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The Literal and the Literary

Translations should be admired, not trusted.

—Fritz Senn

12. *Sacer esto?*

Answer: Semus sumus!

—James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

Literature and translation are consubstantial, as Jorge Luis Borges says—and Borges as you know is always right. Their mysterious kinship is founded upon an infinity of inter- and intralingual movements and mutations: of letter into spirit (and vice versa!) and letter into letter; of the literal into the figurative; ultimately, of the literal into the literary. These transmutations break the bonds of words and things and, sometimes, the bounds of reason. In a monolingual universe, i.e., one that doesn't know or will not acknowledge the ubiquity of translation, those bonds are sacred. Violating and vitalizing the continuity of spirit, translation is *sacer*: at once unholy (or accursed) and—perhaps messianically—holy.¹

Despite recent inroads of theory into translation, translators are by nature diehard empiricists, so our work starts with what Fritz Senn calls an “inductive scrutiny” of words—what they mean, what they are made of, and what in turn they make, as they combine with their neighbors into syntactical units larger than the word, or send shoots of association, forming intricate networks. The two key words in my title are almost identical in shape, though seldom in meaning. Letters are the particulate material and the fundamental objects on the page: literature is literally made of letters. This is the first—intuitive and conjoint—definition of literature and the liter-

1. In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce frames the *sacer esto* of Roman law (“if the patron abuse the client, let him be accursed”) as a question; the answer, *semus sumus* introduces the writer qua forger and thief of language (who, usurping God's prerogative, makes “the dumb speak”). The paronymic *semus sumus* suggests “we are the same [as]” or “we are sham,” i.e., both the gift and grift of translation. For Benjamin, “translation keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation.” (*Illuminations*, 74-5)

ary: that which is made of letters. “Avec ses vingt-quatre signes, cette Littérature exactement dénommée les Lettres, ainsi que par de multiples fusions en la figure de phrases puis le vers, système agencé comme un spirituel zodiaque, implique sa doctrine propre, abstraite, ésotérique comme quelque théologie,” remarks Mallarmé in “La Littérature. Doctrine.” He also writes of the “miracle, in the highest sense of the word” of

words led back to their origin, which is the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, so gifted with infinity that they will finally consecrate Language. Everything is caught up in their endless variations and then arises out of them in the form of the Principle... The book [is] a total expansion of the letter. “The Book: A Spiritual Instrument”²

The preceding two quotes contain a numerical scandal: twenty-four (letters) translated as twenty-six. English and French share but do not have the same alphabet: this asymmetry is invisible but does become a problem in the singular case of translating a text which refers to its own alphabetical element, when letters become literary. The letters of the alphabet then expose a fundamental rift: no matter how accurate or “literal” the translation is, the very English of the second quote essentially falsifies Mallarmé’s *doctrine propre*. In other words, letters can be said to have—indeed, to *be*—a meaning of sorts, and this literal meaning confounds translation when it becomes literary. It takes translation to reveal this oddity. (For more, visit Borges’s “Library of Babel.”)

The affinity between the literal and the literary is vexed by further inconstancies of meaning: “literal” as the core of the adverb “literally” can mean its own opposite; “literally” is, in fact, often used erroneously to mean “figuratively” as, for example, when Joyce knowingly opens “The Dead” with this solecism: “Lily, the caretaker’s daughter, was literally run off her feet.” Notice that what is an

2. *Selected Poetry and Prose*, p. 82. Mallarmé’s focus on letters emphasizes literature’s writtenness: strictly speaking, there is no oral *literature* though obviously there are all sorts of “oral” verbal genres (Homer becomes Homer when they get written down) and though the oral/aural plays a crucial role in the experience of literature.

erroneous, if common, misuse of “literally” is, in this case (i.e., in a work of art), precisely the hallmark of the literary. (The error has a characterological value: for the central intelligence in the story, Gabriel Conroy, who is something of a snob and a pedant, common and erroneous are almost synonymous.) This sliding of the literal into the figurative is crucial for a proper understanding—and translation—of any metaphor. “Literal” in “literal translation” is literal only metaphorically, not literally, and goes back to Horace’s *nec verbum verbo*, i.e., *not word for word*, which has to do with syntactic rules and license, not with phonographics.

One would imagine that translators have an in-trained intuitive grasp of “literal translation”—or do they? The first commandment of our craft is *Thou shalt not translate literally*, precisely because literal translation is assumed to lose or destroy the literary (effect); literal translation makes the literary ludicrous. However, the same commandment against literal translation can be reversed precisely in the name of, or for the sake of, the literary, precisely according to the theory which proposes that there is some such thing as the literary. (“That focus upon expression, upon the verbal mass itself, which I have called the only essential characteristic of poetry, is directed not only to the form of the phrase, but also to the form of the word itself” reads Jakobson’s definition of the literary.) In recent years what could loosely and preliminarily be called “literal” translation has risen out of disfavor and into theoretical and even practical vogue. In part, this is a cyclical turn, and has to do with the lure of the foreign (over the fish of the familiar). At its best it takes the form of comic workshop exercises in phonetic “translation” from the mere appearance of a language unknown to the translator; at its worst, it is the product of unquestioned theory used to justify questionable translation. In serious translation enterprises, the pursuit of difference through strange syntax results in a misleading sense of (modernist) experimentation where there may be none, i.e., the use of Latin or German word order in English. From the standpoint of ordinary communication, there is nothing un- or defamiliar about that order in Latin or German, of course, but things do change when you look at, say, the obligatory position of the verb at the end of the sentence in certain German constructions: for the poet and the poetologist this is a non-trivial linguistic fact. Poets,

who are literally *tactile* syntacticians, have been known to prefer at times certain species of literal translation for the sheer feel of it.³

In short, the crossings of the literal and the literary are rather peculiar, paradoxical, and elusive. My mother (herself a translator) taught me with a rap across the knuckles to beware literal translation, but corporeal punishment notwithstanding, I remain drawn to the *meaning* of the literal *for* the literary. Translating James Joyce, among others, made me keenly aware that the pursuit of the literary through the literal can range from the plausible to the preposterous; it also honed my awareness of translation's value as a double-edged tool for analysis. Nothing takes us faster to the heart of matters linguistic and metaphysical than translation: that's precisely the reason why the early Church fathers report fistfights over issues of translation; why Luther premised the Reformation upon his sense of the spirit vs the letter of scripture-in-translation or why the mullahs sentenced Salman Rushdie to death (and did, in fact, kill his Japanese translator).⁴ Translation is far more than an analytical tool: it is the medium, the mode of being, if you will, of literature.

