Rossetti’s Armadillo

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…He had at one time and another a Pomeranian puppy called Punch, an Irish wolfhound called Wolf, two brown owls called Jenny and Bobby, some rabbits, dormice, hedgehogs, white mice, squirrels, a mole, a chameleon, some salamanders, a deer, a wallaby, some kangaroos, two wombats, a Canadian marmot, a woodchuck, an armadillo, a raccoon, a Brahmin Bull, a jackass, and numerous birds including peacocks, Chinese horned owls, talking grey parrots, a raven, and a grass parakeet. They lived a life of conflict and depredation in and about the house and gardens and those of his neighbours. The armadillo disappeared for several weeks, and suddenly appeared through the floor of a basement kitchen some distance away, to the great alarm of the cook, "who opined that if it was not the devil, there was no knowing what it was."

—Evelyn Waugh, *Rossetti*

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INTRODUCTION

AT THE MERCY OF SYBIL: ON THE ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE TRANSLATOR TO THOSE WHO DEPEND ON HIS WORK

The statement was made during a panel on translation, held just the day before I sat down to write this, at an academic conference at the University of Colorado. It was in the context of a discussion concerning the University of Oklahoma's program to fund translators working on bringing Chinese texts over into English; the plan is for money to be set aside by the university to cover, not only publication costs of the final product, but the preservation of the translator's notes and correspondence with the author of the original text, thus leading to a unique trove of documentation to be preserved at the university archives, chronicling the process of translation. "What a wonderful idea," someone commented from the rear of the room, sparsely populated by — who else? — translators. "This really adds a new dimension to the question, who is the real author of the translated text?"

For me, because I am more of a practitioner than a theorist of translation, and perhaps because I am a poet myself, and not just a translator of the poetry of others, the "question" raised by the woman at the back of the room does not exist at all. The author of the translation is the same person as the author of the original work. The interesting Mexican poet, Tedi López Mills, is the author of the contemporary anti-epyllion *Muerte en la rúa Augusta*. Although I translated this book into both English, as *Death on Rúa Augusta*, and into Polish, as *Śmierć na rúa Augusta*, it is Tedi, and not me, who is the author of both the English *Death* and the Polish *Śmierć*, as well as the Spanish *Muerte*. I, as the translator, am nothing more than the medium through which she is able to reach a public who had no access to her work, while it remained in Spanish. To use an overblown metaphor from the hurriedly conceived, and somewhat unfortunate title of this essay (parts of which were delivered at

that same conference), Tedi is the "goddess" who needs the human mouth of this "Sybil," me, the translator, in order to contact with the folk waiting for her voice outside the cave.

This is not to denigrate the critical, and creative, act of the translation of verse. However, it is to underscore one important fact that translators sometimes like to blur when speaking of their work. The translated text, no matter how satisfying it may be as poetry in its own right, would simply not exist were it not for the preexistence of the original verse it represents in another language. The translation may, in the eyes of those who can read both languages, surpass the original in beauty, but it is never completely the property of the translator, who must always defer to the poet. The act of translation implies the existence of a translatable core of meaning, or aesthetic experience, in the original, which first moved the translator to attempt a recreation in a new language. Consequently, the task of the translator is to recreate, as fully as possible, that core in the target language, as perfectly as possible, even when this requires him to restrain himself from "correcting" the text in the new language; from saying things differently than what the author intended, even if that "different" approach seems to him to make the new poem better. The only difference that should exist between the original text, and its translation, is the language. Of course, that is an ideal statement, and not as practical and obvious as it sounds to those unfamiliar with the act of translating even the simplest expressions. It is, however, or should be, the central pivot of translational ethics: it is the author, not the translator, in the driver's seat; she or he is the font of the meaning, and the aesthetic experience, which first moved the translator to take up his or her pen; and she or he is the final authority on what the poem means, not only in the original, but also in its translations.

I can speak from experience here. There were several passages in my English *Death* (discussed more fully in the conclusion to this book), which I thought more felicitous in expression than what Tedi wanted the poem to sound like in the target language. And although in our constant correspondence over the various drafts, I argued, as is my right, for my point of view, whenever she put her foot down and said "No, this is how I want it," I acquiesced, and happily, with a clear conscience. For this translation of mine is no less Tedi's work than the original Spanish version. Her voice, again, is that of the deity; I am nothing more than the medium in the cave.

I'd like to make that clear at the outset, because translators of verse tend to exaggerate the creative and proprietary aspects of their work. In a curious way that both argues for the ubiquity of the translational process

and seeks a respectful acknowledgement for its necessity and importance, they like to quote Octavio Paz, who tells us that we learn to translate when we learn to speak.[1] George Steiner drives the phenomenon still further into our mind's core, telling us that all communication is translation.[2] When we strive to understand what someone is saying, we are translating. Paz is, of course, a marvelous poet and thinker in his own right, and Steiner perhaps the most clinical, and eloquent, theorist of verse translation that English has to offer. In wishing to get away from these journeys into theoretical bon mots, however, I do so because, in the mouths of others they often sound a bit too apologetic. I would rather start from the very most basic premise, highlighted above: a translator is a person who acts as a medium between two persons who don't speak the same language. The receptor not being able to understand the message formulated by the sender, because of the linguistic barrier, the translator is necessary in order to reformulate the incomprehensible original message into comprehensible terms.

