A Treacherous Art

Also by Art Beck:

Enlightenment, Notes for a Scurrilous Life
Red Hill Press, 1977

The Discovery of Music
Vagabond, 1977

Luxorius: *Opera Omnia Luxorius*
Otis Books/Seismicity, 2012

Martial: *Mea Roma*
Shearsman, 2018

The Insistent Island
Magra Books, 2019

Rilke: *Etudes, A Rilke Recital*
Shanti Arts Publishing, 2020

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A Treacherous Art

—Translating Poetry—

Art Beck

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Remembering John Tranter, whose welcomes meant so much.

A Brief Foreword

These pieces are selected from a steady series of essays and reviews I found myself publishing in the late aughts of the still early century. It was a period in which I was translating poetry, not so much as a specific translation "project," but as an extension of writing poetry. And as an interactive means of reading poetry.

My impetus for writing prose on translated poetry was explorative, not didactic. During that period, I eventually published three translation collections from three very different cultural periods. In 2012, the 91 extant poems of Luxorius, a sixth century C.E. Latin epigramist, writing in Vandal-occupied North Africa at the dawn of the Dark Ages. This segued into a multi-year delve into the first century C.E. grandmaster of epigram, Martial, who flourished at the cusp of the Roman Empire's greatest expansion, and culminated in a good-sized, 2018 selection. And, concurrently, beginning with a chapbook in the late '70s, I'd been translating Rilke, finally publishing an extensive selection in 2020. (That most myopic of years.)

One can happily and productively write poetry without too much theorizing. In fact, at least in our era's thinking, the best poems spring from need not theory. Even successful formalists utilize form as vehicle, not inspiration. But when you find yourself wanting to translate poetry into poetry, you can also find yourself in an anarchic unmapped landscape, navigating a cliff's edge in the fog between languages. When translating established classics, "do no harm" isn't a concern. But "don't do anything stupid" is a prime directive. All other rules spring from that. The "translation police" exist, but they're not so much to be feared as one's internal gestapo. So, many of these pieces served as negotiations with myself for permission. Some make repeat visits to the poets above for multiple looks. But from somewhere over the years, Catullus also kept showing up. I welcomed and re-welcomed those visits.

An Essential Wildness: Does World Literature Exist and How Does it Get That Way?

I: *A visionary myopia, or how bilingual do you need to be to translate poetry?*

Late last year (2011), Tim Parks posted a provocative essay entitled 'Translating in the Dark' on *The New York Review of Books* blog. Parks, a regular *NYRB* contributor, is a British novelist, translator and essayist who's lived and taught at university level in Italy for some time. Beyond being fluent in Italian, he seems to be more than a bit of an Italophile. I'm not quite sure if his article draws any final conclusion, which makes it all the more fertile. But his thrust is to challenge the fairly well-accepted convention that (with the help of various resources) poetry can be successfully translated without a thorough grounding in the source language and culture, so long as the translator is a good enough poet. Or, as a quote in the article from the British poet Jamie McKendrick puts it: "The translator's knowledge of language is more important than their knowledge of languages."

Parks opens by quoting 2011 poetry Nobelist, Tomas Tranströmer: "We must believe in poetry translation if we want to believe in world literature". And Parks gives due credit to all the poets, bilingually challenged or not, who've attempted to contribute to literature by translating. But Parks wonders if it's all that easy, and over the course of the essay, he almost seems to question whether such a thing as a "world literature" can or should exist. As Parks puts it:

> I have no quarrel with the aspiration, or all the intriguing translation/imitation processes it encourages. My sole objection would be that it is unwise to lose sight of the reality that cultures are immensely complex and different and that this belief in World Literature could actually create a situation where we become more parochial and bound in our own culture, bringing other work into it in a process of mere assimilation and deluding ourselves that, because it sounds attractive in our own language, we are close to the foreign experience.

This statement, perhaps unintentionally, seems to echo an ongoing "domestication vs. foreignization" debate among translation theorists. "Domesticated" translated texts ideally read as if they were originally written in the new language. By artfully presenting the illusion of clarity rather than a smudged window, the translator brings you an interesting visitor who's learned to speak your language well.

