

## Writing Through: Practising Translation

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This essay exists as a segment in a line of study and writing practice that moves between a critical theory analysis of translation studies conceptions of language, and the practical questions of what those ideas might mean for contemporary translation and writing practice. Although the underlying preoccupation of this essay, and my more general line of inquiry is translation studies and practice, in many ways translation is merely a way into a discussion on language. For this essay, translation is the threshold of language. But the two trails of the discussion never manage to elude each other, and these concatenations have informed two experimental translation methods, referred to here as *Live Translations* and *Series Translations*. Following the essay are a number of poems in translation, all of which come from *Blanco Nuclear* (1985) by the contemporary Spanish poet, Esteban Pujals Gesalí.<sup>1</sup> The first group, the *Live Translations* consist of transcriptions I made from audio recordings read in a public setting, in which the texts were translated *in situ*, either off the page of original Spanish-language poems, or through a process very much like that carried out by simultaneous translators, for which readings of the poems were played back to me through headphones at varying speeds to be translated before the audience. The translations collected are imperfect renderings, attesting to a moment in language practice rather than language objects. The second method involves an iterative translation process, by which three versions of any one poem are rendered, with varying levels of fluency,

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<sup>1</sup> Esteban Pujals Gesalí (born Madrid in 1952) teaches English and North American literature at the Autonomous University of Madrid. He has translated, among many others, T.S. Eliot, *Cuatro Cuartetos* (1990) and John Ashbery, *Galeones de abril* (1994), is the editor of an anthology of contemporary US poetry, *La lengua radical* (1992), and has published numerous critical studies in Spanish of US poets and writers. His poetry includes *Blanco Nuclear* (1985) and *Juegos de artificio* (1986).

fidelity and servility. All three translations are presented one after the other as a series, with no version asserting itself as the primary translation. These examples, as well as the translation methods themselves, are intended as preliminary experiments within an endlessly divergent continuum of potential methods and translations, and not as a complete representation of a methodology.

### Is Translation Possible?

*'That utterances are translated from one language to another is a fact we meet with everywhere, in the most diverse forms.'* Friedrich Schleiermacher (2004: 43).

'Poetry,' Roman Jakobson asserted in 1959, reigned over as it is by paronomasia, 'by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible' (2000: 118). We meet with the fact of translation everywhere, yet it is in some way impossible. The situation seems to vibrate. It is lifted up and suppressed at the same moment, relifted, relieved and struck down again. In both directions the thing moves out of sight. One way out of the aporia of translation's impossibility is mapped by Derrida in 'What Is a 'Relevant' Translation?' in which he states 'I don't believe that anything can ever be untranslatable—or, moreover, translatable' (2001: 178). This axiom avoids the charge of unintelligibility or contradiction by positing a certain *economy* that relates the translatable to the untranslatable, not as the same to the other, but as same to same or other to other. This economy folds out in two directions. The first, *property*, from the etymological root of the term economy: *oikonomia*, the law—*nomos*—of the *oikos*, of what is proper, appropriate to itself, at home (178). The other, *quantity*, provides a referent, qualifies, since economy requires calculable quantities. A relevant translation then, is a translation 'whose economy, in these two senses, is the best possible, the most appropriating and the most appropriate possible' (178-179). The functioning of this economy—the economy which holds the translatable and untranslatable beside each other as same to same, other to other—is illustrated by way of two hyperbole. First, a fully competent translator, fluent in two languages, cultures and cultural memories, given time, should find no untranslatable, no remainder, in a work. What lacks a simple referent can be explained through analogy, what lacks analogy can be taught. Second, a competent reader, given a book full of translator's notes, should receive on all levels, what is called the original.

However, this operation does not take the name of translation according to Derrida's economy. The books don't balance. For 'the translation must be *quantitatively equivalent* to the original' (2001: 179). This quantity, he claims, must be measured by *the number of words*: 'The philosophy of translation, the ethics of translation—if translation does in fact have these things—*today* aspires to be a philosophy of the word, a linguistics or ethics of the word. At the beginning of translation is the word' (180). And though most translation is more interested in the sense than the verbal, 'relevance' is still tied up with an ideal, not of word-for-word, but 'as close as possible to the equivalence of 'one word *by* one word,' thereby respecting verbal quantity as a quantity of words, 'each of which is an irreducible body, the indivisible unity of a meaning or concept' (Derrida 2001: 181). However words are at once stubbornly singular and irretrievably plural. The concept of *différance* critiques this conception of the word. For Derrida, meaning is an 'effect of relations and differences along a potentially endless chain of signifiers—polysemous, intertextual, subject to infinite linkages' (cited in Venuti 2003: 238). As such meaning is always 'differential and deferred, never present as an original unity... a site of proliferating possibilities that can be activated in diverse ways by the receivers of an utterance,' which thus 'exceed the control of individual users' (Venuti 2003: 238).

This intractable valency of words asserts itself wherever there is a homophonic or homonymic effect. It is at this moment that translation acknowledges its impossibility. For a homonym or homophone defies word-to-word translation<sup>2</sup>. It necessitates either the resignation to the loss of effect, economy, strategy—and 'this loss can be enormous'—or the addition of some kind of gloss, a translator's note, which 'even in the best of cases ... confesses the impotence or failure of the translation' (Derrida 2001: 181).<sup>3</sup> While the translator's note achieves an explanation of the meaning and effects in the original, it breaks with 'the economic law of the word, which defines the essence of translation in the strict sense' (181). Nothing is untranslatable. Nothing is translatable.

The last way out of this impossible task of translation is through an interrogation of the relation of impossibility to possibility, an interrogation that Derrida initiates through a

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<sup>2</sup> Once again the case of poetry makes its way to the front, declaring itself to be preeminently difficult, in that: 'in poetry ... phonemic similarity is sensed as semantic relationship' (Jakobson 2000: 118).