By presenting translation in such a category, we take it out of the realms of technique and poetics, and present it as an ethical question. Translation, in short, is a service industry. It is not for the translator to take center stage, but for the message to be showcased. The message is what is important here. For example, the receptor wants to hear what Czesław Miłosz has to say. Few are the readers who pick up a copy of *The Unattainable Earth* because they want to read Robert Hass. The translator is midwife, not mother. She may receive the child from the mother's womb and present it to the world through the glass windows of the maternity ward, but she must always return the child to the arms of the woman who bore it. And every May, it is Mom who receives Mother's Day cards from all those people whose lives have been brightened by the presence of the child she has brought into the world. There are no cards for Midwives. There is no Maternity Nurses' or Obstetrician's Day.

At the risk of sounding apologetic myself, I would like to stress that this is not to say that translators are not worthy of our respect and admiration. Just the contrary. The translator is like the brave, or foolhardy, man who treads a geyser basin. What looks like terra firma may be only a thin, brittle crust, and one false step can send him plunging into the boiling water below.

To remind ourselves of just how difficult a task translation can be, we need only consider the thin crust of Gerard Manley Hopkins' short verse "Spring and Fall." This familiar poem, concerning a young child's intuiting of her mortality by witnessing the falling of leaves in autumn, ends with the lines:

It ís the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

The unwary reader of the poem, if he is a native speaker of English, will find himself naturally emphasizing the word "blight." Read this way, the poet would be affirming the child's insight, saying in effect, "You're right, Margaret, you're going to die some day too. Alas." A cruel enough thing for anyone to say to a child; all the more so, if the narrator is, like the poet (we may assume), a Jesuit priest. Does it make sense that Hopkins should write a poem so nihilistic, so focused on inevitable death? Yet that is what we get from the Polish translation of this verse by Stanisław Barańczak, himself a poet of great stature with an affection for puns:

Że na zgubę swą człowiek się rodzi,
Że nad sobą, Małgorzatką, łzy ronisz.[3]

[That man is born to his own ruin,
That for yourself, for Margaret, you weep].

Yet if we take a closer look at the English original, we notice that Hopkins has placed an accent above the verb "is." Hopkins, as perhaps no other English poet, sensitive to meter and the importance of stress, here has the reader place an accent on an unnatural place in the phrase: "It IS the blight man was born for." Read in this way, the poem does not end with an affirmation of death, but rather, a mood of expectation. "Yes, it IS the blight man was born for," Hopkins' speaker says, "Yes, you ARE going to die, but…" But what? And thus our eye is led back to the title of the poem, closing a circle that mimics the cycle of the seasons, and we understand: just as the trees will clothe themselves anew with leaves come springtime, so will we spring forth again, in resurrection, after the fall of death. "It IS the blight man was born for," death IS inevitable, but there is no other way to arrive at eternal life. And thus, that one small accent changes a poem of despair into one of hope.

To his credit, when this was pointed out to him, Barańczak went back to the poem and tried to correct it. In the second edition of his translations of Hopkins, the lines read:

Że rodzi się po to, aby umrzeć—
To ty, Małgorzatko, nad którą płaczesz.[4]

[That one is born for this: in order to die—
It's you, Margaret, over whom you weep.]

Not a perfect giving back of the original, but better than the first; the fact of one's being born in order to die is at least ambiguously suggestive enough to admit of other, positive readings of the striking causal statement.

Hopkins' eloquent accent is an extreme case of the pitfalls awaiting the incautious translator. Danger spots are legion in any poem, as attested to by Konstantin Balmont's Russian translations of Walt Whitman. In his Russian version of "To the Man-of-War Bird," the line "thou art all wings," is rendered "you are winds, all winds." Anyone familiar with Cyrillic calligraphy is aware of the fact that the consonant "d," when written in Cyrillic cursive script, looks exactly like the Latin lower-case "g." Thus, Balmont's eyes played a trick on him here: reading "wings," his mind, shifting constantly between the two idioms of English and Russian, mistakenly saw a "d" where the "g," ought to be, and after the inimitable linguistic somersaulting was over, read "winds" [*vietry*] where really were "wings" [*krilya*]. A more egregious error is made in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." There, instead of seeing "lilac" [*siren'*], Balmont saw "lily" [*liliya*], which, as Kornei Čukovskij remarks, led the translator to invent "the heretofore unknown natural phenomenon of lilies growing on bushes."[5]

I have before me a copy of the *Oxford Book of French Verse*, which I once picked up second-hand. Judging from the tiny notations, in a feminine hand, that interstice various poems collected therein, I deduce that the previous owner was a conscientious student, who prepared careful English cribs of the poems assigned for discussion in class. One of the poems she worked over was Malherbe's "Consolation à M. du Périer," composed upon the untimely death of the latter's child. The sixth stanza of the poem reads:

> Penses-tu que, plus vieille, en la maison céleste
> Elle eût eu plus d'accueil?
> Ou qu'elle eût moins senti la poussière funeste
> Et les vers du cercueil?
>
> [Is it that you think that she would have received a grander greeting in the heavenly mansions, were she to have arrived there at a more advanced age? Or that she would have less felt the dust of the grave, the worms of the coffin?]