Proponents of "foreignization", conversely, advocate subordinating the target language to the unique otherness of the translated culture. Rather than straining for equivalent images and idioms that can distort as much as clarify, the "foreignizing" translator takes you on a trip abroad. If clarity is possible, that's great, but the illusion of transparency is a falsifying mirror. Parks seems to frame that debate when he goes on to quote Tranströmer again: "I perceived, during the first enthusiastic poetry years, all poetry as Swedish. Eliot, Trakl, Éluard—they were all Swedish writers, as they appeared in priceless, imperfect, translations…"

No one would quarrel with Parks' general argument that a deeper knowledge of the source language can only improve a translation. And I find myself open to his general arguments in regard to literary prose translation (at which Parks excels). But I'm not so sure about lyric poetry where I'm more in sympathy with McKendrick. My quibbles are the practical concerns of a practicing poetry translator, wondering whether "imperfection" may actually be the unavoidable (and worthwhile) price of translating poetry. Whether accuracy, as opposed, say, to resonance, should even be the primary goal. An awful lot of what passes as translated poetry is prosaic, vapid, and published only because of the reputation of the original. But I'd argue that the deficiency of these renderings isn't usually their accuracy. Rather, it's a lack of creative vitality.

I'm guessing Parks would disagree. He's particularly dismissive of *Dante's Inferno,* a 1998 collection edited by Daniel Halpern of various renditions and imitations of Dante by 20 contemporary English language poets as diverse as Seamus Heaney, Jorie Graham, W.S. Merwin, Carolyn Forché, etc. For Parks: "The result is inevitably extremely uneven as in each case we feel the Italian poet's voice being dragged this way and that according to each translator's assumptions of what he might or might not have sounded like. Sometimes it is Heaney's *Inferno*, sometimes it is Carolyn Forché's, sometimes it is W.S. Merwin's but it is never Dante's." These kind of exercises will, of course, not be to everyone's taste and results are bound to be mixed. However, I think Parks is critical of Halperin's project, not for what it is, essentially *a response* to Dante from

within another time and culture, but for what it's not: a serious attempt to replicate Dante.

As an alternative to the creative re-renderings in Halpern's *Inferno*, Parks offers Robert and Jean Hollander's 2002 "unrhymed verse" "reworking" of John Sinclair's 1939 prose translation as a "serious approximation and a fine read." Fair enough. The three translators are Dante scholars with a deep respect for the original and this is the kind of version that should merit the respect of anyone who wants to go beyond just being entertained.

But, insofar as bringing us "close to the foreign experience," a serious reader might also bear in mind that Dante died in 1321, roughly a couple of generations before Chaucer. The Hollanders' translation is presented in mannered, but contemporary English. Perhaps Italian has developed less dynamically than English, but Dante's Italian isn't modern Italian and from the start any Dante translator has to decide which Dante to bring over: the antique Dante that a modern Italian reader encounters; a Dante who speaks a modern tongue; or some combination.

And is there any technique that might bring us *anywhere even close* to what must have been the almost revolutionary experience of the 14th century reader discovering the birth of a suddenly eloquent language in Dante's vernacular? These are translation issues that the light of scholarship and linguistics can't solve. I'd argue that the only responses lie in creativity.

In the back of my mind, there's some vague, still forming, stretched metaphor of a large immigrant family where some of the children assimilate and others remain faithfully in the *barrio*. If translations are emigrating children, how fertile has *The Divine Comedy* been these many generations later? And how can you expect all those great, great, great grandkids to remain home, still making the sign of the cross?

Parks also doesn't address what, to me, seems a core question: *whether poetry translation involves an essential added step akin to the elusive but real difference between poetry and prose.* The question comes to mind because there are times his meditation almost abuts the Robert Frost "poetry is what gets lost in translation" bromide. Parks, not un-similarly, quotes Celan: "Poetry is the fatal uniqueness of language."

But why is it only in poetry translation, not prose, that the tradition of foreign language challenged translators is respectable, even honored? Is this just a modern innovation, or are there reasons that have as much to do with the nature of poetry as with the vagaries of translators?

Many commentators thoughtfully discuss the difficulties of translating prose across cultures. But it's usually only when discussing poetry that "difficult" sometimes segues to "uncapturable." Is there some correlation worth exploring here? There's a lot of crossover and both are equally "literature," but I wonder if beyond their many commonalities, the translation of, at least shorter lyric, poems doesn't involve different practicalities than, say, translating novels or stories.

