

The Compound Ghost

On Poetic Translation

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*'I caught the sudden look of some dead master
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled,
Both one and many; in the brown baked features
The eyes of a familiar compound ghost
Both intimate and unidentifiable.'*

T.S. Eliot: Little Gidding II:39-43

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1. A New and Present Life

Poetic translation is an act of re-creation: it is the begetting of a new life: it is the re-energising in one's own terms of the product of an alien tongue. Alien because it is not one's own, or alien because it is one's own transformed by time, and become less accessible. We translate in order to re-vitalise, to lay claim to a text, and to reclaim a text for others. A true and good translation of a past classic is a work of resurrection, the raising to life of that which is otherwise forever entombed in the past, an act of strange alchemy conducted in the crucible of a living mind, a crucible to which is added not only the artefact produced by an original mind, but also the ghostly presence of that first animator. From the elements is made a mystic compound, a fusion of forms and voices.

The act of translation, if it is carried out with all the resources at the translator's command, those of a translator properly equipped for the task, conjures a potent spirit, a spirit of intellect and feeling, of knowledge and perception, which is a product neither of one mind nor the other, but a miraculous consequence of both. A ghost, the only kind of ghost that can exist, a ghost in the mind, stands beside the writer's desk, gazes over the translator's shoulder, rests a hand there, and through this present will and the past form imposes its past will on this present form. The ghost conjured seeks its immortality, the only immortality that can exist, immortality in memory, in *re-interpretation*.

The translator's task is to release the memory embedded in language, and re-embed that memory in fresh language. The translator's art is that of metamorphosis, to

give life in a new shape to what lived and breathed, what may still live and breathe, in its primary shape. It is to lead from its source a spring of water, and channel it towards a new pool of understanding, a still pool beneath the bank, a *remanso* in Lorca's terms, a residual calm not swept on by the flow, in which the source finds fresh presence, while leaving the stream free to run on into other pools, to reach other translators and creators, in that endless course which constitutes 'the tradition'.

The Muse, who is the symbolic goddess of that tradition, the Muse who is ever-young and ever-present, ever-watchful, and ever-inviolable, is the second shade at the translator's shoulder, she into whose eyes the writer always gazes in peril and with awe, she whose light is the matrix within which literary creation has its root, the matrix that shapes the embryo and gives birth with pain to the offspring, and loves with an equal love every one of its miraculous children, despite their faults and shortcomings.

Alchemy, metamorphosis, resurrection: metaphors of an active and toilsome process that is itself a metaphor, since the Latin *translatus* means *carried across*: metaphors neither too strong, nor too fanciful, to describe that process, since minor authors may indeed live by it and great ones frequently die of it. A dead translation is indeed a mere corpse, and translation may betray and destroy, just as it may on occasions transfigure and exceed, making a fine translation the graceful embellishment of an ever-living monument. The translation of great poetry in particular asks nothing less than the total engagement of the literary mind of the translator: it demands Aesculapius' divine skill, the vision of blind Tiresias', and Frankenstein's ability to

make the energy of our own lightning, our own living spark, pass into the compound carcass, till it rises from its couch, to terrify us with its reality, and move us by its tenderness.

And the resurrectionist's task is also fraught with danger; at worst the work of a body-snatcher, a grave-robber, appropriating body-parts, idly dismembering the flesh of the dear departed or even the still-breathing, for the sake of knowledge, plaudits, or worse. At best the translator is a semi-divinity, whose new-created shade can enter the tomb with all the other shades its siblings, and be resurrected with them in the only possible judgement day, that of the tradition: at worst the translator is a criminal of sorts, even a murderer. But the danger of the task is not a reason for shirking it: after all the punishment for failure is not death, merely that oblivion which overtakes everything mortal and transient, and the process is essential, part of the life-blood of literature, without which it might become a series of isolated gasps from dying torches, rather than as it must be, the passing on of the one bright flame from generation to generation. So, let us be brave.

And let us dispel half-truths. Let us accept the translation of poetry as the most difficult of literary tasks, and the most risky, while refusing the often heard definition of poetry as 'that which is untranslatable from one language to another'. Poetry is never untranslatable, though elements of it may be: it is simply not *replicable* in another language than its own. To demand replication is unreasonable, yet to deny translation, which by its very definition and metaphor always leaves the original intact

and un-violated, in order to set up a fresh image of it, is unfruitful.

The issue is not whether the original can be replicated but whether there are *values* in it that can be unlocked, and if so whether they can be unlocked in such a way that the original is not reduced but extended: its power increased, through its influence, its echoes, its reflections, and its ability to generate a ‘new original’ in new words while never ceasing to remain enshrined in its own. To steal a complete creation without acknowledgement is indeed to plagiarise it, but to re-create it while acknowledging its primacy is to pay homage to it, as Pound well understood in his *Propertius*. And therefore all such re-creations have validity, and there exists a whole spectrum of parameters that may drive translation, of which the desire for ‘accuracy’ or ‘equivalence’ is but one.

Behind all genuine translation there lies this urge to re-claim a value, or even many values, for good or less good ends. We seize on texts that are not yet dead, not stable; not sacred or enshrined; not yet ‘finished’ because the tradition is not finished: on texts that speak to us, on texts that have something yet to offer us. If the need is great, if the values are essential, then they are possessed with terrible urgency. We invoke the greater voice, and its authority, we rekindle a light to shine it on our own times. The values we seek may be moral, social, political, literary, or of some other nature. We may need to reclaim those values, values such as ‘piety’, or ‘truth’, ‘friendship’ or ‘love’, ‘freedom’ or ‘order’, ‘beauty’ or ‘form’: the precise values we seek may even be hidden from us, veiled by a feeling, a glimpse of some composite holistic quality, such

as that which emanates from a Sappho's fragmented verse, a hard to analyze, yet easy to appreciate quality, which language, and above all poetry through its intensity and concentration, can communicate, even beyond the tomb.

