



# Exile and Translation

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## Introduction

A major current of Western philosophical and literary thought, including seminal figures such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Blanchot, has argued that a new experience of ontology and language must pass via a deliberate renunciation and suspension of conventionally accepted approaches to being and language. If this is correct, a re-conceptualisation of exile and translation as potential paths towards suspending habitual experiences of being and language might be of significant value. This article provides preliminary insights into a reconfiguration of translation as that process which enables an alternative use of language. It contends that by entering into the process of translation, the author enacts an implicit or explicit, voluntary or involuntary, act of exile from the familiar which may bring about an experience of estrangement and suspension, the outcomes of which can be revelatory. It is perhaps something like this that the Italian poet Giorgio Caproni went through when he translated from the French; famously stating that translation had taught him to speak “more gently to things”. This article traces the possible meanings of this learned “gentleness”, and the potentially considerable role played by translation to achieve it, through a discussion of directly related literary and philosophical concerns.

## I

If it is true, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, that writing is an “immobile voyage” (1986: 35), and that in writing the traveller defers the journey by actually departing, enacting a movement, translation is, then, the quintessential evidence of a journey that “*goes where one isn't*”. (1994: 254) The “going where one isn't” means to fill a gap through writing or, in the words of Ann Smock, to “bridge a gulf that does not, for all that, become passable.” (2003: 31)





This impossible going is a *writerly* journey whose ultimate purpose is, in the words of Franz Kafka, to get “away from here, just away from here (*nur weg von hier*). On and on away from here, that’s the only way I can reach my goal (*nur so kann ich mein Ziel erreichen*).” (1991: 137) It is also, as Giorgio Caproni put it so admirably, a returning where we have never been: “I returned there/ where I had never been./ Nothing, from how it was not, has changed./ On the table (the checkered/ cloth), half filled/ I found the glass/ never filled. Everything/ is still as/ I have never left it.” (1992: 81) But exactly what does “to return where we have never been” mean?

## II

The beginning of productive creativity correlates with, and is complemented by a sense of astonishment in the face of what is taking place before one’s eyes and in the language that lends tangibility to production.

In *Was ist das – die Philosophie? (What is Philosophy?)*, Martin Heidegger defines astonishment thus: “In astonishment (*im Erstaunen*) we restrain ourselves (*être en arrêt*). We step back, as it were, from being (*Wir treten gleichsam zurück vor dem Seienden*), from the fact that it is as it is and not otherwise.” (1963: 85) It is at once philosophically significant and poetic that Heidegger chose to define astonishment as an act of self-restraint where restraint, and here lies the beauty and the importance of this statement, is the active refusal to accept that which is pre-arranged and pre-ordained, pre-packaged, arbitrarily complete. Heidegger invites us instead to break this artificial, un-philosophical and un-poetical reading of life, to destroy it in order to pave the way, the path, to seeing it and to saying it “otherwise” (*anders*).

In the same book, Heidegger speaks of destruction (*Destruktion*) in a way that leaves no doubt about his understanding of the meaning of philosophising. “Destruction”, writes Heidegger, “does not mean destroying but dismantling, demolishing, putting to one side the merely historical assertions about the history of philosophy (*Destruktion bedeutet nicht Zerstören, sondern Abbauen, Abtragen und Auf-die-Seite-stellen*).



Destruction means – to open our ears, to make ourselves free for what speaks to us in tradition as the Being of being (*Sein des Seienden*). By listening to this interpellation (*Indem wir auf diesen Zuspruch hören*) we attain the correspondence (*die Entsprechung*).”(1963: 73)

### III

Most of modern production (the language of modernity) is predicated upon the notions of suspension and destruction, and upon the creative power of ambiguity and antinomy. Modernity is, in other words, concerned with and indeed informed by the notion of exile. Examples abound. Discussing the work of Charles Baudelaire, in *Infancy and History* Agamben claimed that: “In Baudelaire a man expropriated from experience (*espropriato dell’esperienza*) exposes himself to the force of shock. Poetry responds to the expropriation of experience by converting this expropriation into a reason for surviving and making the inexperiencible its normal condition (*facendo dell’inesperibile la sua condizione normale*). In this perspective, the search for the ‘new’ (*nuovo*) does not appear as the search for a new object of experience; instead, it implies an eclipse and a suspension of experience (*implica al contrario, un’eclisse e una sospensione dell’esperienza*).” (2001: 38)

But what exactly does “a suspension of experience” mean, and more importantly, what kind of language and literature are “a language and a literature of suspension”?

