted.
(*CP* 355)

Particularly interesting are poems which refer to the willow. Indeed, the willow appears in several works, including “In October” (1950), “Anachronisms” (1957-61) and “Oxford” (1963). In “Willow” (1978) (*CP* 347), the tree is imbued with a survivor’s “toughness” and obstinacy. Such resolute strength in the midst of fires may be related to the Holocaust which consumed Hamburger’s extended family:

Chop up the dry remains,
Burn them: they’ll spit.

Here pastoral poetry again overlaps with satire as the trees “spit” back at their tormentors in a post-Holocaust world.

Hamburger is fascinated with roots, and his poems about trees are often meditations on his own “transplanted” status as a German-Jew with British citizenship (see, for example, “Winter Solstice 1999,” *Intersections*). When he seeks his own roots (“looked for my origin”) in “The Search” (1962) (*CP* 440), he is

Always sure of the route
Though the people grew foreign, bizarre.

Though sure of the way back home (“route”), the searcher cannot find his roots among the “foreign, bizarre” people he encounters. He is more like the “displaced persons” of an earlier poem, “The Road” (1961) (*CP* 437): possibly Jewish refugees “whose nationhood is a cause.” Eventually, the searcher finds his native village

Where they told me: here you were born.
An unlikely place – no petrol pump, office block,
poster? –
Yet I could not deny it, and asked them the name.
Why, Mors, need we tell you, m o r s, MORS.

Like a post-Holocaust Jew returning to Germany, the narrator inevitably meets reminders of death (“Why, Mors, need we tell you, m o r s, MORS”). Home has become a site of apocalypse.

“At Staufen” (1975) (*CP* 295-298) describes a cemetery where pre-Holocaust generations of German Jews are buried:

Dark the gravestones were, too,
At Sulzburg, the Hebrew letters
Blacked out by centuries
Of moss on the oldest;
With no new ones to come,
With the last of a long line
Gassed, east of here, gone.

Here Hamburger contrasts the sense of social integration that German-Jews enjoyed before the Third Reich – as signified by their gravestone markers – with the rejection of Jews in the Nazi era: victims of the Holocaust are granted no

burial place, no inscription, no sign of their presence in the German polity. This goes some way to explaining why Hamburger’s relationship with Germany remains literary – through widely praised translations – while the poet chooses not to live there. The last generation of German Jews was “gassed,” and is now “gone.”

Hamburger notes in the introduction to his translations of poems by Paul Celan: “With the late Nelly Sachs he shared a constant awareness of writing as a survivor and witness of the European-Jewish holocaust” (*Nineteen Poems by Paul Celan*, 12). “Surviving in the teeth of displacement” (*After the Second Flood*, *ASF* 277), Hamburger resembles his fellow poets-in-exile Sachs and Celan. As the son of highly assimilated German-Jews, it is possible that Hamburger empathises with Sachs when he states that she “was scarcely conscious of her Jewishness before the Third Reich” (*PoP* 285). The Holocaust hurt Sachs, Hamburger and Celan into a heightened awareness of the apocalyptic possibilities at the heart of European civilization.

John Mander is right to suggest that the poet re-asserts “the values of an older Germany” (*Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, 163); while John Matthias qualifies such an assessment by remarking in Hamburger’s poetry “the moral consciousness of the modern European Jew” (*Poetry*, 1974). Moreover, it seems to me that Hamburger uses satire as a weapon and a warning against the apocalyptic worlds he descries on today’s horizon.

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For information concerning the forthcoming issue, please contact the editor at <john.stotesbury@joensuu.fi>. The deadline for copy will be 15 September 2006.