Great translations depend upon sympathy of values, which may even override irreconcilable differences of views. So the republican may make an excellent job of translating the royalist, the atheist of translating some religious poet, the pacifist of translating the Iliad, relying in each case on common values which illuminate translator and author, and pass through their linked symbiotic 'mind' in the process of re-emergence, despite their differences. For this is the mystery, that language enshrines *mind* not merely words, and that in the true meeting of languages, of translator and original text, there is above all a meeting of intellects, through the partial re-creation in the mind of the translator of the thought processes of the primary author. Without that genetic commonality of human psyches, without that shared inner grasp, public language itself would not exist, let alone the sharing of whole thought complexes. That which may belong to some yet to be discovered non-terrestrial physical structure and culture might indeed be untranslatable, but 'I am human, and consider nothing human alien to me.' (Terence: *Heauton Timoroumenos*)

To grasp the detail but lose the *values*, that is the unforgivable failure in translation. To fall short in the detail but grasp the values, that is qualified success. And qualified success is all we dare hope for, since even to exceed the original is a form of failure, though the legacy it may leave to the new language may be inestimable. Qualified success

is the best outcome, and expert criticism assists with the process of qualification and assessment, just as linguistic skill is essential for the process of translation itself. I can think of a small number of translations that read 'better' than the original in its own tongue. I can think of many that read much worse, so that the balance is on the side of failure. But the qualified successes are hard fought for and well won.

Through translation, then, we seek to discover or re-create values, or gain authority from the past for our values, as Dante and Petrarch sought values in, and support from, the texts of a greater Rome. But there are many other reasons for undertaking the task. It may be the desire purely to communicate to others an achievement or greatness we admire, and along with that achievement the values it embodies, implicitly rather than explicitly. It may be a desire to strengthen our own grasp on life, to seek reassurance, to confirm our own values, to carry out an act which is the inverse of Odysseus' offering of blood to the dead, before he can summon the spirits: for it may be their blood, their life, their strength we seek in the darkness beyond the sacrificial pit, and perhaps it is we who are summoned, and by something, or someone greater than ourselves, by the presence of meaning locked in the given text. Merely to bathe in the light of a great mind is often a sufficient privilege and a reward if any reward is needed. Merely to enter into an inner dialogue, to be stimulated, to assist oneself in one's own inward development, merely to engage, may be a sufficient motive.

I would maintain then that every text is by definition translatable, because every text can and must be

interpreted, and that our understanding of the process is sharpened by a close consideration of what can be carried over into the new language and what cannot, of what depends on the original inspiration and what depends on this new one, since all fine translation needs inspiration not merely competence. The test of success is that the new text stands in its own right, that it is enjoyable in its own right, while both revitalising its original and communicating the values of that original, values that are located within that original's 'meaning'.

It is because language enshrines and expresses *meaning*, that it can be translated. If a language wholly failed to convey any present meaning to us, not even by 'direct pointing' at objects of the senses, then it could not be translated. The more distant and alien the language and culture of the original is from us, the more difficult it is for us to comprehend its substance. Translation starts from the search for 'meaning', and the attempt to re-create it, that meaning which expresses the maximum amount of value to us, to the present. It also follows that since the achievement of maximum value is at least as dependent on our own needs and language as on the original author's needs and language, then literal translation, in the sense of as 'accurate' a replacement as possible of word by word and phrase by phrase, may not always deliver us the maximum value. Equally, the overriding needs or desires of the translator may impose a meaning that deviates too far from the original for the result to be considered a translation, so that it is best called an adaptation, an imitation, an invocation or homage, yet every kind of success enriches

the language and the tradition. Do the work: we can argue later, if we choose, about the terms!

It also follows that the texts a given age considers irrelevant, that fail to inspire it, whose values are too remote from it, will not be much translated, and must await a shift in values: for translation is ultimately born out of desire, and a fine translation is born out of love. If it were not so, then the completion of such an act of true translation would not feel, as it does, like separation from a friend or lover. There is always in truth a profound sensation as the ghost returns to the grave, even though its offspring remains in the world above.

The relationship is in many ways a sacred marriage, a marriage of author and translator, a marriage born of yearning and necessity, of longing and fate. It is a marriage between two minds, where one is embodied in the text, illuminated also by whatever is known about the original author and the text, and the other is revealed by the process of translation, and illuminated by the qualities and skills it brings to that process. Both minds are then embodied in the mutual meeting, which takes place within the translator's mind alone, which in turn simulates and modifies analogues of the creative processes which took place in the original mind, and gives birth to the offspring of both. This concept of a fully engaged mind (that of the translator) invoking another's mind, through genetic and cultural empathy, and blending it into itself (with consequences also for its own development), raises a key issue when we consider the viability of automatic or electronic translation: that issue centres on the machine's ability to elicit meaning and therefore value from a text.

The metaphor of marriage, like that of resurrection, or transmutation, fails to capture the full strangeness and uniqueness of translation as a process, but it may serve to indicate that process's dual nature. Language is so intimately bound up with our very being that no metaphor exhausts the complexity of its relationship with the self.

