

Translating Water

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Water is not only meant to reveal itself to the eye and the touch, but to speak and sing in seventeen different registers. Thus dream waters mumble and ebb and swell and roar and trickle and splash and stream and dally, and they wash you and can carry you away. They can rain from above and well up from the depths. (Illich, 1992, pp. 145–146)

I

All translation is interpretation.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) (Gadamer, 1989, p. 384)

Furuike ya kawazu tobikomu izu no oto

An old pond: a frog jumps in—the sound of water.

Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) (quoted in Sato, 1983, p. 149)

MATSUO BASHO'S (1644–1694) old haiku is lovingly attended to in Hiroaki Sato's book *One Hundred Frogs: From Renga to Haiku to English* (1983). Along with placing the delicate art of the word and its translation in a tangled nest of wonderful historical, philosophical, cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, linguistic, and ecological contexts, Sato gathers together “one hundred frogs”: dozens and dozens of suggested translations and takes on Basho's original work.

Already, the above citation from Basho (quoted in Sato, 1983, p. 149) betrays the fact that the original Japanese text, which is itself already a translation of a deeply meditative, lived-experience, is herewith *transliterated*. Already, the betrayals of words and their ways are deep and abiding. I will leave it to others to delve this depth. All I have for pedagogical experience, here, is the weird work of teaching young children whose tongues are other-wise, who come to know that, in English, you have to start at the left hand side of a word and move through it to the right in sounding it out. And this—“sounding it out”—needs to be done as a way of trying to work out a word you don't recognize “on sight,” shall we say. As with, say, Japanese, “frog” is read by a reader “familiar” with this word, not as a string of soundable phonemes but as something recognized all at once, more like a picture seen in one glance and uttered in one sound, *frog*.

I must add, here, how fascinated a Grade Two class was recently when we spoke together about the old, Early Medieval quarrels about “silent reading” (very common in contemporary elementary school classrooms) and “reading out-loud.” It is lost to memory that the very idea of silent reading entered into European consciousness around the 11th century (see Carruthers, 2003, 2005; Carruthers & Ziolkowski, 2002; Illich, 1992, 1993; Illich & Sanders, 1988; Stock, 1983) and has ancestries leading back to Augustine’s idea of the “inner voice.”

In almost all cases, texts were ‘til then *voiced* when read. The idea of “silent reading” made no sense, since, without the voice’s mutterings, without transport on the breath, without the spirit performing the text, the text remained dead and useless and meaningless. To read required that the text be inhabited by the breath of the one reading. This meant becoming familiar with this habitat and its vestiges. We still recognise that some of us are better out-loud readers than others, and that to read silently something that one does not understand is one thing, but to try to read it aloud is truly strange and estranging. And all this is to say nothing yet about the differences, in elementary schools, between reading a story and telling a story.

Around the 11th century, two co-incident movements of thought occurred with a common consequence. Once written texts became more widespread, it became more possible to imagine the voices of the ancients housed in texts outside of myself. As such, as the ancients moved outwards into the world beyond my breath and voice, my sense of “myself” moved inwards. “Myself” became increasingly more singular, purged, less haunted by the ghostly voices of others. Knowledge became “out there” as I became “in here,” and European philosophy was ripe for the moves of Cartesianism which fulfils the purging (the “de-worldling,” disincarnating) of the self with a clear and distinct but empty “I am.”

As “myself” became more intimately “interior,” “silent reading” started to make more sense. Moreover, as the voice moved inwards and reading aloud became less and less predominant, texts began to have to be punctuated, chaptered, headlined, paginated, and spaces began to appear between words. All this work, which was once done by the out-loud reading voice, had to become written. Thus began what Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders (1988) named, in the subtitle to their book, “the alphabetization of the modern mind.” Wonderfully, “silent reading” and “punctuation”—to name just these two for now—are not simply language arts techniques to be mastered by Grade Two children and bloodlessly inscribed as Curriculum Requirements. They are also lovely old stories about how things were once different about the voice, the breath, the sound of words, and the puncturing of calf-skins with inks.

