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EDITORIAL: TRANSLATION AND THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

By Rainer Schulte

The essential function of English Departments and certainly also of Modern Language Departments is to provide students with techniques and methodologies for meaningful and enjoyable interpretations of texts. However, fashions of criticism have greatly endangered the close reading of literary and humanistic works. Articles meant to illuminate literary texts have removed themselves considerably from a work under consideration, and they frequently lapse into an academic jargon that builds a wall between the reader and the poem or the fictional work.

Some decades ago, English departments introduced creative writing programs to revitalize the act of reading and to reconnect students with the dynamics of words on the page. I venture to say that the primary goal of creative writing workshops was not to train each participant to become a major writer, but rather to make the reading of literary works an enjoyable experience for students. As a parenthetical observation, I might add that creative writing courses are not part of the curriculum in European universities. Yet, the academic world has accepted creative writing as a viable educational pursuit. However, translation is rarely considered an essential component of literature departments. Many deans and chairs of literature programs fail to recognize the importance of translation as a major force to reinvigorate the study of literature and the humanities. Scholars who work either as translators of literature or as scholars of translation studies are often not recognized by the established literature departments, and they certainly don’t get credit for their work when it comes to academic promotions.

The time has come to reverse these prejudices. The philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer states that “reading is already translation.” Octavio Paz contends that when we read a text, we must translate it into our present sensibility. It follows that reading and interpreting a text within the same language is itself a translation. An investigation of the translator’s methods can shed light on the process of interpretation. The translator’s starting point — and here resides the important link with the act of interpretation — must be anchored in what translators have to face and comprehend in the foreign text. If we transfer this idea to the act of reading within the same language, then each word must be considered a “foreign” entity. The reader must approach each word as if it were a word in a foreign language. A writer manipulates words, often modifies and enhances their established connotations, creates new fields of meaning through the interaction with other words, and builds a universe of feelings and emotions that enlarges the reader’s and interpreter’s way of seeing and understanding a world view. Practically speaking, the reader as translator continuously raises the question: what kind of research must I undertake in order to do justice to the text I am reading, whether I choose to translate it from a foreign language into my own or whether I translate it into my present sensibility within the same language?

For a moment, it will be helpful to contemplate on the nature of words. The reading process has to start with the assumption that each word reflects an inherent uncertainty, both as an isolated phenomenon and as a semiotic possibility of a sentence, a paragraph, or the context of the entire work. The rediscovery of that uncertainty in each word constitutes the initial attitude that the reader has to bring to the text. Reading becomes the making of meaning and not the description of already-fixed meanings. From the translation point of view, the conceptual frame of interpretation should be changed from “What does a text mean?” to “How does a text come to mean?” The latter reaffirms that there is no such thing as the definitive interpretation of a text, just as there is no definitive translation of any foreign work.

To place these concepts into a tangible practice, I outline two exercises that should illustrate how translation methods can intensify the act of interpretation. The first one is concerned with the research area and the second one with the notion of multiple translations and therefore multiple interpretations.

Words have an etymological and a philological existence. If we take, for example, the first line of Francis Bacon’s essay “Of Studies,” which reads, “Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability,” then the immediate research will have to focus on what meanings were attributed to delight, ornament, and ability in the respective century. The Oxford English Dictionary will be the best tool to determine their etymological origin. Tracing these words throughout the century to the present moment will provide the reader with the changes those words
have accumulated during their travel from the past to the present. Even though these words still have the same spelling in the present, their semantic environment has changed, which forces the reader to reevaluate their connotations in the Bacon essay. To further show the nature of interpretation, it might be helpful to take a few sentences from the Bacon essay and have those translated into contemporary American English. The internal workings of the act of reading and interpretation will become obvious.

Another example to introduce the reader to the internal structure and movement of a poem is the use of multiple translations. If we take Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem “The Panther” and the various translations that are available to us, we gain insights into the interpretive process.

The first two words of the poem are “Der Blick….” Many translators have rendered this poem into English. The choices brought by the translators to “Blick” are amazing: gaze, vision, glance, seeing, and sight. Every time the reader is confronted with yet another English choice for “der Blick,” the poem has to be reentered and rethought from that perspective. Each reading engages the reader in reconstructing the poem from a different perspective. In its original visualization, translation fosters the practice of establishing relationships within a given text. Words, images, and expressions are linked by reinforcing similar directions of thinking. Translation methodologies refocus our attitude toward the interpretation of literary works and activate in us, the readers, the faculty of associative thinking. The pleasure of reading as translation creates in the reader a never-ending dialogue between reader and text. We, the readers, constantly explore how a text comes to mean.

It is time for professors of literature to make translation workshops an integral part of their teaching and for chairs of literature departments to consider translation research and translation methods an important innovation to bring the pleasure back to the reading of English and world literatures.
FRANTZ FANON: RETRIEVING A LOST VOICE

A conversation between Celia Britton and Richard Philcox on the latest translation of Frantz Fanon’s Les Damnés de la terre (The Wretched of the Earth)

Celia Britton is Professor of French at University College London; she is a Fellow of the British Academy and an internationally recognized specialist on French Caribbean literature, in particular the work of Edouard Glissant.

Richard Philcox is a well-known translator of French Caribbean literature and has translated most of the works of the Guadeloupean novelist Maryse Condé into English. His latest translation of Fanon’s Les Damnés de la terre (The Wretched of the Earth) was published by Grove/Atlantic in 2005. This is his first venture into a philosophical and political text. He is currently working on the English translation of Fanon’s Peau noire masques blancs (Black Skin, White Masks).

Celia Britton: It might initially seem odd to describe Fanon as a “lost voice.” Can you explain why or in what sense he is “lost”?

Richard Philcox: As I see it, Fanon’s voice, I mean his actual voice, got lost in the Farrington translation of 1963. Although we must pay homage to the original translation, which had the merit of conveying Fanon’s ideas to an English-speaking readership, although it raises the debate on whether it is better to be badly translated than not translated at all, Farrington’s original translation of Les Damnés de la Terre is seriously flawed. All I know of her is that she is or was English, and probably Left in her political opinions and sympathetic to the Third World. In fact, she was a member of the British Communist Party. But she seems to have had very little knowledge of the cultures she was dealing with: for example, the West African dress the boubou and Muslim slippers are translated as saris and pampooties (p. 221); and the vessels for carrying water known as les canaries came out as the girls of the village with their canaries (p. 228). And the poor Songhais of Mali are described as underfed and illiterate, thrown between sky and water with empty heads and empty eyes (p. 209). If she did have a strategy of translation, it was literal, almost word for word, and naturally, the voice of Fanon loses its force, becomes dull and stilted. Farrington appropriated the text for its message and the ideology of the author. In the process, she forgot about the inner logic of the text, how the words come to have meaning. The levels of language, the texture of the words, the images and metaphors tended to be disregarded in favor of the message. (See the article by Elizabeth Miller, “Applying Theory to the Practice of Literary Translation: Contemporary Latin American Authors” in Translation Review No. 69, 2005.)

One of the great challenges a translator faces is to find the voice of the author he is translating and to muffle or even gag his own. And yet by translating (Octavio Paz says “transforming,” “transmuting”) his text into another language, the translator’s voice will inevitably emerge, and if he is not careful, the translator’s and not the author’s style will dominate, taking over linguistically and stylistically. I just hope that my translations of Maryse Condé and Fanon in English don’t sound the same.

The very fact of transporting Fanon into English inevitably means a loss. So what do we gain? Very much like a conductor interpreting his own version of Beethoven’s 5th, Schubert’s Lieder, or Chopin’s sonatas, or a director interpreting Shakespeare, Racine, or Molière with a 21-st-century vision, or Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice or Sense and Sensibility adapted for the screen, I decided to modernize and update Fanon’s text for a 21st-century readership. Once I had established the literary and cultural context of the work, I retrieved Fanon’s ideas and Fanon’s voice in a 21st-century vocabulary that can carry them over to an English-speaking readership “to adjust a previous translation to the pulse of the present language,” as Rainer Schulte says. As I say in my translator’s postface: “I felt that his voice had got distorted and he should be given a second chance to be heard. John Felstiner wrote in his book Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu’ that “perhaps the real ‘original’ behind any translation occurs not in the written poem, but in the poet’s voice speaking the verse aloud…. What translation comes down to is listening.”

I have the good fortune to be in possession of a tape of Fanon’s address to the First Congress of Black
Constance Farrington’s translation: “The symbols of social order — the police, the bugle calls in the barracks, military parades and the waving flags — are at one and the same time inhibitory and stimulating: for they do not convey the message ‘Don’t dare to budge’; rather they cry out ‘Get ready to attack.’” (p. 53).

My translation: “The symbols of society such as the police force, bugle calls in the barracks, military parades, and the flag flying aloft, serve not only as inhibitors but also as stimulants. They do not signify ‘Stay where you are.’ But rather ‘Get ready to do the right thing.’” (p. 16).

Inspired by Spike Lee and more in keeping with the French that says you’d better get it right.

The second example deals with the French who have gone over to the other side and champion the Algerian cause:

“Le scandale éclate vraiment quand des prototypes de cette espèce passent de l’autre côté, se font nègres ou arabes et acceptent les souffrances, la torture, la mort.” (p. 139).

Constance Farrington’s translation: “The scandal explodes when the prototypes of this division of the species go over to the enemy, become Negroes or Arabs, and accept suffering, torture, and death.” (p. 145).

My translation: “The scandal really erupts when pioneers of the species change sides, go ‘native,’ and volunteer to undergo suffering, torture and death.” (p. 94).

I believe that the fact of having lived in Africa and the Caribbean has given me greater understanding and empathy of the developing world and its problems. Especially the fact of living in Guadeloupe, where Fanon’s decolonization of the mind is so urgent. Unlike Sartre’s preface, Fanon was not writing for the Europeans, and it was this empathy, of entering into the mind and body of the colonized, that was one of my greatest challenges.

CB: When the first translations were published, the English-speaking readership for Fanon was closely linked to the militant Black Power and anticolonial struggles of the 60s. Now, 40 years later, who is reading Fanon in English? Does this new readership make different demands on the translator?

RP: The publication of the English translations of Fanon in the 1960s coincided with a time of extraordinary political and social upheaval, not only for the Black Panthers, but also for the radical student
movement in the American universities. It was the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement, the Cold War, the African independences and the emergence of socialist and anarchist movements of all sorts. The success of a book or film often coincides with a public need. Postcolonial literatures in French and English are a case in point, and today the postcolonial scholar has had a field day with Fanon. For example, most postcolonial scholars work with the English translation. Charles Lam Markmann’s translation of “L’expérience vécue du noir” as “The Fact of Blackness” completely eradicates Fanon’s use of phenomenology, and instead of linking him to Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Jeanson, places him in the black/white relationship of the U.S. South, and the infamous Ya Bon Banania, that grinning Senegalese infantryman advertising a breakfast cereal, becomes “Sho’ Good Eatin.’” In fact, most of Markmann’s references, especially in dialogue, refer to the American South. The translator of 2006 is very different from the translator of 1965. He or she can look back at the anticolonial struggles of the 60s and view them from a different angle. The world context has radically changed, countries have changed names, the wretched of the earth are at the gates of Europe, climbing over barbed wire to get into the Spanish enclaves of North Africa, hiding in or under trucks heading through the Channel Tunnel for the so-called Eldorado of the United Kingdom, clinging to boats and ships with the hope of arriving on the shores of Italy. The 21st century is synonymous with globalization, migration, and new technologies by which even cell phones can be used as deadly devices for setting off bombs or calling for help from two towers in downtown Manhattan. And even today, we haven’t yet seen where the Internet will take us. For the translator of the 1960s, political causes and ideologies were more clear-cut, Communism versus Capitalism, Independence versus Colonialism, Left versus Right, Republican versus Fascist. Today we would talk of the growing inequalities between the rich and the poor, North and South, exclusion, disposable people, the Other rather than the colonized, the asylum seekers, and the undocumented aliens. Since the translator is a product of his environment, the 1960 translator had no qualms translating “indigène” by “native” or “nègre” by “Negro” or “tam-tam” by “tom-tom.” She was totally immersed in the colonial context and vocabulary. I am in no position to do so. Our vocabulary has evolved. Words today are politically charged. I am in a postcolonial context translating for a readership, mainly of university students, who are far removed from that historical context. Unlike the French or the British of the 1960s who were all feeling the effects of the anticolonial struggles, the war in Algeria, and the decline of the empire, today’s readers have to be introduced to the world of colonialism and its realities with a vocabulary that is not reminiscent of Hollywood movies, but rather be made aware of who the colonized of today really are. Who are the contemporary equivalents of the colonized?

CB: Henry Louis Gates has claimed that Fanon’s writings are “highly porous, that is, wide open to interpretation” — and that as a result, critics have in effect constructed a variety of different Fanons to suit their own purposes. Do you think that by providing a more accurate translation of his work, you have, so to speak, eliminated some of these, or is it more a question of preserving the openness of his thought?

RP: I cannot think that anyone outside the academic community in the Anglophone world would now bother to read Fanon. He is quoted constantly as a theorist of decolonization and, wrongly, as an advocate of violence. But few people have actually read him from cover to cover, and in many people’s minds, from the kids from the “banlieue” to right-wing activists, he has become a stereotype, someone to quote. Any new reader of Fanon would be a student introduced to him by his teacher. Although every text is porous and open to interpretation, I believe Fanon’s thought to be quite clear, especially as we look back from the year 2005 in hindsight. Even the famous phrase “Àu niveau des individus la violence désintoxique” (p. 90) seemed clear to me, and I have kept “violence is a cleansing force” (p. 51), although I must admit I had second thoughts on my weekly trip to Princeton through the blighted landscape of urban New Jersey where the graffiti on the wall read “Detox the Ghetto.” His ideas, of course, can be challenged and debated, but I think we now have a much clearer idea of what he was thinking and especially experiencing. Perhaps because we can look back objectively, perhaps because we feel less involved. Perhaps there will be less interpretation and more discussion of his ideas. His thoughts on the bourgeoisie of Africa joining hands in the huge caravan of corruption and becoming “a bourgeois bourgeoisie that is dismally, inanely, and cynically bourgeois” (p. 99). His thoughts on culture differentiating Africa from the Americas, visioning the disappearance of black culture in favor of national cultures, regarding tradition as basically stifling
whereas a culture is constantly changing, modernizing, and penetrated by outside influences. History proved him wrong, of course, on many points, such as Pan-Africanism, the role of the peasantry in leading a revolution, and the fate of Algeria. But at the time, his analyses of alienation and decolonization were extraordinary eye-openers, not only for complacent Europe but also for his fellow islanders, blinded to reality. With a book like Macey’s biography, which lays important emphasis on Fanon’s Martinican upbringing and background, we can understand how Fanon’s lived experience as a black Martinican influenced his thinking. As I am a reader-friendly translator, perhaps I have made a more accurate translation, but only in the sense that the reader, and probably a young reader, will gain better access to Fanon’s thinking and understand not only the colonial context but also his prophecies of things to come.

There are passages in which his lyricism transports him into opacity: “Alentour le Blanc, en haut le ciel s’arrache son nombril…” (Peau noire masques blancs) (p. 92); “Cette affectivité en érection, épire par des gardiens invisibles mais qui communiquent sans transition avec le noyau de la personnalité, va se complaire avec érotisme dans les dissolutions motrices de la crise.” (Les Damnés de la terre) (p. 57). Don’t forget that a translator is writing for the reader who does not know the original text in the original language, so he has an enormous responsibility towards both the author and the reader.

**CB:** One of the most distinctive features of Fanon’s writing must surely be the range and diversity of his intellectual references, and therefore his linguistic registers — from quite technical psychiatric discourse to literary quotations, philosophical terms, political analysis, autobiographical anecdotes, and his own peculiar kind of lyricism. Your translation manages to convey this disparate quality very well without endangering the overall coherence of the work — was this a problem you were aware of?

**RP:** Yes, and perhaps that is his modernity, his hunger for new sources, new information; especially Black Skin, White Masks: you can imagine the young Fanon arriving in France from his parochial Martinique and reveling in all the literature from Sartre, Hegel, to Merleau-Ponty, the libraries and bookshops, the journals of psychiatry, and the wealth of information at his fingertips; it’s a call for what could be possible, a hope for humanity. “Oh mon corps, fais toujours de moi un homme qui interroge!” (Peau noire, masques blancs) (p. 188). Knowing he was going to die, it’s almost as if he wanted to cram as much as possible into Les Damnés de la Terre from all his readings. The book is almost theatrical in tone, and some of the passages could easily be made into a performance. We know that he wrote three plays early in his life, very Sartrean in register, and that he used the theatre in the therapeutical treatment of his patients at Blida. This brings us back to Ato Sekyi-Otu and his description of Fanon’s work as one dramatic experience. Fanon’s life itself was filled with drama, and as Edouard Glissant says, he was the only French-speaking Caribbean who really matched actions to words by espousing the Algerian cause.

**CB:** Your translation of The Wretched of the Earth is now published, and you are still working on Black Skin, White Masks. Did you have a specific reason for doing them in this order?

**RP:** This was the editor’s decision. I believe that The Wretched of the Earth is perhaps his most famous book and the one that is most widely read and taught. It is perhaps easier to read than the bricolage of texts in Black Skin, White Masks, which is very much a book written for the French-speaking Antillean and the lived experience of the black man and woman. We should also keep in mind that the chapter “On Violence” in The Wretched of the Earth plus Sartre’s preface have become autonomous texts and are perhaps studied far more than the rest of the book.

The two books are in many ways very different. Let us not forget that Black Skin, White Masks was first written as a proposal for his thesis and Fanon was still smarting from his experiences in the Free French army during the war (“Je me suis trompé,” he wrote his mother, describing the racism of the French officers, realizing that war was not his war) and from the alienation of his fellow islanders.

The tone of The Wretched of the Earth is angry: “But the war goes on. And for many years to come we shall be bandaging the countless and sometimes indelible wounds inflicted on our people by the colonialist onslaught.” (p. 181).

“For centuries Europe has brought the progress of other men to a halt and enslaved them for its own purpose and glory; for centuries it has stifled virtually the whole of humanity in the name of a so-called ‘spiritual adventure.’ Look at it now teetering between atomic destruction and spiritual disintegration.” (p. 235).
Whereas *Black Skin, White Masks* is ironical, sarcastic even, slightly irritated: “Don’t expect to see any explosion today. It’s too early … or too late. I’m not the bearer of absolute truths. No fundamental inspiration has flashed across my mind. I honestly think, however, it’s time some things were said. Things I’m going to say, not shout. I’ve long given up shouting.” (p. 5 in the original French. My translation).

Fanon’s move from the Caribbean to North Africa via France must have affected him as a writer. From a disillusioned intellectual, he became an angry young militant actively involved in the cause of decolonization. He goes from the subjective “je” to the militant and engaged “nous.” It is interesting to note that in *Peau noire masques blancs*, the subjective and objective are indissociable, and he constantly confronts the scientific “nous” of the psychiatrist and philosopher with the subjective “je,” the consciousness, and the objective “il,” the lived experience of the black man. In *Les Damnés de la terre* it is the “nous” that dominates, but not the scientific “nous” of *Peau noire masques blancs* but “nous” the Algerians, “nous” the decolonized, and the translator had to be very much aware of these nuances. The first translator of *Peau noire masques blancs* simply translated all the “nous” by “I” and thereby lost something in the process.

We definitely need to know where Fanon is coming from and where he was brought up, as Macey’s biography brilliantly shows. I personally came to Fanon through my experience of the French Caribbean and the alienation of his fellow islanders. Fanon had little patience for the Martinicans, and on his last visit to Martinique in 1951, Alice Cherki quotes him as saying: “I met more milquetoasts than men.” And then there is that quote to his friend Berthene Juminer I mention in my postface where he comments on the tragic events of 1959 in Martinique: “Let them pick up their dead, rip their insides out and parade them in open trucks through the town …. Let them yell out: ‘Look what the colonialists have done!’ But they won’t do anything of the sort. They’ll vote a series of symbolic motions and start dying of poverty all over again. In the end, this outburst of anger reassures the colonialists. It’s merely a way of letting off steam, a bit like a wet dream. You make love to a shadow. You soil the bed. But the next morning everything is back to normal. And you don’t think any more about it.”

He definitely needed a colony with a cause, and of course he found it in Algeria.

**CB:** Through the research you did for the translation and through the process of translation itself (which creates a particular intimacy with a writer’s thought), you must have arrived at a very clear sense of Fanon the man (as opposed to the theorist). How would you describe him to us?

**RP:** Difficult. We probably wouldn’t have got on at all. There are perhaps some authors it’s better not to meet, except through their writings. He loved to talk and discuss, something that I’m not too fond of. According to Simone de Beauvoir, he told Claude Lanzmann that he would pay twenty thousand francs a day to talk with Sartre from morning to night for two weeks. He was an intellectual engagé. I’m just a translator.

He must have been impetuous, didn’t censor himself, let his emotions gush out and was probably very susceptible.

I think the best way to describe him is to quote Aimé Césaire: “Perhaps Fanon reached such heights and his vision was so broad because he was a French Caribbean, in other words he had started off so far down and from such a narrow base. Perhaps only a French Caribbean, in other words one so mystified to start off with, could manage to dismantle with such skill the most elusive mechanisms of mystification; only a French Caribbean, finally, could want so desperately to escape powerlessness through action and solitude through fraternity.”

### Notes

WHEN TRANSLATION FAILS: THE ETHICS OF NOT TRANSLATING AND THE LINGUISTIC WEAPONRY OF ARGENTINA’S DIRTY WAR

By Clare E. Sullivan

Translators, for completely understandable reasons, devote a great deal of time and energy devising ways to solve difficult linguistic problems; so much so that we become transfixed by translation, obsessed with converting every last detail of a literary work to a linguistic and contextual equivalent. More than a few translators consider leaving any word or phrase in its original form to be an intellectually lazy thing to do. By and large, I count myself as one of them. This past year, however, I became involved in a translation project that convinced me not only that there are certain instances in which leaving words unchanged is not lazy, but that it can be culturally more appropriate (dare I say ethically preferable) to converting them to English equivalents. I am thinking specifically of works in which certain words have highly specific political implications and uses, works like 259 Saltos, uno inmortal (259 Leaps, the Last One Death-Defying), a complex work of fiction by Alicia Kozameh that deals with personal and political implications of Argentina’s Dirty War.

259 Saltos is an autobiographical novel about the author’s political exile in the United States and Mexico. In it, the protagonist, Sara, offers a first-person account of her struggles with her new land and language. Interspersed among the anecdotes and cultural observations that make up the bulk of 259 Saltos, however, are grisly details and recollections of the period of political oppression and terror that occurred in Argentina between 1976 and 1983, the period that has come to be known as the Dirty War. During this time, a military junta took control of the government and punished dissenters brutally. An estimated 11,000 people were kidnapped and thrown into prisons where rape, torture, and starvation were commonplace (onwar.com). Many of these prisoners were never heard from again. They became know as los desaparecidos, for these and the myriad other victims of the Argentine government, language played a central role in their political lives, on the one hand as an instrument of systematic oppression, on the other as a weapon of resistance.

As Marguerite Feitlowitz explains in her book A Lexicon of Terror, one of the strategies the Argentine military employed in its attempt to hide its acts of kidnapping and torture was to soften the language it used. Torture, for example, was always referred to by another name, such as trabajo (work) or tratamiento (treatment) (53). “Language helps to ritualize torture; it lends structure, provides a ‘reason,’ an ‘explanation,’ an ‘objective’” (50). In addition, the regime poisoned the vocabulary used to describe its enemies. The guerillas who opposed the government were called “subversive criminals,” and their bases of operation were known as “criminal camps” by the regime (51). Such manipulations of language allowed the rulers to justify their abuse of dissenters and to criminalize them in the eyes of the general population.

Maintaining their own vocabulary, then, was a way for the common people to combat the regime’s brainwashing and hold onto their sense of dignity. The word desaparecido referred to those who had been kidnapped by the military. Using this word was a way in which their friends and family reminded themselves that these people had not gone on vacation or died of natural causes. They were gone because some unnatural forces had worked upon them, hence the transformation of an intransitive verb “to disappear” into a transitive one “to disappear (someone).”

As I set out to translate Kozameh’s novel, I tried to stay mindful of the ways in which language had been used during the Dirty War. I wanted readers to understand that words under the military regime were not always what they seemed, that many had in fact been changed by the Argentine government to influence the way that people saw them, as well as by prisoners trying desperately to hold onto their identity. I therefore felt quite a bit of responsibility. I didn’t want to simply change the novel into English, I wanted to recreate some measure of the struggle that was occurring with language in Kozameh’s story.

In The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference, translator and theorist Lawrence Venuti explains that the translator is responsible for retaining not simply the meaning but also the flavor of original texts. Terming it “foreignization,” he claims that such a practice is long overdue in the world of translated texts. He derides the tendency to erase difference in a target language, a practice that he claims obscures the culture of the original (as well as
the act of translation itself). “In practice the fact of translation is erased by suppressing the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, assimilating it to dominant values in the target-language culture, making it recognizable and therefore seemingly untranslated” (31).

Influenced by this idea, I elected not to translate various words and expressions from 259 Saltos into English, partly to retain historical perspective, partly to preserve the novel’s political and cultural implications. Beyond that, some of the horrors of the Dirty War Kozameh attempts to portray in her novel simply cannot be adequately expressed in any language other than Spanish. Of course, in other instances I was compelled to preserve vocabulary for the same reason any other translators might: because certain social and cultural terms, notably for foods and racial distinctions, have no equivalent in English.

The final reason I chose to avoid translating some particular terms was to preserve the novel’s tone of critical distance and its idiosyncratic style. Consequently, readers seeking to conquer this difficult text must be willing to look up certain terms, either on the internet or in a bilingual dictionary (or simply infer their meaning from context). My hope is that after such inquiry, a reader will gain a more complete picture of both a foreign region and an increasingly distant historical period. My belief is that challenging readers in this way is justified, if for no other reason than that the central theme of the novel is displacement and the crossing of boundaries between one culture and another.

What follows is a selection of words that I struggled with during the course of translating 259 Saltos that I hope will illustrate some of this thinking.

**A highly selective glossary of terms**

**Milicos.** A derogatory term Argentine political prisoners used to refer to the military. It is impossible to capture the pervasive resentment and fear that led to the creation and popularization of this term. Feitlowitz, in an interview with a community organizer and former prisoner of the Argentine regime, provides an insight: “These families are starving,” she says, “but they’re too afraid to organize, even just five women sewing! The milicos taught them well,” she said, using derogatory slang to refer to the military: Fear us, fear each other, fear yourselves”(136). The emotions and associations this word conjures among the survivors of the Dirty War are as obvious as they are unique to that particular place and time. It was therefore clear to me that such a word demands the respect one would give any other cultural artifact. That is, it demands to be left alone.

Which is not to say I did not try my hand at translating this word, in addition to many other such artifacts, early on. At first, I tried translating *milicos* simply as “military” but found that instead of having negative implications, it connoted authority, even respect (at least to a U.S. audience). Thus I tried to build in disdain and disgust with “fucking military,” but while that certainly conveyed the author’s anger, it failed to capture the fear that is such an important aspect of the word. A good example is this scene from 259 Saltos in which a prospective employer explains why he cannot hire Sara, a former subversive: “And, let me tell you, even if I did decide to give you the job, in less than an hour the *milicos* or the police would issue a summons and make me fire you. Or they’d threaten to close me down. Or they’d kill me in the street. Right here.” (Kozameh 98). The *milicos* had such a fierce reputation that the mere mention of their name struck terror into people, making their presence and collective will felt even in absentia. Since *milicos* is an informal expression in Spanish, not a proper term such as ejército or militares, I initially thought I would find a suitable substitute in the slang we use to describe the U.S. military or domestic police. Terms like “boys in blue,” however, were too soft. Other possibilities (G.I. Joe, Jar Heads) referred to specific branches of the U.S. military that didn’t correspond to Argentina’s armed forces.

*Sótano* literally means “basement,” but in the context of the Dirty War it meant a makeshift prison in the lower levels of a police station. It was in the *Sótano* that the author endured fourteen months of imprisonment and torture. The context of the word in the novel does not make the meaning clear, however (“Now, as in the Sótano: with my shoes tied tight, no threaten to close me down. Or they’d kill me in the street.” (Kozameh 98)). The *milicos* had such a fierce reputation that the mere mention of their name struck terror into people, making their presence and collective will felt even in absentia. Since *milicos* is an informal expression in Spanish, not a proper term such as ejército or militares, I initially thought I would find a suitable substitute in the slang we use to describe the U.S. military or domestic police. Terms like “boys in blue,” however, were too soft. Other possibilities (G.I. Joe, Jar Heads) referred to specific branches of the U.S. military that didn’t correspond to Argentina’s armed forces.

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Although it is a proper name, I considered translating *Sótano* as “the hole,” a common slang expression for prison in English, so that the reader would know where the narrator was. That expression, however, derives from the Black Hole of Calcutta, an infamous prison of 18th-century India where it was thought more than one hundred prisoners died in cramped, airless conditions (Wikipedia, see esp. pars. 1–4). Since that name referred to a historical event on a faraway continent, I decided to look elsewhere for a term. Other slang terms in American English are “the joint,” “the big house,” “the stony lonesome” or “the slammer.” All would be instantly recognizable to a
U.S. audience but would be associated with “doing time to pay the crime,” not with unspeakable acts of political torture. The name “dungeon” might have implied sadistic horror. Another option was to translate the word literally as “basement.” But since the Sótano refers to a particular place and time, I decided in the end not to alter it.

