Homophonics & Self-Translation

Cole Swensen

Paris / Providence
Brown University

No translation is entirely non-homophonic, and the closer a text is to art along an art-to-information continuum, the more important a role homophonics is likely to play. This is not only completely appropriate, but absolutely crucial to maintaining the character of an artistic text, which by definition requires dimensions other than the semantic. In fact, one definition of poetics might be "everything that disrupts the ideal of a perfect equation between word and meaning". That kind of semantic immediacy is, probably fortunately, an unattainable ideal; even the most informational text cannot completely avoid the materiality of its medium, including the augmentative and distracting fact of sound relationships, which occur in any text, intended or not. Given that, a translation of an art text—i.e., a text-based work of art or a text written with the intention of creating a work of art—that doesn't take the homophonic dimension into account is stripping out aesthetic content—the exact stuff that makes it art rather than information.

And it happens all the time—not because translators are insensitive to the issue, but because contemporary global culture is—and has been for centuries—strongly biased toward information, and this bias is so embedded that we are all, for the most part, unaware of it. We don't question it. To change what a person says is seen as a form of perjury, a kind of violence done to the writer's mind and character, but to change *the way* someone has said something is seen as changing but a surface detail; it's the what that counts, not the way. But with writing that falls toward the 'art' end of the continuum, the *way* is a *what* of equal weight.

This embedded bias has a specific function; it protects information at the expense of aesthetics, but above all, it protects information *from* aesthetics, which is always in danger of compromising it through distracting enrichments (assonance, alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, parallelism, anaphora, and countless other rhetorical devices), as well as from tangling ambiguities, and other obfuscating tendencies. The largely

undiscussed warrant underlying this bias is that information is a tradable commodity while aesthetic elements are not—which is, of course, not entirely true, as the multi-billion-dollar advertising industry amply proves, but the prejudice for information over aesthetics, often expressed in terms of 'clarity' or 'directness', remains insidiously dominant, and translators, even of poetry that is clearly highly dependent on sound relationships, fall prey to this bias.

That said, the tradition of the ghastly translation that performs absurdist acrobatics in order to retain metric and rhyme schemes is all too familiar, but translators only launch into such gyrations precisely because they do not feel that they have the license, the permission, to compromise the semantic content as they would—and routinely do—comprise sound.

Homophonic translations model an alternative politic—by reversing the poles and privileging aesthetics over information, they foreground the value of experience, i.e. the immediate, present, and non-transferable experience of a text, and by contrast make apparent the fact that the transferable nature of informational language entails a process of alienation in which language users, both writers and readers, are sent off down a chain of endless deferrals.

While, because of prevailing prejudices, giving sound equal privilege in translation can be difficult in practice, self-translation can offer a kind of laboratory for exploring the possibilities because an author is considered to have the right to alter the original whereas a translator doesn't; making them one and the same eliminates the problem. The practice of self-translation, in a sense, liberates the translator-writer from translation itself, showing it in the light of a constraint; it breaks down the barriers within translation, such as that between sound and sense, and by doing so, highlights the fact that it's translation that creates these barriers in the first place, subdividing a text in ways that don't exist for the writer. By exploring these inner divisions, the writer-translator can seek ways to overcome them that may then aid him or her when translating the work of other people. The self-translations below follow sound as much or more than sense; balance was a constant consideration, with hopes that the whole, though deviating from the original, would nonetheless reflect it accurately.

> Trees with leaves green backed by silver. Turning wherever the light, what small Light, is taken in. Tree with light painted on. Then tree with points of dark which Are birds or fruit that slowly build up into a night.

> Feuilles d'arbres, leurs dos d'argent. Feuilles tournantes partout où le jour, ce jour Épars, est entrainé. Arbre avec le jour sur dessiné. Puis arbre avec taches noires Qui sont des oiseaux ou des fruits qui peu à peu édifient une nuit.

♦

Pale bond. Grain runs. Embarks upon. It's mostly rain and we pass on. Past a Tossing road through a stand of hay. Stand among graves. Stand trees in line Migrating through rain, the rain first a green and then a form.

Lien pâle. Les champs coulent. S'embarquent dans. C'est toute pluie et Nous passons. On passe d'une route turbulente, roulant entre des meules De foin. Migration d'arbres en ligne, une ligne de fuite, qui fuit en troupeau Sous la pluie, la pluie en premier un vert et puis une forme.



White flock over the field just set. In a scattering flood. Over the field just Horses on all sides and two white horses walk the silence in half. Against A sky oddly sifted, and later pass. Down a lane that curves and then comes Across.

Envol blanche au-dessus des champs. Dans un éclat parsemé. Au-delà d'un Pré : que des chevaux de tous côtés et deux chevaux blancs arpentent le Silence en deux. À contre-jour par un ciel écarté. La longueur d'un chemin Qui courbe et puis s'écarte pour de vrai.