2. The Sacred Marriage

The ideal marriage is a marriage of individuals: and in that sense a marriage of equals. It is less than ideal if the parties are unable to communicate on some essential level. In the alchemical marriage, in the metamorphosing union of author and translator, the onus of communication is on the translator who effectively *takes* in marriage, rather than on the author who is *taken*, and who, unless he or she is still physically alive and participates in the act of translation, is essentially passive as regards the present and future, though vital in regard to the past. The translator can only reasonably enter into such a marriage if he or she brings to it various crucial qualities (and I am thinking predominantly of the translation of poetry in all this, true poetry, as a condensed and heightened form of language, possessed of specific energies, innate integrity, and moulded under the heat and pressure of personal need).

The original author is assumed to have already possessed a number of these qualities, namely a developed poetic spirit and mind, a desire to express meaning and value, and a certain expertise in communicating in the original language. The original author 'brings' the finished text to the marriage, imbued with meaning and value, with

form, however slight, with the cultural richness of its inception, and the state of the source language at the time of the text's creation. That is the initial dowry.

The translator, if this is to be a true marriage of equals, is likewise required to bring to the marriage a substantially developed poetic spirit and mind, coupled with a grasp of essential meanings and values as expressed in and beyond the text, and an ability to write with expertise and fluency in the target language.

A developed poetic mind and spirit can only be achieved by intensive practice of the art of poetry, combined with intensive reading and listening. And the fuller and more thoughtful the lived and the poetic lives, the more the translator brings to the text. Without depth one cannot translate depth.

A grasp of essential meanings and values derives from culture and tradition, from experience and contemplation, from study and learning, from assimilated familiarity with the human condition, from an understanding of the original author's cultural, historical, literary and philosophical context, from intuitions as to the author's intent, and from a deep empathy, and identification. Thus there are authors a given translator should never touch because there is no empathy there, no deeper love. What is produced from such a union may still have a being of its own, but it is unlikely to contain the illuminating spark.

And the translator needs linguistic and literary skill of a high order *in the target language*. A paradox of translation, a point that is seldom stressed, is that native fluency in the original language is *not* a primary requirement for the process, although a sufficient

understanding of the text is of course essential if the ‘translation’ is intended to be at all ‘faithful’. That is why many fine poets have been able to create excellent translations simply using accurate cribs. There are dictionaries available to aid them, there is often a common linguistic culture, for example that out of which the Romance languages developed, and there is a pressure of meaning and value which often points the translator towards the ‘right’ words, and frequently in ways the native speaker might through familiarity have missed.

The embarrassment often expressed over the use of literal cribs is unnecessary, since it is *meaning* that is vital, and if that is grasped the translator can overcome deficiencies of fluency and even linguistic knowledge. That fine poets can greatly influence their peers with adaptations from cribs is witnessed by the facts: Pound’s Chinese and Lowell’s Russian imitations, for example. What is ‘translated’ is intrinsically closer in the latter case, given more of a shared culture than in the former, but the value to *English* is inestimable in both cases.

However translating from a crib without a good grasp of the source language feels like translating through a veil. The outcome might be excellent, but the translator has no way of knowing the degree to which the text has been misrepresented. Only informed and sensitive criticism by those with expertise in both poetry and the source language can help.

What is not optional for the translator is a high level of expertise in manipulating the *target* language, in which the ‘best’ equivalent meanings for individual words and phrases must be found, among all the multiple meanings of

individual words and phrases in that target language. Words indeed may need to be translated by phrases, enhanced by bracketed explanations or linked notes, re-ordered and re-cast, tenses altered, nouns singularised or pluralized, etc, etc. And if the translation is an ‘adaptation’ or ‘imitation’, then the grasp of meaning and intent, context and tradition, in the original language, and creativity in the target language, take even greater precedence over mere fluency in the source language itself.

No one, then, is debarred from attempting translation, but no one is assured of achievement either. To be, for example, a fine French scholar and yet unable to write poetic English is no guarantee of success in translating a Baudelaire, let alone a Mallarmé. Conversely, the ability to write fine English is no excuse if the result is wilful mutilation of an author’s meaning and context, or a translation made inaccurately to no specific purpose. Yet all *creative* adaptation is valid, because it stimulates perception of the original, and only a worthless original is damaged by it.

We should likewise remember that the ‘true’ original does not exist even in the *original* language, except as artefact, since every reader understands and *interprets* an original poem differently, and the author’s own intent may itself have been lost in creation: who indeed has written the ‘perfect’ poem, or even been certain always of their intent? But there is a degree of ‘closeness’ to the original that can be felt and understood, can be argued over and criticised. The translator may be happier creating a translation that is ‘close’ and ‘accurate’ than a free adaptation, yet adaptation can also be immensely rewarding. Pound’s *Propertius* is

fine: even though we know this is ‘another’ Propertius to the author we perceive when we read the Latin. Homage indeed: to create another self for the man: which in turn does not quell the urge to translate the original Propertius more ‘closely’, and especially on behalf of an audience that has no Latin.

There is pleasure in both, and the ‘real’ Propertius and Pound’s *Propertius* are in fruitful tension: we cannot ask Propertius himself for his view. Some authors might be flattered by translation, others disconcerted or irritated by it. It is a marriage (albeit one-sided in inception) and marriages are full of flattery, and irritation. Yet once a work is exposed to the light who then ‘owns’ it: is it the author or its audience or both? The original artefact, carrying an aspect of its author’s mind and creativity, ‘belongs’ to the Muse and the tradition, not to any one individual, not even to the original author. *Pace*, you lovers of profit and copyright – neither has anything to do with art or literature. That is why we find a deep and profound beauty in anonymous work, ancient art and folk art in particular, whose creators we have no knowledge of, and that glow with the warmth of a free gift, endlessly given.

