

John Watson

Translucérations

A Rigmarole

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First Impatient Translator:

Welcome to the Institute of Transluceration
(Formerly the Translators' Guild).

It is determined that, as from this moment,
Our practice will encourage greater recklessness,

And allow interjections and tangents
Like rockets which reach escape velocity.

Second Impatient Translator:

Let us make Lowell's freedoms with Montale
Seem by comparison timid. Let us

Recognise that the originals will remain
Long after our flamboyances have faded.

Therefore, even if our extravagances
Are only for our private use,

To be shared on our annual meringue picnic
Under flowering trees whose names we forget

With privileged sightings of a spiralling kestrel,
Let us throw caution to the mistral.

Guild Secretary: Indeed. We don't want
Transcriptions for treble recorder.
We want brass bands in full sun.

Archives Officer: Let us work
With titles such as, let us say –
Valéry Steps Out;
Milosz at the Laundromat;
Szyborska Lights Two Cigarettes
In the Manner of Paul Henried
In Now Voyager;
Brodsky Under an Odd Sky;
Ekeloff Returning from the Surf
Mysteriously Loses His Towel.

Publicity Officer: And for each engage
An over-the-top, into-the-clouds,
We-don't-need-the-moon-
We-have-the-stars machinery.

Chorus: And let us proceed with abandon
And let Translation become Transluceration,
Encouraging a fanfare of ravens and geese
Startled by our concerted cries.

Guild Treasurer: Assume for a moment
Some distant allusion to the trope, *Paintings*.
We would at once dredge up the cartoon:
A man is looking ruefully at rain
From the room where in profile
Is Whistler's Mother. She is saying,
'Surely, son, you can find some
Suitable subject indoors to paint?'

Second Archive Officer: What about the one
With Rembrandt in his studio, surrounded
By self-portraits and his wife at the door
Saying sourly, 'That's the trouble with you,
Rembrandt. It's all self, self, self.?'

Technician: But haven't we mentioned that before?

Second Technician: Isn't that the point?

Research Officer: We must, above all,
Avoid the decorous. And aspire instead to something
Approaching the banalities of the following.
A couple make an appointment with a doctor.
Doctor: 'And what seems to be the trouble?'
Man: 'We want you to observe us
Having sexual relations and tell us
If we're getting anything wrong.'

Acolyte: But what happens next?
Transluceration must encourage impatience –

Bystander: What has all of this to do
With the principle of systematic waywardness
Underlying our dangerous art? Are we not
Trying to erect a scaffolding flexible enough
To be constrained round any edifice?

Enthusiastic Adherent: This is an instance,
Is it not, of the deviousness outlined
In our latest Tractatus. Namely,
We must translate as if, inexplicably,
The dam wall upstream had been breached.

Bystander: Please continue.

Research Officer: The doctor agrees.
Afterwards he makes his diagnosis. 'No.
I think everything was correct.'

Next week, they return.

The same.

The following week,
the same.

The doctor says,
'Hang on. I've already said everything
Was in order. Why do you keep returning?'

Interjector: 'Are we there yet?'

Research Officer (with some impatience):

Man: 'I can't go to her place.
She can't come to mine. The Novotel
Costs \$150. Here it's only \$50
And we get \$43 back.'

Eager Aspirant: Can we move on?

Timekeeper: And if we are aspiring to extremes,
Let the untranslated and untranslatable trope
Be our model. Let us aim high and embrace
The cuckoo-editing, bell-warmèd, lark-
Charmed, rook-racked, river-rounded.

Recruiting Officer: Or perhaps
Mealed-with-yellow shallows.

Translationese Censor: Extravagance rules.
Let extravaganza be our aim.

Keeper of the Hopkins Archive: And achieve
The achieve of, the mastery of the thing.

Apprentice: Might we not begin our exercises?

Instructor: Very well. But we must all
Adhere to the idea of excess, wildness,
Unprecedented levels of exuberant recklessness,
And avoid dull reverential literalness.

Apprentice: But have we not already done that?

Instructor: Perhaps. The first exercise:
We begin with the cuckoos and Cloud
Cuckoo Land. Take the passage just mentioned
Involving cuckoo and bells. Imagine that this
Is a literal translation from a language
We do not know. Your task is to render it freely,
Remembering that extravagance – even a degree
Of incoherence – may be necessary to balance
The loss of the original language. You have
The rest of the afternoon, starting Now.

Dictionary Monitor: But first – Is there
To be apple-bobbing at our picnic?

Catering Officer: Certainly, but with one
Alteration: Pears in season will replace apples.

Trainee: I think I have a first draft.

Copyist: Great! Shoot! Scoot! Convolute!

Trainee: Here it is:
Cuckoo echoing two-note samba, bell
Peal shaking dusk liquid ambar,
Rook black dark viola da gamba,
River taking a meander –

Invigilator: Can do better.