Poetry has been defined as that which is *lost* in translation (conversely, translation is that which loses poetry). The adage is attributed to Frost but it predates him by a long stretch: it antedates the Romantic view of poetic language it evokes, i.e., an indissoluble, organic, indeed sacred and mysterious bond between the matter (or letter) of a given language and the spirit of its poetry. Ultimately, the spirit of this adage goes back to the Church fathers (read St. Jerome, patron of translators), and the notion of a "sacred text."

The post-Romantic/modernist view which aestheticizes (and resacralizes) the sacred comes down to the following crux: If the lit-

3. Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles (which resemble interlinear translation) are fascinating because of Hölderlin's idiosyncratic poetic genius. Interlinear translation was a common pedagogical device but the classical languages are no longer the common medium of education and cannot be counted on as an apperceptive background. For the reader of a traditional interlinear translation that apperceptive background makes all the difference: it saves the literal version from being perceived as gibberish ("lost in the bottomless depths of language," as Benjamin says, who sees in this loss a messianic glimmer; Benjamin's case for literalness is *not* based on a desire to retain the meaning; cf. *Illuminations*, p. 82).

4. The story of that death sentence hinges, in part, upon a literal translation (or mis-translation) of Rushdie's title; ultimately, however, it is underwritten by the Koranic prohibition of translation as such, the so-called inimitability of the Koran.

erary is coterminous with an intentional focus on language (Mallarmé, Benjamin, Jakobson et al), then the literary and the literal are one and the same. If the “literary” is identified with the spirit (or any spirit-oriented term: vision, intent, moral), then the literary is more or less translatable. If, on the other hand, the literary is indissolubly bound up with the letter (matter), then the *literary is more or less untranslatable*. (A strange corollary of this state of affairs is that not literary but *literal translation is the impossible one*, the greater illusion, the subtler fraud.)⁵

As a translator I happily acknowledge that poetry (or any verbal artifact perceived to have aesthetic qualities) is untranslatable and therefore that translation of poetry begins with a loss, but I’m not going to beat the drum of loss to death in the name of difference (as though anything in translation could be the “same”). I emphasize that translation *begins* with a loss because for me this is the obvious, and not trivial, point; everything that’s interesting and makes translation worthwhile (for both practitioner and reader) follows from this admission.⁶ As the eponym and *raison d’être* of the “Found in Translation” Conference presume, what can be found in translation—and *nowhere else*—is therefore the far more interesting question.

In proposing to explore some licit and illicit entanglements of the literal and the literary, I speak as goal-oriented practitioner of translation but also as a scholar of the literary for whom translation is by far the best methodological tool. Says John Felstiner: “In translation, as in parody, criticism and creativity converge; translation is the utmost case of engaged literary interpretation.” Moreover, translation enacts a total interpretation: any other interpretive approach is more or less partial and can/must ignore a certain portion of the text; only in translation is everything *literally* taken into account or,

5. Cf. Octavio Paz: “The literal is not a translation. [It is] conceivable and useful when one is learning a language.” *The Poet’s Other Voice*, p. 156. And: “[literal translation is] a string of words that helps us read the text in its original language. It is a glossary rather than a translation, which is always a literary activity. Without exception, even when the translator’s sole intention is to convey meaning, as in the case of scientific texts, translation implies a transformation of the original. That transformation is not—nor can it be—anything but literary.” (*Theories of Translation*, p. 154.)

6. The view of translation as loss owes its popularity to the irresistible rhetorical appeal (or seduction) of half-truths, not to mention the paradoxical pleasure of loss (or *Lust am Verlust*, to pun the matter in German).

as Pliny observes, “what slipped the reader cannot hide from the translator” (Book VII, letter 9). In a sense, translation as a process always involves “word-for-word” progress even if the end-result is not—and should not be—a word-for-word copy.

My intent here and now is not didactic/judgmental. Rather, I want to explore effects: the provenance of certain literal-literary effects (or translatorial decisions) and effects of effects (ripples of effects). Northrop Frye observes that our sense of the term “literal” comes from medieval times, “and may be due to the theological origin of critical categories. In theology, the literal meaning of Scripture is usually the historical meaning, its accuracy as a record of facts and truths.” Indeed, Augustin of Dacia says that the literal teaches the facts, the allegorical teaches what you should believe, the moral what you should do, the anagogical what you should aim for.

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,
Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.*

Literary criticism almost invariably gives you 2, 3, and/or 4. But notice that Augustin’s maxim already frames the literary in terms of interpretation, i.e., away from “littera.” And so does Frye, rejecting the conception of literal meaning as “simple descriptive meaning” in favor of “inner structure of interlocking motifs.”⁷ These two instances alone are enough to suggest how thoroughgoing is our need, in dealing with the literal, for a far better articulated sense of it than the customary opposition of literal vs figurative meaning. We need a notion of the literal ranging from phonographic fundamentals (morphological and submorphemic) to “literal” syntax and repertoires of literalized literary gestures.⁸

Let me begin at the beginning, and catch the literal in the act, before it has run for cover (the cover of meaning, “facts,” “truth,”

7. *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 76. “An historical event cannot be literally anything but an historical event [...] The literal meaning of Dante’s own *Commedia* is not historical, not at any rate a simple description of what ‘really happened’ to Dante.” Frye goes on to say that “if a poem cannot literally be anything but a poem, then the literal basis of meaning in poetry can only be its letters, its inner structure of interlocking motifs.” (ibid. pp. 76-7) Notice the sliding in his argument, as the apposition “its inner structure of interlocking motifs” moves us *away* from letters.