What the translator must bring to the process, above all, is that mingled respect, love, liking, and admiration that we bring to friendship, deep relationship, and marriage. The love is by definition one sided, more like unrequited love? Well, there is a bond nevertheless, mutual love of the Muse. They who separately love a discipline share that love or liking by default. Mutual love and respect for the Muse, and the translator’s liking and respect for the original author, cement the relationship in the translator’s living

mind. A peculiar intimacy arises, across time, through the effort of understanding and creation, in which difference is appreciated, there is laughter and irony with respect to the original, there is internal dispute and dissent, but also a ‘mutual’ influence, between the simulated original and the living translator, a melting and convergence. The eternal strangeness of the ‘other’ is bridged for a moment, as it is in life, by close attention.

It is not so much a matter of equity, or equality, or *equivalence*, but rather a matter of absorption, re-creation and giving. An interpretive musician may feel a similar effect when faced with a Beethoven sonata, only in translation the re-creation in language is arguably more demanding and closer to original creation. But there is an element of the same melding. For a director to bring a script to life, in the theatre or cinematically, demands just such creative engagement with the text, an infusion of modernity, a meeting of minds, further refined by the cast’s own subtle re-interpretations of their parts.

And the process is a process of tightrope-walking in which inattention spells disaster, in which we must work ever more closely, ever more carefully, but with inspiration, to ‘carve the backs of the statues’ as the medieval masons did in detailed ‘invisible’ tribute to their deity, our aim being balance, the conferral of legitimacy, and a form of ‘accuracy’ or equivalence with which we can rest content. A dull, an uncommitted translation, after all, is a curse: a shining-bright one an act of faith and a blessing.

In translation, as in true marriage, the translator seeks mirror and mask, self and opposite, stimulus and challenge, affection and arousal. We nurture the obscured, neglected

and misunderstood in our partner, we discover and enshrine values: we seek and find love, truth and beauty. And the values within that marriage are restless values, as love, truth and beauty are: they may engender conflict, they need to be continually questioned and retrieved. Values are not written on stone forever, a misunderstanding displayed by all established codes and dogmatic religions: human values must be re-lived and re-created in every generation, and in the single self, and not in ignorance, but within the tradition, as a development and a re-creation, in a critique, and transformation of the past.

3. The Retrieval of Meaning

To repeat: no translation of a poem can be a *replica* of its original in another language. The concepts ‘replica’ and ‘another language’ are opposed. Every translation is an *interpretation*, just as every reading of a text in the native tongue is also an interpretation, dependent on the knowledge and poetic instincts of the reader. The original poem, as an artefact, is left untouched by its translation, but as a cultural presence it is transformed by the presence of its ghosts, its reflections in the mirror of translation reflected back upon itself. It is transfigured by its resurrection, by its influence, just as a dead man or woman may be dust in the air or the ground but their impact, our assessment and perception of them, is felt as greater than that dust. How indeed do we assess another person, except from the detail of our experience of them, and others’ perceptions of them and interactions with them? We *interpret* them.

Capturing the ‘other’ is no simple task. Do we not make as many errors in reading a person we know, as a text we do not? The artefact, yes, remains, intact, uncommunicated as essence, as thing-in-itself, yet it can only be known at all by being grasped through its echoes, its interpretation, by being experienced, as mind interacts with it. The devil is in the interpreted detail. The degree of communication is always variable. There are no generalisations in translation, or in interpretation. Only the specific performance counts.

And there is a spectrum within poetic translatability, from the purely untranslatable to the readily accessible. The un-translatability of ‘poetry’ has often been claimed by poets (Dante, Du Bellay, Frost etc), arguing the unassailable purity of the created poem, its unique integrity, its particularity and its dependence for its effect on every nuance of original language, culture, intent and meaning. Fine, there is certainly truth in that at one end of the spectrum, and yet a poor poem also might be redeemed by a great translation, infusing new life and additional meaning into it, sometimes by the mere effect of a word, some felicity, charm or grace in the target language, missing from the source. To translate poetry into poetry, and not into chaff, requires at least the creation of a valid poem in the target language, something vital and resonant in some way, though not wholly independent of its source. The ghost must at least convince Hamlet!

Let us start by considering what is not translatable. And I will not use examples from other languages, only English, while asking the reader to consider how on earth these examples could be ‘translated’ into another tongue. It

is simple to find lines of English poetry which are indeed *un-translatable* because they embody the specific music (inflection, pitch, stress, beat, shape, force, strength, length, alliteration, rhyme, tone, order etc etc.) of English:

‘Your eyen two whole slay me suddenly,
I may the beauty of them not sustain.’ *Chaucer*

‘The grave’s a fine and private place
Yet none I think do there embrace.’ *Marvell*.

The untranslatable, and very beautiful, melding of thought and form, music and intent, here create an unrhymed and rhymed couplet respectively. It is not strictly relevant to analyse the effects, but note how Chaucer’s lines break syllabically into a 3:2:2:3 pattern followed by a 2:3:2:3, while Marvell’s octosyllables break into segments of 4:4. Note Chaucer’s use of the ‘o’ sound in ‘*two whole*’ to slow the line, and then the impulse of the try-syllabic and alliterative ‘*suddenly*’. Note Marvell’s use of the ‘a’ sound, and his alliteration on the letter ‘p’, and his ‘fine’ use of the bracketed ‘*I think*’. That is music.