It is worth reflecting further on Agamben’s emphasis on the suspension of experience. In chapter three of *Infancy and History*, under the sub-heading *La poesia moderna e l’esperienza* (“Modern Poetry and Experience”), we read:

... modern poetry from Baudelaire onwards is seen to be founded not on new experience, but on an unprecedented lack of experience (*una mancanza di esperienza senza precedenti*). Hence the boldness (*disinvoltura*) with which Baudelaire can place shock at the centre of his artistic work. It is experience that best affords us protection from surprises (*protezione dalle sorprese*), and the production of shock always implies a gap (*falla*) in experience. To experience something means divesting it of novelty (*novità*), neutralizing its shock potential (*neutralizzare il suo potenziale di choc*). (2001: 37)



The word “shock” occupies a central and commanding position in this important passage. It appears to be in close relation to “surprise”, and opposed to experience. “Shock” is the “surprise” that upsets experience and relegates experience to the background, puts it out of sight, renders it useless and impracticable. It is not that experience disappears because of exposure to “shock”. Rather, experience becomes devoid of meaning, empty, voiceless. It speaks no more, and with its silence comes the *nakedness* of the subject.

By nakedness we mean here the simple event of being devoid of experience, which in turn means that moment devoid of historiography, that abyss so vital to the thinking of Heidegger and Blanchot, the present-now (*Jetzt-Zeit*) to which Benjamin devotes so many pages and so much thought. In other words, by nakedness we mean here the suspension of existence by virtue of which existence manifests itself as existence as-such. In his study entitled *Sur Nietzsche (On Nietzsche)*, Georges Bataille defines nakedness as the space of inaction or the suspension of action. He writes: “If I give up the viewpoint of action, my perfect nakedness is revealed to me.” (2004: xvii) Two pages later he adds: “Art constitutes a minor free zone outside action, paying for its freedom by giving up the real world.” (2004: xxix)

In Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, in the chapter on the *flâneur*, we read: “Truth becomes something living; it lives solely in the rhythm by which statement and counterstatement displace each other in order to think each other.” (1999: 418) Living truth is nothing other, then, than naked truth; the truth that exists as it confronts the shock of its own existence. What is extraordinary about Benjamin’s thought is its emphasis on life beyond the ordinary conception of life, and of existence beyond the common understanding of existence.

#### IV

How does this relate to the present discussion of exile and translation?

In a short essay discussing his translation of Céline’s *Mort à crédit*, first published in the literary journal *Il Verri* in the January-February issue of



1968, and re-published almost thirty years later in the collection of essays *La scatola nera (The Black Box)*, Giorgio Caproni writes that translation has taught him to “*parler [...] plus doucement aux choses* (“to speak more gently to things”).” (1996: 58, my translation) The significance of this statement is considerable, especially in the light of the central position given to the preposition *aux* (to), around which the meaning of the sentence revolves. Caproni claims that translation has enabled him to talk *to things*, and not *about things*. This form of speech, of writing, is not indirect, is not descriptive or representational. It is rather an encounter and an intersection in language. Translation leads Caproni to a territory where “thingness”, that is, both the subject of speech and its interlocutor and listener, are united by that language-event that does not speak *about*. In other words, the experience of being exposed to the presence of the non-linguistic does not happen *through* language but *in* language. Language is therefore no longer a means but more precisely, and certainly more poignantly, the end and the very locus of shared life. The “gentle speaking to things” is that climactic moment at which the subject arrives at its maximal unconcealment and openness, pouring itself out in language, simultaneously uttering its whole vulnerability by willingly sharing it with the life around it. And life responds to these bouts of utter exposure (of destruction) through its consent to listen and its devoted attention.

