The Stephen Spender Prize is open to everyone, regardless of age or language skills. Maybe you only have vague memories of the French lessons from your schooldays, or wish you had learned your grandparents’ native tongue, or maybe you’ve never even considered learning another language ... but anyone can take part. This year, we’re introducing additional commendations for first-time entrants! And you could become one of the 2020 prizewinners, who will benefit from:

- Cash prizes
- The publication of their translation in our booklet and on our website
- Eternal fame! Many previous winners have gone on to become award-winning poets and translators.

“My best gift from the Stephen Spender Prize is self-belief. Translation freed me from years of writer’s block, renewed my confidence, and led to the publication of my first book…”

Jane Tozer, 2006 prizewinner
"I actually first read [The Traveller] in translation 15 years ago, and I started to think about it again after I came back from walking the Camino de Santiago last year. I wanted to show it to the friends who had accompanied me on that walk, as I felt that so much of what we had experienced was echoed there, and because I couldn’t find that translation anymore, I translated it myself. To me, translating comes from the same desire that I have when teaching English literature, to bring something that I think is beautiful to someone who hasn’t read before, as if to say: 'Isn’t this amazing? Isn’t this exactly what tiredness feels like, isn’t this exactly what trees look like out of a train window?’ [...] Taking part in this competition has created for me a real desire to bring Romanian poetry to those who haven't read it before and to help other bilingual young people discover their native country’s literary culture, and then share it with others."

At a time when uncertainty and change are affecting every aspect of our lives, we want everyone to be able to access the power of poetry. And what better way to ensure our minds can continue to roam free, exploring unfamiliar cultures and lands, than to read and translate poetry from all over the world? In the words of Mary Jean Chan, poet and co-judge of this year’s Prize:

‘Now more than ever, I turn to poetry for its propensity towards truth, its tensile strength, and its insistence that language can, and must be, the bridge that connects us all during these difficult times.’

Mary Jean Chan, poet

Translation can seem a daunting and mysterious process when you’re new to it, and poetry translation even more so. But here’s the thing: There is no right or wrong way to translate, and no such thing as one perfect translation. If you were to give the same text to ten different people, the translations they produce would be very different. What matters is being playful with language, and enjoying the process of bringing the poem into English. So, whether you’ve never translated before – be it poetry or prose – or you have but would like some encouragement, read on for some tips to get you started.
Choosing your poem  

Seek to be inspired and challenged

Try to choose a poem which speaks to you in some way – one that will both inspire and challenge you. If you have access to poetry books at home, look through these. If not, browse online: there are websites dedicated to poetry in all the languages you can imagine. Try the Poetry Translation Centre and Modern Poetry in Translation websites, or look through our archives.

It doesn’t matter if the poem has been translated before; your version will be unique (just make sure that, if you look at other translations, you mention this in your commentary.) In 2019, we received over 700 entries from 65 languages, and we hope to top this in 2020. Why not surprise us with a language we haven’t encountered before? It can be from any language, ancient or modern. This year, for the first time, we’re also welcoming translations of rap lyrics, joining spoken word and slam poetry, as well as of BSL poetry.

If you find a poem you like, but aren’t sure if the genre will be eligible, drop us a line at prize@stephen-spender.org — in all likelihood it will be! If you need some inspiration, we have a suggested list of contemporary and classic poems in several languages. If you want to find poems in a particular language, try a simple Google search in the language in question. For example, to find contemporary Brazilian poetry, search for: ‘poesia brasileira contemporânea’. NB: You don’t need permission from the poet/publisher to translate the poem, but SST will seek permission to publish it if you win - it’s therefore helpful to note the name of the volume in which the poem was published, or the URL if it’s an online publication.

The practical bit: entry guidelines

To enter, we invite you to submit your English translation of a published poem from any language, together with the original poem and a commentary of no more than 300 words (guidelines for the commentary are given below). You can enter either online or by post – full instructions are on our site – and payment (£8 per entry for over 18s) can be made via PayPal.

The submitted translation should be no more than 60 lines long, so you can submit an extract if your chosen poem is longer. Each translation must be your own original work and not a copy or substantial copy of someone else's translation; your translation must not have been previously published or broadcast.

