

## LANGUE-IN-CHEEK

*reading & writing between the lines*

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Of course this supplement remains incomplete;  
there are literally no bounds to the English language.  
—W.W. Skeat, *Etymological Dictionary*

I've been thinking quite a lot lately about the wrong music. About what happens when you put on a piece of music and then it turns out not to be what you want to hear. You thought it was but it isn't. So you stop it and try something else, trying to match your sense of what you want to listen to with the reality of what you are going to be hearing. Sometimes it simply doesn't work at all, nothing fits. You're trying to translate your sense of your self at a certain moment into a correlative (and encompassing) imagined musical experience, something that will fit with your state of mind, your emotional state, your mood, the rhythm of your thinking—or you may be wanting to be changed by the music, to be lifted out of a state of morose indifference by Schubert or Don Cherry or The Dixie Chicks—but in each case the attempt fails. I think this must be a common experience these days, but nobody seems to write about it. I've been thinking about it because it involves bridging invisible gaps, of a quite everyday sort, like the gap between what you are and what you want to be, what you feel and what you want to feel, where you are and where you'd rather not be—that sort of thing. And I wondered—and this

brings me to the matter of translation and the work of Clive Scott—whether poetry and translation might have anything to say about these invisible gaps.

After all, every poem contains materials taken from the object world. They may be scenes, places, phrases, things, concepts, dispositions or events, but whatever they are they are taken in, incorporated, into the poem's own idiopathic thought-syntax, which in turn becomes part of the psychic space and psychic organisation of the reader. Sometimes this material is another poem, or sometimes it may be part or fragments of another poem. This may make the poem a translation, but it doesn't necessarily make it one. Whether that makes a difference is the question I want to use as a starting-point today.

Clive has written about 'a reading which imagines text into existence even as it reads':<sup>1</sup> I want to think about what happens when I read a poem which is based in an act of translation which imagines text out of one existence and into another even as it writes. Not so much translating a poem as translating the reading performance of a poem into the world of another poem. The source text here is more than a source and less than a text, or maybe the other way round, more than a text and less than a source. Or maybe neither. Maybe just a resource, or a resurgence, even an insurgence. At all events, it raises the question of what survives of the poem's sources and what has to be destroyed, both in the writing and the reading.

We might suppose that any act of reading a poem harms it: intentionally, or unintentionally, we wound, disfigure, or deface the poem as we read it because we hallucinate our sense of its sense. As Winnicott puts it in another context, 'The fact is that an external object has no being for you or me except in so far as you or I hallucinate it, but being sane we take care not to hallucinate except where we

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<sup>1</sup> Clive Scott, *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 31

know what to see.<sup>2</sup> Commenting on this in one of his essays, John Wilkinson suggests that ‘Winnicott went on to worry about this “we”, how hallucinating where we know what to see begs the question of the socialising construction of *how* we know what to see—I would say further, how the hallucinated seen can be instated as a real, bound hybridity, the social object, part-object, the spoken and written, the seen and the touched, the theorized and felt, the accepted and held at arm’s length.’<sup>3</sup> All of which might apply, figuratively at least, to the process of making a readable poem out of a hallucinated reading of another poem and its place in the world. Earlier in the same essay Wilkinson introduces Winnicott’s distinction between object-relating and object-use, a distinction which relies on a recognition of the world as always-already there, and allows space for its existence via its fantasy-destruction. This was sweetly set out by Winnicott in the following sequence, which Wilkinson doesn’t quote, and which I now want to hallucinate into a dialogue between source text and created text:

‘The subject says to the object: “I destroyed you”, and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says: “Hullo object!” “I destroyed you.” “I love you.” “You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you.” “While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) fantasy.” Here fantasy begins for the individual. The subject can now use the object that survives.’<sup>4</sup>