II: *Reverberation and Re-Creation, Poetry at Play*

Translation involves the interaction of both reading and writing skills in various admixture. At the writing extreme, we can find poets interested primarily in writing their own poem, using the foreign language original only as a touchstone. Yeats' great poem which begins "When you are old and grey and full of sleep / And nodding by the fire, take down this book…" is really a variation on a famous 16th century French sonnet by Pierre de Ronsard. Its opening, *Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir, à la chandelle, / Assise auprès du feu…* might be rendered: "When you are very old at evening, by candlelight beside the fire…."

The Ronsard poem is as iconic as Yeats' is, but would anyone seriously wish Yeats had stuck to Rostand's text and forewent what amounts to a rich ancestral conversation, a "continuation" rather than translation of Ronsard. Yeats doesn't pretend to be translating and makes no reference to Ronsard. Is it translation? Yes; no; maybe? But would Yeats' poem have existed without Ronsard's? And of course, this comes down to a matter of intent. Or, rather the degree one might value the translator's or appropriator's intent versus the intent of the original poet. Still, if poetry in translation aspires to rise to the level of poetry, it has to do so *in the target* not the *source language.* In a sense, Yeats begins by exploring Ronsard like a bat in a treasure cave, but then discovers a personal poem echoing in his own depths.

Among practicing poets, there's an often noted dynamic: a successful poem achieves poetry only at the point that it imposes its own sudden intent on whatever intent the poet began with. Let's posit that this spark is what can't help but be "lost in translation." And can only be re-captured by a similar spontaneous combustion in the target language. If you buy into this, poetic license is not only a privilege, but the essence of a poem. And the *la belle infidèle* mot, which implicitly wonders whether a translation has to choose between beauty and fidelity, becomes the inverse of Celan's "fatal

uniqueness of language." Even if for some theorists, the translated poem should ideally retain a foreign accent, it's an accent in the new, not the old language. This is at least one argument for "dark translation": skill follows temperament. There just aren't that many good poet-scholars. No matter how formal or mannered on the surface, poetry cultivates an essential wildness.

III. *Crutches, Night Vision and Germination*

Implicit in Jamie McKendrick's observation, which values language skill over "knowledge of languages," is the acknowledgement that there are many available compensations. A poet with limited foreign language fluency can access dictionaries, trots, other translations and commentaries. The practice of consultation or collaboration with linguistic scholars or native speakers is common. In some cases, the translator can correspond with living authors. Taking this a step further, the University of Iowa has an International Writing Program that sponsors visiting foreign authors who collaborate with graduate writing students in translating their work, sometimes for publication.

Last fall there was a long American Literary Translators ATALK chat group thread triggered by Parks' essay. In the course of it, I asked Russell Valentino, who edits *The Iowa Review* and has some exposure to these workshops, if the collaborative authors get fussy about "mutations" in the poetry translation process. He responded: "Some are quite willing to allow their English works to become something quite different from their 'originals'. And sometimes they go back and change things in their originals as a result of being translated in this way, which puts their texts under a kind of scrutiny that they may not have ever enjoyed before."

So a linguistics-challenged translator-poet can enlist a lot of help. But there are really no compensations for poetic weaknesses. There are many examples of literature being created by good writers translating (often with even suspect help) from languages they weren't fluent in. *There are no examples of literature created by inept writers.*

Still, Parks' essay raises a valid question. When translated poetry rises to that indefinable but recognizable level of "literature," is it "world literature"? *Or simply literature in the new language?* For me – and it's only my personal temperament talking – does it matter? If the translated poem achieves poetry, something's come alive and I'm not going to complain just because that life is new.

Browsing an old journal entry, I found I'd noted two quotes from George Seferis, another poetry Nobelist, with an indication to myself that they were from different periods of his life. I'd like to be able to cite their sources, but maybe it's more fitting for the direction of this piece just to pull them out of the air and hope they're accurate. "All art/poetry is blind." And "No poem is ever alone." Those statements, taken together, seem apropos to the organic nature of translated poetry. Rather than "translating in the dark," maybe the issue is whether the translated poem, similar to the original poem, requires *a leap in the dark*.

Why not accept that when poems move *as poems* between languages they don't/can't replicate; but rather mutate and germinate? And if so, it's not clarity but fertility that's at stake. Tranströmer's youthful reading of Eliot, Trakl, Éluard etc. as *Swedish* poets seems, after all, to have had the effect of nurturing a great new Swedish poet.