Picnic Location Coordinator: Please
Dispose of completed exercises thoughtfully.

Task Coordinator: It is time to proceed
To an actual transluceration, embodying
Our much heralded principle of overload.
The envelope please. And, the winner is:
Milosz the Melismatic.
Our many would-be Translucentists
– Lucent Scientists all – will take
A passage from Milosz and run with it,
Shimmy and shimmer and tango at a tangent.
Many may even incorporate echoes
Of Seamus Heaney's second visit to Krakow
To that poet in age. There he sits
In Easter Island profile in his Nineties
Facing in his living room signs of death,
The bronze head and torso of his second wife
Who has preceded him into the Overworld.

Old Hand: Here's a possible Milosz text
For which our acolytes might put on skates.
But they must get the essences – of parsley,
Of vanilla, of nightshade – and, of course, of Milosz.
And just as our Loeb Latin Library volumes,
Still in their red jackets formed a plinth
On which we rested our champagne flutes,
So this from Milosz, Warsaw, 1941:

*Workmen have dragged out
Heavy books to make a table of them
And begun to cut their bread.*

To which I would add *blintzes*.
And further I would imagine these tomes
Containing one volume of Milosz himself
Which falls open at the splendid lines
Concerning Death Valley, an excellent subject
For the would-be translucerator.

Eager Understudy: Let me have this one, please.
This line is, how you say?, *charmant*:

In Death Valley I thought about hairstyles.

Could 'hairstyles' be expanded as follows?
(Let me transition into transluceration mode:)

Thinking of your Apotheosis of Veronica Lake,
And the lake so remote from here – that
It seems like books rejected from Apocrypha,
I thought about a hand arranging spotlights
At the Students' Ball in the city
From which shouts of elation could not reach me.

Fact Checker: Next, Milosz in his traverse
Of the exotic gardens of Death Valley, writes
Minerals did not sound the last trumpet.
This could be equally promising.

Second Understudy: Let me. Let me.
That is to say their silence underground
Is greater even than the silence of the apricot
Still ripening in its gated orchard.

Now, Dawn in the Ionian forest sees a party
Of Translucerationists camping out.
Early risers are bringing water from the lake.
One calls, in the frost-cool air,
'While we have scarcely begun Miloszing
Who else might offer us golden branches?'

Compositor: Wislawa Szymborska outdoing Brodsky
In the rapid consumption of cigarettes?

A Long-winded Official: As a digression
I must mention that Wislawa, smiling
Somewhat ruefully and holding a cigarette,
Often launched a poem laconically
With twenty or so lines which make
The reader impatient to reach the last five
Where the fireworks will be set off on barges.
As a suitable case for treatment, the judges
Have selected just such a conclusion
– Two final lines – which our team
Is invited to transfabulate and embroider, lines
Which at their leanest are characteristic.
They are these:

*The book of events
Is open halfway.*

Several Enthusiasts: Yes! Yes!
And subsequently a Transluceration Workshop
(With cakes) was held at our lakeside campfire.
The results were less than translucent.

For instance:

Every beginning, no matter at what point
It is designated, is only a sequel
To a vast machinery of events which are
Irretrievable like water approaching the weir
Carrying branches. The book of these – no matter
How often perused is always – *always*
Open on the lectern at the midpoint.

And again:

Every beginning is, after all, inevitably
Only a sequel and even, perhaps,
A prequel after it has passed.
And the book of events – illumined
And shedding gold leaf as pages turn –
Is nevertheless open at the halfway point.

Third Beginner:

This book of events is in fair condition,
With some pages foxed and some underlinings.

Assessor: Clearly more work is needed.

Can the spectacular confluence of glacier
And waterfall beside our camp site
Have distracted our novices?
Or was it the water-walking spider
Which they watched so intently, crossing
From lily pad to lily pad? Something
Has clearly blunted their resolve
So that their expected torrent of invention
Has dwindled to a trickle.

Trainee Aspirant: Certainly we watched
This creature walking on water. It seemed
To all of us like an allegory
Of the exercise we are undertaking.
Perhaps this led to our lack of incandescence.

One Given to Speculation: It is true
That we were distracted by this exercise
In surface tension. And other proposals
Have demanded our attention. One is
The notion of *unveiling a text*
Which could then be translated freely.

Sceptic: Do you mean out of deference
To the integrity of Szymborska or Milosz?
If so, this runs contrary to our premise
That runaway tumbleweeds of transluceration
Might provide a remedy and a means
To avoid the dread translationese.

One Given to Compromise: Let us
Begin with a poem *about translation*.
It is by Marina Brodskaya, herself
A distinguished translator. And take as given
Its conceit of the foreign poet – outside –
Like an alien spaceman, his space suit
On fire, entering the atmosphere to arrive
On your writing table. Whereupon you
As translator must extinguish the flames
In an old army stores blanket, and then,
With hands on, pumping his chest, try
To revive him and encourage heart beats
So that he can breathe the local air.
Is he wearing a Van Allen Belt? If so
Loosen it and encourage him to speak.

