

A Conversation on Translation

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The critic Walter Benjamin wrote a very famous and very difficult book-length essay on Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities*, from which I'll cite the following passage:

[Goethe's] literary composition remains turned toward the interior in the veiled light refracted through multi-colored panes. Shortly after [the] completion [of the novel], [Goethe] wrote to Zelter: "Wherever my new novel finds you, accept it in a friendly manner. I am convinced that the transparent and opaque veil will not prevent you from seeing inside to the form truly intended."¹

This imagery of the veil that is at once transparent and opaque—and which must finally lead to our seeing inside "to the form truly intended"—gives us just about everything essential, I think, to a conversation about translation.

The translator of a work means to bring to light "the form truly intended"—and here I will gloss the words "truly intended" to refer to the intention that informs the work and not, supposing it recoverable, something in the mind of the author during the act of writing. The sort of work-based intentionality I have in mind responds to the question, "What does the work aim to accomplish?" in the sense, even in the humble sense, in which a chair aims to be sat upon quite apart from the commotion in the mind of the carpenter at the time of its making (as, for example, his thinking, "Oh, the limbs of my chair are lovely"; or, "this chair is going to bring about a revolution in sitting"; or: "this chair will be a commercial success—and will pay for my new loft in Dumbo," and so forth).

Now the form "truly intended" that Goethe speaks of is, of course, a function of the *language* of the work; it comes to light for a reader from his or her reading—and knowing—its words. It will not come to light for the reader whose knowledge of that language is sub-par the author's facility. Here, then, is the task of the translator. He or she (henceforth, "he") is called upon to carry over that form, the thrust of that form, into a work in another

1 Benjamin, "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*," originally published in *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* (1924-25), trans. Stanley Corngold in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996), p. 352, alt.

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language—in a technical sense, into *his, the translator's*, own work, since he borrows none of the author's words; he replaces them with words of his own composition.

(Admittedly, it is only a low sort of ownership that the translator enjoys: the work is his—but it is a plagiarism—or, less punitively, it is “a translation.”)

In another sense, it might be interesting to think of the translation as a dream of the original. The translation presents itself with a *prima facie clarity* of feature. I do think this clarity is an overriding concern of the translation. And so, in speaking about the clarity of the form of things, we are reminded of Nietzsche's (surprising) example of the dream as this very medium of Apollinian plasticity, fascinating visibility, precision of feature and form. In the dream, he writes, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, “We enjoy the *form* with an immediate understanding; every shape speaks to us; nothing is indifferent and unnecessary.” The translation must be clear and compelling; it is well advised to strive for clarity of presentation (“Klarheit der Darstellung”)—or it must strike the reader so, who will have a less perfect or imperfect or scant or no knowledge of the original at all. The original will be dark for him, as the translation will be light.

This, at any rate, is the view of Don Paterson, the accomplished translator of Rilke's *Sonette an Orpheus*—although, to be sure, he thinks of this very demand for clarity as the drawback of mere *translation*: “A translation,” he writes, “tries to remain true to the original words and their relations, and its primary aim is [...] one of stylistic elegance (meaning, essentially, the smooth elimination of syntactic and idiomatic artifacts from the original tongue).”² It is precisely because the result is *merely* a translation that Paterson means to produce a *version* that will be an original sequence of poems.

Paterson's point will take us later on to a discussion of what the translator might do with passages in the original that are dark even to him whose knowledge of the language is—in principle—perfect.

Now even as I adduce some of the aims involved in translation, I must confess that I am suspicious of their *value in practice*—as well as of the value of a good deal of the translation theory that has circulated in vast quantities on both shores. Here, theory acts on principle; it conjures and addresses situations presumed to be

2 Don Paterson, *Orpheus* (London: Faber, 2006), 73.

eternally stable (even in their calculable flux). It's been assumed that such a situation exists for the translator, and this assumption prompts a general consensus about what translation does—viz.: it carries over the meanings of words from one language to another—from the source language to the target language, leaving, in principle, no child of connotation behind. The source house-of-language has been fully emptied out; all the entities dwelling there have been brought to safety.

