

On Translating Poetry

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Abstract: Both Walter Benjamin and Ezra Pound have written brilliantly on the theory of translation; but I regard Benjamin's theory as flawed by sense that any text is defective because it is written in a finite language (instead of an imaginary pre-Babel language intelligible to everyone), and Pound's theory as flawed because it regards logopoeia (verbal aspects of texts) as basically untranslatable. I try to remap the areas of transparency and opacity in language in more translator-friendly ways. I conclude with a discussion of my own work as a translator of poems by Heinrich Heine.

Key words: Walter Benjamin; Ezra Pound; translating poetry; language

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标题：论诗歌翻译

内容摘要：本雅明和庞德在翻译理论上都有精彩论述。在我看来，本雅明认为任何文本都是由有局限的语言书写而不是由一种想象之中的人人都懂的前巴别塔语言书写，因而存在瑕疵，这未免有失偏颇；庞德的理论认为义象（即文本的言语方面）几乎是不可译的，因而也存有缺陷。在本文中，我试图以多个更加重视译者的方式重新界定语言的透明性和模糊性，并以我所翻译的海涅诗歌为例进行了分析和论证。

关键词：本雅明；庞德；诗歌翻译；语言

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One of the most celebrated essays on translation is by Walter Benjamin, originally the foreword to a translation of Baudelaire (1923):

The intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, graphic; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational. For the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language is at work.... (20)

The transfer can never be total, but what reaches this region is that element in a translation which goes beyond transmittal of subject matter. This nucleus is best defined as the element that does not lend itself to translation. Even when all the surface content has been extracted and transmitted, the primary concern of the genuine translator remains elusive. Unlike the words of the original, it is not translatable, because the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translation. While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds. For it signifies a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien. This disjunction prevents translation and at the same time makes it superfluous. For any translation of a work originating in a specific stage of linguistic history represents, in regard to a specific aspect of its content, translation into all other languages. Thus translation, ironically, transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm since it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering. The original can only be raised there anew and at other points of time.... (19)

In the realm of translation, too, the words 'in the beginning was the word' apply. On the other hand, as regards the meaning, the language of a translation can—in fact, must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*. Therefore it is not the highest praise of a translation, particularly in the age of its origin, to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language. Rather, the significance of fidelity as ensured by literalness is that the work reflects the great longing for linguistic complementation. A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade. (21)

This passage of Benjamin's is an exalted and fascinating meditation, and yet it is not my own philosophy, because I think that Benjamin makes some questionable assumptions about language. First, he assumes that the curse of Babel is temporary and will ultimately be undone: every speech act is a deformed, yowling, semi-articulate image of the thing it would be if it were uttered in the Adamic language that all human beings could instantly understand. Each new translation of a poem is a complement to and partial completion of the original. Translation, to Benjamin, is an act both humble and sacred: humble, because the translator defers in every possible way to the poet; sacred because the full array of translations of a text into every known human language would

allow the reader—the archangelic reader who reads all languages—to glimpse what the text would look like if freed from the constraint of having been written in a particular tongue. Myself I don't think this is true: a given translation, even a great one, does not gesture toward some realization of the original text in a post-Pentecostal heaven; it is just as thoroughly bound to its new language as the original was to the old.

Benjamin is correct in believing that a poem, like any artwork, gestures across the boundaries of its particular language and of language in general toward realizations in other languages, other media; but just as there is no artwork independent of a material medium, there is no poem independent of a particular language. Just after Benjamin published his essay, James Joyce started to write in an experimental pan-language; but it turned out that *Finnegans Wake* succeeded better in extending the domain of English than in creating a new Esperanto. A pan-linguistic text should scarcely need to be translated at all; Joyce's work can be translated only with the most extreme difficulty.