8. The literary always teeters on the verge of—and eventually, inevitably tumbles into—kitsch: that’s when the literary becomes merely literal again, i.e., the letter of fashion.

etc.). To do so I'll give you fundamentals: naked letters and rude noises (framed by and in silent letters). Jakobson, whose view of literary language is my guide, places at the heart of the literary the figure of paronomasia, or paronymy. Paronymic attractions *occur* at the level of the literal which is the arena where phonetics clashes with orthography. Paronymic attraction means, above all, that the shape of literary expression is determined first and foremost (though not exclusively) by the phonographic fundamentals of a language: *Die Sprache spricht* in and through what Bollinger calls "visual morphemes" and "phonesthemic patterns." (*Forms of English*, pp. 191-276) From a poetological point of view the latter provide the paronymic matrices of a given language.

If paronymy is not just one of many rhetorical means but the rhetorical dominant of a poem (the dominant of a style or entire oeuvre), the moral for translation is that the principle of literal fidelity ought to become a principle of rhetorical fidelity—fidelity to paronymy, that is. To put it otherwise, in cases where paronymy is the dominant of a poem/style, the phonographic fundamentals of the *translated* poem *must* be governed by paronymy, or else the translation will have lost (or lied about) what's most important, and no literalist fidelity to "content" (paraphrasable content) can compensate for that loss. What you have then is not translation but gloss.

A poem of Morgenstern's is an ideal point of departure because in it meaning is not the issue: nonetheless it taxes hermeneutic reason to the utmost. A contemporary of Rilke's, Morgenstern wrote the second and third best-known German poems (No. 1 must go to Goethe), and just as Rilke surpassed the *symbolistes* he learned from, Morgenstern surpassed Lear and Carroll. His *Galgenlieder* were to exercise a stronger influence (if that's the right word) upon twentieth-century German poetry than any of Rilke's.

The Great Lalulā

Kroklokwaſzi? Seṁemeṁi!

Seiokrontro—prafriplo:

Bifzi, bafzi; hulaleṁi:

quasti basti bo...

Lalu lalu lalu lalu la!

Hontraruru miromente
zasku zes rü rü?
Entepente, leiolente
klekwapufzi lü?
Lalu lalu lalu lalu la!

Simarar kos malzipempu
silzuzankunkrei (;)!
Marjomar dos: Quempu Lempu
Siri Suri Sei []!
Lalu lalu lalu lalu la!

“The Great Lalula” is an icon of poetry as an aniconic disposition of letters, voided of meaning: aniconic because unlike concrete poetry, this “phonetic rhapsody” (Morgenstern’s term) doesn’t have the outline of any recognizable object outside poetry (or a stylized abstract design like the famous “Silence”), yet its shape is quintessentially poetic. A loud hullaballu of letters, the poem looks like an exercise in almost pure empiricism (voice), except for a couple of extraordinary diacritical and punctuation signs.⁹ Yet those mean precisely that it is not loud but silent, essentially silent. No empirical voice, no empirical tongue—whether real, artificial (say, Esperanto) or imaginary (Tlönese, in Borges)—can articulate some of its signs. The manuscript spellings of *semmememi* and *hulalemme*, respectively, suggest that the *m*’s and *m*-macrons in the printed version are to be thought as different phonemes—*avant la lettre* (cp. English *coma* vs *comma*). However, the parenthesized semicolon and the bracketed blank push us beyond voice. Are they part of the rhyme?(!) In the realm of punctuation, parentheses and brackets can be said to have a rhymoid affinity. It is delightful to imagine how the late Victor Borge might have performed that “rhyme” of a parenthesized semicolon and a bracketed blank. Because of its essential silence “The Great Lalula” cannot be dubbed a lyric if one insists, as German aesthetics has, on the essential, constitutive connection in the lyric of subjectivity and voice.

9. Morgenstern’s *manuscript* shows no diacritical signs and the punctuation is fairly conventional (*if* it makes sense to speak of conventional punctuation in a poem devoid of meaning); also notably different is the poem’s refrain: *Lalulalulalula!*

That this is essentially a poem, however—that is, an artifact contrived after certain rules—there can be no doubt: if it’s stanzaicized like a poem, lineated like a poem, rhymed like a poem, and quacks patterns like a poem, it is a poem. It even sports a song-like refrain. Its patterns of sound or letter repetition are exquisitely intricate and infinitely suggestive of submorphemic meaning. (The poem’s first line could be said to flirt with the idea of naming its “unit” of meaning: “semememi,” which “responds” to the initial question (for example, a bewildered *Whatthehellsthat?*), recalls the Greek *semeion* (sign) and *semainein* (to mean)—notice the macrons!—as well as memory: in the play of meaning, signs and memory are, of course, both *sine-qua-nons*. Further, if you have a taste for such things, you may notice the Hebrew letter “mem” (water), the French *même* or *mesme* with its letters a little out of whack, an attempt at translingual play (same :: *même*), etc., etc., etc. Very smart people, including Leo Spitzer, have had very interesting things to say about “The Great Lalula,” but my purpose here is limited to a consideration of how the literal and the literary play in translation.

From that standpoint, the matter is both obvious and not so obvious. The obvious thing is that there is nothing to translate: there is no meaning. “The Great Lalula” is fundamentally different from, say, Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky.” And yet: imagine this poem in a collection of Morgenstern’s poems translated into English.¹⁰ The question then arises: should a translator reproduce its letters (which would be a limit-case of literal translation)? That is, should he, properly speaking, translate only the “translatable” portion of its title (the two little words meaning “the great”)?

The poem’s phonographological fundamentals compel us to take into account a host of features that are *not neutral* in terms of language, poetics, and translation. For example, the poem is written in an alphabet we think we recognize right away, but think again: the incidence of letters is not that of English (quite aside from the bizarre diacritical signs). There are no *c*’s, there is a higher inci-

10. Max Knight’s brilliant translation of the *Galgenlieder* prints “Das grosse Lalula” at the head of the selection, leaving the title *untranslated*, thereby warning us not to assume that this title which looks German on the face of it can be translated into English without a problem. As in the case of “Fisches Nachtgesang” (see below) Knight recognizes that Morgenstern’s poems give type and tongue to the constitutive aporias of translation and are siren songs for the man of translation.

dence of *k*'s than in English, the number and position of the *z*'s don't seem English, etc. Some of this vaguely recalls German even though, in the last analysis, the poem eludes German orthography, too. (It does not analyze the German language the way Roman Jakobson's futurist productions analyze Russian.¹¹) Nonetheless, we do have the linguistic clue of the original title. But if we read the poem accordingly, our reading would differ significantly from a reading based on the vocalization rules of English orthography. We could read it in English with or without a German accent, if you will. (One may, in fact, extrapolate and generalize from this metaphor by claiming that certain translations *look* as though they were *spoken* with a foreign accent.) The lettering of the poem, then, works as a kind of visual shibboleth.

