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Giving Distance its Due (On 'Mutual Translatability')¹

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"The problem with such a no-nonsense approach to things, one which extracts the general from the particular and then sets the particular aside as detail, illustration, background, or qualification, is that it leaves us helpless in the face of the very difference we need to explore."

--Clifford Geertz (1995:40), *After the Fact*

Translation is a great emptier, and much was lost when the *Rāmāyana* was brought to Java and Bali from India—on the west wind.

The Old Javanese *Rāmāyana* is in large part a translation (about 70% translation and 30% original, according to C. Hooykaas, who compared it, word by word, line by line, with its Sanskrit source, the *Bhaṭṭi-kāvya*. Much was added, and much was lost in the transmission (Hooykaas 1955).

It seems to be a general phenomenon that when a foreign system of writing comes to a people, the task of the first few centuries is largely translating from the foreign philology associated with the writing (philology in Kroeber's sense of a collection of prior texts and the equipment to get at them). That is, writing does not come as a pure technology, if there is such a thing, but with a rich content already in place, a philology.

The Old Javanese *Rāmāyana* was an act of translation across unrelated languages—except you could say that they came together and became related in this work. We know little about the marriage of Sanskrit and Old Javanese which gave rise to the translation language called Kawi. The language of Java (the mother? father?) at that time (prior to the 10th century) is largely silent, unrecorded. No one is very sure what was happening noetically at the time when the composition took place more than a thousand years ago.

Anyone who has read it would agree, I think, that the Old Javanese *Rāmāyana* is a work of great beauty and power. One can see why it has been such an exemplary prior text, in Java and particularly in Bali. The Old Javanese *Rāmāyana* has been the source of many genres of theatre, of poetry and recitation, and of visual representations, of names, and of public philosophy (e.g. the code of the good ruler, spoken by Rama as he turns over political power to his brother). I'd like to look closely at a particular passage from the Old Javanese *Rāmāyana* —a passage believed by Professor Hooykaas and others to be original, not a translation but an elaboration of the original, composed in the translation language.

I'd like to discuss not its source, the Sanskrit text it was translated from, but a later stage in the life of the translation: the stage when it undergoes further translation into English.²

But first I would like to frame the translating within a larger question—larger only in the sense that a frame is larger than a picture and sometimes even engulfs, overwhelms the picture. The frame here is a consideration that comes to me from Roman Jakobson—the key term is *mutual translatability*. How close or distant is any one language to or from any other language? What are the differences, and how do they matter in translating?

The term mutual translatability comes from Roman Jakobson's essay on translation which many of us read back a while ago in the early 60's, called "On linguistic aspects of translation." Consider for a moment the paragraph from which I've taken the term mutual translatability:

"Equivalence in difference is the cardinal problem of language and the pivotal concern of linguistics. Like any receiver of verbal messages, the linguist acts as their interpreter..."

[Jakobson will continue this yoking of everyday language use and what linguists do: both interpret the verbal messages they receive. He continues.]

"...No linguistic specimen may be interpreted by the science of language without a translation of its signs into other signs of the same system or into signs of another system..."

[All linguistics profoundly involves translation, either within a language—or across languages. Now comes the term.]

"...Any comparison of two languages implies an examination of their mutual translatability; widespread practice of interlingual communication, particularly translating activities, must be kept under constant scrutiny by linguistic science." (Jakobson 1959:2)

[Do we do that, *scrutinize* the mutual translatability of languages? *Mutual translatability*?]

How do we study mutual translatability? (I'll leave the "why" to the end of this essay.) There are major obstacles. The biggest obstacle may be what Michael Polanyi called "transparency" (Polanyi 1975). If I say, "Look at Livia over there!" I want you to look through my words at someone or something outside them. Everyday languaging operates that way, for the most part. We look through language as if it were transparent...unless for some reason it gets opaque. I think of frost on a windshield calling attention to the windshield. In the same way we tend to look "through" distant texts. Historians look through to learn what Java was like back then. Anthropologists look through them to find ancient Javanese cultural patterns. Linguists look through them at historic Austronesian grammatical

relations and lexical forms. When one is **using** language, i.e. languaging, opaqueness is pathological—it gets in the way of looking through. But the study of mutual translatability seems to require a high degree of opaqueness—the partial loss of normal transparency: Call it translucence, since we require the light of some degree of equivalence in order to see the medium at all.

