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Lost and Found in Translation

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Panel: Lost - and Found - in Translation

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LOST AND FOUND IN TRANSLATION – A Panel

‘Deer Enclosure by Wang Wei’

Translation in its most basic form is a transfer (in a language) of one’s meaning into another language, retaining that same meaning in the new language. On another level it is (also) a transposition of the form and shape of the original into the forms of speech of the target language. It is therefore my honest opinion that all can be very easily lost and that nothing much (or as little as possible) ought to be found in translation—except for the thing translated, that is. I believe that the translator who is in the business of finding much besides that which has already been found by the author waves his or her credentials too high. These credentials are hard to gain (especially those in the poetry department), and whatever skills related to finding they include must *eo ipso* exclude as much secondary invention, poetic or otherwise, as is humanly possible. And according to German philosopher Martin Heidegger, poets have a special place and responsibility in this. In his essay on the *Anaximander Fragment*, a meditation on how to translate the Greek terms *on* and *einai* into German, he equates thinking with the act of poetry. To use language in a non-poetic way, he says (and I paraphrase), is to live in only one dimension of time: chronological time. But again and again in the history of translation, we run up against the fact that this process appears to unfold outside of time and space, where translation stands as the contact barrier between the text and myself—but a barrier that exists solely to facilitate contact. Remove the barrier, and contact would be impossible, for there would be no distinction between you and me. Not only would the essence of the thing not be defined, we too would have no edges. No subject would be preserved. But when it is preserved, then the work of art works on its translator, too; within him a certain self-transcendence takes place, bringing him out of his fixation with the self and bringing him into a relationship with the text (*Die Holzwege*, 1950).

What strikes me in Heidegger’s description of the translation process is how close it comes to our experience of the act of reading. Do we not while we read forget all space and time, become self-absorbed, and by the necessity of the action, self-transcend and bring ourselves out of fixation with the self and into a relationship with the text? We do, and Heidegger is right in saying so, for this is precisely what all translation *first and foremost* is: our reading of a text to the zero point of self-oblivion. No one I know of puts it better than the Victorian poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti: “The life-blood of rhymed translation is this—that a good poem shall not be turned into a bad one. The only true motive for putting poetry into a fresh language,” continues Rossetti, “must be to endow a fresh nation, as far as possible, with one more possession of beauty. Poetry not being an exact science, literality of rendering is altogether secondary to this chief aim. I say literality,—not fidelity, which is by no means the same thing. The task of the translator (and with all humility be it spoken) is one of some self-denial” (*Preface to The Early Italian Poets in Poems and Translations, 1850-1880*).

Let me very briefly touch on just two of Rossetti’s main points. I certainly believe that whatever comes out of translating poetry should be a poem, a good one preferably. But this is the touchiest of subjects in any discussion of poetry, and knowing as we all do what sometimes passes for a translation of verse, we can hardly grudge Vladimir Nabokov for saying that “the clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest

paraphrase.” Hermeneutics teaches us Nabokov may well be right in his austere judgment, for there is no substitute for our reading in the original, especially in the case of poetry—it is a loss on our part when we can’t. Or as Robert Frost famously remarked, “poetry is what gets lost in translation.”

For a translator of Frost this is a challenging thought, which—although not made for this purpose—must certainly put some of Rosetti’s humility and, even more to the point, some of his sobriety into the translator’s head. It undoubtedly put some into mine. Opinions of great writers are always welcome, but the crucial point to make in relation to the two mentioned, is that the notion of a poem as a fully realized work of art excludes it from being its own paraphrase. And if so, it appears that Nabokov is not talking of poetry translation in the sense Rosetti, Heidegger and Frost do. And, fair to say, by talking of translation Frost does in fact talk of something else, too. He is *defining poetry* by means of translation. In order to get to “his” definition of translation one would have to reverse the argument of the sentence and take it a step further, asserting—a) that no translation of a poem is capable of being poetic in the sense the poem itself can be—which is wrong; and b) that no meaningful poetry of any author can be deduced from any translation of his or her poems whatsoever, which is clear nonsense. With Frost you can’t reverse the argument. Its hidden assertion is a firm disbelief in the transferability of poetry as such, and this is a cultural belief and one that is not easy to see to. Languages are never totally equivalent—information loss or the necessity of adding information is a well-known feature of translations. If one wants to translate a piece from Chinese (a language without verbal tenses) into English, the translator has to add verbal tenses in English, and, as I’m told, many other things beside. The students here can read into this in their prescribed reading of Weinberger’s and Paz’s *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei* (where a little poem called *Deer Enclosure* by the Chinese poet is translated nineteen times over by as many different translators) and see how it comes about for themselves. However, in the case of poetry, translation becomes even more difficult than that due to the importance of sound. Sound, and the specific meanings attached to it—on which Frost so insisted in his many other, and may I say, more apt definitions of poetry and writing—are for the good part almost impossible to translate. As the German philosopher Schopenhauer concluded: “Poems cannot be translated; they can only be transposed, and that is always awkward.” So, beware of transpositions that do not make for awkward reading! It is interesting to note, that in this Frost was not very far from Schopenhauer, for what he says in one of his subsequent qualifications of the above statement is (and I quote him from memory) that all good translations are interpretations and that the reading of them should therefore always leave us a little sadder for the fact of not having been able to read the original ourselves (*R. F. Letters to Louis Untermeyer*, 1963). The final test, I suppose, must here lie with the author. Would the old master find it satisfying? Would he even approve of it? Probably not, but how are we to know? Why, in many ways—and they are more than nineteen, I can tell you—I don’t approve of translations of my poetry, and some of them are of my own making! Poets are jealous guardians of their word-hoard (to borrow an expression from *Beowulf*); they are the dragons of the translator’s realm (if, indeed, the translator is allowed to possess such a thing). George Steiner is aware of that, when he says: “[I have taken translation to include] the writing of a poem in which a poem in another language is the vitalizing, shaping presence; a poem which can be read and responded to independently but which is not ontologically complete, a previous poem being its occasion,

