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Getting from Here to There

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Poet

Thripsy pillivinx,
Inky tinky pobblebockle abblesquabs?—Flosky! Beebul trimple flosky!…ferrymoyassity amsky flamsky ramsky damsky cocklefether squiggs,
Flinkywisty pomm,
Slushypipp

—a letter sent by Edward Lear to Evelyn Baring (1862)

Why do we translate? Apart from the fact that communication is a transactional necessity and the urge to communicate irresistible, all communication is inherently flawed and as often as not misleading or destabilizing. If this is true for everyday exchanges in the same language, it follows as the night the night that to translate from one language to another is an exercise in brave futility, and further, to attempt to convey the *figurative* idiom of literature from one language to another can only be the quintessence of a benign sort of hybris.

Moreover, how is one to properly judge the success of a translation if one is always to some degree estranged from one's own language and doubly removed from the target-language no matter how well it has been learned or how deeply assimilated? The same applies to the reader for whom the target-language is the mother tongue. The dilemma is a specification of the well-known paradox of the Hermeneutic Circle in which the text is dependent on the context but the context must be at least partially recuperated from the text, or, variously, of the so-called Linguistic Riddle in which every word can only be defined in terms of another word and so on ad infinitum, leading us back eventually to the starting point. This is a puzzle in which all speakers and interpreters are ensnared, but especially the translator who finds herself or himself riding two carousels at once, rotating in opposite directions or at any rate on different planes. There is no escaping the predicament which, extrapolating from Dr. Slushypipp's famous letter, may be further designated as the problem of *ferrymoyassity*. The only solution is to shrug one's shoulders, utter an expletive—Flosky!—and proceed.

Translation is impossible because it cannot be pure. Those who hold out for the eventual neutrality and transparence of computer translation programs are bound to be severely disappointed. Such programs are only a special case of all cross-language attempts at transmission and, what is even more chastening, every act of translation is only a slightly less evident absurdity than the cybernetic process which translates the English proverb "out of sight, out of mind" into the Russian "blind and insane." I have heard that a computer rendered the aphorism "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" into the Russian equivalent of "the vodka is agreeable but the meat has gone bad." One recalls, too, Hillary Clinton's embarrassment presenting a reset button to her Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, with the word "reset" emerging as "overcharged" or "overloaded." Her aides may well have used a computer translation, petaflopping incompatibles. The computer fails at recuperating both connotation and context, which is precisely, *mutatis mutandis* and on a higher level, the dilemma confronting the translator who, say, tries to render a Chinese text into Bantu glottal stop. Of course, such verbal commutation pales before the insuperable task of trying to render French into English or English into French. I speak from experience.

It is hard to say anything about translation that is not a fardel of commonplaces but I will attempt to place the discipline in the framework of the drive to self transcendence, where it seems to me properly to belong. Let's begin with etymology and look at the word itself. "Translate" derives from Latin *translates* = transferred, carried over, which is itself a specification of the verb *transferre* = to transfer, to carry over.

This form of conveyance is precisely what is at issue in both the method of *delivery* and the function of *deliverance* represented by the rhetorical trope of metaphor. The word itself performs its own meaning, from the Greek *meta* (after, behind) and *phorein* (to carry). A metaphor is that which *carries something over* from one place to another, be it a pile of bricks or an array of meanings; indeed in certain parts of Greece a pick-up truck, properly a *fortigo* (or rather, *fortigaki*, in the diminutive), is also known as a *metafera*—the movers themselves are called *metafores*. You stack a couple of barrels of olives in the bed of the truck and drive it over from Kalamata to Sparti. Which is essentially the business in which the translator is involved. Only one never quite manages to reach Sparti and sometimes one may even have trouble finding one's way back to Kalamata. The act of translation may in this sense be

regarded as the embodiment of an incomplete but necessary metaphorical process. The profit, the gain, the reimbursement at arrival, remains dubious, though we are always adding olives to the barrel and the olives themselves, steeped in their briny medium, are, like wine in the cask, undergoing a species of metamorphosis in transit.

The cliché we most often resort to—which like all clichés is never very far from the truth, which is also a cliché—is that something is always *lost* in translation—apart, that is, from the translator's time and energy. The original semantic climate of a work—the atmospherics of meaning it generates, the intangibles unique to a particular language, the cultural context in which it is embedded—falls by the wayside and is not recoverable.