In other words, these letters may carry no lexical or morphemic meaning in the ordinary sense yet they do carry the "meaning" of their native conventions. Regardless of the poem's meaning (or the lack thereof), a translator has to make certain choices on the literal level, and those choices would betray his entire philosophy of language, for example, his assumptions about whether or not speaking voice precedes the writing hand, i.e., whether there is some phonic substance (be it that of sound, fury or gibberish) before the differential graphic sign. (If one begins with a German mouth in mind, one would probably have to wonder whether to render the (German) *w*'s as (English) *v*'s, the *z*'s as *ts*'s or *tz*'s, and German *Sei* as, perhaps, *Zie/Zye* or *zie/zye*, capitalized or non-capitalized depending upon one's sense of the word as a name or a common noun (or a verb).¹² In a moment we shall see that the very best of translators do worry about the value of letters, apart from any consideration of extralinguistic meaning.

I love Morgenstern's poem for its stark theoretical simplicity which works like a phenomenological reduction of historical and psychological meaning and a return to the thing itself: it presents a perfect coincidence of the literal and the literary. In strictly translatorial terms, however, it is less of an oddity than you may think.

11. Janecek calls them "succinct [studies] of language in all its aspects: phonetic, morphological, semantic, syntactic, and written." *Zaum: The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism*, pp. 186-189.

12. This *Sei* is a meaningful word, in German, and can be read as an imperative *Be!*

European translators of Henry Wordsworth Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* had to grapple with similar questions and some of them, for example Ivan Bunin whose prose and poetry earned him the Nobel Prize, achieved wonderful results. (In Bunin's translation, *The Song of Hiawatha* instantly became a minor classic and arguably left its imprint on Russian futurism.)

I move now from the alphabetical as such to intersections of the literal and the literary on the sub- and para-lexical level, in the work of a writer who had a lifelong obsession with the technology of the letter: James Joyce. Whether that obsession had something to do with his failing eyesight, with the exuberance of the Celtic illuminated book, with the nineteenth-century linguistic explosion or with the twentieth-century media impact upon the letter, Joyce (as a perceptive critic puts it) "saw and saw to every letter, in no small measure because letters are the most fundamental objects on the page."¹³ Joyce's fascination with letters obviously pre-dated *Ulysses* and came to a head in the "alphybetyformed verbage" of *Finnegans Wake*, where letters are characters, characters are letters (and sometimes even incomplete letters), and God "is" a one-hundred-letter word. But my attention for the moment rests on a few extraordinary alphabetical objects in *Ulysses*.

The fourth episode of the book opens with a delightful duet between Mr. Leopold Bloom and his cat. This duet is, in fact, a trio, for the scene ends with Molly's somnolently inarticulate grunt "Mn" (which her husband translates to mean "No"). Among the remarkable feats of the passage is the contrast between the cat's part, as exquisitely articulated as the "white button under the butt of her tail," and Molly's grunt, as messy as her heap of soiled underwear and as obscure as the big black dot at the end of the Ithaca chapter.

Here is, schematicized, the cat's part—first, in English, then in various translations:

Mkgnao!
Mrkgnao!
Mrkrgrnao!
Gurrhr!

13. Roy Gottfried, *Joyce's Iritis and the Irritated Text*, p. 4.

Ulysses	<i>Mkgnao!</i>	<i>Mrkgnao!</i>	<i>Mrkrgnao!</i>	<i>Gurrhr!</i>
French	<i>Mrkrгнаô!</i>	<i>Mrkrгнаô!</i>	<i>Mrkrгнаô!</i>	<i>Gurrhr!</i>
German–G	<i>Mrkgnao!</i>	<i>Mrkgnao!</i>	<i>Mrkgnao!</i>	<i>Gurrhr!</i>
German–W	<i>Mkgnau!</i>	<i>Mrkgnau!</i>	<i>Mrkrgnau!</i>	<i>Garrhr!</i>
Italian	<i>Mkgnao!</i>	<i>Mrkgnao!</i>	<i>Mrkrgnao!</i>	<i>Grr!</i>
Polish	<i>Mkrniau!</i>	<i>Mkrniau!</i>	<i>Mkrniau!</i>	<i>Grrr!</i>
Russian	<i>Mrow!</i>	<i>Mrow!</i>	<i>Mgrrrow!</i>	<i>Myaf!</i>
	<i>Mppay</i>			<i>Мяв</i>
Spanish	<i>iMkñau!</i>	<i>iMrkñao!</i>	<i>iMrkñao!</i>	<i>iGurrjr!</i>
Turkish	<i>Mkgnau!</i>	<i>Mrkgnau</i>	<i>Mrkgnau!</i>	<i>Gurrhr!</i>

The cat’s part in Feline English—i.e., Felinglish—is not the common English cat’s cry *meow*. (A few pages later “in answer” to another locution by the cat (*narrated* as “the cat mewed to him”) Mr. Bloom says “Miaow!” [4.461-2] which is conventional for a human imitating a feline.) Joyce gives us an ultra-realistic cat cry but in rendering the cat’s “speech” the way he does, he goes beyond onomatopoeia, pushing the pattern and thereby the method of realism (*mimesis*) as far as it can go—unto its opposite, as it were.¹⁴ His is no longer a merely Balzacian exactitude of milieu.¹⁵ Notice the numerical precision of the *r*-series in Joyce: $\emptyset - R - RR - RRR$. Rather than a feline cry, ultra-realistically imitated, isn’t this a pattern of letters on the page, the aesthetic pleasure of which is precisely its being a pattern? (Our response involves the quintessential rational and poetological activity: counting.) In short, the cat speech in *Ulysses* represents, in a meow, the fundamental linguistic tension of the book: the tension between the forces of empiricism and those of rationalism, between the sensuous and the intelligible, the immediate and the schematic.

