

Provoked by Translation

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ABSTRACT

An evocation of translation as process, and the voices discovered. Followed by some notes on research fields; and on translation, editing, and self-editing.

I.

IMAGINE A GASHING WOUND. IMAGINE A WOUND SUFFERED BY A dashing though rather portly lieutenant in the artillery. Imagine him wounded in the head and calling it the arm, in salutation of another damaged poet whose generosity he faulted. Imagine him befriending a painter with blue hands launching himself into painting on the winds of the blue. Imagine an art devoted to understanding the meaning of study and blown apart by World War I. Imagine fearless living lost in deathly confusion. Imagine the confusion of rips and tears and voices shattered like shrapnel shattering. Imagine shards of voice without the magic of breaking to make, and instead a hundred deafnesses and blindnesses each lost in their own hearing and seeing. Imagine living when so many have died and been killed. Imagine joy confused in complacency or the other way around. Imagine inventing the ease and the freedom to shape and fashion, to give birth to all things, and still being stuck in an image of invention. Imagine war giving birth to despair, and then imagine a study of despair in the language of glee. Imagine the protection of an inner world as the only gift people are willing to accept. Imagine inventing utopias for the sake and the beauty of others but enclosing others still further. Imagine the joy of study confused with the joy of cages, all in the name of study. Imagine the volatility of eyes and ears and vocal chords fluttering over the crests of confusion. Imagine rust and poison mixing the colors of living. Imagine the currencies of delusion and poetry confused.

And then imagine listening to a music made of scattered memories, a music alive and dissolving in the confusion of the moment. And now imagine our own moment absorbed as well in a past to which it is lovingly and brutally deaf. Imagine the obliteration of words offered in words, the words of a specific ocean drowning in their own specific ocean. Or imagine something else entirely. But looking back at it in this moment, such is how I imagine my time translating *Seated Woman*, the last text Apollinaire wrote before dying in 1918 of the Spanish Flu that incubated during the war, the many and varied experiences of which he evokes with wit, purpose, and the silence of grief, as though natural and manmade catastrophes were woven together. In re-joining life at the point of death, Apollinaire finds a vein of writing from which gushes both psychological and political trauma. And yet confidence is rekindled in looking and hearing, and he writes with words that fly if only they belong to you and any reader now. As though to speak grief, destruction, and disaster, as well as love, only the words of others will do. And I imagine translating as catching up with the capacity we all share to give shape to the unknown multitudes we carry within.

II.

This story of provocation began when Christopher Ohge and Mathelinda Nabugodi asked a group of us to turn our minds to the interaction of creativity, thinking, and editing. I felt this was an invitation to think about process, that this was its beauty; and that the meaning behind putting the words creative and critical together — or its appeal, or the aura it produces, or its charisma, or its capacity to be adored, but also to energize, and to be challenged, and dumped, and pursued again — all lies in the doing and not the defining. The showing and not the telling. Showing a thought and not telling others to think it. Or just showing. Showing in process. The process of showing, showing what might never be shown and always hidden even in the process.

The thread that started to unravel and flow was given by the four key words offered by Christopher and Mathelinda as catalysts, and I was struck by their interconnectedness, and their interaction with each other. Annotation, embodiment, translation, intentionality. The idea that to annotate a text from our own time or another, originally in our own language or another, is an act of embodiment at a personal level. The idea that embodied thought might drive acts of translation. And finally the interaction of translation and intentionality, which embraces the notion of an audience,

of fashioning new audiences, and of rediscovering ways of not just communicating but relating.

I landed on translation principally because translating is what I was doing in that moment. So, translating in a relation with editing. And I'm not sure that what I've ended up offering is a creative translation or a creative-critical one either. Still, to join creative and critical is to start trying to match intention to process, and keep enquiry open rather than establish a field. There's a sense in which I've come to think of translation as a form of self-editing: a way of observing how and what I hear in a literary text; and how it's given me to communicate that way of hearing.

I was translating a short novel called *La Femme assise* in French, *Seated Woman* in English, by the French-Polish avant-garde writer Guillaume Apollinaire. He began researching for it in the years before World War I, but it's the last text he wrote before dying in the flu epidemic two days before Armistice Day in 1918 at the age of 38. If translating is a form of editing, the tiny but large question of the definite article in the title from French to English speaks volumes. What is a definite or an indefinite association, and what are the lines of communication involved in and across languages? *Seated Woman* without the article steers readers towards the Cubist portrait by Pablo Picasso of 1909, and in that way to the Cubist optimism at large in which Apollinaire was centrally involved. By optimism, I mean the belief that the body as both object and subject of vision can be formally fragmented and produce inclusive rather than tyrannical points of view.

And yet by the end of the novel, *Seated Woman* is revealed as the common name for a fake five-Swiss-franc coin in wide circulation in the World War I years. In between the two, the third seated woman in the novel appears as a vast *papier maché* sculpture in a vast Mormon parade in Salt Lake City. Freedom of thought has turned into the fluidity of propaganda, fake utopia, and the commercialization of desire.

Following lines of association involved me in re-discovering them in a different language and a different time, with each of these moments in time echoing the other in disease, war, and corruption. And as a translator shadow-boxing with fantasy, I felt myself in an intimate partnership with the editor of the complete prose works in French of Guillaume Apollinaire, Michel Décaudin, later joined by Pierre Caizergues. From Décaudin's work it's clear that that to show fantasies of dominance and resentment at work, also creativity and diversity, Apollinaire needed them all to be rooted in documented reality. This ranges from Mormon dogma, practice and architecture, to the Medieval Nine Elders plucked from history and myth to

symbolize chivalry and a life by death. It's as though to investigate fantasy and the social fabric it weaves, Apollinaire needed authentic detail and fake authenticity to coincide.

Paradoxically, to produce that effect in English I needed to re-dramatize it, incorporate Décaudin's work as editor in my translating, which means to bear witness to it in silence. Perhaps fantasies themselves work by covering their own historic and psychological tracks. And to give them voice, perhaps ever-changing relations of the creative and the critical need to be developed — as they have been down the ages in art and thought. In any case as I translated *Seated Woman* and in the act of translation generally, I felt that to speak of loss and destruction, also love, also their power, only the words of others will do. And I imagined translating as catching up with the capacity we all share to give shape to the unknown multitudes we carry within.

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Works Cited

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