II

There is an old Italian saying: “*Traduttore, traditore* [to translate is to betray].”
(Bethune, 2002)

The last part of Basho’s (already translated and transliterated) text is what is of interest here. A great ecological and meditative confluence: the sound of water and its translation into words.

Translation—it “betrays” something, hands something over one to another, it gives something away and takes something back. And, hermeneutically understood, this is precisely the roots, too, of those traditions which are not only handed over to us and in whose “handing down” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 284) we are already inevitably involved, but to which, inversely, we have always already been handed over. Our very act of being human is already to be handed over, betrayed, visible and audible, presumed-upon, witnessed, not just witnessing, known, not just knowing. We don’t begin as self-determining subjectivities but, as already having been

handed over to the ways of things (our language[s] and culture[s] and so on, all mixed and multifarious and, to the extent that we belong to them, often deathly silent and presumed), we are already betrayed by our belonging.

To *understand* this betrayal—to open things up to being other-wise—is the work of hermeneutics. To understand is to betray these betrayals, that is, to *interpret* them.

III

What the expression expresses is not merely what is supposed to be expressed in it—what is meant by it—but primarily what is also expressed by the words without its being intended—i.e., what the expression, as it were, “betrays.” In this wider sense the word “expression” refers to far more than linguistic expression; rather, it includes everything that we have to get behind, and that at the same time enables us to get behind it. Interpretation, therefore, does not refer to the sense intended, but to the sense that is hidden and has to be disclosed. The translator must preserve the character of his own language, the language into which he is translating, while still recognizing the value of the alien, even antagonistic character of [what is being translated]. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 336)

Back to Hiroaki Sato’s book, consider the intimate relation between the translationary betrayals of words and this living, Earthly presence, in Basho’s words, of “the sound of water.” (Hamill & Kaji, 2000). Throughout Sato’s collection, this last part of the *haiku* variously becomes voiced as “hark, water’s music” (Bryan, quoted in Sato, 1983, p. 152), “the splash” (Miyamori, p. 152), “sleeping echoes awake” (Saito, p. 153), “plop!” (Blyth, p. 154), “the water’s noise” (Fraser, p. 154), “WATERSPLASH” (Beilenson, p. 155), “a deep resonance” (Yuasa, p. 159), “a frog-leaps-in-splash...” (O’Donnol, p. 159), “Kdang!” (Bond, p. 160), “water-note” (Maeda, p. 160), “with splash-splish” (Ikeda, p. 161).

There are dozens more that are offered. From Alan Ginsberg, from whose work we’ve come to expect a complex relation to such matters of poetry and sound and the Beat-East, we get (I’m tempted to say “of course”), “kerplunk” (Ginsberg, quoted in Sato, 1983, p. 164):

Ker—The first element in numerous onomatopoeic or echoic formations intended to imitate the sound or the effect of the fall of some heavy body, as *kerchunk*, *-flop*, *-plunk*, *-slam*, *-slap*, *-splash*, *-souse*, *-swash*, *-swosh*, *-thump*, *-whop*, etc.

U.S. vulgar—1903, in *Outing* XLIII. 83/1 “The sound made by the water when the frog dives, we used to express when we were boys, by the word “*kerplunk*”

(Online Etymological Dictionary, n.d.)

One could also consider trickle, slosh, splash, popple, ripple, burble, purl, gurgle, swash, and murmur: various English soundings of “the play of water” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 332).

Surely, in this *haiku*, these final words also *mean something* (breaking the surface, interrupting the stillness, opening the depths, or perhaps the sudden crack of sound that announces enlightenment after the stillness of the pond is broken [“breaking open the *being* of the object” as Gadamer (1989, p. 360) describes interpretation’s betrayals]. But still there is (to coin a phrase) a “plop” in which the ear abides.

Remember with those boys in 1903 the great turbulent thunks of a flat stone tossed high and entering water perfectly straight at a great Pythagorean right-angle?

An air-capturing ga-goomp like a bullfroggy throating?