<sup>3</sup> Of course, this recognition of impotence or failure could also be applied to any sort of textual addendum or marginalia, footnotes being a prime example or offender.

discussion of mercy and might, as it appears in *The Merchant of Venice* (1951) in which Portia describes mercy as ‘the mightiest in the mightiest’ (44.1.185). This might rises over might and ‘obliges us to ask ourselves if the experience of forgiveness is an experience of “power,” of the “power-to-forgive,”’ (Derrida 2001: 192), or one might say: the power to relinquish one’s power/obligation to punish. What is at play here is a hermeneutics of the superlative. ‘More as *the most* and as *more than*, of the mightiest as *more mighty than*—and as *more than mighty*.’ The superlative then becomes of ‘another order than might, power, or the possible: the impossible that is *more than impossible and therefore possible*’ (193). This idea perhaps finds its most enlightening example in the German prefix *über*. Derrida cites a phrase from Angelus Silesius: ‘*das Überunmöglichste ist möglich*’ (193). Which can be translated, depending on the rendering of *über*, as ‘*the most impossible, the absolute impossible, the impossible par excellence is possible*,’ or also, ‘*the more than impossible, the beyond impossible is possible*.’ Either way, they ‘wind up saying that the tip of the summit (the peak) belongs to a different order than that of the summit’ (193).

The words here, in the race to the superlative, to superate one another, leap over each other without realising that they have left each other behind. The mightiest of might becomes more than might, and finds itself aligned with mercy. The most impossible, the more than impossible, finds itself back in the realm of possibility. This is the lot of translation. Never believing that it can bring the original across into the translating language, it nevertheless finds itself within this language, and it made the journey by way of the original text. By relieving it of its duty. Lifting it up and suppressing it simultaneously.

The situation, the question of what is actually happening in translation, is illumined greatly by Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘The Task of the Translator’ (1968). This piece, written as an introduction to his own—critically unsuccessful—translation of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, occupies a central position in my reading of translation theory and practice.

### **The task of the translator**

Benjamin’s essay sits within the greater volume of critical writing surrounding translation in a profoundly uneasy fashion. In one sense, he follows many of the tropes common to translation theory. He discusses sense and form, identity, fidelity and license. However, rather than directly arguing against the traditional ideals of

translation, his text argues across them. It moves along a different axis. Benjamin's methodology is a kind of strange, intuitive science that picks apart the seemingly cohesive fabric of language to look at the constitution of the thread. If language is like cotton, he analyses the makeup of tropical flora; if it is like gossamer, he is talking about the sociology of spiders.

The influence that Benjamin's ideas would have on my thinking was not immediate upon first reading his essay. It seemed to have some relevant insights, and the citations from Rudolf Pannwitz seemed especially important. The notion that the translator must allow his own language 'to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue' (cited in Benjamin 1968: 81), immediately resonated with my intuitive ideas about the purpose of translation. As a whole however, the article was one that I passed over quickly in search of more ideal material. My lack of receptiveness stemmed in part from a paralysing aversion to terms such as *pure*, *true*, *absolute*. The idea of a pure language—when my interests lay in the hybrid, interwoven, interstitial qualities of languages—seemed, if not objectionable, then at least unduly aggrandising. Derrida mentions something similar in relation to Heidegger's terminology on language: 'I do not much like the term "essence" of language. I would prefer to give a more living and dynamic meaning to this way of being, to this manifestation of linguistic spectrality, which is valid for all languages' (2005: 105).

In time I realised that Benjamin's notion of *pure language* (*reine Sprache*) was an important idea. Not only did it contain a recognition of the 'inner relation' between languages, but also an understanding of some kind of movement in expression, of which the textual body of language scarcely bears a trace. As I read over the text again and again, as well as other writers' readings of it, I began noting down all the important citations. I seemed to be rewriting the text almost line by line. Eventually, I began to develop the feeling that what I was doing was actually something like the character Pierre Menard from Borges's ficto-philosophical essay, originally published in 1941, 'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote' (1965). I felt closer to this text than to much of my own writing, which seemed never to reach its mark.

What I had initially perceived as a *movement* in language, which is generally left unrecognised by most translation/literary theory, was described in Benjamin's description of that element in language that 'cannot be communicated' (1968: 79). This

element is either

something that symbolizes or something symbolized. It is the former only in the finite products of language, the latter in the evolving of the languages themselves. And that which seeks to represent, to produce itself in the evolving of languages, is that very nucleus of pure language. Though concealed and fragmentary, it is an active force in life as the symbolized thing itself, whereas it inhabits linguistic creations only in symbolized form. While that ultimate essence, pure language, in the various tongues is tied only to linguistic elements and their changes, in linguistic creations it is weighted with a heavy, alien meaning. To relieve it of this, to turn the symbolizing into the symbolized, to regain pure language fully formed in the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation. (80)

This should not be taken to mean that works of translation are written in this pure language. Translations still take form within one or another of the fallen languages of man. It is only a 'somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages' (75), and it represents the inner relationship between languages by 'realizing it in embryonic or intensive form' (73). The relation of languages is based on the fact that they are not strangers, but are related in what they want to express (73). It is this *intention* in language that constitutes the relationship between languages, and also, which is the aim of translation: to reach for a mode of intention, which complements that of the original. In this way, the sense of the original is not something to be conveyed; in fact, translation must 'in large measure refrain from wanting to communicate something, from rendering sense' (79).

The original is important to the translation only by relieving the translator 'of the effort of assembling and expressing what is to be conveyed' (79). The translation owes its existence to the original but does not serve it (72). Their kinship is not one of likeness (74), but rather involves the search for the 'intended effect upon the language into which' the work is being translated, so as to 'produce in it an echo of the original' (77). This echo, Christopher Fynsk explains, makes 'the symbolizing dimension of the original reverberate in a kind of sympathetic vibration' (1996: 185).