Now look back at the translations: they show translators caught in the above dilemma, as well as pushed and pulled by the letters of their own languages and traditions. Notice, for example, that Wollschläger, the recent and very capable German translator who in

14. For a superb discussion of onomatopoeia in Joyce and onomatopoeia as a “model for all literary language,” see Attridge, pp. 127-157.

15. Bloom’s cat’s entry in *Ulysses* recalls the delightful entry of Madame Vauquer’s cat at the beginning of *Le Père Goriot*: “Cette pièce est dans tout son lustre au moment où, vers sept heures du matin, le chat de madame Vauquer précède sa maîtresse, saute sur les buffets, y faire le lait que contiennent plusieurs jattes couvertes d’assiettes, et fait entendre son *ronron* matinal.” Balzac’s cat is conventional.

many cases chooses not to translate but to reproduce bits and pieces of English language in his text (that's as literal as it gets even if those English tidbits are immediately othered by the German matrix they're embedded in), nonetheless renders the cat's English (if you can call it English) *u* in Gurrhr! as *a*, Garrhr! Even more to the point, the cat's *ao* becomes *au* which is very common in German while in English *ao* is very uncommon (and its sound value is questionable, considering that its one natural lexical home in English is *gaol*).¹⁶ Similarly, de Angelis was prevented, by the rules of Italian orthography, from doing justice to the cat's last statement: Italian does not use *h* after *r* (cp. the English spelling of *catarrh*, *rhetoric* vs *catarro*, *retorica* in Italian). Valverde chose to do a kind of Spanish justice, translating the *h* with a *j*, which replicates the sound but misses the *purr-gurrhr* connection (*purr* in Spanish is *ronroneo*).

The translations of Bloom's cat's speech I happen to find variously disappointing but I'm interested not in criticizing them as errors but in seeing through the errors. If we put aside mere carelessness and typos, it seems that the translators made choices they thought were justifiable. One could argue, for example, that Joyce's exquisitely differentiated articulation of the cat's voice is excessive, especially from the standpoint of a preeminently rational language such as French. Or you could argue that language X onomatopoeicizes feline enunciations in a way that doesn't allow for such differentiations. Yet the differentiations in Joyce do not suggest mere imitation of animal sounds but belong to the rational structure of the book. They embody the principles of intelligibility in the composition of *Ulysses*, in terms of both writing and reading. Reading (the ability to read) is commonly defined as a kind of translation in the course of which the letters vanish: "Only one who can take in whole words or even lines at a glance, without thinking of individual letters, knows how to read" (quoted in Kittler, p. 178). Leopold Bloom's cat cunningly questions our assumptions about reading and about literacy—in the literal and the literate sense.

A book can simulate a wider range of sensory experience, in part because certain "translations" of sensory metaphors are easier than others. Sights and sounds, in that regard, are especially interesting

16. The British (and presumably Irish) cats' *miaow* looks (and therefore sounds) slightly more sophisticated than the simpler American *meow*.

not in so far as they are named or represented (by way of images or onomatopoeia) but as sheer presences, so to speak: *Ulysses* is unique by virtue of both the incidence and the inventiveness of certain unignorable, loud and glaring, strings of letters in all of its episodes.

Many such page objects foreground features which set them apart from any useful notion of what a “word” is and for that reason deserve to be treated separately. Hence my terms sub- and para-lexical units. Unit or object isn’t quite the right word for in Joyce words can make waves, e.g., “wavyavyeavyheavyeavyevyevyhair” [*Ulysses* 11.809] which blends the heavy and the immaterial in a “word” which is both heavier and thingier than an ordinary word (its mass of letters blocks easy progress to the referent) as well as pure gesture, undulation. Alphabetical objects of this sort range from self-evident allegory to something for which there is no name—which is hardly surprising. (Language can reflect upon itself but is struck dumb at the sight of its excesses.) To the former (transparent allegory), belong instances such as a horse “saying” “Hohohohohohoh hohohohome” and “Hohohohohome” [15.4479, 4899], an *equi*-vocation compounded of (1) onomatopoeia, (2) allegory (a speaking animal, articulating a human word), and (3) a letteristic re-verberation: i.e., in the immediately preceding lines, a character says “Hah, hah, hah,” which is followed by Leopold Bloom’s “He, he, he.” [15.4871, 413] As it happens, *home* is a key word in *Ulysses* and the horse-laugh is triggered off by Bloom’s “I was just making my way home . . .”—which is a lie.¹⁷ So our textual object is an instance of (3.1) hyperbolic horse-laugh and (3.2) a kind of vowel conjugation. The specifically Joycean touch is neither the onomatopoeia, nor the allegory per se, but the combination of riot and rigor, of exuberant letters (this is what hits the eye first, before we home in on the meaning of “home”) and a rational pattern or scheme. The former synthesizes noise; the latter analyzes the resources of language as such and their networks on the page.

Here are a few translations:

Fr: *Honhonhonhonhonhon! Honhonhonhon!*
 Ger-G: *Hauhauhauhauhauhau! Hauhauhause!*

17. Bloom’s is a key statement in terms of both plot (making-one’s-way-home is the theme of the *Odyssey*) and character (he is evasive and apologetic, embarrassed by being seen in the redlight district of Dublin and mortified by Corny Kelleher’s joke “Thanks be to God we have it in the house”).

Ger-W: *Heiheiheiheiheihei! Heiheiheiheim!*
 It: *Cahaaaaaaa! Caaaaacàsaaa!*
 Pol: *Chachachachachacha! Chachachachatki!*

The Morel translation echoes laughs and responds in rhyme to “je rentrais à la maison”. The two German translations opt for precision vis-a-vis “home” and only a partial echo of laughs. Di Angelis also opted for the referent “home” but his horse’s laugh is even less of a laugh (it’s partially supported by the Italian for horse, *cavallo*). By embedding “cha” in *chata*, Slomczynski gets both the laugh and the referent even though his “home” is strained (*chata* is Polish for “cottage”). What’s significant about all of these choices is that the shape of the “word” is, in the end, more important than any missed or strained part of meaning. The sheer excess of letters is the primary literal literary gesture.¹⁸