And how my using these words this way betrays a different world than Bryan's already cited neo-Victorian "Hark" (quoted in Sato, 1983, p. 152). What is betrayed in translating the sound of water into words is not just the sound of water but the sounding of the words themselves, portrayed, in this citation, with the sound-word "resonance":

Every word breaks forth as if from a center and is related to a whole, through which alone it is a word. Every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate.

(Gadamer, 1989, p. 458)

IV

The French have a saying: "*Traduire, c'est trahir*—to translate is to betray."

(Doublebirdie, 2005)

The sound of water implies...the eye and the ear of a recluse attentive to the minute changes in nature and suggests a large meditative loneliness, sometimes referred to as *sabi*: the sound of the water paradoxically deepens the sense of surrounding quiet.

(Shirane, 1996, p. 51)

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QUOTATION: "Meditation and water are wedded forever."

ATTRIBUTION: Herman Melville (1819-1891), U.S. author. *Moby-Dick* (1851), ch. 1, *The Writings of Herman Melville*, vol. 6, eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (1988). (Bartleby.com, 2008)

Out for a walk by the Elbow River and the various creeks that trickle into it. Remembering another of Basho's great invocations, this time to the pine tree:

From the pine tree
learn of the pine tree,
And from the bamboo
of the bamboo. (see the spectacular Website <http://www.ahapoetry.com/haiku.htm>)

And so too it is with the sound of water. Basho's Haiku-invocation is a chance to remember that Earth-places can be great teachers, that there is learning to be had in the terrible presence of things and their ways. There is, perishing here in this walking meditation that hears, a great sense of *passing*:

If there are such things as natural symbols, then sounds are surely the natural symbol of transience and the lostness of past time. They are essentially evanescent, an exact correlative of wistfulness and poignant regret, not to mention sentimentality. They seem to be nature's way of mourning. (Ree, 2000, pp. 23–24)

Again, a great Mediaeval debate. To read out loud is to interpret, because casting written texts up into the voice is an act of incarnating, enspiriting and bringing to life what it is saying to us—"awakened into spoken language," as Gadamer (1989, p. 394) puts it. Reading a text out

loud means that I (and not just the text's "author") am *saying* these words. Something happens when we read something aloud. The voice is asked to experience the truth of the words in uttering them, and that truth is carried on a voice full of perishing and mourning and lostness, even when, perhaps especially when, the words sounded speak to a truth that will outlast the breath of that frail voice itself. The voice and its sounds "pass by" like texts do not. The voice and its breathing pass away into silence. The airs stop moving, even while the written text remains, now the corpse of the vanished breath.

Where water sounds, water breathes. Hearing the sound of water is hearing the breathing (aeration) of water:

a frog-pond ploomp!
makes it breathe. (Flygare, quoted in Sato, 1983, p. 167)

To hear the breathing of water is to be one who breathes:

Seeing the frailty of your life through seeing the breath is the meditation on the recollection of death. Just realizing this fact—that if the breath goes in but does not go out again, or goes out but does not come in again, your life is over—is enough to change the mind. It will startle you into being awake. (Chah, 2001, p. 44)

Soundwalk near the river's edge with a difficult task in mind, and as a form of meditative obedience, to hear or to heed such perishing—the "emptying out" of things beyond their feigned and timid self-containment, out into all their relations. Caught in the sounding bristles of water's tricks over rocks, listening to the auditory spaciousness of the place and how the soundplays of water play out a huge, sensuous, multifarious voicing. This sound of riverwater sounds the distance of that rock face on the far side and later, as the face slopes downwards and away, the sound sounds this movement of rock (which is at once a movement of an animal body past such rock movements—this is *one thing*, not two) and can be heard to belong properly to it. Listening to its shifts and flutters as we walk—shifts in how its sounds are spread out territorially, marked around this animal-body and its bi-aurality: lefts, rights, distances, closeness, aheads, behinds, echoes off of steep rockshorelines. The sound is framed by distant red squirrel chits and chats whose scold is not about us. There's something up over there—bear? Other hikers? A hawk perhaps? Riversound. Woodswater. Pinepitched. Mourning. That heart-breaking sound of an unseen Red-Tailed Hawk overhead downstream has already disappeared without a trace.