This is the language of Ponge and Pascoli and of those poets and writers for whom language becomes life. It is a paradox and also an irony that the recognition of language as life is confined to poetry and madness, to those “anarchic” experiences which are treated either with suspicion, indifference and disdain or, in a contrary manner, with unconsidered and often incongruous enthusiasm. It is doubly puzzling that life must renounce its juridical status to regain its fullness. But this is precisely what Caproni claims as a result of his reflections on translation. He can speak “more gently to things” because he has exposed himself to the experience of linguistic exile. And translation is the door to linguistic exile.

## V

The mistake that is often made about translation – and to a certain

extent about the notion of exile, too – is that translating consigns the translator to another language and culture. In translating, the translator, who already knows well – or reasonably well – the language and the culture that s/he translates from, will gain an even better and deeper knowledge of that language and culture. What is less often discussed is that in translating, which means continually exiting and re-entering one's own language and culture, the translator gains a deeper understanding of his/her own language and culture, and of his/her own life. The translator can, as in the case of Caproni, experience language as life. In taking the self out of its known boundaries, the self comes to know itself better.

It is in this sense that departing, never imply a return to the same but rather a discovery of new and unfamiliar territories which are nonetheless already inside the self. This also means that *leaving* can be the best way to stay in one's own company, and the most precious gift that one can make to oneself. If it is true, as Adriana Cavarero argues in *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* [1997] (*Relating Narratives*, 2000), that auto/biographical stories catch the essence of the unique identity of a person through the necessary process of relation with another who tells or listens to the stories, then it is also true that translation, the relational narrative *par excellence*, is another essential path to discovery. It was in translating René Char that Caproni realised that:

*La letteratura e la poesia-che-si-sapeva-già non porgono più alcun soccorso al lettore, e questi, coinvolto da capo a piedi in quei bouts d'existence incorruptible che sono i poèmes, rimane perfettamente solo a sentirsi investito d'un potere – d'un interiore libertà: d'uno slancio vitale e d'un coraggio morale – che per un istante egli crede di ricevere femminilmente dall'esterno, mentre poi s'accorge che tale ricchezza era già in lui, sonnecchiante ma presente, come se il poeta altro non avesse fatto che risvegliarla, non inventando, ma scoprendo; e quindi suscitando un moto, più che d'ammirazione, di gratitudine. (1996: 61, emphasis in the text)*  
*(The literature and the poetry-one-already-knew no longer offer any help to the reader, who, caught up from head to toe in those bouts d'existence incorruptibles that are the poèmes, is left entirely alone to feel himself invested with a power – an inner freedom: a vital energy and moral courage – which for a moment he thinks he receives femininely from the outside,*

*until he realizes that this richness was already in him, slumbering but present, as if the poet had done nothing other than to reawaken it, not inventing, but discovering; and so exciting an impulse, more than of admiration, of gratitude. Translation by Joseph Falsone)*

We find in this passage many of the things discussed so far. And yet, these “things” are illuminated by a clarity (*nitidezza*) and precision that demand attention. Translation is not only an exile from the usual (from “the literature and the poetry-one-already-knew”), it is also an exile into the self where the consent to listen, indeed the consent to receive the other as part of the self, wakens an ethical courage and a passion living dormant, neglected and uncertain. The richness of the self can be found in the dialectic relation with the other, and this richness is not an invention, a creation from nothing. It is rather a discovery which is nothing other than the result of a process of disorientation and defamiliarisation.

Caproni could not be more explicit when, quoting from Char, he stresses that “*Celui qui invente, au contraire de celui qui découvre, n’ajoute aux choses, n’apporte aux êtres que des masques...*” (“Those who invent, by contrast to those who discover, do not add to things, they only endow beings with masks...”) (1996: 62, my translation) The central argument is that the poet (Caproni) comes to understand what he believes is the real essence of art through translation. The notion that nothing is actually created, and that artistic creation is a process of discovery, casts new light on the idea of originality and purity, and also on the relation between the original and the translation. A redefinition of poetic exile, but also of translation, must commence from this premise.