I know only one way to study “mutual translatability.” That is to hold up the translation and its source, side by side, and sort out the exuberances and the deficiencies, exposing as much surface as possible.³ What things are in the translation but have no counterparts in the source text? Those are the exuberances. What things (of any sort) are in the source text but have no counterparts in the translation? The deficiencies (Oretga y Gasset 1955). And do it both ways—into and out of each language, as a meditation on a translation, sorting out the equivalences in the differences, and just as assiduously, the differences in the equivalences, so as to keep it as mutual as possible.

One of the most pleasant activities in the study of philology is to carry out this comparison, to meditate on a translation and its source in this way. A translation may have been hard to achieve, even unpleasant in the turning of many dictionary pages, but having got one, the activity of comparison always seems engaging, a kind of drama involving all kinds of meanings, clashing and merging in the space between the texts.

It’s not just the drama of actors and goals and instruments and settings and times in two languages but, necessarily, also the particular drama of their once-upon-a-time composition, by some one, some particular utterer, some where, some time, and for some reason. And also there emerges the equally particular drama of memory, the unfolding evocations of prior texts in different readers and hearers, then and now, here and there. These equivalences and differences of memory are especially provocative, and probably are the most difficult to realize.

Bits of all of this drama emerge in that time after a translation has been achieved when one then looks back and forth, from the translation to its source, and back again. (This is a slow version of the esthetic of reading from a bilingual edition, where translation and text face each other, and footnotes grow up from the bottom.)⁴ I’d like to go through some stages of that comparison with you, as a way of scrutinizing mutual translatability.

The Old Javanese *Rāmāyana* is called in Javanese a *kakawin*. *Ka-kawi-an*: the kawi-ing of the *Rāmāyana*. Kawi is the name for the literary language resulting from the marriage of Old Javanese and Sanskrit. Let me telescope several centuries of the very unfinished philological study of the Old Javanese *Rāmāyana* into a few observations about it.

The composition of the Old Javanese *Rāmāyana* must have been an extraordinary incursion into the language of Java. Composing it meant telling and explaining a huge story from a distant culture across the sea, using exotic Sanskrit vocabulary in every line, finding counterparts for Sanskrit morphology and syntax in a totally unrelated language, writing in Sanskrit meters, and working under the

assumption that Sanskrit was the language of the Gods and thereby the language of Truth. As in all translation, much was left behind, and much was added.

All translation has an edge of aggression. But I think it was a momentous language marriage, not a rape, this early translation from Sanskrit to Kawi.

It was not a spoken, everyday language that emerged from this union but an artifice, a literary artifact, called Kawi. The literary language emerges first, and, in Thoreau's words about language, "the chisel of a thousand years retouches it."⁵

It seems clear that the chisel of a thousand years has touched the *Rāmāyana Kakawin*. It has been dated back to before 930 C.E. by some scholars, and new versions keep appearing to the present. A detailed picture of that early translating back in 10th century Java and its subsequent transmission and reshaping through its history—the biography of the living text—awaits a far better scholar than I. Hooykaas has laid the groundwork.

Let me instead think about people of our time and place in the act of translating Old Javanese into English, scrutinizing, in Jakobson's words, their mutual translatability, sorting out their differences and equivalences.

Let us plunge right in to the story. Rama and the monkey army arrive at the southern tip of India. Between them and Sri Lanka is the Gulf of Mannar. Rama now knows, from Hanuman, just where Sita is across the gulf, and Rama himself is at a very high pitch of excitement and so in his ardor to rescue Sita, his love gives rise to hatred toward the obstacle before him. We see the ugly side of power. Rama shoots a flaming arrow into the sea, and it boils and the fish begin to die—*maletuk utek nya sumirat sakeng tutuk*—their brains burst out from their heads. Oysters vomit pearls. The sea fills with a putrid smell. The god of that sea-realm, Baruna, speaks quietly to Rama, and lays out the dreadful consequences of what Rama is doing. Rama takes back his arrow, and sends the monkeys to find rocks in order to build a causeway across to Lanka.

