

*Translation of Poetry | Poetry of Translation:  
Some Thoughts on Transpoiesis<sup>1</sup>*

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*The process of translation is identical to poetic creation.*

– OCTAVIO PAZ

One Definition of Poetry: What gets lost in the translation.

One Definition of Translation: Transferring an object from one place to another; displacing a thing from here to there.

When a bowl of water is moved from sink to table, some water may spill and be lost. When a poem is translated, some poetry may leak out and be lost.

The goal of the translator: to keep as much water in the bowl as possible.



Everything in the poem communicates. The whole of the poem must be taken into account in the translation.

Meanings, sounds, and shapes of words; the agglomerates they form when combined into lines, lines into stanzas, stanzas into poems; the form of the poem, the aesthetic forces that shape and define it, the literary tradition that stands behind it.

Translating a poem implies transferring all of those things from one place (language, culture, tradition) to another. Or not. (On purpose.)

<sup>1</sup> This essay first appeared in French in *Œil de bœuf* 22 (2001), and in English in *Aufgabe* 2 (2001). It has been slightly revised here.

## *Paraphrasis*

VALÉRY: One does not finish a translation; one abandons it.



## *On “faithful” translations*

One is tempted to ask: faithful to what?

A facetious question, perhaps, but in answering it the translator determines for himself and all of his readers what the poem is ultimately “about.” This is a weighty decision, for his readers’ experience of the poem, their contact with the writer in question, and their glimpse – however brief – of the “foreign” culture and literary history reflected by the translated poem, will be informed by the translator’s perception of the work and the manner in which he translates it.

So...

Is it better to translate as closely – as “literally” – as possible and perhaps lose the beauty, the “poetry” of the original, or should one attempt to recreate as fully as possible the experience of the original poem, sacrificing to whatever extent what the poet actually “said” to achieve that goal?

DICTUM: Translations are like women: the beautiful ones are not faithful and the faithful ones are not beautiful.



## *Translating Constraint*

You translate the constraint, in addition to (at times, instead of) the poem. In an honest translation, priority must be given to the limitations that inform the original – whether a

traditional verse umptina or an Oulipian zippogram – even if the “content” of the poem will suffer as a result.

A translation of an anagrammatic poem that is not anagrammatic itself is a lie.<sup>2</sup>



### *The Impossibility of Translating Constraint*

An anagram cannot be translated. At least, not entirely. Certainly, the words formed by permutating the letters of the original words can be translated. However, such a translation fails to convey the constraint. Such a translation fails.

*Difficulty:* The closer the poem is to the nuts and bolts of the original language (as are poems featuring a constraint related to the mechanics [orthography, syntax, puns, etc.] of the original language), the more difficult the translation.

If the constraint is deeply rooted in the original language (like the anagram, for example), strict translation is impossible, and *transpoiesis* is necessary: one must recreate a work in the target language using the same constraint. One does not translate the words composing the original poem, one translates (in the sense of carrying over from one language/literary tradition/culture) the creative act from which the original poem is sprung.

EXAMPLE: The following anagrammatic poem was written by Hans Bellmer and Nora Mitrani (with the collaboration of Joë Bousquet), on a fragment from Nerval: “Rose au cœur violet.” Two other poems follow; the first a German version on the same Nerval fragment by Unica Zürn and Hans Bellmer, the second, my own English version. The second and third poems are not translations of the first; they are recreations *written through* the same constraint from the same source fragment.

<sup>2</sup> And the reader may counter that the translation of an anagrammatic poem that *is* anagrammatic is not a translation. The reader is right; see below.

*Rose au cœur violet*

Se vouer à toi ô cruel  
A toi, couleuvre rose  
O, vouloir être cause  
Couvre-toi, la rue ose  
Ouvre-toi, ô la sucrée

Va où suréel côtoie  
O, l'oiseau crève-tour  
Vil os écœurera route  
Cœur violé osa tuer

Sœur à voile courte – écolier vous a outré  
Curé, où Eros t'a violé – où l'écu osera te voir  
Où verte coloriée sua – cou ouvert sera loi

O rire sous le couteau  
Roses au cœur violet

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*Rosen mit violetterm Herz*

Hortensie reitet zum Olm  
Sie loht im Zorne, meutert  
Hoer, Untier, Mimose lenzt  
Entröte sie im Holzturm  
Lunte her, zittere im Moos  
Turmotter, ziehe mein Los  
Immer zeitlose Totenuhr

Romhure zotet mit Eselin – Listviehmormone zetert  
Nimm Lottes Eiterzeh vor – Lusttote, nimm rohe Reize  
Heize Monstrumteile rot – los, hetze mir vir Motten

Vorzeiten-Himmel rostet  
Ins leere Ruhm-Motto Zeit  
Zieht Reim vom ersten Lot

Im letzten Ei Rest vom Ohr  
Violetter Zenith-Sommer

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*Rose With The Violet Heart*

Soothe leather with rivet,  
thee lit. O thwart Eros' hive,  
overthrow it. The she-eel at  
the raw, lithe torso: Eve hit  
it here (that sore) with love.

There – violate others with  
a slit. He hit two over three  
tho' their earthiest vowel  
over-oil thee with threats.