Being English, I would hardly have the temerity to attempt to translate these examples into another target language. It needs a foreign tongue and eye, without inhibition and fear, to do so: we might almost say an *ignorant* tongue and eye. And yet we cannot say that the *thought* is untranslatable. In fact the thought is readily accessible in both cases. We cannot even say that a translator could not create something beautiful and graceful and musical in another tongue that might both capture the

thought, and also the deeper ‘meaning’, the intent and tone of each, Chaucer’s breathless, amazed, humbled realisation, that is, or Marvell’s precise ironic sadness and yearning.

Poetry is difficult (ultimately impossible) to analyse because it crystallises both thought and emotion in a complex beyond words. That is its true purpose. To enshrine the language: but to go beyond into the reality, of which words are only a part. So we will not forbid anyone to translate these lines into French say or Spanish, but we will not expect their translation to convey, easily, what they convey in English! Yet translate enough Chaucer and enough Marvell and something more may be communicated, something of their cast of mind, their world-view. Couplets, verses, whole poems may ‘succeed’, where individual lines fail miserably.

If we were only here for the original music, then I agree that it would not be worth attempting to translate poetry: the music is only very rarely, and by chance, perhaps through a relationship between languages, or words with common roots, susceptible of translation. But if we are here also for other aspects of meaning, including thought and intent, tone and manner, shape rather than exact form, mood and resonance, tradition and allusion, metaphor and simile, then patience! The musical ‘meaning’ eludes, though rhythm may help us, and stress, so that even the music may be hinted at, glimpsed, half-heard, but other meanings hover about the translation. The ghost is not solid, the features are altered, the voice is transformed, but nevertheless we know it, there is *recognition*, we are moved.

Yes, it is all too easy to build a case as to why translation should not work. The forms of verse, the capacity of a language for rhyme, the local history and resonance of words, the inner reference to other echoes in the language, and in the tradition, the altered ‘visual’ element as with Chinese, the weight of vowels and consonants, the differences in aspects of culture, political or intellectual, social or moral, the lack of certain concepts in one language present in the other, the use of metaphor, simile colloquialism, adage, or imagery, as enshrined in the languages in different countries (their history), and above all that elusive music, which fluent prose shares to a high degree, including alliteration, syllabic weight, word lengths and natural stress patterns. How indeed can one translate quantitative classical verse into modern stressed verse? It is all impossible, why bother?

Yet at the other extreme there is the readily translatable, the direct pointing at objects for example in a ‘shared’ culture, e.g. the European, especially those which have common, unique, technical uses, the common sources of verbs and use of tenses. Rhythm can often be reproduced, with changes of word order or re-casting of whole phrases. Non-equivalence or non-existence of concepts, adages, metaphors, allusions, can be got round by verbal trickery or simple substitution of non-equivalents that align and are consonant with the remainder. Cultural ignorance can be overcome by footnotes, brought back to a re-reading: rhyme can be artificially reproduced, through the mere act of rhyming and the verbal stress of line endings, rather than the identity of rhymes. Common verse forms such as the sonnet may exist in both languages, even

if for example hexameter and pentameter might exchange roles,

Above all where music is lost, meaning, intent and mood can still be communicated. And a new music can be created, in fact must be created if the translation is to be alive. Cultural values must be re-created, corresponding echoes sought for, context understood. Our saving grace is our common humanity. In the end there is often that direct-pointing. The word for 'moon' varies with language, but the moon itself is a common fact, and a poetic possibility in all languages. 'Love' is probably more easily understood without words between human beings than it is through them. We do deal with each other across cultures: we do absorb others' words into our own languages to fill the gaps. We cast the common net, and catch mutual fish. A translation is allowed to use a word from the source language where nothing else will do, and claim it for the new language. Cultural depth depends not on one language alone but on the extension of our minds through many languages. Ovid indeed said that everyone should own to at least two.

Without translation we are blind and parochial, without it we cannot transmit values, or reclaim them, we cannot sensitise our awareness. The failure of translation is more fruitful than the silence born of not attempting it, because it swells the heart and extends the brain. The act of homage, of memory and celebration does not bring back our dead friends and loved ones, but are we human without it, does not every transient mind have its ghosts, its half-vanished acts, its memories, its silent agonies and secret

joys, its interpretations and translations of the past and the present?

How then to establish meaning in translation? Firstly the *translator* seeks to reflect the author's thought as thought, and word as word. Accuracy to no purpose is foolish, but so is inaccuracy to no purpose. Adaptation has the right to lead away from the original, and be fruitful in its own unique way, but its discarding of the original thought and expression may lead to the adaptation being far distant from its original, and it may be better claimed simply as a new creation, a body-snatching that ended in the Cheshire Cat's grin. All is in the detail. The arguments over authenticity, integrity and value will never end, nor should they.

Secondly the author's deep intent must be sought, in other words the mood, pressure, stress, inflection, rhythm of his or her thought, the tone of the expression, its style, its dynamic, ultimately its untranslatable music. The mind rises and falls with the lines of a poem, as Coleridge said his did with the lines of a mountain. If that wave of feeling, that movement of the physical self with thought is lost, then the intent and meaning may also be lost.

Thirdly the cultural context of the poem must be grasped, whether it is the context common to all humanity, or a context unique to one moment of time, one place, that is one space-time of the language. Every trick known must be used to bridge the cultural gap, and narrow the difference, whether it is achieved by expansion and explanation within the poem, as Shakespeare offered up both European imports and 'English' equivalents within his verse, or by footnotes and borrowings, or by a major

adaptation through dialect, colloquialism, slang and modernism to point style. Or conversely the cultural gap may be highlighted, may be used wittingly or unwittingly to contrast cultures, as Pope and Dryden highlight both themselves and their classical sources in a dance of mutual recognition and difference. Does Pound's 'troubadour' English bring that Provençal culture closer to us or push it further away? In painting, does Pre-Raphaelite Medievalism bring us closer to Chaucer and his age, or take us into another imaginary realm?