The created text into which the destroyed object creatively survives in this instance—that is, the text I want to talk about today—is called *Letters from Sarah*, and it is by that most stylish and extraordinary of British lyric poets, John James. It appeared in book form in 1973, collecting together a sequence of sixteen poems

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<sup>2</sup> D. W. Winnicott, ‘The Fate of the Transitional Object’ [1959], in D.W. Winnicott, Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, Madeline Davis (eds.), *Psycho-analytic Explorations* (Karnac, 1989), pp. 53-8, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> John Wilkinson, ‘Following the Poem’, in *The Lyric Touch: essays on the poetry of excess* (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), pp. 189-211, p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> D.W. Winnicott, ‘On “The Use of an Object”; I: The Use of an Object and Relating through Identifications’, in Winnicott *et al*, *Psycho-analytic Explorations*, pp. 218-227, p. 222.

most of which had appeared disparately in little magazines three or four years earlier.<sup>5</sup> When I first read them, in 1969, I was struck by a number of qualities they possessed: a tone of panache and self-confidence tinged with self-aware diffidence, a discursive restraint that went along with an expansiveness of gesture, a technical mastery of phrase and disjunction which I could never satisfactorily emulate, a sense of the domestic and the exotic in the same space, and perhaps most of all, a feeling of enormous space and distance in the psychic landscapes the poems conjured into being. I was not immediately aware, though, that the poems were translations. At some point I was told that they were, and that the ‘Sarah’ of the title, *Letters from Sarah*, was in fact Tristan Tzara. I was immensely taken with the idea that this kind of transmutation was possible, but I’m not sure whether it altered my reading of the poems, although it undeniably gave them a new kind of relationality. But. I let almost forty years go by before thinking about what to do for this paper prompted me to look more closely at the relation between the English poems and their French originals.

As it turned out, finding the original texts was not easy, but after some days intensive reading and re-reading I was able to make a fairly exhaustive list of what in *Letters from Sarah* derived from what Tzara originals. But mostly what this left me with, apart from a mild feeling of satisfaction, was a list of new questions: What did this knowledge add to my reading of the poems? What difference does it make to re-insert the originals into my reading experience? Is it useful to think of Tzara’s texts as lying *behind* my first reading (and is *behind* the right preposition?)? Then did the poems start out as entire translations, or did the originals provide fragmentary

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<sup>5</sup> John James, *Letters from Sarah*, with drawings by Philip Crozier (Cambridge: Street Editions, 1973). See also John James, *Collected Poems* (Cambridge: Salt, 2002), pp. 87-104. The original first poem of *Letters from Sarah* (1) appeared in *Collection 5*, 1969. It was a reasonably exact and complete version of ‘La grande complainte de mon obscurité trois’ [Henri Béhar (ed.), Tristan Tzara, *Poésies Complètes* (Flammarion, 2011), p. 135], and was not republished. (Other poems were not changed between magazine publication and the book: they appeared as follows: 2 & 8: *Curiously Strong* II/5; 3, 9, 15 & 16 in *Curiously Strong* II/10; others in *Collection 7*: all in 1969.) The sequence was first published as an integral collection, in a German translation by Rolf Eckart John, as the second issue of John’s magazine *Der Fröhliche Tarzan* (Köln, 1971), with illustrations by Thomas Hornemann.

materials for the poems? Say you read a poem, and then decide you want to translate it: what are you translating? What if the poem is in a language you only imperfectly comprehend? What if your reading of the poem is not just personal, but partial, fragmentary or even largely mistaken? What are the implications of this for the way you use the material in your own poem? Does it matter? Or what if you decided that an original translation needed expansion or rewriting? Or alteration? Or adaptation? How far do you need to be aware of the true extent of your betrayal of the original text? Is there, indeed, ever an original text? Or is there only an original process of reading, a moment of attention beside other moments of attention to different orders of things?