Throatier thieves who let totalities hover, whet her  
thievish tool where treat wove stealthier, o thither,  
here shoot what trite veil heaviest root let whither.

Ætherish whorlet veto it –  
rose with the violet heart.

The translator's task is harder than the poet's; the poet creates, the translator recreates. His choices are both limited and dictated by someone else whose priorities were self-imposed. The translator is not a writer. He is condemned (or permitted, depending on how you look at it) to re-write only.



### *Translating Sound*

Translating from a language which is not a language; can this be done? Does “translation” have any meaning in this context? Can one translate a “sound poem” – Kruchenykh’s *zaum* poem “дир бул щыл,” for example – and if so, how would one go about it? What would one actually translate? Here is the *zaum* original, followed by English, then French versions of the poem.

дир бул щыл	dir bul shchyl	dir boul chtchyl
убешщур	ubeshshchur	oubechchtchour
скум	skum	skoum
вы со бу	vy so bu	vy so bou
р л эз	r l ez	r l èze

Though written in *zaum* (not Russian) and thus semantically transparent, the poem does contain potential phonetic associations for Russian speakers which will undoubtedly be different if not non-existent for non-Russian speakers. Strictly speaking, there is nothing here to translate,<sup>3</sup> and most “translations” of this poem are nothing more than transliterations; they seek to reproduce the sounds of the original words but do not convey their associations.

<sup>3</sup> Well, almost nothing: “вы” is a Russian word (meaning “you”).

Perhaps *transpoiesis* – rather than transliteration – would be appropriate here: rather than merely transliterate this work, the translator might recreate a work having similar associations in the target language (which, of course, leads to another set of problems...)<sup>4</sup>



Transliteration is more akin to musical transposition than to translation *stricto sensu*. This because we are dealing only with sound and meaning is absent.

The transliterator’s task resembles that of a composer transposing a clarinette melody for the flute: notate the sounds of one orchestral voice that the same notes may sound when played by another.

Translating is more like orchestration: in orchestrating, the composer transfers a work from one musical idiom (the solo piano for example) to another (an entire orchestra), recreating it for a different musical context. The original work is the both the point of departure and final destination of the orchestration. It will be transformed in the process, though it will remain the same piece.



*On “successful translations”*

Again, this begs the questions: successful with respect to what and determined by whom? (See comments on “faithful” translations, above.)

The only honest definition of a successful translation can be: the translator was successful in conveying to his readers what he determined was most important in the poem he translated.

4 Namely, does one then translate the associations? For example, if Kruchenykh’s *zaum* poem has a “Tartar tinge,” as the poet himself declared, should one attempt to find English associations for Tartar (be there any), or does one select another language having a similar relationship to and resonances in English that Tartar may have in Russian (a Native American language, for example), and write a new poem thus “tinged”?

As most of his readers will never know what was at stake in the operation, they cannot judge the translation's success. At best, they can conclude that it "reads well" in the target language, or doesn't.



### *Paraphrasis*

DUKE ELLINGTON: If it reads good it *is* good.



### *A Dilemma*

How does one translate a poem from a language whose poetic tradition differs from that of the language into which one is translating?

For example, how is one to translate a modern or contemporary poem written in rhymed and metered verse into a language whose modern or contemporary poetry has lost its verse tradition (i.e. translating Mayakovsky into English), or – more problematic still – into a language which has never had a poetic tradition resembling that of conventional Western versification (i.e. Ronsard into Korean or Arabic)?

Or again, how does one translate a poetic work written in a form common to one language into another language in which that form has no currency or in which that form remains distinctly "foreign" (i.e. translating the limerick into Spanish or the *renga* into French)? Does one retain the form of the original, with its distinctive (but meaningless, in the target language) structure, meter, rhyme, etc., or does one attempt to infuse with original poem with features familiar to the target language (like rhyming English haiku translations), or perhaps "translate" the form or genre of the original into an equivalent poetic form existent in the poetic tradition of the target language?

In solving a different, but analogous problem, Paz, Roubaud, Sanguinetti and Tomlinson – when they set about composing a Western *renga* – did not retain the Japanese form, but chose instead to write a sequence of collective sonnets. Paz noted in a preface: "It goes

without saying that rather than appropriate a genre we decided to implement a system of poetic textual production.... And *renga* is above all a practice.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus it was not a poetic form that was carried over from one tradition to another, but rather the act of writing poetry itself. The concern was not to preserve an artifact, but an art; to focus not on a creation, but on recreation; not to deal so much with translation but with *transpoiesis*.



### *Paraphrasis*

DYLAN THOMAS: I am not interested in translation. I am interested in translations.



It is perhaps best to not spend too much time discussing translation – it keeps one from translating. Problems arise and are solved, or not, yet writing continues.

“Yes, but,” one might retort, “translating poetry is a special task.” Indeed it is, in fact it is virtually tautological. If we agree with Paz’s notion that the act of translation is indistinguishable from poetic creation, we must conclude that – paradoxically – to translate poetry is to write it, to live the creative act that ultimately results in a poem at once the same and yet different from its source. If we do agree with this, the adage *Traduttore traditore* will need to be reworked – *Traduttore creatore* would seem more appropriate.

5 *Renga* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 20. My translation.