Fourthly, and vitally, the poem must stand as a true poem in English, though with a real antecedent and a heritage, beyond itself. The translator must stand up and be counted as a poet. Either the poem is a poem, or it is a dull paraphrase, a ghost with the power of a ghost, or a mere trick of the light. And what does it take to make a poem? Knowledge, skill, tact, and sensitivity: love, truth and courage.

4. The Ghost in the Machine

I find it helpful myself to think about machine (or automated, or electronic, or computerised) translation as a means of thinking about human translation. What will the machine of the future need to do in order to translate good poetry into good English poetry, rather than merely translating language to language? In other words, as we progress from programmed rules of grammar combined with simple dictionary look-up what must be added to achieve a fine translation? Well, we can begin by recalling the qualities the human translator needs.

The machine must firstly be capable of creating fluent output in English, in other words English must be its *native* tongue. That has many implications. Language is not a passive mirror but an active form of engagement with the world. Every word, every phrase has echoes. Pick up a dictionary, look at any word, even one of the simplest, and look at the synonyms, or equivalent words and phrases offered to define the word and its usage. Pick up a thesaurus to appreciate the linguistic richness clustering around a single word or phrase. This machine must not only have access to a rich dictionary and thesaurus but it must understand the equivalences given for each word, the contexts in which they and the word itself are used, the common phrases that contain the word, for example adages, sayings, current turns of speech, and it must understand these as applied in combination with rules of grammar and parts of speech.

Because we live in the world our minds are constantly testing and updating words, constantly forming patterns of aural, vocal and written language, learning endlessly until death the subtler meanings of words and phrases, in order to apply them to our subtler understanding of life itself. Language drags with it our whole culture, and the past of our culture, and the past and present of other cultures. It encapsulates our arts and our sciences, our politics and our personal lives, every complex aspect of our complex world. So the machine has to be competent in all of this, it has to be able to function at least as well as a competent poet in comprehending what it means to be alive in a specific culture.

Secondly the machine must write good poetry in English, or at least be able to imitate good poetry in English, without necessarily being strikingly original. It might be argued that the better a poet is at original work the better at translation, but there are plenty of good even great poets whose translations are only competent, and only a very few great poets who are also great translators. So specialist knowledge of English poetry will be required to enhance general knowledge of the language. The machine will need to grasp how to achieve sound musical English.

It would be fine if we could currently explain how that is done, but original work and translation too are partly carried out at a subconscious level of the mind, which will often achieve the answer that 'feels right', by juggling words, word order, synonyms, phrasing, metre, form and music (e.g. alliteration, word length, rhyme etc) without the conscious mind being aware of how it is done. That awaits better understanding of the brain. We know when we read a poem whether we like and appreciate it, and we often know when we have written something competent ourselves, but we often fail to fully know both why the poem works for us and how the poem has been made to work. The most mysterious and potent poems often rely on effects that are below the conscious mind, that make the hairs of the neck stand up, or that penetrate deep into consciousness through striking some common or mutual human chord. In order to write well the machine will also need a deep understanding of human emotion and the ability to both feel it and imbue language with it. How else could it 'understand' what is being said in cultural and other terms, in other words grasp 'the meaning'.

Let us assume this machine now has such an ability to explore meaning in its 'native' language, English. The elements of meaning (not exhaustive) it can grasp are: literal and factual meaning, including 'direct pointing' at objects and mental phenomena; emotional meaning and the ability to feel or simulate feeling at a most subtle and complex level; cultural meaning including current and past usages, how the world largely works, human interaction and social phenomena, allusion, simile, metaphor, myth and logic, a knowledge of the arts and sciences, the wider the better, and a broad spectrum of belief systems, attitudes, attributes, and styles; the meaning of tone and voice, such as is used to express humour, irony, mockery, exhortation, etc etc;

Thirdly, this *by now fully conscious machine* (I offer that statement as a speculative hostage to fortune. I assert that full awareness, which implies conscious as well as sub-conscious awareness, of the world is required to capture the requisite equivalent 'world' of expression) needs to be able to grasp meaning in the source language to be translated. This means understanding the elements of that language, its rules and customs of word-usage and grammar, though without necessarily being fluent in the language, and obviously being equipped with a rich dictionary and thesaurus of that language. It means, in particular, understanding the potential presence of phrases, terms, concepts and words that have no dictionary equivalent and need to be tackled in some other way.

It is a trivial exercise, which I shall not indulge in, to show that even in say French and English which largely share a culture and history, the range of a given word in

French will be different to its range in English and vice versa. Each word has synonyms and usages in its own language which fails to map exactly to the other language. Some words, though relatively few, are simply unique in meaning, or nuance, and are often imported, think of all the words of French origin in English, such as ennui, chic, double-entendre, coup d'état.

The failure of words to map exactly (and as I have said not just words, but phrases, concepts, world-views, histories, customs etc, etc) presents the machine with both a difficulty and an opportunity. The difficulty is that of understanding the original author's *intention*, the 'meaning', in all its senses, the machine is trying to unravel. The opportunity is that of choice, between different ways of expressing the original text in English in order to express that presumed intention. The difficulty is one of meaning and understanding, the opportunity is one of new intention and decision. And did the original author understand his or her own meaning and intent? And has the act of expression introduced other echoes not included within that core intent? And is the meaning deliberately or unintentionally ambiguous? Poetry thrives on ambiguity. Clearly the issue of meaning is far more complex than I indicate here. Original poetry can surprise with meanings it carries beyond those of which the poet was conscious.

