

John Felstiner

THE NATURAL PRAYER OF THE SOUL

“Ceremonious ape! . . . Punctilious pig! . . . VLADIMIR: Moron! ESTRAGON: That’s the idea, let’s abuse each other . . . Moron! . . . Vermin! . . . Abortion! . . . Crab-louse! . . . Sewer-rat! . . . Curate! . . . Cretin! . . . ESTRAGON (*with finality*): Critic! VLADIMIR: Oh! *He wilts, vanquished.*”

Somewhere between this exchange in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Matthew Arnold’s late-Victorian *Function of Criticism at the Present Time*, which urged a “disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world”—somewhere along that ever-extending spectrum, I’ll be venturing a few thoughts on literary criticism today.

What I have to say will stay mostly personal, specific, tentative, and it will end up demonstrating what I take to be the possible task of a critic/biographer/translator. I’ll try to demonstrate, rather than categorize or generalize, or opine or abstract or survey.

After all, the range of literary critical inquiry nowadays seems endless: from tracing Biblical filaments in Emily Dickinson’s verse, for instance, to assessing the men or women in her life; from Allen Ginsberg’s kabbalist Buddhism and tantric Judaism to the sneakers he wore in Prague, now accessible to scholars in Stanford’s poetry archive. And at the prick of a pin this whole undertaking may collapse. Recently Ken Kesey recalled: “You know, I don’t think Allen read any criticism at all!”

Which prompts the question, How does the critic’s work relate to the artist’s? Oscar Wilde in “The Critic as Artist,” pulling Arnold out on a limb with him, claimed that “Criticism demands infinitely more cultivation than creation does”—an anticipation of certain trends today, which treat the literary work not as a text but as a pretext for critical acumen.

The 1997 Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism in memory of Newton Arvin was presented to John Felstiner at The University of Iowa last May. These were his remarks on that occasion. Denis Donoghue, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Elizabeth Hardwick, Geoffrey H. Hartman, Seamus Heaney, and Frank Kermode were the judges.

If I had to identify my own approach, all gropingly arrived at, I'd call it mid-Fifties New Criticism, but smelted countless times during forty years and reblended with what has seemed purifying or enriching. Such is my interpretive approach—pervaded (it should go without saying) by upheavals lived within earshot of: World War Two, Vietnam, Israel, Chile, and on and on. Plus, of course, a lifetime's ordinary personal losses and provisional gains.

I still hear I. A. Richards cajoling us to read a poem for that which makes it irreplaceably itself and not some other thing. I still like R. P. Blackmur's coital recharging of the tired old style-content dualism: style, "the quality of the act of perception . . . married in rhythm to the urgency of the thing perceived," i.e. content. And daily more precious to me, from so far back, is Bill Alfred valuing a stanza of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*: "that attention to detail which is a species of love." Decades later when I came upon Paul Celan underscoring Walter Benjamin's maxim on Kafka—"Attentiveness is the natural prayer of the soul"—I recognized my true ground.

Attentiveness, *Aufmerksamkeit*: Kafka had it, and I look for literary critics, in some way corresponsive with our authors, to practice attentiveness as well. Celan, who lost family, culture, and homeland to the European Jewish catastrophe and to what he called "the thousand darkneses of deathbringing speech"—Celan in a late lyric, facing a Scriptural "text-void," tells us: "hear deep in / with your mouth," *hör dich ein / mit dem Mund*.

Hath it then been told thee, O critic, what is good, And what the Lord doth require of thee? Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God. . . . Ah, if only it were that difficult! What then *is* required? At least, to begin with, James Joyce's "Wipe your glosses with what you know." That is, a clear seeing based in keen hearing, however complex the thing seen and heard. The other day a Washington lawyer called to thank me: "Celan is so difficult," he said, "and you've made him easy." "Well, not easy," I hoped, "but accessible."

To venture deeper: What seems to me worth trying for, especially in teaching, is access not merely to the text but to that galvanic recognition we sometimes get in encountering genuine art. I have a sharp

visual memory of sitting at my desk throughout one sophomore night, having that day (thanks to Charles Olson's *Call Me Ishmael* and Newton Arvin's *Melville*) perused Melville's copy of *King Lear* in the Houghton Library; on the bourbon-stained pages of my term paper I was revealing the kinship of Ahab's Pip to Lear's Fool. And another moment, this one from grad school: discovering in a word that Faulkner coined, "immobly," the key to time and consciousness in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Clearly I was in need then of an exquisite satire I came to know only later, Thurber's "A Final Note on Chanda Bell," wherein the eager Jamesian critic discovers the figure in the carpet, the key to her writing: "Fixing me with her hooded gaze, 'You have found the figure, Thurber,' she said one afternoon, 'but have you found the carpet?'"

