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## Homage to Translation: Benjamin in Japan

If translation were the apparatus allowing us to approach—

If translation were always taking place as part of a politics concerned with the flow of power—

If Billie Holiday's late signature song "Strange Fruit" had been written by Able Meeropol, aka Lewis Allan, a Jewish poet from the Bronx—

If repetition were a form of translation—

If symmetry were understood as translation plus reflection—

Walter Benjamin famously wrote that a translation should have an awkwardness about it that shows off "the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language." He argued that translations should not attempt to ameliorate syntactical variance between two languages, but instead should celebrate the host language's instructive difference.

Curiously, Benjamin's radical claim about translation did not markedly influence his own translations of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisian*.

When I read a poem, I hear it in my thorax.

Basho praised a poetics of connotative associations, what the Japanese call “scent links” as opposed to merely thematic or linguistic links.

I often think of tone as the auditory equivalent of touch.

The Japanese sentence, *Doko e ikuna desuka*, might be literally translated, following Benjamin’s theory, as *Where to go are (you)*. We can see that such a translation emphasizes the Japanese placement of adverb, auxiliary verb, transitive verb, and implied subject. This literal translation does not colonize the Japanese language or stuff it into the shoe of familiar English syntax.

Such a translation has the benefit of refreshing the English language with an unusual syntactical structure proper to the Japanese. In this sense, the English reader is enriched and startled by something exotic.

The literal-syntax translation has opened the door to new possibilities of expression that might be imagined to correspond not only to cultural differences, but to differences in processing thought, in cognition itself.

This could be important politically and philosophically. If modes of syntax give rise to modes of thinking and being, we may learn something crucial, something we had not considered in our own language, through literal-syntax translations.

For instance, when Juan de la Cruz writes, “Entreme donde no supe/ Y quedame no sabiendo,” (literally, “Entered I where not I knew/ And remained I not knowing”) his placement of the subject behind the verb is paramount. The speaker admits, through syntax, that he is not the prime mover of his own (life) sentence. The verb comes first. And in Spanish, God is not “The Word” but El Verbo, the verb. The saint’s syntax models a whole theology.

Should a poet then translate “Doko e ikuna desuka” as “Where to are going (you)”?

Maybe. But in its original context, the Japanese line carries no such strangeness to its native readers. The Japanese reader of the Japanese line is *not* startled by its unusual word order.

So the literal-syntax translation, for all it does do, fails to account for the Japanese line’s essential ordinariness or for the relationship between the Japanese reader and the original text.

None of the guards at Attica could translate the prisoners’ code of knocks and pauses.

Should we place a higher value on the sequence of words or on their total effect? Walter Benjamin insists that it is “a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator.”

I would suggest the contrary, that it is least worthwhile to translate words.

If a word's meaning is its use, isn't it the sentence or the complex of surrounding signs that gives meaning to the word?

We not only have no word for many Japanese reduplicatives, but our culture lacks the concepts as well. Hira hira—waver. Hara hara—tears or leaves. Kong kong—heavy snow. Niko niko—smile. Niya niya—smirking. Pata pata—pitter patter. Can can—blaring bell or sun. Gan gan—oppressive larger bell. Kin kin—piercing headaches.

As a translator, I aim to recreate, sometimes in different places, the same degree of reader participation in the translation as in the original.

In the translation, I want to awaken a like pleasure.

And how do we deal with an original text that is itself syntactically innovative? If the literal-syntax translator translates conventional word order unconventionally, how can an originally unconventional writing be given its due?

If Akhmatova sounds like Klebnikov in English, what should Klebnikov sound like?

Servius comments on the “fidus... Achates” of the *Aenid* I.188 and he draws a distinction between *fidus* and *fidelis*, between faithful and dependable.

A translation might be merely dependable, replacing one word with another or faithful where faith is a form of intuition and openness.

At temperatures of 100 million degrees, a tritium nucleus and a deuterium nucleus overcome electrostatic repulsion and are translated into a nucleus of helium plus a neutron. The missing mass is converted into prodigious energy.

Translation is a divine apparatus, an alembic for the transference of energy, rhythm, language, and imagination. Perhaps it is, finally, more of a spiritual than a transcriptural activity.