And when we consider that communication or transfer in the *same* language is always open to misunderstanding, and that, if Paul de Man is right, even self-communication, as well as the effort at speaking or writing anything that approximates the slightest complexity, is the victim of an inevitable rhetorical slippage or displacement so that we can never say what we really intend, *provided we know even this*, then we may as well expire with Hamlet's last words: "The rest is silence." Or with Wittgenstein's famous conclusion to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." For how can we "speak about" another language with authority when we can "speak about" neither our language nor ourselves with conviction? The task is, obviously, impossible.

But of course simply to go on living is to persist in the impossible. We are the kind of creature that is programmed to succeed at failure—one recalls the Greek poet Andreas Karavis' definition of a human being as "a creature that can be wrong about everything"—yet it is the fact of our inevitable failure that propels us toward the repeated effort at transcendence. Everything we do, every activity in which we engage or participate, is ultimately doomed to failure—call it the Second Law of Homodynamics—and still we succeed for a time if only in the very act of persistence. Jacques Lacan is right when, to put it very simply, he defines desire as the difference between what we want and what we get—a rather more sophisticated analysis than Mick Jagger's. That is, desire is dyadic and whatever it is that we ostensibly seek and acquire is always less than what we are really asking for. There is always a carry-over from the initial to the ancillary, from the

inaugural to its enclitic correlative, a kind of fine print or unspoken claim. You ask the waitress for a cup of coffee, let's say, and you may even get it if you're lucky, but what you are really articulating in so many or not so many words is a second question, what you are really posing is a second demand, which can be translated as: "Will you love me forever?" Therefore, since your essential, unformulated request must inexorably be refused, you have no choice but to order a second cup of coffee. And this is especially true of translation: translators do all their work slumped over a paper-littered table at Second Cup, waiting for love.

Translation, then, is the paradigm and image of all human striving, dedicated to failure yet married to desire, to realize the slippery and ever-elusive promise of transcendence from the given to the possible impossible, to establish contact between indiscernibles, to work at the *rapprochement* not only between two languages and two readers but ultimately between two aspects of the divided self, the self we negotiate daily in the market of the commonplace and the self we intuit existing *in potentia* on the other side of language—the language, be it said, without which we would become unrecognizable to ourselves, but which at the same time reduces us to a predictable and limiting set of internal relations that resists the effort at transcendence.

Language, we must remember, is a far more complex phenomenon than the common coin we invariably take for granted. To begin with, it is not only a medium of exchange and a mode of self-expression, however displacing it may be, but also a wall built to keep out the interloper and to preserve the integrity of the language group Itself. As I wrote in a poem entitled "On Learning Greek," when, living on Crete at a time and in a place where no-one spoke English or French or even German, I was first trying to batter my way into the Greek language:

> *Language is the longest wall in the world and the strongest.*
> *It was meant to keep out the barbarians,*
> *it was meant to baffle the philistines,*
> *each involuted tense another bartizan*
> *against the Mongols in the north,*
> *the tunnels of grammar hopelessly insoluble*
> *as if by plan;*
> *even the architects with blueprints in hand*
> *occasionally lose their way*
> *and the engineers sometimes forget*
> *where the sewers and aqueducts intersect.*
> *On the parapets the putists stroll*
> *with calfbound textbooks strapped to their wrists,*
> *scanning the horizon for sign of the enemy:*

they know that only a very long siege
can breach the intractable stone.
Language is the longest wall in the world and the strongest.

But the complexity of language, the intricacy of resistance, the repelling of the outsider in the defence of what Nietzsche termed "ipsissimosity," or "very owness," which it embodies, is only part of the story. Language is also a barrier lodged securely in place between the quotidian and *terra incognita*. Hence the scandal of metaphor—the device by which language, as if aware of its intransigence and wishing to make amends, arranges its own transgression and the rupture of liminality—where, to return to my earlier example, we are now moving not only barrels of olives but, so to speak, cases of bootleg whiskey. Or variously, driving our *metafera* from Kalamata to Sparti and ending up in Corinth, only to find that our olives have been magically changed into currants. It is via the agency of metaphor that language permits us to exercise the creative faculty of imagination, to carry over, to translate. And translation, as a discipline, is the very incarnation of metaphor. (You will note, too, that I have not thus far been parsimonious in my deployment of metaphorical operations.)

Now we are in a position to monetize our liberty. In articulating the primal desire for discovery and metamorphosis, we have the power, if we are willing to use it, to move the imaginative experience over into the realm of the possible, and from there, however altered or diminished, into the dimension of the real. In other words, translation probes the boundaries of representation. In other words, translation is always in other words. And since the literal is enacted differently in different languages, it follows that translation is by necessity a semantic performance that allows for deviations and inventions, for variety and flexibility—one thinks of Bergson's privileging of a flexible vice over a rigid virtue, and of Greek-English translator Gail Holst-Warhaft's description of the process as involving "creative acts of infidelity." The transfer part of translation is finally a transfer from the literal to the figurative, from Self 1 to Self 2, from the empirical to the peregrine, from what we are to what we may theoretically become, from what is accepted to that which is often frowned upon, from the cloistered to the eclectic, that is, toward new meanings, new valencies of the possible, a new experience of the otherwise stubborn and barriered self, however mitigated in the execution.

I am reminded in this connection of a short poem by the Japanese poet Shuntaro Tanikawa, entitled "Here," translated by William Elliott and Kazuo Kawamura. The subject is love between a man and a woman, but it applies equally well to the relationship between the translator and the text.

> *I say, "Let us go somewhere."*
> *You say, "Where to?"*
> *"Here is good enough," I say.*
> *"It's alright with me, too," you say.*
> *While we are talking the day ends*
> *and this place is now some other place.*

One can put this dialectic in another way as well. "One's destination," Henry Miller writes in *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, "is never a place but always a new way of looking at things." It is in this deeper sense that translation, in moving from one language to another, is an attempt to overcome the language barrier itself in order to achieve not only "a new way of looking at things," as Miller has it, but in effect a new way of being—that is, to break the "sound barrier" represented by the language one is born into as an instantiation of a limiting condition. It is in finding or generating a new language that one finds or generates a new self, impelled by desire into metaphorical substitution, to breach the containing radius of the topical personality, to flamsky the cocklefether squiggs, and render the fixed fluid. And this process is theoretically infinite.

The sixteenth century French poet Joachim Du Bellay spoke truly when he said, in commenting on the translation process, that what you cannot render in one place you must compensate for in another. But he neglected to consider that compensations are always transitive, requiring a protracted series of complementary adjustments that trail off into the pleiadic realm of the cosmos beyond the borders of the text. The trouble clearly begins with the evasiveness or ambiguity inherent even in a literal nomothesis between two languages. It is only compounded if we adopt John Wycliffe's otherwise sage advice that one should "translate aftir the sentence, and not oneli aftir the wordis." For we have already taken a firm step into a textually unverifiable world and are well on our way toward a new "aftirworld" of sensibility and affect not previsioned or controlled by philological allegiances.

Further, since one can only escape into what must eventually become another form of captivity, one is constrained to begin all over again: another language, another persona, another project, another book. In an

important way, every translator conceals a writer within and every writer a translator—in fact many translators are practicing writers themselves and vice versa. But whether the translator is an autonomous professional or a writer in drag, what he or she is doing is approaching an unprecedented world of lexical and imaginative possibilities, opening up a new or an as yet only indirectly experienced territory of the sensibility. To translate is to come dressed as the other, the Second Person we intuit in ourselves, but, as Odysseus Elytis writes in *To Axion Esti*, "Look, it is you who speak and I who come true." I believe that everyone who engages seriously in the act of translation comes to experience this gradual and mysterious shift from the locus of the mundane and the typical to the saving delinquency of the unforeseen and the improbable. As we move from one recension to another along the path of multiple revisions toward a relatively finished product, we assemble *un riche dossier génétique* that serves to establish the progressive biography of an evolving persona which represents the true target we are trying to hit.

The nonsense epigraph from Edward Lear is recognizably structured on the basis of English grammar, syntax and morphology, yet in the absence of lexicological isomorphs how might it be "translated" into French or German or indeed any other conceivable language? The passage is, strictly speaking, untranslatable, which stands as one possible definition of nonsense. But at the same time it is precisely this unique and unmodifiable strip of expressive material that the translator aims for as a destination text—as both a clarion of arrival and a terminus in the unexampled. Obviously, with respect to this second, imaginal text and in the course of time, meanings will be assigned and the burden of communicability domesticated, but in the process as well as the accomplishment of the act of translocation itself, it is the singular that counts. The new language we arrive at is not only a natural language whose structure and vocabulary we have patiently acquired but what we might call a third language akin to nonsense only the translator ultimately understands and which defines the contours and lineations of the projected self which has mastered it. There is a sense in which translation is always nonsense, but also—and this is the essence of the gambit—a modulation of the *ur-spracht* of our desire for otherness. The first beneficiary, so to speak, is always the translator the result of whose work may be enjoyed by her readers to their intellectual and emotional profit, but whose *experience* is in itself transformative and untranslatable.

All translation, then, is a crossing-over, a form of invention and self-invention, or if one likes, the higher transvestism. One starts by dressing differently; one ends with a sex change. And so one emerges from the text with something that resembles a new identity or experimental self, however problematic it may be, and speaking a new vernacular, however initially exotic and bewildering to ourselves as well as others. Inky tinky pobblebockle abblesquabs.

2.

And this explains more or less the rationale behind the project on which I embarked with respect to my heteronymous poet Andreas Karavis, whom I invented as a prelude to his reinvention of his inventor. In creating my Greek alter ego or doppelgänger—or rather, in attempting to recreate myself under his auspices—I often felt as if I'd entered upon a process of translation, and in point of psychological fact, I had. I was not, of course, actually translating a pre-existent text—as for example was the case when I produced *Demilunes*, a translation of 32 Québécois and Québécoise poets—but rather a *potentially existing* body of work which had the power to make the conditional tense of aspiration declarative in the present. If I were to give this process a name, I would call it "projective translation." One projects oneself into an other who flourishes on a variant and novel plane of existence and returns changed, like an astronaut who has visited another planet and come back a different person, not entirely recognizable to his friends or even to himself. But give or take the degree of transmutation, is not this what inevitably happens when one sets about rendering a text from one language into another?

And is this not more or less what happened to St. Jerome, the patron saint of translators, when, as his 15th century biographer Fratte Matheo Da Ferrara tells us, after reading Tully and Plato "he was afflicted by a very great fever and was not far from death. Then, rapt in spirit he was carried before the tribunal of Christ, and there so much light and splendor was seen by him that, suddenly cast down upon the ground, he was not able to look on high. Being questioned as to his condition, he answered that he was a Christian. But He who sat on the throne said, 'Thou liest, because thou art a Ciceronian, and not a Christian.' "? In accepting this scourging, and abandoning his Ciceronianism, St. Jerome was cured of his fever, that is, of his former self, and was thenceforth incardinated into the Church.

In completing a successful translation, every practitioner becomes a little less of a Ciceronian and a little more of a Christian—not literally, of course, but metaphorically. But *also literally* in the sense that the vectors and gradients of one's existence are altered or reconfigured, as if by a kind of alchemy. Despite—or because of—the hard work and undeniable drudgery involved, one begins to feel what Paracelsus called the "archetic appetite" for change (from Archeus, the exalted spirit), turning the Draconite into the Filius Macrocosmi, granite into gold. The change may be partial or immanent—a few flecks of gold stippling the stone—or massive—one glitters with an alien light. And scares the hell out of oneself in the process.

As I've written elsewhere, my Greek counterpart Andreas Karavis seemed for a time to take over my life almost completely. I became little more than a highfalutin poetic stenographer, copying down letters, obiter dicta, lines of poetry and sometimes entire poems of which one—a short lyric entitled *Sto Manaviko*, "In the Grocery Store"—came to me in a dream in flawless Greek, a language I love but continue to struggle with. But entering Greek meant entering another, and indeed a preferred self. Friends have told me that the minute I begin speaking Greek, I become another person, and not necessarily a nice one: apparently I become super-confident to the point of arrogance,

peremptory, demanding, impatient and prone to flamboyant gesticulation. In effect, I become Karavis, that is, the poet who is an extended trope or metaphor of the desire for transformation and whose poems are a metonym for the reconstructed self.

The locus of this peculiar renovation, of this new and different place in the

archipelago of psychic states of which the self consists, is what Karavis called Saracen Island, which on the one hand is the actual name of a tiny uninhabited islet off the coast of the island of Skyros—*Nisi Sarakinos*—and on the other, as the title of his book, the metaphorical correlate of the spiritual region that the translation or transfer from the given envisages. It is the meridian of chance, discovery and difference, the place where the imagination makes landfall, the new language of experience one begins to master, the valediction that signifies arrival. Flinkywisty pomm!

For translation, whether of a specific text or a transdimensional counterpart, may well be the primary act of imagination. Indeed, for Karavis, as well as for his Canadian "translator" and indeed for anyone

preoccupied with the ritual of transposition in the parabolic quest for newness, the imagination is the agency that reinvents the world anew with each succeeding day, that translates the *possible other* into a reasonable if bounded facsimile of the one who one is. It is what ensures our freedom, always partial and approximate. The act of translation is the reification of the imaginative domain. True, the domestic imperative inevitably intervenes—one has to marry, divorce, get a job, write papers, grade papers, pay bills, escape creditors, walk the dog, renegotiate the mortgage, raise children, then deal with their ingratitude, and all the dreary rest of it—so that the "translated self" often lapses into abeyance. Yet it never
ceases to beckon. As the Greek Nobel laureate George Seferis wrote in a poem entitled "*Sto Tropo Gamma Sigma*," "In the Manner of G.S.," "*Opos kai na taxidepso, I Elldha me plegoni*": "Wherever I may travel, Greece wounds me."

Nostalgia is not to be scoffed at or resented. It is both the guardian and the harbinger of the projective imagination, encompassing both the past and the future. It speaks of the home one returns to and sees as if for the first time *as something completely unprecedented*. So we might also speculate that translation is a form of creative nostalgia. Indeed, it resembles or imaginatively re-enacts the ancient Greek manner of writing, called *boustrophedon* ("as the ox plows"), proceeding left to right on one line, right to left on the next, which is to say, emigrating toward the other, repatriating to the same—but, in this instance, the same which is mysteriously no longer the same.

I can still recall Karavis saying to me, behind a raised pedagogical finger: "Never forget this. Imagination is a discipline but reality is only an indulgence." He mulled over this apothegm for a while and then added: "It is only by appellation that we may be saved—by naming that which may not even be present or which we only dimly remember. Imagination may be nothing less than the highest form of memory, the personal residue of a tribal or perhaps racial legacy of desire and conviction. It is the only way to oppose the *antimimon pneuma*, the counterfeit spirit, the cup of forgetfulness the everyday world has forced us to drink. The imagination is a map of what may once have been there on good days—which are always scarce—but which we can superpose on the void. It is the memory of possibility, that which banishes the night that is always descending and so creating the fresh, unprecedented dawn in which we can make our temporary escape from the prison

of the already accomplished or the forcing-house of the banal. It is the faculty that enables us to make something out of nothing or much out of little or other out of same. Call it the *pneumatiki thriskia* [the true, spiritual religion] or that which creates *to kanoniko fengari* [literally, the proper moon, or the right state of mind]. Imagination is the internal translator that gives us the mobility that we need to *ferry us from here to there* and to make of there a new here." This was plainly Karavis' understanding of ferrymoyassity.

A short time later he produced the following poem, *I Thea Apo 'tho* ("The View from Here"), looking out from his home on the tiny island of Lipsi, his "here," toward the enormous and beckoning vista of the "there"—the two bracketing words with which his poem opens and closes.

The View from Here

Here, on good days,
you can see the cloudy shape of Patmos
nautical miles to the west,

and the rock
of Agathónisi to the east
emerges as Atlantis

rises from
the pure mythology of horizons,
the blue margins of the mind.

Arkí
and Maráthi are twin presences
most bitter weather spares,

even rain
won't wash them out; and southward, Goat-island
teeters on the steeps of air.

Yet there are
days when even Samos, that massive
rump of an island, only

a binocular's
cast to the north, squatting there upon
gigantic hams of mountain,

plump on sea,
thins to merest gossamer, vanishes
as if by some enchantment

from the eye;
and days when the sea too disappears

utterly, as if it sank

with the ships,
islands and continents it sank;
and when even Lipsi

itself, both
peak and plummeting scarp, dissolves,
and nothing seems to be left

except you
standing on the deck of your caique or
on the parapet of stone

at cliff-edge,
scanning the haze for islands, naming them
as if you knew they were there.

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