Second, Benjamin assumes that, though “in the beginning was the Word,” the word is not only something said aloud, or a graph of something said aloud, but also an intention or meaning somewhat independent of the phonetic or graphic aspect of the text. This assumption is neither strictly true nor strictly false: a monistic theory of language, in which form and content, sound and meaning, speech and intention, are inextricable, is always going to attract critics who delight in the irreducibility of the artwork, the rasp and plush and slip and gnarl of a line of poetry that stays in your head your whole life long. That is, critics like me. On the other hand, it is difficult to write actual literary criticism without making some separation between the phonetic and the semantic. Still, I think that Benjamin, by urging translators to refashion the poet's presumed *intentio* by means of abject word-by-word literalness, is less a recipe for successful translation than a forlorn hope that any pedant's interlinear gloss will somehow constitute a miracle. (In his Baudelaire translations Benjamin is far more daring, brilliantly farfetched, than his theory suggests he should be.) Benjamin asks translators both to do too much and to do too little. I believe it is sufficient to ask translators to do too much.

Third, there is the issue of transparency. This is, I believe, a false goal. A particular poem has transparent aspects and opaque aspects. Where the poem is transparent, the translator should indeed aspire to transparency. But where the poem is opaque, the translator will have to be opaque, too; and the quality of this opacity will, and should, be different from that of the original. A literary translation is itself a poem, and therefore a freestanding verbal object, whatever its debt to its original.

In order to develop this thesis about the contrast of transparent and opaque elements in a poem, let me turn to a still more brilliant and versatile translator, Ezra Pound.

Pound thought that the poeticality of a poem dwelt in three areas, which he termed *melopoeia*, *phanopoeia*, and *logopoeia*:

If we look at what actually happens in poetry, we find that the language is charged or

energized in various manners.

MELOPOEIA, wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning.

PHANOPOIEA, which is a casting of images upon the visual imagination.

LOGOPOEIA, ‘the dance of the intellect among words’, that is to say, it employs words not only for their direct meaning, but it takes count in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we expect to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play. It holds the aesthetic content which is peculiarly the domain of verbal manifestation, and cannot possibly be contained in plastic or in music. It is the latest come, and perhaps most tricky and undependable mode.

The *melopoeia* can be appreciated by a foreigner with a sensitive ear, even though he be ignorant of the language in which the poem is written. It is practically impossible to transfer or translate it from one language to another, save perhaps by divine accident, and for half a line at a time.

Phanopoeia can, on the other hand, 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, and the neglect of perfectly well-known and formulative rules.

Logopoeia does not translate; though the attitude of mind it expresses may pass through a paraphrase. Or one might say, you cannot translate it ‘locally’, but having determined the original author’s state of mind, you may or may not be able to find a derivative or an equivalent. (Benjamin, “How to Read” 25)

For Pound, a poem is transparent insofar as it is addressed to the eye, almost entirely opaque insofar as it is addressed to the ear or to Wernicke’s area of the brain.

I will not strongly contest Pound’s belief that descriptive passages tend to translate with less effort than other passages—though in fact the basic vocabulary of colors and shapes is strangely unstable from one language to the next: the humble, unhip *square* is not the same as the French word *carré*, with its past-participle—like, spruce, squared-off edges. (I won’t even begin to mention the kvackingly militaristic German word *Quadrat*.) There is at least a little opacity in even the most pictorially vivid text. But I will object to his treatment of both *melopoeia* and *logopoeia*.

The melos of a line of verse is too subtle to quantify completely, but it is easy to mention a number of important factors: in English, the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables; the degree of stress or unstress on each syllable, leading to (slight or definite) elision or prolongation of the syllabic mass; the movement through the line of open and closed vowels, sometimes producing an effect of smoothness or effortfulness; the unfolding consonant rhythm of friction or liquidity or cluck, voluptuously rhyming with the primary-appetitive things we do with our lips and mouth. In another language with an accentual prosody, such as German or Russian, each of these effects can be reproduced, always imperfectly, but neither translation nor poetry itself has anything to do with perfection. Translations between languages with accentual prosody and languages with quantitative or syllable-count prosody present other challenges, but a translator

sensitive to aggregations, attenuations, and residues of sound is likely to go far.