I should say something at this point about the use John James makes of the Tzara poems, as they are not straightforward translations, although they may possibly have begun life as such. The first *Letters from Sarah* poem in fact was a straight, line for line, translation, but it was excluded from the book. All the others have more tenuous connections with the French. The best way to show what I mean is to take a couple of examples:

(Some poems in the sequence relate directly to source poems by Tzara, or to parts of them: others draw constituent elements from two or more sources; but since the source texts are not the only source of material, this is not of primary importance: see *Appendix I*.)

The first example is an extract, the last three lines of a poem, some of whose earlier content is taken from elsewhere:

there are shafts under the mountains  
& my lungs are wakeful as a trainload of Tottenham supporters  
midgets for beer and madness

It's clear that this isn't conventional translation. Look at what's left out,  
first, and what's put in:  
le football dans le poumon  
casse les vitres (insomnie)

dans le puits on fait bouillir les nains  
pour le vin et la folie  
picabia arp ribemont-dessaigues  
bonjour<sup>6</sup>

The 'shafts under the mountain' comes from somewhere else entirely; the football suggests Tottenham supporters, 'insomnie' makes them wakeful, the 'nains' are turned into a confectioned metaphorical phrase, and the wine is turned into beer.

Now the second example:

8.  
the fever & obscurity of our organisms  
the matchless flowers of

in the snow of the interior

only touch me  
& I'm brittle as a snailshell  
at the edge of this broad white country  
all colourless wind and poplars

who gives a damn anyway  
drooly girls with blue umbrellas  
are bombing along the slide

drops of ink the flowery envelope

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### **Danse caoutchouc verre**

maladie obscurité fleurir en allumettes dans nos organismes  
geler

moi touche-moi  
touche-moi seulement

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<sup>6</sup> from 'Cinéma calendrier du coeur abstrait maisons' (21) in Tzara, *Poésies complètes*, p. 160

escargot monte sur axe pays blanc

vent veut  
incolore  
veut veut  
trembles  
veut  
qui qui oui veut

monsieur  
tzacatzac  
parasol  
casse casse  
glace glisse  
monsieur

monsieur  
noix d'encre fait un bruit la fleur-timbre-poste<sup>7</sup>

Both are complete poems, the first few words of the translation correspond to the source text, but almost at once different transformations come into view; ‘fleurir en allumettes’ becomes ‘the matchless flowers of’, and the self-referential sound-play of ‘tzacatzac | parasol | casse casse | glace glisse’ is absorbed into the adjective ‘drooly’ and its semantic content into the vision of ‘girls with blue umbrellas | bombing along the slide’. The word ‘trembles’ has suggested ‘poplars’, via the propensity of their leaves to shimmer, and so on. Another change is prosodic: Tzara’s short lines have disappeared into a more expansive syntax, and in a parallel move, the disparate objects of Tzara’s Dadaistic curation have been set within elements of a landscape. Finally, and more important than either of those changes, there is the incorporation of forms of personal disposition in exclamations, confessions, desires, and other personal utterances. This becomes increasingly important when the poems are read in sequence and the operations of voice accrete new force and emotional density, without being aligned into a single biographical or autobiographical entity. The use of the source texts seems to be an

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143

aid to the expression of subjective or interior states without the need for any continuous personal presence to give them narrative coherence. We are therefore in a world of relative abstraction, characteristically poised between local concrete detail and broad abstraction: ‘steam is rising soothingly | around the glass of this continual departure’, say; or, ‘The ferns are seeding the plains of my destiny | snowing under certain pieces of reckless foolishness’.

