

TRANSLATION IMPOSSIBLE

by Khaled Mattawa

Some readers will recall the controversial Polish-American novelist Jerzy Kosinski, author of the National Book Award-winning novel *Steps*, the equally troubling novel *Being There*, which was made into an excellent film starring Peter Sellers, and the harrowing debut work *The Painted Bird*. The young Kosinski and his parents survived the Holocaust due to the cunning of his father and the generosity and bravery of fellow Polish nationals. Kosinski migrated to the United States in 1957 while his parents stayed in Poland. He tells the story of telephone conversations he had with his father, who was a classicist, and how the two of them tried to talk in Latin in order to confuse the likely censors listening in. As they spoke they heard clicks and chirps, signs of the authorities eavesdropping on their conversations. Then one day, the operator barged in and declared, "This call must be terminated. You are speaking in a language that is not recognized by the United Nations!"

The amusing thing about the Kosinski anecdote is also what is frightening about it. One can imagine a scene in a film showing the translators' corps working for the Polish secret police calling on each other, those on duty and those off, or others on vacation, trying to find someone who specializes in this strange language—all the languages recognized by the United Nations. It's a special joy to see those in power befuddled by the things they're supposed to have mastered. In the end the Polish secret police ended the Kosinskis' conversations because they could not filter them. Like all smart customs regulators trying to catch smugglers, they have to let some things get through if they are ever going to catch the big one. But what happens when they cannot see or understand what they are certain is passing before them? That's when they step in and stop the traffic altogether.

Let me turn to another extreme example that involves another translation of invasive languages. The anti-terror apparatuses in the Pentagon and the CIA/NSA have a dream of doing away with their native language experts (their middle men) and replacing them with translation machines that will render speech accurately, without bias or mediation. They have set up phone interceptors to monitor telephone calls from all over the world, specifi-

cally to listen for terrorist language. They have given their machines certain words in Arabic, such as "Jihad" and "the Great Satan" to catch potential plotters. This is what America is listening for. How many terrorists/Jihadis ever mention Jihad in their phone conversation? I don't know.

The point about these two cases is that translation constantly rubs against our notions of Utopia. One of these versions involves a translator who provides information so perfectly that we are overjoyed by the transparency and happy union of languages. In this dream two languages come together and the intervening translator is supposed to dissolve. People want this to happen in translation so much that even those who do not understand a language are often willing to correct or question the translator. That's what happens when you translate faithfully and well. People want to shove you aside and speak to each other directly! But a translator or translation is not like a judge or minister presiding over a marriage whom everyone forgets after the wedding. Translation sticks around, as a problem as well as a boon, and makes us conscious of the misfit in our presence.

There's also the utopian vision that Walter Benjamin suggested in his essay "The Task of the Translator." Benjamin preferred that translation be literal, and in that way imperfect, so that it points to an ideal of poetry that exists beyond both the original and translated version. It should try to capture "an idea in the mind of God," he wrote, an idea that we can't reach in our own language, and that no language and no poetry can express. Translation, according to Benjamin's suggestion, should make us realize that we have been engaged in a kind of suspension of disbelief as to our poetic inadequacy. He wanted translation to lead us to the ruins of a linguistic utopia, to Babel before the tower was built and when all human beings had one language. He also meant for translation in this manner to make us imagine an afterlife where an ideal of beauty and transparency dominates.

Is translation possible? I do not like the verb "is" in this question, nor do I like the adjective "possible." I feel that the question posed before us is ontological. Is this a chair? Yes, it is a chair. That's not a good question. Let's

try again: A stuffed tiger and a living tiger are both tigers; the active verbs tell us which of them lives and which merely exists. To try to harness the living noun of translation with a verb like “is” will only strangle it. Translation never *is*, translation *happens*. And if an adjective is needed, the first I can think of here is “inevitable.”