We have begun to discuss some general principles of translation, so consider some additional sub-principles. The translator must struggle with *competing* aims: 1. to make the source text speak the target language fluently, quite as if the source-author *had written* in the target language (so that would be: Kafka writing for the *New Yorker* or Aeschylus, as in the hands of Anne Carson, writing for *Granta*). Or, on the other hand, 2. the translator must make the target language speak with an accent—the accent of the original German or French or Greek in the sense of conveying something of the material flavor, the “feel” of that *foreign* language—effects of diction, of the sound-look of words—odd metaphors—effects of grammar (as, for example, in German: transposed word order or extended adjectival construction or agglutinated nominatives).

In an Introduction to his newly edited six-volume translation of Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu*—a translation by various hands—the editor, Christopher Prendergast, discusses this competition of ideas as follows:

Although not without precedent (there are already team-work translations in both German and Italian), the disadvantages of such an arrangement [of the various hands] are obvious. At the deepest level they concern the management of differences arising not just from the interpretation of Proust's text but from philosophical conflicts over the nature and purpose of literary translation as such. This, broadly, is the conflict between what we might call the naturalizing and the foreignizing conceptions. The latter holds that we should never be allowed to forget that what we are reading is indeed a translation and that it is therefore both duty-bound and condemned to bear within it some trace of the foreignness in which it has taken up abode. Reading *À la recherche* in English should not seek to mask the fact that it was originally written

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in French. Conversely, the former assumes that the prime task of the translator is to naturalize the host language as far as possible into the terms of the guest language, in such a way as to create for the reader the sense that he or she is reading a text as if it had been 'originally' written in the guest language. This appears to have been Kilmartin's working hypothesis. "(T)he main problem with Scott Moncrieff's version is a matter of tone. A translator ought constantly to be asking himself: 'How would the author put this if he were writing in English?'" Yet, if at first glance, this looks like a reasonable benchmark, it is in fact demented. Perhaps we can make some sense of the notion of what *À la recherche* would have looked like had Proust written it in English by recasting it as the question of how a roughly contemporaneous English writer might have written it. But this counterfactual imagining is also a somewhat murky notion. What, from the history of English-language fiction, could serve as a comparable model of literary prose? The style of Henry James or Edith Wharton, for example? The analogy, if pressed, would quite rapidly reach breaking point.³

Well, if there are these two contending strains, now add on contending strain number three, if you will follow Walter Benjamin, namely: The task of the (inevitably inept) translation is to conjure yet another language—neither the language of the source nor of the target text in whatever idiom of choice. This third language is the so-called "pure" language that precedes and undergirds all particular languages. It is not crystal clear what that language is in Benjamin—perhaps it is the lost "language" of intellectual intuition.

Finally, to give a last example of such principles, there are competing claims as well in the matter of whether the translation should strive for the condition of the pony. This would be a literal, a mimetic accuracy so precise that a reader of the target text who was also fluent in the source language could, with a few standard adjustments, back-translate the translation into the source text, which he or she didn't hitherto know. On the other hand, there's the question of whether free paraphrase, a bit of fireworks on the side, wouldn't be allowed.

3 Christopher Prendergast, "General Editor's Introduction" to Marcel Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Penguin, 2003), xiv-xv.

Here is an example: Edwin and Willa Muir, the eminent first English translators of Kafka, translated a phrase from Kafka's story "Arabs and Jackals" describing the movements of the jackals. The phrase reads "sie gingen" ("they went away"). The Muirs' translation reads: "*They turned tail* and ran." This elegant periphrasis will, of course, throw the pony-rider. Riding back to German, he would have to wonder whether Kafka had referred to these animals as so many "Wendeschwänze."

I'd like to describe for a moment a few more obstacles to the pony principle taken from life. These arise from the ponies produced in conversation with the late German wit and writer Reinhard Lettau. Now, you must understand first that some of the motorways in America are called "turnpikes" (the section of Highway I-95, for example, which leads from Princeton to New York is called the New Jersey Turnpike). So Lettau would excuse himself from late dinners in Princeton by saying he "musste leider dem *Wendehecht* gleich ins Auge gucken." It would not be difficult for a bilingual listener—or reader—to ride this pony back to "looking straightaway into the face of the turncoat pike," where pike now refers to a kind of lake fish: "brochet," "Hecht". But that wasn't what was *meant*. Homonyms are the bane of ponies. (Put that on my gravestone).

