

Translation as the Failing Test

The sense of stupidity never leaves. It is a test bound to failure. That is why I love it— I know I will fail before you can even see me fail. It is a perfect relationship; I love to be wrong, to be admonished. (see Sedgewick, see spanking)

Clare Cavanagh, the English language translator of Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska calls translating “joyful failure” in her essay “The Art of Losing.”

Translation is the text we can keep failing together. Nothing will ever be contemporary enough. No word in English will mean all of the ideas the German word contains. Translation highlights the “miscarriage of saying.” Language always falls short, but then again, what doesn’t? Cavanagh, in that same essay writes,

Translating poetry, we’re often reminded, is impossible. Well, apparently so is bees’ flying— but the bees who translate poetry have been busy for a long while now, so perhaps it’s time to reconsider this particular brand of impossibility. What people really mean when they say this, I suspect, is that it’s impossible to translate poetry perfectly. Fair enough. But what are the other activities that we human beings perform so flawlessly against which the translation of poetry is being measured and found wanting?

The cry from so many that a translation isn’t good enough makes visible something else, it shows a majority of readers to be believers in the unique possibility of original language, of some type of linguistic primacy. The O... and the — in Heinrich Von Kleist’s story “The Marquise of O...” make clear something

true about all language— none of it can *mean* as it wants to (as we want it to). The dots and dashes that repeat in a story that can make as much or as a little sense as the reader desires help to leave things open. In Von Kleist the *O* is sex, the *O* incantation, the *O* is holy. The — is rape, the — is silence, the — is erasure. Speculation will always be just that. These are fractures in language and in their respective silence they proliferate meaning. These traces, as Derrida would have it, are just those, and translation reminds readers of this ever-present fact.

Attempting to translate is always an attempt and the translator knows this from the outset, but she keeps going. It is perhaps a combination of love for the original text and a love for one's own language that drives the translator into giving the text new life, but no matter how "good" the translation, it cannot be (as good as) the original. Or maybe it can be?

In her epistolary novel *I Love Dick*, Chris Kraus writes: "Accepting contradictions means not believing anymore in the primacy of 'true feeling.' Everything is true and simultaneously. It's why I hate Sam Shepard and all your True West stuff— it's like analysis, as if the riddle could be solved by digging up the buried child." Translation cannot have a true feeling (i.e. a true version). Like a poem cannot have a true feeling (i.e. a true meaning). Despite believing this idea, that there is not a true version of a poem or reading, as a translator, on a very practical level, I have to make decisions about meaning in language and make definitive choices to put onto paper. This decision making and doubting makes me feel stupid, like I am banging my head against a wall.

The deep stupidity I feel each time I sit down to write my own work should be enough, the insecurity we each bring to the page, the disconnect between thought or feeling and language. But with translating comes the constant cry of untranslatability, making the impossibility of transmuting an idea into language and then taking that language from one mind to another and attempting produce a shadow of the original idea in yet another language all the more daunting. It makes me feel like Pierre Menard. Borges's story takes on new meaning to the translator. When I first read "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" I thought it was clever. And I thought Menard stupid, totally insane even. But Menard is the ultimate translator, he seeks to find a way to replicate a text just as the translator does. Borges writes: "He [Menard] resolved to anticipate the vanity that awaits all the labors of mankind; he undertook a task of infinite complexity, a task futile from the outset. He dedicated his scruples and his nights 'lit by midnight oil' to repeating in a foreign tongue a book that already existed."

Isn't that what a translator does? Translation undermines the very idea of originality while simultaneously supporting it as it reaches for the primordial language not even the original author could have grasped. Translation of contemporary literature implies through its very existence and publication that there is a correct reading/interpretation of a text; rarely will two competing editions of a new book come out at once. When a new text is translated there is only one version in a given language. It is only with time and canonization is a text really able to live out its full potential as multiple in various iterations and editions. This notion helps to make sense of why we write the same story or

paint the same painting our whole lives in some way— we reach for the original, primordial version that has never existed. Each translation/version is a new iteration of the (similar? same?) idea.

In *On Translation* Paul Ricoeur uses Freudian psychology to describe this idea of the lack of perfection, “The creative tension between the universal and the plural ensures that the task of translation is an endless one, a work of tireless memory and mourning, of appropriation and disappropriation, of taking up and letting go, of expressing oneself and welcoming others.” Endless. Like Benjamin’s *Aufgabe* a task and also something to let go of, the translation is something that must eventually be released by the translator and left to live freely in the world.

In saying translation requires us to be stupid we are reminded of the active contradictions we must hold while translating, one must make choices in language while also understanding that those choices are not the only options that exist. In her essay “Translation and the Art of Revision,” Susan Bernofsky writes how it has taken her, in some cases years, to decide upon the best word for a translation. Even after a book has already been published. Perhaps the best we can do is make choices for ourselves as individual readers and writers and for our particular time and a place.

Pierre Mendard remains quite stupid in my mind, but I love him a bit more for it, I feel for him. Despite his efforts he fails to grasp his own originality, preferring to reach for the originality of Cervantes. Philosopher Avital Ronell writes about this kind of stupidity, this holding onto or search for fixed meaning:

The stupid are unable to make breaks or breakaways; they are hampered even on a rhetorical level, for they cannot run with grammatical leaps or metonymical discontinuity. They are incapable of referring allegorically or embracing deferral. ("Slow Learner")

When I write stories and poems of my own, I don't worry about stabilizing meaning. I enjoy the play of language, I "embrace deferral." This is valid on the level of content but also in terms of form. I seek to destabilize formal conventions in my stories. Linguistically or theoretically this "deferral" Ronell refers to is tightly connected to Derrida's *différance*, an endless chain of signification that proliferates meaning (and in fact, for Derrida, translation is a repeated act of impossibility). The act of translation requires the translator to stop this back and forth and decide on a final meaning for the original signifier in the form of an "equivalent" in a different language. This is a back and forth process quite similar to what Susan Bernofsky describes it in her essay,

To immerse oneself fully in the work of translation is to become a medium, transcribing a text that exists only as a sort of phantasm in the translator's imagination: the text is just like the original but written in a different language. Revising means listening to a potential text, hearing it amid all the rhythmical detritus of inadequate versions. With each successive draft, the text draws closer to the ideal form it will inhabit when its transformation is complete.

That is where Bernofsky and I differ— for me the text is never, ever, complete.

If stupidity is a parallel of certainty, then in some ways the translator must be stupid. Not stupid in the sense of making errors but stupid in a transcendental way; stupidity as philosophy, stupid as ontological status. Spending some time reading about the history of stupidity in thought it becomes clear that stupidity

and error are not at all the same thing— stupidity is an attitude, a mindset, a way of thinking all its own. Normally stupidity has a negative connotation. Stupidity is defined as being set in one's ways or as Ronell calls it an "unflinching certitude." While she does go on to reckon with the slippery nature of stupidity in its many forms for this essay, certitude is the kind of stupidity I would like to focus on.

To get through a single page or stanza while translating one must send oneself into the realm of stupidity. Going back and forth is fine but in the end one word must mean another word and be sent to the printer.

I've begun to think about stupidity as a value in translation— a value in a positive sense. A translator can value her lack of knowledge, but she can also give in to the stupidest impulse in writing— to pin down meaning. The translator can and must say "this equals that" and so on for each new word encountered.

In his essay *Minima & Moralia* Theodore Adorno writes "[...] stupidity is above all no natural quality, but something socially produced and socially amplified." Our leaders guide us into believing binaries, good/evil, man/woman, friend/enemy— concrete and stupid definitions. Our current technologies promote translatability for all written and spoken text. Google translate is the great bastion of stupidity in language advocating a "this equals that mentality."

A concrete example of the value of stupidity in translation occurs when words are particularly unclear in their meaning or have multiple meanings that are quite unrelated. I am sitting looking at a word that can be both: *le parti*. Parts or parties, parts or parties? It's in a dystopian story by Donatella Della Ratta

she's a friend, I can call her up and ask. Parts or parties, parts or parties?*

This isn't the only one. Can the phrase work both ways? Am I revealing my own limitations in even asking the question? The author of the original doesn't have to have an answer, doesn't have to decide which meaning to stick to, but the translator does.

And this is a very clear example. Translating a poem reaches far beyond a word for word idea of translation into the realm of sound and feeling. Writing a feeling is often impossible but perhaps less so than translating a feeling one has never experienced. The translator then, must attempt to translate her reading experience—it is questionable if much beyond this is possible.

More difficult translation examples abound when translating poetry. All of the elements of the original poem give a holistic meaning and feeling that are difficult to create again; additionally, sound and rhyme are all part of the original poem and can seem over-worked if forced in a different language. I've found this to be particularly true of poems with abstract or less narrative structures. This poem I translated by Vito M. Bonito is an example of this:

io non ho mani

*iddio crescere fammi
le mani*

I don't have hands

mygod grow them I demand

* This note on Donatella Della Ratta's story was added before publication now in 2020, because again, three years after writing this essay, I still find myself dumbfounded by language.

hands

This linguistic doubt, of course, appears again. In Bonito's text there is a word for god, *iddio*. In Italian it is historical and sacred and blasphemous. After much deliberation I made a new word up, according to these interpretations. The choice to use *mygod* can be justified, but then again, so could a number of other options.

In this particular poem the rhyme and sing-songy nature of the final lines was also a problem that relies on interpretation and choice. In the end of the sound seemed more important than word for word translation. Seemed being the important word here. Tomorrow I might change my mind.