I have no idea how our anonymous student did in her French Lit. class; she certainly worked hard at it. But in her translation of this verse — cribs like this are also translations — she made a rather humorous mistake in

the fourth line of the stanza above: reading *vers* for *ver*. In a manner that nearly looks forward to the "inept" love poet of Baudelaire's "Une charogne" (included in this book), she has the poor girl suffering, not from grave-worms, but from someone's poetry! Certainly, that can be a more painful infestation at times, but it's not what Malherbe means to say.

This is a sophomoric mistake, and it has no more serious ramifications than a blush and some gentle ribbing in the seminar room, if she were called upon to parse the poem. But in Balmont's case, we're dealing with the dissemination of translational errors among the general populace, by a literary authority. Like a bacillus, Balmont's Whitman cannot help but infect the Russian population interested in the American poet. Here, it is hard to explain away this latter mistake as anything other than slovenly translating, satisfying oneself (mistakenly) with seeming cognates, especially in the latter case; making haste, that makes waste.

Balmont and Whitman were rough contemporaries, but I have no evidence of the former ever traveling to the United States, or corresponding with the American poet. He was on his own, like most translators, which is no excuse, surely, but can be offered as an extenuating circumstance. What about poets and translators working together? One would think that errors couldn't happen in a case.

Speaking from experience, it is true that having the poet at your elbow can help you avoid some embarrassing errors. Not long ago, in working on that translation of *Muerte en la rúa Augusta*, I nearly fell through the crust myself. In poem 17 of the cycle, the protagonist, Gordon Smith, goes up into the bedroom, opens his wife's dresser drawers, and, tossing her underwear up to the ceiling begins to dance and sing: "tip-top, de puntitas por los tulipanes…"[6] Although the phrase *de puntitas*, "on tip-toe," should have given me all the hint I needed, my eye was fixed on that first expression, "tip-top." In English, this means "a-one," "perfect," "marvelous," as in "I'm in tip-top shape," and thus I completely whiffed on the cultural reference so obvious to people of my generation familiar with Tiny Tim and Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In. It was only when Tedi read the translation and clued me in on her Spanish rendering of "Tip-toe Through the Tulips," that I was able to back-translate the line into English and save myself some blushing. Whether or not the general Spanish or Latino reader of the poem familiar with the English song would have understood the reference thus nuanced into Spanish is beside the point. Tedi, as translator of Al Dubin's lyrics has the right to acclimatize them to the milieu of the target language (where, in this case, "tip-top" may be an acceptable homophone, fitting the metrical scheme of the original), but I,

as translator, or back-translator, in this case, must, as it were, return the baby to her mother's arms.

Still, even the presence of the poet is not always enough. For example, in Poem 13 of Peter Dale Scott's translation of Czesław Miłosz's cycle *Po ziemi naszej* [Throughout our Lands], we read of the native Californians, who "sewed a clock from the plumage of flickers, hummingbirds and tanagers." So reads the text as printed in Miłosz's Selected Poems, published in 1980 by Ecco Press.[7] When I came across that bit of horological mastery, I was knocked back a ways; was that a misprint? No: the line is repeated in several other editions of Miłosz in English. The question we all want answered is, how were the Miwok or Chumash tribesmen of the sixteenth century able to conceive of a timepiece, and construct it, from the feathers of flickers, hummingbirds and tanagers? How did you wind it? Did it keep good time?

The answer is, of course, they weren't. The word in question is *płaszcz*, which has nothing to do with timepieces, and everything to do with ritual coverings, capes, shawls, *cloaks*. What happened here is obvious to anyone who heard the late Czesław Miłosz speaking in English. To the end of his life he had a strong accent; to his ear, "clock" was approximately homophonic to "cloak." In distinguishing between the two words, he obviously knew what he meant, but it may not have been the same for Peter Dale Scott. Given the fact that Miłosz liked to collaborate in the translation of his poems into English, and given the fact that this poem is bylined as "translated by Peter Dale Scott and Czesław Miłosz," it seems reasonable to assume that they were working on this poem together. I suppose Miłosz suggested "cloaks" of colored feathers, Scott heard "clocks," wrote it down, no one caught it, and so it remains. Not only in the 1980 edition of the *Selected Poems*, but also in the Ecco editions from 1988, *Collected Poems* 1931-1987 (p. 153), 2001, *New and Collected Poems* 1931-2001 (p. 187) and 2006, *Selected Poems* 1931-2004 (p. 61).

It seems baffling to me that no one, from typesetter to editor to reader, ever noticed this error. Although I couldn't get in touch with the translator, Robert Hass, the editor of the last volume, was very surprised when I told him about it, writing "I wonder how it can be that we never caught this." What seems most surprising, however, is why the translator himself did not "catch this." "Clocks, Czesław? Did I hear you correctly? You mean like a watch?" If only he had asked. Instead, if (as it seems) he just accepted what he thought he heard, uncritically, even though the result did not make sense, one wonders what business he has translating a language he does not know well enough to work with in the first place.