Compañero is of course a cognate for the English word “companion.” In Spanish, however, it has both political and cultural implications. Sometimes it is translated as “comrade,” because it has been used to denote political partners in the socialist movement. More broadly, it describes the kind of political camaraderie found among the lower echelons of a variety of protest movements. But in the case of 259 Saltos, it refers to the tens of thousands of ordinary citizens whose lives were transformed upon being kidnapped by the milicos. To the armed forces, these people were known as “subversive elements.” The name employed by their fellow sufferers, compañero, underscores their humanity and shared misery. “And when my elbow on that sheet unleashes that laughter, I’m laughing like crazy with my compañeras during a recess in the courtyard of Villa Devoto prison, about some nonsense, some joke, the sudden flowering of a good mood, the cleverness of one of us. And when my elbow on that sheet unleashes that cry, I’m crying with rage at the impossibility of restraining the hand of a torturer as it moves towards a compañero’s testicles, electric cattle prod in hand” (Kozameh 76). The term is thus profoundly descriptive of a unique kind of companionship, one that enables survival among victims and fashions kinship from shared experience.

Translating the word as “companion” would eliminate too many of the cultural echoes inherent in the word. A companion could be a classmate or a roommate involved in a purely platonic relationship with the narrator. In the text, however, compañero most often connotes a lover who either lives with or sustains a particularly life-giving relationship with the protagonist. “And of course our compañeros, husbands, boyfriends, prisoners, were the love — that would be waiting for us when they returned to the street — and it wasn’t that we were forgetting such a privilege, of course not” (Kozameh 88). More often than not, compañero has a two-fold meaning in 259 Saltos, personal partner and political partner. The literal equivalent in English has no such implications.

A rosca de reyes is a ring-shaped cake, yet it also refers to the form of someone who has just undergone torture: the fetal position. Rosca de reyes is made annually in Latin American to commemorate the Día de reyes (the Feast of the Three Kings, also known as Epiphany), when children receive gifts left for them by the Magi. Though Latin Americans celebrate Christmas Eve with great fanfare and feasting (and Christmas Day in a more subdued way), children do not receive presents until the Día de reyes, which occurs on the 6th of January. The rosca is a sweet bread formed into a round, doughnut-like shape that contains a prize, often decorated with a hardboiled egg. Using the word for a festive holiday cake to signify a human being in post-torture agony clearly speaks not only to the despair of the Dirty War’s political prisoners but also to a deep and bitter cynicism. “Juliana had become some kind of rosca de reyes (without a hard-boiled egg, without a hidden prize) deposited on the innermost bed of our shiny new dwelling place. And she shook with sobs that, in their own rhythm and harmony were analogous, in their function, to the synchronized vomiting taking place in the row of three latrines along the end of the ward” (Kozameh 82).

I initially translated rosca de reyes as “a box of Cracker Jack” because it is probably the best popular American example of a sweet treat with a prize inside. But Cracker Jack clearly lacks the descriptive power of the original. First, it doesn’t approximate the round shape of the cake and of Juliana’s suffering body. Also, while it may conjure memories of a childhood treat, it does not have the holiday and religious associations that throw the isolation and alienation of Juliana into such stark relief. My next thought was to try to translate this expression precisely, since something very like a rosca de reyes can be found in North American culture: the “King Cake.” As many American readers would know, the King Cake is the traditional pastry of Mardi Gras (at least as it occurs in and around New Orleans). It is decorated in brightly colored icing, sweetened with sprinkled sugar, and contains a hidden prize (a tiny plastic baby that confers upon the finder the privilege of making next year’s cake). It shares the doughnut-like shape of the rosca de reyes. But is it acceptable to translate a rosca de reyes not merely to another language but to an altogether different culture?

In his book Le Ton beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language, translator (and translated author) Douglas Hofstadter describes two types of texts, the “culture-dependent” and the “culture-independent”: “Thus there are books … whose message is primarily ‘culture-independent,’ and there are novels, history books, and so forth, whose message is primarily ‘culture-dependent’ … As for novels, in
most cases it would also be a disaster to ‘transculturate’ them — to reconstruct them in the style of the target culture. Every trace of the original would be lost, and all that would remain would be a vaguely reminiscent tale told in a completely new setting” (152). To me, the argument is compelling. Thus, although it seemed that I had hit upon the perfect cultural equivalent (both terms even contain a reference to a king!), the author objected, her grounds being that a King Cake does not exist in Latin America, let alone in Argentina. The term would transpose a place- and time-specific reference from Argentina to present-day North America, where it would be stripped of its cultural significance. Furthermore, she maintained, it would swap a Christmas feast for a Lenten one. Hofstadter would agree with her. Even though the rosca de reyes is unfamiliar to American readers, inserting a provisional equivalent is in the end disrespectful to the text and the Argentine culture.

*Imbunche* is an indigenous word that appears late in the novel as Sara describes her experiences as a prisoner. The word comes to Argentine Spanish via the Mapuche language (an indigenous people of the Southern Cone) and refers to a mythical monster; a defomed child kidnapped by witches and raised starving (García 109–112). The *milicos*, Sara explains, would like to change everyone, to brainwash them so that they offer no resistance to their captors: “So I would like to change everyone, to brainwash them so starving (García 109–112). The *milicos*, Sara explains, would like to change everyone, to brainwash them so that they offer no resistance to their captors: “So I would like to change everyone, to brainwash them so that they offer no resistance to their captors: “So I should have transformed myself into something other than what I am … Better to be, let’s see, a piece of dough before it’s baked. A daisy. An *imbunche*. A spoonful of sand … They made sure I understood it without much subtlety” (Kozameh 48–49).

Interestingly, the *imbunche* is the only item in Sara’s list that speaks directly to the cruelty and isolation inherent in her circumstances. Nevertheless, it signifies an important form of resistance. Even as Sara is losing herself to the *milicos’* point of view, she can still recognize that she is being fundamentally abused. Feitlowitz observed in her prisoner interviews that government torturers talked obsessively to their victims in an effort to make their actions seem like a part of normal life, to change their victims’ views of reality (49–50). In the text, Sara’s captors make it clear that she will not survive for long if she does not change her way of looking at the world and, consequently, herself. I therefore kept the word *imbunche*. It is, after all, a term native to the culture of Chile and Argentina (though similar stories exist in many cultures; in fact, Kozameh herself sees the *imbunche* as an archetypal Rosemary’s Baby-type legend), and its political significance within the context of the Dirty War cannot be denied.

*Patrona* and *Patrón*. I confess that there were a few (a very few) words that I left untranslated that did not originate within the context of the Dirty War. *Patrona* and *Patrón* were two of them. In the text, the protagonist Sara uses the terms *patrona* and *patrón* in reference to her boss (and her boss’ husband) during her brief stint as a housekeeper in Beverly Hills. The word *patrón* obviously has a long history, beginning with the feudal lords of South American colonial times (or feudal Spain), where a lord exerted almost god-like control over the destiny of his agricultural workers. Sara clearly uses the word sarcastically, to convey the resentment she feels as an educated woman, poet, and activist forced into servile labor in the United States.

In the Catholic Church, a *patrón* is a saint who watches over a particular community or group (Real Academia Española). Sara’s *patrona* fills a similar, mother-like role for her. On realizing that Sara is a poet, she makes a genuine effort to keep her housework to a minimum, at one point carrying her up to her private bedroom when she faints. The *patrona* even provides Sara with special toiletries and a typewriter, inviting her to dinner like one of the family. She shows a concern that, while still condescending, transcends the relationship of boss and underling: “Dear, my dear. I am a little worried. I have the impression that this house, with the six bathrooms and large number of bedrooms, sitting rooms, the enormous kitchen, the two floors, the basement and attic, is too much for you” (Kozameh 37). To call this woman simply her “boss” or even “the lady of the house” would fail to capture the complexity of her role and its historical underpinnings.

**Güera** describes a physical characteristic or type and is a word whose social and political implications are particular to Mexico. According to the *Streetwise Spanish Dictionary / Thesaurus*, güera is a Mexican term for a woman with blonde hair (177). More broadly, however, it refers to someone who does not have indigenous features and is thus more likely to belong to the upper class. The word appears at the point in 259 Saltos when Sara moves to Mexico to continue her exile. Upon disembarking from her plane, she is instantly confronted by the archetype of the güera, which, as in many other cultures, has become the standard of beauty for the advertising industry. The figure is stretched across a billboard. She responds: “So, what is the fantasy of the writer exiled to some part of the world where the intimate and often evident desires of its inhabitants are represented by a blonde
girl, a güera, who looks at them, so sure of herself, from an ad for a product that’s intended to beautify their indigenous features?” (115). She thus recoils instinctively from the racism of her adopted country.

Translating güera simply as “blonde” would of course hint at the status of blonde women in American society, both privileged and mocked, envied and disdained. Indeed, as Sara notices the billboard looming over her, she wonders why this woman should be given such a privileged place. Yet to translate the word in this way removes it from its cultural context: Mexican society in all its bewildering variety, where blondes with blue eyes are adored by the media and dark-haired women with indigenous features are relegated to second-class status. But there are also countless variations and gradations of colors and features there. Güera can refer to someone with European features (i.e., more streamlined nose, lighter skin) even if she doesn’t have blonde hair. It can even denote a foreigner, someone who is not from Mexico and does not belong there. Sara experiences reverse racism in this context later in the novel when, nine months pregnant, she is riding on the bus and no one offers her a seat. Because she is taller and lighter-skinned than most of the other riders, she is perceived as a privileged being, underving of additional special treatment. “So you just hold on, güera, tight, ’cause no one’s going to give you a seat. A working man like me isn’t going to take a chance standing up on this bus” (Kozameh 132).

Palta and aguacate. In general, I chose not to translate food names in 259 Saltos; my rationale, to preserve the culture that Sara carries with her into exile. One of these instances is the scene in which Sara is dining with her patrona’s family in their home in Beverly Hills. Sara is speaking with her mouth full: “I am a political exile, I managed to say between the pieces of celery and avocado (aguacate, palta) still slipping around in my mouth” (Kozameh 38). At the same time, she is trying to communicate with her patrona’s family via a bilingual dictionary. I chose to leave the Spanish words in part because they underscore the difficulty she is having in communicating. Yet I had another rationale for preserving the two terms. Looking at the above sentence, it comprises a list of the different words for avocado in the two major Latin America regions. According to Real Academia Española’s on-line dictionary, aguacate (from the Nahua language) is the word employed in Central America, whereas palta (from the Quechua) is the South American term. This progression is significant, demonstrating her resistance to surrendering the language and culture of her home. Yet in the end, the experience of exile leaves Sara alienated. “You are not Mexican, but you do not speak English well. You do not know how to clean a house, you seem educated, but you are working as a live-in servant. What is going on? Who are you?” (37). She is out of place no matter where she is.

The implications of not translating for the reader

Maintaining the cultural and historical dignity of a text is all very well, but what do these non-translations demand of the reader? First, the reader must be willing to research these terms in the interest of fully appreciating the story. Some of the words, especially the food-related terms (rosca de reyes, palta) are readily accessible through the use of an Internet search engine. A simple Google search for roscas de reyes yields more than 48,000 results, frequently in translation, many including pictures. Among the first ten results, eight were in English, and most went to great lengths to discuss both the cake (many had recipes) and its Catholic context. Other terms (aguacate, patrón, and compañero) were not as easily referenced on the web. Yet all can be found in Spanish-English dictionaries both on-line and in book format. A search for aguacate in the Spanish-English section of www.wordreference.com produced “m Bot (árbol) avocado; (fruto) avocado (pear).” Patrón and compañero can be found this way as well, but since both words have cognates in English, their meanings are easily gleaned from the context.

More difficult are the Dirty War–specific slang terms like milicos. Though accessible on the Web, this word is rarely explained except on Spanish-language websites. Likewise, güera is not easy to find via Internet searches and so must be meticulously traced through Mexican slang sections of an on-line dictionary. Imbunche, an indigenous word, can be found on-line, but again only via Spanish-language websites. And so, even an industrious English-speaking reader can easily end up frustrated.

One option to prevent such frustration was to provide footnotes throughout the text. Yet I decided against it for two reasons. First, 259 Saltos is in many ways a narrative poem. Its form is reminiscent of a book of poems, complete with free verse–like prose and chapters as short as a few lines, even a few words. The writing itself is almost musical, with words chosen as much for their “feel” as their meaning. During the translation process, I read most of the book’s passages aloud, as their rhythm was carefully constructed and tied closely to the story line. My aim
to as great an extent as possible, frequently kept me from settling for simple literal translations of the text. Furthermore, as the importance of the book’s rhythms became increasingly apparent to me, I became increasingly wary of interrupting the reading process with footnotes. I also feared that footnotes might limit the book’s readership, because they are an academic convention (Venuti 22).

Another strategy was to insert endnotes or a glossary at the conclusion of the text. This option was rejected by the author, however, as it was her desire to retain a certain mystery in the text. And indeed, her imperative recalls Venuti, who maintains that it is not only acceptable but necessary to leave evidence of the original culture and language in the translation so as to provide the reader with a more complete encounter with the source text. “Those (translations) that work best, the most powerful in recreating cultural values and the most responsible in accounting for that power, usually engage readers in domestic terms that have been defamiliarized to some extent, made fascinating by a revisionary encounter with a foreign text” (5). In other words, it is the translator’s responsibility to carry some of the culture and history forward from the original text. With this in mind, and in consultation with the author, I decided to retain the Spanish words that pointed specifically to the historical and political realities of the Dirty War or to the social structures and cultural practices of Alicia Kozameh’s homeland.

Admittedly, these decisions pose a challenge to a reader. He or she must be willing to supplement the reading experience with occasional detours into reference texts. Very likely, there will be times when the reader will have to settle for an incomplete grasp of a term. I believe that these small inconveniences and frustrations are appropriate to 259 Saltos, a text that aims to portray a young woman’s ongoing frustrations in creating a space for difference; here, in Mexico, and in her native Argentina. As Venuti reminds us, “to interrogate American cultural and political values, to evoke the foreignness of the foreign text, an American literary translator must not be cooperative, but challenging, not simply communicative, but provocative as well” (23). My goal is to provide readers with that challenge, as well as a compelling, if occasionally disturbing, glimpse into Alicia Kozameh’s world.

Works Cited
Renowned author Willard Manus gives us this grand story of high adventure set on the beautiful Aegean Sea. A Dog Called Leka tells the story of Ben Edgeworth, an eighteen-year-old American boy, and his remarkable dog Leka, as they sail among the Greek isles in a catamaran built by Ben himself. The reader will join with the two adventurers as they face unexpected dangers, learning to survive by their wits and skill. Leka came to Ben as a hungry stray, searching the shipyard for scraps of food. He quickly proves himself to be a faithful companion in an extraordinary journey that will stay with the reader long after the last page is turned.


Willard Manus was born and raised in New York City but lived for many years in the Greek islands, mostly in the village of Lindos, on the island of Rhodes. His experiences there were published in a memoir, THIS WAY TO PARADISE—DANCING ON THE TABLES. While living in the Aegean, he also wrote novels, plays and articles—and learned how to sail and spear-fish.
LOSING SIGNIFIED IN TRANSLATION: KOTZWINKLE’S
THE FAN MAN

by Robert E. Kohn

The defining quality of William Kotzwinkle’s protagonist in The Fan Man is the “very idiosyncratic manner of [his] existence” (Lewis 55). The German and Spanish translations by Dirk Müller and Iris Menéndez of this unique American novel appear to have successfully captured this idiosyncrasy but to have missed the pervasive but subtle signifiers of Tibetan Buddhism. This being a postmodern novel, it is not surprising that many of its signifiers have multiple meanings, some of which would be missed in foreign translations. Although Lewis speaks only in general terms about Kotzwinkle’s allusions to “Eastern religious mysticism,” a reader looking for Tibetan Buddhist themes is likely to find them on virtually every page of The Fan Man (55).1 I would not say that this calls for the kind of “new translations of the same work” that Rainer Schulte (1) advocates in the wake of “new interpretive perspectives,” but it does reveal certain intrinsic limitations in the translation of modernist and especially postmodernist works, which typically have multiple signifieds per signifier.

“One of the most commonly used chants,” writes Paul Roland, “is the Buddhist benediction ‘Om mani padme hum,’ which roughly translates as ‘Hail to the jewel in the lotus,’ an acknowledgement of the Buddha nature that is present in us all” (99). When one of the characters in Don DeLillo’s Underworld comes upon a “spray-paint graffiti […] of Om mani padme hum […] he knows it is […] some kind of mantra, a thing hippies chanted in Central Park” (462). The first sentence of the first chapter of The Fan Man begins with a phrase that conveys the cadence and sounds of this famous mantra: “I am all alone in my pad, man” (9). In the German translation, this is “Ich bin ganz allein in meinem Apartment” (5), and in the Spanish translation, “Estoy solo en mi cubil, tío” (9). The sonorous correlations occur only in the English translation: om (alone), mani (man), padme (pad). It is likely that the ubiquitous “man” in the novel is meant by the protagonist to evoke the solemn mantra; in Saussure’s terms, man is the signifier, om mani padme hum is the signified, and this particular connection of signifier and signified constitutes a “linguistic sign” (67). It follows that there are multiple allusions to Tibetan Buddhism on every page of The Fan Man, for the intimate appellation appears 58 times in the first chapter of the English version, and by extrapolation to all 26 chapters, 1500 times in this short novel. That the translators missed this particular linguistic sign is suggested by the fact that the substituted “Mann” appears only 49 times in the first chapter of the German edition, and the substituted “tío” only 33 times in the Spanish edition.2 The final hum in the mantra resonates in the “humping note” of the battery-powered, hand-held fan in the last sentence of the first chapter (13, emphasis added). The respective translations of humming, Summton and zumbadora, at least incorporate the um sound.

The unkempt, unconventionally dressed, marijuana-soused protagonist of The Fan Man is indeed one of the New York City hippies that DeLillo’s character associates with the mantra. His name, Horse Badorties, whose name is the same in both the German and Spanish translations, suggests his hippie character, for the ancient Greek translation of horse is hippos. His last name is an anagram for “Bardo ties,” which explains the reference to “the Bardo of Dreams, man, if I can locate my bed” (12). This translates as “das Bardo der Traüme betreten, Mann, sofern ich mein Bett finden kann” (8) and “al Bardo de los Sueños, tío, si logro localizer mi cama” (11). The translators in this case and even the critics were probably aware that the Bardo of Dreams is one of the periods between death and rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism, but passed it off as another example of the novel’s idiosyncrasies or “glancing references to Eastern thought” (Lewis 64).

Horse represents the Tantric deity Hayagriva, which means “horse-headed one” in Tibetan and is also one of the emanations of Padmasambhava, who is considered a semi-deity because of historical evidence that he brought Buddhism to Tibet in the ninth century and legends that he was born in a lotus blossom and had magic powers (Evans-Wentz 150, 188, 109). Horse’s frequent references to his “pad” signify not only the padme in the mantra but also Horse’s ancient tie to Padmasambhava. Neither of the translations, Apartment nor cubil (5, 9), has the 1960s connotation that “pad” has, nor do they resonate in the famous mantra or connect to Padmasambhava. Evans-Wentz
describes one of the stranger miracles in Padmasambhava’s legendary life in which a revered dakini “transformed Padma into the syllable Hüm and [...] thereby cleansed [him] of all defilements and obscurations” (132–33). This is the same hum that connects Horse to the mantra and to his humming battery-powered, hand-held fan. 3

Based on a survey of some key Buddhist signifiers in the original English and the two translations, it appears that the German translator was less inclined than the Spanish translator to change some of the arcane terms. Consider, for example, the original and respective translations of

“Fanning myself with plastic breezes, making weird faces, what else, man, is needed? Only one other thing, man, and that is a tremendously deep and resonant Horse Badorties Tibetan lama bass note which he is now going to make:

‘Braaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaummmmmmm mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.’

Mothers with their children look at me, man, and then explain to their kiddies that if you don’t learn to blow silent farts in church you will turn out like that awful man. But the kids know, man, they know it is better to freely release the energies” (Kotzwinkle 29).

“Fächel mir mit Plastikflügeln Luft zu, schneid Grimassen, was sonst noch, Mann, wird gebraucht? Nur eins noch, Mann, und das ist eine ungeheure tiefe und durchdringende Horse-Badorties-Tibet-Lama-Baßnote, die er jetzt losläßt:

‘Brooooooooommmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.’

Mütter mit ihren Kindern seh mich an, Mann, und erklären dann ihren Kleinen, daß, wenn du nicht lernst, leise in der Kirche zu furzen, du einmal wie der schreckliche Mann da wirst. Aber die Kinder wissen das, Mann, die wissen, daß es besser ist, den Energien freien Lauf zu lassen’” (Mülder 27).

“Me ventilo con brisas de plástico, hago caras extrañas, ¿qué más falta, tío? Una sola cosa, una resonancia tremendamente profunda del contrabajo tibetano de un lama Horse Badorties, que ahora éste producirá:

-Praaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaammmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.

Las madres con hijos me miran, tío, y luego explican a sus criaturas que si no aprenden a echarse pedos silenciosos en la iglesia se volverán como ese tio espantoso. Pero los crios saben, tío, saben que es mejor descargar libremente las energías” (Menéndez 24).

In the English, the simulated crepitation signifies Brahma or Brahm. The Buddha is known for repudiating the Hindu god Brahma and rejecting the Brahmins’ claim to superior birth. Buddhism is non-theistic and anti-caste, and whatever meanings Kotzwinkle intended for this passage, one of them was surely derisive. The German word for Brahma is also Brahma and the word for Brahmin is Brahmene, so that Mülder’s “Brooooo…” eliminates the Buddhist linguistic sign. Menéndez’s “Praaa …” makes sense because it is closer to pedos and therefore accentuates Horse’s eccentricity. But it does close off the accessibility of the Buddhist signifier for Spanish readers.

What appears to be the most outlandish chapter in the novel is entitled “It’s Dorky-Day Once Again!” in English (153), “Es ist mal wieder Dorkie-Tag!” in German (149), and “!Otra vez es día de chicharras!” in Spanish (117). Dorky is a silly word in English and presumably, dorkie has the same connotation in German. Chicharra is a quasi-slang word in Spanish that denotes a pesky little bug that makes a rackety noise on very hot days. In the novel, Horse exasperates his new friends who have come to talk to him and all he will do is keep saying “Dorky dorky dorky […]” over and over and over; 186 lines with nothing but dorkys, about as many dorkys in this one chapter as there are mans in the entire novel. 4 Unlike chicharra, which has no serious status as a meditation mantra, dorky is very close to a Tibetan word, Dorje, which “is applied to anything of an exalted religious character” (Evans-Wentz 107n).

To suggest that the translators were at fault in missing the Buddhist signifiers in The Fan Man is not fair. Even Lewis, who is the foremost interpreter of Kotzwinkle’s writing and gives the best overall interpretation of The Fan Man, makes no specific mention of Buddhist signifiers. What the translators did, that Lewis did not, was to close off the possibility for their readers to make this connection on their own. The modernist text, Terry Eagleton writes, “is plural and diffuse, an inexhaustible tissue or galaxy of signifiers, a seamless weave of codes and fragments of codes, through which the critic may cut his own errant path” (138). To expect the translator to know all the signifiers and codes that the author planted in the text is to expect him or her to anticipate the “inexhaustible.” Moreover, “the resistance of modern writers to having their archetypes ‘spotted,’” which
Northrup Frye (102) attributes “to a natural anxiety to keep them as versatile as possible,” would put an omniscient translator at odds with the author. Not only can it be difficult for a reader to know exactly what an author’s words mean, but in the case of the foreign translator, there may be no matching words that signify all of the same signifieds.

However, there is also the possibility that the foreign translator will facilitate new signifieds from his own culture that the author had not anticipated. Hans Pfitzinger, who has translated four of Kotzwinkle’s novels, though not The Fan Man, into German, remarked to Lewis “that a ‘fan’ in German is derived from fanatiker and ‘is widely used in connection with soccer enthusiasts, mostly in an appreciative, positive way’” (Lewis 167). By titling his translation Fan Man, Mülder opened the rich possibility to his readers of identifying Horse with over-enthusiastic sports fans. I had not thought of this aspect of Badorties, and it does enrich the novel for me. Interestingly, the credit in the German edition was not the usual Aus dem Englischen von … but rather Aus dem Amerikanischen von Dirk Mülder, which may partly explain why the German translation has more of the original words of the English version and therefore left open the potential for Buddhist linguistic signs.

Notes

I would have written this essay sooner if I had found a new or used copy of the Spanish translation of The Fan Man on the internet. After six years, I concluded that it had dropped out of sight and gave up trying. Serendipitously, my wife and I were recently on a tour of Argentina that included a hosted dinner in Buenos Aires at the home of Ignacio Arnaudo. When I told him about my abandoned quest, he took it as a challenge to find the book for me. I urged him not to waste his time, but he persisted and six weeks later found an Argentine book seller who still had an unsold, new copy. For all his time and effort, he refused to even consider being reimbursed. This essay is dedicated to Ignacio Arnaudo and his lovely family.

1The Tibetan Buddhist themes that I have extracted from the The Fan Man, which are probably only the “tip of the iceberg,” are discussed in my essay “The Ambivalence in Kotzwinkle’s Beat and Bardo Ties” (College Literature 27.2). For similar studies of other postmodern novels, see my “Seven Buddhist Themes in Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49” (Religion & Literature 35.1), “Buddhist Duality in William Gaddis’s Carpenter’s Gothic” (Critique 45.4), “The Merging of Tantric Buddhism and L’Exîte Tantrique in John Hawkes’s The Passion Artist” (Critique 47.2), “Parody, Heteroglossia and Chronotope in Don DeLillo’s Great Jones Street” (Style, 39.2), and “Ronald Sukenick’s Out” (The Explicator, forthcoming).

2There are two German editions of The Fan Man. A later edition, published by Rowohl in Reinbek, went through a number of printings and includes a photograph of Kotzwinkle and a zu diesem Buch. The translation is Mülder’s, and although the type-set is different, the main text is identical in both editions.

3The protagonist of The Fan Man is also based on the exploits of Chögyam Trungpa, who is still remembered for the “crazy wisdom” that he preached. I did not know until six years after I published my Kotzwinkle essay that my college classmate, the playwright Richard Janaro, had known Trungpa. I was excited to learn from him that the “Rinpoche always carried a fan — except when two young boys patiently fanned him” (personal email, dated April 20, 2006).

4In his book How to Meditate, Paul Roland advises the beginner to create a continuous loop with the word or phrase chosen as the meditation mantra. “Keep the intonation and rhythm even, synchronized with your breathing or heartbeat so that the monotony of the sound becomes hypnotic. […] Try not to think about the meaning of the mantra but rather let it become a meaningless sound in which you are absorbed”(99).

Works Cited

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**Custody of the Eyes**
Diemela Eltit
Translated by Helen Lane and Ronald Christ
Publication date: June 2006

Custody of the Eyes, Helen Lane and Ronald Christ's brilliant translation of Diemela Eltit's Los vigilantes (1994), dramatizes voice, gender, and power in the relationship among mother, son, and father. Lane and Christ capture the intensity of expression that evokes, calls upon, even prescribes upon the figure of the mother as the lightning rod of power and repression in an oppressive society. Custody of the Eyes explores the climate of vigilance related not only to gender and familial relations but also to the social fabric torn by the Chilean experience of Pinochet's dictatorship.—Danny J. Anderson

Eltit creates a voice trapped, hysterically, in paranoia and desperation. Framed by several pages of the son's even creepier monologue, this is an elliptical, Kafkaesque cry of utter terror.—Publishers Weekly

**Zarco, The Blue-eyed Bandit**
Ignacio Manuel Altamirano
Translated by Ronald Christ
Introduction by Christopher Conway
Edited by Sheridan Phillips
Publication date: December 2006

The Blue-eyed Bandit will steal readers' hearts. Nineteenth-century Mexico comes alive in this elegantly crafted melodrama, a bridge to understanding the period's traditional gender roles, its stark moral divides, and, particularly, its harsh racial hierarchies. Ignacio Altamirano was one of several Latin American novelists who escaped the ideological grip of scientific racism long before the region's essayists and scientists could do so. Novelists did not have to disprove prevailing racist notions in order to escape them in fiction. They could create characters who defied racial stereotypes, appealing to their readers to recognize the truth of their depictions despite the pronouncements of prestigious European white supremacists.... Not to be missed!

John Charles Chasteen

lumenbooks.org
MANY words in indigenous African languages frustrate trans-lingual transposition by the sheer complexity of their polysemic range. Such words are so culture-bound that they do not translate easily across languages, especially when their metaphysical polyvalence in the source language has no equivalent in the target language. One may then ask: what happens when an African oral poetic thought finds expression in English? What are the translator’s frustrations? What problems arise? What are the strategies for resolving these problems and frustrations? In other words, if language is truly the dress of poetry, how would an African oral poetry look and feel in an English garment? What adjustments must be made in size and style in order to have a beautiful garment? Drawing from my own personal experience, I observed that translation yields place to mediation as the translator is constrained to try out or devise a series of strategies of transposition and transference, which in the words of Osundare leads to “kiss and quarrel” between the concerned languages (p. 15). According to him, when two languages meet, they kiss and quarrel. They achieve a tacit understanding on the common grounds of similarity and convergence, then negotiate, often through strident rivalry and self-preserving altercations, their areas of dissimilarity and divergence.

My intention in this article is to discuss some of the difficulties that I encountered when I was translating data on the corpus of Yoruba royal poetry to English. Translation, in the context of my work, means literally “carrying across,” and this implies all other forms that carry the prefix trans-. It also means not only transportation or transmission or transposition but also transformation and transmutation, for all these activities take place when translating literature in an African language to the English language. My approach to the notion of translation should be seen first in its orthodox sense as the linguistic operation that consists in transporting meaning from one language to another. However, as Anuradha Dingwaney points out, if translation is one of the primary means by which texts produced in one or another indigenous language of the various countries arbitrarily grouped together under the “Third,” or non-Western, World are made available in Western, metropolitan languages, it is not restricted to such linguistic transfers alone. For Dingwaney, “translation is also the vehicle” through which “Third World cultures (are made to) travel — transported or “borne across” to and recuperated audiences in the West” (p. 4). Unfortunately, most of the Western-oriented, linguistic-based translation theories are not applicable or relevant to African oral texts because of the multiplicity of meanings usually attached to specific words in African languages. The major weakness of these theories is that they do not take into consideration underlying sociocultural factors in works produced by African oral artists. A consideration of these factors in African literature will produce what Kwame Appiah has called “thick translation” and which he defines as a translation that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context…. A thick description of the context of literary production, a translation that draws on and creates that sort of understanding, meets the need to challenge ourselves … to go further, to undertake the harder project of a genuinely informed respect for others (pp. 817–818).

