

Nell REGAN

First a confession, or an admission even: I love translating poetry. I love it because you have to bring all your poetic muscle to bear but are not facing into a blank page or screen. I love it because you are learning your craft from the inside out in trying to enter into the imagination and language of another writer and intimately follow their each move. I love it because, in the words of one whom I cannot recall, you are building a cathedral for the voice of the poem.

I love reading poetry translated into English. I love it because it carries something into the language that is fresh, that is unexpected, and although great poetry makes us see the world anew, there is often, in translated work, a specific syntactical surprise, a landscape and a sensibility hitherto unexplored in English so it becomes an infusion or transfusion into the language. I love it because however hard we try there are concerns and voices within national literatures that we all must tire of. I love it because it is like travelling, and provides a deep renewal in language.

I sought several paths into this paper. One way was through the words that have no direct equivalent translation (into English in this instance) and the light they shine on the emotional, political and physical landscape where a language is formed.

How there is no direct translation in English for the Vietnamese word *xanh* because it is used for both blue and green. Something could be *xanh* like the leaves or *xanh* like the sky because blue and green have traditionally been seen as a continuum in many languages.

How there is no direct English translation for the Irish word *dinnseanachas*, which means lore of place and has also come to mean how the place and the writer influence each other. Although the word *topography* comes near, it does not carry the shades, the depths of meaning of the Irish word and its centrality to the culture and literature.

When I asked my wonderful IWP colleagues for more examples of similar words, they came out of the ether like popcorn popping. Two of most illuminating politically are the Chinese 下乡 or *xia xiang*, meaning to travel from the city to the countryside in order to be re-educated and, from the Urdu *fitnabaz*, or one who spreads sedition in the land.

How German has a series of words with no direct correlation in English that are extraordinary in their emotional specificity and shades of largely negative feelings. A good example is *schadenfreude*, or the pleasure derived from the misfortunes of others, which has actually been imported into English. Interesting to discover that its antonym, the Sanskrit word and Buddhist concept *mudita*, meaning the pleasure that comes from delighting in other people's well-being, has no single word translation in English, either. I was walking on Clinton St. one evening, in conversation with a group of writers on traditional IWP topics such as the place to find the cheapest beer, how to use the washing machine and the legal perils of crossing the street in America, when the talk turned to language and translation. Jeremy Tiang introduced the extraordinary German word *schwellenangst*, which in English means fear of crossing thresholds. I am left unsure as to which is the more fascinating; the fact that a culture has a specific word for this concept or the word itself, which pervades the imagination thoroughly.

If it is true you cannot conceive of what you cannot perceive, and a word does not exist in a language, then here we are, bumping up against the limits of translation. Like the other week when, in the humid Iowan heat, in the garden of Martini's, I was proudly showing my newly purchased collection of classic Chinese poems translated by Kenneth Rexroth to the table. Yueran Zhang started to leaf through it and laugh, and then laugh some more; she stretched over to show Dorothy Tse, who also began to laugh uncontrollably as they turned each successive page, stretching over the table to each other and pointing at even more

hilarious pages. *No* they shook their heads *no, no no* and recited off by heart several of the poems. The text, even by this acclaimed translator, falling so far short of the music and complexity of the Chinese original.

As a way of exploring these challenges inherent in the translation process, I wondered if the dictionary might provide further signposts and went to look at the etymology of the verb itself, to translate. It seems appropriate to discover that it actually comes from another language, from the Latin *translatus*, meaning carried or borne over. It made its first appearance in English in the 1300s, but the first appearance of the meaning with which we are concerned, to turn from one language to another, doesn't appear until the mid-1400s. I like these roots of the word, I like how they sound, I like their physicality and the idea of bearing or carrying over a poem or play or a story from one language to another. Then, like a dropped coin something catches my eye and leads me onto the other path I sought.

I read how the Latin word *transferre*, the origin of *translate*, actually replaced an earlier Old English word *awenden* which also meant to turn, to direct, and I am back in the stalls of Abbey Theatre, Dublin watching *Translations* by Brian Friel, set in 1832. How the Irish characters in the play spoke Latin, Greek and sometimes French as well as Gaelic but no English: how they were bemused that the English soldiers spoke only English. How, in the 1830s, as the British army surveyed and mapped Ireland for the first time, the place names with all their lore, their stories, their *dinnseanachas* were transformed into odd-sounding English names and recorded as such. How these names, which English can get its tongue around, have no meaning in themselves. So *Baile Beag*, literally the small town, becomes Ballybeg, just as where I live in Dublin, *Gleann na gCaorach*, the glen of the sheep becomes Glenageary; *Chill Iníon Léinín*, the church of the daughters' of Lennon becomes Killiney; *Deilg Inis* the isle of thorns, becomes Dalkey. How on stage, a love scene is played out between an English soldier and an Irish woman with no common language *except* these place names, which they exchange as intimacies. How the soldier speaks the place names of Norfolk in England, names with a history and a language just as rich as the Irish names but how their *dinnseanachas* was overlaid by an earlier Roman invasion and influence, just as Irish culture is being overlaid by English in the play. How this process of replacement, of colonisation by one dominant language of another is not a new thing, how translation is not always a neutral act and how this is built into the word itself—*translate*, with the displaced ghost of *awenden* behind it.