The entry and commentary guidelines differ slightly for the open category (over 18s) and youth categories, so please read these carefully on our website, together with the FAQs and Terms and Conditions.
The creative bit: 
translating your poem

Once you have chosen your poem, read it through, both on the page and out loud – or listen to it, if your source text is spoken word or rap – exploring it from all angles. It’s generally agreed that there is **no closer reader than a translator**.

**How does it make you feel?** Consider the **tone** and the **atmosphere** it depicts. Think of some adjectives that come to mind when you read it: is it joyful, sad, contemplative?

**Listen** to how the words and lines sound in the original. Is the poem smooth and flowing, or does it have an abrupt, staccato rhythm? Does it build up to a crescendo, or start with intensity and settle into calm?

Circle and **look up any words you don’t know** (if the source language is new to you, this could be most of them!) in a physical or online dictionary. If you can’t find them there, and you know a native speaker, consider asking them to explain the word to you.

"I would encourage you to spend ample time on hearing the original poem speak, especially if it is in a language that you know. As a creative writer, your task is then to see how best to translate not just the meaning of the source text, but also its musicality, its cadences, its rhythms of speech. Draft the translation boldly; the meticulous editing process can come afterwards."

- Mary Jean Chan

Are there any **cultural references** in the original which would be unfamiliar to an English-language reader? How do you feel these could be best conveyed? Perhaps they can be retained, giving the reader a sense of something new and previously unknown. Or maybe it will serve your translation better to re-imagine these, creating an equivalent feeling in the English language.

Look at the **form**. Does it have a regular metre? Consider how you might like to approach its form as you translate. Do you feel that the original form should be retained? Perhaps **free verse** would better serve the poem in English, or maybe you could swap the form for another, like a sonnet? Is it a rhyming poem? Depending upon the language of your source poem, it may be trickier to reproduce the rhyme in English, and if you try to grip onto it too tightly, you may find that the essence and mood of the poem slips away. **Rhymer** can sound forced; if you choose to use rhyme in your translation, try to make it sound as natural as possible. Rhyming dictionaries can be found online, try RhymeZone or Rhymer.

One could say that the aim is to recreate the poem in a way which prompts similar feelings in the English-language reader to those experienced by the source-language reader. It may help to think to yourself: **If the poet’s native language were English, how might they have expressed this?**
Making a first draft

Now you’ve familiarised yourself with the inner workings of your poem, it’s time to make your first draft! Approaches to this vary; some people prefer to get a very rough, literal draft down quickly, while others take it slow, turning over the word choices in their mind before putting pen to paper. Feel into it and see what works best for you; whenever you’re new to something, it takes time to figure out which approach suits you best.

You may want to start by making a literal translation, then taking a more creative, freer approach as you edit. If you encounter tricky words or sections during your first draft, it’s okay to leave them to come back to later – often the time and space will help a solution arise, and it’s better not to spend ages stuck on one part.

Editing

Well done, you now have a draft translation of your poem! The next stage – to edit – is an essential part of any translation and creative writing process, revising and polishing to make sure the text reads well in English in its own right. It’s always advisable to give yourself time for this: try to set aside your translation for a day or two before coming back to it with fresh eyes. You’ll be surprised how solutions to tricky problems can come to you in the most unlikely moments, after you’ve given your mind a much-needed break.

Once you’re ready, look at your translation again. Read it out loud to yourself. How does it sound? Are there any sections that sound awkward? (Top tip: try to save each version as you edit, so you can easily go back to a previous one).

Translating is about making choices, delving into each word, examining it from all angles. When you edit, question whether each word is working as hard as it can; is there perhaps a better choice? Is the image being vividly conveyed? Assume that, unlike you, the reader won’t see the original poem, so it’s important to make sure the translation stands alone as a good poem. Does it sound as though it could have been written in English originally? This doesn’t mean you have to remove all elements of ‘otherness’, or echoes of the other culture, but rather that it prompts equivalent reactions and emotions to those a reader would have had from the original.
How to write the commentary

One of the aims of the Stephen Spender Prize is to shine a light on translators and the translation process. In your commentary of no more than 300 words, which will be judged on content rather than style or expression, you can tell us about your approach: for example, why you chose to translate this particular poem, and about any challenges you encountered translating between the source language and English. This could be about a cultural reference which is very specific to the source language and culture. How did you approach this and what was your solution? Or it could be about a particularly tricky word, or an element of wordplay. Or was the original in a particular form which you felt needed adapting in order to convey the core message and feeling of the poem in English? Please note that the commentary guidelines are slightly different for the youth categories, and can be found on our website.