It is this form of translation, which Wole Soyinka employs in translating the work of the eminent Yoruba creative writer Fagunwa, that I also employed in my English translation of Yoruba royal poetry. In his assessment of Fagunwa’s works, Abiola Irele notes that “Fagunwa’s works belong then to the great tradition of allegorical and symbolic literature, set within the framework of a particular complex of cultural references. His achievement resides in his creation of a form in which the Yoruba imaginative tradition can be given a translation in modern terms, and in the process acquired new vitality....” (p. 182). I opted for this form of translation in my book because what Irele alludes to as “cultural references” in Fagunwa’s works also permeate the data on Yoruba royal poetry that I worked on.

Royal poetry is one of the most developed and elaborate oral poetic genres of the Yoruba people. A substantial part of the poetry is made up of praises of past kings, which allows the bards to provide their audience with skeletal information that could assist in drawing up a list of names of past and present kings of any particular Yorùbá town. As a result of this, Yorùbá royal bards are regarded as chroniclers of the king’s genealogy, reminding the present
incumbent of histories and great deeds of his predecessors. This is usually done through citation of names and epithets of each of the past kings, references to members of their nuclear family, lineage cognomen, and allusion to achievements and historical facts associated with the reign of each of the past rulers. Therefore, Yoruba royal bards reveal themselves through their composition as “poet-intellectuals,” gifted with a profound knowledge of the language, history, psychology, and value system of the Yoruba culture, and the inheritors of the collective wisdom of the people. Their primary function is to remember events and people, then, in the silence of their thoughts and hearts, weave the events together in chant. Thus, palace poets are highly respected in Yorùbá society for their knowledge of men and events, and their linguistic competence.

Consequently, my translation of the genre sets out to capture the spirit and depth of the oral text in English by striking a compromise between a literal and a literary translation. I tried to keep the change of word order to the barest minimum by adopting a word-for-word matching of lines or half-lines between the Yoruba and English versions. My intention was to produce an English text that will be enjoyable and accessible to a diverse audience, including but not limited to students and scholars of African linguistics, sociology, anthropology, history, political science, religion, and folklore. Precedence was thus given to accuracy, clarity, simplicity, effectiveness, and faithfulness in my translation, even though I encountered some inevitable difficulties.

One of the major challenges that I faced in translating Yoruba royal poetry was deciding how best to express the different types of Yoruba personal names prevalent in the chant in English. Citation of personal names of kings is a common feature of Yorùbá royal poetry. Perhaps it is the prominent role played by names in the production of the genre that encouraged Wolff to refer to it as “an artistic form of name calling” (p. 50), while Babalola describes it as “an artistic form of name praising” (p. 2). To the Yoruba people, name opens the door to the house of a being; it is the readiest, most direct channel to a person’s ori and all it stands for in the liturgy of existence. The Yoruba believe that to endow something with a name is to give it life beyond subsistence. Therefore, when royal bards address their patrons by their different names, they are unlocking the rulers’ hidden power because the activity of naming is thought of as being effectual. To the Yoruba people, human subjects react to the utterance of their names with deep gratification and with an enhancement of their aura, which is sometimes actually visible in their physical behavior.

These names are known as orúkọ àbísọ (personal names) or oríkì àbísọ (personal praise names). This class of names is predominantly given after birth to underscore the significance of names among the “Yorùbá because the total meaning of the constituent morphemes is taken into consideration” (Olatunji, p. 69). It is also common in Yorùbá society for a child to have as many as four or five names. The reason for this occurrence is because apart from the parents or relations that give names to a new child, other well-wishers also shower names on a new child during the naming ceremony. This phenomenon accounts for Yoruba royal bards’ acclamation of paramount rulers through citation of their numerous personal names. For instance, Yorùbá royal and titled family names usually have prefixes or suffixes such as Adé (crown), Olá (honor), and Oyè (chieftaincy, royalty). In the following example, royal bards acclaim the incumbent traditional ruler of Òyó town through his personal praise name (Àtàndá) and six of his other personal names: (O)láyíwolá, Oláléye, (Adé)pòjù, Yìnyínolá, Dúrójayé, and Olúkókun:

Láyíwolá Àtàndá, omoo Pópó.
Oláléye, Pójù okoo iyáá Núúrú.
Pójù, omo Àtìbá
Pójù, omo Àtiàgbó.
Láyíwolá, bábá-yèyé.
Ôròmadie ò mawódi okè

Ìrán-an baba tí n ló másá.
Omoo Pópó,
Obinrin tí ò lórogún
Yinyínolá, won ò mårún.

Ìyáà re lórogún, omo Àtìbá.
Dúrójayé, baba láfín lóbàkan.
A-tó-báà-tií-perí.
Láyíwolá, omoo Láwọin.

Láyíwolá Àtàndá, offsington of Pópó.
Oláléye, Pójù of Núúrú’s mother
Pójù, child of Àtìbá
Pójù, child of Àtiàgbó.
Láyíwolá, the almighty.
The chick may not easily identify the kite from all flying birds
But its older paternal generation (the cock) can.

Yinyínolá, they cannot appreciate the effects of infectious diseases.
Your mother had rivals, child of Àtìbá.
Dúrójayé, lord in the palace have half-brothers.
One-who-is-worthy-of-his-praises,
Láyíwolá, child of Láwọin.
A substantial part of Yorùbá royal poetry also consists of names of past holders of every particular kingship title. The following excerpt, taken from the poetry chanted in honor of another Yorùbá paramount ruler, the Sòún of Ògbómòsó town, substantiates further the claim that the tradition of name listing is a phenomenon of Yorùbá royal chanting:

Ágbémólá lọ́rúko Sòún àkókó jé. Ónún ló kókó télú Ògbómòsó dò. Ki gbogbo oba ki won ó tó máa je ìgbà tí ó sì mó, Ló kan Ìjááyí Ògídì-olú, Oníkàngà-àjipon… ìgbà tí ó sì éléyíunni mó, N ló kan oba Ajagungbadé. Ìbísúnmí, Bángbọ́yẹ̀, ìrèlè oba… ìgbà tí ó sì éléyíunni mó, N ló wá k’Àlàbí Òyééwùmí Òyééwùmí, Ládíméjí, Ládɛ̃jó… ìbáribá oníile lìkì Lorílè áwọn oba tó ‘Ògbómòsó dò ìgbà tí ó sì éléyíunni mó, Ti Jógíoró kú, N ló wá kan Ikúmọyèdé Àjàsá. Ónún ni bàbá Àjàáyí Ògídì-olú. ìgbà tí ó sì éléyíunni mó, N ló kan Ídòwù Bálàntà… ìgbà tí ó sì éléyíunni mó Ló wá kan Àkintùndé, Òwè Ìsòlá ìgbà tí ó sì éléyíunni mó, Ò wá kan Àbárá Olú-Óyó, Òyéédókun… ìgbà tí ó sì éléyíunni mó, N lo wá kan Àlàáó, Onísòroṣe Ọgídì-olú. ìgbà tí ó sì éléyíunni mó, N ló kan Òlóhundé, omoo Ómídèle. ìgbà tí ó sì éléyíunni mó, N ló kan Oláyodé Ìdégàkè, Òkoo Pàtè. ìgbà tí ó sì éléyíunni mó, Ò wá kan Àjibólà, Ìdígùn, Òlèépọ̀ ọ̀ràn… ìgbà tí ó sì éléyíunni mó, Ò wá kan Ĭkè Lànípèkun…

Oogún-ún Mófoláyòmí, Co-rivals of Mófoláyòmí,
Omoo Adékúnlé, Child of Adékúnlé.
Oo kú, Láyíwolá omoo Láwoin. Your honor, Láyíwolá child of Láwoin.
O dùn láwo, You are reliable
O dùn nimúlè. You are good as a confidant.
Láyíwolá tāa gbékèlé Láyíwolá that we rely on
Ó níi yáwó kú. Will not die prematurely.
Nnkan ó níi s’Aláyélúwà, Nothing will happen to His Royal Highness.
Omoo Adéyemí.

Translation Review
In the above excerpt, the concerned royal bard gives a list of names of the past sixteen rulers of Ògbómòsó town as: Ògúnmólá, Àjàyí, Ajagungbadé, Oyèéwùmí, Àjàsá, Bólántà, Ìsòlá, Oyèédòkun, Àlàó, Olóhundé, Adégòkè, Ajibólá, Olánipèkun, Olátúnjí, Olájídé, and Orímádégún.

These are anthroponymic names that derive their meaning and import from historical, social, cultural, and linguistic circumstances of the bearer’s family and community. There is therefore a lot in a Yoruba name, the instant summary of the essence and personality of its bearer. Sadly, translation prevents a direct transfer of cultural meanings associated with names in that society. Culture itself is a complex configuration of ideas, values, customs, folkways, etc., shaped by a certain environment, a certain social ambiance. Owing to the status of English as the language of a foreign culture and environment, it has no ready mechanism for fully articulating some salient aspects of African culture and environment. What does the translator do in such circumstance?

The answer is both artistic and linguistic; it involves the bending of English and the moulding of it into a new shape. The untranslatable item is transferred, and to make it intelligible in its new English environment, the translator resorts to a device known as cushioning (for details, see Young and Osundare). Cushioning is the method of easing the “harshness” of an untranslatable item in its new environment, a means of boosting intelligibility by adding to the target information that is extra to the source; it is a technique for familiarizing the strangeness of an item in a new surrounding. There are two types of cushioning: the intra-text and extra-text. The extra-text cushioning method is particularly useful for my translation of Yoruba names because it allows the handling of problematic items and untranslatable concepts in the footnotes, endnotes or glossary, where more detailed cultural information is provided. The method saves the labor of intra-text cushioning, thereby preventing the redundacy that often accompanies conventional cushioning. Therefore, I was able to retain all Yoruba names (although in italicized form) in the English version of the poem, and provided detailed cultural meanings of the names in footnotes. Even this method has its own weakness, because it creates serious problems for the non-Yoruba reader, who is forced to hunt between text and foot/endnote each time a name is encountered. This is a particularly cumbersome and frustrating drill in Yoruba royal poetry when there is an over-transfer of names.

Closely related to the problem posed by names is the preponderance of references to nicknames, epithets, or sobriquets of paramount rulers in Yoruba royal poetry. Generally, there are two types of them: bound and unbound. In bound epithets, the real name comes first, cataphorically connected to the epithet, which serves grammatically as qualifier element and semantically as the information bearer:

- *Àjàlá òkín* who built a separate house for his car.

Unbound epithets are those not connected to any preceding element. They may be single words or a multiword description. Unbound epithets can expand into praise names, carrying more information in a generally more complex structure. These are separate units accumulated over time and referring to qualities or events associated with the subject but usually otherwise unrelated. The rendering carries some of the salient features of praise-names: the appositional grammatical structure, which enables them to chain up wagons of attributes like a freight train, and their highly hyperbolic rhetorical property, which permits the heaping up of encomiums on heroic deeds.

Most Yoruba royal epithets are phrases coined by bards to describe the military exploits of their patrons, most especially for those of them who participated in the Yoruba intra-tribal wars of the 18th to 19th centuries. Below is an excerpt taken from praises in honor of an early king of Saki town in northwestern Yorubaland:

- *Òkèrè*, *Òkìkí Bóyèdè*…
- *Òkìkí Bóyèdè*, the *Òkèrè*…
Arógunjó,  One-who-dances/rejoices-when-at-war.
Paragada-bi-iná-jóko  One-who-destroys-as-the-wild-fire
Ogun-léyìn-Osòrun… The-support-for-Osòrun-when-at-war…
Aféfé-tíi-teri-oko-ba… The-wild-wind-that-makes-the-grass/forest-bow.
Gbólásiré,  Gbólásiré,
A-lé-mó-ło,  One-who-does-not-move-when-asked-to-leave
O-sùn-kaàkà-jagun  One-who-wages-war-even-in-his-sleep
À-rán-inú-èsó  The-highly-valued-of-the-èsó (warriors)
Foláwiyó,  Foláwiyó,

Here, royal bards relied heavily on the military prowess of the ruler in compiling the epithets. Each of the epithets is a reflection of his military exploits, power, skill, and achievements when in the battlefield. The eulogy chronicles movement, tension, and suspense. It evokes figures of speech to describe the king’s zeal for combat, his belligerency, his restless energy, and the terror that he induces in his enemies as he brings them to their knees by pure psychological advantage. For instance, he is eulogized as “the-wild-wind-that-makes-the-grass/forest-bow” to support the claim that the sheer power of the presence of his person spells conquest and subjugation for man and nature.

In addition to the military prowess of rulers, royal poets also pile up epithets to depict attitudes and behaviors of their patrons. A good example is the following excerpt of praises in honor of the paramount ruler of Òkukù town:
A-won-bí-agbon,  Rare-as-a-wasp
Àjálà ókín tó kólée móótó lótó.  Ájálà30 ókín31 who built a separate house for his car.
Àábá-demo-deyá  The-staple-that-pins-down-both-mother-and-child.
Èbò Òkè-òtìn  The European of Òkè-Ótìn,32
Àjálà tíí dámo lèkun-á-n-se-kóntá.  Ájálà has stopped people being insolent.
Ó fídí alásejù bomíí gbóná.  He-who-dips-the-over-reacher-into-hot-water.
Àjálà gbôná Ìbàdàn lówó aláwígbó  Ájálà blocked the road to Ìbàdàn from the disobedient people.

Karin Barber, in her ground-breaking work on the Yoruba ancient town of Òkukù, reveals that King Oyinlola had spent many years in Ghana before his enthronement as the Olókukù in 1934 (p. 239). While he was still there, he built himself a mansion that had a car garage in his home town of Òkukù. It is for that reason that he has been praised as “Àjálà ókín who built a separate house for his car.” He also had the backing of the colonial authorities during his tenure against insubordinate individuals and towns in his domain. Therefore, the royal chanters acclaim him as the “European of Òkè-ótìn.” The king uses the colonial apparatus of justice for his own ends; hence, he is acclaimed as “the one who locks people up until the white man comes.” He is compared to ààbà, a staple used symbolically in magical charms, to support the fact that the king occasionally uses force to control his own people. The more high-handed he was, the more his bards exalted him.

I based my morpheme-by-morpheme translation of epithets in royal poetry on the criteria laid down for integrated cushioning, a sub-type of intra-text cushioning. According to Osundare in “Caliban’s Gamble: The Stylistic Repercussions of Writing African Literature in English,” there are two main types of intra-text cushioning: overt and covert. In overt cushioning, the untranslatable item is immediately followed up with a juxtaposed English translation. Formations of this type manifest the profundity of the translator’s creative-stylistic dilemma and highlight the problem of his/her divided loyalty. How then does one give artistic mediation to one’s experience without keeping those outside one’s linguistic and cultural context out of the picture? The doublets in the overt cushioning are an expressive compromise, a stylistic way out of the dilemma. Each of the juxtaposed items is aimed at a different audience, with the translation equivalent performing the cushioning role for the English audience.
The other type of intra-text cushioning, the covert, has two identifiable sub-types: mixed transfer and integrated cushioning. Mixed transfers are somewhat similar to the doublet formation mentioned above, but they have an attributive characteristic that is absent in the latter. Contrary to the nature of overt cushioning, the English portion of the covert mixed transfer interprets an aspect of the meaning and function of the source item, thereby minimizing the problems of intelligibility. It is another contextualization device for easing the discomfort of literary communication.

For my translation of Yoruba royal poetry, I found integrated cushioning to be more subtle than the other forms of intra-text cushioning. With integrated cushioning, the meaning and function of royal epithets are so contextually deducible from the nominalization that further cushioning becomes unnecessary. A major weakness of this method, however, is that the translation cannot account fully for the different stories behind the creation of each epithet.

Another experiential-cultural problem that I faced is how best to accurately translate the predominant use of Yoruba kinship terms in royal poetry into English. We all know that kinship terms differ from culture to culture, and language is the supreme bearer of that difference. How, for instance, does one articulate the polygynous Yoruba system in English, the language of a monogamous culture? A translator needs to translate the Yoruba word ìyàwó not conventionally as “wife” all the time but, also, as “wives” or “co-wives” as occasion demands. Another device exploits the teknonymic nature of the African naming system by referring to the people by the name of their children: “Òkánlàwón’s father,” or “husband of Núúrú’s mother.”

In Yorùbá society, the size of a man’s family is an indicator of his achievements and greatness. The longer a Yorùbá man is able to keep his large family together, the more his administrative acumen and greatness are recognized and appreciated in the society. This accounts for the regular use of kinship terms in Yorùbá royal poetry to link paramount rulers to their relations and forebears when royal bards are chanting their praises. This is a feature that is common to Yorùbá praise poetry in general and not necessarily restricted to the praises in honor of the royal people alone (Olatunji, p. 91). Kinship terms in royal poetry, which link a Yoruba paramount ruler to his forebears, are meant to confirm the right of the person concerned (the addressee) to the throne and also to challenge him to achieve the greatness of his forebears, whereas those kinship terms that connect the king to his wives and children, who are considered to be marks of his greatness in the society, are meant to confirm the right of the incumbent’s children to the throne. Therefore, the preponderant use of kinship terms gives the royal poets the opportunity to expose some of the qualities of greatness and achievements of their masters. The most common kinship terms usually used in royal poetry to link paramount rulers to their families are omo (child of or offspring of), baba (father of), and oko (husband of), as shown in this example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yoruba Term</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Òkèrè, okoo Moyírádé…</td>
<td>The Òkèrè, ìyàwó of Moyírádé…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adéwuyí, oko Elékúndé…</td>
<td>Adéwuyí, omo of Elékúndé…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajibikèé Olúgásà…</td>
<td>Ajibikèé the husband of Olúgásà…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…okoo Toríolá</td>
<td>…husband of Toríolá…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Òkèrè Ásámú…</td>
<td>Ásámú, father of Òkèrè…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ológbénlá Akánó…</td>
<td>Ológbénlá father of Akánó…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baba Àjámú…</td>
<td>Father of Àjámú…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baba Okùnoyè.</td>
<td>Father of Okùnoyè.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Òkèrè, baba Olúsanmí.</td>
<td>Òkèrè, father of Olúsanmí.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Àkánó, baba Mójóóláógbé</td>
<td>Àkánó, father of Mójóóláógbé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afolábí, Òkèrè, omo Ìjí…</td>
<td>Afolábí, the Òkèrè, offspring of Ìjí lineage…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ádigún, omo Aréwàkálé…</td>
<td>Ádigún, child-of-the-one-whose-beauty-is-recognized-in-all-homes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Òkèrè, oko Obádoyin…</td>
<td>Òkèrè, husband of Obádoyin…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baba Òkánlàwón…</td>
<td>Father of Òkánlàwón…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child of the man with the brass-bicycle.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The translation of ìyàwó in English is a contextualized use of the kinship term. It is a device that exploits the teknonymic nature of the African naming system by referring to the people by the name of their children.
Baba Abínbólá níí jé bée. That is the name of Abínbólá’s father.

In this example, four of the former occupants of Ôkèrè kingship institution in Sakí town (Bóyèdé, Adéwuyí, Ajibikẹẹ, and Afolábí Àkánó) are acclaimed as the husband of their respective wives: Mojírádé (line 1), Elékúndé (line 2), Toríolá (line 4), and Mójọóláógbé (line 11), while King Àkànún Oyèétòrò is linked to his only son, Òkánlàyí (line 15). Furthermore, both Òkánlàyí and Ibúolá Àjání Oyèdókun are acclaimed as the father of Jayéolá (line 20) and Abínbólá (line 22), respectively.

My experience as a translator of Yoruba royal poetry showed that kinship terms such as “brothers,” “sisters,” “father,” “mother,” “daughter,” or “son” undergo a kind of culturo-linguistic recontextualization. “Brothers” and “sisters” cease to be exclusively siblings, while “father” and “mother” are not necessarily biological parents. Therefore, *omo*, for instance, cannot always be taken to mean “child of” or “born of” in Yoruba oral literature; occasionally, it also serves as a convenient term to link person with his/her ancestors and forebears. That accounts for my translation of *omo* as “offspring of” to mean descendant of those associated with or renowned for particular things. For instance, in line 12 of the immediate past excerpt, King Afolábí Àdìgún is linked to his forebears’ lineage as “the offspring of Ìjí lineage.” However, there are occasions when *omo* simply means “child of” or “born of,” as we have in the case of King Àsàmú (lines 5–6), who is linked to his grandfather’s epithet, as “omo ajagun-joba” — the child of the warrior turned king. In other words, King Àsàmú is the grandchild of King Ôkikí Bóyèdé, who owns the epithet “warrior-turned-king.”

One other feature of Yorùbá royal poetry that created problems for me during my translation is the numerous allusions made by poets to major historical events associated with the tenure of each of the paramount rulers mentioned in their chants. Royal poetry is not primarily historical records but rather poems with historical allusions, even though such allusions are based on the psychological attitude adopted by certain people toward certain events in their society. Yoruba royal bards employ allusion in their production in order to take their chant out of the realm of the ordinary. Since such allusions are not given in detail, only the culturally informed members of the community can competently supply detailed material on the skeletal information provided by the bards. In the following excerpt, for instance:

*Adétóún:* Ayé Abíódún, During the days of Abíódún,
*Mopélólá:* La rojú sisé. We had time to engage in labor.

*Adétóún:* Ayé Abíódún, During the days of Abíódún,
*Mopélólá:* La rówó ṣibáyé. We had money to enjoy life.

*Adétóún:* Ayé Abíódún, During the days of Abíódún,
*Mopélólá:* La figbá wonwó. We measure money in calabash.

*Adétóún:* Ayé Àrógangan, During the days of Àrógangan,
*Mopélólá:* Lòpòló gbòde. Frogs took over the whole place.

*Adétóún:* Ayé Àlè Àrógangan, During the days of Àlè Àrógangan,
*Mopélólá:* La fagbón dèrú kalè. We packed our luggage in the basket.

the bards are referring to the eighteenth-century political development in the Yoruba city of Òyó, with regard to the peaceful reign of King Abíódún (1774–1789) and the crisis-ridden tenure of his successor, Aláàfin Awólè Arógangan (1789–1796). Oral tradition and available literatures on Òyó history confirmed that Old Òyó witnessed peace and progress during the reign of Aláàfin Abíódún (see Atanda, p. 28 and Johnson, p. 182–188). That prompted the bards to refer to the period of his reign as the time that people “had money to enjoy life” because the economy was so buoyant that people had to measure their “money in calabash.” However, Aláàfin Awólè, who succeeded him, was not all that fortunate. His tenure was retrogressive and crisis-ridden. As a result of the problems in his domain, many people moved out of the city and took refuge elsewhere in the southern part of Yorùbáland. The mass movement of people out of Old Òyó is what the bards epitomized in the packing of “our luggage in the basket.” The climax of the crises was the misunderstanding that Aláàfin Awólè had with his Chief of Army Staff, Àfõnjá, which led to Awólè’s suicide (Johnson, p. 188–192). It was reported that before the suicide, the king cursed the town of Òyó and his subjects. The story claimed further that as a result of the curse, a plague of frogs covered the whole city of Old Òyó.
within seventy-two hours of the demise of the Aláàfin (line 8). This particular incident was perceived as a bad omen for the town.

Curiously enough, the crises that followed the death of Aláàfin Awólè actually confirmed the fear entertained by the generality of the people of Òyó. Aláàfin Adébò, who succeeded him, died within three months of his installation; Aláàfin Mákùú, who took over from Adébò, also died after six months in office (Johnson, p. 192). With the untimely death of these two succeeding paramount rulers, the royal position remained unoccupied for many years because no one was willing to offer himself for it. Eventually, Aláàfin Majjóótú was installed in about 1830. He was followed in quick succession by Aláàfin Àmòdó (1833–1834) and Aláàfin Olúewu (1834–1837) (see Atanda, p. 28–42 and Johnson, p. 127).

The translation of allusion in Yoruba poetry becomes more problematic for me whenever royal bards are passing critical comments on their patrons. Yorùbá royal bards are generally not known for direct criticism of their patrons. What they normally do, instead, is to highly celebrate whatever they consider to be in the interest of their patrons and lightly condemn their vices of actions. These they achieve by the proper formation of figures of thought and of speech through the creation of noble fiction by clever choice of words. If and when royal chanters have to be critical of their patrons or their policies, they often adopt the techniques of indirect reference and allusiveness for their subtle and oblique criticism. For instance, a Yoruba king, renowned in history for his “surpassing cruelties” as a prince, was later eulogized by his court poet as the “greatest of all blacksmiths” without a detailed account of the incident that led to his being praised as “the blacksmith who forges neither hoe nor machete” except human beings that he forges “like a gong”:

Alágbède òkè Àkèsán
Ki i rokó, kí i rádá.
Òun náá ló félè
R’oláníran bí agogo.
A-mú-bí-eyá,
Dábándáyá
A-dá-má-sojo.
Ójè, oko Ôgünbánké
Tíí jé ‘Agogoójá.’
Ajúwón, Ò-yí-píi-loógün.
Ajúwón, omoó Kárá,
Omoó Kóró…
A-ri-dígi,
Ìgá-múú-sà…
Okoó mi, ó-yagi-já.

The blacksmith at the upper side of Àkèsán
Who forges neither hoe nor machete.
It was him who gently
Forges Oláníran like a gong.
One-who-is-as-sharp-as-the-eyá-knife,
Dábándáyá
One who does not behave cravenly in times of crisis.
Ôjè, husband of Ôgünbánké
Who bears the appellation ‘the fighting bell.’
Ajúwón, one-who-rolls-over-charms.
Ajúwón, offspring of the one with sharp voice
Offspring of the one with dreadful voice…
One-whose-presence-is-enough-to-make-other-people-shiver…
My lord, one-who-tears-off-the-tree-to-fight.

However, another historical account reported by Samuel Johnson gives a more detailed information with respect to the horrifying incident that actually led to that appellation:

A young man, Folarin by name, had a mistress of whom he was deprived by Láwání (the addressee). One day, seeing Folárìn pass along the street, he (the addressee) sent for him and with a heavy blacksmith’s hammer smashed his knees and ankles rendering him (Folárìn) a cripple for life, and then nicknamed himself ‘Alágbède Àkèsán tìí tún Folárìn ro’ — the blacksmith at Àkèsán who can recast Folárín’s limbs — (p. 398).

While it is true that most of these allusions are told in an everyday diction that might be easily understood by most native speakers of Yoruba, the question that I battled with during my translation was how to make these allusions meaningful and interesting to non-Yoruba readers of my book. I must confess that I have allowed myself a few liberties in representing what I consider to be the appeal of the texts in my translation. In order not to take undue liberties, however, I was guided by Horst Frenz’s recommendation that:

a translator must bring sympathy and understanding to the work he is to translate. He must be the original author’s most intimate, most exact, in short, his best reader. But he must do more than read. He must attempt to see what the
The translator must be creative (pp. 119–120).

If Frenz can say this for the translator of the cold print of a text, how much truer, then, are his recommendations for the translator who not only interviewed oral poets/performers but actually watched and recorded the performance personally and can thus easily recall the context. My solution to the lingering problem of allusion, therefore, was to provide an introductory historical narrative on each text prior to the translation itself. By so doing, I was able to separate the “creative work” of the translator that Frenz talks about from the translated text itself.

From the foregoing, one may conclude that translation, even the most conventional of it, is a risky, frustrating activity that is never fully accomplished. In other words, any attempt to translate African oral literature to English will end up with a partial rather than total portrayal of African experience. The translator’s task is made even more difficult by the fact that there are items and structures in African languages that pose serious problems — cultural and linguistic — of untranslatability. It goes without saying that since African culture is different from European culture, and since, as we have said, language and culture are intimately bound together, there will be numerous words, ideas, symbols, etc., in African languages that have no equivalents in English. Such cases of non-correspondence are a thorn in the imaginative-creative flesh of the translator. Attempts to solve these problems by force-matching words or ideas with near equivalents in English have not always worked perfectly. At times, the desperate search for equivalents in English undermines or totally negativizes the meaning, import, and function of the source item.

Equally intimidating and frustrating are the problems of linguistic untranslatability from an African language to English. Many African languages are tonal and syllable-isochronic, but English is stress-isochronic. In order, words both have different ways of achieving even the same effect, and so problems of untranslatability arise when an attempt is made to force one language into the framework of another. This is particularly the case with Yoruba, a language that thrives on the fusion of sound and meaning. Verbal word play involving onomatopoeia, pun, and phonaesthetics lose their bite and force when transplanted into English. So what does the translator do when confronted with this kind of problem? Does she or he sweep it under the carpet and pretend it does not exist? Does she or he avoid this area of his or her experience, thereby leaving a hole in the translated text? The answer is, No! A way out of the problem, as demonstrated in my translation of Yoruba royal poetry, is the adoption of cushioning, the clever (and at times not so clever) strategy devised for boosting the intelligibility of problematic source items. Because of the limitations of this strategy, I would like to conclude this article by suggesting that in the translation of indigenous African texts to foreign languages, translators should locate their attitudes somewhere between two extremes. On one end is the delusion of Levi-Strauss that “the mythical value of a myth remains preserved, even through the worst translation…. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the story which it tells” (p. 210). On the other end is the overzealous poeticity of those who are determined to match the indigenous text with a flawless lofty translation.
Notes

1 The Yorùbá language belongs to the Kwa family subgroup of the Greenberg’s Niger-Congo phylum of African languages, and it is the first language of about thirty million people in the West African sub-region, where it is regarded as one of the major languages. Speakers of the language are found largely in West Africa, stretching from the Bight of Benin in Nigeria to as far West as Abomey in Benin Republic. The people also transverse the borders of Nigeria and Benin Republic to a few other West African countries where they exist in isolated pockets (i.e., the Atapame in the northern Province of Togo, otherwise known as Anago, Tsha, and Ife; and the Aku in Liberia and Sierra Leone). The Yoruba people possess certain essential characteristics in common: they are largely farmers, highly urbanized and artistic people whose skill was once of a high order. Their indigenous religion is polytheism, which is centered on a pantheon of divinities known as Olódùmarè, but the people nevertheless recognize the existence of a Supreme God (Oríṣá, but the people nevertheless recognize the existence of a Supreme God (Olódùmarè). The Yoruba people possess a hierarchical social structure and developed an aristocratic or monarchical political system that has the king as its head. The Trans-Atlantic slavery of the 18th and 19th centuries brought a sizeable number of Yorùbá people to the New World, most especially to Cuba (where they are known as the Lukumi), Brazil (where they are known as Nago), Trinidad, Haiti, and Puerto Rico, where elements of Yorùbá culture and language are still found today.

