Verstellte Sicht

On Collective Translation[1]

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A word whose meaning we do not know becomes a body of sound. It does not mean, it sounds. It evokes associations, images, remembrances. It resonates. When meaning is obscured, space is created: space for the materiality of the letters, for the flesh of the words. A desert for sound. No meaning that leads astray. The connection between signifier and significate is cut, the languages' tangible potential breaks open. Embracing non-understanding—or rather: taking the slow path to understanding—makes for overtones. It means to listen. It means to see: you look at the word and it looks back. It can be seen without its hull, its reference. The word remains within itself, it no longer strives towards its meaning. It lays bare. It sounds. The difference becomes perceptible between how it is and how it says itself. Without the weight of meaning, it reveals what it is made of. It is material. It uncovers layers: layers of sound, layers of letters, layers of possibilities. When you read or hear a word in another language, in an unknown language, you read it and listen to it differently. You inscribe in it the difference your own language makes. Italian wrings other ideas and images from a Norwegian word than Georgian or German. An unknown Greek word will be read in another way by somebody shaped by Portuguese or by Hebrew. Inscribing difference is a slow approach towards (non-)understanding. The discovery of slowness. Where does understanding come from? What does it mean to understand? What do you stand under? Does it mean you submit? To what? Or is understanding what in German is called "Unterstand," a shelter, a refuge?

1 A translation of the present text into Norwegian by Arild Vange was published in February 2025, under the title "Forhindret sikt. Om kollektiv oversettelse," in the online literary journal *Krabben. Tidsskrift for poesikritikk*. Available at: https://www.krabbenpoesikritikk.no/arkiv/forhindret-sikt-om-kollektiv-oversettelse/. Accessed 28 Apr. 2025.

It is not necessary to not know a language for it to become foreign. In certain moments, our own language, too, our so-called mother tongue, undresses and reveals its materiality, in other words, its unfamiliarity, its strangeness. They are moments when a word suddenly reveals facets that are usually hidden by its meaning. (Why does "mean" mean "to signify" and, at the same time, "vile"?) When you understand a word, you usually do not look at it closer. It is strange to stop the chain of meaning: to look and to listen. (And then suddenly, the German "Stelle," the place, the position, evokes the Italian stars, "stelle.") To unsee, to unknow. To mishear: mother, la mer, das Meer. To stop meaning. Isn't this what happens in poetry? In poetry you are tempted to unsee meanings. To uncover difference. To detect sounds. Relations, paths between words, between languages. Ties between the words and yourself.

When you do not know the language you are about to read, a whole cosmos opens up for sound, for mishearing, for productive misunderstanding. A network of relations is created. Our own language, our own readings and experiences read along. You read what you hear. You hear what you see. What you are. You invent connections between letters, between punctuation marks. You see sound. Meaning does not come from the inside of a word or a text, it comes, to speak with Saussure, always from the side. From the side: like a gust. Sometimes it comes from the person sitting next to you. Among other people, within a group with different languages and different stories, words are heard and read differently. Reading together makes a whole difference. Everybody reads differently. Everybody understands and translates differently. It is a bodily experience because everybody experiences words in another manner. It is an experience of language becoming strange. Not only the foreign language, but also one's supposedly own language. Mother. La mer. Das Meer. Translating as an act of strangeness.

Each week, a group of different people from various countries and languages, called *Versatorium*, gathers in Vienna to experience the strangeness of language. We sit, we read, we listen. We translate Arild Vange's poems from Norwegian, from Bokmål, to be more precise: *Fjordarbeid* (Vange). A translation of fjords, a *rite de passage*. Our project description says:

> Perhaps the Norwegian word fjord is a fjord in itself, a place of passage. The word itself a rich passage. A patron saint or simply a companion for those that translate, for those who are underway, travelling and moving, trading, seeking, fleeing, thinking, for all those engaged in something that probably is not progress but transgress, an upsetting instead of setting forth. Doing

> something that does not become more and more and evermore successful, full of aftermaths. Forming instead of advancing […]. *Fjord* is more than a Norwegian word. In different shapes it belongs to many languages of the world. It can be seen in *Stratford* and *Oxford* as well as *Firth of Forth* or in *porous*. It is expressed in *afford* and *further*, in *pro* and *progress* and *form*. *Prose* is a fjord. *Ford*, *foreword* and ფიორი are fjords. Fjord can be traced back to Latin *per* (across) and *portus* (port), even to *Bosporus* right in the middle of Istanbul. And to Greek *poros*. The origin is said to be Sanskrit *pàri*. (Waterhouse, Reinstadler, and Füchsl 6)

So, we do upset fjords, and words. The language of the poems is permeated by other languages. Languages mingle: one sentence, three languages. Or four? Where are the borders between languages? Can poetry ever not be plurilingual? Can there ever be one language? How to translate an English verse inside a Norwegian poem? As the lyrical I travels through the continent, from Norway through Germany towards Vienna, the poems become more and more German. They incorporate what they hear. The last poem, with the title *(Wien: 2)*, apparently contains more German than Norwegian words. Still, we do not understand it better. "Franz / und Milena machen Urlaub / getrennt" (Vange 59). How can we trace, how can we reflect the becoming-German of a Norwegian poem with a translation into German?