("An asthmatic squeal, *keeer-r-r* [slurring downwards]") (Peterson, 1980, p. 154).

Sharpness of small, fast bitty-trickles make breath rush a bit in a new wash of sounds. Listening to the breadth of this river's sounding is listening to a great three-dimensional space that surrounds this body. *This* body, here, now, full of aches, and now, in writing, remembered specifically in attempts to compose this waterwalk in the composites of writing.

But this is not quite yet a good betrayal of the sound of water. Consider: that these specific soundings, to be *just thus*, require *just these* rocks placed *just so*. These exact sounds require *exactly this* relation between gravels and shallows and high-pitched trickles. This is the sound, not just of these gravels, but of their having arrived here, with all the flooded stormwearing meticulousness that it requires, with gravities and iccold rockbreakings and the shatters of falling cliffpieces. All of this is what this sound *is*.

This is its betrayal.

Further along, *these* exact sounds require *exactly this* placement of large rocks that can capture drumskins of air into deep, hollow-sounding adumbrations. And all of this requires all the ages of glaciers and plate shifts and spring run-offs and water-wearings and those cold-ice Alberta winters and bear scramblings that, over a vast and patient time, placed just *that* pebble *there*. Consider: what am I *hearing* in the sound of water? It is an abstraction to think of sound waves and auditory canals alone (recall, however, that auditory canals are themselves partially swirls of water's sound-bearings). It is equally abstract to think that I am not hearing the ancestral ecological voices of this whole place, echoing just here, just now, in all its frail and passing particularity.

Shirane's (1996) *sabi*: a small, delicate water-sound like the lap at the water's edge can only sound in an acre of quiet. The smaller the sound, the larger the quiet must be. The smaller the sound, the larger the quiet becomes. *Hearing* the rock ancestries of this small sound deepens the sense of surrounding quiet. It is the rocks-having-happened-to-fall-here sounding:

Stillness and activity are actually the same thing. This short poem demonstrates that if there were no stillness to the old pond, there would be no sound as a frog jumps into the water. The activity exists as the same moment as the non-activity, they are the same thing. (openpoetry.com, n.d.)

It is ages sounding, just right here. It is all this handing-down that is betrayed. This trickle of water greened from the mineral-spring richness, *this* trickle betrays all things.

This is called "ecological awareness."

V

License is not precisely betrayal, but another kind of faithfulness. But from the point of view of fidelity, understood as being bound to the literal text, it may well be that that other order of faithfulness, the one associated with freedom and license, can only be read as betrayal. (Butler, 2004, p. 82)

Every translation of the sound of water into words, as with every translation of the words for the sound of water into another tongue—every translation is a betrayal, an interpretation which breaks open the being of the object and makes it vulnerable to the otherwise ear and tongue and imagination.

However, as Judith Butler (2004) hints, this need not be understood only negatively, as if human language somehow necessarily distorts or despoils the immediacies of ecological experience (standing here, body-facing, sounding water all around). Every translation of the sound of water into written words is also capable of *betraying something* of the sound of water, that is, revealing something, making something *show* about the sound of water, as much as leaving the sound of water still unsaid. It is easy to imagine that the betrayal of words means simply that words fail and do badly by things (I've often wondered if this is what David Abram [1996] is suggesting, paradoxically given how beautiful a writer he is). I'm suggesting that in their very failure to capture and claim and the thing altogether (in their failure to make the thing face this way and no other), they succeed in presenting the sound of water that, even though it is uttered in words, remains experienced, in these words, as *there*, "beyond my wanting and doing" (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxviii), "standing there" (Heidegger's *Da*), reposing beyond the words themselves:

The existing thing does not simply offer us a recognizable and familiar surface contour; it also has an inner depth of self-sufficiency that Heidegger calls “standing-in-itself.” The complete unhiddenness of all beings, their total objectification (by means of a representation that conceives things in their perfect state [fully given, fully present, fully presented, fully written or spoken, finished]) would negate this standing-in-itself of beings and lead to a total leveling of them. A complete objectification of this kind would no longer represent beings that stand in their own being. Rather, it would represent nothing more than our opportunity for using beings, and what would be manifest would be the will that seizes upon and dominates things. In [hermeneutic experience] we experience an absolute opposition to this will-to-control, not in the sense of a rigid resistance to the presumption of our will, which is bent on utilizing things, but in the sense of the superior and intrusive power of a being reposing in itself. (Gadamer, 1977, pp. 226–227)

Cultivating this experience of the repose of things is what hermeneutics calls “the art of writing” (Gadamer, 1977, p. 390). In regard to the arguments regarding silent reading and reading out loud and speaking, Gadamer suggests that some writing that is well wrought “reads itself,” (p. 390), writing which “draws readers into the course of thought,” (p. 390), its “productive movement” (p. 390) in which the art of writing appears artless and disappears in favour of the appearance of the thing itself.

Moreover, every translation of the sound of the words for the sound of water into another tongue *betrays something* of the life of the words translated (in *both* tongues—“Hark,” “kerplunk”) and of the sound of water (it *shows* something about words and tongues and water’s sounds and how each tongue sings such sounds out loud). Words are not *representations of things*. Words are not *stand-ins*. Words that bespeak the sound of water are meant to make it present, to show it off, to lead us to it and offer us up to its ways, not to stand in front of it and block our way. They are not substitutes but rather heralds of the arrival of the thing.

Words are another kind of faithfulness, a presentation of water’s sound, a voice of the voicing thing.

In words, the thing appears. It is not just *referred to*.

VI

Jane Reichhold, who fires off missives on *haiku* over the Internet claims that Basho’s final phrase can be literally “water of sound” in Japanese: “The water of sound. Sound as water. Sound moving as water does. Sound rippling outward as water does when disturbed.” She’s suggesting that Basho’s concluding phrase is an actual visual image—in water—of how sound moves. But I noticed—amazingly could feel—that the final Japanese words make an auditory equivalent of how waves of sound/water circle outward from their source fading as they go: *mizu-no-oto*. Do you hear those opening ripples in the repeated o’s and in their duration? O’s don’t cut off like the p’s in “plop!” They fade away. Like a *haiku* voiced out (Bakken, 2003).

VII

There is an old Italian saying that equates the translator’s craft with treason: “*Traduttore, traditore*.” A French version, laced with misogyny, suggests that a translation’s fidelity to the original is inversely proportional to its aesthetic value: “*Les traductions sont comme*

les femmes, ou belles ou fideles [Translations are like women, either beautiful or faithful/true.].” (Gurria-Quintana, 2006)

Even if translation is treason, it is a necessary form of treachery on which readers depend.
(Gurria-Quintana, 2006).

Swallowing
Life rafts of pain pills—
with sips of chills
Basho's frog
floating in a jar of rain— (Anderson, 2006)

VIII: Final Pedagogical Reflection

once upon a time ther was a rain drop and it gope on a bird then the sun trd into a watrvapr the radrop fad his bovrtrs and trnd into a fofe white cloud and then it trnd in too a havie plak kloub and then it trd in bake to the sam radrop and gropt on the sam bird.
Name Eric

Below is a translation which opens this water-text out into a field of “conventionality” and allows its meaning to become visible and audible while, at the same time, betraying its frailty, this young boy and his ear for the soundings of words and their meaning—six years old at the time, writing at the computer—now slipped away into adulthood:

Once upon a time there was a raindrop.
And it dropped on a bird.
The sun turned into a water vapour.
The raindrop found his brothers
And turned into a fluffy white cloud.
And then it turned into a heavy black cloud.
And then it turned back into the same raindrop
And dropped on to the same bird. Eric Jardine

I cite it here to be read out loud. It is my chance to mourn anew the sound of translating water and its passing.

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