2 There are different categories of personal names among the Yorùbá people. Some of them are combinations of information on the occupation, status, or religious beliefs of the child’s descendants and the circumstance(s) surrounding the birth of the child. Examples are: Adéfúnké, meaning “the crown has given me this one to pet,” usually given to a female child born into a royal family, and Odérindé, meaning “the hunter has returned,” usually given to a male child born into a family of hunters or warriors shortly after the death of the child’s grandfather. Some Yorùbá children are believed to have been “born along with their personal names” because their names, in whole, reveal their position in the sequence of siblings or posture at birth. For example, the first born of a set of twins is called Táyéwò, meaning “have a taste of the world and see how good,” while the second born is called Kéyindé, meaning “one who arrives last.” A child conceived in the absence of the mother’s menstruation is named Ìlòrí, while a male child born with the umbilical cord twisted around his neck is named Òjó. (See O. Olatunji, Features of Yoruba Oral Poetry. Ibadan: University Press Limited, 1984, pp. 68–73 for more of such names).

3 Male personal praise name suggests heroic qualities, but in females, it suggests praise, tenderness, care, and endearment. For instance, Àjàmú — “one whom we fight to take possession of” — is a male personal oríkì usually given to a male child conceived after much disagreement between parents, while Àníké — “one whom we own to pet” — is a female personal praise name. (See A. Akinyemi “On the Meaning of Yorùbá Personal Oríkì (oríkì ábíso) — A Literary Appraisal.” Research in Yorùbá Language and Literature. No. 4, 1993, pp. 78–82 for more of such names.)

4 Personal name of the king, meaning “honor rolled into honor.”

5 Personal praise name of the king, meaning “one specially searched for creation.” This type of name is usually given to a male child whose conception was specifically planned by both parents.

6 Name of a royal deity in Òyó town associated with rivers.

7 One of the personal names of the king, meaning “honor that commands respect.”

8 Shortened form of another personal name of the king, Adépọjú, meaning “these crowns are just too many.”

9 Sòún is the official title of the paramount ruler of Ògbómòsó, a Yorùbá town of about 33 miles north of Òyó. Data were collected from royal bards in the palace of the Sòún in October 1995.

10 Personal name of the first occupant of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó, meaning “Oládùmarè (hero-deity associated with iron, hunting, and war) has ceased the honor.”

11 Personal name of one of the past occupants of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó. This is a Yorùbá name usually given to a male child born face-down.

12 Appellation of one of the past occupants of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó, meaning “one who fights a war to own his crown.”

13 Personal name of the king mentioned in the preceding footnote, meaning “join hands with me to lift this title.”

14 Personal name of one of the past occupants of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó, meaning “I love this title.” Alábí is the king’s personal praise name, given to a male child born after a sequence of female children.

15 Other personal names of the king mentioned in the preceding footnote; Oládìmíjí (honor is doubled) and Oládèjò (honor is eightfold).

16 Reference to the king’s lineage.

17 Appellation of another king, meaning “a tough person.”

18 Names of one of the past occupants of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó. While Ikúmọyédé (meaning literally “it is death that brings this title”) is a personal name conveying the message that the child was given birth to shortly after the death of a former occupant of the position, Ajásà (literally “one possessed after retreating from a fight or struggle”) is the king’s personal praise name.

19 Personal name of a former occupant of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó. Ìdówú is a Yorùbá name given to a child born immediately after a set of twins.

20 Names of one of the past occupants of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó. Akintíándé (the brave one has returned) is the personal name conveying the message that
the child was given birth to shortly after the death of his grandfather (who happens to be a warrior), and Ísòlá is the addressee’s personal praise name.

21 Personal name of one of the past occupants of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó, meaning “title becomes an ocean,” conveying the wish of parents that the birth of the child has confirmed their right to the kingship institution. Àbàrì olú Òyó is one of the numerous appellations of the addressee that has lost its etymological meaning.

22 While Áláá is the personal praise name of one of the past occupants of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó, onísòríṣègi (which has also lost its meaning) is an appellation of the king.

23 Personal name of one of the past occupants of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó, meaning “the owner has arrived.”

24 Personal names of one of the past occupants of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó — Oláyodé (honor has come to be exalted) and Ædégökè (the crown has risen up).

25 Names of one of the past occupants of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó. Ajíbólá (one who wakes up to be met by honor) is the personal name, Ædígin (one who is specially selected and tied straight) is the personal praise name, and Eléépo àrán (one who is covered in silk velvet) is the sobriquet.

26 Names of one of the past occupants of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó — Òkín (a rock, a hill, or a mountain) is a sobriquet of the king, but (O) ‘Lánìpè kún (honor is endless) is his personal name.

27 Personal name of one of the past occupants of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó, meaning “honor has risen again.”

28 Names of one of the past occupants of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó. Oláyídé (honor has arrived again) is the personal name, Ajíghé (one who fights to possess forever) is the personal praise name given to a child conceived after prolonged arguments between parents, and Òkin (peacock) is the totem of the king’s paternal lineage.

29 Name of one of the past occupants of the kingship institution in Ògbómòsó town — Òrímádégún (one on whose head the crown stands straight).

30 The king’s personal praise name.

31 The peacock, totem of the king’s lineage.

32 Upper side of river Òtin, reference to the location of Òkùkù town.

33 Personal name of the king, meaning “honor is like honey.”

34 Official title of the paramount ruler of Sakí, a north-central Yorùbá town.

35 Personal name of the king’s wife, meaning “one who has woken up to see the crown.”

36 Personal name of one of the occupants of the kingship institution in Sakí, meaning “the crown is honorable.”

37 Personal name of the wife of the king named in the preceding footnote, meaning “he who cries a lot has arrived.”

38 Personal names of one of the occupants of the kingship institution in Sakí.

39 Personal name of the wife of the king mentioned in the preceding footnote, meaning “because of honor.”

40 Personal praise name of one of the occupants of the kingship institution in Sakí, meaning “one specially selected to be possessed,” usually given to a male child whose conception was planned for and agreed upon by both parents.

41 Personal praise name of one of the occupants of the kingship institution in Sakí, meaning “one specially selected to be possessed,” usually given to a male child whose conception was planned for and agreed upon by both parents.

42 Personal praise name of one of the king’s children, meaning “one possessed as a result of struggle,” usually given to a male child whose pregnancy was conceived after prolonged arguments between parents.

43 Personal name of one of the king’s children, meaning “the cord of chieftaincy.”

44 Personal name of one of the king’s children, meaning “I have been rewarded by the Almighty God.”

45 Personal name of one of the king’s children, meaning “do not allow honor to elude us.”

46 Personal name of one of the occupants of the kingship institution in Sakí, meaning “one born with honor.”

47 Personal praise name of one of the addressee’s children, meaning “one carefully tied and made straight,” usually given to a male child whose conception was planned for and agreed upon by both parents.

48 Personal name of the king’s wife, meaning “kingship that turned honey.”

49 Personal name of the king’s son. This is a Yorùbá name usually given to a male child that separates the sequence of female children.

50 Personal names of the king. Àkànnmú (“one whose pregnancy was conceived after a single physical contact of parents”) is the praise name, and Òyèèòòò (chieftaincy is settled or resolved) is the personal name.

51 Praise name of Sàngó, Yorùbá hero-deity associated with thunder and lightning, adopted for the king of Sakí who happens to be a devotee of the deity.

52 Personal name of one of the king’s children, meaning “one born to enjoy honor.”

53 Personal name of the king, meaning “one whose honor is bountiful.”

54 Personal name of the king’s father, meaning “one who engages in war in spite of his honor.”

55 Personal name of one of the king’s children, meaning “the child whom we bore in honor.”
56 Name of a traditional market in Òyó town. The market is located close to the palace and it is regarded as the king’s market.

57 Personal name of the victim, meaning “honor has lineage.”

58 A word from the Hausa language, meaning doing things independently. Hausa is spoken in northern Nigeria and most of the West African countries, such as Niger, Ghana, Togo, Cameroon, and Benin Republic.

59 Cognomen for devotees of Yorùbá Egún (ancestral spirit and indigenous masquerade), often used as a prefix in naming of children born into the Egún family in Yorùbáland.

60 Personal name of the king’s wife, meaning “Ògún (hero-deity associated with iron, hunting, and war) will pet this one for me.”

61 One of the personal names of the king. The name was first used by an earlier Aláàfin also known as Ajáká.

Bibliography


MIDDLESEX AND THE TRANSLATION OF AMBIGUITY

By Anton Pujol

In 1994, Jeffrey Eugenides made a grand entrance into the literary world with his novel The Virgin Suicides, which was quickly translated into 13 languages. Inspired by a true event, his free retelling of the macabre end of the five Lisbon daughters received ecstatic praise from both national and international reviewers. It also served as the basis of the cult movie directed by Sofia Coppola (1999).

More accolades greeted the publication of his much-anticipated second novel, Middlesex (2002), culminating in the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Eugenides’s voluminous saga of three generations of the Stephanides family takes the reader through the 20th century from Asia Minor to Detroit. The tumultuous succession of events is narrated by the charming Calliope Stephanides, a person who, from beginning to end, defies our expectations, making life adjustments as challenging as we are ever likely to witness. Calliope’s voice, that playful and ever-present I, is at the heart of Eugenides’s success, yet it creates a quandary for the translator. The fifth chromosome and the stubborn recessive gene bound to it rule the protagonist’s life. Calliope is a hermaphrodite; that is, neither she nor he, or, in Eugenides’s simple dodge, a highly ambiguous I.1 This article will analyze four romance-language translations of Middlesex to show how they deal with Calliope’s dilemma and how they inevitably resolve it by betraying Calliope’s idiosyncrasies for the foreign reader from the start.

The novel’s opening line plunges us into the confusing crux: “I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August 1974” (3). And it continues, “Like Tiresias, I was first one thing, and then the other.” The narrator then tells the story of the Stephanides family’s odyssey from war-torn Bursa to settling down in Detroit. Raised as a girl, Calliope’s childhood is rather normal until puberty, when the expected physical changes do not take place. She is forced to fake her periods to calm an increasingly nervous mother. “I did cramps the way Meryl Streep does accents” (361), the young protagonist confesses. Cal/Callie keeps reminding the reader about the abnormality, since no classmate had “two testicles squatting illegally in their inguinal canals. Unknown to me, those anarchists had taken up residence in my abdomen, and were even hooked up to the utilities” (294).

Callie falls in love with the “Obscure Object,” as she calls the girl she desires in homage to Buñuel, and starts experimenting with a very idiosyncratic lesbianism.2 She also has sexual relationships with the Object’s brother, who, surprisingly, fails to notice anything strange. During a fight with the boy, a strategic kick sends Cal/Callie to a hospital, where the testicles finally descend, and Callie, perhaps now Cal, writes: “From my birth when they went undetected, to my baptism where they upstaged the priest, to my troubled adolescence when they did not do much of anything and then did everything at once, my genitals have been the most significant thing that ever happened to me. … I got a recessive gene on my fifth chromosome and some very rare family jewels indeed” (401).

Immediately afterward, the parents take their offspring to New York to the “world’s leading authority on human hermaphroditism” (409). Dr. Peter Luce decides to operate, so Callie can go on living as a woman.3 The narrator then panics and flees to San Francisco, along the way transforming into a man. After living as a homeless person for a long time and suffering much sexual harassment (“It’s a fucking freak” [476], yell two men who try to rape him, thinking he is a woman), the narrator finally comes to grips with the new identity. He returns to the Middlesex home as a man. The novel ends with some hope for the future of Callie, now Cal, although in a still highly ambiguous state.

Ambiguity has received much academic treatment, simply because it makes a text interesting by defying readers’ expectations and also because language is, inherently, ambiguous. The figures of the hermaphrodite and the androgyne have appeared in Western literature since the classics, starting with Plato’s Symposium as recounted by Aristophanes, and fascinated many intellectuals from Sigmund Freud to Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, to mention a significant few.4 From antiquity, as Kari Weil writes, “the actual birth of a hermaphrodite was regarded as
an evil omen from the Gods and required that the infant be put to death” (36), a notion that, given the Greek background of our novel, takes on a very special resonance here. Middlesex deals with a scientifically classified hermaphrodite and not an androgyne, since the former “is the representation of the androgyne that cannot be otherwise figured” (Weil 36). Thus, the protagonist’s dual reality is supported by real-world data, and, as the novel sharply observes, part of a long tradition, certified by the scientific community. We must note that the narrator is a true hermaphrodite who never endures any kind of gender-reassignment surgery and successfully plays both (and, some might argue, three) sides of the gender spectrum.

The omniscient narrator’s voice is duplicitous in several ways. Not only does it cross gender boundaries, both psychological and physical, but it also tells the grandparents’ adventure from a prefetal point of view, as the reader learns, and even describes in painstaking detail its own conception and birth. Since everything is told in the first person, the I is narratively fraught with problems. However, nowhere does the playfulness of the I construct become more treacherous than for the translator in assigning a grammatical gender category. As should be clear by now, Eugenides’s use of the I in English eliminates the need to use gender-specific markers; a luxury that romance-language translators, for example, do not have. Eugenides acknowledges this device in a recent interview: “For philosophical reasons I wanted the I,” and, he adds, “I wanted the I because I didn’t want that terrible situation where the character is a she, then you turn the page and she becomes he — or even the more dreaded s/he” (Weich 2). Translators into a romance language have to choose a gender and destroy the language have to choose a gender and destroy the grammatical requirement to gender, the translated rendering a character that, although it resembles the original, is very different and, unfortunately, a lot less original.

Unfortunately, however, Eugenides’s mischievous I can embody a gender that does not clearly identify itself, until the 41-year-old, living in Berlin, decides to be a man, living with a congenital gift. The Berlin setting is a metaphor for Cal’s transformation: a city that not too long ago was, as the narrator still is, made up of two very different parts, and has become (in name at least) one. Earlier, as the narrator candidly confesses:

Through all this I made no lasting conclusions about myself. I know it’s hard to believe, but that’s the way it works. The mind self-edits. The mind air-brushes. It’s a different thing to be inside a body than outside. From outside, you can look, inspect, compare. From inside there is no comparison. (387)

The translator, operating from the outside, has to negate the true construct that the narrator becomes, rendering a character that, although it resembles the original, is very different and, unfortunately, a lot less original.

In order to show the duress in the process, I will concentrate on three key moments in the novel when assigning a gender becomes an insurmountable problem for the translator. Dividing the text in two would have been feasible had the narration been in the third person. Leaving aside the question of assigning a gender, the narrator keeps us guessing, challenging us not to suspend disbelief for a moment. The novel’s opening riddle may be solved at the end but only with major reservations. In between, the translator is forced to decipher the narrator’s ontological essence, which, ironically, the narrator avoids at all costs. Although it could be argued that romance languages can express gender without identifying the subject as male or female, such contrivance would prove impossibly unwieldy, given the novel’s length (approximately 500 pages). Nevertheless, without some effort to cope with their grammatical requirement to gender, the translated
texts risk coming across as in a “third language,” as noted by Alan Duff when he writes that “the ‘untranslatable’ must be translated. But the effort to translate at all costs often leads to a straining for effect” (11). Moreover, by avoiding the original’s intrinsic ambiguity, the translators might actually render a more striking, unusual, and even bizarre construction.

It only takes the second paragraph of the novel to reveal what a quandary the translation job becomes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Catalan</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>Italian</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am a former field hockey goalie,</td>
<td>Vaig ser portera (F)</td>
<td>Un ancien gardien (M)</td>
<td>Giocatrice (F)</td>
<td>He sido guardameta (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>long-standing member of Save-the-Manatee Foundation,</td>
<td>Una antigó membre (F)</td>
<td>Membre de longue date (N)</td>
<td>Membro (M)</td>
<td>Miembro (M/N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rare attendant at the Greek Orthodox liturgy,</td>
<td>Una assistent irregular (F)</td>
<td>Grec orthodoxe (M)</td>
<td>Sporadico frequentatore (M)</td>
<td>Esporadico asistente (M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and, for most of my adult life an employee</td>
<td>Treballador (M)</td>
<td>Employé (M)</td>
<td>Dipendente (N)</td>
<td>Funcionario (M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve been ridiculed by classmates,</td>
<td>La befa de la classe (N)</td>
<td>J’ai été la risée (F)</td>
<td>Schernita dalle compagne (F)</td>
<td>Fui ridiculizado (M) por mis compañeros</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guinea-pigged by doctors, palpated by specialists and researched</td>
<td>El conillet M’han palpat… M’ha examinat (N)</td>
<td>Le cobaye des medecins L’object des …(N)</td>
<td>Trattata… Palpata Studiata (F)</td>
<td>Convertido en Palpado Calibrado (M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a swimming pool turned me into myth; (3)</td>
<td>Em va convertir en un mite (N)</td>
<td>M’a métamorphosé (M) en nympe (F)</td>
<td>Mi transformo en un mito (N)</td>
<td>Me convirtió en un mito (N)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We have only just been introduced to the narrator, and while the depiction in English remains grammatically neutral, there is no telling whether our “twice-born character” is a man or a woman at each description. The most salient information that we can gather from the four translations is that they have no commonality; they each designate the various stages in the narrator’s life under different genders, which will render vastly different images for their respective readers. An important difference is that the Spanish translation makes the protagonist a man throughout the passage, avoiding any gender ambiguity. On the other side, both the Catalan and the Italian versions assign different genders for different periods, although, to complicate matters, they do not coincide. The French version also mixes the two genders but, surprisingly, concludes the description by translating myth as nympe, a clear feminine reference, instead of the most obvious choice mythe, while, at the same time, conjugating the verb in the masculine form, a felicitous combination.

Subtleties aside, all the translators’ decisions are perfectly defensible, given the source. However, we cannot underestimate the impact that going from a nongendered I to a specific gender will make in the reader’s final construct of the character. The Spanish version is the most drastic, since the narrator describes his life only as a man, never as a girl, even though he says he was born twice in different genders; a reference that, at this point, is absolutely incomprehensible. Although Cal is now narrating from a (nongenetically) male perspective, it is hard to imagine that he would not use she to describe the period during which he lived as Callie. For the same reason, all versions use the masculine when the narrator talks about “my adult life.”

The differences carry subtle understandings of the text. When the narrator informs us of being “a rare attendant at the Greek Orthodox liturgy,” only the Catalan version uses the feminine form. These occasions show the power of choice in translation, since the text only mentions Callie going to religious services, never the 41-year-old narrator, who is,
indeed, highly unlikely to attend. The only clear error seems to be in the Spanish version, which uses the masculine form for “I’ve been ridiculed by classmates.” Since Callie attended an all-girls school, the use of the masculine compañeros is clearly flawed. However, the original, highly ambiguous text continually forces the translator to make difficult choices.

The same problem that plagues the translators often perplexes the characters involved in the action, which proves that the narrative never eases the narrator’s gender enigma. Metalinguistically, the narrator also strives for a language that can convey the confusing situation, but not even the source language is adequate: “I’ve never had the right words to describe my life, and now that I’ve entered my story, I need them more than ever” (217). Not only the narrator finds language ineffectual; several other characters are often at a loss for words. The problem is embedded in the climactic scene, when Dr. Luce, an expert in genetical liminalities, tries to talk about his new patient avoiding any kind of gender markers:

<table>
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<th>Italian</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The doctor hadn’t said my name.</td>
<td>El doctor no havia dit el meu nom. (N)</td>
<td>Le médecin n’avait pas dit mon nom. (N)</td>
<td>Il dottore non mi aveva nominata. (F)</td>
<td>El médico no había pronunciado mi nombre. (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He hadn’t said “daughter” either. He didn’t use any pronouns at all.</td>
<td>No havia dit “filla” tampoc.</td>
<td>Il n’avais pas dit “fille” non plus.</td>
<td>Non aveva detto neanche “figlia”.</td>
<td>Ni “hija” tampoco. No utilizó pronombre alguno.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Luce just said] I’ll need to see your child every day. (414)</td>
<td>M’aniria bé poder veure la Callie cada dia. (463) (F)</td>
<td>Il faudra que je voque votre enfant tous les jours. (535) (N)</td>
<td>Devo vedere la vostra creatura tutti i gioni. (474) (N)</td>
<td>Necesitaré ver a su bebé todos los días. (527-28) (N)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we saw before, there is no agreement among the versions, but three particular instances need attention. For example, the Italian translation uses the feminine form, nominata, instead of the more gender-neutral expression the narrator is trying to convey. The Catalan and Spanish translators commit the most glaring oversight, due to the lack of an appropriate neutral equivalent for “your child” in both languages. The Spanish version uses bebé, which is unsuitable for describing a teenager, whereas the Catalan translation is forced to betray the text by contradicting what Dr. Luce is willfully trying to avoid: mentioning the narrator’s (female) name. While hearing “the words that were not there” (414), Mrs. Stephanides’s reaction to hearing “your child” gets lost in the Catalan, robbing the scene of the emotional, yet unspoken, discovery of things to come.

Peter Luce performs a key function in the narrative that, up to this moment, has been absent: he is an objective evaluator of the narrator’s ambiguous gender, whose clinical opinions will trigger the protagonist’s final decision. Luce serves not only to establish what the medical community would recommend, but, more important, to keep the reader aware that our narrator’s gender, far from being definitive, is still caught between two realms. The fact that Luce, after having performed multiple examinations, both physical and psychological, remains unable to render an informed opinion places the reader in the same ambiguous position as at the opening of the novel: it is impossible to know what the narrator’s gender is. Thus, we can safely assume that the translators should not have assigned any definite gender marker, since it would be misleading and work against the narrative goal. However, the target languages offer no choice.

To complicate matters more, after Luce’s assessment certifies the narrator’s ambiguity, the four versions analyzed here only assign the feminine gender. For instance, when Luce wants to continue the psychological analysis, the narrator shouts, “It’s not like I’m crazy” (416). In the translations, we find: “No estic pas boja” (464); “Je ne suis pas folle, moi-même” (536); “Non sono mica matta” (475); and “como si estuviera loca” (528), the four languages making the narrator into a girl. However, throughout the novel the translators have assigned that same narrator/character
both genders despite the never-resolved “Dionysian revelry” (295) contesting for possession of the body.

The character’s hermaphroditism itself becomes another problem for the translators. Whereas in the romance languages analyzed here, the word is grammatically masculine, in English, although that exercise was somewhat easier, since the editors applied feminine nouns when the character talked about herself, italicized to distinguish the differences, leaving all the rest in the masculine form (xiv). It is logical in Middlesex, then, that the narrator never identifies a gender when talking about the condition in question, except at the end, when Cal declares himself a man, if one with a big secret. However, another grammatically gendered process takes place when describing other hermaphrodites, especially when Cal meets Zora in San Francisco.

Zora works, along with our narrator and pre-op transsexuals, in the sordid “Octopussy’s Garden” and is, like the protagonist, a hermaphrodite. In the Garden, Zora and Callie submerge themselves in a pool, naked, showing their peculiar genitals to amazed clients. Although they always use drugs while working, the pool provides a womb-like environment, where they can fully and, perhaps, exclusively show themselves, without being subjected to society’s muddy regulations. Although Zora’s condition is known as “Androgen Insensitivity,” she is always referred to as a woman: “Although XY like me, she had developed along female lines. But Zora had done it far better than I had …. Zora didn’t want to be a woman. She preferred to identify herself as a hermaphrodite. She was the first one I met. The first person like me” (487–88). The fact that the narrator describes her as a woman, against her explicit wishes, while still keeping his/her own preference under wraps, proves that even though a culturally female-to-male transformation has started, biologically, we are still dealing with a double-gendered construct that never defines itself, thanks to the almost constant use of the grammatical I. Nevertheless, in the last sentence, the narrator switches the feminine pronoun for an interesting “the first person.”

Relying on Aristophanes, Zora informs the narrator, “The original person was two halves, one male, one female. Then these got separated. That’s why everybody’s always searching for their other half. Except for us. We’ve got both halves already” (489; emphasis mine). Zora plays a role in the narrative akin to that of Dr. Luce: to remind the reader that although the narrator might consider himself a man, trying to reduce the duality into a binary gendered schema will be a perennial problem. It makes it impossible for the four romance-language versions to convey the liminality that permeates the persona because of grammatical restrictions. Following the above conversation, Zora tells the narrator to “consider yourself lucky” for having rejected the idea of belonging to just one gender; it is understood that Zora would never apply a gender to our protagonist. The translators in the Catalan, Italian, and Spanish iterations all conjugate the adjective in the masculine form: afortunat (543), fortunato (557), and afortunado (621), respectively. Only the French version escapes binarism by using the circumlocution, “Tu as de la chance” (627), which, although it changes the propositional meaning a little, seems to agree with Zora’s understanding of the gender problems that affect people like them.

Citing selected moments from the text and its translations, we must conclude that rendering the protagonist’s crux without betraying it is impossible. We all make choices when reading; the translators are forced to relay their own readings, while working with inconvenient target languages that completely limit their choices. Although the original keeps us guessing and, as I have shown through the figures of Dr. Luce and Zora, unsettles our readings, the translators’ only option is to end such rhetorical games.

The question of reading and interpreting texts found powerful expression in Roland Barthes’ seminal S/Z, where he uses la Zambinella, a castrato singer, to put forth his famous five codes and distinction between the readerly and the writerly text. Just as Barthes deconstructs Zambinella’s signifiers, I believe that the four translators had to “begin a process of nomination, which is the essence of the reader’s activity: To read is to struggle to name, to subject the sentences of the text to a semantic transformation” (92). The reader of the English version has the luxury of creating a complex literary figure that the reader of the four versions analyzed here will not have, since the very nature of the foreign grammar must decipher differently the hermeneutic aspect of the narration. The mixture of the young Callie, the androgynous young Cal, and the strangely ambiguous voice of the adult Cal defies category, which is, I believe, the true gift of Middlesex. Whether this gift can be conveyed in translation is another story.

There are no easy answers. Not even for our protagonist, and, although I will not reveal the ending,
we are still not sure what is happening with Cal’s sexual life. We know only that the narrator does not know either. However, imagining what might happen behind closed doors, at the end, submerges us into the same fascinating realm of hybrid character that we encountered at the beginning. Lawrence Venuti’s notion that whenever we translate, we should reflect “on the ethnocentric violence of translation” (41) fits perfectly to translating Middlesex, because doing violence is unavoidable: we will have to name and sever what should remain unnamed. The translator will be forced to translate ambiguous signifiers and, on a more tragic level, to convert what Barthes coined the “writable” text into a “readable” one. The Dionysian struggle that takes place within Callie/Cal will be negated. The narrator’s sadness and frustration, never having “the right words to describe my life and now that I’ve entered my story, I need them more than ever,” and lacking “complicated hybrid emotions” (217), parallels the translators’ task, since their languages also preclude the possibility of expressing the original with the right words.

Notes
1According to Dr. Peter Luce’s clinical study of the protagonist, Calliope (aka Cal) suffers from “5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome,” and “during examination, undescended testes could be palpated. The ‘penis’ was slightly hypospadiac, with the urethra opening on the underside” (435-36). In males, such deficiency gives them ambiguous genitalia. In the novel, the cause for this deficiency is attributed to the protagonist’s grandparents, who were also brother and sister. Lately, this condition has received a vast amount of discussion in all media. On 19 September 2004, the New York Times published “When Gender Isn’t a Given” by Mireya Navarro, explaining the problems for children and parents affected by this deficiency and exploring the difficulty for parents facing their child’s gender-reassignment surgery. For more information and an extended bibliography on the matter, consult the Intersex Society of America’s website, http://www.isna.org/drupal/.
2It is important to note that the narrator’s reference to the “Obscure Object” is marked by a sexless connotation.
3Dr. Peter Luce and his “Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic” seem to have been inspired by the famous Dr. John Money and the studies that he conducted at Johns Hopkins University during the 1970s. His decision to gender reassign a 17-month-old child whose penis had been completely burned during a routine circumcision is the basis of John Colapinto’s book, As Nature Made Him: The Boy who was Raised as a Girl.
4For the purpose of this essay, I have concentrated on Roland Barthes’s S/Z, Michel Foucault’s discovery of, and commentary on, Herculine Barbin. Being the Recently

Works Cited
TRANSLATION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT: THE SPLENDID ISOLATION OF OUR RETRANSLATORS OF RUSSIAN CLASSICS

By Timothy D. Sergay

“Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour.”
— T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”

The translator Peter Constantine’s acknowledgments in the front matter of the 2002 Norton Complete Works of Isaac Babel, which Constantine translated single-handedly, include generous thanks to editors, his copyeditor, his agent, the agent of the Babel estate, the curator and librarian of the Slavic and Baltic Division of the New York Public Library, and various scholars and personal advisors, including prominent Babel specialists Gregory Freidin and Efraim Sicher. Yet he says nothing at all of his indebtedness toward (or simply collegial respect for) any previous translators of Babel into English. This personal choice on Constantine’s part is puzzling, to say the least, in view of his membership on the PEN Translation Committee, his activities as an editor of Conjunctions, and his public remarks in favor of “increasing the visibility of translators.”