To revisit the 16th century, Arthur Golding's 1567 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is an English masterpiece. But its rhymed couplet scheme and earthy Anglo-Saxon energy present a stark contrast to Ovid's 1st century sophisticate's subtle Latin voice. Ovid, it might be argued, was writing, if not at the end, at least at the climax of a literary era. Golding, conversely, wrote at the fountainhead. And he created an English rather than Latinate work that seemed to insistently engage the most fertile English poet of his age.

Golding's Ovid is difficult to read now, its language and accent as *olde* as its quirky aesthetic. But scratch Shakespeare almost anywhere, from *Romeo and Juliet* to the *Tempest* and you'll find Golding's Ovid speaking to you. Most well-educated Elizabethans could read Latin; a literal replication would have served little purpose beyond a trot, similar to those in the Loeb Classical Library. Golding was a competent Latinist among many other Latinists, but those skills were secondary to the élan, the *poetry*, of his personal re-creation. It was Golding's command of living English, not Latin, that spawned a new classic of the new Elizabethan age.

The Alternate Version

Generation after generation, a seemingly self-replenishing subset of pundits shake their heads and question whether literature can ever be detached from the language and culture of its origination. You might "pretend" you're reading Homer, or Tolstoy, or Rilke or Dante in translation. But is such a thing as literary translation even possible without contaminating the glories of the original? Are translators essentially akin to colonists and exploiters? Isn't linguistic equivalence an illusion? And isn't the very fluency of a "readable" translation just a mark of its inaccuracy?

The questions may seem largely academic, but at their heart is the issue of whether such a concept as "world literature" can really exist. And if so, does a work come alive in a new language *as itself, or as something else?* Can (or even should) literature ever really emigrate?

And pondering all that, it might be productive to step away and consider the dynamics of a rare phenomenon obliquely akin to translation. The "exophones", emigrating authors who successfully translate *not texts, but themselves* into a new culture and language.

I. *The Translation of the Self*

Almost everyone who's ever tried to learn a new language as an adult experiences a quantum degree of difficulty between reading/comprehending – and trying to speak, much less write it. The difference, as it were, between language and tongue? Even so, throughout history, untold multitudes of immigrants have become fluent in new languages in the process of making new lives.

Fluency comes in degrees, of course. My grandparents were minimally educated Poles who emigrated in the early teens of the last century. They spoke well enough to get along; work, shop, listen to the radio and, later, watch television in English. But they read only Polish newspapers and their ability to write English probably never exceeded the most rudimentary post-card message. That's a far cry from the, not unusual, immigrant in the corporate or business world, whose English skills, accented or not, may be several cuts above that of the native-born clerical staff.

But over the ages, how many of this great migrating horde have written classic literature in their new language? Out of billions of world emigrants,

even a (doubtful) million is a number infinitely more infinitesimal than 1%. If "world literature" exists anywhere, it seems certainly present here, at the extremes of cosmopolitanism. Where despite its rarity, its significance seems to far outweigh its numbers.

There's an arty-trendy feel about that term ,"exophonic", but, lacking a better word, it will have to do. In a February 2011 article in *The Guardian*, Dan Vyleta (who's described as a "Czech-German-English-Canadian" novelist) listed his pick for the top ten exophonic books. Among Vyleta's authors is Joseph Conrad who Vyleta characterize as "the patron saint of exophonic authors." And, of course, Vladimir Nabokov, Arthur Koestler, Joseph Brodsky (a poet in Russian and essayist in English). And the non-Eastern Europeans Ha Jin and Samuel Beckett.

II. *The divided dynamics of transformation*

One exophonic writer who Vyleta misses is Apuleius, whose 2nd century novel *Asinus Aureas* (*The Golden Ass*; originally entitled *Metamorphoses)* remains an often translated classic. The rambling story of Lucius who was magically turned into a jackass, and after many adventures restored to humanity is still read as much for pleasure as scholarship today. And the last lines of its short prologue seem particularly apropos to this discussion: *Iam haec equidem ipsa vocis immutatio desultoriae scientiae stil quem accessimus respondet. Fabulam Graecqanicam incipimus. Lector intende: laetaberis*.

Roughly in English: "But then, for my part, I'd respond that this desultory interchange of language is precisely the literary discipline required. It's a Greek story we're commencing: Reader, pay attention. You'll be glad."

There's a practical translation challenge in these lines that I think is really difficult to solve – an essential image that didn't come across in my translation above. An image perhaps central to the exophone experience, and to that ephemeral concept, "world literature."