This draws my attention to contemplate the laminated verbal spaces of the poems, and the psychic work they construct, their mental space, their imagination-space. So I turn to a poem, the second in the sequence. I read the first line,

at the frontier we gave ’em a lot of madam

and pause. It’s an odd and (I think) outdated phrase, to give a person madam, or some madam. It means to flatter, to offer a made-up story or explanation, but it is not just out of place because of its oddness: it’s further dislocated here by its location ‘at the frontier’. The first poem in the sequence has already mentioned ‘your passport’, the ‘bridge’, ‘leaving’ and has constructed an atmosphere of menace, drawing on a non-specific narrative which will recur frequently in the poems, though more as a structural device than as any kind of actual story. Now here we are at the frontier, between one country and another, between perhaps one language and another:

at the frontier we gave ’em a lot of madam  
before accelerating away  
to an accompaniment of whistle-blasts  
into the forest a breather under the beeches  
our hands & faces black with ink  
the roe deer were eating nuts or something<sup>8</sup>

The prose syntax and semantically-conformative line-endings depict an escape, but it’s an escape into a different prosody when in line four the phrase ‘a breather under the beeches’ comes in with no punctuation, elliptically, ambiguously,

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<sup>8</sup> *Letters from Sarah*, 2

tempting the ear with its vocalic echo, and soothing the forward movement as it opens out into the quiet woodland. But almost at once we are returned to the material text with the ink on ‘our hands & faces’, and to a more insouciant tone in ‘the roedeer were eating nuts or something’. Knowing that there is an act of translation involved in the writing gives this last phrase an additional resonance, a casual ‘I can’t be bothered to look it up in a dictionary’ sort of ring, somewhere between an uncertainty we might experience in reality and a meta-discursive commentary.

If we look at the opening lines of the poem from which this poem derives, we can see where some of the stuff comes from, but two things stand out: one, the frontier is moved to the beginning; and two, the connections work quite differently.

madame prit le galop  
coup de sifflet à la frontière  
propre simple âme sténographiée  
accompagne les rares collections d’assassinats à entrée libre  
sous la table et dans la noix  
chevreuil  
cherchons le poumon trempé d’encre noire<sup>9</sup>

I want to make more of this word ‘frontier’, this boundary between lands and languages, this gap between texts, this limit of powers or extent of what its rulers regard as civilisation. A frontier is dangerous, it’s an edge, a border, a line, and its guards might well need to be placated and accelerated away from. Especially if, like these poems, you’re in disguise. Some translations might claim dual nationality, but it is more as though these ones are engaged in smuggling, and as such seem from time to time extravagantly, even swaggeringly, limited by their native tongue.

our new secretary is a simple creature & is going out  
with a right collection of villains free of charge<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Tzara, *Poésies complètes*, p. 172 (‘Mauvais desirs clé du vertige Arp Hypoglose’)

<sup>10</sup> *Letters from Sarah*, 2

(two lines, incidentally, with no correlative originals in the French, so far as I can see). And then, in addition, there is an irony in the handling of these smuggled goods that sets up boundaries and frontiers within tones of voice and kinds of personal utterance.

The idea of frontiers may help us read the structures of these poems. What do the frontiers hold back, or what do they keep in? What is exchanged across them? Are there interiors and exteriors, rather than a continuous subjectivity? What happens in their margins? What do they frame? What are we attending to, and what are we allowing ourselves to be distracted by? ‘Marches’, that old word for frontier territories, comes from the same root as ‘margin’; they both derive from ‘mark’, a word of complex etymology meaning both boundary and field. Boundaries and frontiers between languages are porous in different ways, can be crossed in different ways, semantically, acoustically, associatively, rhythmically; one of the great achievements of *Letters from Sarah* is to not only construct poems out of these boundaries but to make boundaries and breaks and gaps central to the poems’ syntax. The conceptual parataxis that results from this enables the voice of the poems to be, and to inhabit, an *array* of circumstances rather than a single self, and this means we can read a fuller variety of prior stimuli into the forms taken by consciousness. The gaps and shifts in the poems, sometimes sutured with a conjunction or an ampersand, but equally often unmarked, or marked by a line break, also create distances of tone, and wit, sometimes humour or irony, which provide different angles and perspectives from which to consider the stance of the poem. Sometimes this works by unexpected words, as in the line ‘& when I dash into the chasm for my medicine’<sup>11</sup> or ‘the dark roads soften to cheese’,<sup>12</sup> but there is nothing that sounds like a translation. Yet there is unmistakably a sense in the poems of being away from home, over a frontier, in hotels, in the interior, in ‘this broad white country’, ‘under this resonant ceiling’, ‘on the other balcony’, or in a host of other locations and dislocations. After each break my reading of the poem