But Robert Weil, the editor in charge of Norton’s Babel project, surely shares responsibility for allowing a subtle churlishness by omission toward preceding translators to become a consistent policy for the volume as a whole. The Norton Complete Babel comes with an ample collection of what Gerard Genette has called “paratexts” — the jacket and flap copy; Cynthia Ozick’s introduction; Nathalie Babel Brown’s editor’s preface, acknowledgments, and afterword; Constantine’s foreword and acknowledgments; and end matter consisting of a chronology and notes. These texts never once refer to any of Constantine’s predecessors by name. These persons are instead anonymously subsumed in a single phrase (“There have been … numerous translators, translating the same materials, sometimes ineptly, sometimes excellently”) and in a claim of having achieved “unique coherence and consistency” in an English edition simply because for the first time a single person has translated the whole available corpus. The chronology by the Babel specialist and biographer Gregory Freidin mentions four landmark volumes in Babel’s “life in English”: the 1929 Red Cavalry, the 1955 Collected Stories, the 1964 Lonely Years, and the 1966 You Must Know Everything, the latter two edited by Babel-Brown, but it studiously omits the names of the translators (Nadia Helstein, Walter Morison [revising Helstein], Mirra Ginsburg, Andrew R. MacAndrew, and Max Hayward) who actually created those English texts. In Professor Freidin’s chronology, the publication of the 1994 Penguin Collected Stories, translated by David McDuff and edited by Freidin’s fellow Babel specialist Efraim Sicher (revised and reissued in 1998), is not even mentioned. The publication in 1995 by Yale University Press of an English translation of Babel’s 1920 diary by H.T. Willetts is likewise omitted. In her preface, Babel-Brown quotes a biographical remark from Cynthia Ozick’s 1995 review of “Babel’s 1920 Diary” in The New Republic, but without any indication that unlike “the volumes entitled Red Cavalry and The Odessa Stories,” the volume under review in Ozick’s article was in fact an English-language publication, and certainly without mentioning its translator, Willetts. The publication in 1996 of Antonina Pirozhkova’s memoir At His Side, however, did merit an entry in the chronology, and in this case alone the translators are named (Anne Frydman and Robert L. Busch) — making it clear that the omission of the names of Babel’s earlier translators everywhere else is quite deliberate.

One finds the very same erasure of predecessors in the paratexts of Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky’s translation of Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina: no mention anywhere of even Constance Garnett, just a dismissive reference to “previous versions.” This practice by the “P/V team” remains unchanged since the publication in 1990 of their retranslation of Dostoevsky’s Brothers Karamazov. In Constantine’s first post-Babel Russian project, a retranslation of Nikolai Gogol’s Taras Bulba, the translator once again makes no mention of at least eight preceding translators of this tale into English (dating back to George Tolstoy’s translation of 1860). Robert D. Kaplan, to be sure, does quote an observation about Gogol’s tale by one of those
translators, David D. Magarshack, in his introduction. But again there is no reference to any predecessors in terms of their literary contribution.

On the other hand, perhaps a tight lid on the acknowledgment of preceding translators is nothing more than an obligatory “hard-ball” sales strategy, made strictly in concession to the marketing department. Why risk plugging any competing edition? Perhaps the economics of the foreign-literature niche have grown altogether too harsh since 1970, when W.H. Auden wrote the following in his review of David Luke’s retranslations of Thomas Mann:

Anyone who offers a fresh translation of a prose work — poetry is another matter — is in duty bound to justify his undertaking by explaining why he thinks that earlier versions are unsatisfactory, a task which can only be congenial to the malicious. Dr. Luke has felt, quite rightly, obliged to cite some of the errors made by Mrs. Lowe-Porter, and anybody who knows German will agree with him that many of these are serious. But he does so with obvious reluctance and concludes by paying her a just tribute: “Her task, as the exclusive translator of [Mann’s] entire work, was, of course, Herculean, and her mistakes were probably as much due to understandable haste as to an inadequate knowledge of German. Her achievement deserves credit for its sheer volume, and it would be churlish to deny that her renderings are often by no means infelicitous. My own method in retranslating these six stories was to avoid consulting the existing versions of them until I had at least decided on my first draft for a given sentence or paragraph. The corresponding passage in Mrs. Lowe-Porter would then occasionally suggest second thoughts.”

Are the days of such literary gentility gone forever? Not at all. Refusal even to mention one’s predecessors in presenting a retranslation is still a voluntary stance. Other contemporary practitioners take a different one. Robert Chandler notes in his Russian Short Stories from Pushkin to Buida that all the translations bearing his own name in the volume represent collaboration to varying degrees with his wife Elizabeth, with those who checked his drafts, and also with previous translators. “Many translators,” he observes, “avoid looking at the work of their predecessors; others evidently do look but are ashamed to admit it. This is surprising: in most fields of human endeavor ignorance of previous work in a given field is considered unacceptable.” Wyatt Mason’s introduction to his 2002 Rimbaud Complete includes a careful review of the contrasting translation philosophies of two predecessors, Wallace Fowlie and Paul Schmidt, and concludes, “The difficulty with any of these philosophies of translation — Fowlie’s, Schmidt’s, my own — is that none provides an indelible solution.” Mark Harman opens the preface to his 1998 retranslation of Kafka’s The Castle by citing Auden’s dictum of 1970. “I have no desire,” Harman continues, “to malign the translations of the Muirs…. Their elegant translations, beginning with The Castle (1930), quickly established Kafka’s reputation in the English-speaking world.” (Surely Helstein’s and Morison’s work, whatever its demerits, did the very same for Babel.) Harman then undertakes a judicious and historically informed analysis of the deficiencies in the Muirs’ renderings of Kafka. Robert Fagles set a high standard for magnanimity in his introduction to his 1990 version of the Iliad:

[My debts to others are considerable, and here I say my thanks to William Arrowsmith, Robert Graves, Martin Hammond, Richmond Lattimore, Christopher Logue, Paul Mazon, Ennis Reese and E. V. Rieu. A few I have known in person, most I have never met. Yet I suspect we all have known each other in a way, having trekked across the same territory…. In any event, the translator I have known the best is the one to whom I owe the most, Robert Fitzgerald…."

One would look in vain for such grace, humility, and active engagement with the English translatorly tradition in the presentation of either Constantine’s Babel or the P/V team’s Karenina. For these volumes, there is no “tradition”: there is only “the individual talent.” Before us, our foreign authors were void and without form in the English tongue, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

Given the prominence — not to say dominance — of the P/V team and Peter Constantine in the narrow circle of Russian-English literary translation, it is especially regrettable that a solipsistic stance toward one’s predecessors has perforce become the rule in the presentation of high-profile new editions of classical Russian literature in English. Is there precedent, perhaps, for such a stance in Russian literary history itself? Of course. There was the Futurists’ famous manifesto of December 1912, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste”: “Only we are the face of our Time.
Through us, the horn of time trumpets in literary art. The past is too constricting. The Academy and Pushkin are more inscrutable than hieroglyphics. Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and all their ilk must be tossed off the ship of Contemporaneity. But this gesture by Mayakovsky and his friends was certain to produce the greatest possible épatage of the bourgeoisie precisely because Russian culture is so highly conservative, so reverent toward its traditions. Russians often observe that somehow they only manage to love their leading lights posthumously — but they do indeed love them, with moving intensity. Far more representative of Russia’s own translation culture is Vikentii Veresaev’s critique of the “cult of originality” in translation. In his retranslation of Homer’s Iliad in 1949, Veresaev incorporated select passages from the preceding Russian translations by Gnedich and Minsky. Defending this practice in his preface, Veresaev laid out a scheme for “diachronic,” accumulative collaboration among successive translators:

When a new translator sets out to retranslate a classical work, his first and most pressing order of business is to avoid any resemblance to his predecessors. A particular expression, a line, a couplet or even an entire stanza in an earlier translator’s work might be impossible to improve upon. But that doesn’t matter! Originality is sacred. So the translator ventures his own, original solution, knowing full well that it is both worse and less faithful. All the achievements of prior translators are canceled out, and each starts over from scratch.

This approach seems altogether wrong-headed to me. The overarching goal, the justification for the whole enterprise is a maximally precise and maximally artistic rendering of the original work. If we accept the principle of collective collaboration in space, so to speak, then why should we reject the idea of collective collaboration across time as well, among an entire succession of translators? I might name Veresaev’s approach “translation scrambles,” after “golf scrambles,” a particularly social and noncompetitive event where the best ball hit by any member of a foursome is used for each new stroke. Of course, implementing Veresaev’s ideas would entail problems of licensing, royalty-sharing and general ego-management. But in spirit, those ideas are far more appealing, far more “Russian” than the pose of creative isolation and self-sufficiency adopted by Peter Constantine and the P/V team. Is it really too late for Veresaev’s “traditionalist” and terribly Russian “collectivism” to suggest a few “second thoughts”? In 2002, the journal Conjunctions published a special translations issue (No. 38) co-edited by Constantine with the title Rejoicing Revoicing. When revoicing foreign texts that others have already lovingly revoiced into the language we share with them, surely an attitude of simple respect for those others should have some place in our “rejoicing.” After all, far sooner than we’d like, and particularly if we attempt retraductions of classics, we ourselves will be “others” for someone else.

Notes

6. The omission of Willetts’s name is especially curious. Harry Willetts (1922–2005), the accomplished translator of Solzhenitsyn, was evidently the first translator to be “cast” for Nathalie Babel-Brown’s project of a complete Babel in English. In a New York Times article dated Jan. 25, 1990, Babel-Brown was interviewed about her appearance at an evening of Babel readings held that night at New York’s 92nd Street Y. The speakers at that session, wrote D.J.R. Bruckner, “will use new English translations made by Harry Willetts of Oxford University for a complete new American edition.” Between 1990 and his death in 2005, Willetts devoted himself to translating Solzhenitsyn (the novel November 1916 and a retranslation of One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich). Constantine’s involvement with the Norton Complete Babel dates to 1998.

14 My concern here is only with the attitude toward predecessors demonstrated by Peter Constantine and the P/V team in the “paratexts” of their volumes, not with the adequacy of the texts themselves, which, to be sure, have been highly and widely praised. Dissenting views on the linguistic and stylistic quality of these retranslations have nevertheless begun appearing; on Constantine, see my article “Isaac Babel’s Life in English” in *Translation and Literature* 15, Part 2 (Autumn 2006), 238–253; on the P/V team, see M. Berdy and V. Lanchikov, “Uspekh i uspeshnost’: Russkaia klassika v perevodakh R. Pevera i L. Volokhonskoi,” *Mosty* No. 1 (2006), 18–31; abridged version at www.lingyoda.ru/transforum/articles/berdi_lanchikov.asp.

Whenever we talk of translation, one of the most frequent metaphors we rely on is that of a bridge: a strategy to connect what would otherwise remain unbridged, and thus a mechanism to grant a voice to what would otherwise have to remain mute, or at least muted in any other language than the original. Any discussion of translation is necessarily a discussion of relationships, and in particular the relationship between an original text and its translated version, often referred to as “the source” and “the target.” Little wonder, then, that for some Renaissance humanists, translation was often prized over original composition, in that creative artists merely give voice to what is already within them, through natural talent, discipline, and skill, whereas translators combine equivalent creativity, talents, and skills in the name of bringing people together, of minimizing the gulf between Self and Other.

Such elementary notions as these are particularly important in the theorizing of literary translation, which it is helpful at this point to distinguish from what we might call, for the sake of simplification, “technical translation.” This distinction turns on the all-important concept of “interpretation.” If “translation” is an effort to duplicate, in some new and different form, what a text says, then “interpretation” is an effort to say what a text means, with equally significant implications for both the source and the target texts. If we take as an example of a text calling for what I have referred to as “technical translation” one that provides instructions for assembling a bicycle, or one that discusses the mingling of nitrogen and glycerin, we clearly hope for translations in which the translator has embroidered on his own personal take on the source material as little as possible. Otherwise, many a holiday morning stands to be ruined, and many a Chemistry Department’s roof stands to be blown off, if we have translators who indulge their imagination and give us what they think the source stands for, or signifies, rather than what it says. “Literary translation,” on the other hand, owes as much to what the source-text “says” as to what the interpreter thinks it “means.” The neophyte translator confronted with Macbeth’s dagger has little problem finding an accurate Russian or Spanish equivalent for such a weapon, but when we remember that there is, in a certain sense, no handy colloquial usage of the verb “to be” in Russian, while there are two quite distinct such verbs in Spanish, the translator has first to decide what Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” means before he can say it in Russian or in Spanish.

“Technical translation” may thus be said to be primarily “source-driven” — what one of my teachers used to call “translation out of...” — whereas “literary translation” may be characterized as more “target-driven”: “translation into...,” so to speak. “Technical translation” owes chiefly to the source; “literary translation” owes mostly to the target; all translation implies interpretation. The problem lies in the fact that there can be scant call on interpretive latitude if our task is to Italianize or to Arabize “a one and seven-eighths inch flat-head screw” or “two parts of hydrogen to one part of oxygen”: but if we must put the Welsh verb dysgu into English, or the adjective glas, we must know that the verb covers both English “to teach” and “to learn,” and the adjective both “blue” and “green,” and we must commit ourselves (all jokes about the blue grass of Kentucky aside) to which of these we believe to be currently meant. We translate our own, subjective, perception of intended meaning, not uttered words, which, once pronounced, proceed to acquire some kind of objectivity.

It is this necessity of interpretive latitude imposed on the literary translator — what I have called elsewhere “the hermeneutic imperative” — that is of interest to me here and that underlies my title today, “Betrayals and Fidelities of Literary Translation.” Behind this, many of you will have recognized the so-called Italian expression traduttore-traditore, “translator-traitor” (“so-called” Italian, since all research seems to suggest that the first use of this expression can be attributed to a French Renaissance poet, who was doing what so many French Renaissance poets were good at: being rude to the Italians!). In tagging the translator as a traitor, it is important to realize that the betrayals in question can occur regarding not only the source but also the target text. To translate the Spanish word toro by “cow” is clearly a betrayal of the original: toro just does not mean “cow,” any more than it means “steering wheel.”
or “broccoli.” But if we take a French sentence like “Entrant du trottoir, avec le sirop d’orange et le boeuf haché dans son sac-à-dos, il a pris l’ascenseur jusqu’au bureau de son infirmière-chef,” and offer it to an American audience as “Coming in from the pavement, and with the squash and the mince in his rucksack, he took the lift up to his sister’s office,” we may well have betrayed the target text, no matter how unexceptionable and “accurate” such a version might be for a British audience. In the USA, we might have done better to say: “Coming in off the sidewalk, and with the bottled orange-juice concentrate and the ground beef in his backpack, he took the elevator to his head nurse’s station.” These are precisely the grounds on which, where one used to find in French translations from the English language, the annotation “traduit de l’anglais” [translated from the English], one now finds “traduit de l’américain /de l’australien” and so on. Words not only say but mean, and that is the essence of the issue.

This problem is perfectly illustrated in the Argentine writer Jorge-Luis Borges’s brilliant short story, Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote [Pierre Ménard, author of Don Quijote]. You and I might be tempted to say that what the protagonist, Pierre Ménard, is doing is simply copying out, word for word, Cervantes’s original, for there is not one iota of difference between the words in the Cervantine “source” and Ménard’s “target version.” Had photocopiers been common in the 1940s, when the story was written, Ménard could simply have xeroxed his Spanish original and still called it a translation, for it is the reader who is doing the translating here, not the writer. As Borges argues, since this “transcription” is being done by a twentieth-century writer for a twentieth-century readership, this is not mere recopying, but authentic translation.

For us to read Ménard today is certainly to reread what Cervantes said, but it can no longer be to read what Cervantes meant. As Borges notes, “Cervantes’s text and that of Ménard are verbally identical, but the latter is almost infinitely richer.” This is because the original is inevitably chained to a specific mode of discourse and to a certain time and place in our cultural history; Ménard’s version, on the other hand, is enriched for us by all the benefits of intertextuality and historical remove that stand to inform our own, contemporary, experience of the text. The mere reproduction, in the 20th century, of what Cervantes had said in the 17th suffices in itself to ferry new meaning. Time and place matter. In whatever language, words like “chivalry,” “armor,” “knight-at-arms,” and “courty behavior” necessarily correspond to different realities, and invite different interpretations, in early-17th-century Castile and early-21st-century Massachusetts. Ménard’s rewriting of Cervantes’s original, no matter how identical it is in its manner of saying, carries limitless new meanings for later ages and thereby represents as much (and perhaps even more) of a “translation” as any mere shift of linguistic medium. Indeed, it is in this sense that all new reading, whether in the language of the original or in another tongue, constitutes an ongoing act of interpretive translation.

Borges’s story deals with translation in which the words remain unaltered. At the other end of the spectrum, we can consider the case of translations in which the new words radically affect, and even alter, our understanding of the original. The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai has recounted how, as a young man, he had sought to win the favor of a certain young lady by translating for her some of the love poems of W. H. Auden. Amichai ran into problems of an unexpected nature, however. In Hebrew, personal pronouns reflect gender more extensively than they do in English: where we have “he” and “she” (which are gender-specific), we also have “I”, “you,” “we,” and “they,” which are indeterminate as to gender. In Hebrew, the pronoun equivalent to the English “you” differ according to whether the person being addressed is a man or a woman. This mattered a great deal in Amichai’s attempts to have the English poet function as his intercessor with his girlfriend, to whom he would have wished to say “I love you”: in Hebrew, “aní ohev ótáh.” But Mr. Auden was in love with another man, and his love poetry was never intended for a woman. He could say in English “I love you,” whether to a man or to a woman, but in Hebrew “ani ohev otáh” could only be addressed to a woman: Auden’s intentions would call for “ani ohev othá” — and Amichai would never get a date on the strength of saying that to his girlfriend. As he famously remarked: “In Hebrew you have to commit yourself, but in English you can go either way!”

Indeed, this puts me in mind of the story of the tourist who has assiduously studied Hebrew in preparation for his first visit to Israel: upon arriving in Tel Aviv, he goes to a bar and proudly asks for a Coca-Cola, only to have the barman respond, “And which book of the Bible did you step out of?” The relationship between source and target can be fraught with ambiguities and occasions for mishap. The bridge is often all too slippery.
But, of course, if translation is viewed as a bridge, we cannot be selective or partial in our exploitation of the metaphor. We cannot forget that while a bridge conjoins, it also codifies a certain separateness: you do not need a bridge if there is no gulf or gap in the first place. Translation is necessary only because we do not know the other language: translation surely brings about a meeting of Self and Other, but not usually on the terms of the Other. That is one reason why foreign languages matter in a liberal-arts curriculum: either I learn the Hawaiian’s language and go to him, or he learns English and comes to me — and we cannot doubt what the outcome of the power politics of such a calculus as that is going to be. We know all too well who will have to do the approaching.

It must also of course be conceded that, once in a while, the function of translation is not to facilitate but in fact to impede communication — although this can backfire in spectacular ways. I still recall our thrill at discovering, in high school, that all the really “juicy parts” of Freud’s case-studies and of Kraft-Ebbing’s Psychopathia Sexualis were in Latin, in the hope that our raging adolescent hormones would remain forever ignorant of such exciting topics. In actuality, of course, nothing was more guaranteed to drive us to the vigorous study of Latin grammar and vocabulary, nor indeed to lead us to the breathless exploration of Ovid and Martial in the original.

Not everything can be translated, of course. Sometimes it is a matter of a particularity within the frame of cultural reference of the source language, having no equivalent within the target framework: the specific word for a special right-hand glove made from the skin of a young female ibex, used uniquely by princely adolescents for learning falconry in tenth-century Ethiopia, might for example force us into periphrastic description, “translation as gloss,” as the only solution, if we were translating from Amharic to English (although not, perhaps, if we were translating into Arabic). (I made that example up, by the way!) And of course, translation can sometimes be impossible for purely semantic reasons: the words might simply not be there. Dorothy Parker’s quip, upon being told that President Coolidge had just died — “How do they know?” — presents no difficulty whatsoever for the translator, although it certainly helps if the target readers know that Coolidge was known as “Silent Cal.” But the account of her remark, upon being informed that guests at a Halloween party were ducking for apples, must doubtless remain eternally untranslatable: “That, but for a typographical inaccuracy, is the story of my life!” We could certainly translate the words, but the meaning would seem to be intractable.

If translation aspires to anything more than a basic level of lexical equivalency, literary translation in particular calls for acute sensitivity to what is sometimes called the conveyance of “equivalent effect,” which I take to be precisely what the great German critic Walter Benjamin had in mind in arguing that a translation must incorporate first and foremost the original’s “mode of signification.” The translator’s business is not to convey what the original “says” (once he changes the language of the original, how can he?), but rather its “mode of signification” — the nexus of what it means and how it says what it means. If to say is to mean, then to say anew is to mean anew. The theorizing of translation engages primarily matters of epistemology and cultural conceptualization long before it engages matters of semantic formulation. How, for example, might a writer from Puerto Rico living, say, in New York and for whom the fruit she calls a “guanábana,” which symbolizes all the fragrance and lush sweetness of her beautiful homeland, deal with the fact that the English name for this tropical fruit is “soursop”? Over and above any issues of familiarity and unfamiliarity, how can echoes of “sourness” and “soppiness” evoke the perfumed delicacy of a fruit that might symbolize so powerfully the bitter-sweet nature of exile? And that is the translative dilemma in a nutshell: how to make the alien familiar and the different comprehensible while avoiding a complex trap — deformation of the Other through reductive assimilation to the norms of the Self, and betrayal of the Self by denying either our distinction from, or our common bond with, the Other.

The search for “equivalent effect” or the representation of the original’s “mode of signification” is thus what governs “the betrayals and fidelities” I am speaking of, and this effort is clearly first and foremost responsive to the target rather than to the source. I recently discovered a fascinating example of this while reading the novel We by Yevgeny Zamyatin, a brilliant 1920s precursor of such novels as Huxley’s Brave New World and Orwell’s 1984, and which takes place in OneState (one word), where Newspeak abounds. In his introduction, the translator, Clarence Brown, explains how he dealt with a particular problem created by the Russian original:

The inhabitants of OneState have only numbers, no names, and they all wear the same uniform, only the word “uniform,” the author tells us, has been worn down by time to “unif.” That’s what Zamyatin writes in Russian, the Cyrillic
equivalents of those four letters: u-n-i-f. All previous translators known to me have opted for “unif” in their English versions.

This struck me as wrong. I did not think an English speaker [...] would naturally come up with “unif” as the worn-down stump of “uniform.” So I made it “yuny” [...] I was listening one evening to [...] the play-by-play for a Yankees game… The right fielder was racing for a high fly [...] when he slipped in a slick spot. “And not only did he miss the ball,” said [the radio commentator], “but he got his yuny wet!” I felt like grabbing a cab for the Bronx to throw my arms round his neck in gratitude. I had got it right: “Yuny” is the spontaneous and natural American reduction of “uniform.”

Fate is not always so kind to the literary translator! This notion of seeking to capture the original’s “mode of signification” is at the heart of the translative enterprise. I recently found an example in, of all places, the train between Toronto and Montreal, in the free bi-lingual magazine distributed to the passengers. None of us would suppose that the French word “défaite” [defeat] could ever be an accurate translation of the English word “victory”: yet, in an article on the 17th century Anglo-French wars in North America, the words “After the victory on the Plains of Abraham...” were paralleled, in the face to face text, by the words “Après la défaite des plaines d’Abraham...,” for it was not triumph but loss for French Canadians that Wolfe defeated Montcalm outside Quebec City in 1759. By the same reckoning, we can suppose that the words “How the West was won” might accurately be translated, into Shoshone or Iroquois, as “How the East was lost.” Words mean, and their meaning is attained only through interpretation.

This type of problematization can be explored with particular value in some translated excerpts from the originals of Montaigne and Neruda, authors for whom the nature of language itself was a central artistic and intellectual preoccupation. The French Renaissance essayist Michel de Montaigne (d. 1592) was translated into English almost as soon as his Essays were published from 1580 on. In our own time, he has benefited from two remarkable translations, one by the American Donald Frame (published in 1957), and the other published in 1991 by the English scholar Michael Screech. Having been privileged to know somewhat both translators, and to have read much of their critical analyses, I can safely affirm that, although they were comparable in some ways — both of them brilliant scholars and translators, and academics of enormous distinction and generosity of spirit — they were very different men: Frame, at Columbia, the embodiment of humanist agnosticism, for whom the wisdom of the Renaissance lay in its embrace of the Greco-Roman ideals of balance and lucidity; Screech, at Oxford, the incarnation of High Anglicanism (that would be Episcopalianism in translation...), for whom the Renaissance is indelibly marked by the intellectual anxieties and spiritual upheavals brought about by the Protestant Reformation. A comparison of the two translations shows again and again how Frame has translated his Montaigne, just as surely as Screech has translated his. Indeed, Montaigne himself would have been the first to concede that there are as many Montaignes as he has readers, all of whom will be interpreters whether they are translators or not. Perhaps nothing better illustrates the dichotomous Montaigne who emerges from any comparison of Frame’s and Screech’s versions than consideration of the very last words we hear from the essayist (at the end of Book III, Essay 13, On Experience), words that, curiously enough, Montaigne leaves on the tongue, and in the tongue, of another. As we close the book, it is the Latin words of the poet Horace that resonate in our minds, in a moving prayer to Apollo, asking that, even if old age brings us physical difficulties, we might continue to enjoy the life of the mind, in the company of the Muses. The techniques brought by each scholar to enable us to hear Montaigne’s final words here, as he allows another to speak for him, to “interpret” his thoughts to us, are revelatory indeed. Screech’s translation of the poem, faultless in its rendering of the Latin original, spares us nothing of the physical degradation of old age and ensures that our terminal reading culminates on a note of desolation and loss: “Vouchsafe, O Son of Latona, that I may enjoy those things I have prepared; and, with my mind intact I pray, may I not degenerate into a squalid senility, in which the lyre is wanting.” In following so closely the word-order of the Latin, Screech has clearly sought to preserve the perspective of his own commentary on these lines: “Horace’s words evoke the fear of fears for a man of Montaigne’s turn of mind: senile dementia: and his last word of all encapsulates the dread of old folk throughout the ages: want….” Frame, on the other hand, with subtle rearrangement, in a version made comfortably harmonious by rhyme and rhythm, and with recourse to a litotes (“not unsolaced”) that enables him to put his own understated cast on the citation, sends us ultimately on our hopeful way with the consolation of music in our ears:
Grant me but health, Latona’s son,
And to enjoy the wealth I’ve won,
And honored age, with mind entire
And not unsolaced by the lyre.

Screech’s last word characterizes the lyre by its absence, as indeed does… I was going to say Montaigne’s, but of course I should say Horace’s: with Frame’s last word, the lyre resonates soothingly in our ears as we close the book. Which is the “more accurate” version? Which is the “real” Montaigne? Perhaps only Montaigne’s “Montaigne” — but no writer knows better his own diversity and variability than Montaigne: he is nothing if not his own translator, with all his own betrayals and fidelities. The fact is that both Frame and Screech refract the Latin original not only through their own interpretive prism, but — more tellingly — through the prism of how they believe Montaigne himself would have translated it. Screech is unarguably closer to what Montaigne, through Horace, says; but Frame is surely closer to what Montaigne, uninterpreted by Horace or anyone else, means.

To define the end we seek as “equivalent effect” is only meaningful, of course, if we have at our disposal “equivalent means.” For the great 20th-century Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, matters of language, of the tactile, tangible words, their sounds and their consistency just as much as their fields of reference, were of primary concern — and this is particularly so in his feelings about the Spanish language. In one of his most famous passages, he writes of the incredible voracity and brutal strength of the Spanish conquistadors as they subjugated the Indian populations with whom he identifies so strongly:

They strode through the tremendous mountain chains, across the bristling Americas, looking for potatoes, pork-sausages, beans, black tobacco, gold, corn, fried eggs, with that voracious appetite which the world has never seen since… But from the boots of these barbarians, from their beards, their helmets, their horse-shoes, there fell like pebbles the luminous words which remained among us, resplendent… the language. We emerged with loss… We emerged with gain… They took away the gold and they left us gold… They took away everything and they left us everything… They left us words.

This immensely powerful sense of the Spanish language permeates Neruda’s poetry, and thus presents his translators with special issues. In his Alturas de Macchu Picchu (The Heights of Macchu Picchu), he meditates on the bonds between past and present, between conqueror and conquered; and, in a great concluding song of human solidarity, he invokes the humble, downtrodden, and faceless Indian workers whose true monument Macchu Picchu is, far more than it is ever a monument to the great and powerful of this world:

from Canto XI

… no veo a la bestia veloz,
no veo el ciego ciclo de sus garras,
veo el antiguo ser, servidor, el dormido
en los campos, veo un cuerpo, mil cuerpos, un hombre,

mil mujeres,
bajo la racha negra, negros de lluvia y noche,
con la piedra pesada de la estatuas:
Juan Cortapiedras, hijo de Wiracocha,
Juan Comefrio, hijo de estrella verde,
Juan Piesdescalzos, nieto de la turquesa,
sube a nacer conmigo, hermano.

Translations can have one resonance for those who know the source language as their native language, but quite a different one for those for whom both the source and the target versions are in foreign languages, as is the case for me with Neruda’s Spanish original and Roger Caillois’s French translation. This is of course an extremely personal thing (and I am sure I say this because I am not French, and therefore have other acoustic and experiential points of reference), but to my ears the French language, with its shaped, closed vowels and resonant nasals, comes off as too precious, too far at the front of the mouth and not enough in the throat, to capture the stony asperities of the Spanish here:

… je ne vois pas la bête rapide,
Je ne vois pas le cercle aveugle de ses griffes,
Je vois l’être antique, le serviteur, l’endormi
Dans les champs, je vois un corps, mille corps, un homme,

mille femmes,
Sous la rafale noire, noirs de pluie et de nuit,
Avec la lourde pierre de la statue:
Jean Brisceaillou, fils de Wiracocha,
Jean Mangefroid, fils d’étoile vertes,
Jean Piedsnu, petit-fils de la turquoise:
Monte, et nais avec moi, frère!