The translator has the obligation to his readers, who have no access to the original poem, to be their advocate in cases like this, and not simply to "let it stand" because "it's poetry, and doesn't need to be logical. Maybe it's a symbol."

Not being able to contact Scott or Miłosz, we have no way of knowing if that is what actually happened, or whether this is a typesetter's error, unfortunately repeated. But again, it is the translator's responsibility to look through the proofs of his work and make sure that errors like this do not crop up; certainly, someone ought to have stepped in and controlled the quality of this work. They had twenty-six years, and at least four printings of the poem, to do so. One chuckles at all the interpretational acrobatics engaged in over the years by scholars attempting to make sense out of a clock made out of bird feathers…

Yet we are here not only to speak of the ethics of the translator to make sure he gets it right. The other side of the ethics question, perhaps the more urgent side, concerns those translators who are expert in the source language, know the original text inside out, and yet indulge in the sort of highly idiosyncratic, strongly directioned type of translation that borders on adaptation.

In the early part of the twentieth century, when his city of Kraków was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the painter and poet Stanisław Wyspiański translated Corneille's play *Le Cid* into Polish. Wyspiański was a strident Polish patriot, who once famously refused nomination to a professorial post at the Cracovian Conservatory of Fine Art because the official document was signed by Emperor Franz Josef, and he "refused to accept a position at a Polish institution of higher learning from the hands of a foreign monarch." Corneille's play is both an apotheosis of the heroic Rodrigo, and the King he serves. Such a thing would never fly with Wyspiański, who displayed such a cavalier contempt for the person of his own (like it or not) monarch. So, his translation, which still works as a vibrant drama of personal heroism, avoids the matter entirely. In nearly every place in the original text where praise of the King is sounded, Wyspiański substitutes the word "Fatherland." For example, the original dialogue between the hero and the king in scene three of act four reads:

Don Rodrigue
Je sais trop que je dois au bien de votre empire,
Et le sang qui m'anime, et l'air que je respire ;
Et quand je les perdrai pour un si digne objet,
Je ferai seulement le devoir d'un sujet.

Don Fernand
Tous ceux que ce devoir à mon service engage
Ne s'en acquittent pas avec même courage ;
Et lorsque la valeur ne va point dans l'excès,
Elle ne produit point de si rares succès.
IV.iii. 1233-1240[8]

[**Don Rodrigue (the Cid)**
I know too well how much I owe to your rule, / Both the blood that animates me, and the air that I breathe; / And should I lose them for such a worthy object, / I would only be fulfilling the obligation of a subject.

Don Fernand (the King)
Not all who are engaged in my service / Acquit themselves with the same heroism; / And unless valor is shown in such excess / She does not produce such rare successes.]

Wyspiański, on the other hand, translates it:

Don Rodrygo
Wszystko, co byłem uczynił, nie dla się ni żołdu.
Nie wdzięczności czuję się godny, ani hołdu.
Uważam za powinność i szczęsną mą dolę,
jeżli mogę Ojczyźnie dać siły w niewolę.
Jeżli mogę królowi wiernym służyć sługą.
Nie mierzyć chwałby danej mnie — z moją zasługą.

Don Fernand
Chociaż czynisz powinność, li co honor każe,
nie każdy rzuci krew swą Ojczyźnie w ołtarze.
Nie starczy wierny sługa. Mąż wielkiego ducha,
ten dopiero Ojczyzny skarg i wołań słucha.
IV.iii. 238-247[9]

[**Don Rodrigue**
Everything which I have done, / was not done for myself or for pay. / I do not feel worthy of gratitude or homage. / I hold it my obligation and happy fate / if I can give the Fatherland strength in bondage. / If I can serve the king as a faithful servant. The praise given me should not/ be measured — with my deserts.

Don Fernand
Although you fulfill an obligation, / or are acting according to honor, / not every man throws his blood / upon the altar of the Fatherland. / A faithful servant is not enough. / A man of great spirit, / this is he who heeds / his Fatherland's plaints and cries.]

All in all, Wyspiański substitutes the word *ojczyzna*, "fatherland," the only authority he personally is willing to acknowledge, for the following terms in Corneille: *l'Espagne, l'empire, ton pays* (i.e. Rodrigue's), *ton roi, le trône, mon état* (i.e. the king's), *la Castille, pour moi* (i.e. the king), *votre service* (i.e. the king's), *le peuple, la patrie.* In the passage cited above, it should also be noted that while Rodrygo uses the word King (after invoking the Fatherland), the King himself uses only the latter term, thus proving himself a monarch such as Wyspiański might accept, one who subsumes his glory to that of his nation.

Is there anything wrong with this? Not necessarily; unless one attempts to teach Corneille via this translation. Wyspiański is an important poet in his own right, and his version of the play can be used on stage, or by scholars interested in Wyspiański, or by those studying comparative translations. The point is, this text is Stanisław Wyspiański, pure and simple, not Pierre Corneille. As long as we understand this, and as long as this is not the only translation of Corneille in Polish, no harm, no foul. Translation is a creative act as well as an act of scholarship. It is important to be clear here: we are not speaking of those translations that surpass the original in quality or beauty. Whether or not the Germans are right in pitying English speakers for not being able to read Shakespeare in Schlegel's idiom is not the question here. It is not necessarily the genius of the translator that makes such a phenomenon come about, but often the properties of the source language, which are better suited to the giving back of the core of meaning than the original tongue. Besides, such evaluations are often highly subjective. One thinks of Ezra Pound's rather eclectic preference for Gavin Douglas' translation of the *Aeneid* into Chaucer's English, over Virgil's Latin original.[10] No, the ethical question is, how much self-expression can the translator be allowed? The answer to that depends on the answer to another question: what sort of translation are we talking about?