In perfect balance, what Rama has done to the sea the monkeys proceed to do to the land. The monkeys go amuck as they frighten and scatter the animals of the forest and tear huge rocks from the earth. Oddly, none of this seems to bother Rama or the gods. It is less a rape than a ravishment, as one friend suggests.⁶ Then comes the passage I'd like to present in translation and after that look at the original via that translation.⁷

There was one monkey alone, big as a mountain, cruel and wild,
Self-absorbed he was and violent, never sought help,
He struck the slope of the mountain, a shower of noise, trees snapped and
smashed,
Stones cracked split shattered, spread out, crashed, in a thunder of sound.

All at once he tore up that whole mountain, huge and high as it was,
Compare him to a lover going amuck, not attending to gentleness,

The mountain—think it a girl, crying, ravished,
And the water of lakes rising up banks and shores was like her overflowing
tears.

A pair of swans and a band of cranes cried out in grief,
Loud, then swarmed with black bees, flew up in clouds,
Birds with young sang out together, all wept, loud,
Think of that as the voice of the mountain in the pain of assault.

A strong wind howling penetrates the deep caves,
Like her breathing in the embrace of that ape,
The clouds moving on the slopes of the mountain were blown away,
Think of her torn sarong billowing every which way, baring her.

Torn up gemstones flash fly, and even emeralds scatter, all strewn down the
slope,
Think of her jewelled sash, cut away, cast away glittering,
And the trees bend in the wind, the mangoes, the banyans, the asanas,
Like the opened, loosened, released hair coil of the shikarinI.

That last word, *shikarinī*, takes us back to the artifice, to the act of composition itself. It is the name of a Sanskrit metric line, the name of the meter that these particular lines have been composed in, with light (.) and heavy (-) syllables:

. . . / - - - / . . . / . . . - / - . . / . .

This is the recurring rhythm in Kawi of each of the lines translated above. This particular rhythm sets the lines translated above apart from the rest of that chapter (*sarggah*) of the Old Javanese *Rāmāyana*.

And the word, *shikarinī*, is also a triple pun in Sanskrit, referring not only to the name of a verse form, but also to the girl's garlanded hair coil, and further to the mountain itself. It is a feminine form of 'mountain', diminutive ... and perhaps the inspiration for the whole elaborate comparison lies in that word. Madhav Despande told me about the meter:

"The bunching of heavy syllables in the beginning seems to give a feeling of a slow climb with the bunching of light syllables giving a feeling of a steep incline, or quick gait. Perhaps the word refers to such a sound image of a hill. The names of Sanskrit meters are generally indicative of such sound images."

As noted above, Hooykaas shows us that this passage is not to be found in the Sanskrit source, the *Bhaṭṭi-kāvya*. It is widely assumed that it is original in Kawi, an expansion, not a translation. What is being translated is a Sanskritic form of verse, based on light and heavy syllabic weight, including vowel length, into a language in which vowel length was not contrastive. A set of rules for length in Kawi is created, elaborated from Sanskrit (e.g. a vowel resulting from sandhi is considered long; a vowel before a consonant cluster is considered long, etc.).

But the fun is looking back, as I said, at the mutual translatability of Kawi and modern English, the differences and the equivalences. For that we need a glossing. I know no other way to begin.⁸

Paradigm of Glosses (Text from Santosa 1980)

Sarggah XV, stanzas 64 - 68, glossed

NOTE: The stars (*) are place holders for what seem to me untranslatable morphemes.

Stanza 64.

Hanéki Be this	wré ape one unique	tunggal alone	kagiri-giri * mountain awsome frightful	göng big	nyogra NYA-strong cruel	magalak * wild	
ahangkārāmbĕk self	nyān mind NYA-N*	guragada insolent violent	tan not will	angān desire	tulungana help *		
tinĕmpuh * hit	nyāng NYA-NG side wonder mountain	pārśwādbhuta flank marvel noise	kaparupuh * thunder	puh smash	kayu tree	pukah break	
bĕlah cleft	bĕntar split	śirnga broken	ng NG	watu rock	kumalasā * spread (like mat)	syūh crush	kabarubuh * thunder

Stanza 65.

