

Interview mit George Szirtes

George Szirtes wurde 1948 in Budapest geboren. Im Jahr 1956, nach Niederschlagung des ungarischen Aufstands, flüchtete er mit seiner Familie nach Großbritannien. Er studierte Malerei am *College of Art and Design* in Leeds und am *Goldsmiths College* der *University of London*, und wurde anschließend Lehrer für Kunst und Kunstgeschichte, sowie für Literatur und *Creative Writing* an verschiedenen Institutionen. George Szirtes veröffentlichte seine ersten Gedichte in den siebziger Jahren und wurde im Jahr 1979 mit dem „Faber Memorial Prize“ ausgezeichnet für seinen ersten größeren Gedichtband *The Slant Door*. 1982 wurde er in die *Royal Society of Literature* aufgenommen. Eine erste Reise nach Ungarn im Jahr 1984 wurde zum Ausgangspunkt einer regen Auseinandersetzung mit der ungarischen Literatur und einer vielseitigen Übersetzertätigkeit, welche unter anderem mit dem „European Poetry Translation Prize“ ausgezeichnet wurde. Im Jahr 2005 bekam George Szirtes einen weiteren wichtigen Preis, den „T. S. Eliot Prize“, für seinen Gedichtband *Reel*.

Die Dichtung von George Szirtes zeichnet sich vor allem durch die Tiefe der Introspektion, bildliche Qualität und die Suche nach der perfekten Form aus.

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Mr Szirtes, a number of students from Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich had the chance and pleasure to attend your reading and talk of November 2011. This stimulating encounter generated many questions, so please allow me to thank you very much, also on behalf of the students from the Department of German as a Foreign Language, for the opportunity to ask some of them in this interview.

Our department hosts students from all over the world, thus language and understanding are main issues in our educational programme, both in a daily and broader sense. Hence the maybe slightly different character of the questions to come, as compared to those of other interviews you have been involved in.

1. You moved to Great Britain when you were eight years old, therefore English was your second language. Could you maintain, in terms of the Sapir-Whorf theory, but relying on your own experience, that learning a foreign language triggers off a restructuring of reality, a slightly new view of the world around you?

In so far as I understand it, I suspect language does restructure ‘something’, whatever the ‘reality’ may be. If I may use Hungarian as my natural term of reference, a table continues to be table in so far as it performs a recognised function whether one calls it *table* or *asztal*, but being aware of alternatives weakens the authority of both languages and creates an interesting and, sometimes, anxious gap for the reader / speaker where new or modified senses of reality may incubate. The usage of *table* and of *asztal* have different histories in different contexts in different languages. One doesn’t simply exchange one for the other by changing words. (Eva Hoffman’s classic book *Lost in Translation*, articulates this beautifully.) In any case, even at a fairly simple level, we are, I believe, aware that experience / reality isn’t what we say about it, and that saying is its own

reality: it is the reality of saying. A language is, in many senses, its users. What users say constitutes the language reality a foreign speaker is obliged to enter on whatever terms are available to him or her.

2. What do you find peculiar about writing in a foreign language? Do you consider that it may be an enriching experience due precisely to the fact that the writer, and especially the poet, – potentially not fully aware of all the constraints of the new language – can display a fresh, uninhibited creativity?

I don't think I set out to discover a 'fresh, uninhibited creativity' in my second language in any conscious way. In fact, after a few years in England I no longer consciously felt English to be a foreign language although it might have remained so – and remains so – in a residual sense. In long-term retrospect it now seems there are both advantages and disadvantages in working with a chronologically second language. The advantages include a kind of ultra-sensitivity to the curiosities and possibilities of the second language; the disadvantage is an incomplete understanding of the ordinary; of some infinitely sensitive cultural system at the heart of the banal.

3. Your formal education is basically that of a visual artist. You studied Fine Art and you teach art now. Do you think that the exquisitely visual quality of your poetry has been a consequence of it, or rather that both your love for painting and the pictorial character of your poetry emerged out of an inner urge to visualise, both with words and colours and as poignantly as possible, experiences of all kind, some of which with highly traumatic content?