While there may be little real harm in strongly directioned literary translations, what about the texts that many people approach with reverence, in, as it were, deadly seriousness? The Islamic communities are very rigorous in this regard. As they believe that the Koran is eternally pre-existent, the product of the mouth of Allah, they see it as immutable, unchangeable, and even untranslatable. Only the text in Arabic is the Koran *eo ipso*; all other versions of the book, in any other language, are called "interpretations," not translations. The text is so sacred to them, that no pretense is made to the possibility of creating "equivalents" in other tongues.

The same is not true, famously so, with the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Theologically speaking, despite the reverence in which all Christians, especially Protestants, hold the Bible, as a divinely revealed text, it has rarely been the object of such bibliolatry as the Koran. Christians have been prototypically receptive to translation, i.e., the acknowledgement that (whatever linguists may say to the contrary), language is the clothing of thought, and there is a body or "core" of inalterable message that can be sufficiently (if not perfectly) transmitted when transposed from one tongue into another. While this attitude has led to the remarkable openness of Christian proselytism,[11] it has also lain the text open to translational skewing in favor of the particular theological preferences of the given translator. The most famous example of this is Martin Luther's addition of the German word *allein* (only) to Romans 3:28. Instead of "we account a man to be justified by faith, without the works of the law," which seems clear enough, Luther's text reads "we account a man to be justified by faith alone, without the works of the law," a choice which certainly seems to be an evangelical fine-tuning of Paul's words, making of the Apostle of the Gentiles a sort of proto-Evangelical, underscoring to his original audience the thesis of "justification by faith, without reference to works," which was to be a cornerstone of the Protestant movement over a thousand years in the future. Although in his reply to his critics, Luther stressed that the grammatical nature of the German language requires *allein* [*solum*, alone] in this case, he unabashedly admits to inserting it in order to make the Bible even clearer on this point [*sic*] so that there would be no misunderstanding about what St. Paul meant to say, theologically speaking:

> Now, I was not relying on and following the nature of the languages alone, however, when, in Romans 3[:28] I inserted the world *solum*. Actually the text itself and the meaning of St. Paul urgently require and demand it. For in that very passage he is dealing with the main point of Christian doctrine, namely that we are justified by faith in Christ without any works of the law. And Paul cuts away all works so completely, as even to say that the works of the law — though it is God's law and word — do not help us for justification [Rom 3:20].[12]

Of course, Luther is also famous for saying that the New Testament is like the Nativity manger: one must distinguish the Christ Child from the "straw" in which He lies — the "straw" in this case being the letter of St. James, pointed to by his Catholic polemicists, as proof that Scripture teaches us that "faith without works is dead."

Such has been the fate of the Holy Scriptures in the hands of its translators, throughout the ages, stretching from the English Catholic translators of the 1582 Douai-Rheims version, who, in their polemics with the Elizabethan Protestants, were so desirous of underscoring the Eucharistic miracle denied by their opponents that they render Matthew 6:11 as "Give us this day our supersubstantial bread," to the radical priest John Dominic Crossan's *The Essential Jesus* (1989). That latter text, purporting to be a reconstruction of Q, or the "Synoptic Sayings Source," not only presents familiar-sounding Bible verses without the necessary evangelical context, but also rephrases them in such a way that the social activism of the translator is transparent. For example, his "translation" of Mt. 8:19-20 reads "Every fox has a den / Every bird has a nest / Only humans are homeless." If it didn't sound so cynical, it might be worth wondering if Crossan's book is really either "essential" or "Jesus" at all.

The point we are getting at is: certain texts require of their translator a bit more care than others. Poetry is for aesthetic enjoyment, the Holy Scriptures, like the Koran or any other religious text, possess a value for the people who use it which surpasses, supersedes, even makes irrelevant their literary qualities. One recalls St. Augustine's gradual approach to Catholicism as recorded in the *Confessions*. His disdain for the scanty literary qualities of the New Testament kept him at arm's length from Christianity, until he came to understand that it's all about the message, and not the literary trappings such as style and eloquence. In short, whatever the translator's particular beliefs may be in reference to the sacred text he is dealing with, he must keep in mind that simple fact; that the content, the core message, that he is asked to render is more important than his own performance, his own cleverness, and that he risks a novel interpretation of the content at great peril. To continue with our metaphor of treading thermal areas, this translator risks falling through the crust into a much hotter environment than a geyser…

