Books Discussed in This Column


There are some translations that one needs to accept in concept to be able to read them well. A prime example is the Zukofskys' infamous homophonic translation of Catullus, in which they prioritize music before meaning by making the English resemble the Latin in sound, rhythm, and syntax. To read such a translation in the same way one reads, for example, Paul Green's Catullus would be a mistake. Rather, these two translations exist on a continuum of rewriting, with conceptual translation at one end and normative translation at the other.

Although we might expect "literal translation" to be one of the poles on such a continuum, honestly I have no idea what that means. Looked at holistically, all translation involves rewriting aimed at making the work of literature relevant for a new audience—new as in culturally and, oftentimes, temporally as well. When I read a work of literature in translation, I need to understand, first and foremost, exactly what the translator considers relevant in presenting the work for me as a contemporary reader. Some projects might feel very normative, as in Green's version of Catullus 112: "You're such a macho guy, Naso, yet few other macho guys seek your/your company. How so? Naso, you're macho—and a queen." Others clearly follow a different idea of what's most relevant to convey the original, as in the Zukofskys' version of the same lines: "Mool 'tis homos, Naso, 'tis queer take 'im mood 'tis ho most he / descended: Naso, mood 'tis—is it pathetic, cuss." This is why, in the best of all possible worlds, we would have multiple translations of any given text to consider, none of them "literal."

On the far conceptual end of the rewriting continuum are those projects that call much attention to their method that the problem of translation becomes the central concern in and of itself. Perhaps this is why the Zukofskys' Catullus is so widely discussed but seldom read. We're fascinated with its explicit graphicality—sound in translating poetry, yet its wash of Latinate tonal texture that we almost understand is a lot to wade through. Such projects pose questions about the work of interpretation at the heart of rewriting: Paul Legault's English-to-English translation, The Emily Dickinson Reader, would be a good, lacunar example. But for a more exhaustive approach, I keep coming back to—and actually reading—Christian Hawkey's 2010 translation of Georg Trakl's poetry, Ventrakl.

Ventrakl takes what is the subtitle, "a collaboration," the cover design gives away a fundamental notion at the heart of the book, that of translation as an intimate relationship with a ghost. Accordingly, Hawkey's name and English title hover in blue on top of Georg Trakl's name and German title in a haunting, pale red (the elements appear again, but in reverse, on the back cover). The effect looks a bit like an image meant to be viewed through 3D glasses, as if we are being asked to consider the writing before us through a special lens. And, indeed, in his introduction, Hawkey calls our attention to the difficulty of using customary terminology to describe his project. "Ultimately these are not my poems," he asserts. "Nor are they Trakl's. They occur at some place between our languages, texts, names, as well as between our (ghostly) bodies redoubled by the erotics of collaboration and translation." With this, the pun of the title Ventrakl takes on additional resonance. This is a bodily experience, something that courses through the veins. It also calls our attention to the premise of intimacy at the core of Hawkey's project, which elsewhere he calls "transrelating," a prolonging of a friendship between ghosts. In this case, the friendship is decided between men (all of the quotes that Hawkey brings in throughout the book are from men as well) and pivots around desire to understand Trakl's melancholy, wax-time experiences, incestuous relationship with his sister, and suicide.

In addition to intimacy, play often turns out to be an essential facet of conceptual translation projects—just look at any of Legault's pithy one-liners reworking Dickinson—and Hawkey proceeds in such a spirit. He began the project with little German under his belt. How then, might you ask, could he enter into a collaboration with the early-twentieth-century Austrian poet? His many and varied methods of engagement point to rigorous play, including:

- Working with machine translations and often false cognates by using Microsoft's spell checker and online translation engines
- Steeping himself in all things Trakl, including previous translations
- Shooting, with a 12-gauge, an open Trakl book, then using a dictionary to translate what's left
- Reflecting on the non-linguistic record of Trakl's life as seen in images and photographs
- Leaving a Trakl book to decompose outside in a jar of water for a year, then seeing which pieces of words in what order float to the top

Performance, engagement, participation, competition, reproduction, speculation—all of these aspects of play surface in Hawkey's methods and trouble the act of appropriation. They cause us to question fundamental, received notions of what it means to translate.

As might be expected, what we find in the pages of Ventrakl crosses genre and privileges process, conmingling with Hawkey's postmodern approach in his own poetry that often investigates how we construct the self. In this case, Hawkey extends the interrogation to how we construct and mythologize certain poets, such as Trakl, through translation, biography, and image—all part of the rewriting equation. "What in these roads leading away and into you do I know?" he asks a third of the way through the book. His answer includes this:

I know that you once announced you were going to commit suicide to a friend and the friend, weary of your posing, said "Please, not while I'm around." That you once said I am only half-born, after all. That I am—here, now—just as com

Lyrics appear alongside such prose passages, quotes from other authors, photographs, and imagined Q&As between Hawkey and Trakl that all work to layer ideas and themes. In this way, Hawkey worries at the very fabric of the text. As he writes later on:

What persists despite efforts to translate around you, with you, read you, are the singular performances of decay and decomposition, as if intertextuality (meaning moving between texts) is materializing itself as an organic process, de- and re-composing itself [. . .]