In trying to evaluate any translation, one does of course try to evaluate it as a piece of French, or English, or whatever the target language happens to be — and this is obviously a perfectly fine piece of French. But, in terms of “equivalent effect,” it is
Neruda? The simple answer is No: but that is too simple, since I am speaking as a foreigner familiar with both French and Spanish, one who approaches them equally as foreign languages. For the monoglot French speaker, we might have to say it is Neruda, and that is perhaps as far as we can go.

More successful, in my view — not as a piece of English, but as an effort to recapture the original’s “modes of signification” — is John Felstiner’s translation. His opening “I see not…,” for example, captures the original’s declamatory tone better than the equally possible “I do not see” — but this option was of course not open to the French translator, since there is only one way to negate a verb in French. I also find his rendering of the Indians’ names generally superior, keeping the Spanish of “stone” [piedra] in “Jack Stonebreaker,” while the French has Brisécaillou, “Pebble breaker,” nowhere near as harsh and rocky. Whether “Coldbiter” as a translation of “Comefrío” is to be preferred is another matter, for here the French “Mangefroid” is certainly closer to the Spanish [eats cold]. On the other hand, while to translate “Juan” by “Jean” is perfectly acceptable, I feel that Felstiner’s “Jack” better captures the patronizing familiarity with which the Europeans decided that if you had seen one Indian you had seen them all, and that plain Jack would suit their appointed station in life better than the more elevated tone of “John”:

… I see not the swift beast,
not the blind cycling of its claws,
I see the ancient human, a human slave, sleeping in the fields, I see one body, a thousand bodies, a man a thousand women under black gusts, blackened by rain and night, with the stonework’s massive carving:
Jack Stonebreaker, son of Wiracocha,
Jack Coldbiter, son of the green star,
Jack Barefoot, grandson of the turquoise,
rise to be born with me, brother.

The translative enterprise is, after all, like any other human creative endeavor, first and foremost an act of attempted communication, of reaching out. I began with the image of a bridge: perhaps we might yet see the attempt to build bridges as an act of connection rather than a codification of separateness. It is surely not too much to hope that we might yet learn to embrace the idealism of a Renaissance humanist like Louis le Roy, who could, in 1558, write in praise of translation:

“What is more admirable than to see […] human beings separated by so many seas and mountains, so far and so different from one another, engaged in mutual concourse? […] I hope that, after so many storms and tempests, some kindly wind will bring us to a haven of rest and tranquility, so that we may devote ourselves to the study of matters both human and divine, and of their causes — for such is wisdom.”
Marcelijus Martinaitis is the author of fifteen collections of poetry and five collections of essays, and in 1998 was the recipient of the Lithuanian National Award, the highest honor bestowed upon a Lithuanian writer. In 1964, Martinaitis graduated from Vilnius University with a degree in Lithuanian Literature. For more than a decade, he worked as a journalist and editor, but from 1980 on, he taught ethnography, literary analysis, and poetry at Vilnius University until his retirement in 2002.

Martinaitis is considered a major poet in Lithuania, and his work has helped shape the national consciousness, particularly his series of persona poems about the elusive Kukutis, a trickster fool, an archaic pagan farmer, a staff-bearing messenger, who not only does not adjust to the dictates of the occupying Soviet regime but cannot even comprehend them. Martinaitis’s Kukutis poems were chanted at the mass rallies of the late eighties and early nineties. They were set to music and sung all over the country and performed as skits in theaters.

Martinaitis’s work has been translated into English, Estonian, French, Norwegian, Russian, Swedish, and Ukrainian. Martinaitis himself is a translator from Swedish. In addition to his work as a poet and educator, Martinaitis is respected in Lithuania as a social activist and as one of the first members of the Lithuanian grassroots political movement Sąjūdis. During the late eighties and early nineties, Martinaitis actively participated in Lithuania’s struggle to regain its independence. In 1989, he was elected into the Supreme Soviet and traveled to Moscow to argue Lithuania’s cause as part of a larger plan to work within the Soviet system toward the goal of Lithuanian independence.

Lithuanians took advantage of Gorbochev’s perestroika, using the loosening of control over the press to begin talking about taboo subjects — the partisan warfare that raged across Lithuania from 1944 through 1956; the mass deportations of Lithuanian intellectuals and wealthy farmers to Siberia in 1941, 1944, and 1948, and the intermittent deportations that took place into the 1960s; the illegal occupation of the Baltic States by the Soviet Union through the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. The explosion of information and discussion that began in late 1988 led Lithuanians into declaring their independence from the Soviet Union on March 11, 1990. Lithuania finally regained its independence de jure and de facto in 1991. After half a century of censorship, isolation, and foreign domination, Lithuanians were propelled into the information age. The change happened seemingly overnight, leaving many people adrift, unable to adapt to a new way of life, and most importantly, to a new way of thinking. People’s inner selves, which they’d repressed their entire lives in order to ensure their personal safety and the safety of their families, began to leach out. For some, this was a freeing, enlightening process; for others, it was terrifying. It is this process that Martinaitis is concerned with in his most recent collection of persona poems, K.B.: The Suspect.

Martinaitis was born in 1936 in the village of Paserbentis in geographically and culturally isolated Western Lithuania. Martinaitis’s childhood in an archaic village community shaped his early consciousness as a poet, as did his experiences of the Soviet and later German occupations of 1941 and 1944 and the post-war partisan warfare that lasted until 1956. In an autobiographical essay Prilenktas prie savo gyvenimo (Bound to My Life), Martinaitis describes his earliest childhood memories:

Those nights during the mass deportations in our small village were the most terrifying: the running in the night before you’ve awoken; the lights from their flashlights coming closer; the act of pushing yourself harder and harder down into the ground in the pit you’re hiding in. I cannot understand or explain the blindness, the cruelty, of that time, because we had no idea why it was happening. Everyone was condemned as guilty, even the innocents. I was afraid to be left at home, I was afraid to fall asleep at night, I was afraid to wake in the morning, I was terrified of the knock on the window, the shootings, the bloody clothing, the talk of strangers, the false kindness of the strangers, the things they gave us as gifts, the stench of burned houses… Soon everything was covered in lice, people’s cottages began to sink into the ground, everywhere the belongings of the deportees lay scattered, and people began to steal from the deportee’s homes. (Martinaitis, 12–14)
In that same collection of essays, Martinaitis talks about being so traumatized by war and by the skirmishes and fighting that took place around his village during the decade-long partisan resistance to the Soviet occupation that he was unable to learn how to read or write or count until the age of ten (Martinaitis 12–14). And the terror does not end with his childhood. The most productive part of Martinaitis’s life was lived during the long years of Soviet occupation, which lasted from 1944 to 1991. As a writer and educator, Martinaitis was constantly monitored by the KGB. Although he says that he luckily was never brought in for interrogation, there was always the fear that one day he would be. Living under the repressive Soviet regime, Soviet citizens were forced to construct a mask of obsequiousness with which they navigated their public lives, burying their inner selves deep inside.

According to Martinaitis, Kukutis was the first Lithuanian to bypass the Soviet border control unnoticed. In the eighties, Kukutis made his appearance in Sweden, and since then, he has traveled the globe, showing up around the world in fourteen separate translations.

_The Ballads of Kukutis_ is set in the Stalin era, during the forced collectivization of farms, when Lithuania’s farmers lost their land and their archaic lifestyles to the process of collectivization in which private farms were confiscated and united as large collectively run farms. Also, during the Stalin and Khrushchev eras, villages were flattened by bulldozers in order to create large expanses of arable land. These forced measures taken against an agrarian people whose entire world-view and religion was linked to the land had a devastating effect. However, Martinaitis’s hero, Kukutis, the trickster fool, lives through these dark times hardly taking notice of the processes taking place around him. In fact, his very existence is an affront to the local Soviet government. Not only does Kukutis live and function outside of regulation, he possesses the ability to pass between this life and the beyond, is both animate and inanimate, and knows no borders or limits. He is a trickster character in the tradition of the Native American trickster tales.

Amazingly, Kukutis was able to infiltrate and evade censorship when _The Ballads of Kukutis_ first made its appearance in 1977. Under the Soviet system, Lithuanian literature was censored and closely monitored. The process worked as follows. The writer presented his or her manuscript to the editor at the government publishing house. The editor would read the manuscript, making sure there were no obvious allusions that would catch the attention of the censors. These would be allusions such as religious references, mention of the partisan warfare of the post-war period, or ideas reminiscent of democracy or human rights. Once the editor was satisfied that the manuscript was acceptable, he passed it on to GLAVLIT, a communist party committee that read it thoroughly, again searching for any allusions that would be considered anti-Soviet. Obviously, the writer did not have the right to know who was reading his or her manuscript, nor did he or she have access to the committee’s comments on the manuscript. If anything suspicious were detected, it was the job of the editor to mediate with the writer and to ask that revisions be made. Once all changes were made, then the manuscript would officially go before the Soviet Literature Committee, who decided whether the manuscript would be published or not and who might or might not request more changes or omissions. After all final changes were made, the manuscript would go to press. Once the first copy of the book was produced, it would be presented again to GLAVLIT, where it would be checked one last time for anti-Soviet references. This last step was particularly nerve-wracking for both the editor and the writer, because if problems were discovered at this stage, all the printed books would need to be destroyed at the expense of the publishing house. Because this would be the worst possible scenario, many editors would end up taking out too much from a manuscript beforehand in fear of the final censorship. Luckily, few Russians in Moscow could
read or understand Lithuanian, and therefore double agents within the communist party and the publishing houses in Lithuania could slide “dubious” manuscripts past the censors, thus creating an official local literary culture that was more open and expressive than that of Soviet Russia.

In the case of The Ballads of Kukutis, nothing offensive was found by the censors with the exception of one mention of Stalin, which Martinaitis’s editor suggested he remove not only for political reasons, but also because it grounded the magical quality of the poems too firmly in that one particular time period. Otherwise, Kukutis marched right past the censors and became the catalyst for revolution.

During the mass political rallies of the late eighties and early nineties, poems from The Ballads of Kukutis were chanted, sung, and performed. People immediately connected with the character of Kukutis and in their minds and hearts felt that they were all Kukutises. Once this process had begun, there was virtually nothing the authorities could do to stop it — the movement was that massive.

In Western Lithuania where Martinaitis grew up, the word “Kukutis” was used as a nonsense word. People would jokingly refer to each other as “Kukutises,” especially in clumsy or awkward situations. But “Kukutis” is also the name of a particular rare bird — a beautiful bird with a red crown — one might glimpse only once in a lifetime. The word “Kukutis” is also related to the Lithuanian word “gegutė” — coo-coo bird. Martinaitis claims that the name “Kukutis” came to him completely unexpectedly and from deep within his unconscious, as did the entire manuscript of poems, which he wrote rather effortlessly and with little revision. Only years later did he read that in Persian literature, the name of the bird that acted as Solomon’s messenger was “Kukuts.”

Martinaitis’s Kukutis character has a wooden leg. The wooden leg is a folkloric symbol of wisdom and also acts as the staff of the messenger. Because Kukutis can pass between worlds, he fulfills the role of messenger. This concept turned out to be rather prophetic, as The Ballads of Kukutis has been translated into fourteen languages and has made its mark in a number of European countries. In fact, The Ballads of Kukutis is the most widely read work of Lithuanian poetry outside of Lithuania. For Lithuanians, Kukutis carried the message of freedom. Outside of Lithuania, Kukutis bore witness to the fragility and the tenacity of an occupied people’s will to survive.

Written between 1967 and 1987, during the height of the Cold War, the poems may have eluded censorship because they were read as “literature of the absurd.” But that’s only how the censors read them. The public immediately picked up on the hidden allusions in the poems. Just to give an example, the following poem ostensibly is about a moose and can be read on a literal level as a dark poem about moose hunting. However, those who knew Lithuanian mythology, knew that the moose symbolizes the power of the Lithuanian nation, and that the act of trapping and weakening the moose, patiently, over a long period of time, so that even a small child could pet it, could be read as Lithuania’s story of occupation. When the country was occupied a second time by the Soviet Union in 1944, thousands of young people escaped mobilization into the Soviet army by fleeing into the forests, where they organized themselves as partisan fighters. For ten years, the partisan fighters engaged in battles and skirmishes with Soviet troops, impeding the process of colonization. The partisans knew that they were fighting a losing battle, realizing that they were forgotten by the West, but kept on fighting all the same until 1956. Eventually, the nation’s will was weakened enough so that “even a child could pet it.”

Kukutis Teaches a Child How to Pet a Moose

You must wait until winter
when there will be a lot of snow
and hungry moose
will roam about the forests…

“Then can I pet one?”

Not yet. You must
spread out some hay,
set up a trap,
and wait —
patiently, for a long time.

“Then can I pet one?”

Not yet. You must
wait until the moose
is trapped…

“Now can I pet it?”

It’s still dangerous.
A moose, after all, is a wild animal —
it thrashes about covered in its blood.
You must push its head securely to the ground
and tie up his legs with ropes.
Once it is exhausted and sighs heavily
even a child can come near
and gently pet it…

The biggest challenge for me in translating the Kukutis poems was to familiarize myself with the rural pagan world that centers the poems. Before I attempted translating these poems, while still studying in Lithuania in 1988–1989, I joined an ethnographic music group and together with this group scoured the countryside, searching for villages where the old traditions were still practiced. We’d travel to remote places, ask the elderly in the village if they remembered songs or stories, and asked them to sing them. We’d write the words in notebooks and the most musical among us would memorize the melodies and harmonies. At the time, it was illegal to own a tape recorder or video camera in the Soviet Union, so ethnographers had to depend on their memory and on notebooks. We’d bring the notebooks back to Vilnius, where we’d meet twice a week to commit the songs to memory. Everyone in the group copied the songs into their own song notebooks because typewriters and photocopy machines were also illegal, and computers were out of the question. Working this way I familiarized myself with the four major dialects of Lithuania, was able to experience how people lived outside of the city, and immersed myself in the music and rhythms at the core of the contemporary Lithuanian poetry.

In The Ballads of Kukutis, Martinaitis plays with the clash between Kukutis’s folkloric village mentality and the mindset of the city. Kukutis was a collective farm worker. In the Soviet Union, collective farm workers were like modern-day serfs. Their pay was low, and often they were not issued either internal or external Soviet passports, and so they could not change their place of residence or travel. They were at the mercy of the head of their collective farm, who was at the same time an overlord and a direct liaison to government authorities. There was virtually no way to break out of life on the collective farms, and people from the collective farms traveled very infrequently. In the following poem, Kukutis goes to Vilnius and, overwhelmed by the big city, falls asleep in its most prestigious public square — the Cathedral Square. The challenge in this poem was to recreate the noise of the original.

Kukutis Dreams up Žuveliškės Village in the Cathedral Square

Kukutis
lay his head on a loaf of bread
and dizzied from the summer’s heat
dreamed up Žuveliškės village
in the Vilnius Cathedral Square

Like after the great flood out of Noah’s saved ark into the square poured forth flocks of sparrows and dogs bloated cows yearling calves and girls surrounded by bulls with wreaths on their heads made from the first dandelions of the year at the end of the Cathedral Square leaning on his pitchfork Mr. Little Fish happily stares at a lamb standing before the bell tower showing off his sheepskin coat the entire square is soon crowed with Žuveliškės from all corners something alive comes crawling out hurrying everything begins to bellow moo cackle oink whistle crow crackle neigh squeal quack hiss cluck bleat cock-a-doodle-doo howl yelp cackle and smell like a cattle yard’s warmth in a manure wagon’s wheels the coolness of a hundred-year-old pantry the hot depths of whiskey of old people’s dirty words Žuveliškės village sets itself up from the Vilnelė River all the way to the Bell Tower with the cow’s footpath winding straight through the very center of the Cathedral with the laziness of an afternoon’s nap and the suffocating noise of historical chickens clucking with Antosė seated on the hay wagon and her firm breasts squeezed together

A police officer approaches Kukutis and shouts:
Kukutis — Stop — Dreaming —
In a public square — What are you doing —
Kukutis —
Staring at cleavages — What will Europe —
Think of us —
In a historic square — You’ve bred — Pigs —
You’ve built — Pigsties — Chicken coops —
Abolished farmsteads —
Already crossed off the list of approved architecture — Stop —
This dreaming — Immediately —

Martinaitis used his Kukutis character to make political statements. In the following poem, Martinaitis uses word play and a fairy tale voice to make a statement about superpowers. The subjects of the Fools’ King chase after his wheelbarrow “thanking him/that they may thank him by ringing bells…..”
Looking at this poem now, I cannot help but think that the poem speaks to all colonizing forces regardless of era or culture. It is not enough to occupy a foreign country, the occupier demands that the occupied people be thankful for the “good” that occupation will do them.

**The Story I Came Up With to Cheer Up Hanged Kukutis**

In a wheelbarrow on feathers
they push the fools’ king around
so that he may look around him and see
if the kingdom is big.
Along the way, lined up,
they ring bells for him,
thanking him
that they may thank him by ringing bells...

He rides around the earth
ten, twenty, times
and cannot find
where the kingdom ends.
And everywhere they consent
to their own consent
by singing and ringing bells.

“How many times,” the king asks,
does the kingdom go around the earth?”
“As many times,” they answer,
as there are times around the earth…”

And the king is amazed
at how the same ones
keep thanking the king for what
they have done for themselves —
they thank him
that they may thank him
by ringing bells...

Only a few hanged ones
chase after the wheelbarrow asking
that they be granted the permission to die.

“No,” the king shakes his head,
“the rules of the kingdom are
that it is forbidden
for the hanged to die!”

The king rides along in his wheelbarrow
and is followed by one fool or the other
and all of them are the same king.

In the poem “Kukutis Gazes at a Stewardess,” Kukutis sees himself as though for the first time through the eyes of a stewardess on an airplane and is overcome with shame over his shabby appearance. This kind of shame would have been familiar to any Soviet citizen who would have traveled to the West during the Cold War era. Kukutis cannot change his appearance because he is a victim of poverty, but he cannot understand that, and so he blames himself. However, Martinaitis wouldn’t be Martinaitis if he didn’t have the ability to laugh at Kukutis’s pathos and at the same time laugh at himself. Kukutis is a lecherous old soul, and his insecurities do not stop him from lapsing into a daydream about how the stewardess must look when she undresses at night before going to bed. The image inside Kukutis’s head presented me with an unique challenge as a translator. The poems are written in the third person limited omniscient, and the reader experiences the world through Kukutis’s limitations. When Kukutis studies the stewardess, he sees something that he’d never seen before in his life — nylons. The women Kukutis would have experienced on his collective farm in Western Lithuania would never have owned nylons, which could only be purchased on the black market in the cities at the time. They would have worn woolen stockings. So, to Kukutis this stewardess is wearing some sort of “see-through stockings.” Translating this poem I struggled over whether I should call the stewardess’s hosiery “see-through stockings” or translate them as nylons. I realized that if I called her hosiery nylons, I would have moved outside of Kukutis’s head and outside of his realm of experience. I decided to go with the more awkward, but at the same time more psychologically revealing translation.

**Kukutis Gazes at a Stewardess**

When she glances at me —
how ugly my mouth seems,
how run-down I look,
how my right leg gets in the way
as I climb inside the airplane.

When she glances at me —
how tiny my cottage windows are,
how unkempt my yard is,
overrun with chickens and pigs.
How ugly my sleep,
how dirty my straw-covered dreams,
especially when she leans over me, revealing her perfumed cleavage.

When she glances at me —
even I’m disgusted by the way I eat with such an awful mouth.
How ashamed I am when I see her in my thoughts, before going to bed —
dancing out of those see-through stockings.

The Kukutis poems are persona poems, but the persona of Kukutis symbolizes Lithuania as a whole, more specifically, the Lithuania of the Soviet era. At the time these poems were written, Lithuania was perceived by its intelligentsia as a dying nation, as a culture and a language that were facing extinction. The persona of Kukutis — the illiterate farmer who stubbornly clings to his pagan belief system, who does not even seem intellectually capable of comprehending the high ideals of communism, represents a culture that is facing extinction. The final poem of the collection, “A Last Farewell to Kukutis,” addresses the loss of small cultures as they are absorbed into larger ones. At the time this poem was written, there was a real fear that Lithuania, like many other tiny occupied nations, would simply cease to exist and the larger nations would never even notice their disappearance. There is also a sense of the modern world moving forward while this small nation, impotent as a result of foreign domination, must remain lagging behind.

A Last Farewell to Kukutis

Small Kukutis dies, burrowing into the grass, curled up like a bee beside its hive.
He dies for the last time, breathing in all the good of life.

Kukutis dies, so small — unseen from airplanes, undetectable on radar screens, unnoticed by submarines.

Kukutis dies quietly, without interrupting radio waves, train schedules, flight patterns…

Small Kukutis dies, not hurting anyone — like a sigh.
So small, invisible to the entire world, he dies for all times, dies wherever there is a trace of life, a corner of sky, a handful of earth, an ant toting a fir needle.

He dies in birds’ nests, on snow-covered mountain peaks, in fruit seeds, in grain, he dies in books, in bee hives…

He dies there where he can never be — in express train windows, assembly halls.
He dies for words, for children, for the Antarctic, for Ararat, Australia, the Andes, he dies for the entire world…

A star, risen over the horizon, broadcasts his eternal death, to infinity.

The Lithuanian grammatical structure is formulated according to a Latin model with five declensions of nouns, seven cases in each. The language has a rich system of declensions, conjugations, participles, perfect and imperfect verb forms, morphological gender distinctions, declensions of adjectives, and a complex system of diminutives that allow the speaker to pile diminutive upon diminutive. While meaning in English is derived from word order, context, and tacit assumptions that are part of the common language code, meaning in Lithuanian is derived by establishing the relationship of one word to another by means of morphological systems that change the word forms. Because Lithuanian is an archaic, pre-industrial language, its forms and vocabulary reflect the experiences of a rooted country life and fine shades of interpretation of meaning in nature. The complexity of the Lithuanian language allows for subtle shades of meaning, elaborate word play, and humor. The language Martinaitis uses in his Kukutis poems is archaic and agrarian.

However, crafting literature in the post-modern era using a pre-Christian language presents a daunting challenge for contemporary Lithuanian writers whose lifestyles in the twenty-first century do not differ much from those in the West. Almost two decades after The Ballads of Kukutis, Martinaitis published a new
collection of persona poems, *K.B. The Suspect*. Again, using the limited third-person omniscient narrator, Martinaitis creates a collection that must be read from inside the main character’s head. My challenge as a translator was to recreate K.B.’s sardonic, cynical, and sometimes loopy voice in English. K.B. is a sophisticated urbanite, a snob, in a word, the antithesis of Kukutis. *K.B. The Suspect* addresses post-Soviet East European reality as no other Lithuanian collection to date. Haunted by his past and bewildered by his present, K.B. represents a contemporary version of *Homo sovieticus*. As K.B. negotiates the dark, unsafe streets of Lithuania’s capital, Vilnius, the reader cannot help but recognize the fear and paranoia that hover around the edges of contemporary urban life in Eastern Europe. This collection of poems evokes our darkest moments of street panic and maintains a tension throughout that puts the reader on edge.

The image of the elegant Margarita — who dresses exquisitely even just to carry out the trash — appears as a leitmotif throughout the collection. Margarita represents the art and beauty with which K.B. wishes to surround himself. K.B. and Margarita frolic through virtual reality, page through reproductions of renaissance art, and read Dante out loud, but ultimately cannot escape the darkness of their post-Soviet reality — a stranger hangs himself under their windows in the courtyard, every evening at twilight mysterious homeless people show up to dig through the trash dumpsters, and a den of crime has established itself on an imaginary sixth floor in their apartment building.

This collection was put into my hands by Martinaitis during my last trip to Lithuania. I was there to attend a poetry translation conference sponsored by the Lithuanian Writers’ Union. Before the conference began, I had spent a few days staying with a girlfriend, a single mother with two teenaged children, who lives in one of the poorest and most crime-ridden neighborhoods in Vilnius. When I read the collection for the first time in that setting, the darkness of the poems connected on a very literal level with the fear my girlfriend and I felt each evening returning to her apartment from classical music concerts and cafes and other diversions in the elegant Old City section of Vilnius.

As Lithuania struggles to rebuild after a fifty-year occupation, street crime, paranoia, and suspicion about peoples’ pasts in that other reality — that of communism — continues to hang over daily life. As with his *Kukutis* collection, Martinaitis taps into the collective unconscious of the moment and delivers a new persona to suit the times.

K.B. represents the psychology of the typical post-Soviet individual — he was aware of the mechanisms of terror operating behind the backdrop of ordinary, everyday life, and those mechanisms terrified him, and yet he felt helpless to resist the regime; in fact, if forced or even slightly coerced, he would have willingly joined forces with the architects of that terror. Having come of age in a totalitarian regime, K.B. is expert at addressing the world wearing the mask that he has constructed. Once the regime has collapsed, K.B. considers himself free to pursue his true interests in lyric poetry and renaissance art, and yet, longing for connection with his fellow countrymen, he is baffled that people shun him, particularly in public spaces. In the opening poem of the collection, “K.B.: I am the Suspect,” K.B. is exasperated that strangers on the street or in the trolleybuses seem to avoid him. K. B. is frustrated with people’s reactions to him. He sits down next to a woman on the trolleybus and she “sidles away” while “another shifts her back toward me.” His frustration feeds his anger and sense of alienation:

I don’t know how to explain to all of them that they needn’t run, that they ought to allow me to tame them, to pet them, talk to them, feed them, love them.

It doesn’t mean anything to those creatures, those women, those bees, that my documents are in order, that I haven’t been tried, that I read the holy bible, that I meditate in verse, that I return my debts, that I pay my bills on time, that I love my neighbor no less than I love myself.

In the poem “K.B. About the One Walking Toward Him,” K.B. is walking down a dark, narrow street in Vilnius when he sees a man walking toward him and panics, desperately thinking to himself, “Should I run? It’s too late for that — I could get hit on the back of the head…….” The man walking toward him is equally terror-struck. Once they pass each other uneventfully, K.B. recognizes the other man as “the Author,” his alter ego, his keeper of secrets. This type of paranoia is typical of post-Soviet street culture in Eastern Europe. Street crime is rampant and poorly controlled. And that is nothing compared to the organized criminal activity that feeds a better part of Eastern Europe’s economy — trafficking in women and children, the drug trade, organized crime. In the
poem “K.B. Talks About the Non-existent Sixth Floor,” K.B. suspects that there is a hidden sixth floor in his five-story apartment building and that he can hear the criminals “clearly making plans. Tortures are discussed. Large sums of money rustle as they change hands.” Martinaitis’s apartment is on the fifth floor of a building with a flat roof. Convinced that someone could easily climb down from the roof onto his balcony and enter the apartment through the balcony, he moved out of his apartment and into his summer cottage on the outskirts of Vilnius. Only there, frightened by the rampant crime committed against senior citizens like himself who are murdered on a daily basis in their farmhouses by wandering petty criminals looking for cash, he slept for years with an ax beside his bed (Martinaitis interview).

Yet, as much as K.B. longs for openness, he chooses to hide his identity behind the initials K.B., entrusting his true identity to his author. In the poem “From K.B.’s Police Report,” K.B. gives the following explanation:

A name and a surname
are a means of collecting evidence,
a means of harassment, of terror,
a means of recognition at borders,
a means of being found always and anywhere
through invoices, receipts, letters,
threats, debts.

My name and surname
are often used against me.
I am locked out, accused,
recognized more by my name
than by my face.
Called by my name
I am stopped,
beaten in alleyways —
women make claims against me.

K.B. was not necessarily a KGB agent in what Lithuanians commonly refer to as “that other life” during the Soviet occupation, although, according to Martinaitis, he could have been. K.B. was not necessarily an interrogator, nor was he necessarily interrogated, but, as Martinaitis explains, “he knew that people around him were being interrogated and that made him fearful and paranoid” (Martinaitis interview). The reader doesn’t know for sure and does not find out. Similarly, people in Lithuania today are not entirely sure about their neighbor’s pasts, and even if they are, there is not much they can do about it, as the first Lithuanian parliament voted not to ban former Communist party members from government and to take a reconciliatory position toward former agents and high-ranking communists rather than creating a situation that could cause a potential “witch hunt.” In her essay on K.B.: The Suspect, “Creation is a Suspicious Act,” the Lithuanian literary critic Viktorija Daujautytė comments, “Indeed, it is not easy to understand how somebody who used to talk one way is now talking in a different way, and is doing so sincerely. This cannot be and this can be” (Daujautytė 8).

A major theme in K.B. The Suspect is that of loneliness and isolation experienced while living in close contact with strangers in a major metropolis. K.B. wants to love and to be loved, but his snobbery gets in the way. He has lost the capacity for simple human emotions, such as love, compassion, humility. He pursues the lovely Margarita and yet is disappointed when he compares her body with that of a nude hanging in a museum and finds, “some aspects of [her] figure are vulgarized, altered, not represented accurately. I daresay some aspects of [her] nakedness are somewhat more vulgar.” Striving toward expressing his appreciation of high art, K.B. continually stumbles into the realm of the vulgar.

In the poem “K.B.: What Kind of Tree is That? The One That Crushed That Man?” K.B. happens upon the scene of an accident — a tree has fallen and crushed a man — and all he can think of is, “What’s the name of that tree that crushed that man? / How silly of me to forget? / Most likely an ash? / But no, and not an oak either… / I ought to know… / When I get home I’ll make it a point to look it up.” K.B. has lost the capacity for simple human compassion, never mind care. He leaves the scene of the accident utterly unconcerned for the crushed man and goes home to look up the genus of the tree.