We translate sonnets by four poets (Octavio Paz, Jacques Roubaud, Edoardo Sanguineti, Charles Tomlinson), written collectively in four languages. *Renga*, a Japanese chain poem. We let ourselves be guided by the sound of the sonnets, we build poems with the sound material of the words. We translate the form. We find German haikus. We sit in an old Viennese café as they were then, in the year 1969, sitting in a Paris basement, and we have fun.

We translate poems by Andrea Zanzotto. We find words that only exist in the Zanzotto cosmos: "sposa-folla" (24), "intergamie" (15), "terapizzano" and "terapizzino" (34–35). We find "case-dicibilità" (17) (and somebody suggests translating it as "Hausdruckskraft"). We find words like "indisseppellibili" (45). Seven syllables. Two negative prefixes after each other. Does a double negation make a positive? The dictionaries do not know. They know "seppellire," to bury. They know "disseppellire," to unearth. Are the silences of the poem, hence, unexcavatable, "unausgrabbar," "unentbergbar"? Do silences that are stuck beneath the earth not ensure that there is language, that there is speaking? Or is it the contrary? Do silences that nobody can dig out overshadow any attempt

of speech? There is a lot of silence in these opaque poems. And at the same time, there is a lot of light: it sparkles, it shines, it shimmers: "luccichi" (34), "scintillamento" (45), "confronti astrali" (34), "lucente" (22), "stelle" (13). There is lightning. One poem is interspersed by a plea at the margin on the right: "non abbaiare" (11). No barking! In defiance of the negation, it is the poem in which we hear it barking, it is the poem that barks.

After reading Zanzotto's poem "Silicio, Carbonio, Castellieri," which ends with the word "omertà" (18)—isn't it the law of silence?—, Peter Waterhouse, in *Language Death Night Outside*, notes:

> The poem spoke of nothing limited. The poem spoke of something illimitable. Everything in the poem was in transition. Nothing in the poem rested in itself. […] There was in the poem no move toward placement. There was in the poem a move toward replacement. (29)

Is the translation of poetry not a constant slipping away? A constant displacement, a movement toward banishment, toward exile?

You often hear that translating is about mastering a foreign language. As if language were an empire over which you could reign. As if the opposite were not true. Sometimes, to be true, to translate, it is necessary to let one's language be "violently moved" by the other language—"durch die fremde sprache gewaltig bewegen zu lassen"—as Rudolf Pannwitz (242), quoted by Walter Benjamin (20) in his essay on translation, affirms. In other words, it means to let one's own language be "expanded" and "deepened" by the foreign language. Mother, la mer, das Meer. It is beyond the idea of reigning over a language. It is beyond the idea of seaming a text together, the contrary of bridging languages. It is more about falling apart.

We translate Rosmarie Waldrop's *A Key into the Language of America* (1994). We have been translating it for years, the translation does not come to an end. We continue. We stop. We resume. It is written in English, but nobody masters English. The text is pervaded by Naragansett, a language first studied and documented in English by Roger Williams in his book *A Key into the Language of America* (1643). Waldrop, a palimpsest of Williams. We find a key, we lose it.

There is something strange about assuming that a language can be mastered. As if it were something external to us, an outside. Isn't it more accurate to say that it is the language that masters us? And what about languages that pervade a world that does not exist anymore, such as the language of Dante? *Volgare*, a language that had not yet existed in a literary form during Dante's

lifetime, the spoken language of a people that does not exist anymore. A language that still had to be forged. A language bound in a complex verse structure—*terza rima*—that was apparently invented by Dante. How can such a language be translated into German, seven hundred years after the exiled Florence poet's death?

"Lectura Dantis in 33 Gesängen" is the name of the project, initiated and accompanied by Theresia Prammer. On the occasion of the seven-hundredth anniversary of Dante's death in 1321, she invited thirty-three German-speaking poets and translators to engage with a canto from the *Commedia*. The experiment resulted in translations in the broadest sense of the word. Acts of carrying bodies. Word-bodies. Bows.