To put the lines in context, we need to back up into Apuleius' "Prologue." The first-person narrator describes himself as a non-native Latin speaker, formally educated in Greece, who later came to practice law in the Roman courts and taught himself workplace Latin with great difficulty. The speaker's educational path isn't inconsistent with what we know of Apuleius'. And the first-person narrator who introduces himself in the "Prologue" might well be taken as somewhat of a proxy, just as the

protagonist's later conversion to the Isis cult has come to be identified with Apuleius' religious beliefs.

In the 'Prologue,' the narrator begs indulgence for mistakes he may make as a foreigner attempting literary Latin. But then he realizes that since it's a Greek story he's telling, his Greek accent is just the thing. It's as if Andrei Codrescu declared himself uniquely qualified to write a new version of Dracula.

What's hard to bring across, though, is the imagery Apuleius uses to describe the switch in languages: *vocis immutatio desutloriae* "Desultory" in English derives from the Latin *desultor.* But it's forgotten its roots. The English adjective implies a sort of idle wandering. The Latin root denotes an acrobat in the *circus* (the races), a trick rider who vaults back and forth between horses and chariots.

If that image could be conveyed, all kinds of things might come to life. The galloping power of two languages (and their underlying cultures). The discipline and grace of the artist as acrobat – and outsider. The *scientiae* of Greek studied in the academy and Latin learned in the school of hard knocks. The serious play and risk of the work at hand. The ringmaster announcing a spectacle well worth the reader's attention.

Apuleius may have been educated in Greece, but Latin became his chosen literary language and he exulted in its mastery. The enrichment of Latin with Greek was nothing new. Some 200 years earlier, Horace staked his claim to fame on being "the first to bring Greek meter into Latin verse." Apuleius, re-inventing the Greek novel in Latin was, similar to Horace, *creating not an imitation but a fresh Latin genre*. Petronius, a century earlier, made a similar, alas only half still extant, foray. But there seems little in Latin in between. It's easier to describe than translate the compressed Latin energy of the *desultor* image. The following is no more than a stab: "But then I tell myself that like an acrobat leaping between horses, this is just the accent and experience the story needs. It is, after all, a Greek tale we're commencing. Reader, pay attention: you'll be glad."

III. *A Polish Novelist? And so, no Nobel*

On December 3, 2009 a friend forwarded Garrison Keillor's *Writer's Almanac* post for the day. It included this note:

> It's the birthday of the man who wrote: 'It is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence — that which makes its truth, its meaning its – subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream – alone.' That's the Polish writer Joseph Conrad… born in Berdichev, Ukraine (1857). By the time Joseph was 12, both his parents had died of tuberculosis. So he went to live with an uncle, got a good education and then went off to sea with the French merchant navy at age 17, and a few years later, joined the British (mercantile) marine…

I found myself crankily emailing back: "John – I was glad you noted Conrad's birthday. A chance to think about him again and realize what a giant he was. The anti-Kipling, etc. I think he pretty well defines the underside of colonialism and also – in *Nostromo*, for instance – sniffs out the fascism lurking in the young century. A hundred years later, he doesn't seem a bit dated. His world still inhabits ours. But sometimes I find that Garrison Keillor – in his literati pose – annoys me no end … The *Polish* writer, Joseph Conrad…'?? Someone who'd never heard of Conrad (and we probably both know more than a few people who haven't) would never realize reading Keillor that Conrad wrote English literature in English, not Polish."

I should first of all apologize to Garrison Keillor. Browsing *The Writer's Almanac* I find he's done other posts on Conrad that more than clarify the issue. My catty response to "the Polish writer" soubriquet was largely driven by the memory of a Conrad biography I'd read some years earlier. I find myself unable to properly cite because I've forgotten the name of the work, but stuck in my memory is the biographer's description of Conrad's quiet elation at hearing he was shortlisted for the 1907 Nobel Prize which was going to be awarded to a British writer. And his later dejection at the whisper that he'd been ultimately rejected in favor of Kipling because the committee had doubts about whether a foreigner writing in English could be an "English author."

The official 1907 Nobel citation included the following: "In the cycle entitled *The Seven Seas* (1896) Kipling reveals himself as an imperialist, a citizen of a world-wide empire. He has undoubtedly done more than any other writer of pure literature to draw tighter the bonds of union between England and her colonies."

In 1899, Conrad published *Heart of Darkness*, in a three-part magazine serial. That novella is a still enduring meditation on the mad underside of colonialism. Early on in the work, Conrad's recurring, alter-