As for the furthest reach of recognition, what Eliot called "music heard so deeply that you are the music while the music lasts"—there we're on our own. What can criticism add when Dickinson encountering the snake, "a narrow fellow in the grass," remarks "a tighter breathing, / And zero at the bone"?

Still, the particulars of recognition. How Yeats's lyrics, for instance, may quietly turn potently on a question: "Who will go ride with Fergus now . . .?" "Why should I blame her that she filled my days / With misery . . .?" "And what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?" "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?" "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" And finally, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" If at times we cannot, it's because those measured lines mined with questioning embody what Yeats himself said: "Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry."

Incidentally, after my book came out I was heartened to receive one day a postcard from someone I didn't know, Helen Vendler, averring that Celan was our "greatest poet since Yeats."

Celan too spoke of poetry as an encounter made of "radical questioning." Here I'd like to suggest one form of encounter, of attentive questioning, that has primed my task as a literary critic. For in writing on Pablo Neruda, I learned that the act of verse translation

especially requires every resource: history, biography, tradition, theory, philology, prosody. Then, the intimate to-and-fro of finding and losing rhythms, sounds, overtones, allusions, and ambiguities attempts a voice-to-voice recognition where critical and creative energy fuse. “Hear deep in / with your mouth.”

Take this brief lyric by Celan, written on the day he got back to Paris from his belated, elated visit to Israel, shortly before his 1970 suicide. Its four stanzas frame both messianic and historic moments within a passionate reunion with a childhood friend:

THERE STOOD
a splinter of fig on your lip,

there stood
Jerusalem around us,

there stood
the bright pine scent
above the Danish skiff we thanked,

I stood
in you.

In these stanzas or momentary stances, translation has much to answer for. When I showed her a version beginning “There stood / a *sliver* of fig on your lip,” Celan’s Israeli friend Ilana told me that their erotic autumn moment had been precarious and painful, so for *Feigensplitter* I changed “sliver” to “splinter of fig”—just in time for the page proofs. And once, after a talk I gave, my friend Chimen Abramsky reminded me of two Psalms—“Our feet are *standing* within thy gates, Jerusalem” and “Jerusalem, mountains are *around* her as the Lord is around His people”—Psalms I now overhear in translating: “there stood / Jerusalem around us.” And later a journey to Jerusalem showed me that “skiff” was OK for a sculpted rowboat, a monument thanking the Danes who in 1943 ferried their Jews safely to Sweden. All these recognitions—a splinter of fig, Jerusalem around us, the Danish skiff—point toward the simplest rhythm, “I stood / in you,” which gathers sacred and secular

and sexual moments into a point of balance: *ich stand / in dir*.

In his longest, most challenging poem “Stretto,” Celan embeds these imperatives: “Read no more—look! / Look no more—go!” From me they demand the active witness of translation. Elsewhere he said: “Poetry no longer imposes, it exposes itself.” Likewise a critic-translator may expose the process of translation so as to vivify a poem in question.

In titling my previous book, *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu*, I liked the ongoing present participle and also its open-ended ambiguity—not only Neruda’s but his translator’s way to the cantos on Macchu Picchu. Then after fifteen years of dwelling with Paul Celan’s poems in a mother tongue that suddenly brutally turned murderers’ tongue, I proposed as title, “Translating Celan: The Strain of Jewishness.” But the prospect of a Bobbsey Twins series deterred me, a sort of “Hardy Boys Translate Celan.” And as for “The Strain of Jewishness,” cooler heads prevailed in Yale’s marketing division.

The only proper title ensued: *Paul Celan*. Yet still I stand by that sense of process and double meaning in “Translating Celan: The Strain of Jewishness.” Kafka once wrote this thought in his journal: “Writing as a form of prayer.” Would Celan subscribe to that? If *he* would, I would, at least in translating. “Hear deep in / with your mouth.”