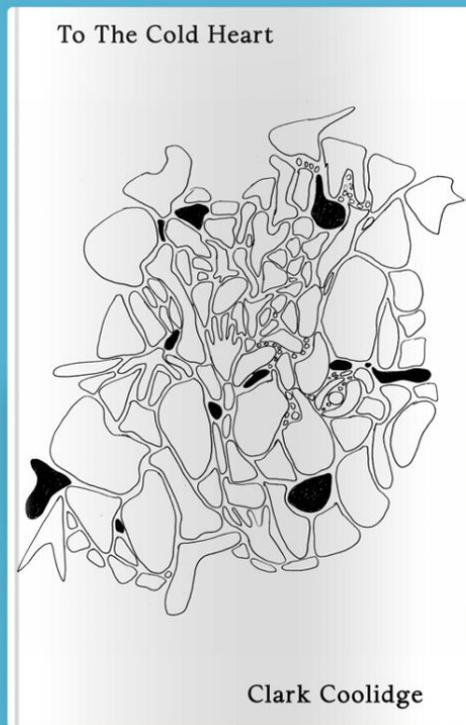


BOMB

Translating to Transform: Clark Coolidge Interviewed by Parker Menzimer

A collection that joins several notable English-language translations of the Tang Dynasty poet, Hanshan.



Clark Coolidge's *To The Cold Heart* (Fenrick Books) is a complete translation "in the loosest sense," of the Tang Dynasty poet, Hanshan. Also referred to as Cold Mountain, Hanshan was a prolific and mythic recluse who recorded his reflections on the rock walls of the mountain where he dwelled with his "sidekick," the poet Shide. *To The Cold Heart* joins several notable English-language translations of the ancient poet, but bears the distinction of being the least literal by far. Here, Coolidge is much more concerned with sound and attitude than with sense.

Coolidge's bibliography is extensive, and often beguiling; his books read like decisive answers to unasked questions. *To The Cold Heart*, an idiosyncratic translation of an idiosyncratic poet, is no exception. At the same time, it's also compelling as a longform exploration of, as Coolidge puts it in this interview, a certain "manner of speech." It is a spritely book, despite its considerable length, a bright surface on which to slip and be carried away.

I first encountered Coolidge's work in an undergraduate seminar—"The San Francisco Renaissance"—with Cole Heinowitz. We studied *Mine: The One That Enters the Stories*, a dense work of poetic prose that demonstrates writing as a process of excavation. I've since had other occasions to study Coolidge's line, which, whether isolated on the page or embedded in paragraph-like blocks, can thrum with contrasting material. His ranging vocabulary is organized in service of rhythm—a quality often associated with his work—and perpetually balks at the precipice of resolution.

I was honored by this opportunity to chat with Clark about *To The Cold Heart* on the brink of its first publication, thirty-one years after its original composition. We connected by phone one Friday afternoon in early May, on a call facilitated by Clark's wife, Susan Coolidge.

—Parker Menzimer

Parker Menzimer

I was reflecting today—I guess it's been twenty-four years since you left the Berkshires to move to Petaluma, California.

Clark Coolidge

December of '97. So that makes it twenty-four this December. Seems impossible [*laughter*]. We lived in the Berkshire hills for about twenty-seven years. This seems shorter, but it's coming up on the same number.

PM

You've published thirteen books since then, by my count, and your *Selected Poems* came out from Station Hill Press in 2017.

CC

There have been some smaller books since then. A few ten- or twelve-page booklets, things like that. I've got over fifty books now. That seems impossible, too.

PM

A lot of your work has been published in shorter volumes by smaller presses. That's the case too with *To The Cold Heart*. How did you and the publisher, Jon Glovin, decide to bring this work out together?

CC

He found out about a box of books in the apartment of Larry Fagin, who had just died. All of that went to the library at Yale, except a couple of my manuscripts, evidently. Jon called me up and said, "I'm thinking of trying to publish these, what do you think?" There were two other attempts to publish *To The Cold Heart*. This was the third major attempt. I was a little bit worried that something would come from outer space and stop it.

PM

I wonder if living in the Berkshires and enduring the winters in any way connected you to Hanshan.

CC

I knew about Hanshan from the Gary Snyder translations back to the '50s. In 1990, a book came out from SUNY Press by a guy named Robert Henricks, which purports to be the complete annotated translations of Cold Mountain. I got hold of it and realized that there were over three hundred Hanshan poems. I thought, "I like long projects, I'll try to write a poem off each one of these." Henricks's translations were not particularly poetic. I've always felt like translations of poems are only good if they're good *poems*. If they *are* good poems they take off from the original material at some point. Like Pound's Li Po poems. Pound didn't really know Chinese, but "Exile's Letter" is one of the greatest poems of all time. I felt the freedom to let it associate, and extend. Sometimes the poems are closer, and sometimes they're so far off you can hardly tell the source.

PM

I'm curious about when you hew closer to the original meaning. In *Space* you experimented with radical syntax, doing away with certain joining language—conjunctions and articles—to make a kind of a fractured line or constellation. I think

Barrett Watten called that “rhythmic and semantic imponderables” in the context of your work.

CC

That sounds like Barry.

PM

Your Cold Mountain poems temper that instinct a little bit. There are lines like “barrier of commingling screens a boon” where you’re aping the logic of a sentence. Was that a response to the work you were translating?

CC

I was retranslating: I took off from that material and made my own version. It certainly is a transformation, taking it another step or few steps further into my crazy head, where words associate with words.

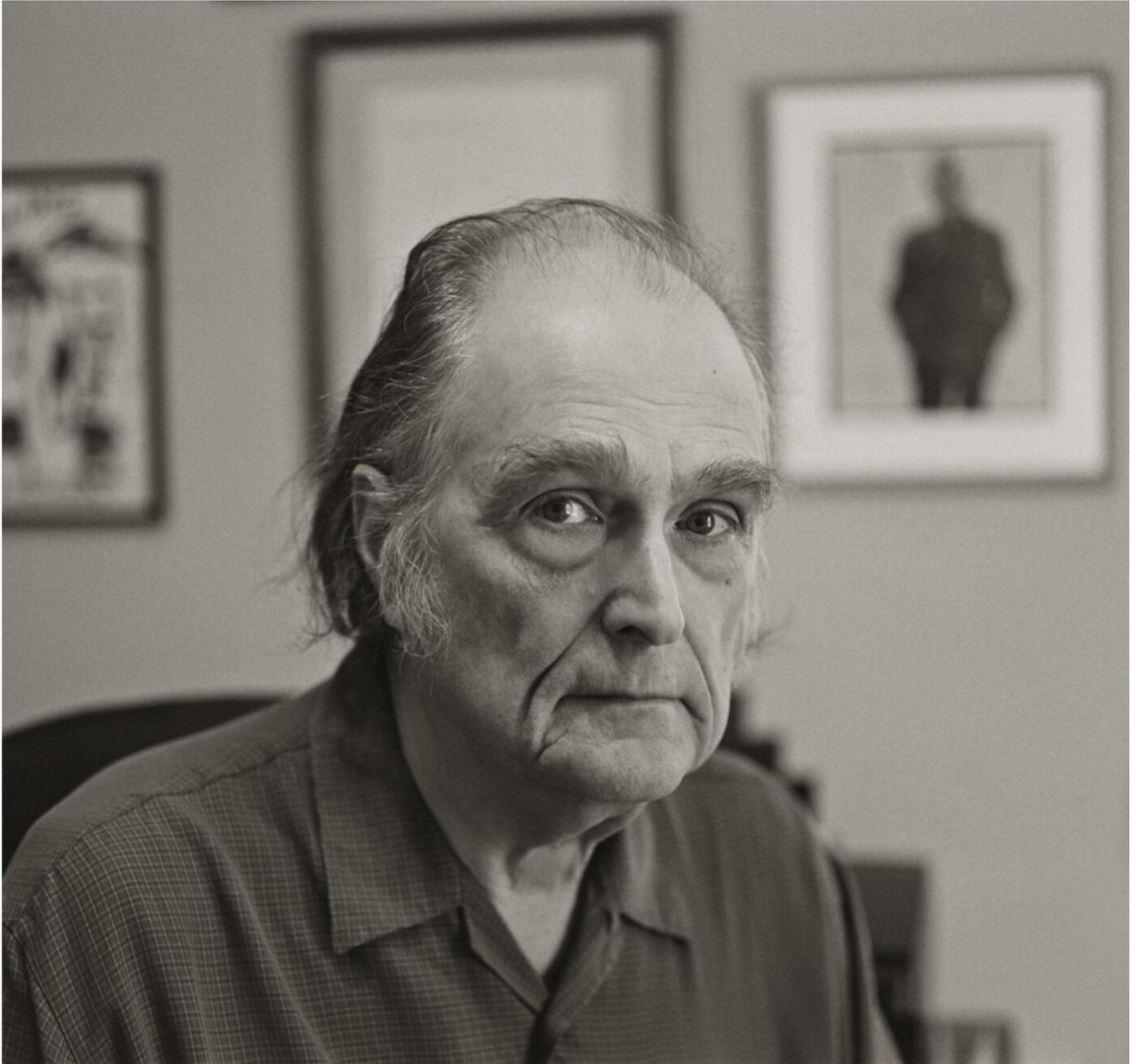


Photo of Clark Coolidge By John Sarsgard.

PM

In an interview with Tom Orange for *Jacket* you said, “you always have your basic language, or your subconscious choices, or whatever it is.” I’m interested in this idea of “basic language.” Does the process of retranslating compel you to bring in *new* language?

CC

I’m basically using my memory of language—that may be one way of putting it—which would be what I remember from spoken language, and what I remember from the

page. If I'm writing at a certain pace I can pick up things from all those areas and associate. I wrote a lot of these things without really realizing what I was writing. I was writing fast. I knew what the project was, of course, but I wasn't trying to make it *be* something. I mean, it had to make *itself* something through *me*.

PM

You've said that creating work can be like "feeling a shape." Which I interpret as, finding a form and then working language into that form. Is that something you were doing with these?

CC

It may have been Schoenberg who said "I sense the envelope of the piece"—I think he used the word *envelope*—"before I write any of the notes." I can see, sort of dimly, this general, overall form. And then I use that. There's some kind of—a manner of speech, I'd say—that Hanshan uses. A kind of first-person narration of memories, or events, or adventures. And I don't think I could totally avoid that if I wanted to. It relates to the epigraph, where I talk about living on the green schist, which is the bedrock of the Taconic Range we were living on.

PM

I was interested in that epigraph, partly because it gives us this geological vocabulary to run with. I know that's very important to you. It made me think of a disagreement you once described with Aram Saroyan: his reading of your work as "a big cliff of rock." And you said, "Geologists read the rocks." I thought of the word *schist* in that context. It's a word of differentiation.

CC

It ended up that I was a major in geology at Brown, two years before I realized, Hey, you know, you're not going to do this. What you really want to do is run around the woods and find crystals.

PM

I love thinking about these poems as the outcomes of a descriptive science of words. There's so much careful attention paid to the properties of each word.

CC

Yeah, that's nice. As long as it carries me forward, and I'm not just stuck with some definition. Right? You wouldn't want that.

PM

Let me ask about the use of arrangement in these poems. These poems are roughly four-to-nine lines, and there's a lot happening with enjambment. But there's no extra space within the lines, something that you've worked with before.