Wawang At once	sinwab *uproot	nyékang NYAIKANG	gunung mtn.	atīsayeng superiorING exceed	göng big	nyan NYA-N
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aruhur

*high

kadi lwir ning kāmi sēdeng agul-agul tan wruh ing aris
 like form N-I- NG lover while amuck not know I-NG calm
 kind soft
 slow

gunung yāngken kanyā kadi ta manangis yan rinabhasa
 m'ntain YA like girl like * * weep YAN *
 consider ravishment
 attack

kalimbak sakweh ning talaga kaharan luh nya humili
 *surge * all N-I- NG lake * like tears NYA *flow
 wavy be-named

Stanza 66.

Saśoka ng hangsā salakibini muwah sārasa masū
 *sorrow NG swan * male/f'male also crane * bound
 joined

humung lāwan kumbang bhramita ya mibēr yeng awang-awang
 *noise with bl'k bee restless YA *fly YA-I-NG clouds

manuk mānak monēng muni ya manangis kapw ya humung
 bird *child *long sound YA *weep all YA *noise
 for voice

Ya tāngken śabdā ning gunung alara wet nyān
 YA TA like voice N NG m'ntain *pain cause NYAN
 sorrow

rinabhasa

* ravishment

Stanza 67.

Angin mādrēs humyus tumama ya rikang gahwaraguhā
 wind *force * howl *enter YA to-IKA-NG deep cave

hard sigh penetrate
fast
,

ya	tekoswasa	nyān	pinēkul	ikanang	wānarabala
YA	TA *breathing	NYA-N	* hug	IKA* NG	ape warrior
	embrace				
	battle				

katūb	pwekang	megha	pracalita	ri	pārśwa	nya	mapasah
hit	PWA* NG	cloud	moving	to	mtn.side	NYA	* * split
blow			waving		ribs		break

ya	tāngkěn	ken-kenyān	rusak	abayangan	tulya	kawudan
YA	TA compare	sarong NYA-N	torn	wavering	like	* expose
		kain	flapping			undress

Stanza 68.

Manik	mabhrā	lumrang	marakata	ri	himbang	nya	sumawur
gems	shine	*spread	emerald	to	slope	NYA	* scatter

ya	tāngkěn	këndit	nyojwala	kasarakat	tulya	ya	pēgat
YA	TA compare	belt	NYA flame	* strewn	like	YA	cut
		girdle	flash	splashed			

lumampah	pwékang	poh	asana	waringin	dé	nikang	angin
* move	PWA*	NG	mango ?	banyan	cause	N-IKA-NG	wind

kadi	pwāsāk	moré	ikana	ta	gēlung	ning	sikarinī
as if	PWA opened	let down	IKA *	TA	hair-coil	of NG	mountain
	loosened	hang					k.o.meter

This paradigm of glosses, my tool of comparison, is very ugly, like a tangle of electrode wires on a smiling face. It is, from an esthetic point of view, totally tasteless. Could it ever become an art-form, this paradigmatic translation? Well, maybe so...built more artistically upon the esthetics of reading and reciting bilingual texts, which many people do for pleasure, including people in Balinese reading clubs. But, on the other hand, it may be important that this paradigm of glosses remain ugly, and hence less seductive, helping the text keep its distance. It seems to me a means justified by the end, the scrutiny of mutual translatability.

Most of the columns in the paradigm of glosses could be expanded without much effort, and that seems a proper corrective for the too common assumption in modern glossing that there are word to word matches across languages, especially distant languages. For instance, take one of the richer terms, **ahangkārāmbēk** in line 2 of the first stanza. It carries four of the five heavies of the meter in that line.

ahangkārāmbēk

* self mind

It's a Sanskrit-Javanese compound, a text-internal glossing, a creation, perhaps by the original composer. Like Dante, the composer of the Old Javanese *Rāmāyana* was a word-maker. To describe the first Sanskrit part, **ahangkāra**, Zoetmulder and Robson's *Old Javanese-English Dictionary* (Zoetmulder and Robson 1982) gives us:

“Conception of one's individuality, the egotistic self (one of the stages in the evolution of the **prakṛti**), selfishness, pride, conceit, arrogance; selfish, proud, etc.; (also in more favourable sense) self-confidence, confident, courageous” (p. 28)

For the second part of the compound, **ambēk**, the Old Javanese part, they give us:

“inner man, mind or heart (as seat of emotions, moods, inclinations, etc. cf *hati*), inner disposition or attitude (as opp. to external behavior), character; inclination, desire, intention” (p. 60-61)

To scrutinize the mutual translatability of just that term, **ahangkārāmbēk**, invites a massive glossing. We come to the edge of what James Matisoff might call micromania. But we also get a glimpse of the Sanskritic-Javanese mindset that this whole passage might evoke in an early reader or hearers of the text. Do we recognize in the violent ape a stage in the evolution of the **prakṛti**—what in modern English could be glossed as ‘the mind’? A stage in the evolution of the mind? Does this passage show us the kind of power a king uses and doesn't always control, at this stage in the evolution of his mind?

There are some philologists who call this kind of close scrutiny adventurism, an unwarranted exoticizing of the text. I would say it is giving distance its due.

It should be clear by now, too, that I'm suggesting that the ravishing of the mountain is an appropriate metaphor for the violent, aggressive moves of the translator. Here's George Steiner's (1975:298) description of that aggression, from the final chapter of his *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*:

“The translator invades, extracts, and brings home. The simile is that of the open-cast mine left an empty scar in the landscape.”⁹

In this movement back and forth from English to Old Javanese, would this particular reading (i.e. comparing the act of translation to ecological ravishment) be possible in the earlier lives of the Old Javanese *Rāmāyana*? I think it could be read that way even then, too, and there are several terminological bridges to that reading: the pun on the mountain-girl-meter at the end of the passage, and, if stages in the evolution of the mind (**prakṛti**) is relevant here, then the further observation that the first definition of the related term **prakṛta** in the *Old Javanese-English Dictionary* also is relevant:

“1. composition, arrangement, story, (prob. also:) rewriting (retelling) in another medium (from Sanskrit to Javanese, from poetry to prose)”
(Zoetmulder and Robson 1982:1388-1389)

Back to equivalences and differences.

Equivalences between the Kawi and the English are above all what one might call sociobiological—we can imagine live beings acting in recognizable environments. We can imagine the big ape tearing up rocks and frightening the birds. We can imagine the ravishing. The metaphor is one we use now, with strip mining or clear-cutting. It comes as a small shock to find such a modern-seeming sensibility in a Kawi poem. It makes people then seem more like us, their language more transparent. Equivalences, above all, do that.

Differences between the Kawi and the English are in another realm, but they frost up that transparency. Look at just the first line. It is just as hard to parse as it is to gloss.

Hanéki wré—There’s this monkey, as yet unidentified. We must remember to strip the tense off the English verb.

Hanéki wré tunggal—There’s this monkey by himself. I think we have to translate **tunggal** as a predicate of **wré** ‘monkey’—he is alone, unique, one of a kind. (I.e. it isn’t a deictic or an article.) Another translation—to avoid the English “there is” construction—might be ‘Stands this ape unique’. It’s a common Kawi figure—two predicates with a common subject between them. It occurs in almost every line of the passage.

Hanéki wré tunggal kagiri-giri göng nya—‘Stands this ape unique frightful size of him’. This phrase as a unit is another predicate. Although **giri** suggests a Sanskrit word for mountain and is probably meant to do that here—it is also a Javanese word, always reduplicated, ‘frightful’ or ‘awesome’. The *ka*-makes it not an act but something that happens to one. What is ‘frightful’ is the ‘bigness’ **göng** of him.

Hanéki wré tunggal kagiri-giri göng nyogra—‘Stands this ape unique frightful size of him cruel’. Another predicate. The final vowel of **-nya** and the initial vowel of **ugra** blend to make **nyogra**. Furthermore, like **wré** earlier, the **nya** here is a topic between two predicates.

Hanéki wré tunggal kagiri-giri göng nyogra magalak—‘Stands this ape unique frightful size of him cruel wild’. Yet another predicate, with **ma-**, untranslatable like all Kawi predicate affixes, but sometimes called stative or middle voice by philologists more confident than I of the translatability of these categories.

Is there a sentence here? We have to stretch English to make it so. There’s a topic and an array of predicates. The line is the unit, and sentencing it may be a little too aggressive. Does it make a difference? Certainly, if we are intent on scrutinizing mutual translatability, noticing differences.

All this is terribly rushed, telescoped, over-packed. There are plenty more differences in these and the following lines, and my goal here is not an exhaustive list of them. I’m interested in something else, something that it is hard to put a name on, more elusive: the elusive figures of Kawi, to paraphrase John Okell on literary Burmese. You might call it the rhetoric of Kawi, the figures of language that these old poets shaped and reshaped with the chisel of a thousand years. I don’t want to obscure them more than I have to.

Underlying them is the grammar of the focus affixes on the predicates and also the elaborate system of deixis in Kawi, which I have described before (see Becker 1995). In the paradigm of glosses above I mark the former with stars and the latter with capitals. Neither the focus system nor the elaborated deixis have easy English counterparts.

Just a word or two about the deictics. From the point of view of English, they have at least five different functions: they may be at once pronominal, demonstrative, relational, definitizing, and foregrounding. They seem to me equal in complexity and text-building importance to the English deixis of tense. It’s not that we don’t have words in English to do all these separate things—it’s that we don’t have single words that do them, and so we tend to say that there are several different meanings of them. That is, **nya** could be translated ‘his or hers’, ‘the’, ‘that’, ‘such a’, ‘look!’, ‘by him/her’.

We are here on the turf of the linguist—sorting out the relations of the terms. Here linguistics feeds philology. I am recalling here, in my comments, some of the work of Foley on bondedness, of Fillmore on cases and deixis, of Givon on topic continuity, of Haas and Matisoff on nominal elaborate expressions, and much more. Each of them asked new questions and gave new insight about these kinds of structural relations.

Why do it? Where have we got to beyond the translation I started with?

There are many answers:

We do it to see better what the original composers/translators were up to.

We do it to make us attend to what is happening and not achieve transparency too quickly.

Above all, I think, we attend to all this to make ourselves aware of the difficulty, the complexity, of doing what this unknown poet was doing. The difficulty of the task is an important part of the meaning of it. One must know, I think, something of how a work is produced and performed in order to be able to look through it. Surface skill is what gives credence to the deeper vision. Control of surfaces is a natural metonymy for larger kinds of control. In music, painting, philosophy, surface skill is the ground for taking any work seriously. In Old Java and Bali (and to some extent still), serious work was composed in forms we'd call poetic. On the poetic skill rested the seriousness with which one could take the composer.

One of the most important things the composer/translator of the Old Javanese *Rāmāyana* was doing was translating the Sanskrit verse forms themselves, finding Kawi ways to manifest them.

In Java, and in our own distant noetic past, this surface play, these sound images, this rich texture was not considered something non-essential, mere ornament. Javanese borrows a term **alangkara** from Sanskrit. We might gloss it as 'ornamentation', but only if we remember that like ornamentation itself (from **ornare**, 'to fit out, furnish, complete'), *alangkara* suggests not the non-essential but the **alang** of the **kara**, the completion of the work (see Coomaraswamy 1981). Giving the work its due. In our time we have estheticized the sound-image, and hence made it unimportant. There has been a massive disassociation of sensibility, to use Eliot's famous term.

Look at that first line again, first the meter:

Hanéki wré tunggal kagiri-giri göng nyogra magalak

. . . - - - . . . - -

And then notice the recurrent g's and k's in this line. Each line is the domain of a recurrent sound. Compare the third line, with the dominant *pu*:-

tiněmpuh nyāng pārśwādbhuta kaparupuh pun kayu pukah

And now imagine a requirement that any serious writer, physicist or political scientist, philosopher, lawyer, or linguist...skillfully produce this kind of texture, not as ornament but as proof of discipline, depth and care. As the completion of ideas. It is like formalizing a grammatical idea in linguistics.

Mutual Translatability? Perhaps the major difference between the translating from Sanskrit to Old Javanese and from Old Javanese to English, is in this different valuing of the surface. The Old Javanese author/translator/composer took the reshaping of the sound image as one of his central tasks. The modern translator

mostly sets the sound-image aside, in the name of transparency. In his essay, Jakobson calls this surface-play **paranomasia** and declares it untranslatable. I suspect that calling it untranslatable is a difference we have discerned in the close examination of the mutual translatability of Kawi and English, but it remained an equivalence between Sanskrit and Kawi.