Yet what is interesting in this particular case is the fact that it is not always the rebels, not always the "fringe" believers who risk the striking, even dangerous, novelty. As part of the Holy Week liturgies in the Catholic Church, a Passion narrative from the Gospels is read aloud, in parts. Recently, this narrative has been taken from the Gospel of Matthew, and includes the following verse (MT 27:38): *Then were crucified with him two thieves: one on the right hand, and one on the left.* So reads the translation in English from the Douai-Rheims version of the Holy Scriptures. However, in the Lectionary used in church, translated by the International Council for English in the Liturgy and approved for use by the Bishops of the English-speaking world, we read: *Two revolutionaries*

were crucified with him, one on his right and the other on his left. Revolutionaries? Where did that come from? The original word in Greek is *lestes*, which can be rendered as "thief," "plunderer," and even "pirate," but "revolutionary?" The Vulgate Latin translation renders this as *latro*, which, while not as common a translation for "thief" as *fur*, still has connotations in which "brigand" and "bandit" predominate. All of the other English versions I have consulted — with the exception of the radical People's New Testament (no further comment necessary) — down to the very contemporary Jerusalem Bible, render the verse traditionally: *At the same time two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and the other on the left.* Why, on earth, do the ICEL translators prefer the very controversial "revolutionaries" here?

Before I attempt to answer that question, we must first realize what is at stake. Two thousand years of Christian theology teaches us that the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross was a perfect sacrifice, as he was a perfectly sinless person. There was no reason for him to die, save out of love, to save fallen man who, because of his sinfulness, cannot make restitution unto God for his reprehensible acts. Here we must pause and remind ourselves that, whatever our own religious (or irreligious) opinions in this matter may be, we are speaking of the objective meaning of a text to be transferred from one language to another; regardless of our own assessment of the truth of that text, we must allow it to speak for itself, truthfully, in order for it to receive a fair hearing in the target language.

The scene on Golgotha: the God-man dying on a cross between two thieves, is central to the Christian message of the entire New Testament. Christ is dying a sacrificial death potentially on behalf of both men crucified beside him. However, salvation also depends on the freely-willing human agent. Both of the thieves crucified with him are sinners, in need of his grace in order to win heaven, and they must make an act of contrition and freely-willed faith in order to receive that grace. In Luke's relation, one of the thieves mocks Jesus, angrily, spitefully. The other, known throughout the Christian tradition as "the good thief" or "the penitent thief," not only rebukes his fellow with the words "we deserve our punishment, this man is innocent," but then turns to Christ with an act of faith following that admission of guilt, and begs mercy of the Savior, who responds "this day thou shalt be with me in paradise."

And now, this is the problem with the trendy, and unscriptural, transformation of "thief" into "revolutionary." Native American quest culture omitted, there is probably no society on earth that looks upon robbery as a praiseworthy act. We moderns may think that crucifixion is a bit too stiff a penalty for shoplifters, but there are certainly few people

who would dispute the moral turpitude of a convicted, self-confessed thief. With "revolutionaries," however, we're in a different world altogether. From Spartacus through Patrick Henry to Che Guevara, most people in our egalitarian, democratic world look upon revolutionaries with sympathy, as heroes. If there are two thieves — Clark's *Commentary* calls them "cutthroats"— nailed to the crosses flanking Jesus on Golgotha, we see two sinners, two people paying a stiff penalty for a universally reproved criminal act. If these two people are now become revolutionaries, we see the unjust political murder of innocents. We see people dying for their political convictions, for freedom, and we cry foul.

And thus, certainly without so intending, the translators of the ICEL Lectionary have gutted the Biblical text of its theological sense as a key meditation on God's salvific grace, so necessary to sinful man; in setting up crosses bearing "revolutionaries" rather than "thieves," they have raised a Golgotha upon which not one, but three innocents are put to an unjust death, thus destroying the central tenet of all stripes of Christianity: the one, unique oblation of Christ on the Cross.

Not long ago I consulted Fr. Janusz A. Ihnatowicz of St. Thomas University in Houston on this very subject. Fr. Ihnatowicz is a patristic scholar as well as a highly regarded poet and translator. Speaking of the problem with *lestes*, he writes that "*lestes* means bandit. In the days of Christ, the word was used as a pejorative term for *sicarii*, or political terrorists. […] However, no evidence exists whatsoever that would allow us to understand the two thieves crucified alongside Jesus to be anything other than run of the mill robbers. To the contrary, the words of the repentant thief in Luke are the words of a common criminal; no patriotic zealot would suggest that he is 'justly suffering for the crimes he has committed' in contrast to Jesus, who is suffering innocently. I'm afraid that the ICEL translators have allowed themselves to be swayed by a certain type of political correctness."

In conclusion, can *lestes* be translated "revolutionary?" To be fair, Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* does suggest the possibility. However, the word is given as a possible equivalent rather far down the list. In translating even a simple word, we don't start at the tail end of the definitions, as the ICEL translators have done, unless we have a very good reason, usually contextual, for moving past the generally accepted equivalents to the arcane and specialist terms. And here, the ICEL translators have provided their own, socio-political context in the place of the theological context that has been valid for some two millennia. It is a bold decision that they have made.[13]

In short, this is fun, but it is a topic for academic discussions, certainly not for the people in the pews, where no footnotes, no scholarly apparatus, is available for clarification. Whatever their motivation, the ICEL translators have acted unethically in this case, inserting themselves, strongly, and I would suggest unjustly, between the author and his audience, and in so doing, distorting the message, which would have been so easy to transmit!, to people who have no way to approach this text save through their services. The Scriptures (no matter what the translator himself may think of their objective truth) are not merely aesthetic exercises in storytelling. They are "service texts," texts that point beyond themselves, texts that seek to connect with their receptors in a visceral way that is meant to change their lives. They are far too important, in this context, to play fast and loose with. To put it in another way: would we wish to see surgical textbooks translated in any fashion save the most literal? There is too much at stake here, for imprecision.