The German poet Anja Utler comments on her task as follows: "I am translating a canto from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. I do not speak Italian. Taken separately, each of these two sentences is okay. Together, they are absurd."

Indeed, it seems absurd, impossible to translate from an unknown language, when translating is bound to notions such as fidelity, or equivalence. If translating, however, means to create something on and out and of the source material, translation turns into a potential even when the material remains strange. Isn't this what Dante himself did? According to Pasolini, Dante's work is characterized by plurilingualism, a form of a Realism opposed to Literature: "Il suo plurilinguismo, le sue tecniche poetiche e narrative, erano forme di un realismo che si opponeva, ancora una volta, alla Letteratura" (1648). Wasn't it Dante's task to create a new language from the ruins of various varieties, of different dialects, daily spoken words, unwritten meanings? To create an original scheme of verses that is characterized by an incessant movement, as Dante and Vergil walk up and down and down and up, without pause, through the realms of the world beyond?

This is how *Versatorium* is found in front of the twenty-sixth canto of the *Inferno*, like being in front of a yet closed door to an unknown world. We meet every week in a park, we sit in the grass, or, when the regulations during the pandemics would allow it, in an old Viennese café. During one session, which usually takes two to three hours, we usually translate three verses. One *terza rima*. We read, we listen. It happens that we spend a whole evening around two words. We try to follow the traces of their history, to skim possible strata of relationships. We carry huge dictionaries. Latin, Italian, German. But first, we try to hear the words, the verses. We look at the letters. We try to hear the sound without sense. Those who do not know Italian, hear and see most. Those who know Italian often do not find an "Unterstand" either. Do we go under? It is not

strange that the mother becomes strange. It is not strange to lose one's tongue. The combination of not knowing and knowing, a form of understanding that can never be sure of itself, is fruitful for a translation that is not meant to stop, that seeks to trace possible movements of the text, that seeks to answer.

The grammar of Dante's *Commedia* is rough, impassable, it stumbles, it falters, just as Dante and Vergil on their passage through the inferno. The text, too, with its innumerous accents pointing to different directions, with its commas and semicolons, seems to form a pathless terrain: "la solinga via" (Inf. XXVI, 16), "unwegsamer weg." The punctuation marks that run and break through the textmesh take the shape of dense underbrush. They are stones, "scharten und zacken aus fels," that we stumble upon. The syntax is vertiginous. The text feels like falling.

In his "Conversation about Dante," Osip Mandelstam writes:

> Every word is a bundle and the meaning sticks out of it in various directions, not striving toward any one official point. When we pronounce "sun" we are, as it were, making an immense journey which has become so familiar to us that we move along in our sleep. What distinguishes poetry from automatic speech is that it rouses us and shakes us awake in the middle of a word. Then the word turns out to be far longer than we thought, and we remember that to speak means to be forever on the road. (13)

So we let ourselves be shaken. We stop at the words. We try to stumble also in German. "Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio / quando drizzo la mente a ciò ch'io vidi / e più lo 'ngegno affreno ch'i' non soglio" (Inf. XXVI, 19–21), Dante writes, as he remembers—i.e., he relives physically (in his members) what he had suffered—what he now sets out to write about. During a ghostly Viennese summer, centuries after that, it will be relived again, and it will become as follows: "damals litt ich abermals erleid ich jetzt / da ich spitz das denken auf das was ich sah / und mehr hemme die gabe ich wie ich's nicht kenne."

Before the end of our canto, Ulysses pleads to his companions not to stop, to continue the journey, despite all dangers, in defiance of death: "Considerate la vostra semenza: / fatti non foste a viver come bruti, / ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza" (Inf. XXVI, 118–20).

The word "semenza" is charged with meaning: sperm, sprout, germ, descent, parentage, origin, nature. Or "considerare": isn't there a star shining forth in the word?: "sider," "sidus": "star," "constellation." We collect variations, possibilities: "gewahrt eure saat," "kennt euren kern," "beseht euren kern,"

"gewahrt euren kern," "das mark eures seins," "den semen eures seins," "euren ursprung," "eure bestimmung," "denkt an euer sein."

The translation changes, moves, so many different versions appear, ideas, images, so that it is hard to say where a final version might come from. Also, a final version is provisionary. "The ground begins to slip. Rhythm of swallows seen from below. It is a strange truth that remains of contentment are yet another obstacle," Rosmarie Waldrop (6) writes. The version that remains on the paper, the version that is finally sent, is when no one objects anymore. Or when everybody laughs. When it seems to sound good. When it can be read aloud. When we see and hear, in the case of Dante, the text stumbling and stuttering as hell.