begetter, and in the literal sense, *raison d'être*" (*The Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation*, 1966). So, here we have it! The "shaping presence"—a mere shadow of the solidity of a notion required for a satisfying definition—but this is what we are looking for in any transposition of a piece, be it musical or otherwise. And if we find it—indeed, if we *recognize* it as such—the translator's work is being done. And it so happens that this work comes (in my view, anyway) very close to the work of a poet. Poetry's chief function—and I put this up as my underlying belief or, as the Greeks would say, the *hypothesis* of anything I may say on the subject—poetry's chief function and its very purpose in life is one of protecting the thing it presents (thus making it—as much as it can—inaccessible to appropriation). But, mind you, I say close, and this is all I say. No touching is allowed. As writers, we are within our own potentials all citizens of the world, as translators we only belong to one country and to one language—our own. And even this only for a certain period of time, some say fifty years at the max. By then the text would have been done twice, three times over—or forgotten.

Now, as we come to more practical matters of poetry translation, I cannot but mention Ezra Pound's *How to Read* with his three partite classification of poetry. Within the first of his strange Greek categories, *melopoeia* as he calls it, the words "are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning"; the second, *phanopoeia*, he describes as "a casting of images upon the visual imagination"; and the third *logopoeia*, as "the dance of the intellect among words." The first can be appreciated by a foreigner with a sensitive ear, even if he doesn't speak the language, yet it is practically impossible to transfer or translate "save by divine accident, and for half a line at a time." The second can "be translated almost, or wholly, intact. When it is good enough, it is practically impossible for the translator to destroy it save by very crass bungling." (You would have noticed that the Chinese poem I referred to falls into this category.) The translation of third rests with us. "Having determined the original author's state of mind, you may or may not be able to find... an equivalent."

If I am to go back to Robert Frost's original subject of what can or cannot be lost (or found) in translated poetry, I think that Ezra Pound here explains his friend and rival, too. This is made obvious from Frost's later qualifications of the subject, especially the ones made in the letters to Korean and Japanese writers, accessible in the correspondence chapter in the American Library Edition of his *Collected Works*. There he makes the first and partially the third of Pound's three aspects of poetry subjects to our cultural inheritance, and thus the subjects of mutually exclusive thought and speech traditions, where *quid pro quo* is neither given nor tolerated. Strictly speaking, I agree with this view on general and historic terms. My objection is that it doesn't take into account two things that do take place in intercultural exchanges—not only in linguistic ones, thank God, but of almost any kind.

1. There exists among certain writers in any age or place, and across the barriers the two present, a form of human and artistic understanding, a certain *rapport* between them which is hard to describe and which I will not try to describe now. All I can say is that if it didn't exist we wouldn't be here today and neither would this fine library—at least not as we see it, but in a much poorer state, bereft of many of its finest possessions.

2. Words, especially when used in the sense of Steiner’s “shaping presence,” have their own powerful means of defending themselves against the transgressions of their shape and sense. For sooner or later they will make nonsense out of the work that attempts such transgressions. If distorted they fight back with a vengeance which no attempt on them survives. The poetic intelligence secretly working behind it all is sometimes of such proportions that it scares me to even talk about it. I like to tell my friends how awfully lost and stupid I often felt when translating Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. And I felt this with Frost, too. I felt like I was playing chess with Capablanca or Bobby Fisher, never knowing from which way the next blow will come; all I knew was it would not take long in coming. But the scariest and the surest thing of them all is that such powerful words always win their battles. The original survives, it always does, and it is only our feeble attempts at it that are being relegated to dust and oblivion. No wonder then there are so few who still want to do it and with so little success. Perhaps John Dryden said it best: “the true reason why we have so few versions which are tolerable [is that] there are so few who have all the talents which are requisite for translation, and that there is so little praise and so small encouragement for so considerable a part of learning” (Preface to *Fables, Ancient and Modern*, 1700). So, if you ask me, is it really so hard as to make it almost impossible, I would say that it is. I hasten to add however, that translators, too, possess powerful tools which may go a long way in their favour. Not least among such tools of trade are our very own past blunders, which inform us better than any scholarly notes we have studied might do. They incite us to do better the second, third, fourth time around... But the chief of them (if I am allowed another unruly paraphrase) is love. And the respect for the object of it that goes with it. We often forget that as translators, linguists, scholars or whatever else we may be in relation to great poetry, we only see darkly. Of course, we can be whoever we like, but only as long as we are readers first, and *amateur* readers at that—that is to say “lovers” of it. Thus not only will we stay true to it, as Heidegger says, but the text itself will stay true to us. Then, if we have the ear for it, we may even hear it speak to us, softly most of the time, in our own language. I am aware that all this (or some of it) may sound to you like a rerun of some overtly poetical gobbledegook, but here is the testimony to what I say from a very famous colleague of mine, a translator of *Beowulf* and the Nobel laureate, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney. This is what he says: “It is one thing to find lexical meanings for the words and to have some feel for how the metre might go, but it is quite another thing to find the tuning fork that will give you the note and pitch for the overall music of the work. Without some melody sensed or promised, it is simply impossible for a poet to establish translator’s right-of-way into and through the text. I was therefore lucky to hear this enabling note almost straight away...” (*Beowulf*, Norton, 2001). What can I say, some fortunate fellow, Seamus! And with this I conclude.