But wait—"Turncoat pike?" Honestly, could any bilingual native speaker ever have come to that? Well, yes, actually, a reasonably cultivated one, who might very well have read the poem by Christian Morgenstern titled—"Der Hecht"—a pike that, as a *converted* fish, might very truly be designated a "Wendehecht," to wit:

Ein Hecht, vom heiligen Anton
bekehrt, beschloss, samt Frau und Sohn,
am vegetarischen Gedanken
moralisch sich emporzuranken.

Er aß seit jenem nur noch dies:
Seegras, Seerose und Seegrieß.
Doch Grieß, Gras, Rose floss, o Graus,
entsetzlich wieder hinten aus.

Der ganze Teich ward angesteckt.
Fünfhundert Fische sind verreckt.
Doch Sankt Anton, gerufen eilig,
sprach nichts als "Heilig! heilig! heilig!"⁴

4 <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/christian-morgenstern-gedichte-325/46>.

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A pike, *converted* by Saint Anthony, resolved, together with his wife and son, to raise himself morally with vegetarian thoughts. From that time on, he ate only the following: sea grass, sea roses, and sea grits. But grits, grass, and roses, oh drear, flowed in ghastly fashion out the rear. The entire pond became polluted; five hundred fish expired duly; but Saint Anthony, hurriedly summoned, could cry but “Holy! Holy! Holy!”⁵

I return to Lettau and ponies one last time: Lettau, at generous buffets, after consuming the *first* mountain of vegetables—sea grass, sea roses, sea grits—would ask the company whether they were inclined “auf Sekunden zu gehen” (“to go for seconds”); but ponies of course, as in all the examples above, can produce distracting, if lovely, surreal connotations. As there are no “lake fish” in the “turnpike,” so, in returning to the buffet table, one does not tread (lightly) on carpets woven of little fractions of time.

Now where is this fugue on translation principles heading? It means to stress the force that operates against such principles, a *Tücke der Wörter*, a sort of free-floating mischief inside the target language that will throw sand in the eyes of the products produced by solid-enough-seeming theory.

Here are examples of what I mean, again from real life, as it were.

An editor at Norton Critical Editions asked me to vet a sample translation of a passage from *The Sufferings of Young Werther*—a translation I did not care for: it was literally “unspeakable.” Here are the cruxes.

On the evening of his very sad, heart-rending suicide, Werther steps out of door and looks at the starry sky.

Ich trete an das Fenster, meine Beste, und sehe, und
sehe noch durch die stürmenden, vorüberfliehenden
Wolken einzelne Sterne des ewigen Himmels! Nein,
ihr werdet nicht fallen! Der Ewige trägt euch an
seinem Herzen, und mich.

The sample translation read (italics mine):

I step to the window, *my dearest*, and see, and still
see, through the rushing clouds flying over me a few

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stars of the eternal heavens! No, *you* will not fall! the
Eternal bears you, and me, in his heart.⁶

Right from the start, this unsatisfying translation returns us to the pony-question, the drive to produce a text that is rigorously homologous with the original. True, this translation does meet the standard of word-for-word literalness, but in doing so, raises questions once again of miscommunication. The reader will surely wonder, on reading the English text: “Who is the ‘you’ here borne up by “the Eternal”? And he or she will of course think that it is “my dearest”—i.e., Lotte, Charlotte, to whom the letter is addressed—who is sustained by the Eternal One. But the German pronoun “ihr,” unlike the “you” in the English translation, makes it clear that a plural antecedent to “you” is required, so this soliloquy is not about one’s beloved but about pole stars that do not fall.

A previous translator, the canny Burton *Pike* (!), rightly adds to the English translation a word not in the source text—the word “stars,” writing: “Stars, you will not fall!” The English sentence demands the extra word in order to *translate* the German. But that will break the pony.

Of course, the pony-claim persists, on the argument *caveat lector*; the text is what it says, not what it might need to say in order to be clear.