The translation is not interested in any 'core of meaning latent in the original' (Fynsk 1996: 185), since 'meaning is never found in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences' (Benjamin 1968: 75),<sup>4</sup> rather it is interested with the original's core meaning only inasmuch as it 'lends itself to complementation and ultimately a harmony' (Fynsk 1996: 185). In an earlier essay on language, originally published in

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<sup>4</sup> In Derrida's terminology, it is always 'differential or deferred,' says Venutti (2003: 238).

1916, Benjamin argues that language communicates the ‘mental being’ of things only insofar as it is included in its linguistic being, ‘insofar as it is capable of being communicated’ (1996: 63). The translation only hopes to ‘touch the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense’ (Benjamin 1968: 81), as a tangent touches a curve. Sense is *touched lightly*, not *conveyed*. This sentiment is echoed by Derrida when he describes translation as coming to ‘lick’ the body of the ‘idiomatic singularity’ of the word as a flame or an amorous tongue might, ‘refusing at the last moment to consume or consummate’ (2001: 175). Weaving together Derrida and Benjamin, this flame leaves the body of the word intact—though not without eliciting the appearance of the other, drawing it out (Derrida 2001: 175)—and it is at this point, that translation ‘catches fire on the eternal life of the works and the perpetual renewal of language’ (Benjamin 1968: 75). And it is at this moment that we arrive before the possibility of learning something of our relation with language.

### **Translation as *experimentum linguae***

In his preface to *Infancy and History*, Giorgio Agamben makes the claim that ‘one of the most urgent tasks for contemporary thought is, without a doubt, to redefine the concept of the transcendental in terms of its relation with language’ (1993: 4). Refiguring Kant’s concept of the transcendental, which omitted the question of language, Agamben proposes that the transcendental ‘must instead indicate an experience which is undergone only within language, an *experimentum linguae* in the true meaning of the words, in which what is experienced is language itself’ (4). To undergo an experience with something involves some kind of submission to it. ‘This something befalls us, strikes us, overwhelms and transforms us ... the experience is not of our own making ... we endure it, we suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it’ (Heidegger 1971: 57). Language requires rendition. As well as being something to which we surrender, Heidegger states that an experience means ‘to attain something by going on a way’ (66). We must, therefore, make some sort of movement—a movement in language—in order to gain some knowledge of our relation to language. The task here is largely one of thinking. Not a putting of questions, but a listening for what is to be put in question (71).

But language is too close to us. We find ourselves entangled and compromised by the web of language. However if we take notice of the ‘peculiar properties of thought,’ and

look about us in ‘the realm where thinking abides,’ we loosen ourselves from the web somewhat (75). When we speak, we tend to speak of things we already understand. But what concerns us regarding our relation with language is something that evades us. We want to give language the floor. What is called for is not more talk, since ‘discourse cannot speak its taking place’ (Agamben 1991: 62). In fact, it is possible that we are not able to say anything concrete *about* our relation to language. ‘There is some evidence,’ Heidegger states, that the essential nature of language flatly refuses to express itself in words’ (1971: 81). We may only be able to submit ourselves to an experience with it and carry on our way, somehow enriched by the experience. That silent experience is what we must carry over into our writing—and translation—practice.

Just as the claim *I mean what I say* did not circumvent the problem of the referents of language and meaning in the earlier discussion, neither does our apparent and undeniable relation with language silence the question of an experience *with* language. To say *I speak* does not resolve Agamben’s ‘stubbornly pursued train of thought: what is the meaning of ‘I speak’?’ (1993: 5). Speech teaches us next to nothing about language since we are only able to simply ‘go ahead and speak a language’ precisely because language does not bring itself to language in this context but ‘holds back’ (Heidegger 1971: 59). Similarly, we understand and take for granted that we breathe air constantly, but this tells us little of air and still less of our experience of it. If we have to struggle for air however, we come closer to an understanding of our need for it. We may not understand the mechanics, but in moments of asphyxiation, we understand something about our relation with it. This also holds for language.

Heidegger explains that language speaks itself as language ‘when we cannot find the right word for something that concerns us’ (1971: 59). It is then that we ‘leave unspoken what we have in mind and ... language itself has distantly and fleetingly touched us with its essential being’ (59). This makes sense within Benjamin’s framework also, if we imagine that in that moment of aphasia, language gives up on the business of signifying this or that object, and we find ourselves engaged in a moment of *intention*. Oddly, it is while we *mean to say* something, rather than when we have assigned a word *to mean* something, that we are most in contact with language as language. In Heidegger’s terminology, because we are being touched by the essence of language; in Benjamin’s because we have not yet translated pure language into fallen language. For

Agamben, the split that Benjamin finds in language is still relevant, however the division is not so much between pure language and languages, but rather is ‘ a fracture inherent in human language’ (Bartoloni 2004). In the work of Agamben, this moment of the self-presentation of language occurs in the notion of infancy<sup>5</sup>: ‘Infancy is an *experimentum linguae* of this kind, in which the limits of language are to be found not outside language, in the direction of its referent, but in an experience of language as such, in its pure self reference’ (Agamben 1993: 5).

The relation here to translation is evident. Translation, as a form, acknowledges its own aphasia: its impossible possibility, its ‘devotion to ruin,’ as Derrida (2001: 181) would have it. Having language as its only referent, it then sets about a movement toward other language, to other words. Time after time it comes upon a lack of words and paradoxically moves through pleonastic turns to overcome that loss. The translator, amongst two (in)complete systems of expression, is swamped by language yet continually at a loss for words. To return to the air metaphor, it is like breathing out of the window of a speeding car. The air rushes towards us yet we struggle to inhale. The translator has two languages on which to hold but is forever slipping between them.