Here is our crux, ripe for clear statement. The machine must *understand meaning and intention*, in order to grasp the original meaning and intention, and express the new, meaning and intention. The machine that largely understands meaning and intention is the *human brain*, both conscious and sub-conscious. Therefore our machine

will need to be equivalent in large part to a human brain in its abilities, consciousness and performance. Who then, as an aside, would deny it humanity? Who would preclude it from human rights and obligations? It would be a mind-machine on a par with our own.

Now our conscious machine is ready to translate. Having grasped an approximate set of meanings and intentions, having scoped the word ranges, and located all the cultural referents, our machine will not now be saying to itself: 'What on earth does this mean?' It can now select equivalent meanings within the target language's word-ranges and cultural referents, and determine the 'hidden prose' equivalent of the poetic original, having by the way carried out some often tricky but essentially mundane tasks such as finding satisfactory equivalents for proper names, and technical terms, and finding the original English text for any English passages which the author has translated into the source language, and which should not normally be re-translated but must be restored, etc, etc.

I have suggested that there is a paraphrase, a 'hidden prose' crib, hiding behind this process, but that is in fact misleading. Such a prose crib or even crude 'literal translation' may flit through the conscious mind as one translates a phrase or re-orders words, or searches for equivalents, but equally the sub-conscious or conscious mind will present poetic fragments to be assimilated into the process, e.g. a fruitful English rhyme, a lively piece of alliteration, a rhythmic pattern of stresses, an alternative word with fewer or more syllables etc, etc. Suddenly it feels *right*, where the rightness stems not only from a feeling of having captured meaning, intent, and original

music, but of having introduced meaning, and fresh music in accord with the translator's innate style and poetic knowledge. Interestingly the machine will have acquired its own innate style and knowledge.

This employment of intelligent machines on the translation process will become vital, since translation is a never-ending and increasing need and the number of skilled, let alone inspired, translators limited. Machines that can translate great poetry into fine poetry will take far longer to develop than machines that can do routine translation. For the former, if I were to guess at a timescale I would suggest 150-200 years from now (2007) for the development of widely and deeply conscious machines capable of comprehensive poetic intelligence (artificial humans in the arts, 'artans' perhaps?) though possibly sooner. But, remember, they will no longer be machines, they will be minds, individuals, and they may not be interested!

The machine's performance must be judged in the same way as a human performance, does the new poem live, does it have integrity, does it add to knowledge and perception of the original, does it resurrect, revivify, metamorphose, alchemise that original? If it fails in cultural reference, voice, emotional impact, fluency, phrasing, word-order, sensitivity, or in the thousand other ways translation can fail, then it fails. If it succeeds, though inaccurate, as adaptation or imitation, or free excursion, then it succeeds, while challenging the reader to come to an opinion, to place it within the context of the original's after-life, as I can place Pound's *Propertius* in my own mind, neither over-valuing it, nor under-valuing it, seeing it

as meaning-led, sensitive to old and new context, musical and expressive.

At present machine translation is inadequate for lack of the higher capabilities discussed above. The mirror for the present is human, with the machine sometimes useful for drudgery, for basic word look-up, for quick insensitive scanning of a text. But improvement is to be looked for, in line with improvements in machine-intelligence developed elsewhere. It will be a very long time, I believe, before machines translate fine poetry as well as they can play demanding chess. In fact they may well be able to write fine poetry before they can translate it finely. Language is chess with a vaster number of pieces each of whose modes of deployment may be infinitely more variable than in chess, and whose explicit and implicit meanings in combination imply an infinitely broader field of requisite knowledge to employ a valid strategy in achieving the goal set. The ghost is not yet embedded in the electronic or bionic machine, it must still at present borrow its embodiment from the human brain, and as yet the subconscious mind must still be propitiated with blood beside the trench, before the shades of the dead can cross to us.

5. The Disease of Translation

Dryden's *Virgil* was the result of his earlier-acknowledged fever for translation, a habit he classed as a disease. Ah, we have such a need to reclaim, understand and re-interpret the past, the tradition, that it grips us and

obsesses us. And the truly ‘original’ poet needs to absorb the tradition more rapidly not less rapidly than others, since originality is the freshest deployment of the past in pursuit of the present and in anticipation of the future.

And why translate now, why translate again? The reason is because ideas and ideals slip from us if they are not constantly re-incarnated. Mythological divinities, like the Muse, must arrive wearing many masks, and the ‘meaning’ of the humanly-created godhead is displayed by all of them. Our ‘classics’, in whatever languages, embody for us ideals, ideals of many kinds such as decency, reticence, balance, free creativity, nobility, depth, gravity, integrity, care, beauty, form, loyalty, grace, intellect, humanity, ideals we may lose sight of in the pain and effort of daily living.

Poetry, and in particular secular and ‘pagan’ poetry, may offer a route back and outwards to other worlds of true human feeling and valid thought wonderfully related to, and yet subtly different from our own. The one Humanity is present behind many masks, and no mask is other-worldly in any religious sense. The prize of translation is to become that compound ghost, if only for a moment, which is the ‘other’, to bridge distance in space-time, to love in that fierce tension between difference and possession, between closeness and separation.