And so, having found himself a free man in a free society, the middle-aged K.B. is depressed. His inner self now has permission to come out of hiding and may express itself without fear of punishment, but that inner self often comes out in convoluted ways. K.B. would like to pass his days immersing himself in high art, but finds himself brought back down to earth by the vulgarities of life around him. In the poem “A Hanged Man in the Old City Square,” a man hangs himself in the courtyard under K.B.’s apartment window. In the time between when the man opens and then closes his briefcase, “the way responsible fathers do,” pulling out a noose and later hanging himself, Margarita reads Dante out loud to K.B. as they page through a book of reproductions. K.B. complains to
the police that “In his pants pocket all they found was a receipt/for his telephone bill and for his laundry.” K.B. is upset that “suicide has become shabby” and is angry with the police because it does not concern them that “suicides have lost their taste.” Lithuania has the highest suicide rate in the world, making suicide in this culture commonplace. Martinaitis comments on suicide by placing it within his landscape of post-Soviet life.

Advertising is new to post-Soviet Lithuania. Under the communist system, the only public displays were propagandistic. In Riga in the early years of independence, I saw how on the side of an apartment building, six stories of red from a former Soviet propaganda slogan were painted over as a Coca-Cola ad — the old slogan faintly lingering under the Coca-Cola trademark. In this poem, Martinaitis reacts to the onslaught of advertising all over the Lithuanian media. K.B. is asked to advertise Colgate toothpaste and so he does, but remember, we are in the third person limited omniscient, so we get the advertisement filtered through K.B.’s paranoia. K.B. is worried about safety, and so in his advertisement he stresses that there is safety in taking time out of your busy day to brush your teeth and that’s why you should buy Colgate toothpaste.

**K.B. Advertises Colgate Toothpaste**

When you brush your teeth with this toothpaste you see yourself in the mirror each day, and that is so rare these days with people rushing about so much.

It’s the best opportunity, while gazing at yourself, to think about your age and whether you still appeal to women.

While you brush your teeth with Colgate the past disappears and you can see yourself the way you are right now.

You are brushing your teeth and meanwhile somewhere an accident happens, terrorists bomb a café.

As you can see, the safest thing you could be doing is to be brushing your teeth before the mirror each morning.

You can’t get in an accident, you can’t say something indecent, hurt someone’s feelings and so on.

I repeat — the safest thing of all is the toothpaste Colgate.

I’d also like to remind you that by using this toothpaste daily your teeth will remain healthy a hundred years after you are gone.

Capitalism has brought with it an abundance of trash. That abundance of trash has created a new subculture in the post-Soviet republics — people who live by rummaging through trash dumpsters. Under the Soviet system, dumpsters were not publicly available for people to dispose of their trash. In the cities, there was a system of trash collection that involved a fleet of garbage trucks that made the rounds of city neighborhoods between the hours of six and seven. The trucks would stop in each neighborhood for a few minutes and people would come out of their apartments with their trash in buckets or bags and pour the trash into the garbage truck. Within the past five years, this system of communal trash collection has been replaced with dumpsters placed within city neighborhoods and apartment complexes. In this poem, K.B. muses to himself over the “trash society” that has appeared as though “out of nowhere” to process the refuse of people’s daily lives.

**K.B. and the Trash Angels**

Already at twilight they appear suddenly out of nowhere — as though out of a Bosch painting, as though from the beyond, or from the world of shadows. They work, surrounding the dumpsters, their arms submerged to their elbows, as though searching for signs of life above a sacrificed beast: the lungs, the heart, the liver.

Who is that trash society? Hunger strikers? Bums? Alcoholics? Former celebrities?
They work slowly, with great concentration, until they are replaced by vigilant stray cats hovering a few feet away.

They pull things from the trash and shove it into bags, whatever can be saved, whatever can still be civilized.

Everything else they throw back — torn family albums, books without their covers, a canary in a plastic bag, worn suede gloves, ball gowns, potato peelings, shards of crystal, drafts of poems, dentures, collections of old postcards, invitations to a formal gathering, leaflets with election promises, a torn wedding photograph — everything, that’s been anesthetized: hope, trust, confessions, mourning, intrigues, pride get tossed aside…

As though they were the final judgment, the angles from the shadow world — beside the dumpsters, furiously sorting, complete history.

An unfortunate development as a result of the convenience of dumpsters is that more and more often infants are abandoned in them. In a conversation about this poem with Martinaitis, he commented on how this tragedy is “in the news constantly.” K.B. is walking past the dumpsters when he hears “mysterious sounds” and assumes the worst.

**K.B. Hears Mysterious Sounds**

This is what happened to me one night —
I was walking along an unlit city street when suddenly I heard an infant wailing as loud as though it were under my feet, right beside me, as though the sound were coming from the sewer.

I checked the garbage cans, looked over the dumpsters — but couldn’t find the source of the sound.

I couldn’t understand what was happening to me. For a moment I thought that maybe it was some post-modernist trick — some sort of installation?

Some time later I began to understand that the voice was coming from the depths of the earth.

After that it followed me everywhere:
I heard it ringing in my ears, in the telephone receiver, while locking the door, while flushing the toilet. I heard it especially when women walked past — probably it comes from their wombs.

I hear it all around: from paintings, from sculptures, from poetry, from love songs, from trash dumpsters and sewage pipes.

And that is how I acquired a secret sense of hearing — the ability to hear the unborn — the world is filled with their cries.

It’s much worse to be unborn, much much worse than being dead.

The Soviet Union boasted that its crime rate was non-existent. In the post-Soviet countries, people often wonder out loud whether there was crime happening during the Soviet years only they did not know about it because it was not reported or whether crime really has increased since independence. In large cities such as Vilnius or Kaunas or Klaiptėda, where people do not know their neighbors, people are often suspicious whether the person next door is not involved in some sort of underground criminal activity. Our family lived in a small apartment house in 1995–1996 where all the neighbors knew each other except for one mysterious couple who rented on the top floor. One of our neighbors, a Ukrainian housewife who was home all the time, would talk constantly about the “den of crime” on the top floor. No one believed her, but one day she became so suspicious about the mystery neighbors that she called a detective from a pay phone on the corner to come and check out strange sounds coming from that apartment. The police came, stormed the apartment, the residents jumped out the windows and raced across the snowy yard, but dropped a small bundle while fleeing. The police opened up the bundle and found hundreds of...
falsified passports inside. And so, for me as a translator, there was a certain serendipity working with this poem.

**K.B. Talks about the Non-existent Sixth Floor**

I live on the fifth and top floor.
Above me, where there shouldn’t be anything at all, things go on at night.
I suspect there is a sixth floor up there, a floor that isn’t visible from above or from the street.

I am convinced that there is a den of crime up there.
At night I hear them clearly making plans.
Tortures are discussed. Large sums of money rustle as they change hands.

Sometimes I hear them sharpening their knives.
Afterward they try them out on the tables or the walls.
A body, obviously stabbed, topples to the ground, most likely someone who lost at cards.

After that I hear chortling, glasses clinking, punches — a teenage girl screams out while being raped — all of it gets repeated on the nightly news. Horrible orgies go on ’til morning, orgasmic screams…

Up stairs, above me, everything I’d read in the paper, heard on the radio, saw on the news, is relived…
The ritualistic sacrifices are particularly brutal — I can almost see the blood congealing on the cracks in the ceiling…

Meanwhile someone disconnects the police: yesterday’s bank robberies will be repeated…
The city sleeps. On the secret floor, above me, each night inexplicable crimes are relived.

When presented with a new translation project, my first task is to read and reread the piece in the original until I hear the voice in my head. It is the job of the translator to thoroughly analyze and internalize that voice and to create an equivalent in the target language. Once I’ve internalized that voice, I begin thinking about how I could recreate that voice in English. Each translated work should sound different from the last. Each must have its own unique voice — a voice that will stay with the reader in the target language, a voice that is easily identifiable, a voice that can live on outside of the text. The translator needs to think about the speaker in the source-language text as a character and then must think and write in the voice of that character. How would Kukutis say this? How would K.B. say it?

When I translate poetry, I first work closely with the original, checking and rechecking the meanings of unfamiliar words. If possible, I e-mail the poet and ask questions or better yet, meet with him or her. Once I feel I’ve been as thorough as I possibly can be, I put away the original. I actually hide it from myself, so that I’m not tempted to rely on it like a crutch. Then I revise the translation as though it had been written in English, keeping the source text out of mind. I revise for fluency, for readability, and most importantly, for voice. It is important to read out loud in order to retain the rhythms of the original on the one hand, while making sure that the translation reads fluently in English on the other hand.

However, at the same time, I’m conscious not to stray too far from the original. When you are both a writer and a translator, it is difficult not to feel as though you “own” the text. You need to remind yourself that the original text is not yours and from the perspective of the reader, neither is your translation. In this way, the translator acts as a medium and the translation becomes a message from another world.

**Bibliography**


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INDEX ON CENSORSHIP

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The idea behind INDEX was to make public the circumstances of those who are silenced in their own countries. Since the end of communism, and with an increasingly fragmented world, new and troubling questions have surfaced, some of them challenging the primacy of free expression itself: religious extremism, relative values and cultural difference, the rise of nationalism, rewriting of history, hate speech, pornography, violence on television, freedom on the Internet are just some of them. And we are concerned not just with official censorship, but with any form of silencing, whoever is doing it. We welcome contributions from anyone concerned with issues of free speech. Our articles range widely from essays to opinion pieces, from oral testimony to fiction and poetry. The views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the editors, the publisher, or the editorial board.

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HOW TRANSLATING MAKES ME A BETTER CREATIVE WRITING TEACHER

By Steven Stewart

The continuing marginalization of translation at colleges and universities in the United States is an issue that most translators are aware of. As a poet-translator who has spent a great deal of time on the academic job market over the past five years looking for a creative-writing position, I have firsthand experience with this marginalization. During a campus interview a few years ago, I was told directly by a department chair that the university was intrigued by the success I was having with publishing my translations but that these publications would not count toward tenure if the university decided to offer me the job. Many deans, department chairs, and other faculty members seem to view translation with suspicion, as if my commitment to translation indicates that I am somehow less committed to and less capable of teaching creative writing; as if translation were a distraction or a liability that would keep me from whatever real work is to be done.

So what can be done to combat this type of faulty assumption? Various individuals and groups (including ALTA) have been making strides with regard to this issue. The most important thing, of course, is for us as translators to continue (or to redouble) our efforts to educate members of the academy about the worth of translation. To that end, I have been trying to articulate some of the ways that my experience with translation sets me apart from other job candidates who are not translators, specifically with respect to creative writing positions. A young translator on the job market cannot afford to adopt an “Aw, shucks, I’m just a translator” approach but must instead be able to demonstrate what he or she has to offer.

Underlying today’s world of university creative writing programs is the assumption that someone who creates good writing can make others do so. But where does this assumption come from? Are the best basketball players the best coaches? The best physicists the best physics teachers? The answer is a pause-inducing sometimes.

It is my belief that my time spent translating, rather than being a distraction, is in fact a fundamental activity for making me a better writing teacher. It makes me better equipped to respond to student work and guide it toward better forms. The study of writing requires a well-developed sense of the nuances of expression and meaning, and I can’t think of anything better to develop these than translating literary texts. To paraphrase Borges, nothing shares more with the act of creating poetry than the act of translating it. Translating actually affords more of the necessary practice and skills useful for teaching the practice of writing than even doing my own writing does. Every time I translate, I’m doing what I do when I teach writing: I’m working with strategies for taking a draft that I didn’t create from a state of not working (in English) to a state of working (in English). By translating, I get a better understanding of the art of improving a text and a better sense of how to communicate to another what he or she needs to do to make improvements.

When translating, I spend time getting deeply into texts that are very different from what I myself would have written, just like the texts my students write. I would assert that to be a good teacher of writing, it is more important to be a good reader than a good writer. And to be a good translator, one must be a good reader. Translators deal in difference, possibilities, and options even more so than other types of writers. A good translator, like a good writing teacher, must be open and ready to process and inform another’s words and ideas. As a poet, I can be closed or narcissistic in ways I cannot be as a translator. How, then, does time spent on my own writing make me suited to respond to students, particularly students whose writing is very much unlike my own? Instead, it is often the case that it is the work I do as a translator that comes into play in my classroom interactions with students.

I would like to offer an example of how the experience I gain as a translator can connect with my teaching in a writing classroom: I have recently been co-translating the work of Korean poet Wonchul Shin along with the author. Although Wonchul has a substantial amount of English, he is not near the point of being able to render his own poetry into English. Since I don’t know any Korean, Wonchul sends me very rough English versions of his poems, which I revise and send back to him, at which point there begins a process of negotiation: he offers counter-suggestions, telling me if I have taken something too far away from the original and presenting alternatives;
it is a healthy process of pushing and pulling as we work out an acceptable version of the poem in English, a process not unlike what happens in a healthy writing workshop. Moreover, poems and stories that I work with and help create when translating are actually quite similar to the work of my students in writing courses: texts that are at times brilliant, at times obscure, texts of great potential that have yet to find their final form (in English), texts that I can perhaps help guide toward becoming more successful versions.

Experience with translation is not a liability; it is instead an activity that offers writing teachers the opportunity to have more tools and experience at their disposal than they would otherwise have. Writing teachers who translate are everything that non-translating writing teachers are and more. This is an argument that needs to be made to members of the larger creative world until it begins to be heard and acknowledged.
THE “NEW ORIGINAL” ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF VICENTE HUIDOBRO’S ALTAZOR

By Justin Read

In 1945, Vicente Huidobro joined the Allied assault on Berlin, following American and British troops straight to the infamous bombed-out bunker, whereupon Huidobro recovered Hitler’s telephone from the ashes. The telephone evidently remained on display in Huidobro’s residence in Santiago de Chile until his death in 1948. By that point, Huidobro had already run for the presidency of Chile twice (and lost both times); been chloroformed by British spies in Paris and kept as their hostage for three days in retaliation for his support of Irish independence; and just barely escaped murder threatened by his second wife’s brothers, who followed the poet to Paris to revenge Huidobro’s stealing their then-16-year-old sister away from a Chilean convent and secretly marrying her. We should also mention that by the 1940s, Huidobro was already recognized worldwide as a significant figure of the avant-garde, a contemporary of Appolinaire, Juan Gris, Picasso, Arp, the Ulraístas, and the Surrealists, having almost single-handedly transported avant-garde aesthetics to the Americas from Europe. “Contemporary poetry begins with me,” Huidobro was wont to say, a claim that infuriated many of Huidobro’s peers — in part because it was true.

Truth, however, is nothing that should overly concern us in considering these details of Huidobro’s biography. What does matter is simply the fact that Huidobro himself had the chutzpah to promote the obvious confabulations he had created for his life as fact. Life for Huidobro was not something one just allowed to be true; Huidobro’s life, just like his art, was a truth that he himself created of his own volition. Such acts of volition stand at the heart of Huidobro’s aesthetic, Creationism. For the better part of five decades, Huidobro argued for an art and poetry completely removed from reference to the “real” world, in favor of an art that created a world to be inhabited — poetry as an act of autopoeisis. Although ahead of his time — Huidobro’s thoughts on creacionismo predate, for instance, Marinetti’s formulation of Futurism — Huidobro’s arrogance won him few converts during his lifetime. If Groucho Marx would never join a club that would accept only himself as a member. The number of Latin American Creationist poets really only numbers one.

Nevertheless, among the greatest works of the Latin American vanguardia we must count (along with Vallejo’s Trilce and Neruda’s Residencia en la tierra) Huidobro’s epic Creationist masterpiece, Altazor. Although the title page of Altazor carries the date 1919, the poem itself was not published in its entirety (in seven cantos and a “Prefacio”) until the Ediciones Iberoamericana first edition of 1931. Before that date, fragments of the work had appeared sporadically in several journals and newspapers, including La Nación newspaper in Santiago, Eugene Jolas’s transition, and the short-lived journal Favorables Poemas Paris edited by César Vallejo and Juan Larrea. Beyond these rather mundane facts, however, it is difficult to say anything at all definitive about Altazor — not because it is so murky or difficult but rather because the work is so utterly duplicitous at every step of the way. Or rather, every definitive statement we make about the text must be immediately qualified with its opposite, a fact that must carry over into our consideration of Eliot Weinberger’s excellent “new” English translation of Altazor — which is not so very new as much as it is a revision of what must be considered the definitive English translation of Huidobro’s work.

The duplicity of Altazor presents its own particular challenges to the foreign-language translator. Briefly, the “plot” (if indeed that is the right term) of Altazor initially centers on a hero, Altazor, who was born at the Equinox on the same day as Jesus Christ, and who is falling through the sky in a parachute. Although we never know where Altazor begins his journey or where it ends, the long, Whitmanesque strophes of the “Prefacio” relate the hero’s encounters with birds, the Creator, and a Virgin with “hands transparent as light bulbs” (7), among other things. After a long soliloquy expressing his existential angst in Canto I, Altazor steadily disintegrates into gibberish — or better put, as the narrative of Altazor (the character) begins to dissipate, the narrative of Altazor (the text) begins to emerge. In Canto IV, for instance, Huidobro begins to deform and meld signifiers primarily around the word “golondrina” (a bird, “swallow”):
By Canto V, we abruptly enter into the “Molinos” or “Mills” of Altazor: almost 200 verses reiterating the formula “Molino” + (preposition) + (nominalized verb ending in “-m(i)ento”):

- Molino de enamoramiento
- Molino de encabezamiento
- Molino de encastillamiento
- Molino de aparecimiento
- Molino de despojaamiento
- Molino de atesoramiento
- Molino de enloquecimiento
- Molino de ensortijamiento
- Molino de envenanamiento
- Molino de acontecimiento
- Molino de descuartizamiento (116)

“Molino” at this point has little or no semantic reference to an actual mill; rather, the text itself becomes a mill that grinds through lexical morphemes in no particular order. In other words, we must learn to disassociate Altazor from reference to some exterior reality in order to comprehend the poem as a reality in itself. This lesson must be learned quickly if the reader is to understand anything from the work’s final cantos, for in the final lines of Altazor we are really left with nothing but vowels:

Lalalí
Lo ia
i i o
Ai a i a i i o i a (150)

Most readers and critics have taken these verses to be the reintroduction of Altazor (the character) into the text, as if representing the cries of the hero as he shoots through the atmosphere towards his inexorable death. (Personally, I prefer to read them merely as orthography, as random typescript splayed across the page, a point to which I will return later.) However the verses of Altazor are read, the task of any translator approaching these lines amounts to a hopeless conundrum. On the one hand, the text seems to return to the primal elements of language itself — the grunt or the vowel — in which case we would have to determine that the narrative of Altazor leads to a return to a pre-Babelian state of language. On the other hand, we cannot help but see the final canto as an exemplary modern text, in which case the narrative guides into a new language, a new post-post-Babelian tongue capable of universal communication. Either option is none too palatable for the translator, who must choose between the return to a language in which translation was unnecessary, or alternatively, the promotion of a language in which translation is no longer necessary.

That is, Altazor fashions itself as a “new original” language that foresees (in a typically avant-garde manner) the reformulation of human existence in a higher state of “pure” language. In addition to being logically impossible, however, the idea of a “new original” bears striking resemblance to what every translator strives to achieve in his or her work. Indeed, we might rightly state that the language of Altazor is not Spanish, but rather “translation” itself. Eliot Weinberger states as much in his new introduction to the latest edition of his translation. At one point, Weinberger observes that Huidobro consistently invokes a “nightingale” with the term “rosiñol,” a word that approximates the French “rossignol” but not the Spanish “ruiseñor.” The translator thus notes that “the original of this untranslatable poem may itself be a translation.” (xii) Immediately after this statement, Weinberger proceeds:

Furthermore, Altazor, even in Spanish, has no definitive text. There has never been a scholarly edition of Huidobro — much remains uncollected — and none of the many editions of Altazor agree with one another. Stanza breaks vary widely; words occasionally are different. In order to translate the poem, I had to invent an original. (xii, emphasis added)

For one reason or another, Altazor is a work that calls upon the translator to stop serving the original, and start inventing the original. Bear in mind that, if indeed translation is the original language of the text, then we must consider the author to be a translator, and indeed the reader to be a translator, as well. In other words, originality amounts to an act of translation, re-invention, re-definition, “transcreation.”

Finding an origin — an original state — for Altazor can therefore become a daunting task. Most of the early published fragments of the work indeed...
appeared in French. The “golondrina” section of Canto IV just cited, for instance, appears in the fragment published in *transition* no. 19–20 in June 1930 under the title “Fragment d’Altazor”:

A l’horitagne de la montazon
Une hironline sur sa mandodelle
Décrochée le matin de la lunaille
Approche approche à tout galop.

Déjà vient vient la mandodelle
Déjà vient vient l’hirondoline
Déjà s’approche oche oche l’hirondelle
Déjà s’approche l’hironnelle
Déjà s’approche l’hironiréle… (194)

Obviously this French “fragment” is not an exact translation of the “original” published version; of course, we could also say that the “original” Spanish version is an inexact translation of the French. Of these two statements, we should be inclined to favor the latter as more accurate. In fact, the first published version of any kind of the Chilean newspaper, *La Nación*, of Wednesday, April 29, 1925. There we will find in the “Notas de Arte” section a poem by Huidobro entitled “Altazar” with the subtitle “Fragmento de ‘Un viaje en paracaídas.’” What follows is a version of the “Prefacio.” Interestingly, this 1925 version is in fact a *translation* of the preface translated — not by Huidobro — but by the editor of the “Notas de Arte” section, the Chilean vanguardista poet, Jean Emar (aka Juan Emar). Indeed, a recently recovered manuscript of the work held in the archives of the Fundación Vicente Huidobro in Santiago — if indeed this manuscript is verifiable as an “original” from 1917 to 1919 — demonstrates that the “Prefacio” and much of the rest of *Altazor* were originally written not in Spanish but rather in French. This would come as no shock to avid Huidobro readers, because the bilingual Huidobro published as many original poetic works in French as in Spanish. What is shocking, however, is that we must now definitively view the “original” *Altazor* published in 1931 to be a “new original” translation of itself.

Thus, in direct violation of Derrida’s famous dictum that “There can be no translation of translation,” Eliot Weinberger has given us what the publisher lists as a “Revised Spanish/English bilingual edition” of *Altazor*. Without question, Weinberger’s translation is masterful — just as it was in 1975 and 1998 and several times in between. The operant mode of the *Altazor* in Spanish is velocity; it is a text that reads lightning-fast. Beyond its meanings, so much of *Altazor* is its tone — at times desperate, but mostly adventurous, satirical, and ultimately, *fun*. Yet in transforming diction from Spanish to English, the results may be rather tedious, owing perhaps to the heavy use of digressive dependent clauses in Spanish. Beyond the mere meaning of words, Weinberger has always paid attention to the more material aspects of *Altazor* in his translation (and subsequent revisions) — its pace, its rhythm, its velocity, all of which constitute the *poetry* of the work. Throughout the early sections especially, Weinberger provides literal translations of Huidobro’s words without losing a sense of being both literate and literary. Weinberger’s is a translation that bounces around words almost casually (just as in the Spanish [and one would presume, French]). A prime example of this may be found in the “Ojos” of Canto IV (here quoted side-by-side with Weinberger’s English to the right):

Ojo por ojo como hostia por hostia
Eye for an eye like host for a host
Ojo árbol     Treeeye
Ojo pájaro    Birdeye
Ojo río      Rivereye
Ojo montaña  Mountaineye
Ojo mar      Seaeye
Ojo tierra   Eartheye
Ojo luna     Mooneye
Ojo cielo    Skyeye
Ojo silencio Husheye
Ojo soledad por ojo ausencia
Onlyeye for a lonelyeye
Ojo dolor por ojo risa
A misereye for a lullabeye (80–83)

Here Weinberger strays quite clearly from the literal presentation of the Spanish. That is, instead of “Eye river, Eye mountain, Eye sea” as from the original “Ojo río, Ojo montaña, Ojo mar,” Weinberger has chosen to attach “-eye” as a suffix. This in turn allows him to begin playing with the rules of English syntax and morphology: the double sense of “soledad,” for instance, is transferred into “Onlyeye” and “lonelyeye.” The effect of this transference is itself doubled by the sound and sight of these terms: the suffix “-ly” is doubled in the orthography of “eye” both in the recurrence of the letter “y” and the move from the long “e” of the phoneme /li/ to the recurrence of the letter “e” in “eye.” Similarly, “misereye” looks as if it could be pronounced like “misery,” although it seems to be pronounced /miz (ə)r aI/; whereas “lullabeye” introduces an eye into the homophone “lullaby” simply with the addition of two “e’s”.

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In other words, Weinberger begins to play with rules of linguistic construction in the target language in order to produce what Haroldo de Campos might have called a “cannibalistic” translation; although the translation does not remain servile to the “original,” it nevertheless provides the reader in the target language the opportunity to play with and explore language in a similar way as the “original.” This is especially important once gibberish assumes primary importance in the text. The “golondrina/hirondelle” section, which we have viewed in both Spanish and French, for instance, Weinberger translates as follows:

At the horslope of the hillzon
The violonswallow with a cellotail
Slipped down this morning from a lunawing
And hurries near
Look here swoops the swooping swallow
Here swoops the whooping wallow
Here swoops the weeping wellow
Look here swoops the sweeping shrillow
Swoops the swamping shallow
Swoops the sheeping woolow
Swoops the slooping swallow (89)

The temptation would be strong, I think, to translate the chain “golondrina, golonfina, golontrina, goloncima, golonchina, golonclima, golonrima, golonrisa…” literally — as if one could indeed translate this nonsense into something like “swalloctrine, swallofine, swalloctrine, swallocline, swallocline, swalloclime, swalloclime.” Yet although the meanings of certain lexical elements in this section are significant, what is ultimately most important is the form those elements assume. Thus, Weinberger seems perfectly justified in observing the “s-w” and “o-w” of the term “swallow” and in playing with ways of modifying any or all of those letters/phonemes accordingly. The result has little or nothing to do with the original, save for the fact that the formal modus operandi of the Spanish text is preserved. And this, I would argue, allows the reader the greatest ability to understand what Altazor really is in whatever language it might occur.

This is not to say, however, that we must entirely agree with choices that Weinberger has made. To reiterate, “truth” is a function that does not really apply to Altazor or to Huidobro’s aesthetic in any meaningful way, except in the text’s own existence as a material object. If the work seeks to create a “new” language, therefore, it does not really matter if that language truly is new or not, nor whether or not that language has any true meaning; it is much more significant that this language simply exists. At certain key moments, however, Weinberger’s translation appears to fall into the pre-deconstructive trap of valorizing language as an oral or phonological medium, even though the work itself deconstructs language by foregrounding its own writing and typography. In the passage just cited, for example, Weinberger appears to operate onomatopoetically, such that the sound of “swoop” and “s-w” intones the movement of a swallow as it flies about various lexical-morphological forms. Yet this emphasis on sound and phonetics may interrupt the effect of the work as we move into the final two cantos.

Weinberger translates the final lines:

Lalali
   Io ia
   i i o
   Ai a i a i i o ia (150)

as:

Lalalee
   Eeoh eeah
   ee ee ee oh
   Ahee ah ee ahee ah ee ee ee oh eeah (151)

The use of “ah” and “ee” in (what is nominally) the English version appears to preserve the sound of the Spanish vowels “a” and “i.” Yet given the emphasis the work places on both materiality (i.e., the materialization of a “new” language) and translation (i.e., the fact that this part of the text is written in “Translation” above and beyond Spanish), it seems fundamental to me that these final verses consist almost exclusively of vowels printed on a page. In other words, typography itself is ultimately more meaningful than the sounds that typography might (but might not) convey.

At certain junctures (e.g., “misereye”), Weinberger proceeds full-throttle in the deconstructive avant-garde vein; at these moments, he serves as an “interpretive” translator rather than an “imitative” one, allowing for a “readerly” text that permits the reader maximum play with respect to the signifiers on the page. Yet at other moments (e.g., “Ahee ah ee”), Weinberger seems focused too sharply on signifieds rather than signifiers and therefore delimits the linguistic possibilities left available to the reader. Indeed, Weinberger points out this apparent inconsistency in his new introduction:

I have attempted, for better or worse, to translate everything — all the manic rhymes, word plays, free-floating syllables, neologisms — without resorting to the explanatory footnotes that would...
have created a critical edition and not a poem. Whenever possible, I stuck to a literal, dictionary reading while attempting to reproduce the various effects. These do not always occur in the corresponding lines: at times, when certain elements couldn’t be transported in the exact line, I inserted them elsewhere; a few times, I let the English spin out its own word plays and puns. The hope is that the translation will be read as a whole and not as a series of line-by-line recreations. Above all, I tried to translate with Huidobro’s vision of poetry as a divine game of language…. The game of Altazor has an infinite number of moves, and I’ve played it differently each time I’ve published a version. (xii)

Weinberger, in short, stays close to his bilingual dictionary as much as he can but also realizes that the literal translation may at times be insufficient. This is no criticism of Weinberger, since he is confronting choices that all translators must make. Whatever inconsistencies we may find in Weinberger’s method (sometimes too literal, other times not literal at all), one must always bear in mind that his ultimate goal is play — to play around with translation so that readers may put a surprisingly malleable, contradictory, and often maddening text into play. Whatever minor disagreements we might have with Weinberger’s choices, his translation of Altazor has been singularly effective in bringing the work to audiences outside of Latin America and Latin American studies and allowing that audience to work with the text in ways the text itself demands to be read.

Whether or not Weinberger has in fact given us an entirely “new” original translation or only a revised version of an “original” is inconsequential. We should merely be grateful that Altazor has been placed back into circulation in such an attractive and affordable volume. This is especially significant in terms of pedagogy. Given its double-dating (1919 and 1931), Altazor in many ways bookends the entre-guerre avant-garde. The work should be mandatory reading in any course on 20th-century Latin American, American, or European literature, as Huidobro’s epic both presents the principal formal and technical currents of its day and provides avenues to explore the connections and disparities between First-World and Third-World modernisms. In this regard, we need not limit ourselves to English or Comparative Literature. Even in Spanish-language classrooms, I myself have found that Weinberger’s translation allows non-native speakers the ability to appreciate the feel of Huidobro’s work, the joyful velocity with which it propels toward genesis and apocalypse simultaneously.

A work originally written in translation, after all, should always be read in translation.