At the other end of our range we find letter-objects where the quotient of allegorical meaning is close to (or equals) zero. (It can never equal zero insofar as everything in and of language, be it a single letter or even a blank, has some systemic meaning.) An earlier observation placed under the caption ORTHOGRAPHICAL, “everything speaks its own way” [7.177], finds its fulfillment in “Circe” which contains some of the most striking textual objects in *Ulysses*. The rule of “Circe” is that in it “everything speaks its own way” and reassembles what can be found elsewhere; i.e., the monstrous textual objects of “Circe” are not locally and psychologically motivated but globally motivated by the entire book. In this excerpt, some-

18. The shape of Joyce’s horse’s locution recalls the crossing of the literal and the literary in the generic name of Swift’s *houyhnhnms*. The power of Swift’s invention comes precisely from its unspeakability: in English (and not only English) orthography the sequence of letters h-o-u-y-h-n-h-n-m-s is literally unpronounceable and can exist only as a string of letters on the page, a sequence of graphic marks. Swift’s writing is not simply allegorical but hauntingly allegorical: its meaning cannot be explained away by way of allegoresis: a ghost of radical strangeness will always haunt it, an inhuman dimension contributed precisely by writing the unspeakable. The fascination of the name lies precisely in its being equivocally allegorical: the *houyhnhnm*’s homonym (or human name, so to speak) “whinnim” recognizably comes from the verb *whinney*, its suffix echoing perhaps the Hebraic plural *-im* (seraph, seraphim), just as its referent, the rational horse, recognizably partakes of the equine species as we know it, physically as well as spiritually (horses are smart, loyal, brave, beautiful, etc.). But that’s half the story: on the other side we have an alphabetical monstrosity or sheer bestial noises (just try snorting out *houyhnhnm*).

thing called the “dummymummy” of Bloom rolls through the air and, plopping into the sea, says (if one may say so):

Bbbbblllllblblbllobscb! [15.3381]
Bbbbblllllbbblblodschbg? [Mod Lib 550]¹⁹

Meaningless, certainly, though not without a meaningful pattern: 5 b’s, followed by 5 l’s, followed by a triple bl, followed by the sound of noise/?/ blobscb. B and L are, of course, ostensibly meaningful, being Leopold Bloom’s initials. The whole object can arguably be read as a scrambled stuttering-gurgling-lisping rendition of “Bloom,” the final nasal labial (*m*) displaced by a plosive labial (*b*). “Pure” onomatopoeia of splashing would call for a *p* (plopschp) but the initial 5 b’s and 5 l’s have already rejected mere onomatopoeia: Joyce never “imitates” mere noise: in his work chaos is not simply orderly but reflects upon the orders (and disorders) of our foremost instrument, language.²⁰

Here are the choices of the same five major translators: it is noteworthy that on the literal level we run not into missed meanings but, rather, into misses in prints and patterns. We can only speculate why this or that translator decided to simplify Joyce’s pattern (it may well be that translators are particularly susceptible to the fear of meaninglessness: meaninglessness calls in question their very *raison d’être*).

Fr: *Vvrvrvrvrvrvrvrplтч*
Ger-G: *Bbbbbbbbbbbbbbbobschbg*
Ger-W: *Bbbbblllllbbblblutschbg*
It: Same as Modern Library edition of original
Pol: *Bblblblblblchlup?*

19. I cite the Modern Library version along with Gabler’s “corrected” text because pre-1986 translations followed the Modern Library. Entering these words makes one painfully aware of the enormity of the typists’ and typesetters’ task and the absolute inevitability of error.

20. Having a bundle of letters rolling “rotatingly” through the air is perhaps an invitation to imagine *p*’s somersaulting into *b*’s. The repetition of (and a return to) the initial *b* makes the pattern in Gabler’s edition neater.

A little later, Stephen's father Simon Dedalus "swoops uncertainly through the air, wheeling... on strong ponderous buzzard wings," and utters a similar statement:

([H]e makes the beagle's call, giving tongue)

Bulbul! Burblblburblbl! [15.3950]

BulBul! Burblblbrurblbl! (Modern Library 572)

Simon's mode of entry and statement establish a complexly-motivated link between him and Bloom: both are fathers; Simon's arrival echoes, verbally, the gulls Bloom has observed and fed earlier; both are associated with dogs (and God, the father); there is an emphatic affinity of gibberish between what Bloom's dummymummy says and Simon's beagle's call.²¹

In the same set of translations, Morel motivates his sacrifice of Bloom's initials in the dummymummy's locution by echoing a key word from the immediately preceding speech where two leitmotifs Bloom has already been associated with are conjoined in his speech: "Thirtytwo head over heels per second [...] Giddy Elijah" [15.3374-5]. Morel's version of this is "Trente-deux par seconde la tête la première... Vertigineux Èlie." Bloom is explicitly identified with Elijah in "ben Bloom Elija" [12.1916].²² In the case of Simon Dedalus's beagle call, however, Morel's earlier divergence comes at the price of losing the Bbbblllllblblblbobschb-Burblblburblbl connection.

21. Because beagles are so firmly associated with *the* English country sport, one wonders how a language unfamiliar with English-style fox hunting might hear a beagle's call: rendition of animal sounds is never a question of mere acoustic transcription. (Stephen's father makes a beagle's call because early on Stephen associates himself with a fox.)

22. The name of Elijah has stuck in Bloom's mind since midday when a "sombre YMCA young man" thrusts a throwaway into his hand announcing a revival to be led by an American preacher; the throwaway contains inspirational catchphrases such as "Elijah is coming" and "Blood of the Lamb"; the latter, Bloom at first mistakenly assumes to refer to himself (Bloo... Me? No.), and this mistake is one of the reasons why the phrase sticks in his mind and drives the leitmotif Bloom-Elijah. [8.5ff] Later, Bloom throws down among the gulls "a crumpled paper ball," i.e., the inspirational leaflet, and the narrative follows its progress with the words "Elijah thirtytwo feet per sec is coming. Not a bit. The ball bobbed on the wake of the swells." [8.57-9] All of this is recycled, compressed, in the dummymummy segment of "Circe."

