

LARRY KEARNEY

ON TRANSLATION

I was talking to Ben Hollander about translation in general and said in passing, “I think we all need to first prove that we’re capable of translating from English to English.”

The thought stuck with me. So I started doing that, translating from English to English, and a book came in rather quickly, a day or so, and in its final form there were poems from other languages, too, all rendered without reference to the originals. The effort was not to duplicate the objects that were the originals, but to present the translations that occurred in me as poems shed themselves off the originals as transferred substance, like dying leaves off a tree. I take it as a fact that the substance of a poem is poetry, and that poetry comes or goes as it pleases. As Jack Spicer said to me once, ‘there aren’t good poems and bad poems—there are poems and non-poems.’

My access to the poem (more its access to me, really), started with the apples falling in the beginning of Lawrence’s *Ship of Death*. I can see them now, and over the years they’ve extended themselves in many forms.

So I’ve been translating.

When I think now of translation I think of transmittable substance rather than an occasion of art, and in many ways I think the most valuable traditional translations are the prose paragraphs at the bottoms of the pages in the old Penguin editions.

For me, art is a desperate convenience (or inconvenience when it recognizes an audience and curries favor). It requires a lifetime of attention to matters that the poem itself as it chooses to appear will swallow whole, smirking. *One has to be able*, however, and the heightened, hinting tactility that art permits has helped many a poem get to the page. As have the poet’s reading, passion, obstinacy, rage, exhaustion and refusal to be initiated.

The job, after all, is to be able to say what the poem wants to say when it wants to say it, and in terms of execution what’s required is everything the mind can hold coupled to a willingness to let go. So not only do I not think I have an obligation to render the particular trappings of art in a poem from another language, I think that the only significant translation is descriptive

of the poem (or poems), the original has left behind. The experience of a poem, as opposed to a non-poem, is poetry. Verse is different, and there are many well-known, well-thought of and well-wrought pieces of verse that are susceptible to traditional translation (which has never much worked, anyway, but that's another matter).

What I mean to say is that the point of the poem is the transmission of poetry and that poetry is pure content the presentation of which requires an initial act of translation from a cloud of unknowing to a cloud of movable words. It takes what you have and uses it, and the result is never adequate to the experience. So to attempt to duplicate what has had to be a failure, however close it's come, seems to me a trivial game and I'd rather try to let the poem do what it does best, i.e. propagate itself. The content of the poem will always be on some level uncommunicable—which is the passion of poetry and the specter of gnosis.

I mean no disrespect to the original poems, traditional translators or to versification, for that matter, but the experience of poetry is an experience of something happening. To the extension of that end, a translation should happen too. The event may involve the living moment, or a proof of the present in form of ghost, or a bent geographic placement in a hallway between two roomsful of voices, but it will always be simultaneously real and unreal and make a demand for words that just aren't available.

A successful translation will open the fugitive doors in the originals. Sometimes the landscapes will be different, but what could be better than that? I think that complaining about a translation would require me to take my flimsy personality a lot more seriously than it deserves. In matters of art, god knows I've put in my time, but in matters of poetry there's just an instant, and it already in the past.

My wife points out that the implication here is that only poets can translate, and while I could be glib and say yeah, I don't really have an answer to the question as it seems to me that while my own intensely democratic cast of mind rejects the implied Calvinism, there is something there.

But I mentioned the refusal to be initiated and taken up into a structure, whether the refusal

is public or private and sly, and there's something there, too, as if the poem recognizes the available isolatos and proceeds accordingly. But I also think that for every human being there's a poem somewhere that will render him open and speechless and needing to speak, and to that degree everyone is capable, however unlikely that capability may seem on the surface. A guy in a bar once told me that there was one poem that he thought was the most beautiful thing he ever heard and I asked him what it was and he gave me an extemporaneous reading of a version of the poem that begins "Whither thou goest I will go," and his version, in the noise and the lights and the smell of the beer, was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever heard. He had translated it, allowing the poem to move around the stuff in his head as it chose. This is as good as it gets, I thought at the time.