Before I end, I have one final ethical proposition for translators, also taken from the medical sphere. This enjoyable art, in which we all indulge, is not all about us. Let us not get in the way of the authors we appreciate so much ourselves, that we are moved to recreate their work in a different language. First of all, let us do no harm.

In the following chapters, I offer thirty-odd of my own translations for the critical consideration of the reader. I have been so dogmatic and sure of myself, shooting out the finger of blame at my colleagues for the ten pages or so of this introduction, that it's only fair to give others the opportunity to pay me back in kind.

Rossetti's Armadillo is an homage of sorts to George Steiner, without whose magnificent books such as *After Babel* and, especially, the *Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation*, I might never have been moved to take up the pen and attempt the craft, something which has provided me with much satisfaction over the years. That second title — unfortunately and rather inexplicably out of print since 1966 — is not only a marvelous anthology of great verse translation in English. Parenthetically speaking, what an ear Steiner has for the poetic statement in English! Not a single verse selected by him for his anthology is uninteresting, not a single one of these translations does not stand on its own as a thoroughly enjoyable English poem. But beyond this, his introduction to the book is a succinct and wise essay on the craft of translating poetry, worth more, pound for pound, than many hefty books of translation theory.

At one point in the introduction, where he mentions again that the translated poem stands forever in a natural relation to the original from which it arises, he states that the ideal translation of poetry would contain,

not only the final product, but also the original poem alongside it, as well as a running commentary by the translator elucidating his critical understanding of the original poem, and explaining the problems he had to overcome in attempting his recreation.[14] To a certain extent, I have tried to create a book that would be a fulfillment of his desideratum. Each of my English verse translations is printed along with that edition of the original poem from which I was working. It is followed by a critical essay that, I hope, will provide the reader with one further, deeper level than my translation by itself, i.e. a glimpse at the interpretational context of the original poem (as I understand it); what I drew out of it, how I understood it as a reader, before I moved on to attempt its critical recreation in English. While I don't often speak directly of the challenges I faced at this or that point of the translation in question, that matter should be palpable, explicitly or implicitly, to the reader as he or she makes his way through the essay.

There is no Dante Gabriel Rossetti in *Rossetti's Armadillo*. Obviously, I can't render English into English, no matter what sense Borges' modern translation of Cervantes "into sixteenth century Spanish" might have. The odd title of the book was suggested by the passage from Evelyn Waugh's biography of the painter and poet, which I append as a sort of preface. How marvelous it must have been for Rossetti, to have such a collection of animals! These poems of mine are a sort of zoological garden themselves. They are "critters" that I came across on my strolls and so fell in love with, that I had to bring them home with me. I believe that the metaphor of the "collector of animals" is an apt one for the verse translator, indeed, for all translators. Too often, in our desire to ramp up respect for the creative aspect of our art, we tend to rise ourselves to the level of the original poet — which word, in the original Greek *poietes*, means "maker, creator." If this my zoological garden is a shadow of the Garden of Eden, I am not God, who created the beasts, I am Adam, before whom the Lord parades them; all I do is to name them, in my own tongue.

Boulder, Colorado October 12, 2012

Notes

[1]Octavio Paz, *Traducción: literatura y literalidad* (Madrid: Tusquets Editores, 1971), p. 7.
[2] George Steiner, quoting an "adage familiar to Novalis and Humboldt," in *After Babel* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), p. 250.
[3] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Wybór wierszy*, trans. Stanisław Barańczak (Kraków: Znak, 1981).
[4] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *33 wiersze*, trans. Stanisław Barańczak (Kraków: Arka, 1992).
[5] Kornei Čukovskij, *The Art of Translation* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), p. 25.
[6] Tedi López Mills, *Muerte en la rúa Augusta* (Oaxaca / Monterrey: Almadia, 2009).
[7] Czesław Miłosz, *Selected Poems* (New York: Ecco Press, 1980).
[8] Pierre Corneille, *Le Cid* (Paris: Larousse, 1990).
[9] Stanisław Wyspiański, *Cyd*, in *Dzieła zebrane* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1960), Vol. 9.
[10] Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 2010), p. 58.
[11] And enculturation. Christian "field translators" of the Scriptures, as Eugene A. Nida points out, are not only encouraged, but expected, to fit the unchangeable message to the realia of the target culture as closely as possible. "White as egret feathers" in place of "white as snow" for cultures that have never experienced frozen precipitation is the tamest example of this.
[12] Martin Luther, "On Translating: an Open Letter," *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), Vol. 35, p. 195.
[13] To prove to what extent the understanding of the identity of the "two thieves" on Calvary is traditional and self-evident, one has only to consider the well-known epigram of Voltaire on his portrait being set between those of La Beaumelle and de Fréron: *Le Jay vient de mettre Voltaire / Entre La Beaumelle and de Fréron: / Ce serait vraiment un Calvaire, / S'il s'y trouvait un bon larron.* The splendid joke would be incomprehensible were it not for the author's certainty that the mere mention of three persons on Calvary would be understood immediately by the reader as the innocent Christ, and two malefactors, thieves, not "revolutionaries." There is no better gauge of the immediate meaning of a word than its use in a joke or witticism.
[14] George Steiner, *The Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1966), pp. 34-35. His exact words are: "Each poem in this book should have the original on the facing page. A prose paraphrase, perhaps bracketing the principal difficulties, should fill the margin as in a polyglot Bible. This is the only completely honest format for a reader and user of poetic translation." Steiner's ideal will perhaps be more closely approximated by the series of hyper-documented translations from the Chinese envisioned by the University of Oklahoma project described at the outset of this essay. The final, published product, as explained by Prof. Jonathan Stallings, the initiator of the project, is not