CC

By the time I was writing *To The Cold Heart*, I was more into phrases and sentences rather than just single words, although the single words are there. John Ashbery was interviewed, I think in the '60s, or early '70s, by Bill Berkson, who asked him a lot of questions about *The Tennis Court Oath* and that period of his writing. The main poem we were fascinated with was a numbered sequence of short poems called "Europe," some of which are literally one word. John said, "I wanted that to be the whole experience. I wouldn't reduce that word or associate it with anything else. I would just put it right in the middle of the page." He said later he wanted to give that same feeling of an isolated object, a charge or whatever, to a phrase, maybe even a sentence or a paragraph. That's something I've thought about, and I never associated with him, but there he is saying it in this suppressed interview that was never actually published. I guess I'm trying to say, that in terms of arrangement, I wanted to have that same emphasis on a phrase or a sentence or some longer linguistic figure. That was my argument with Aram. He would reduce everything down to one word. I would reduce it down to one word, and then accumulate other words around it.

PM

That's an interesting way to think about the poetic phrase, a kind of accumulation.

CC

Back then I wanted to put things together that didn't normally go together syntactically. I was working with tape in the '60s. I would put words on loops of tape. Put one word on one loop, and another word on another loop, and the loops are different lengths. Let's say you had two words that normally go together, like "I see." Play them at the same time and the gap between the words changes—they would be two separate words. Just two words going by each other at different speeds.

PM

In the Orange interview you talk about how a project can "get ahead of you," and compel you to "chase it down." I think you said, "I've always been following something. If it stops pulling me then I will stop."

CC

There have been times when I thought maybe I was finished. Something happened toward the end of the '90s, just before I moved out here when I thought, You know, I've written an awful lot, and maybe I didn't have to do this anymore. I mean, there's a side of it that's not entirely pleasant, you know? You're pushed and pulled and you want to find what's there. On the other hand, you get up every day and think, I've got to do this again? Then, within days of that feeling, I would find myself writing another line. I

realized, like many of us have realized, that it's not under our control. Evidently, this is what we're supposed to do.

PM

What are you following now?

CC

Well, I'm trying to play the drums again. I had a couple of strokes a couple of years ago, and I lost function of most of my left side. My left hand and foot. I didn't lose any speech, or brain function, but I couldn't control my left side. I've gotten a lot of it back, but there still are things that aren't automatic anymore. On the other hand, I've found it interesting that I'm forced to stop and look at these things that I would normally do, and think of doing other things. Maybe slower things, more simple phrases. Poetically —do you know Nathaniel Mackey's work? Did you see that new box set that New Directions put out?

PM

It's gorgeous.

CC

That's almost one thousand pages of poetry. In one shot. It's amazing. In that book there are two main poems that were happening in parallel, and he's been writing them for twenty years. I've been doing something similar. I've realized, in the middle of all this writing, after twenty years, that it's really all one work. I think there are about seventeen thousand pages or something like that. And I'm not exaggerating. In the last ten years it's been mainly sonnets, which I don't understand. I never had that much interest in sonnets, per se. I know I was really influenced by Ted Berrigan's sonnets. A lot of us in that generation were. Even if we thought we came out of William Carlos Williams, it turned out it's maybe so basic to the poetic effort that you can't get away from it.

PM

You published some of your sonnets in 2013, right? With Fence Books.

CC

88 Sonnets, yeah. That's a tribute to Berrigan because there are eighty-eight sonnets in his book. Also, eighty-eight keys on the piano. The old eighty-eight. But anyway, the long poem, the endless poem, doesn't seem to be stopping.

PM

We'll look for your box set.

To *The Cold Heart* is available for purchase [here](#).

Parker Menzimer is a poet and editor. He is editorial director of Topos Press and an MFA candidate at Brooklyn College where he is a Truman Capote Literary Trust Fellow.

[poetry collections](#) [translation](#) [china](#) [language poetry](#) [Clark Coolidge](#) [To The Cold Heart](#) [Hanshan Parker Menzimer](#)

Read also:

Clark Coolidge's *A Book Beginning What and Ending Away* by Wendy Lotterman