Fr: *Boulboul! Biourblblrourbbl!*
 Ger-G: *BulBul! Burblblbrurbbl!* [proofreader's omission?]
 Ger-W: *BulBul! Burblblbrurbbl!*
 It: *Bulbul! Burblblurbbl!*
 Pol: *Bulbul! Burlblblbrurbbl!*

A somewhat similar structure of noise-and-sense informs Blazes Boylan's and Molly's orgasmic grunts-sighs and other obscene and seen alphabetisms in *Ulysses*. Derek Attridge has expertly studied one species of carnal noise that enjoys unforgettable prominence in *Ulysses*, the language of wind (*Peculiar Language*, 136-157), so I'll wind up my Joyce observations with the language of yawning. *Ulysses* features the world's yaldest yawn, twice:

- #1 *iiiiichaaaaaaach!* [8.970; Modern Library 177]
 #2 *iiiiiiiiaaaaaaaach!* [15.1698; Modern Library 490]

How do we read this literal object? Davy Byrne's second "yawn" is made of 9 *i*'s, 7 *a*'s and 1 *c* and 1 *h*. His first yawn (introduced, narratively, by a humdinger of a verb, "smiledyawnednodded" all in one) comprises 6 *i*'s, 7 *a*'s, 2 *c*'s and 2 *h*'s. This is noteworthy: the "words" can't be taken in without counting—or can they?! What do we do when we see this object on the page?! We can discern two literary gestures (or at least two steps within one larger gesture): the first is one of sheer exuberance, for the monstrous size and shape of the yawn partake of Rabelaisian comic mimesis; the second, though, imposes an intelligible frame upon the gigantic corporeal exhalation, binding it in letters and numbers. Notice that as an intellectual gesture, the sequence of 9 *i*'s does not participate in phonetic mimesis. I'm not sure what it would mean to vocalize *iiiiii*: *aiaiaiaiaia* won't do; a long *i*-sound in English is renderable by *e*'s (and that's precisely what Joyce does with Stephen's name: *Steeeeeeeeeeephen* [1.629]); a discrete articulation, i.e., *i-i-i-i-i*, would sound/look more like a sneeze than a yawn. In short, instead of a bunch of letters which represent (imitate) a natural noise, *iiiiii* confronts us with pure letters: so many discrete abstract signs. Letters of the alphabet, as Freud says, "do not occur in nature." (*Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 312) Davy

Byrne's yawn does not imitate a natural physiological occurrence. Let's see what the translators imitate:

- #2 Fr: *Iiiiiiaaaaaah!* (8 *i*'s, 7 *a*'s)
Ger-G: *Iiiiiiiiiiaaaaaach!* (12 *i*'s, 6 *a*'s)
Ger-W: *Iiiiiiaaaaaa!* (same as original)
It: *Iaaaaaaaa!* (1 *i*, 10 *a*'s)
Pol: *Iiiiiiaaaaaa!* (7 *i*'s, 8 *a*'s)

You can imagine these are—what should we say?—not reckless choices: Goyert and de Angelis display unmistakable numerical patterns of *i*'s and *a*'s, 12::6 and 1:10, respectively (both of these are far more obviously structured than Joyce's yawns warrant); Slomczynski's pattern is less obvious numerically but no doubt motivated in that he couldn't have failed to notice that his version has more *a*'s than *i*'s—the opposite of Joyce's order. (His rendition of the other yawn, see below, indicates a very deliberate choice, not a throw of dice.) Morel's text may contain a typo; the difference is negligible (notice, however, that this yawn is dramatically different from the first one). Wollschläger reproduces Joyce's order. As for the literal link between the two yawns and, therefore, the literary gesture/rule which stipulates that everything in "Circe" mirrors something which has already occurred elsewhere in *Ulysses*, Morel clearly fails the test, his two yawns being hardly recognizable as alphabetic objects.

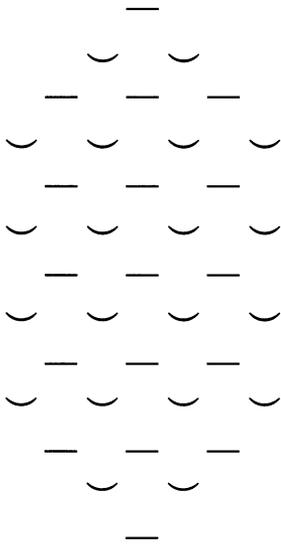
- #1 Fr: *Hâ—âââââ—ââh!*
Ger-G: same as original
Ger-W: same as original
It: *Iaaaaaaaaah!* (9 *a*'s)
Pol: *Iiiiiiaaaaaach* (7 *i*'s, 7 *a*'s: not an "accidental" pattern)

As for the "smileyawnednod" all in one, one may be tempted to subtract the *yawn*'s transcription in order to discover the "words" for "smiled" and "nodded"—but Joyce has the last laugh: the all-in-one takes one letter fewer than does the yawn alone.

On this trail of ever desemanticized utterances, I'll conclude with a look at the possibilities for literal and literary translation of something less-than-letters. (Or is it more? You tell me.)

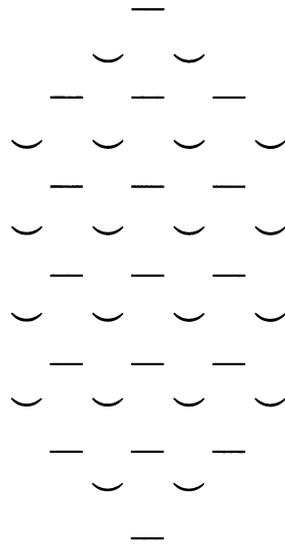
Fisches Nachtgesang

Christian Morgenstern



Fishes' Nightsong

W.D. Snodgrass,
Walter Arndt, translators



Morgenstern's "Nightsong (or Night Hymn) of the Fish" (or perhaps "Piscine Serenade") is itself already a translation of sorts, as well as a critique of poetic reason. Dubbed "the deepest German poem" by Morgenstern himself, the poem is a parody (if that's the right word) of Goethe's "Ein Gleiches," subtitled "Wanderers Nachtlied." (The Goethe-link is implicated in the title and to a lesser extent in the prosody: Goethe's poem has a somewhat similar but irregular syllabic scheme.)

Morgenstern's poem is minimalist with a vengeance: its material is the notion of poetry as numbers. It is an almost perfect/pure representation of schematicism (and a schema of representation), a dance of steps/numbers. The poem's alphabet are the prosodic signs for long and short syllables: conventions of poetry & poetry of convention. Morgenstern's poem teeters on the mini-most verge of materiality in that it is also, as a *fish*song, imperceptibly audible and,

as a *nightsong*, imperceptibly visible. If you read it as a schematization of long/short syllables, then some of its lines are unsayable/impossible. (e.g., that line of 4 short syllables?!)