Logopoeia, like melopoeia, sometimes lends itself quite easily to translation. (Only in the case of puns is translation likely to be truly impossible.) I assume that figures of speech are part of logopoeia, since they are dances of the intellect among words. Certainly they are not melopoeia; Pound might argue that many figures of speech, such as similes, tend to fall under the aspect of phanopoeia, and it is certainly true that many similes present bright pictures to the eye; if I compare destiny to a blind camel (as Zuhair did), or the movement of troops on the battlefield to swarming insects (as Homer did), I am certainly appealing to the visual imagination. But consider the following simile of Gotthold Lessing's: I am as fast as the transition from good to evil (*schnell.... als der Übergang vom Guten zum Bösen*). Here there is nothing for the eye: it is pure logopoeia, and yet nothing is hard to translate. Many other figures of speech, such as anaphora, that is, beginning clauses with identical words (a famous example is Winston Churchill's "We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight them in the air, we shall fight them on the beaches"), can be reproduced in many languages without the slightest difficulty.

I'm especially puzzled by the fact that irony strikes Pound as resistant to translation. Some of Jules Laforgue's ironical jingles are indeed untranslatable (*Là, voyons mam'zelle la Lune, / Ne gardons pas ainsi rancune*—Up there, let's look at Missy Moon, and let's not hold any grudges; T. S. Eliot made this jingle even jinglier by paraphrasing it as *La lune ne garde aucune rancune*), but most kinds of irony move quite easily from one language to another. If Oedipus proudly exerts his brains to solve the riddle of *Who killed Laius?*, the effect is about the same in Greek or English or Chinese. In the libretto for Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1927), Jean Cocteau and Jean Daniélou paraphrase Sophocles' dénouement into terse Latin:

Natus sum, quo nefastum est.

Concubui cui nefastum est.

Cecidi quem nefastum est.

Lux facta est.

I was born from a woman forbidden to bear me.

I married a woman I was forbidden to marry.

I killed a man I was forbidden to kill.

The light breaks.

The patterning of the tense, devastated, devastating understatements comes through with equal clarity and conviction.

The translator, then, must gladly accept those features of the original that easily cross over into other tongues, and try to cope as well as possible with those opaque and recalcitrant elements that resist translation, by finding some matching opacity in the destination language. There are many thoughts that are easier to think in German or Latin than in English, simply because the higher level of inflection bends ideas in certain directions. The famous final proposition in Ludwig

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (1921), *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen*, can be translated elegantly into English, but only by resorting to archaism: *Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent* (this is how the proposition is rendered in the English translation of 1922). If I avoid *whereof* and *thereof*, I must forgo Wittgenstein's striking parallelism: *Those things you cannot speak of must remain lost in silence*; or, *The unspeakable must remain unspoken*—itself a sentence with a certain rhetorical force, but a thought that angles away from Wittgenstein's, in that Wittgenstein is in effect muzzling a human speaker, whereas my translation posits no human presence at all.

But most of the opaque elements of poetry (and I do consider Wittgenstein a poet) lie in the realm of melopoeia. I've had occasion to translate a number of poems from German or French into English (mostly poems translated by many others before me), and maybe it would be helpful to discuss some of the many large exasperations and the few small moments of happiness I've had in trying to find some equivalent to some particular glory in an old text. The translations I'll be discussing are all of poems by Heinrich Heine, because he uses simple words and simple syntax—but his plainness is astonishingly sophisticated and tricky. Precisely because Heine ought to be fairly easy to translate, he well illustrates the ways in which no excellent poem can be translated easily. I begin with *Der Doppelgänger*—The Double:

Still ist die Nacht, es ruhen die Gassen,
In diesem Hause wohnte mein Schatz;
Sie hat schon längst die Stadt verlassen,
Doch steht noch das Haus auf demselben Platz.

Da steht auch ein Mensch und starrt in die Höhe
Und ringt die Hände vor Schmerzensgewalt;
Mir graust es, wenn ich sein Antlitz sehe -
Der Mond zeigt mir meine eigne Gestalt.

Du Doppelgänger, du bleicher Geselle!
Was äffst du nach mein Liebesleid,
Das mich gequält auf dieser Stelle
So manche Nacht, in alter Zeit?

Here is a word-for-word literal translation:

Still is the night, the streets are at rest,
In this house my treasure dwelt;
She has long ago left the city,
But her house still stands in the same place.

A man also stands there and stares upward
 And wrings his hands from the violence of pain;
 It terrifies me, when I see his face—
 The moon shows me my own shape.

You double, you pale companion!
 Why do you ape me in my sorrow of love,
 That torments me in this place
 So many nights, in the old times?

This poem succinctly states Heine's whole lyric agon. The poet is drawn to revisit some scene of havoc and desolation, to re-live rejection, loss, pain, vain yearning. But he stands aloof from his own feeling, takes a restrained delight in cultivating a persona of ruin. Yeats once said that the traditional masks of the lyric poet are lover or saint, sage or sensualist, or mere mocker of all life; but Heine evolved a new and compelling mask, the lover as ironist at once rendered immune by his ironic distance, and yet intimately self-excoriated by his inability to take full part in his own feeling. (Heine's own description of his art was "malicious-sentimental".) In *Der Doppelgänger* it is far from clear which is the ghost and which is the real man: the poet himself may be the revenant haunting the place where he once felt authentic emotion, where some fragment of an authentic being still lingers to feel it.

To translate this poem one must first attend to the foursquare design: quatrains in iambic tetrameter (but iambic tetrameter in German almost always has plenty of anapests, since the case endings of German nouns add so many weak syllables to the flow of the sentence). Then one must pay special case to the verb *apes*, on which much of the poem's import falls: the poet beholds a deformed mocking image of himself, or maybe has even come to understand that he is himself a kind of caricature, incapable of being more than love's monkey.

All the lines in Heine poem are rhymed, which poses challenges: how far is the translator willing to go toward substituting incorrect words to preserve rhymes and other sound-patterns? My own policy is to prefer oblique rhymes or even non-rhymes in order to try to preserve as much of the original meaning as possible, but there is a case to be made for preserving rhymes in poems in which the poet's intention seems to be more musical than semantic. If I were translating Edgar Allan Poe's line *The viol, the violet, and the vine* into German, the most literal version would be *Das Viole, das Veilchen, und die Rebe*, but I might be better advised to find some line with a lot more consonance and assonance, since Poe's intent seems to be concerned less with musical instruments or vegetation than with chimings of *v* and long *i*. And yet, if I were to write something that preserved the phonetic character of Poe's line, such as *Die Waisen, die Weisse des Weines*, I would have to think many thoughts, since the German line means *The orphans, the whiteness of the wine*, and I'm not sure that Poe was completely indifferent to the semantic aspect.

Here is my translation of *Der Dop*

The night is quiet, the small streets still,
 Here, in this house, a girl lived once.
 She left the city long ago,
 But the house still stands, just as it was.

And a man stands there, and cranes his neck,
 His knuckles white, mouth agape,
 I shudder as I come to look:
 The moon shows me my own shape.

My double—pale companion-ghost!
 Why do you ape my inner pain,
 The torture of the love I lost,
 The hurt I need to feel again?

In the first stanza, the soggy rhymes of *still* and *go*, or *was* and *once*, may not give much pleasure, but may provide at least a quiet phantom of a rhymed-quatrains structure, possibly appropriate to the phantasmal nature of the experience here recorded. In the second stanza, I invented a second detail about the double's physical stance, the craned neck, in order to have a slant-rhyme for *look*—this adds a bit of vividness to the gesture, maybe at the expense of making the corporeal aspect of the double more striking than Heine intended. In the third stanza I got the melopoeia of Heine's stanza better than in the previous two, but by speaking of "The hurt I need to feel again" I added an idea not present at all in the original. I felt that Heine's poem implies that the double's existence, though terrifying, satisfies some psychic need in the poet—that there is a aspect of deliberate self-flagellation or penance that compels the poet to revisit the locus of his old pain. Whether this interpretation is correct or not, and whether, if correct, my line makes too obvious something that should be left subtle, I leave to you.