Walter Benjamin (1968:76), in his highly provocative essay called “The Task of the Translator”, seems to isolate just this task. “The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original.”

Some can do this with artistry. (I think right away of the word play in Robert Pinsky’s new translation of Dante’s *Inferno* from Old Italian to Modern English.) Others of us make restitution and seek mutuality in notes and commentary, rather than just make another bad translation.

The question often comes up in seminars, what makes a bad translation. A recurring response is, no sense of sound. The lack of a sense of sound—of “surface”—is manifest in several different ways—on the one hand a bad translator can use very conventional English prosodies, clichéd translationese. Or, on the other hand, a translator can try to translate “ideas”, “sense”, “concepts”—usually with no consideration that those are at best evocations of our own prior texts. Or, one can try to make the reader take major part in the translating, become, in part, the translator, which is probably harder, even utopian, but it does have its own esthetic—the esthetic of a philologist, looking back and forth along the frontiers of mutual translatability.

Notes

1. I am grateful to many people for their suggestions and comments, and particularly, for extended critical commentary on a draft, to Nancy Florida, Joseph Vining, Alan Trachtenberg, Rhys Isaac, Deborah Tannen, Lauri Sears, James Boyd White, and Judith Becker.
2. Walter Benjamin (1968:71) writes of translation as a stage in the life of a work in his essay, “The Task of the Translator.”: “The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity. Even in times of narrowly prejudiced thought there was an inkling that life was not limited to organic corporeality...The concept of life is **given its due** only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life...Translations that are more than transmissions of subject matter come into being when in the course of its survival a work has reached the age of its fame.”
3. Jose Ortega y Gasset (1992 [1937]), “On the Difficulty of Reading.” See also Ralph Waldo Emerson (1876), “Plato”: “Our strength is transitional, alternating; or, shall I say, a thread from two strands. The sea-shore, sea seen from shore, shore seen from sea; the taste of two metals in contact; and our enlarged powers at the approach and at the departure of a friend; the experience of poetic creativeness, which is not found in staying at home, nor yet in travelling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible” (p. 2).

4. Putting the original at the end of the translated text hinders this, even though it is difficult now to get editors to accept facing pages, or, even more important, to restore footnotes to the foot of pages, so that the movement across languages can be discussed as it happens. Nabakov (1955) put it well, in "Problems of Translation: *Onegin* in English": "I want translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity."

5. Thoreau (1854) in *Walden* is writing of sounds as "the evidence of nature's health or sound state." He goes on, "Such is the never failing beauty and accuracy of language, the most perfect art in the world; the chisel of a thousand years retouches it."

6. The Kawi term is *rinabhasa*, which I first translated as 'rape'. The English adds a stronger moral condemnation than the episode seems to receive in Kawi. Nancy Florida suggested it might better be translated as 'ravishment' and I have followed her good advice. The Old Javanese *Rāmāyana*, like several versions in India, maintains what might be called a feminine perspective throughout, including the many erotic passages, as for example Hanuman's search for Sita which describes him peering into the bedroom windows of Lanka and lingering as a voyeur before the tender sexual play he discovers. Using the word 'ravishment' allows more dignity to the perspective of the Javanese author.

I might add that it seems to me there is far greater substance to the claim of feminine authorship of the Old Javanese *Rāmāyana* than, for instance, to Harold Bloom's guesses about the authorship of the *Book of J*.

7. This translation owes much to Soewito Santoso's (1980:388-9) English translation in his three volume edition of the *Ramayana Kakawin*. I have used for the most part his romanization of the text, based on Kern (1900).

8. A gloss in traditional philology was an explanation of a difficult term, inserted in the margin or between the lines of a manuscript. Glosses often grew into extended commentaries. In Latin, a foreign word requiring explanation was a *glossa*, from the Greek word for 'tongue' or 'language'. In modern linguistics, a gloss is an interlinear translation, often word by word, and sometimes mistakenly called "literal."

9. George Steiner (1975:800), in *After Babel*, temporalizes the act of translation into four stages: 1) an investment of trust that the thing translated is meaningful; then 2) aggression, described in the words cited above; then 3) appropriation when the new text begins life in a new language; and finally 4) reciprocity, when the distance is given its due. That fourth stage is called by Steiner "the crux of the metier and morals of translation."

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