Finally, he concludes in one of the last prose passages, "I could present these to you in a form that conveys authority, certitude." Yes, he could. But he doesn't.

In addition to this kind of meta-text that surrounds the lyrics, I find the Q&As particularly moving. "What do you mean by 'read,'" Hawkey asks at one point. "I mean widen your nostrils when approaching any text." Ventrakl is the type of book that needs to be approached as an experience—to be read with nostrils flared, to see the layers and reiterations of its themes accumulate until, in the final pages, we encounter the only en face translation, Trakl's pivotal poem "Grodek" presented in both German and English translation. Only through such deep digging in decomposing material, Hawkey seems to suggest, can a translator bring enough of an odor to this final work of normative translation, or sensitize the reader enough to truly smell it.

In a similar though less explicit way, Claudia Keelan's translation of the poems of the troubadour, Truth of My Songs, arises out of her intimacy with the ghosts of these medieval women. "It amazed me how companioned I felt when translating these poems," she states in an interview. "I felt I'd found lost sisters. It was a happy few years." While Hawkey searches out a "locus of resonant and courageous [masculine] melancholy" through his engagement with Trakl, Keelan longs to locate what these women have to tell us about representations of female identity that is relevant in our current patriarchy. Her project is decidedly feminist in concept while following a method that doesn't reduce it to a social message. Rather, she looks to rap or hip-hop as a modern equivalent of these songs of youthful rebellion and defiance against the feudal system.

Keelan's lengthy and fascinating introduction makes clear that she embraces the idea of translation as an act of appropriation and rewriting. "All of these translations circulate in the circumstances of the translator's own writing present," she states, "which is, like it or not, the only living place of reception." The relevance these Provençal poems have to that writing present lies, first and foremost for Keelan, in their resistance to traditional gender dynamics—a social concern, she takes pains to point out, that is still acutely pertinent to current issues surrounding control of women's bodies, inequality, and violence against women. Through a discussion of fin'amor, or ro-

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pective. Accordingly, Keelan varies her resources in a demotic program, I’d probably prefer the latter with a strong self-awareness of the social dynamics they resist. Female artists within male-dominated rap spring to mind—think of Queen Latifah singing about harassment, domestic violence, and relationship issues.

Keelan’s method produces some stunning results. In moments that strike a perfect balance, the poems joust and bounce along, jabbing the reader with puns, sonic play, and political commentary. The canso (a lyric poem in a single voice) by Ayalaí de Porcailaés culminates in such a moment:

I hand over the bank to God
and the city of blanx,
in all the prophets of buy and trade,
the CEOs of all my days,
all of you who my value made,
by outing me in the writing on the wall.

Comparing this to another translation can help give a sense of the extent to which Keelan transforms the lyric for the contemporary reader. Here is how the collection begins:

I commend Belesgar to God
also the city of Aurenga
and Glorita and the castle
and the lord of Provence,
and all those who wish me well
and whose hands are carved.

If I were studying medieval literature in an academic program, I’d probably prefer the latter with its named references; but I’ll take Keelan’s any day as a readable poem relevant to the present. It’s important to remember that this is an anthology and that it includes a number of different received forms, so variation of voice is to be expected. Accordingly, Keelan varies her resources from contemporary culture to include more than just the sounds of hip-hop, as in one poem titled “Lady Lazarus” that appears in the translation. These examples demonstrate how much of a mistake it would be to evaluate Keelan’s versions without first understanding the concept that informs her project. When we do that, we find wholehearted play, profound engagement (I learned so much from Keelan’s introduction), and collaboration.

The author biographies presented at the beginning of each poet’s section were the only disappointing feature of Truth of My Songs. Given the scant information known about the troubairitz and the fact that the identities of many are still unknown, Keelan’s straightforward, biographical approach seems like a missed opportunity. This would have been a great place to show her conceptual understanding of the work. I am thinking in particular of Eliza Griswold’s translations of landays by Afghan women in her 2014 anthology I Am the Bigger of the World. Griswold’s narrative prose conveys an emotional encounter with each poem in a way that allows us to understand the difficulties of translation inherent in her particular project and, in this way, to read the poems with greater depth. Making the conceptual framework of her project a bit more explicit throughout would have allowed Keelan’s intimacy with her source material to shine even more. Hilary Kaplan uses a more normative approach than either Keelan or Hawkey in her award-winning translation of Angélica Freitas’ Riike Shake, which presents the original Portuguese alongside English versions that remain closely in step. Neither original nor translation is conceptual in approach. But the book makes a nice companion to Hawkey’s Ventrakl and shows a translator working brilliantly in kind, sliding into linguistic layering to keep pace. In translating these poems, I was inspired by the shake. Kaplan tells us in her afterward. “I sought to convey the linguistic border-crossing, wordplay, creative appropriation and reappropriation that is found not only in the phrase ‘Rilke shake’ but in the book as a whole.”