I don't teach art now but did for some nineteen years. It is hard to tell what is consequence and what is cause. I think that engagement with the practice of fine art – chiefly painting, but in general the making of visual images - taken together with a love of art history and the history of the visual in general (as well as with the language applied to it) have certainly opened and informed areas of the imagination. At the same time I suspect they have only done so because the visual sense of the world was present in the first place. I think I have always been aware, however crudely, of the host of meanings (plural) of visual signs. As regards traumatic content, I am not sure that I think of content in that way. There are traumatic subjects, one sees, remembers or imagines dreadful things, but in beginning a poem originating in trauma, the trauma is transformed into process – it is almost a game. This goes back to my understanding that language is not an attempt to replicate reality, but the making of reality, a reality whose structures are an aspect of its meaning. Once you have structured a trauma, it is no longer content but play: dangerous play in some respects, particularly depending on the structure, and an absolutely serious form of play. By playing with structure (I don't mean just simple things like metre and rhyme, but I include those) the poem offers a meaningful location for trauma: it gives trauma a place to be, to rage as fiercely as before, but within a system where it finds its proportional place among other things.

4. You are as skilled a translator as a poet and have doubtlessly encountered the eternal problems posed by the translation work. The 'Dichthauer', a group of students from our department and myself have been dealing with some aspects of the limits of translatability in our creative writing workshops. We are very much interested in your answer to the question: "Is everything translatable"?

The simple answer would be to answer that nothing is translatable but that we go on translating because there is no choice. Language itself is translation. Clearly, there is a wide range of activities that are described as translation, ranging from 'I want a glass of water' through to 'I caught this morning morning's minion, kingdom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn falcon' (Gerald Manley Hopkins), from the prose crib of a poem to the attempt to reproduce not only its prose meaning but the conditions under which the poetry remains poetry. We can translate broad categories sufficiently well to make transactions possible, providing simple transactions are all we want, but that is not always the case. One form of poetry translation asks: *how closely can I recreate the experience of reading this poem as a native reader of the original language* (the answer is not at all closely), another asks: *what poetic potential in my own language do I see in the poem in front of me regardless of the experience of the native reader*. As a translator of relatively unknown Hungarian poets I opt for the first form; as a translator of well-known and often translated poems from languages less familiar to me than Hungarian, I often opt for the second, if only because I know that several examples of the first option are already in existence. In effect, however, the first option is likely to bear traces of the second, and the second is likely to carry traces of the first.

5. Our next seminar will deal with the limits of translatability as illustrated by metaphors in poetry. We will translate verse by contemporary poets, mostly English-speaking, into German. Could we kindly ask you to offer us a poem of your own for this purpose?

Yes, I will provide a short poem. Please choose from one of these two:

1. Kleichen and a Man

I have seen eternity and it is like this,
a man and woman dancing in a bar
in a poor street on an unswept floor.

It clings and plots and is desperate,
at a point between violence and abjection,
between warmth and agoraphobic fear.

Let me reverse this and accept the fear.
Let me drop all objections to abjection,
since life itself is desperate

and has to tread the unswept floor
carefully, lovingly, while the bar
hovers in eternity. Like this.

2. Chet Baker

Somewhere at the far end of the hall
In a year you can't remember,
So far away it might have been yesterday,
A voice begins to fall.

Nothing but pathos across a certain distance
That vanishes as soon as heard,
But keeps falling, a wan thin voice
Incapable, it seems, of resistance...

It is only gravity after all, the sound
Of a horn whose very echo fades
In falling. But, God, to be falling
Like that all the way to the ground

And be littered with broken phrases
Even as air clears and smoke rises.

6. The quandary whether poetry should or not be translated by poets has had various, even diametrically opposite answers. Octavio Paz, for instance, stated that poets are rarely good translators, as they tend to use the poems to be translated as pretexts for their own creative endeavours. Where do you place yourself in this respect?

Octavio Paz is referring to what I called my second option above. I think I have explained this a little in my answer to the fourth question. I don't think it is necessary to be an original poet in the receiving language in order to translate, but one must have a good technical capacity for poetry. The original poem will then provide the originality lacking in the capable but less original poet. It might therefore be argued that the best translators of great poetry will be good, rather than great poets. But it would be an impossible argument to maintain as a principle since there would be too many exceptions. Someone with no ear is not likely to be a good translator of poetry. If I may be allowed one subversive thought on behalf of option 2: is it not better that a great new poem should come into the world rather than that a contractual obligation to make as faithful a translation of a great original poem be fulfilled? In other words might not translation be a conversation rather than a service? I suggest this while remembering very clearly that the obligation to translate is not only contractual but moral too in some way.

7. What is your opinion about the role of learning foreign languages in our modern world which, unfortunately, is still far from being free from conflicts?

It is marvelous to learn foreign languages, not just to avoid conflicts (there have been

plenty of civil wars) but to enter the world more fully, more sensitively, more skeptically, more aware of both the world and of everything we say about it.

Thank you very much, Mr Szirtes, we are looking forward to welcoming you again at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich.

Thank you for the questions. I hope to visit Ludwig Maximilian University again before too long.