Our discussion started with a broad question concerning Don’s notion of the version — what is the difference between a version and a translation? Don explained that he thinks a version privileges the reader, and that the notion of a “translation” can set up readers for disappointment. He said that a version focuses on the final product, not the source text, and questioned whether poetry can be translated at all. Isn’t poetry always a version rather than a translation? In poetry, he said, connotation takes precedence over denotation — the precise coordinates for translation don’t exist. There is a difference, then, between a “faithful interpretation” and an “accurate interpretation”. It’s impossible to be faithful to the author, he argued — the difference between translating the living and translating the dead is simply that the dead never complain.

What follows is a summary and paraphrasing of questions posed/answered.
Q: Where does creativity lie in the act of versioning?
D: Latitude is a better way of expressing what a version tries to do — not creativity. Creativity is capable of disaster too — be wary of “creativity” as a praise term.
Q: If there is no proper translation of poetry, why use the term at all?
D: The distinction is worthwhile — the reader needs to be clear about the fidelities involved in the process, and the framing/approach to translation. There is also an important spirit of the conversation which arises from the process of translation when this term is used. An honest, subjective response might include reading material that inspired the source text.
Q: As you say you’re a monoglot, how can you talk about translation at all?
D: This is the most controversial point — he knows enough German to read a bit, but anything that bills itself as perfect translation, even from a fluent German speaker, will be flawed, unless you have 100% fluency in each language — and even then there are issues — but you can make a version without knowing the source language at all.
Q: If a version happens to cohere to the original, is this significant? In that case you would have fidelity to both feeling and to language.
D: Even faithfulness to language is subjective — poetry destabilises meaning, because there is a high degree of complexity when it comes to the wording. Poets can also be misrepresented by prejudice concerning personality politics. You can lose features in translation, but you can also gain features as well.
Q: Rilke is more popular in English than in German — why?
D: Rilke feels prophetic — addresses big questions that English poets had avoided for a while — the bravery is a gesture made by the translators.
Q: Is the version then free from prejudice?
D: It’s interesting to see the way certain features and assumptions make their way into the resulting piece — there is a subconscious influence of culture, time period, artifacts of the translator, etc.
Q: Is there a danger with versions that everything will mirror English poetry?
D: The truth is somewhere in between — a bit like transcribing music for another instrument. English is like a piano — one note for everything — you’ll lose something, but gain something else.
Q: Does a certain translationese approach solve the problem of favouring the source text or the translation (Pound as an example)?
D: Exoticism introduces a distance, but does it? Bad syntax is a cheaply-won effect.
Q: Is it best to serve one master?
D: A good translation is the result of taking latitude to save the best features.
Q: How far can a version be removed from a source?
D: Depends on what you’re trying to do — semiotic interpretations enters you and becomes subjective (Jakobson talks about this).

Q: Relation of author to text — how much is translation a label that applies to the translator’s identity? Is a different identity implied?
D: Yes — to say you’re a translator implies certain expectations about language skills — read the translation and measure the distance — it will depend on the text — integrity is important — don’t represent a version as a translation.

Q: An idea of the author as important? Can one get to know an imaginative personality?
D: Couldn’t agree more — author’s intentions intuitively important, but it has to come from the text — we posit a human hand 00 we can reconstitute consistent personalities to some degree.

Q: Subjectivity of translation — surface features v. involved features — can you collaborate with these subjectively? How does that work? What does creativity mean?
D: Tension itself is interesting, but the braver leaps in composition are made in the home stretch — misplaced fidelities can get in the way — you can ask “What would the author do here?”

Q: If it’s a poem it needs to be on its own, but also needs to relate back to the source — how do you make this decision?
D: It depends on what your interest is as the reader — his worry is that it becomes an academic game that loses the reader. Do what you want, but be honest about the course you’re taking.

Q: Do you think everything is a version?
D: Depends. Is versioning a universal procedure? Poems are translations form the silence anyway — reader’s experience is different for each reader — reading itself is an act of translation — we never know what the reader receives.

Q: Why do we need this distinction? Does it just have to do with linguistic competence?
D: It’s a difference of degree — if you call a version a translation then you can disappoint the reader — it’s primarily a distinction made for the reader.

Q: Commercial considerations of audience?
D: Thankfully, less commercial demands are less important for poetry than prose.

Q: Pound’s translations — how do they work?
D: This is why we need the distinction — Pound’s were good poems, bad translations. Discussion: Does it matter whether we find an author from a translation — whether it can be traced?

Q: Danger of oversimplification?
D: Yes — this is why some texts are harder to translate than others — what you really want is a discussion of nuance — you’ll never get the tone, but you need a tone, to retain some complexity — what’s important is to clearly define the task as interpretation.

Q: Parallel reading (publishing translations alongside originals) — substitution is another approach — but stressing multiplicity is important? How important is it to stress that you’re not skilled in the act of translation? Does it give you interesting freedoms?
D: Ignoramuses such as himself only have selfish reasons for doing this — he did this to get rid of a voice within his own writing that he doesn’t like anymore.

Q: Does it help not to know the original language?
D: It might.

Q: Source v. target invalid?
D: Maybe this is his prejudice — source v. target is not a good description of metaphor, because there’s a flow of senses in both directions, and he thinks the same is true for translation — there’s a conversational approach involved — against military vectors.

The discussion ended with a redefinition of the difference between a version and a translation, and a poetry reading of Don’s poems, “Dog”, “The Dead”, and “Blood”.