As it happens, the late André Lefevere, in a very good article titled “Mother Courage’s Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in Theory of Literature,” complains about this very attempt to supply connections in the case of Brecht’s *Mutter Courage*. The competent translator Ralph Manheim translated Mother Courage’s words to Katrin: “Du bist selber ein Kreuz: du hast ein gutes Herz” as “You’re a cross yourself *because* you have a good heart”—the word “because” is not in the German. The addition helps—but isn’t crucial to understanding. The first American translator of *Mutter Courage*, H. R. Hays, bent over backwards to be helpful, translating this address to Katrin as follows: “You’re a cross yourself. What sort of help are you. And all the same what a good heart you have.” This is funny: trying to get it explicit, he inverts the sense. It’s not, of course, that you also have a good heart, Katrin: it’s that your good heart is the cross—i.e., a source of endless trouble.

6 My italics.

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This same H. R. Hays produced an exemplarily bad but hilarious translation of Mutter Courage's inventory of her belongings, which appears to have inspired Lefevere's mordant reflections. The German reads: "Da ist ein ganzes Messbuch dabei, aus Altötting, zum Einschlagen von Gurken": "There's a whole missal (prayer book) there, from Altötting (a town famous for its sacred relics), for wrapping cucumbers." Hays's translation reads: "There's a whole *ledger* from Altötting to the *storming* of Gurken." Lefevere explains, "the prayer book Mother Courage uses to wrap her cucumbers becomes transformed into a ledger, and the innocent cucumbers themselves grow into an imaginary town Gurken, supposedly the point at which the last transaction was entered into that particular ledger."⁷

This needn't make one despair of the entire enterprise of getting things right. It just might require a bit of fact checking at publishers.

I want to continue with my discussion of the passage from *The Sufferings of Young Werther* to get to my main point. You may recall that our translator in disrepute gives us, for "der Ewige trägt..." "No, *you* will not fall! the *Eternal* bears you, and me, in his heart." *The Eternal bears ... you*. Oh no, this suggests something *ursine, hibernating forever*. So I thought, in an effort to be constructive, about how one might solve this crux and thought and thought and saw that the translation must read: "the Eternal One holds you up." Oh, oh: and is this poor thing the outcome of all higher reflection? I've produced an "*Eternal holdup*." Chicago gangster slang has come in from nowhere to defeat us.

This is what I mean by the dust or mischief in the connotative web work of words. Whatever principled logic guides you to a solution, you will still depend on the mercy of the connotative texture of the target language, full of spite. How often has *le mot juste* become impossible because *le mot juste* has also occurred, not especially "juste" at all, yet immovably, in three places in the sentence before and after?

Why this mischief will defeat every principle: the translator must take his or her way through a thicket of accidents. "The dogs of connotation bark; the caravan backtracks its weary way."

7 André Lefevere, "Mother Courage's Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of Literature," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 239, originally published in *Modern Language Studies* 12.4 (1982), pp. 3-20.

Now this, finally, is to put the matter entirely negatively. And that is one-sided, and would lead to the translator's despair. To cite Kafka's well-known despair of the metaphorical under layer of language,

Metaphors are one among many things which make me despair of writing. Writing's lack of independence from the world, its dependence on the maid who tends the fire, on the cat warming itself by the stove; it is even dependent on the poor old human being warming himself by the stove. All these are independent activities ruled by their own laws; only writing is helpless, cannot live in itself, is a joke and a despair."⁸

But mischief, as you know, can also have rewarding—unsuspected—results. And here is some late proof.

I was asked to translate some unpublished lines of Kafka. They are part of the story of the Hunter Gracchus. The German reads:

“War kein Seefahrer, wollte es nicht werden,
Berg und Wald waren meine Freunde und jetzt—
ältester Seefahrer ... Jäger Gracchus angebetet mit
gerungenen Händen vom Schiffsjungen, der sich im
Mastkorb ängstigt in der Sturmnacht. Lache nicht.”⁹

And my translation:

“Wasn't a seafarer, didn't want to be one. Mountain
and woods were my friends and now—the oldest
seafarer, Hunter Gracchus, worshipped with clasped
hands by the ship boy, trembling with fright in the
crow's nest in the stormy night. Don't laugh.”

Oh my, “Crow's nest”.... That crow isn't in the German but what a marvelous gift. This is “Kafka” (the word means “jackdaw” in Czech, a crow-like bird), Kafka who makes a point of describing the swirl of crows above the rooftops of the castle in *The Castle*, Kafka who wrote: “The crows like to insist that it would take but a single crow to destroy heaven. This is indisputably true, but it says nothing about heaven, because ‘heaven’ is simply another way of saying: the impossibility of crows.”