## VI

In 1964 Italo Calvino married Esther Judith Singer and took up residence in Paris. From that year till 1980, Calvino commuted more or less regularly between France and Italy. And yet, for about sixteen years his home was Paris; a home that for Calvino also signified poetic exile. In one of the few autobiographical pieces on those years, the essay “*Eremita a Parigi*” (“Hermit in Paris”), Calvino writes thus: “I often say, and I have said it so often that I have now become a bit bored with it, that in Paris I have my country house (*la mia casa di campagna*), in the sense that as a



writer I can conduct part of my activity in solitude, it does not matter where, in a house isolated in the midst of the country-side, or on an island, and this country house of mine is right in the middle of Paris. In this way, while the part of my life that is connected with my work (*la vita di relazione connessa col mio lavoro*) takes place entirely in Italy, I come here when I can or have to be on my own (*quando posso o devo stare da solo*), something that is easier for me to do in Paris." (2003: 169)

A clear analogy would be James Joyce's self-exile from Ireland in order to create the bold experimental prose of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. This is the poetic and philosophical exile that writers and philosophers impose on themselves to escape the distraction of day-to-day life in order to concentrate on a search whose ultimate goal is to present them with an image, a form, or just a glimpse or a feeling of what they know exists but remains invisible, missing, out of reach. The author must abandon life in the community, those distractions such as business, marriage, family and daily chores, to prepare, facilitate and arrange an encounter with the ever present unknown and unfamiliar, whatever this might be: God, the unconscious, the Platonic ideas, love, imagination, death or the pure and unfettered nothingness.

But why is it that in the Western literary and philosophical tradition the search for the ultimate truth, or even for the ultimate negation of universal truths, must take place in isolation, in the flight, as Plotinus had it, "of one into oneself"?

As Calvino reflects on the reason why he has not written about Paris, he muses that: "Maybe to write about Paris I ought to leave, to distance myself from it (*dovrei staccarmene, esserne lontano*), if it is true that all writing starts out from a lack or an absence (*se è vero che si scrive sempre partendo da una mancanza, da un'assenza*)." (2003: 167) What is of interest in this passage, especially for the present discussion, is Calvino's final hypothesis that all writing "starts out from a lack or an absence". If we now combine the first and the second quotation from "Hermit in Paris" we find that Calvino says two things. He says that the desire, the will and the impulse to write is generated from a sense of loss and that this writing about the loss must be attended by the imposition of a further loss. The latter is the







abandonment of the quotidian, and the quotidian self. It literally means closing the door to life with others in order to enter the rooms of a life where the only relations are those played out within the isolated self.

## VII

Calvino closes the door. And yet, this door (which Kafka allegorised so powerfully in the story “Vor dem Gesetz” [“Before the Law”]), ought to be left open at all times, regardless of whether we are on this or that side of the door, and whether we are invited or forbidden to pass through it. But the Western tradition, as Calvino testifies, has kept on closing and opening the door. Only from time to time has the door been left open. It is indeed possible that the Western literary and philosophical tradition, starting from Plato, is based on a fundamental mistake, or perhaps on a simple and yet damaging misunderstanding. The loss upon which the production of language and thought is predicated is the cause and the result of this very production and its inherent exclusiveness and closure. It is by closing the door of existence that the loss is inevitably and artificially created. By assuming that what is lost must be looked for in exile, the principle that there would not be an absence without exile must also be accepted.

As a matter of fact, exile is not a means toward an end, it is rather the inevitable and inescapable condition of historical and cultural existence. By artificially producing loss, we merely reproduce what we already are, and as such we do not “add” anything, in the sense that Char gives to the notion of “adding”, we only place masks on what is already there. If it is true that creation is not invention but discovery, the door of existence must be left open. This is the great challenge for contemporary thought.

It is because of this that the writings and the languages on and of the threshold, the great example of which is translation, may initiate an alternative articulation of experience as well as ontology.

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