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

has to reorient itself to take account of another perspective or point of view, another pronoun or another emotional state. Even when the poem feels most familiar, it is liable to reveal another edge or a corner, a margin from which imagined moments arise to colour its reception in my imagination. And trying to keep the French source texts in mind keeps the boundaries of my attention moving too, unsettling the English despite the fact that these poems very satisfactorily and rewardingly delight the whole of my attention when I read them.

This is something to do with the experience of reading these poems knowing them to be in some sense translations. And it may be something to do with the fact that these poems, like many of John James's poems, owe their success to a generous capacity for embodying attentiveness. I am not the first to point out that at several points in his writings he repeats, in one form or another, a couple of lines that go:

& I haven't a thought in my head that could  
sound like a line of Hölderlin<sup>13</sup>

and the attentiveness his poems creates is very much to do with his sense of thought as line. These poems are more *bricolage* and opportunism than anything usually designated by the term translation; yet they constitute a serious act of homage to Tzara's liberating influence, and it's their lines that enable the frontier to be crossed and a new landscape to be constructed.

The act of translation is also quietly echoed throughout the book in occasional lines which work as glosses from some reflecting interior consciousness, as in 'my mistakes are clear to me'<sup>14</sup> or 'but come, let's avoid the particular by invention'<sup>15</sup>—glosses, we remember, originally being words inserted between the lines or in the margin as a comment, explanation, or interpretation; but also we might say as attractive surfaces, distracting us from the work of the tongue itself, whether as speech or language:

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<sup>13</sup> 'Rough', for Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, in *Collected Poems*, p. 114

<sup>14</sup> *Letters from Sarah*, 4

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

does he put out his language  
or is he soothed by a star  
as he tears out his tongue  
in the last part of winter<sup>16</sup>

This curious quatrain appears in the eleventh poem, plangent and striking a note of its own in the book. The ambiguous resonances of putting out one's language are very concretely answered by tearing out one's tongue. Translations put out the source language, and it might well feel put out by that; but in a curious way they also put it in, and the tonal thickening this can provide the poem with becomes a way of enriching its tonal and linguistic resources. *Letters from Sarah* tears up Tzara's tongue, translates it disrespectfully, playfully, but very much in the spirit in which Tzara's tongue wrote. John James manages to keep a curiously detached sense of playful irony in what are at heart serious poems, and their tones of voice, their lines and their command of speech are all a product of an ability to keep another tongue in his cheek, and then to plant it in his readers' minds.

#### APPENDIX I

Sources for the poems in *Letters from Sarah*, where found (page references are to Tristan Tzara, *Poésies complètes*, ed. Henri Béhar (Paris" Flammarion, 2011).

1. La grande complainte de mon obscurité deux (p. 124)
2. Mauvais desirs clé du vertige Arp Hypoglose (p. 172)
3. Printemps (p. 138)
4. Cinéma calendrier 14 (p. 158)
5. Verre traverser paisible (p. 126)
6. Le géant blanc lépreux du paysage (p. 119)
7. Cinéma calendrier 2; 21 (pp. 155, 160)
8. Danse caoutchouc verre (p. 143)

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*,11

9. La grande plainte de mon obscurité (p. 122)
10. Moi touche-moi touche-moi seulement (p. 142) (*fragments*)
11. Instant note frère (p. 149)
12. Amer aile soir (p. 139)
13. Le sel et le vin (p. 151)
14. Remarques (p. 150)
15. *not found*
16. *not found*