The translation that is passed on, at the end, is "sendung," whose combination of letters is similar to "semenza." It does not only mean "consignment," "shipment," but also "mission," "task." It combines with "geschickt," to send, to be destined. Where are Ulysses and his companions sent to? To death? And with it, at the same time, to immortality? What remains, at the end, is: "erkennt eure sendung / ihr seid nicht geschickt zu leben als köter / sondern auszufahren um ehre und kenntnis."

Staying on the road, passing the impassable, the open sea, in order to know is what differentiates the human core from pure animality. "bruti" turned into "köter," an old, pejorative word for an ugly, neglected dog. A stray dog. We found the dog—"canis," "cane"—in "canoscenza," the word Dante uses instead of "conoscenza." To maintain "per" we decided for "auszufahren," since it suggests a movement, a crossing, an expansion. A fjord.

At the end of the canto, there is drowning. It is no longer possible to say where is up, where is down. You do not know any longer where the light comes from: "lo lume era di sotto da la luna / poi che 'ntrati eravam ne l'alto passo" (Inf. XXVI, 131–32). We write: "das licht unterseits der leuchte war / da wir eingegangen waren die über setzung"—"Alto passo": a deep pass, a high pass. A passage into the unknown. "Alto passo" reminds of "alto mare," the deep sea, the high seas. La mer. There is no more difference between above and below, between deep and high. To translate means to err, to no longer know where the occident is, which way is up and which way is down. Translating is not, as it has been said, a crossing of a river, it is a journey "per l'alto mare aperto" (Inf. XXVI, 100), durch die hohe, die offene see. It means to drown.

"Il trapassar del segno" (Par. XXVI, 117), the transgressing, the piercing (with the eyes: to see), the penetrating and permeating of the sign is the cause of "tanto essilio" (Par. XXVI, 116), exile, death, as it says in the *Paradiso*.

Traduttore, traditore. This is the echo of the translator's purgatory. You know that translation is always betrayal. The question, however, is: who is being betrayed? It is not the source text, it is not the other, the author who is going to be betrayed. It is oneself. The mother. La mer. You betray your own language, yourself, by deepening it—violently?—by means of the other language, by the strange world created by somebody who did indeed live a different life. The translation betrays, it strays. Translation, a stray dog. We Danteize the German language until it is hardly recognizable. The language of translation remains "gewaltig und fremd," says Benjamin (15), "tremendous and strange." Perhaps such an alienating translation that lets the target language turn into something strange is the most faithful, canine translation—betray, be true—because it means to give oneself over to the other, the mother, moving oneself violently, allowing oneself to be led astray.

What is a collective translation? It does not mean that everybody makes a suggestion and then it is decided whose version to take. There would not be a suggestion without the others. The others are the condition for a suggestion to be made. But at the end, when there is a result, a final translation, there is no individuality anymore, no authorship. It is a ship that goes under. It merges, it disappears with the others. During the process, during translating, individuality is necessary, essential. Then it is about letting it go. A singular reflection, a reading leads to the next, one association leads to another, until it is no longer distinguishable who said what, who found what. It does not matter either. There is no beginning, there is no end. There is no translation without all these ideas and readings and interpretations, all of them valid in themselves. Without all these other eyes and ears that hear and see all differently. A collective translation is a conglomeration of all these eyes and ears and in-betweens. At the end, there is a text in a language that did not exist before, a mingling of views, of readings. The translation is a life whose future is yet to realize itself, it is future that is to become: "infuturarsi," to "infuture oneself," as it says in Canto XVII of the *Paradiso*. The translation is, as Benjamin writes, a form of "survival," an "afterlife" (10–11). "Überleben": it surpasses life, it goes beyond mere life. Meerleben. Translation is a form of infuturization of the original.

A translating collective collects words, insights, surprises. A surprise is literally an overtake, something that grasps you. A collective is a space that is open for the unexpected. For something that had not been looked at or looked out for before. Should we rather say, it is open for the strange(r), the unseen, the unforeseeable? Perhaps, to translate together from various languages and times, from continents and words that shall never be reigned over, means to evoke the

untranslatable, which is to be defined, with Barbara Cassin, as "what one keeps on (not) translating" (xvii).

It is what keeps us going. It is what does not stop moving us. We stop only to move in a different direction. It is what leads us astray. To read is to err. And the untranslatable is what keeps us straying, stumbling, stammering, wandering, wondering.

"Wir gehen so lala," Franz Kafka (12) writes in his "Contemplation." We go just so-so? It serves as a motto for *Versatorium*. Like a huge flag it waves white above the door of our Viennese premises, in black Georgian letters.

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