All true translation, I have said, represents that act of love. Language decays and alters. Fresh translation is the means to raid the treasure house of the past, the partially buried hoard, and spend that hoard while leaving the original miraculously untouched, the tradition in fact enriched. To take and absorb in translation, in creation, is

to give. To give is to multiply. To give, without thought of cost or return, is to enhance our species forever in the deepest places of the human spirit. As Dante explains to those who are listening, in his *Paradiso*, to give and to share is not to lose or to diminish; to communicate is to understand; and to enter with full intellect into the life and community of other fine minds is to discover the enduring community of humanity.

And so the disease of translation, a virus born of the greater plague of language, of Babel itself, is nevertheless the disease that helps to cure us of our isolation, and give life and energy to the world. Translation should not be imagined as a doomed attempt to repair some forever flawed and easily shattered golden bowl that will always fall apart in our hands, it is rather to take in our hands once more the primal clay, and hear as Mandelstam did the singing of the sea, the music of the islands. It is to re-create from the pattern in front of our eyes, or under our fingers, and yet to bring to a new though related form the individual line, the unique and precise offering, so that nothing we, as creators, touch in art shall be mere copy, and all shall be made over again, made anew.

If there is no danger, if there is no failure tolerated, if there is no feeling of despair at times as pieces of our own golden bowls lie around us crying out to be reconstituted, if we can only criticise those failures and not celebrate the attempt, if we fail to enlarge our hearts by attempting to break down walls and enlarge our understanding, if we fail to 'translate' the other into our own terms in the widest and deepest sense of the term, to carry across, to transform, then we may succeed in enshrining the past in our

museums, but we will not take it into our minds and lives, we may succeed in cleaning the statues in the Pantheon of great authors, but we will not make those statues walk and talk, we will not feel those authors' ghosts steal up to us, and stand in the light behind us, touch us on the shoulder, and speak to us again in familiar terms, and we shall neither honour those authors truly, nor appreciate them truly, nor employ them truly, nor thank them truly.

The wisest understand that *every moment* of our lives is translation, every moment is an interpretation and projection and realisation of the world. Every view we see, every chord we hear, every shape we touch, every taste we savour, every perfume we drown in, is created, transformed from its raw signals, translated. Every text we read is re-interpreted in our own minds, or it dies in the reading. Every setting of a poem, every performance of a score, every influence revealed in a work of plastic art, every sound and movement on a stage, or before a camera, every human conversation, every feeling of empathy, every act of giving, every response to another, every shudder of *recognition*, is an act of translation.

There is no 'correct' translation, just as there is no static conversation, or fixed relationship. There is only a host of echoes from the cliff walls, a host of reflections in the shifting mirror, the host of forms in transformation, as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, becoming both themselves and something other. There is no definitive translation, because there is no unchanging culture. *Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis: the times are altered, and we are altered with them* (Harrison, 1577).

There is no valid case, then, against full-blooded poetic translation, adaptation, and imitation: on the contrary. Those who argue against it, who argue for prose or interlinear paraphrase as a substitute rather than merely an aid to full poetic transmutation, because the original cannot be replicated, merely reveal their prejudice against, or perhaps fear of, endless and honourable failure, and an excessive subservience to the performances of the great and famous, living or dead, a subservience which is always crippling and enervating in its effect. If I fail to make a verse translation of some author work in English then that is my failure, another may succeed where I have failed, given that all success is conditional and qualified and limited. But let us at least respect every attempt.

It is indeed the great poets from whose work we should take the most, whose work we should respect the least as creators and translators, even as we respect it totally as readers and listeners, stealing it if there is no other way, and it is from their human efforts that we should seek to understand the miracle of renewal in every generation. But no excessive fear or subservience! For all gods are flawed gods, made in our human image, and on the highest throne in the world, as Montaigne says (*Essais* III:13), we still sit on our own backside.

6. Another Voice

What language does the compound ghost utter? It speaks both languages, and all languages. What are its resources? It possesses all human resources, of feeling, awareness, and expression, all richness, even though it

touches beauty through a veil, and grasps meaning with the insufficiency of all linguistic meaning. The universe remains the universe: words do not exhaust it, just as the word did not create it. Yet our linguistic defeats are creative. It is not our task to succeed, ultimately. Transience and incompleteness deny us that. It is our task to attempt, with joy, and with love. To *translate* in the deepest and widest sense in order to grasp, hold and deploy value, is to live a life. The poem lives beyond its imitators, beyond its translators, and beyond itself, because it embodies the bones and blood of language. The poem is not destroyed by translation, any more than a gift is destroyed by being given away.

We have the privilege of mind, the privilege of walking in a dead patrol, however terrifying, with the ghosts of our imagination, identification, and re-creation, and to speak that strange double-tongue, that language of the transient yet enduring, that sound of the Muse singing between, around and beyond language, as the Sirens sang, who plagued Ulysses, and the spirits uttered whom he conjured by the fosse. That language is not immortal, nothing of ours is immortal, but it lives the life of the species not the individual. Is language not our greatest artefact? All the languages, I mean, of science, art, music, verse, prose, all the cacophony of Babel, and all the mellifluous tongues of Parnassus?

If we attempt to enter into every moment as though it were a translation of what we are, then at the least we will be enlivened, and at the best 'carried beyond', transported beyond ourselves into the space where we learn, the time where we recognize, the act where we may create.

*'Ipse michi collatus enim non ille videbor:
Frons alia est moresque alii, nova mentis imago,
Voxque aliud mutata sonat...'*

*'Transformed, this self of mine shall no longer seem itself:
Another brow and other manners, a new form of the mind,
Another voice, altered, sounding....'*

*Petrarch: Ad Barbatum Sulmonensem
Epistolae Metricae I.I*