8 Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, 1914-1923, trans. Martin Greenberg (with the assistance of Hannah Arendt) (New York: Schocken, 1949), 200-201

9 Franz Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I*, ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 1990), 378.

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In translating “Josefine, the Singer...” I also ran into a bit of luck. The German reads: “Einmal geschah es, daß irgendein törichtes kleines Ding während Josefinens Gesang in aller Unschuld auch zu pfeifen anfang.” In English (or possibly only American) one writes: “Once it happened that during Josefine’s concert some silly young *pipsqueak* began in all innocence to pipe up.”¹⁰

Finally, as a codicil, and since Christian Morgenstern might still be in the air, I’ll mention another sort of irrational constraint in the host language, felicities of sound. The point is famously conveyed in Morgenstern’s poem on “the aesthetic weasel,” to wit:

Das ästhetische Wiesel

Ein Wiesel
saß auf einem Kiesel
inmitten Bachgeriesel.

Wißt ihr
weshalb?

Das Mondkalb
verriet es mir
im Stillen:

Das raffinier-
te Tier
tats um des Reimes willen.

We would translate—mellifluously, wittily—if we could. A plain prose translation follows, only to have the poem itself declare why the poem cannot be translated: “A weasel / sat on a pebble / in the middle of a trickling brook. / Do you know / Why? / The mooncalf revealed it to me / privately: / The sophistic / ated beast / did it just for the sake of the rhyme.” We cannot rhyme “weasel” with “pebble.” Now there have been *versions*. Max Knight tries to stay close to the matter and the rhyme, to wit:

10 Franz Kafka, “Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse,” *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*, ed. Wolf Kittler, Hans-Gerd Koch, and Gerhard Neumann (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 1994), 354. *Kafka’s Selected Stories*, ed. and trans. Stanley Corngold (New York: Norton, 2007), 96.

The Aesthetic Weasel

A weasel
perched on an easel
within a patch of teasel.

But why
and how?

The Moon Cow
whispered her reply
one time:

The sopheest-
icated beest
did it just for the rhyme.¹¹

His version needed to tamper with conventional orthography.
Betsy Hulick gives us a rowdier version:

The Aesthetic Anaconda

An anaconda
sent a Honda
to Jane Fonda
(the motorcycle, not the car)

not because
the creature was
unhinged by passion for the star
(although it happens all the time).

The case was worse.
Mad for verse,
he couldn't resist the triple rhyme.¹²

I'd like to introduce a small victory following these grander
defeats. In Kafka's story "A Report to an Academy," we read:

11 Max Knight, *The Gallows Songs: Christian Morgenstern's Galgenlieder. A Selection*. Translated, with an Introduction, by Max Knight (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 19.

12 *30 Poems by Christian Morgenstern*, trans. and illust. by Betsy Hulick (Manchester Center, VT.: Shires Press, 2014), 1.

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“Komme ich spät nachts von Banketten ... erwartet mich eine kleine halbdressierte Schimpansin und ich lasse es mir nach Affenart bei ihr wohlgehen.”¹³ I wrote: “If I return late at night from banquets ... a little half-trained chimpanzee is waiting for me, and I have my pleasure of her *in the way of all apes*.”¹⁴ I rhyme, as it were, to Samuel Butler.

Now no *theory* in the world will get you to such happy outcomes. And then again this isn't to say anything especially surprising. You can find this insight everywhere, of late in J. M. Coetzee's new novel, *Summertime*, in which a character says: “Pragmatism always beats principles; that is just the way things are. The universe moves, the ground changes under our feet; principles are always a step behind. Principles are the stuff of comedy. Comedy is what you get when principles bump into reality.”¹⁵

And the fact that it needs to be so often repeated—this Against Theory—only goes to prove the persistence of theory.

13 Kafka, *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*, 313.

14 *Kafka's Selected Stories*, 83. The reference is to Samuel Butler's bitter, semi-autobiographical novel *The Way of All Flesh*.

15 J. M. Coetzee, *Summertime: Scenes from a Provincial Life* (London: Harvill Secker, 2009), 63.