When a new translation of a classic is published it is often called the "definitive" translation. How silly, how stupid. Translations to exist within time and unlike original texts, we as readers expect them to be contemporary to our current moment. Returning to Pierre Menard Borges writes, "The contrast in styles [between the two *Quixotes*] is striking. The archaic style of Menard— who is, in addition, not a native speaker of the language in which he writes— is somewhat affected. Not so the style of his precursor, who employs the Spanish of his time with complete naturalness." This is one of the funniest passages from the story because it is so true. The replication of style can sound clumsy so creating a new version in more contemporary language may be the least offensive method. A translation cannot be definitive when language cannot be definitive— deconstruction has taught us nothing if not this. Avital Ronell writes in that same essay "Slow Learner," "Hastening to finish, achieve, conclude, these

overachievers prove that one can be fast and stupid.” Perhaps it is best to then embrace prismatic translation as the only real solution, the only way that a translation of a story or poem can mimic the deferral and instability of the original and thus make use of the stupidity necessary to write in the first place. A prismatic translation, a translation that represents itself as one of many or actually appears in print in multiple versions by one or more authors, may lead to the most interesting and honest form of translation. There is a Zen koan found in Avital Ronell’s essay “Koan Practice or Taking Down the Test”: “Knowing is not the way.” This is a valid idea in making the case for a prismatic translation: in saying a phrase a poem or a story can be multiple and multiplying.

Stupidity believes in answers. In literary translation there are no answers. We need stupidity to make any and all decisions in literary translation because in dealing with abstract meaning we will constantly find that we are only close, never at the thing. Already in writing itself we are only able to get close to the thing, close to the experience:

*If anything, writing is a non-place for me, where one can abandon oneself to abandonment—I, the infinitely abandoned (one of my ‘issues’). I am always on writing, especially when I am crashing, and stalled in the time of suspensive nothingness, the hiatus, the interruption, where nothing happens, and it is a hollow time, a time of recovery without recuperation. Writing and trauma: a conjunction to explore— particularly if trauma is seen as the impossibility of receiving experiential markings, as the very disruption of experience. It is not clear to me that writing can be an experience as such. (Deleuze, *Différence and Répétition*)*

Translation always has the mark of place, or more likely time, that is why new translations are so often needed. Translation can be an experience for

Deluze in a way that “original” writing cannot in that it can be found, it can inhabit the possible because it is forced to. Unlike Von Kleist’s *O* or — the translated text must rest in some security of meaning, it is full of experimental markings. And the markings or responses to the original text change not only from age to age or region to region but from reader to reader. Each translator must scribe her own stupid choices.

So, in my own choices as a translator there often extremes. In sitting down to translate poetry it feels like I can either translate each word as if from a dictionary or else I can attempt to translate the meanings and abstractions and concepts that I am able to understand. In *The Rustle of Language* Roland

Barthes gets at some of this:

In the arena of language, constructed like a football field, there are two extreme sites, two goals that can never be avoided: Stupidity on the one end, the Unreadable on the other...Stupidity is not linked to error. Always triumphant (impossible to overcome), it derives its victory from an enigmatic power: it is 'Dasein' in all its naked splendor. Whence a terror and fascination, that of a corpse. (Corpse of what? Perhaps of truth: truth as dead.)... Stupidity 'is there,' obtuse as death. Exorcism can only be a formal operation which confronts it 'en bloc,' from outside...Here I am back at the same panic that Stupidity inspires: Is it me? Is it the other? Is it the other who is unreadable (or stupid)? Am I the one who is limited, inept, am I the one who doesn't understand?"

There must be enough knowability or readability in a text for it to communicate. Language is opaque, stupidity lends it some transparency for the purpose of communication. Language is the only means we have as writers when attempting to communicate. A poem in its original language is a living contradiction, a translation even more so. As Ronell states in *The Test Drive*, “If we could communicate, we wouldn’t need to communicate.”

Translating is often difficult because it feels like there should be a definitive edition, there should be a finality to the work. Instead, it is like all writing, hard to define as finished, impossible to make as originally imagined.

Again from Ronell's "Slow Learner":

...stupidity sets the mood that afflicts anyone who presumes to write. To the extent that writing appears to be commandeered by some internal alterity that proves always to be too immature, rather loudmouthed, often saddled with a pronounced narcissistic disorder no matter how much it makes you want to hide and isolate; or, as part of the same debilitating structure, to the extent that the powerhouse inside you is actually too smart for the dumb positings of language...

Translating is a reminder of one's own stupidity and that is a great thing to be reminded of as an artist. In being reminded of our stupidity we can recall that this primordial language we seek is essentially lost forever (or never even existed), in both translation and all writing. Translators, the servants of world literature, earn their title because translating is an exercise in humility in the temple of language. The translator is constantly twisted and bent in trying to make meaning and sound and visuals and experience unite. In writing my own work there are moments when it feels as if signifier and signified belong together, if only for a brief moment. Translation lets us see how false this feeling of security is and how slippery language always remains. How stupid to think that language could conform perfectly to our thoughts and ideas and our cultural baggage, how stupid to think a translation could be timeless or good (not just good enough). How stupid the translator.

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