A sort of companion poem to *Der Doppelgänger* is *Die Stadt*, "The City". In both poems the poet visits a significant extinct place—but in this case it's not the poet, but the city itself that's its own phantom double:

Am fernen Horizonte
Erscheint, wie ein Nebelbild,
Die Stadt mit ihren Türmen,
In Abenddämmerung gehüllt.

Ein feuchter Windzug kräuselt
Die graue Wasserbahn;
Mit traurigem Takte rudert
Der Schiffer in meinem Kahn.

*Die Sonne hebt sich noch einmal
Leuchtend vom Boden empor
Und zeigt mir jene Stelle,
Wo ich das Liebste verlor.* (Schubert, Web)

Literally this could be translated as follows:

*On the far horizon
There appears, like a phantom image,
The city with its towers,
Veiled in the evening twilight.*

*A moist gust ripples
The gray waterway;
The boatsman in my boat
Rows with a mournful beat.*

*The sun rises once more
Lighting up from the ground
And shows me that place
Where I lost my beloved.*

In many of Heine's poems, the extreme evenness of the meter cloaks a massive disruption of the time-scheme. In both *Der Doppelgänger* and *Die Stadt*, the poet is like that character in Yeats's *Purgatory* (1938) who helplessly watches, over and over again, the ghosts of his parents in the act of begetting him, his drunken father raping his mother, lit up in a ruined house, a catastrophe that happened once and for all and yet never ends. The poet keeps approaching an emotional fact he can neither bear nor dispense with. The catastrophe keeps recurring; the poem is something that the poet recites to himself over and over again. Here is my translation of *Die Stadt*:

*On the far horizon
Appears, like shapes in a cloud,
The city with its towers;
The twilight's like a shroud.*

*A damp gust makes ripples
In the gray canal;
The oarsman rows my skiff
With *tempo mesto* pull.*

From the world's edge rises
 Once again the sun
 And shines upon the place
 Where I lost someone.

The daring, perhaps foolish, thing I did was to translate *traurigem Takt*—mournful stroke or beat—as *tempo mesto*, Italian for *sad tempo*. *Takt* is a musical term—as in the title of Robert Stolz's 1930 operetta *Zwei Herzen im Dreivierteltakt*, *Two Hearts in Three-Quarter Time*. The trimeter pulse of Heine's meter made me think of the poem as a kind of waltz, for which the rower's strokes provided a kind of metronome. I have obviously exaggerated the technical-musical aspect of the poem far more than Heine intended; but I might appeal to Benjamin's notion that a translation may be a kind of complement to the original in order to justify my line. Also, outside of Germany this poem is best known through a musical setting, from Franz Schubert's *Schwanengesang* (1828), so the idea of stressing its musicality may come naturally enough.

Music can also be a complement to a poem, so I invite you to listen to a recording of Franz Schubert's setting of *Die Stadt* (1828)—perhaps my favorite, sung by Christoph Prégardien.

The song begins in a state of sheer rhythmlessness. The piano shivers with faint arpeggios of a diminished chord—and the score adds the marking *diminuendo*, as if harmony and volume alike were an exercise in diminishing. As the voice enters, rhythm suddenly becomes quite pronounced, double-dotted chords in the tonic, C minor; the vocal line begins as little more than a monotone on G, occasionally rising a semitone to A. The song offers little in the way of melody, little in the way of figuration—only the light finger-ripples of the diminished chord, and a declamatory voice, singing mostly on the tonic or the dominant note, lifting itself a half-step when stabbed by insight. Keats writes in a famous line, “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains”; and *Die Stadt* is about drowsy numbness interspersed with small tightenings, clenches. The paralysis is almost complete: the singer, having taken a boat into non-existence, illustrates his limbo with non-melodies, forms of talking-to-oneself carried out by other means. Of course it's only an accident that Schubert happened to die soon after writing his Heine songs; but they can appear to be at once a climax of his song-art and a repudiation of singing itself. If a song were to be much sparer than *Die Stadt*, it would be little more than reciting the poem aloud. In *Die Stadt*, song is little more than speech's *Doppelgänger*. I think that maybe Schubert has translated Heine's poem better than anyone else ever will.

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