It is no coincidence that my interest in the strangeness and the limits of language first asserted itself while I was living abroad. For the first time in my life I had to defend myself in a language which was not my own. I quickly began to realise the peculiar enabling and limiting force of the English language with/in which I had grown up.<sup>6</sup> To deform Wittgenstein’s maxim; until then, the limits of my world had been the limits of my language. In a new world a new set of limits set in relief the limits of my language, the limits of my world. The experience is described by Octavio Paz in which the immediate emotions one feels before an unknown language quickly transform themselves into doubts about our own language, as ‘El lenguaje pierde su universalidad y se revela como una pluralidad de lenguas’ (loses its universality and reveals itself as a plurality of languages)<sup>7</sup> (1970: 9).

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<sup>5</sup> Referring to the etymological root of the term meaning *unable to speak*, rather than the developmental stage.

<sup>6</sup> The English I have come to speak of course being merely a composite of a small sample of all the Englishes spoken in my immediate environs and throughout the world. Largely shaped by the locality and familial settings in which I was raised, it also works against much of that language, taking equal parts from pop-culture, high culture, academia, etc.

<sup>7</sup> My translation.

In another language, we are constantly ‘leaving unspoken what we have in mind’ (Heidegger 1971: 59). In our despair at the abandonment of language, we sense the magnitude—without implying in any way a perfect relational system—of language. Wittgenstein’s statement makes sense to us, that ‘the correct expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, albeit as expressing nothing *within* language, is the existence of language itself’ (cited in Agamben 1993: 9). Following through Wittgenstein’s line of thought, Agamben then asks what the most appropriate expression for the existence of language is. The only possible answer, Agamben concludes, is ‘human life, as *ethos*, as ethical way’ (9-10). Moving toward each other in language. This can double as a rationale for translation. Positioned between two languages, the translator refuses to settle in one or the other, but rather remains in the interstice, sounding out the space between the two, tuning the ear to two distinct and strange ways of movement and intention, hoping to realise a new way of approach and relation in the mother tongue.

In order to position the translation methods that I have employed within the discussions initiated in this piece, I want to initiate a further discussion that simultaneously answers to two lines of questioning. I say *answers to* because the discussion doesn’t offer definitive resolutions to the questions, but rather *responds to the call* of the questions. Each question contains a guiding word that, rather than defining and circumscribing the discussion, persistently calls itself out in its full polysemy, returns to the text over and over, forging a presence that is more spectral than definitive. These two words are *relief* and *failure*, or *relieving* and *failing*. The two methods: the Series Translations and the Live Translations, though autonomous, are for me interrelated. So much so in fact, that I find myself unable to conduct two separate discussions; first of one, then of the other. Once again I find myself caught between two paths, two movements, two modes of intention, and the only way forward seems to be to somehow knit the two together.

### **What, then, is a relieving translation? What, then, is a failing translation?**

*... And then there are translations that hurl one language against another... taking the original text for a projectile and treating the translating language like a target. Their task is not to lead a meaning back to itself or anywhere else; but to use the translated language to derail the translating language.*

Michell Foucault (cited in Berman 2004: 277)

Questions, especially as they are posited within a text, always involve a strange, false step in language and thought. They perform in a genuinely dramatic fashion, an almost

embarrassing theatre of ventriloquism. As in a performance which seeks audience participation through friends with rehearsed questions, it tacitly suggests the clichéd response: *well I'm glad you asked that ...* The writer impersonates a presumed response is provoked in the reader, when in fact—a fact we all, with good grace, pretend not to know—the writer chooses to ask questions to which s/he wishes to respond.

The questions that initiate this dual discussion, however, are doubly provocative. Both might seem non sequiturs. *Then* suggests a logical progression, but the discussion thus far has said nothing of *relieving* or *failing* translations. However, relief and failure *are* relevant to translation as I have framed it, and in employing the two terms, I have already begun to clear the way for a response.

To begin with the second question, I would say that if I achieve anything with my Live Translations, it will be a failure. That is not to say that I regard achievement as failure, but rather that I am aiming to prepare the way for an experience with language. And if, as suggested earlier, we only come to know language through moments of failure, of abandonment, when ‘we leave unspoken what we have in mind’ (Heidegger 1971: 59), then a translation method that aims at some sort of *experimentum linguae* must engage with those moments which are ever-present in the taking place of translation. However, while traditional translation methods tend to cover those tracks, the Live Translation brings them out into the open for all to see and hear. So it is in that sense that I actively seek out failures, moments where the word breaks up, necessitating a ‘true step back on the way of thinking’ (Heidegger 1971: 108).

In a sense, the first question is a translational adaptation of the question asked by Derrida in his ‘Qu’est-ce qu’une traduction “relevante”?’ (1999), to which I have referred earlier through the wonderfully abusive translation by Lawrence Venuti (Derrida 2001).<sup>8</sup> The ‘translation’ I’m offering, *relieving* instead of *relevant*, for the (arguably) French term *relevante*, is a gesture made half in jest. Derrida employs the term not only because of the significance assigned to *relevance* in traditional translation theory, but also because of its English roots and ring.<sup>9</sup> Indeed for Derrida, it is unknowable to which language the word *relevante* belongs (2001: 176). However while

<sup>8</sup> Venuti translates the title as ‘What is a “Relevant” Translation?’

<sup>9</sup> Even this explanation oversimplifies the multitudinous investigation to which Derrida subjects the term *relevante/relevant*, an investigation that traverses English German and French, as well as the writings of Hegel, Shakespeare, and Derrida’s own oeuvre.

most translations tend to aim at relevance, mine aim at something else. The aim is not irrelevance, however the idea of relief, of some kind of relieving translation, seems to insist on its relevance.

Firstly, it suggests itself by way of example. The translation of *relevante* by *relieving* could be considered an example of what Phillip Lewis calls *abusive fidelity*. Abusive fidelity in translation is a practice that ‘values experimentation, tampers with usage, seeks to match the polyvalencies and plurivocities or expressive stresses in the original by producing its own’ (1985: 270). These practices work against ‘weak’ or ‘servile’ translations. A critique of such practices is made in another of Derrida’s articles, from 1971: ‘La mythologie blanche.’ In this article Derrida points to weak, servile translations as having a tendency to privilege the *us* system, that is, a chain of values linking the *usual*, the *useful*, and common linguistic *usage*. As Lewis explains: ‘to accredit the use-values is inevitably to opt for what domesticates or familiarizes a message at the expense of whatever might upset or force or abuse language or thought, might seek after the unthought or unthinkable in the unsaid or unsayable’ (1985: 270).

This resonates strongly with the preoccupations of this essay, and after reading of adequate, natural, faithful renderings, I was relieved to read this in an academic text. However, it is possible that my translations go further than the *abusive fidelity* that Lewis articulates. The abuse principle does not ‘risk sacrificing rigour to facility ... faithful transmission to playful tinkering with style and connotation’ (1985: 270). I don’t know if I can say the same for my Series Translations, or even some of the Live Translations. It is true that they may seem close to the naïve abandonment of ‘grammatical, syntactic, and stylistic considerations,’ in favour of a ‘free-for-all approach’ (Bartoloni 2003). However I wanted to push out to the extremes of the language of the original, and follow that out to the extremes of English, seeking out the ‘unthinkable in the unsaid or the unsayable.’ Or, as Heidegger puts it, ‘venturing, like the word of the poets, to that limit where the experience of the taking place of language in the Voice and in death is complete’ (1971: 286).

Within this context, I felt that if I were to adhere to traditional methods and traditional translation theory, I could only fail in my task. This stems in part from doubts as to my capacity as a translator, my competence to comprehend and thus to render the original

Spanish into English.<sup>10</sup> Of course it also speaks of the more serious doubts about language, relation and experience that have driven this line of questioning. From this anxiety over failure I sought relief. I didn't, however, seek to relieve myself of all responsibility to the original texts. I felt a great sense of duty to them, even though my methods may not comply with the economic restraints set out for translation by Derrida. The Series Translations at least, seem to fail to adhere to the *quantity* of the original by creating three poems from one original. As to *property*, the question is more interesting. In the Live Translations, there is an immediate, failing and flailing attempt to make the original proper, the most 'appropriating and appropriate' (Derrida 2001: 179).<sup>11</sup>

Essentially it is a translation that adheres to the ideas of form and content, but at the same time it subjects 'translation to an aleatory adventure,' putting 'languages in contest, exposing one language to predation from another' (Rasula & McCaffery 1998: 247-248), though not in the disembodied space of the page, but in a visibly and audibly dynamic physical environment.

In the Series Translations, although the first two incarnations seem to comply quite strictly with the notion of the proper, of proper meaning and appropriateness, the third might seem to go too far, to break free from the language of the original and cease to merit the title of translation.<sup>12</sup> However I found it to be the most appropriate way to make the original *proper* to me, to my way of thinking and writing. To give an example that is at once analogous and divergent, Robert Lowell, in the introduction to his 'imitations' of European poetry, claimed that he had tried to 'write alive English and to do what my authors might have done if they were writing their poems now and in America' (1958: xi). While Lowell eschews the title of translation, referring to them as imitations, it seems to me he departs from a mistaken idea. It is a bizarre hypothetical that uproots the psyche of real, body-dwelling, spatial and historical beings, and replants them in what was contemporary 'America.' Would those poets, were they to write later and in a vastly different geopolitical context, have written those poems? Surely not. So I

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<sup>10</sup> Jerome Rothenberg admits to a similar reluctance to think of himself as a professional translator, since his grasp of any language other than English is 'limited.' This despite over forty years in the practice (2004: xv)

<sup>11</sup> Though due to the nature of the method, there are glaring errors, renderings that in the moment of their conception mistook one tense for another, or forgot the meanings of words altogether, replacing them with extemporaneous speculations.

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps though, they remain 'one of those other things in *tr.*, a transaction, transformation, travail, *travel*—and a treasure trove [*trouvaille*]' (Derrida 2001: 198)

have not attempted to write the poems that Esteban Pujals Gesalí would have written were he living and working in Sydney today. Rather I have written some of the poems that I might write if I were to employ a similar vocabulary and form to that of the original poems. They are not the only poems that I would write because to write a poem is to leave other poems unwritten. Each iterative act will always form the ‘broken cast’ of ‘a work never penned’ (Agamben 1993: 3). Everything that I write will be shadowed by what I was unable to reach, what is determined to remain unsaid.

Again I return to failure and again I look for relief. For a way of translating that, rather than attempting to replace the original, looks to set it in relief against its possible renderings in another language. The renderings aim to touch the poems at a point. But rather than one rendering touching the poem at one point, there are several versions touching at varying points. To take Benjamin’s idea of echo and harmony, and Fynsk’s extension to the idea of sympathetic vibration, each incarnation aims to strike a note in language—having listened for tones in the original—hoping to hear in return some kind of resonance, some kind of harmony. The note struck each time is slightly different, and hopes to resonate with the mode of intention of the original in a slightly different way. Perhaps one is major and one is minor. The third incarnation may have wandered too far or not far enough, but I think that, particularly as it sits couched within the context of the two earlier variations, some kind of reverberation is created. The Live Translations are struck here only once, but in their immediacy, they know that next time they will hit a different note, and will never be completely replicable. Hopefully though, at some point in these reverberations, the ‘heavy, alien meaning,’ which weighs pure language in the originals, is to some extent ‘relieved’ (Benjamin 1968: 80).

Another aim in creating these iterative, indeterminate models is to forge a form of translating which fails to side with either departure or arrival; the unity of the original or the unity of the translation. In much contemporary study, as Paolo Bartoloni notes, there is a trend to trade ‘transparency,’ ‘faithfulness’ and ‘equivalence’—associated with a tendency to ‘assimilate the other’—for ‘difference’ and ‘resistance’ (2003). While there are obvious gains from such an approach, this manoeuvre fails to break the arrival/departure distinction. This represents a longstanding dichotomy described by Friedrich Schleiermacher in 1813: ‘either the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him; or he leaves the reader in peace as

much as possible and moves the writer toward him' (2004: 49).<sup>13</sup> What Bartoloni proposes in place of this, is a translation studies that resists the 'privileging of finite products, the original and the printed translation,' and reflects the nature of translation, 'which is intrinsically fluid, under way' (2003). This theoretical shift, rather than occupying itself with the beginning or end points of translation, would investigate 'the area in-between the original and the translation, that zone in which two languages and two cultures come together and fuse in a kind of cross fertilisation where their distinctive traits are blurred and confused by the process of superimposition' (2003).

In this 'interstitial' or 'potential' zone, the original is already no longer itself, and the translation is incomplete, has not yet reached its home. The way I have engaged with this shift is through my translation methods, which try to relieve the translations of the weight of the singular title of translation. Both the Series and the Live Translations fail to create definitive, finite literary products.

Of course this failure is once again deliberate, and not just in order to comply with Bartoloni's proposed theoretical shift. These methods also arise from Agamben's critique of the negative foundation of language in *Language and Death* (1991). In language, what we mean, we do not say. From my point of view, all writing, but particularly translation—with its fundamental connection to the relation of meaning and the evolution of language—has to take into account the 'negative breath of *Geist*' at every point in speech, and the 'unspeakability of *Meinung*' in every word (Agamben 1991: 14). A text is not a mere expression of the thought and emotion of the author, but rather attests to the struggling movement *in* language of its conception. In Benjamin's language: it represents the 'death mask of its conception' (1996: 65). The inability to merely express oneself is represented by the text. Instead of signaling something concrete, it bears witness to a mode of intention toward an impossible signaling. In other words: it does not signal or make statements, it merely signs the statement. And if this is true, then shouldn't a translation—and by extension any writing—method bring out and make evident the scars of this voyage in language? Both translation methods attempt this. One does this through textual experimentation and transformation, the

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<sup>13</sup> As in most older texts on translation, the translator here is distinctively gendered. I can't help but feel somewhat culpable here when many of the texts that have informed this investigation have been translations rendered by women. No doubt whole books could be written on the position of women in translation, the silencing of an already silenced figure.

other through performative improvisation. In another form, I have also tried to approach this through my Illustrations. They attempt a kind of writing that is continually thwarted in what they intend. They fail continually to put into words what they have in mind, and thus in saying something else, they recognise themselves as their own broken moulds or death masks. Rather than echos of an original in a translation, they try to become echoes of their other, potential selves. The weight of saying what they mean is relieved, but hopefully in that process they are afforded a greater kind of significance. Just as the original 'has already relieved the translator and his translation of the effort of assembling and expressing what is to be conveyed' (Benjamin 1968: 79).

The last relieving function of translation (outlined here, at least) involves an effort to in some way relieve standardized (standardised? Americanised?) English of its hegemonic dominance, and the ensuing tendency to take 'as universal' 'the 'you' for whom I claim to speak—and hence the 'I' who speaks' (Venuti 2003: 237). This is obviously a much greater task than any single project can think of achieving. But any translation *into* English in a small way helps to equalise—or at least helps initiate a movement *toward* the equalising—the inequity of cultural exchange that Venuti recognises (2003: 237). As well as this translation contains within it a threat to what Charles Bernstein refers to as 'the legitimizing function served by standardization' (2001: 224). Though Bernstein is not writing about translation here, his questions are relevant: 'what is the meaning of this language practice; what values does it propagate; to what degree does it encourage an understanding, a visibility, of its own values or to what degree does it repress the awareness?' (Bernstein 2001: 224). What am I obscuring through my language practice? The voices of others? The voicelessness of my own thought? Translation offers a means of minoritising standardised English. In Deleuze and Guattari's dialect, certain literary texts can increase the 'radical heterogeneity' of language by 'submitting the major language to constant variation, forcing it to become minor, delegitimizing, deterritorializing, alienating it' (cited in Venuti 1998: 10). Translation then, is a 'potential site of variation' (Venuti 1998: 10), questioning the 'seeming unity of standard English' (11).

So my translations, through a motivation that is theoretical, experiential and political, fail to surrender linguistic creations to the standard dialect. If it is true that 'there is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political

multiplicity' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 8), then translation can help to destabilise that takeover. This destabilising force has implications for all language practice. In Benjamin's words, content and language form a unity like 'a fruit and its skin' (1968: 76). However, the organic notion of a text is always an illusion. The text was always falling apart (though perhaps the fruit and skin image holds, since the skin is always loosening itself from the flesh, first in the process of ripening, then of rotting); as de Man puts it: translations 'kill the original, by discovering that the original was already dead' (1986: 84). This does not stand only for translation. There is a kind of pleat involved in firstly engaging with difference in language through translation, and then folding that back over into my own writing in my proper tongue. It is not enough to create translations that signal the 'otherness' of the foreign text. Writing in English involves a tendency toward the kind of universalism mentioned earlier, and merely signalling otherness in translations threatens to leave the standardised language of literary texts unshaken. The effect that translation has on our relation to our own languages should carry over into other kinds of writing practice.

This is because translation offers, if not the guarantee, then at least the uncertain invitation, to radically alter our relation to our own language, to become foreigners, 'but in one's own tongue, not only when speaking a language other than one's own' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 98). When we engage with translated material and allow ourselves to be transformed by it, then we have to admit to there being something between us and our language. It involves a separate way of movement (Benjamin's mode of intention), though we cannot come face to face with it. The image that comes to mind is of a screen. One of those translucent Japanese screens that are used to divide a room. The room we are in is the room of language, and we can make out the movement of figures behind the screen. We cannot touch the figure, but we can see, ever so hazily, their moving form. The figure behind the screen will seem at turns awkward, at turns breathtakingly graceful and economic, and we can only begin to imagine how to mimic that movement. This is the task of the translator: to bring that movement onto the other side of the screen. Or rather, to bring it closer, if still behind a nearer, more translucent screen.

*The Series Translations*

*Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations  
... not abstract areas of identity and similarity. Walter Benjamin (1996: 70).*

NUNCA LO SUFICIENTEMENTE

NUNCA LO SUFICIENTEMENTE  
levantadas las faldas, nunca  
los pantalones fácilmente  
alejados del lugar del suceso;  
vértigo al nacer en deshacer  
el horizonte indefinidamente  
y un encaje en del mar las enaguas.

NEVER (THE) SUFFICIENTLY

NEVER THE SUFFICIENTLY  
lifted the skirts, never  
the pants easily  
distanced from the place of the happening;  
vertigo at to be born in to undo  
the horizon indefinitely  
and a fitting-in of the sea the enwaters.

NEVER ENOUGH

NEVER SUFFICIENTLY

lifted, the skirts, never  
easily distanced the pants  
from the scene of the crime;  
vertigo at being born in undoing  
the horizon indefinitely  
and a lace in the sea of the slip.

NEVER ENOUGH

NEVER ENOUGH

this lifting hurts, never  
easily away, entrants  
from a place where  
what happened? undoing  
the vertigo of written births,  
we see the slippage.

## TEORIA DE LA HIPOTESIS

Nadie ha conocido nunca el vacío;  
en ausencia de estímulos, las alas  
silenciosas, interrumpida  
en la parte occipital de la isla  
la sucesión de no se sabe  
qué datos o qué ondas excéntricas,  
suceden sucedáneos, subtítulos  
que crea asustado el pensamiento. Crecen  
acrósticos ingenios que no existen  
porque son de crystal y no son  
ciertos; una cierta elegancia les basta  
que los haga aún más transparentes.

## THEORY OF THE HYPOTHESIS

Nobody has known never the vacancy;  
in absence of stimulus, the wings  
silent, interrupted  
in the occipital part of the island  
the succession of one doesn't know  
what data or what deep eccentrics,  
substitutes succeed, subtitles  
that create frightened the thought. They grow  
ingenious acrostics that don't exist  
because they are of crystal and are not  
certain; a certain elegance suffices  
that they are made still more transparent.

## THEORY OF THE HYPOTHESIS

Nobody has ever known the emptiness;  
in the absence of stimulus, the wings  
silent, interrupted  
in the occipital part of the island  
the succession of unknown  
data or eccentric waves,  
substitutes follow, subtitles  
that create the frightened thought. Ingenious  
acrostics grow that don't exist  
because they are made of glass and are not  
certain; a certain elegance is enough  
to make them even more transparent.

## BELOW-PAR THESIS THEORY

Nobody even knows this vacancy;  
silent wings stimulate the absence  
of interrupted  
cracks to the back of the head  
the success of unknown  
information or uncentred profundity,  
substitutes follow subtitles  
leaving thought afraid. Crossings  
grow that never were  
even the glass of water is not  
certain; though a certain elegancy  
might make the whole transcendent.

## CUATRO FRAGMENTOS DE UNA POETICA

Para empezar:

Hablar es una arriesgada especie de ejercicio  
y peligrosa...

...la hace su imperfección aparente-  
mente más perfecta todavía...

Las palabras pueden  
en cualquier momento desarticularse,  
resbalarse de su segunda mano  
que son, sonoridades que se quiebran  
por una grieta, irregularidades  
que el coleccionista valora  
por la conformación  
delicada de sus deformidades.

.....

Diremos del piano que extienden las notas  
autodesafinarse haciendo al tocarlo  
muy difícilmente fascinable hasta el final.

## FOUR FRAGMENTS OF A POETICS

To begin:

To talk is a risked species of exercise  
and dangerous...

...it makes her imperfection apparent-  
ly more perfect still...

The words can  
in any moment disarticulate themselves,  
slip of their second hand  
that they are, sonorities that break themselves  
by a crack, irregularities  
that the collectionist valorises  
for the conformation  
delicate of its deformities.

.....

We will say of the piano that the notes extend  
To define themselves making at to play them  
very difficultly fascinable until the final.

## FOUR FRAGMENTS OF A POETICS

To begin:

Talking is an endangered kind of exercise  
and dangerous...

...made by imperfection apparent  
mind more perfect still...

The words can  
at any moment dismantle themselves,  
slip from their second hand  
that they are, sonorities that crack  
and break, irregularities  
that the collector values  
for the delicate  
conformation of its deformities.

.....  
Let us say of the piano that the notes extend  
To untune themselves making them at the playing  
very difficultly fascinant until the end.

## FOR AND OF A FRAGMENT POETICS

To begin:

To speak brings our species to danger  
endangers us...

... made by apparent imperfection  
the mind is more perfect still...

Words can  
at some point unjoin themselves,  
they slip down to us second hand  
goods, broken dreams  
irregularities collect value  
in delicate cups  
conforming with deformations.