Morgenstern's bride of quietness is a ravished vertical fish: sort of dead, or about to die, being caught/pulled out of its element, likely singing its last. It is more subtly dead than the supine/prone quadruped fishes of pro-/anti-Darwin bumper stickers, for if ever there was a poem that answered the call that it should "not mean/ but be" this is it.

You may think there is nothing to translate here (apart from the title which we can ignore)—and you'd be right. Except that there are several different translations of the body of the poem.²³ What interests me is the case of Max Knight vs W.D. Snodgrass.

Snodgrass translates it by leaving it as it is, either because he believes that there is nothing to translate (which is reasonable) or because he reads it referentially, i.e., as referring to the prosodic sign for short/unaccented syllables. In light of my earlier remarks, Snodgrass's would be a sort of literal translation, pointing to the putative "facts" behind the poem. Its meaning is its pattern.

Max Knight, on the other hand, performs what one might call a literary (and self-reflexive) translation: literary in that by inverting the poem he responds to its wit with a *par excellence* literary gesture of his own; self-reflexive in that he bares the device of his translation *qua* translation. Notice that his inversion of half!/ of the moony/scaly units of the poem runs the risk of destroying its putative reference (to long/short syllables), and perhaps changes its tonality: in the original, the breves may suggest a school of happy scales or mouths; in Knight's version the inverted breves recall the icon of tragedy.²⁴ But whereas the charm of Morgenstern's poem depends on its iconic face-

23. In addition to "Fish's Night Song" (Knight, Arndt), "Fishes' Nightsong" (Snodgrass), I've seen the title translated as "Lullaby of the Fish" in Erich Hofacher's Twayne-series volume on Morgenstern; incidentally, the poem "quoted" there looks thus:

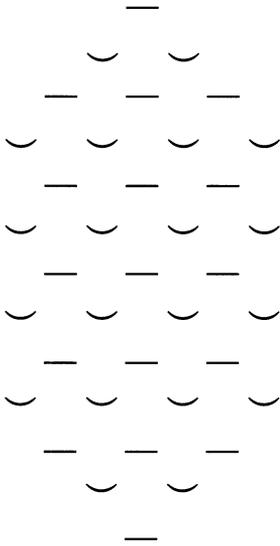
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24. "All humor, we are told, is tragedy with the signs reversed," remarks B.Q. Morgan, anticipating Max Knight's translation ("The Superior Nonsense of Christian Morgenstern." *Books Abroad*, Oklahoma, 1938).

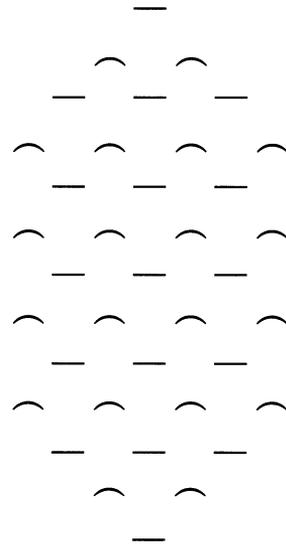
Fisches Nachtgesang

Christian Morgenstern



Fish's Night Song

Max Knight, translator



tiousness, a neutral, aniconic reading of its signs as sheer graphic signs against the undifferentiated white of the page takes us into deeper theoretical waters: The “literal” meaning of writing, according to Jacques Derrida is “metaphoricity itself.” (*Of Grammatology*, p. 15) Metaphoricity (or the use of figurative language) is, of course, a fairly common way of defining the literary.²⁵ Is Morgenstern’s fish, then, literature qua literature, literally?

25. “[The] ‘literal’ meaning given to writing [is] a sign signifying a signifier itself signifying an eternal verity, eternally thought and spoken in the proximity of a present logos [...] natural and universal writing, intelligible and nontemporal writing, is thus named by a metaphor. A writing that is sensible, finite, and so on, is designated as writing in the literal sense; it is thus thought on the side of culture, technique, and artifice; a human procedure, the ruse of being accidentally incarnated or of a finite creature.” Cf. further Derrida’s lucubrations on Valerio Adami’s “Study for a Drawing after Glas” (which features a suspended fish) and a certain “tr” (as in translation, transformation, transcription, transpassing, treachery, tracery &&&). The essays’s title is “+ R” in: *The Truth in Painting*.

Hermeneutics does not engage the literal materiality of the letter (see Kittler). In fact, what it strives for is precisely to overcome and cancel it. And so does reading. A true reader is expected to take in at a glance whole words and even combinations of words. And translation is usually based on a hermeneutic foundation. But I'm especially interested, as you've seen, in cases which compel us to re-examine our assumptions; specifically, cases where certain letter-effects—or even diacritical effects—are not accidental or ornamental but fundamental—so much so that we have to deal with a coincidence of the literal and the literary.

And even though there are no letters in the body of Morgenstern's poem, Knight's version, literally embodies the possibility *and* impossibility of translation. This impossible, self-contradictory condition, this paradox, is just another name for the literary. Notice that the self-reflexive translatorial gesture is made possible (or visible) by the offsetting bilingual pages. I'm no fan of bilingual editions in principle (because they tend to encourage piecemeal readings which inevitably miss the larger aesthetic effect) but in this case the bilingual edition becomes a condition of possibility, in that it exemplifies the very *being* of more than one fishy language.

And now I see it's time I let *all* of us off the hook, and lapsed back into a decent silence to become once more (as Yeats once put it) "dumber than a fish." Since nobody's last words have been able to drown out Kafka's, I'll close now, once and for all, with a particularly telling snippet from his "Silence of the Sirens"—suggesting intimate and ultimate extensions of my literary trail. (The fact that little narratorial asides like the word "namely" and the phrase "if one may so express it" survive in translation is not incidentally to be celebrated, for the passage tells us something about the fate of the telling itself.) And here it is:

The Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence [...] and when Ulysses approached them, the potent songstresses actually did not sing [...] But Ulysses, if one may so express it, did not hear their silence...

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