Like Hawkey, Freitas is interested in dismantling the myths built around certain writers who haunt her writing present. Only, her ghosts are much less melancholic, and she is more irreverent toward them. She “translates” them, through her poetic imagination, with delight at the humanizing effect. Gertrude Stein slides her big butt over in a bathtub, an insane Ezra Pound is kept in a cage in Pisa, and a whole country ships all Malmarines-related material back to France according to the “statute of dissemlament.” These and other canonical giants appear in a great mess of material as the young poet—this was Freitas’ debut collection—figures out how to relate to them. The intertextual blend of Riike Shake manifests as a process of re-composition, though it is a less self-conscious and more joyful way than in Ventrakl. Chunks of recognizable ingredients whirl to the top of liquefying material, which is perfect sauce of sound:

perfect teeth, listen up:
you’re not going to get anywhere with tomatoes and onions again us,
and peas and carrots, perfect teeth.

Hilary Kaplan modulates these sounds and the shifting tonalities within and between poems with great skill.

The translation does not call attention to the problems of transmission in the way that Hawkey’s does explicitly and Keelan’s does implicitly. It was constantly aware of the translated status of the text as I was reading, not because of any faults or translationese—far from it—but because of the layering of linguistic blending in which the translation necessarily participates. We feel the translation motor whirring underneath these poems in English; I suspect the same can be said for the original, with its constant awareness of the rewriting that goes into any act of articulation. “Tell me how much you want all this,” the speaker asks in the poem “airmail.” “And where you want me to send it, and how best to wrap it.”

With different angles of approach, all three of these books allow us into one writer’s process of engaging with other writers’ work—which might just be the perfect definition of translation. After all, if we keep this rather obvious fact in mind, then there’s no way to claim literalness. Instead of anxiety of influence or ideas of faithfulness, we find in these books play, intimacy, indeterminacy, and depth. They stand as records of the voices that pass through both author and translator “at the site of intersection,” as Hawkey says, in the “voice chambers, sound chambers, wherein our own voiced selves and the voiced selves of others constantly enter and exit.” Or, as Freitas puts it:

You who seem to me a true-hearted lover,
I’m very pleased that you’re beset by love for me,
for I am likewise forlorn on your account;
and you’re not going to get anywhere
with tomatoes and onions again us,
and peas and carrots, perfect teeth.

ah, yes, shakespeare is very nice,
but beets, chicory, and watercress?
and rice and beans, and collard greens?
lovely little things, the bull you’re eating
just yesterday was chomping in the field,
and you complained
that the meat was tough.

life’s tough, perfect teeth.
but eat, eat all you can,
and forget this chat,
and dig in.

Let’s throw in a little shakespeare (with a lower-case “s”) to our meal, the speaker says to herself, and then later enacts in another poem that ends with the reworked Shakespeare line “all’s well that’s well ended.”

I’d love to hear Kaplan’s process of arriving at the translation for that line and for so many other moments in the poems that tip us off to the original source in similarly reconfigured ways. Because many of Freitas’ sources are from English, there’s an extra layer of delaying) of linguistic play. “I’d love to hear Kaplan’s process of arriving at the translation for that line and for so many other moments in the poems that tip us off to the original source in similarly reconfigured ways. Because many of Freitas’ sources are from English, there’s an extra layer of delaying) of linguistic play. “I’d love to hear Kaplan’s process of arriving at the translation for that line and for so many other moments in the poems that tip us off to the original source in similarly reconfigured ways. Because many of Freitas’ sources are from English, there’s an extra layer of delaying) of linguistic play. “I’d love to hear Kaplan’s process of arriving at the translation for that line and for so many other moments in the poems that tip us off to the original source in similarly reconfigured ways. Because many of Freitas’ sources are from English, there’s an extra layer of delaying) of linguistic play. “I’d love to hear Kaplan’s process of arriving at the translation for that line and for so many other moments in the poems that tip us off to the original source in similarly reconfigured ways. Because many of Freitas’ sources are from English, there’s an extra layer of delaying) of linguistic play. “I’d love to hear Kaplan’s process of arriving at the translation for that line and for so many other moments in the poems that tip us off to the original source in similarly reconfigured ways. Because many of Freitas’ sources are from English, there’s an extra layer of delaying) of linguistic play.
you need
  to live in the ellipses
need to dissect
  the frog of poetry—
don’t abolish the pond.
leaper, leap in
to the great leap.

Mira Rosenthal is the author of The Local World and translator of two books by Polish poet Tomasz Różycki. Her work has received numerous awards, including an NEA Fellowship, a Stegner Fellowship, a PEN/Heim Translation Grant, and the Northern California Book Award. She is Assistant Professor of Poetry Writing at Cal Poly.

Notes
1. I use Carolyn Bergvall’s brilliant conceptual poem “Via: 48 Dante Variations” (available at poetryfoundation.org) to illustrate this to my students.