Example

*Here is an example commentary written by Ollie Evans, who won second prize, as a first time entrant, in the open category in 2019. You can find more examples of commentaries from previous years on our website.*

"Elfriede Gerstl (1932–2009) played an important part in the post-war Viennese literary scene. This poem combines her distinctive style and humour with themes of landscape and alienation. I emulate the poem’s visual style. Kleinschreibung (lower-case writing) was typical of the radical poetry of the Vienna Group (with which Gerstl was associated) with its roots in Bauhaus modernism. The closest anglicising equivalent is lower-case first person pronouns, recalling e e cummings. While abolishing hierarchies between words, it also highlights the speaker’s sense of alienation; as the subject isn’t capitalised, they no longer take precedence over nouns and verbs. Metrically, I paid close attention to syllables and stress in order to create an equivalent rhythmic echo of the original.

Several word choices diverge from the German to highlight the interweaving of historical violence with the everyday. In line 16, I used the Germanic, ‘fiends’, instead of the French, ‘enemies’, in order to highlight the unsettling proximity between ‘fiend’ and ‘friend’ (‘Feinde/Freunde’).

For someone who survived the Holocaust in Vienna by hiding in cupboards, this ambivalence can be a matter of life and death. The etymological allusion also reveals a connection between the two languages that is both familiar and alienating; a tension that I think underlines the poem as a whole.

‘Gerüstet’ means both ‘ready’ and ‘armed’, like a soldier ready to attack, while ‘fortified’ could allude to a castle or a more quotidian sense of fortification against a cold. I decided that the combination of the two senses – the military with the everyday – was more effective than the more literal ‘armed’ as it gets at something that subtly underlines the entire poem (as well as much post-war Austrian literature): the silent historical violence that pervades everything from everyday language to the supposedly ‘natural’ landscapes of the Austrian and Teutonic Heimat."
The London-based Poetry Translation Centre works in collaboration with poets and translators to bring international poetry – in particular from Africa, Asia and Latin America – to English-speaking audiences. Their excellent website holds an archive of international poetry, displaying the final English language version of the poems produced in their workshops, along with the original language text and the literal “bridge” translation used. There are also a number of dual language recordings, so you can listen to versions of the poem in both languages. Their site offers fascinating insights and is a very useful resource, especially to those new to translating poetry.

Another great website is Poetry International. Its archives are filled with poetry from around the world, displaying the poem in its original language and the translation. You can search by country, language or the poet’s name for inspiration, or simply browse those which have been recently added.

Modern Poetry in Translation is dedicated solely to poetry in translation and has a wonderful site filled with inspiring world poetry. You can sign up to their newsletter for regular updates and subscribe to their print editions, published three times a year. They have an extensive online archive of poems which you can simply browse or search by original language, poem author/translator, and also by word or phrase.

The website Lyrikline, created twenty years ago by Literaturwerkstatt Berlin, holds over 12,000 poems in 87 languages, with over 19,000 translations, and has a thriving online community.

Our own Stephen Spender Trust website contains a wealth of useful tips on translating poetry, including advice from previous prize judges, an archive of previous prize-winning and commended poems, and past winners’ news. Other highlights include ‘An attempt to categorise translated poetry’ by George Szirtes. We also have a YouTube channel, with advice from poet and teacher Michaël Vidon, as well as from this year’s Prize co-judges.

“It's heartening to see this evidence of a country engaging with other languages and cultures, and further proof of the intense creativity of translation and its power to build bridges, start conversations and celebrate difference.”

Charlotte Ryland,
Director, Stephen Spender Trust

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