So if translation is inevitable, how do you deal with it? The Polish secret police’s answer is one way. In Libya when the Qaddafi regime was in power and noted some suspicious activity, it kept only the landlines open, and only foreign-language phone calls that the government could translate were allowed to continue. During the uprising that brought down the regime, it shut down the mobile phone network altogether, which was very difficult to do since even their own agents needed cell phones. Such limitations are not practical in America where the phone lines need to be open for the system to work. The CIA/NSA’s solution to the chaos that translation causes is another utopian vision of sorts, an electronic Tower of Babel that intercepts and translates all the foreign language calls coming through.

The CIA/NSA phone intelligence system and their dream of total comprehension are an extreme example, but the point is that the act of trawling, to fish out what

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we expect to hear, is not limited to governments. And the issue is not limited to catching the so-called bad apples. Only yesterday, a fellow poet and I wondered why two of the best-selling poets in America are an Arab and a Persian (Khalil Gibran and Rumi). We wondered also why two of the best-selling novels in recent years are by an Afghani. What are we listening for when we read/translate works by authors from lands and cultures sometimes considered as enemies?

Is translation possible? Translation will happen, but what do we do when what comes before us defies our expectations, as with Kosinski’s Latin? In what sense do we set up magnets to seek out certain vibrations, tones, phrases from those speaking other languages? In what way does translation exclude, and what does it carelessly include? More than any other kind of exchange, translation seems to me the route through which vital cultural goods are exchanged—in fact, where sometimes cultural goods flee into another language so that they are protected. Indeed, languages can serve as preservatives for cultural products beyond their timely currency, or what Benjamin called an afterlife. There is a whole body of Moroccan literature that is preserved in English now—I’m referring to Paul Bowles’s work—that does not exist in Arabic. There are endless ethnographic ac-



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counts of thousands of people speaking other languages preserved in European languages. There are the forced confessions of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo too. I have a feeling that the translations exist, but the more genuine originals are deeper in the files.

The other side of this equation is how not-translating can be a form of safety. It’s common now in Arab countries like Egypt at Christmas to see Santa Claus and the phrases “Merry Christmas” plastered everywhere, even in shops that do not cater to tourists. Kept in its own language “Merry Christmas” is a quaint foreign thing. There are Christians in Egypt and what they say to each other in Arabic about Christmas is not often heard on the street. I mean, Egyptian Muslims are not threatened by “Merry Christmas” when it stays un-translated. The words “St. Valentine’s Day” could not be translated as such in Saudi Arabia because of the Christian reference and a general aversion to sainthood in Wahabi Islam. So the holiday has become “the Feast of Love.” The holiday has become so popular among young people in Saudi Arabia that the government had to intervene. Perhaps the young Saudis will start calling it something else, since celebrating love or sainthood is allowed in their country.

The point is that translation, however invisible, often rubs against currents of power. It runs into trouble and it causes trouble. I think also, that as a counterweight to utopia, translation happens in perpetuity; there’s no stasis in it as in all utopian visions. Babel merely existed before the tower was built. It was all that noise in the tower that caused God to shatter the unity of a single language and gave Babel its allegorical name. And if signs are at play in one language, deviating from their assigned meanings, watch what they’ll do when they couple with other

signs from another language. A feast of love, indeed. Translation goes on, and requires several attempts, embodying the doubling of noise, the yes and no of our exchanges. Translation includes the moment of anticipation where the words coming at us and the words we anticipate in our mouths are wrestling, corroding, combining. We let what is outside of us settle within, and claim an equal portion of the other's generosity.

I love Kosinski's story because it highlights how the powers-that-be recognize translation's inevitable subver-

siveness, and that is why to me it serves as a sign of a culture's brain wave activity, how translation is like water, and in that sense it is the best means of finding cracks in a society's dead matter, its petrified notions. The Polish example is one system's effort to plug all the holes, and we know what happened to that utopian, or dystopian, fantasy of power. Like air, translation corrodes non-living matter that does not organically engage it—from iron to rust, and from rust to dust, to Whitman's "handkerchief of the Lord," a new language is born. 🌀