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BOOK REVIEWS


Daniela Hurezanu, Reviewer

When I came upon Paul Auster’s translation of A Tomb for Anatole by Stéphane Mallarmé, published by New Directions in 2005, I felt the exhilaration one feels when rediscovering a book once loved, and then forgotten. A lover of Mallarmé, I had read many of his works, this one included, in French, and I was very curious to see how Auster had fared in transposing such a difficult writer into English.

The French manuscript that gave birth to Pour un tombeau d’Anatole was edited and published for the first time by Jean-Pierre Richard in 1961, accompanied by an in-depth analysis of it. Auster’s translation was first published in 1983 by North Point Press and republished now by New Directions after having been “extensively revised by the translator.”

In the New Directions edition, the translation has 202 pages of short fragments, one in English and one in French on each page. For convenience, we may call it poetry, but unlike most poetry, it doesn’t want to be “beautiful.” This divorce from the esthetic goal of the genre is due, at least in part, to the circumstances in which it was written — that is, after the death of Mallarmé’s eight-year-old son in 1879.

As a record of a father’s grief over what Auster calls, in his moving introduction, “the ultimate horror of every parent,” the book has a raw quality that touches us not with the beauty of the words, as poetry usually does, but with an esthetic nakedness pushed to the limit. The writing is so simple, stripped of all superfluous elements, that it becomes, paradoxically, even more hermetic than Mallarmé’s writings generally are. In order to decipher Mallarmé’s obscure writing, Auster has used the biographical information provided by Richard, as well as his scrupulous study.

A Tomb for Anatole is not a conventional book. First, there is the elimination of all definite articles throughout the entire poem, an elimination somewhat similar to what visual artists, sculptors in particular, started doing at the onset of the 20th century in a different medium. The art object is thus reduced to its essentials, but it also becomes more ambiguous, because no one can tell exactly “what it means.” But the most specific trait of this poem is the fact that the poet gives us only fragments of thoughts; that, instead of complete sentences, he gives us only remnants, making language resemble a surface in ruins or a texture riddled with missing links. Again, the circumstances are explanatory: Mallarmé did not write this text with the intention of publishing it, although a close reading (which reveals sections numbered from one to four) indicates that he might have envisaged the possibility of transforming it into a “real” poem.

For the translator, then, the question is: how can one convey the meaning of something from which numerous words necessary for its understanding are missing? If a good translation is one that imitates the effect that the original had upon its readers, as Walter Benjamin said, the translator should imitate the same ruined language. But in order to be able to do that, the translator must first guess what the missing link is — and how is the translator to guess what Mallarmé was thinking but doesn’t explicitly tell us?

For all these reasons, A Tomb for Anatole is not easy to translate. From another perspective, however, it is easier to translate than many other poems: the fact that there are no complete sentences, but rather clusters of words separated by dashes, definitely facilitates the task of the translator. Numerous fragments simply require a straightforward, literal translation, which is what Auster generally does. In this respect, A Tomb for Anatole gives the translator very little creative freedom. Part of the joy of translating comes from finding, among the several possible choices of words or phrases or modulations of the sentence, the one that seems right for the translator’s subjectivity. Not only are the translator’s choices rather limited in this case because there is not much lexical variation, but Mallarmé’s particular type of syntax forces the translator to become a geometer or a grammarian who reproduces the exact syntactical movement of the original. Here, the translator’s creativity means guessing what is missing in the original and understanding the precise (grammatical) relations between words.

For the most part, Auster’s translation is a faithful one, to both the spirit and the letter of the poem. But
the instances in which he has gone astray are puzzling, because they occur either as a result of a careless reading or because he has misunderstood some idiomatic expression. In other cases, like the first one that caught my eye, his translation is questionable because when Mallarmé is deliberately hermetic, Auster decides to “explain” him in a way that not only betrays the poem’s esthetic but may very well be the wrong interpretation:

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{vain} & \text{vaines} \\
\text{cures} & \text{vains} \\
\text{abandoned} & \text{laissés} \\
\text{if nature} & \text{si nature} \\
\text{did not will it} & \text{n’a pas voulu} \\
\hline
\text{I will find them} & \text{j’en trouverai} \\
\text{to work against} & \text{moi pour} \\
\text{death} & \text{mort}
\end{array}
\]

The last three lines in the above example say literally:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I will find some} & \\
\text{me [or “I’] for} & \\
\text{dead [or “death’]}
\end{align*}
\]

Auster must have wondered, as I did, what did Mallarmé mean by “moi pour mort.” In his desire to explain Mallarmé, he links two things that are separate in the original — “I will find some [remedies, cures]” and “for death” — and concludes: I will find the remedies [in order] to work against death. But if this is what Mallarmé intended to say, he probably would have used the preposition “contre” [against] and not “pour” [for], and he wouldn’t have used “moi.” Could it be that Mallarmé offers himself to death (“me for death”) as a “remedy” to save his son? One can speculate endlessly and in the end one can be wrong, but whatever the translator decides to do, it should match the elliptic structure of the original. Auster would have been closer to the original if he had simply done a quasi-literal translation. In his 1983 translation, he comes closer to the original when he translates “moi pour mort” as “myself for dead,” but completely misses the meaning of “j’en trouverai”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I would take} & \\
\text{myself for} & \\
\text{dead}
\end{align*}
\]

On the other hand, in instances when in French we have idiomatic expressions, Auster translates them literally:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{whatever poem} & \\
\text{quoique poème}
\end{align*}
\]

Based on facts basé sur faits
always — should toujours — doive
take only ne prendre que
general facts — faits généraux —
it happens here il se trouve ici
that taken together que donnée d’en-
getter harmonize semble s’accorde

“Il se trouve ici” is an idiomatic phrase meaning “It so happens,” and “donnée d’ensemble” means “general view” (“taken together” would be the translation of “donnés ensemble”). Not to mention that Auster confuses “quoique” (“although”) with “quoi que” (“whatever”).

Another similar example:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{once life has been} & \\
\text{abstraction faite} \\
\text{abstracted, the happiness of being} & \\
\text{de vie, de bonheur d’être} \\
\text{together, etc —} & \\
\text{ensemble, etc. —}
\end{align*}
\]

“Abstraction faite de” is, again, an idiomatic expression, and it means “if one doesn’t take into account” or “leaving aside.” True, these kinds of errors are not very serious and can happen even to experienced translators in their early drafts. But considering that this translation was revised by the translator, who also thanks in his Introduction some very distinguished intellectuals, one wonders why none of the readers has noticed these mistakes.

But there is more (or less). Besides falling into the trap of false friends, Auster is sometimes an inattentive reader:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{what is best in him} & \\
\text{ce qu’il a de meilleur} \\
\text{that happens, through our} & \\
\text{qui arrive, par notre} \\
\text{love and the care} & \\
\text{amour et le soin} \\
\text{we take} & \\
\text{que nous prenons} \\
\text{of his being} & \\
\text{à l’être —} \\
\text{[being, not being] [être, n’étant} \\
\text{more than moral and} & \\
\text{que moral et} \\
\text{as for thought] quant à pensée]
\end{align*}
\]

“To take care of [someone],” which is in French “prendre soin de [quelqu’un]” is slightly different from “prendre soin à [l’être].” “Prendre soin à l’être” could be translated either as “to take care [in being that or it] or as “to take care over (the) being,” in the sense of watching over. “The care we take in watching over (the) being,” which is what Mallarmé says, sounds almost Heideggerian.

Auster interprets “being” as the being of the son and adds the possessive, while Mallarmé uses the definite article. The definite article is used with a clear
purpose, that of transforming the son into a more abstract, and thus more impersonal — less vulnerable to death — being. In the previous lines Mallarmé tells us that his son continues to live as “thought” through his parents, and the lines I quoted develop this idea by making the son a “moral” rather than a physical being. Although in his Introduction, Auster seems very much aware of the presence of this idea, in replacing the definite article by a possessive, his translation fails to convey it.

But if the previous translation is more a question of interpretation and can therefore be justified, the following one has no justification whatsoever:

why stop me pourquoi m’attarder
from making you à vous le rendre
worried inquiet

Auster has obviously read “arrêter” instead of “attarder” and “à vous rendre” instead of “à vous le rendre.” The correct translation is: why [should I] linger rendering him [for you] worried? Or, in a more condensed form:

why linger
painting him
worried

When, in the fragment

I want to suffer everything je veux tout souffrir
<ain> for you <ain> pour toi
who do not know — qui ignore —
nothing will be rien ne sera
taken away (but soustrait (qu’à
you) from the hideous mourning toi) du deuil inouï

Auster translates “qu’à toi” as “but you” instead of “but from you,” as he should, he pretends that the preposition “à” is not there, and changes the meaning of the entire fragment. Moreover, he makes a slight confusion between “soustraire à” (“to take away from”) and “soustraire de” (to take something, to subtract, as in a mathematical operation). In saying “rien ne sera soustrait … du deuil,” Mallarmé means he won’t be spared any suffering, and in saying “rien ne sera soustrait (qu’à toi)” he means only his son will be spared suffering. French grammar and his genius allow him to blend these two ideas into three condensed lines.

In this case, in order to be faithful to both the meaning and the form, the translator should probably do a more free translation. I propose for the last three lines:

none of the
terrible grief will be
spared (but for you) [or: hidden (but from you)]

Or, consider this other example:

— just as this illu-
— comme cet illu-
— sion of survival in
— soire de survie en
us, becomes the absolute
nous, devient d’illusoire
illusion absolu

Auster translates the preposition “de” (“d’illusoire”) as a definite article, “the,” for the simple reason that “becomes the absolute illusion” sounds for him more “natural” than “becomes from illusory, absolute” or “turns from illusory (in)to absolute,” which is the correct translation. Moreover, he doesn’t seem to hear the distinction between “illusoire” and “illusion.” “Illusion” is the same word in English and in French, and if Mallarmé had wanted to use it, he would have used it. He uses “illusoire” for a reason, and one can easily translate it into English as “illusory.”

Another similar example is

— we cannot — on ne peut
hark back to the absolute revenir sur l’absolu
stuff of death — contenu en mort

The word “absolu” can be used as a noun or an adjective; Auster seems to be certain that Mallarmé uses it as an adjective, when in fact, in that case, Mallarmé would have said “le contenu absolu” and would have probably used the preposition “de,” not “en.” “En mort” — “in death” obviously means “once someone has died,” and the “absolute” is the absolute that death is: “the absolute contained in death” and not “the absolute stuff of death.” Auster’s choice of words is also somewhat surprising, because “stuff” is a word unlikely to be used by Mallarmé had he written in English.

And a final example of error based on careless reading:

becomes a devient une
delight (bitter enough jouissance (point assez
point) amère)

The French “point” can be translated either as “point” or as the negation “not.” If Mallarmé had used “point” as a noun, as Auster thinks he did, he would have had to make the agreement with the adjective “bitter.” But “point” is masculine and “amère” is feminine, which means that “amère” is the adjective that modifies “jouissance” and not “point.” The correct
There are many scholars who do not translate literature themselves but who have all kinds of "theories" about translation. Others have no theory but object to any translation that doesn’t faithfully convey the so-called “meaning” of the original. These will usually blame a translator for having translated a preposition incorrectly, without understanding that to be “faithful” when dealing with a literary text means much more than to transplant “information” from one language into another. I realize that in criticizing Auster’s translation, the fact that he mistranslated some prepositions and misunderstood several phrases, I run the risk of being such a scholar, but I think that the nature of Mallarmé’s text is such that one cannot capture its spirit if one ignores its grammatical rigor. A translation should reflect the structure of the text in question. For example, if one translates Dante, one has to find at the same time an equivalent for meter (or rhythm), for the ideas expressed, for the cultural allusions behind the words, for phonetic resonance, and it would be absurd to blame the translator for taking some liberties with insignificant elements like conjunctions, prepositions, and so on. But when one translates Mallarmé, one approaches the text differently, because what is insignificant in Dante’s case is essential for Mallarmé, whose specificity resides in his unusual syntax. Syntax is the relationship between words, and this relationship cannot be properly understood if one doesn’t understand the correct meaning of prepositions or ignores object pronouns. Moreover, Mallarmé’s view of language as transcendence itself becomes extremely important for the translator because it tells him how he “uses” (or refuses to “use”) language.

Although Auster’s translation is not (very) bad as a whole, I wonder whether, considering Mallarmé’s specificity, another translator wouldn’t have been more attuned to Mallarmé’s nuances and particular rapport with language. This edition is certainly an improvement over the first one, but one can see, by consulting the latter, that the translator’s problems go much deeper than one might suspect at a glance. The 1983 edition contains not only all the errors of the 2005 one but also numerous others, of which I will give two disturbing examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1983</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>that I count for you</td>
<td>let me tell you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>among all</td>
<td>the things you are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you lack</td>
<td>missing from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>que je te conte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ce à quoi tu manques</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and:

| you will take me         | you will take him from me |
| thus                     | thus                     |
| ainsi                    |                          |

If New Directions could reprint this translation — which is already a revised translation — in a revised edition (that is, revised by someone other than Paul Auster), the Anglophone reader could one day have a faithful image of Mallarmé.


Nina Serebrianik, Reviewer

A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia and Other Stories is Andrew Bromfield’s fifth translation of Pelevin’s works. It is a collection of eight stories: “A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia,” “Vera Pavlova’s Ninth Dream,” “Sleep,” “Tai Shou Chuan USSR (A Chinese Folktale),” “The Tarzan Swing,” “The Ontology of Childhood,” “Bulldozer Driver’s Day,” and “Prince of Gosplan.” These stories are representative of Pelevin’s short fiction: all of them are grounded in Russia in the late 1980s and 90s and reflect the country’s social and economic conditions of the time, treat them with irony, and contain elements of the grotesque and fantastic. Three of these stories, “A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia,” “Sleep,” and “Bulldozer Driver’s Day,” deserve particular attention, because they present the translator with some rather interesting challenges, such as numerous abbreviations of political organizations’ and company names, curses, and references to Russian folklore and popular culture. In his translation, Bromfield captures the meanings of these situations and makes them accessible for the English speakers.

The action of the title story takes place in the countryside, and so Pelevin uses many words and expressions in his narrative that are unique to the culture of Russian villages. At the same time, the story deals with magic and supernatural phenomena, and so it is full of references to Russian folk tales and
In the beginning of the story, Bromfield chooses to keep the original Russian “zavalinka” instead of finding an appropriate English word for it. His choice works especially well, because Sasha, the hero of the story, does not have a clear concept of what a zavalinka is either, and in the same sentence Pelevin describes what Sasha understands by it. “Sasha had no idea what a zavalinka was, but he imagined it as a comfortable wooden bench set along the log wall of a peasant hut” is Bromfield’s translation of this passage, and the foreign word only enhances the effect it creates. This way, the readers are exposed to a uniquely Russian cultural situation and a Russian word describing it, but they immediately learn its meaning, without having to consult a footnote or an endnote explaining it.

In the very next sentence, there is another cultural situation that is not immediately understandable to people outside of Russia. In the original Russian text Pelevin describes Sasha’s understanding of a “zavalinka” as a rural version of the Tverskoï Boulevard. This street is well-known to most Russians, even those who have never been to Moscow, from literature, film, and popular culture, and so the two words, “Tverskoï Boulevard,” are enough to conjure up the image of the Russian capital in the mind of a native reader. However, for people in other countries the connection with Moscow is not necessarily that strong, and the readers may be confused by a brief reference to a street that they do not know. In his translation, Bromfield makes it “Sasha had imagined Tverskoï Boulevard in Moscow,” and by adding the two words, “in Moscow,” he preserves both the local slant of the reference and the important contrast between the city and the village, and at the same time places the street name in the geographical context understandable to his audience.

Later in the story, Pelevin describes the eerie feeling Sasha has walking through the dark forest and alludes to Russian folk tales when he talks about such characters as соловьи-разбойники, Кашей бессмертный, and баба-яга. These characters are common in Russian folklore, but most non-Russian readers would need an explanation of some kind to understand this highly foreign situation described by Pelevin. In the case of “соловьи-разбойники,” Bromfield uses “nightingale-whistling bandits,” preserving the foreign slant of the words, but also clarifying the meaning of the peculiar name by adding the word “whistling.” Later, Bromfield translates the Russian “кашень” as “walking skeletons,” which creates a connection to the fairy tales and scary stories well-known to his English-speaking readers without violating the original connotation of the Russian word. Finally, Bromfield translates the Russian “баба-яга” as “the wicked witch,” which strengthens the fairy-tale atmosphere of the passage and captures the meaning of the word, because баба-яга is the famous wicked witch of Russian folklore.

Another story, “Sleep,” presents some different historical and cultural challenges. The hero, Nikita with the telling last name Сонечкин (which Bromfield aptly translates as Dozakin), attends a university, and so Pelevin’s narrative is full of terms unique to the Soviet educational system. Often, these terms are abbreviated, and although they are familiar to any reader educated in the Soviet Union, they would not be understandable for people from other backgrounds. In his translation, Bromfield deciphers these abbreviations for his readers without disturbing the flow of the narrative with explanatory notes. Thus, Bromfield translates the original “мл,” which spells out the acronym М-Л, as “Marxism-Leninism,” thus decoding the double encryption. Later on, he translates the Russian “комсор,” the title of one of the hero’s classmates, which stands for секретарь комсомольской организации, as the “Communist Youth League Organizer,” thus clarifying the abbreviation and this character’s role in Nikita’s school life. Another abbreviation used by Pelevin, and also the punch-line of the story “Sleep,” has nothing to do with education. It is the name of a liquor importing company, “Союзэкспорт,” and its acronym СЭХ, which corresponds to the English “sleep.” Bromfield successfully transfers into English both the meaning of the abbreviation and the meaning of the joke, making it the “Special Limited Extra Export Product,” or “SLEEP.” Although these words are noticeably different from the original, especially with the Russian “import” substituted with the English “export,” Bromfield’s choice works especially well, because it creates the same effect as the corresponding Russian text, while fully transferring the intended pun.

Finally, “Sleep” contains one more cultural reference that is quite difficult to transfer into another language. In one of Nikita’s many dreams, Pelevin mentions Thor Heyerdahl and Senkievich. While the former is a world-famous traveler, the latter is one of Russia’s most famous TV show hosts, who is not as well-known outside of his country. Since Pelevin refers to the TV host only by his last name, an explanation is necessary for the non-Russian readers. Again, Bromfield handles the situation by clarifying...
Senkievich’s name right in the text. He makes the smirking Senkievich of the original into “Senkievich, the smirking host of ‘Traveler’s Club,’” making it clear for the audience that the name belongs to a well-known TV personality and explaining the connection with Heyerdahl.

In terms of linguistic challenges, “Bulldozer Driver’s Day” is an especially interesting story. Not only does Pelevin form neologisms in it, he invents new curses, thus making it extremely tricky to translate. One of the characters of the story, Valera, is so good at the art of cursing that others nicknamed him “the dialectician,” and his “dialectics” always have something to do with May or the May Day, both being important allusions to the Communist ideology. This circumstance makes it important to transfer these references into another language accurately, in order to preserve their historical connotation. Bromfield comes up with his own original expressions and uses the English word “Maypole.” Thus, he translates the highly nonsensical Russian “ма́й твоё уро́жай” as the equally absurd “no flickering Mayflies on him,” and he transfers the original “ма́й твою в город-сад под телегу” as “Maypole your mother under a wagon shaft in the garden city.” By adding the word “Maypole,” Bromfield not only strengthens the historical connection discussed above, he also grounds this essentially foreign aspect of the story in the familiar English cultural phenomenon. At the same time, Bromfield’s translation preserves the original offensiveness of the expression, while making it accessible for English-speaking readers.

Another advantage of Bromfield’s translation of “Bulldozer Driver’s Day” is the translator’s understanding of the subtlest nuances of the Russian language and culture. He notices and accurately transfers into English the details of the story that may be easily overlooked. For example, Pelevin describes the apartment where the hero, Ivan, lives and mentions the shoes standing in the corridor. Pelevin refers to some of them as “keds,” which in Russian can mean many kinds of sports shoes. However, in English “Keds” is a specific brand and a registered trademark, which may give an additional slant to the translation of this passage. Bromfield changes it into “sneakers,” thus preserving the meaning of the situation and avoiding adding a connotation that is not there in the original. Later in the story, Ivan looks at a picture called “в поисках внутреннего Булатино,” referring to the Russian retelling of Carlo Collodi’s Pinocchio by Nikolai Tolstoy. While Russian readers are familiar with both Collodi’s story and its Russian version and know both names of the central character, the name Булатино would be completely unknown and confusing for the American audience. Bromfield is well aware of the meaning of the title of the picture and the cultural difference associated with it, and so he translates the title as “In search of the internal Nightingale,” which allows his readers to grasp the humor of the picture of a large log, a man lying on top of it, and its title.

A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia is a collection of Pelevin’s stories that not only reveals the different dimensions of his writing but also demonstrates Andrew Bromfield’s ability to translate all these dimensions into English. While these stories are highly foreign to the American reader, either in terms of cultural and historical background, political references, or popular culture and slang, he manages to transfer the meaning of every situation found in the original text into English, without losing its uniquely Russian flavor.

Andrew Bromfield has translated numerous stories and novels by Dmitry Bakin, Irina Denezhkina, Vladimir Shinkarev, the Strugatsky brothers, Mikhail Kononov, Leonid Latynin, Boris Akunin, and other Russian authors. While living in Moscow, he co-founded Glas, the journal publishing new Russian writing in English translation. In the United States, Bromfield is best known for his translations of Victor Pelevin. Nine of these translations are now available in English from New Directions Publishing Corp. Other translations of Pelevin by Andrew Bromfield are as follows: The Yellow Arrow (New Directions, 1996); Omon Ra (New Directions, 1998); The Life of Insects: A Novel (Penguin, 1999); The Blue Lantern: Stories (New Directions, 2000); Babylon (Faber and Faber, 2000); Buddha’s Little Finger (Penguin, 2001), also published by Faber and Faber under the title of The Clay Machine-Gun; 4 by Pelevin (New Directions, 2001); Homo Zapiens (Penguin, 2003).

Notes

1 In Russian, соловей means “nightingale,” and the bandit receives this name for his technique of deafening his victims by producing an extremely loud whistle sounding somewhat like nightingale’s song.
2 Каще́й бессмертны́й is a popular character of Russian folk tales, an evil sorcerer who never dies and is most commonly depicted as a walking skeleton.
Connecting Lines: New Poetry from Mexico
A Bilingual Anthology. Editor, Luis Cortés Bargalló. Translation Editor, Forrest Gander.

Rainer Schulte, Reviewer

A new venture by Sarabande Books should attract the attention of both American and Mexican poets and readers. Through a partnership to promote wider access to literary voices of Mexican writers and artists in the United States and American writers in Mexico, the National Endowment for the Arts, the United Embassy in Mexico, and Mexico’s National Fund for Culture and the Arts have joined together to support a three-year program of anthology publications.

The two-volume set—Connecting Lines: New Poetry from Mexico and Líneas conectadas: nueva poesía de los Estados Unidos—is the first installment of the series.

I shall focus in this review on Connecting Lines: New Poetry from Mexico,* edited by Luis Cortés Bargalló. The statistics speak to the comprehensive representation of contemporary Mexican poetry: 51 poets (12 women poets), 28 translators, and 3 collaborative translations. The oldest poets included in this volume were born in the 1940s and the youngest in the 1970s. Thus, the selection of poets should be considered a major publication after the now canonic anthology Poesía en movimiento (1966), edited by Octavio Paz, Ali Chumacero, José Emilio Pacheco, and Homero Aridjis.

In his introduction, Luis Cortés Bargalló quotes a statement by Eliot Weinberger that clearly underlines the characteristic traits of this anthology: “Mexican poetry, as it is written today, cannot be conveniently characterized like American poetry, it is made up of a large number of soloists who do not form a choir.”

The poems cover a wide range of poetic expressions—elaborate descriptions of human and nature situations, aphoristic perceptions, and playing with language, experiments with the visual arrangements of poems on the page (Alfonso d’Aquino),” elaborate enumerations of things and objects, political references (Elsa Cross, “The Lovers of Tlatelolco), and innovative metaphorical transformations (Coral Bracho and Manuel Andrade). Throughout the wide range of poetic perceptions certain words reappear with some consistency: shadow, emptiness, abyss, dream, and traveler. A richness of images accompanies many of the poems: broken rocks, trenches of fire, particles of ash, and remains of lost cities.

Many of the poets try to create an intense poetic atmosphere by exploring the intrinsic rhythmic and sound qualities inherent in words, which often recreates a playful atmosphere with some dark undertones. A striking example of this technique is Francisco Hernández’s poem “How Robert Schumann was defeated by the Demons.”

Each line of the poem starts and ends with the same words:

“In order for sun to rise, music by Schumann.
In order to unweave a tapestry, music by Schumann.
In order to kiss my woman, music by Schumann.
In order to bite an apple, music by Schumann.
In order to burn a flag, music by Schumann.
In order to return to infancy, music by Schumann.
In order for Mozart to dance, music by Schumann.
In order to sink a dagger, music by Schumann.

The incongruity of the juxtapositions from one line to the next together with the rhythmic repetition creates an effect of dissonance—playing with words against a somber undertone, especially if the reader were to be familiar with the dark side of the life of Robert Schumann, who tried to commit suicide several times.

Tedi López Mills reruns the word “pigeons” through several lines of his poem “Pigeons vs. Senescence.” In his poem “Convalescence,” the reader is exposed to the first iron in the ear

the first cutting of the saw
the first screeching scribble of letters
the first drop of water in an empty circle
the first blow of the hammer
against a wall and the stone
the first unruly scream beside the gate
the first nail in the midday light

These lines are echoes of Vicente Huidobro’s “Altazor or Journey by Parachute” (“Altazor o el viaje en paracaidas”), an emotional and rhythmic insistence that reverberates in the mind of the reader. Charles Baudelaire also seems to be present in some of the poetic structures. Francisco Segovia feels the need to start several stanzas of his poem “Every tree in its shadow” with the same line: “cada arbol en su sombra.”

Even though the anthology reflects a great variety of poetic formulations, there are words and images that recur in many of the poems. One of the most intriguing leitmotifs is the image of “piedra,” (stone) often reminiscent of Paz’ poetic vision. Malva Flores writes “the stone does not move” and Verónica Volkow transfers an emotional dimension to the word “in the sightless grief of stone.” What is intriguing to realize from a poetic point of view is the poet’s attempt to give form to a particular emotional state by exploring the inherent qualities of an object that comes close to the portrayal of an emotion. In those moments, the poet is not interested in describing an object but rather in
recreating a direction of thinking that the object suggests. The inner landscape of stone can reflect refined emotional modulations.

The variety of poetic expressions and interpretive approaches corresponds to a wide range of translation approaches—from literal to free translations. However, the predominant trend of most translators happens to be toward a close literal reproduction of the original texts. Poetry offers a great many problems that often cannot be satisfactorily recreated in the receptor language. The first two lines of Elisa Ramírez Castañeda’s poem “Happenings” (Occurrencias), translated by Catherine Tylke, read in English:

“It happened to me, yes.
It happened to me”.

However, the original Spanish clearly distinguishes between the two activities:

“Me ocurrió, sí.
Me sucedió.”

Clearly, the Spanish produces two directions to visualize the situation, which obviously would be very difficult to reproduce in English. At the very end of the poem, the last line reads:

“Estaba por allí, me cayó, me jaló, me robó.”

English:

“Around there, it knocked me over, pulled me down, robbed me blind.”

Here the translator decided to expand on the activity of “robar” by adding the adjective “blind.”

Stephen Burt, in his translation of Alberto Blanco’s poem “Poem Seen on a Motel Fan,” presents a model of how the translator expands the direction of thinking of the original text.

Aumento la velocidad y las aspas giran hasta volverse casi invisibles
—solo una gasa blanquecida—pero los reflejos en el centro siguen siendo los mismos.

English:

I turn the speed up and the blades go around almost invisibly; they become only a gauze, pale as ash, or dirty-white gas.

The mirror at their center stays the same.

Images spin in its curvature. And that—

The translator wanted to intensify the image of “gauze” and thus adds “pale as ash” and lets the stanza run beyond the period in the last line with “And that—.”

In one of Coral Bracho’s poems entitled “La Penumbra del cuarto,” the translator chooses the first line of the poem, “Entra el lenguaje,” for the title of the poem and leaves “La Penumbra del cuarto” untranslated, which imparts a different direction of thinking to the poem. However, when the same expression comes up in the first line of the last stanza, “Los dos comparten la penumbra del cuarto,” the translator writes, “The two divide the afternoon’s faint shadow.” That line obviously relates the poem back to its title, which actually sets a particular atmosphere for the poem.

It is always intriguing to see how a translator realizes a particular interpretive perspective and thereby creates a new poem in the receptor language. As we know, no individual translation will ever fully reproduce the totality of a foreign text, and especially not of a poem. However, poems are always being retranslated by new translators, and out of the multiplicity of the translations, the reader comes a little closer to the original text with each new translation. Seen in the larger context of interpretation, there is no such thing as the definitive interpretation of a poem, not even within the language in which it was written.

The previous comments address how some of the translators have viewed and enlarged specific moments in a poem. The majority of the translations, however, can easily be characterized as being close to the original Spanish. The poems that are particularly descriptive in nature lend themselves easily to a translation that is based on a close word correspondence between the Spanish and the English. Poems that are particularly strong in their metaphorical transformation offer the reader some unusual associations. In Fabio Morábito’s poem “Today I don’t Measure out my Lines,” we read, “Today my heart is a henhouse,” “my blood flees like a wire,” and “burros and hens/asses: that’s/ my music.”

In conclusion, I would say that the editors have compiled an extremely balanced anthology of the different poetic voices that have emerged on the contemporary scene of Mexican literature. The reader might want to start with some of the more established voices presented in the anthology: Verónica Volkow, Manuel Andrade, Coral Bracho, Francisco Hernández, Fabio Morábito, Manuel Andrade, and Rafael Vargas, and then discover those poets who are beginning to make themselves heard in the context of Latin American writing. The anthology should definitely be included in any world literature course dealing with contemporary international authors.

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