to be a polished literary translation, but something approaching the interlinear cribs popular at one time for teaching the basics of Latin poetry. They will be books, he admits, not for the general readership, but rather for experts interested in translation *per se*, and perhaps most interesting to those who need it least: those familiar with Chinese and English, and the Chinese author in question. The format of *Rossetti's Armadillo*, while not as perfect an illustration of Steiner's ideal, seeks to approach it nonetheless with the appended explications in a more reader-friendly fashion. The originals are not necessarily critical editions of the poems in question; they are the texts from which I was working. They appear without any intervention on my part, save for updating the spelling, where advisable, as in, for example, Pushkin's poem "Demon" and Voiture's "Rondeau." In other places, such as in Louise Labé's elegy, and the Hussite hymn in Chapter 9, I have left even this alone.

CHAPTER 1

SAPPHO (GREEK, FL. 600 BC)

He seems to me the equal of the gods
whatever man sits face to face with you,
close by, enraptured, giving ear to all
the sweet things you say.

Your laugh, so full of love and raw delight
it stuns my heart with a fearful passion—
for should I see you, even catch a glimpse
of you, I grow dumb,

my tongue is petrified, and straightaway
a slender fire races beneath my skin;
my eyes are numbed with dark, and in my ears
a clamor riots.

Sweat bathes me tip to toe, and a tremor
seizes me wholly. Paler than dry grass
I blanch, with inches only between me
and the pit of death.

Φαίνεταί μοι κῆνος ἴσος θέοισιν
ἔμμεν' ὤνηρ, ὄττις ἐνάντιός τοι
ἰζάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἆδυ φωνεί-
σας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαίσας ἰμμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν
κάρζαν ἐν στήθεσσιν ἐπεπτόασεν,
ὠς γὰρ ἔς τ' ἴδω, βρόχε', ὠς με φώνας
οὐδεν ἔτ' ἴκει,

ἀλλὰ κὰμ μὲν γλῶσσα πέπαγε, λέπτον
δ'αὔτικα χρῷ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμακεν,
ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδεν ὄρημ', ἐπιρρόμ-
βεισι δ' ἄκουαι,

ἀ δέ μ' ἴδρως κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύην
φαίνομαι.[1]

At the very beginning of our tradition, which some hold to be male-dominated, stands the figure of one of the greatest lyric poets of all time—and she is a woman. Sappho, Sappho of Eressus, who flourished on the island of Lesbos around the year 600 BC. Sappho, then, is a Lesbian poet. But, we should add, the same can be said for her friend, the male poet Alcaeus. For the adjective, in the first instance, is purely a geographical term.

What little we know of Sappho's life can be summed up in a few lines. She was born of noble blood, and lived during a time of civil war on her native island. She was married to a rich merchant from the island of Andros, named Kerkylas, and with him had a daughter Kleis, whose name is immortalized in several of the verse fragments that have come down to us.[2] Some scholars, like Alicja Szastyńska-Siemionowa, refer to a period of political exile, while others, Constantine A. Trypanis among them, see this as an unverifiable legend. Although she was widowed at a young age, there is no evidence to support the tale that she committed suicide, because of a later unrequited love, by leaping from the Leucadian Cliff—as in 1801 Antoine-Jean Gros painted her, in the best romantic tradition, against a moiling, moonlit heaven, her eyes searching out the stars, her arms wrapped round her lyre.

There yet remains the question of her homosexuality. Scores of critics, better and worse informed, have argued for and against this supposed character trait, basing their arguments on the slim trove of Sappho's poetic fragments that we possess. Indeed, all of the poems and fragments that have come down to us from Sappho's pen, with the few exceptions of short stanzas such as [Αστερες μὲν ἀμφὶ κάλαν σελάνναν ("The Stars about the Beautiful Moon,") and [Εσπερε πάντα φέρων ὅσα φαίνολις ἐσκέδασ' αὔως ("Hesperus, thou who bringest /back/ all things") have emotional attachment to a female as their subject. This poem is no different. But at the outset, we must repeat the prime caveat for any critic dealing with a lyric poem: the narrator must not be identified with the poet without concrete evidence for the claim;[3] the narrator may be a persona, a fiction. Not all lyric poets are "self-revealing," and, as Sue Blundell points out, the poems themselves prove little either way: