

**ROAD MAPS FOR BABEL:**  
*SOME THOUGHTS ON THE ART OF LITERARY TRANSLATION*

**A Talk by**  
**David Young – Emeritus Professor of English**  
**Friends of the Oberlin College Library**  
**Commencement Weekend Program**

---

I want to found this account of the value of literary translation on a few assumptions that will not be especially controversial in this age of multiculturalism. I submit that it is not too good for a culture to be monolithic: we have seen some frightening examples in the Islamic world recently. Western culture, for all its faults and problems, is surely better off, for example, for being not only Judaeo-Christian but also Greco-Roman in its heritage. That has kept the counter-examples of classicism in constant dialogue and disputation with the orthodoxies of the churches. In this view the Reformation was valuable, too, as was the Counter-Reformation. It's simply based on the recognition that multiple voices make for a better cultural dynamic than authoritarian monologues, and that even a clash of cultures, a multiplicity that fends off impulses to purity and purification, can have positive results.

This mongrel heritage of ours is not without its problems. And some would say that Western culture is in danger of having no center, so pluralized and globalized has it become. I don't want to be complacent about the frightening and ignorant superpower in which I dwell. But I don't think its largest problems stem from multiculturalism. Present-day American pluralism has aroused resistance, both inside and outside the culture, but I for one would not trade it for a more coherent or monolithic possibility.

Thus it is, perhaps, that I feel so comfortable about the peculiar and largely unrecognized art of literary translation. The fact that it is mostly neglected and regularly misunderstood does not even depress me, I think, because I recognize that its valuable functions do not require emphatic or official endorsement. Like the grass, which Shakespeare knew was "crescive by night," growing faster in the darkness, literary translation may well thrive as it does because so little attention falls upon it. If it is unrewarded, it is also, in an overly commercialized society, unmeddled with. If I choose to translate a Chinese or an Italian or a German poet, nobody interferes. Nobody tells me how to do it, and nobody cares particularly whether I am successful. And occasionally I am grateful for just such oblivion.

I recently had word of a project that had student poets in Israel and Palestine writing and translating each others' poems. They did not, they admitted, think that this activity would solve the problems of peace in that area, but they felt that they were at least doing something, if only on a personal level, to counteract the massive misunderstanding and hostility that were daily accumulating around them. Who would be willing to claim that no useful results

can be anticipated from this modest gesture?

My own experience in teaching translation is that the inevitable widening of personal horizons that students experience is a positive gain, sometimes even a very remarkable one. And meanwhile, my own practice as a poet seems to be more and more informed by a habit of translation, an addiction to it, an embrace of all that it means and implies. I used to suggest to the curious that translating was a way to keep the tools in the workshop sharp while waiting around for visits of the muse. But that is to reduce the art to a secondary status, as if it were a hobby, like building ships in bottles or raising orchids.

I'm now willing to say, I think, that whatever value I may have as a writer and as a teacher comes in great part from what I have learned through translating. I have been glad to contribute to the multiple literary conversation that takes place in our world, to take an active and creative part in it. And I feel more confident about the value and even the morality of my activity, when I am supported and even emboldened by words like these of Susan Sontag:

Choices that might be thought of as merely linguistic always imply ethical standards as well, which has made the activity of translating itself the vehicle of such values as integrity, responsibility, fidelity, boldness and humility. The ethical understanding of the task of the translator originated in the awareness that translation is basically an impossible task, if what is meant is that the translator is able to take up the text of an author written in one language and deliver it, intact, without loss, into another language. Obviously, this is not what is being stressed by those who await impatiently the supersession of the dilemmas of the translator by the equivalencings of better, more ingenious translation machines. Literary translation is a branch of literature --- anything but a mechanical task.

Appearing before you, then, as an apologist and promoter of this branch of literature, my sense is that I cannot do better than to share examples of my own activities and to ask you to try to understand more fully what it is that translation involves and includes. With that better understanding, you will be in a stronger position for whatever response – criticism, sympathy, grudging admiration or sheer dismay – seems most appropriate to you.

And I will begin with Petrarch, the project that is most complete among the projects I've been involved in recently. The completeness takes the form of a book published in April, comprising the 366 poems of Petrarch's sequence of love poems for Laura, sometimes known as the *rime sparse*, or the *Canzonieri*, or the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, "fragments of matters in common speech." Because Petrarch was inventing the modern lyric sequence, he wasn't quite sure what to call it or how to think about it, but as he devoted himself to it off and on throughout his life, he came to realize, I think, that it was important and beautiful, a something very new that was larger and more exciting than the sum of its parts. I expect your 14<sup>th</sup> century Tuscan isn't necessarily flourishing these days, but I'm going to ask you to look at the original Italian first:

Cesare, poi che 'l traditor d'Egitto  
li fece il don de l'onorata testa,  
celando l'allegrezza manifesta  
pianse per gli occhi fuor, sì come è scritto;

et Anibal, quando l'imperio afflitto  
vide farsi Fortuna sì molesta,  
rise fra gente lagrimosa et mesta  
per isfogare il suo acerbo despitto;

et così aven che l'animo ciascuna  
sua passion sotto 'l contrario manto  
ricopre co la vista or chiara or bruna.

Però s'alcuna volta io rido o canto,  
facciol perch' í non ò se non quest'una  
via da celare il mio angoscioso pianto.

This poem, number 102 in the sequence, refers to two famous events from classical history. Caesar defeated his son-in-law Pompey at Pharsalia and is said to have wept when presented with Pompey's head. Lucan says he was insincere; other commentators think the emotion was genuine. And Hannibal, the great Carthaginian general is said to have laughed when the senators of Carthage wept at the news of Roman victories in the Second Punic war. A literal prose version of this sonnet would go something like this:

Caesar, when the Egyptian traitor made him a present of that honorable head,  
concealing his indubitable joy, wept with his eyes externally, as it is written;

and Hannibal, when he saw Fortune behaving so cruelly to the afflicted empire,  
laughed among his tearful sad people to give vent to his bitter chagrin;

and so it happens that each soul covers its passion with the contrary mantle,  
presenting a face now clear, now dark.

Therefore, if at any time I laugh or sing, I do it because I have no other way than this  
one to hide my anguished weeping.

My version of this poem, like my others, tries to reflect its formality of organization and movement, while dispensing with the intricate rhyme scheme. I choose iambic pentameter, obviously, that English sonnet standby, and I try to reflect Petrarch's lucid and precise

vocabulary while emulating, if possible, a living voice speaking English:

When the Egyptian traitor handed him  
the honored head of Pompey, Caesar wept,  
or so we're told; he hid his boundless joy  
behind external tears, concealing it;

and Hannibal, when he could see that Fortune  
had turned so cruel to his afflicted empire,  
laughed in the midst of his lamenting people,  
to vent his bitterness another way;

and thus it happens --- every soul may cloak  
the passion of the moment with its opposite,  
a face that's clear or else a face that's dark.

Thus if at any time I laugh or sing  
you may be sure I do it as a way  
to cover up my weeping from the world.

Do you get Petrarch in that version? Well, yes and no. You also get some Young, I guess, and some of what's in Young's ear from Shakespeare and Sidney and Spenser, along with some of Young's values as a poet, including his love of the vocal liveliness that our contemporary poetry affords us. I try to be fairly reticent in these versions, effacing myself as much as possible to let Petrarch take center stage, but it's impossible to efface myself altogether, nor am I sure that would be worth the effort in the first place. Susan Sontag spoke of boldness and humility, and I hope of course that both qualities manage to be present in my Petrarch versions.

Translation projects take many shapes and forms. The Petrarch evolved from my teaching the sonnet cycle tradition that eventuated in Shakespeare's sonnets and wanting my students to have examples of Petrarch that they would find readable and interesting. I did a few, and then a few more, and then suddenly I had a contract to go ahead and do the whole sequence.

My second example derives from a long-standing interest in classical Chinese poetry. I am nearing the end of a project that has involved a selection of poems by the late Tang Dynasty master, Du Mu. In this case I have been collaborating with a colleague, Jiann I. Lin, Oberlin College's East Asian Librarian and a scholar of classical Chinese. This is our second such collaboration, and I thought it would interest you to see how we work together. I will start, therefore, by projecting the Chinese text of a poem, with Lin's literal character-by-character translation. Since he's here, I am going to ask Lin to read it out loud for you, so you can hear the original:

Title: 村 行 = Cun xing  
village tour,  
country journey

春 半 南 陽 西  
spring halfway southern sunshine sunset  
to west

柔 桑 過 村 塢  
soft, mulberry- trees cross over a village  
gentle trees

娉 娉 垂 柳 風  
gracefully weeping willow under the  
wind

點 點 迴 塘 雨  
drop by drop revolving fish-pond in rain

蓑 唱 牧 牛 兒  
(wearing) singing cowherd boy  
rain-cloak

籬 窺 蒨 裙 女  
bamboo to peep dark red, skirt girl  
fence fresh and clear

半 溼 解 征 衫  
half wet take off, traveller gown  
loosen (of long journey)

主 人 饋 雞 黍  
host, host family to offer fowl and millet  
(food) (to welcome friend)

As you can see, the poem is constituted by eight five-character lines. It has rhymes in the original and it reflects the practice of parallelism whereby the lines, in pairs, match their elements in a pleasing kind of grid effect, e.g. lines 3 and 4. where wind and rain, willow and fishpond, are juxtaposed for comparison and contrast, or as in the last pair, where the verb comes crucially at the very center of the line.

My practice with these poems is to treat each line as a free verse stanza. I try to reflect the parallelism but not too strictly or mechanically. Again, I am very interested in trying to create the effect of a voice, a live speaker, sounding like our contemporary. Lin tells me when I have strayed too far from the original, and he also lets me know when he thinks my English is a good fit with the original. Sometimes we go through several versions before we're both satisfied. Here's my current rendering of the poem – I should say *our* rendering, so it's so much a joint effort:

### COUNTRY JOURNEY

Halfway through spring  
the sun sets as I pass Nanyang

under tender mulberry trees  
I enter a quiet village

weeping willows  
stir softly in the wind

under pelting raindrops  
the fishpond's filled with circles

the cowherd boy  
wears a rain-cloak, singing

peeps through a bamboo fence  
to glimpse a girl's red skirt

I peel away my damp  
traveling cape and jacket

just as my host brings out  
a bowl of chicken and millet.

I love the quiet realism of these poems, and I'm thrilled that their images still manage to evoke the moments they captured so lovingly. There is much about the language and the formal conventions that does not survive the translation process, but what does survive, when it is successful, brings me Du Mu's voice and sensibility over something like twelve centuries, alive and vivid in a very different time and place.

Du Mu was especially a master of the very short lyric, and the delicacy and understatement of his poems is striking even in a tradition that cultivated such virtues. I can't resist sharing one more example with you, one that will demonstrate his special mastery.

I will ask Lin to read this one aloud as well:

Title: 盆 池 = Pen chi  
basin pond

鑿 破  
dig, chisel

蒼 苔  
mosses  
dark green

地  
soil

偷 他  
steal, it  
snatch

— 片 天  
a little stretch of sky

白 雲  
white clouds

生  
live

鏡 裏  
in the mirror

明 月  
bright moonlight

落  
leave  
behind

階 前  
on flight of steps

The entire poem is just twenty characters. There are no people in it, and nothing happens of any particular note. It is just a study of water, light, and reflection, as modern in its sensibility as an Impressionist painting or a late twentieth century minimalist poem. Here is our final version of it:

### BASIN POND

A pick can dislodge  
a mossy clod

till it falls in and steals  
a piece of sky

white clouds live there  
deep in the mirror

bright at the rim  
the moon steps in.

One more point about Chinese poetry is worth emphasizing. As you can see from the literal examples, it is in the nature of the language and of the poetry to see to it that the act of reading is itself a translation, an interpretation, a creative completion of the text on the reader's part. The connections are inferred, and we are left to decide how best to articulate them. That means that translating a Chinese poem is both more inviting and more uncertain. You cannot claim to be definitive. Any version will be one among many, valid for its reader, its time and place, but always relative to other readings, other interpretations, myriad possibilities.

That recognition will take me to my last example, which will be not so much a translation as an experiment and a kind of commentary on translation and its problems. For the last few months I have been working on the poems of Paul Celan, the Romanian Holocaust survivor who wrote in German and who died as a suicide in Paris in 1970. You may know that Celan's work is notoriously difficult. The German he wrote was literally a mother tongue, the language his mother had loved and whose literary tradition she had introduced him to; it was also, of course, the language of those who had taken her away and destroyed her, along with his father and six million others who happened to be Jews. Mother-tongue to murder-tongue, as someone put it.

The pressure under which Celan's poems were written, and the conflicted sense of the very medium in which they were cast, help account for his difficulty. That may be why I put off reading him closely or seriously until just this year, when I undertook to edit a symposium on his work for FIELD, the magazine of contemporary poetry and poetics that is published here at Oberlin. I had even met Celan, in 1966 when Stuart Friebert and I had a



grant to interview various contemporary German poets. I felt then that his poems were too closed-in, too hermetic, to appeal to me in that way that other poets did, so I spent very little time on them.

Reading them now has clarified a few things for me. I am more ready to enter Celan's world, with all the weight of its dark history and mordant irony, than I was in my late twenties. Moreover, my reading of this difficult poet has shown me that my translating is really just a form of very close reading. I have been working through Celan's second collection, poem by poem; some of the poems have been translated by others, but many have not. And I have no plans to publish my translations. I am doing the poems in English simply to inhabit, as far as possible, the mind and heart of their maker. It isn't easy being in there – one or two poems and I have to come out, shake myself off, and go take a walk in the sunshine. But it has been a valuable, even unforgettable, literary experience.

The Celan example I want to give you, though, doesn't come from that private work in progress (a book from the middle nineteen-fifties), but rather from Celan's late poems, which are notoriously difficult to translate. These brief, cryptic poems come up against the limits of what poetry and language can express, and thus they also raise questions of whether translation is even possible. Here's an example of what those very late poems are like:

WURFSCHEIBE, mit  
Vorgesichten besternt,

wirf dich

aus dir hinaus.

This has been given a perfectly adequate and thoughtful translation by Katherine Washburn and Margaret Guillemín, in their *Paul Celan: Last Poems* (North Point, 1986).

DISCUS,  
starred with premonitions,

throw yourself

out of yourself.

I have no quarrel with this either on the grounds of accuracy or of expressiveness in English. The problem, as I see it, comes from the extraordinary compression and inventiveness of Celan's German. *Wurfscheibe* is indeed the word for discus, but it is made up of the verb that means *throw*, *pitch*, or *toss*, and the word for a *plate* or a *target* or a *disc*. So it feels very different than a word derived from the Greek; it has its own activity and function, a plate that you throw, built right into it.

Then there is *Vorgesichten*. It looks like the same kind of compound that the English “foresight” is, and indeed it has that same ambiguity that “fore” creates in compounds where it can denote earlier things – forefathers, forebears – and future things – foreboding, foreshadow, forecast – and can also suggest positioning, as in foreground, forehand, and even forehead. But the German word for foresight is *Voraussichten*, so the especially tricky thing about *Vorgesichten* is that it is Celan’s coinage. It did not exist before in German, and I think a German reader, seeing it, while he or she would quickly understand “fore-sight” as its meaning would also glimpse *Vorgeschichten*, which means “prehistoric,” and *Vorsicht*, which means Careful! (taking precautions = *treffen vorsichten*) and the plural for faces, *Gesichtern*, making it also possibly a word for ancestral faces, the plate or disc becoming a face as we study it.

Once past these issues, we face the question of what the poem is addressing. Is this starred disc the great night sky over us? I tend to think so, and the surrounding poems from the 1970 volume help to confirm my hunch. That means that telling the disc to throw itself out of itself is an apocalyptic prayer or gesture, wishing the cosmos or the entire universe to end, to be over. It’s hard to be sure that the poem is saying that, but it’s almost impossible to escape that conclusion at some stage in a careful reading.

It was while I was pondering this poem and its many facets that I realized my multiple perspectives and readings were like a multiple translation, as if a translator’s response to it might not be a single version but a kind of surrounding of it with different, incomplete accounts of it. And haven’t I always told my students that the more translations the better? Just as you can read Homer or Dante more astutely by consulting more and more versions, in lieu of learning Greek or Italian to get you to the original, so, I reasoned, it might be fun to render the Celan poem as a series of variations. The result is playful and, I hope, amusing, and, while not recommended as a regular activity for translators, makes at least for an interesting take on the problems and limits of this art.

## LATE CELAN VARIATIONS

1.  
THROWPLATE, with  
a face full of stars and foresights

throw yourself

out of yourself.

2.  
THROWNDISC  
starred with ancestor faces

throw thyself

out of thyself.

3.

DISCUS, starred with  
ancient things to come

go

throw

yourself

out.

4.

FRISBEE,  
premonition-constellated,

spin right on

out of yrself.

5.

NIGHTSKY, you discus,  
stellate with foreseeings,

toss

thyself

away.

6.  
BIGBANG, you  
starred skydisc,

carefully thrown  
prehistoric plate

take yourself back ---  
be the Big Crunch.

7.  
Etc.

I put it to you that what you were doing as you read through those was:

- a) translating,
- b) interpreting,
- c) playing with language and meaning
- d) reading to get closer to the original

And if I'm right, then translating isn't an appropriation, a colonizing, or some other such bad thing; it is a negotiation between differing realities, a recognition of differences and similarities, a form of reading that attempts to do justice to all the texts and all the readers who may be involved. That's, in any case, how I wish to understand it, and what I'd most like to leave you with, My thanks to the library, which has recently lent me a large German dictionary, a very great many books over many years, and, of course, even my fellow translator, Jiann Lin. It seemed appropriate to me to talk about my love of this activity in the context of friendship – as a friend of the library and a long-time embracer of its riches and its generousities.

---

#### NOTES

The Susan Sontag quote is from her lecture, "The World as India," printed in the TLS June 13, 2003.

The sixth Celan variation courtesy of a suggestion by Ray English.