.....  
We'll say the piano's note intends  
defined selves, making them play  
very difficult pieces right to the end.

## The Live Translations

*'The translator, per definition, fails.'* Paul de Man (1986: 80).

### *On Transcribing the Spoken*

Obviously, in transcribing spoken language, some things are lost and some gained. But the overriding feeling is one of loss. For Barthes, it is in the first place an 'innocence' that is lost. Not because speech is 'in itself fresh, natural, spontaneous, truthful, expressive of a kind of pure interiority,' but because it is tactical. And in passing to the written word, this tactic, 'perceptible to one who knows how to listen, as others know how to read,' is erased (1974: 3-4). In these transcriptions I have deliberately attempted not to clean up the text too much, to leave in some of those 'scraps of language' (4), the phatic and paralinguistic features of the reading, some of which are inevitably lost in any transcription which doesn't resort to copious explanatory notes. I have decided to represent these elements through quite a conventional typographical format. Rather than developing a specific typography to represent the spoken form of the translations—as in the talk pieces of David Antin, for example—I have chosen to lay out the translations as they appear in the original poems, with omissions or additions where they occur in the translation. As such, the majority of the transcriptions effect a strange kind of erasure of the original, as if by accident.

Thinking of birds, Barthes refers to those desperate, interpellant moments in speech, through which a body seeks another body, as songs. 'Gauche, flat, ridiculous when written down' (5), this song is extinguished in our writing. Reading over the transcriptions however, I note at times, in the desperate omissions and catachresis, a strange velocity and force in the language. It may not be the song to which Barthes refers, but it does seem to contain a musical drive which is particular to the wins and losses of the transcription of this specific mode of relation in language.

But writing is not the written; transcription produces a very different textual product to the action that we generally call writing. So these transcriptions have a different place within the body of the text to the other, more writerly elements. They are incomplete documentations of an event. The process leaves things unsaid in ways that straight on-the-page writing does not. One example is the inevitable loss of homonymic ambiguities. When I say the phonetic unit *mo(u)rning*, the listener can hear—by choice

or by chance—either *morning* or *mourning*. In the process of transcription however, I have to make a choice, as it were. Place one above the other, or one *over* the other, obscuring it. It is also true however that in speaking I may have to efface the heteronymic uncertainties latent in the written text. These are just a few reasons why it is with a sense of mourning—the beginning of a new day?—that I transcribe these utterances. While I may find myself compelled to make these choices for the sake of mimesis, I encourage the reader to hear what she or he likes.

These translations were recorded at the University of Technology, Sydney, on 22 October, 2007, before a small audience of friends and colleagues. Preparation was deliberately limited. Though I did investigate vocabulary with which I was unfamiliar or had forgotten, I refrained from working out translations prior to the event. This was in order to create unrehearsed, unrefined translations. The translations were performed, and I wanted them to be performative in the sense that the social—being and discourse—is performative, not in the overdetermined fashion of theatre, or of much performance poetry. The translation was to be the event of its becoming.

CUATRO FRAGMENTOS DE UNA POETICA<sup>14</sup>

Para empezar:

Hablar es una arriesgada especie de ejercicio  
y peligrosa...

...la hace su imperfección aparente-  
mente más perfecta todavía...

Las palabras pueden  
en cualquier momento desarticularse,  
resbalarse de su segunda mano  
que son, sonoridades que se quiebran  
por una grieta, irregularidades  
que el coleccionista valora  
por la conformación  
delicada de sus deformidades.

.....  
Diremos del piano que extienden las notas  
autodesafinarse haciendo al tocarlo  
muy difícilmente fascinable hasta el final.

## FOUR FRAGMENTS OF A POETICS

To begin:

To speak is a risky species of exercise  
and dangerous...

... it makes its imperfection apparent-  
ly more perfect still...

The words can  
in whatever moment unjoin themselves,  
slip from their second hand  
that they are, sonorities that break open  
at a crack, irregularities  
that the collectionist values

deformities.

.....  
We will say of the piano that the notes extend  
to go out of tune, themselves  
until the end.

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<sup>14</sup> This poem was read aloud from the original, and then played back to me via headphones at about 80 percent of the pace at which it was read. From this listening, I gave a translation.





III

Estira el mar los brazos.  
Como una rosa, la ventana  
se abre al sol. Encuentran un jeroglífico  
los tres de indescifrables  
cicatrices al fondo.

III

The ocean stretches its arms.  
Like a rose, the window  
opens to the sun. They find a hieroglyphic  
of the three indecipherable  
scars in the background.

SOBRE UNA MALAGA UTOPICA<sup>16</sup>

Propongamos para empezar un ataque  
 al corazón de la ciudad:  
 el muerto—méritos aparte —  
 tiene al menos esa utilidad  
 principal en la táctica real-  
 idad del tacto: abona  
 el terreno, organiza  
 los órganos y los activa:  
 engendra de su podredumbre  
 caos, cosas en abundancia.  
 Sea ahora su impunidad  
 de sueño así en las nubes  
 como hasta ayer en la vegetación.  
 Sea su urbanidad vigente  
 en las selvas crecer al asomarse  
 por casualidad y los mares,  
 la noche nuevamente  
 lo normal y perfectamente  
 posible seguramente vivir  
 en el aire: divinamente

## OVER A UTOPIAN MALAGA

Let us propose to begin a heart  
 attack of the city:  
 the dead one—merits aside—  
 has at least this utility  
 principal utility of the tactile real-  
 ity of tact:

engenders of its something  
 chaos,

the dreams in the clouds

Of its supernaturalism

the night newly  
   normal perfectly  
       surely  
 in the air: divinely.

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<sup>16</sup> This poem was played back at varying speed, over which a friend, Tom Smith, had control.



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