One Inclined to Run With the Idea:

Then let him speak.
He is curiously relieved and effusive
Surprisingly he knows the host language.
He thanks his rescuer and asks,
'One thing. Why is this planet blue?'
And he persists. 'I'm learning more
About this planet. We were puzzled
On entering the atmosphere, recognising
Nitrogen and oxygen, but unable to understand
How your sky is blue, a primary colour,
While your green fields are a composite.
And of course this is only one
Of the many questions we would ask.'

A Daring Metaphorist: I would add
That this poet from Space who bursts
Through our scriptorium's stained glass skylight
Is Magwitch – none other – needing Pip
To extinguish his blazing space suit.
That poet will later be his benefactor.

Secretary: Ah! You refer to childhood's
Startlement at a screening of David Lean's film,
In the town which is no longer there –
The scene in the graveyard with Pip.

The Previous Speaker: I would like
To go further. I see the intruder,
Who declaims in a language awaiting translation,
His space suit already well alight, plunging
Into the communal float tank in the Age
Of Aquarius in which we are buoyed
On alum ions while listening on headphones
To forest murmurs. He is generous
In his thanks and at once offers
Tentative suggestions in our language.
And, at a stretch, it could be said
His space suit well on fire
With trace elements colouring the flames –
Strontium red and potassium green –
Suggest the multicoloured bird in the tree
Like one never before seen, looking down
To perplex several birdwatchers below
Raising notebooks and binoculars
As it shrieks, ‘Give up?’

Convener (ringing cowbell): We interrupt
This self-indulgent and complacent reverie
With its arbitrariness standing in for cogent excess
And its bird-thou-never-wert prate
To alert all camp tent peg drivers
And would-be Translucerationists and Illusionists
To a crisis in our endeavours.

Few of our Appointed Readers
Have made it thus far, several reporting
A preference for the Upper Falls
Or to scale the glacier. Therefore it is
With regret that we issue an order
To trouble the Sybil and redouble and treble
Effort, aspiration, gyration, syncopation, forestation,
Aeration, eluctation and elucubration,
And to revisit Memory's halls.

Late Arrival: Have I missed anything?
Here's my elaboration on the skylight poet.

A foreign voice from outer space
Is loud against the skylight glass;
His space suit heat shield is on fire.

He's short of air.

Next, standing in a pool of glass
Amongst anthologies of verse,
We're wrapping him in towels. He speaks,

Suggesting, as he takes
A breath of alien oxygen,
A working version of a line
Which otherwise is misconstrued.

He sips some lemonade,
Then, splitting idiomatic straws
He takes the shortest one and sighs.
But we supply a linking phrase
And we are all at ease,

Transliterating as we go.
We laugh at words we both know,
We smile at words beyond the pale –
Which, like a brick wall,
Stand in our way. We back and fill,
Wrong-footed by concerns of style.
But suddenly his space suit flares
And chars a page of prose.
And now, regrettably – he says –
He has a rendezvous with Mars.
He hopes we won't be up the creek
But leaves us with the Work.
At this we ask him if he minds.
If we translate him *out of bounds*?
He laughs and shouts, 'A worthy task!
I thought you'd never ask!'

Convener: Very well. But it is our view
That we have moved on from Marina Brodskaya.

Two More Latecomers (Gwendolyn and Fiona):
We have been holed up in the waterfall cave
And we thought transfixation might work
In the form of a small domestic drama.
Here it is. It is about the space poet
And is called *Scriptorium*.

The Scene: A Scriptorium with large skylight.

Enter Librarian. He takes down a tome

From the floor to ceiling bookshelves.

Librarian: Let us see... *Elucubration*. Ah!

It means Burning the midnight oil – something

We should all be doing regularly to assist

Our *elucation*, that is to say, *struggle*.

Enter Miriam.

Miriam: May I borrow a cup of sugar?

Librarian: Certainly. You know where it is.

Exit Miriam, within.

He replaces dictionary on shelves.

Librarian: What is that tapping at the skylight?

A loud crash and a waterfall of glass.

A foreign poet in a space suit falls

Through the skylight, his space suit on fire.

Librarian: Good Heavens, man. We'll have

To get you out of that suit.

Enter Gwendolyn and Fiona, Acolytes.

Gwendolyn (sings): Anything you can do

I can do better. I can do

Anything better than you.

Fiona (sings): No you can't.

Gwendolyn (sings): Yes I can.

Space Poet: Here is a little something

For you to go to town on.

Gwendolyn: Oh good. We'll retreat –

Fiona: To our cave in the forest.

Enter Miriam.

Miriam: Would there be any dessicated coconut?
Librarian: Possibly. Look in the jar marked *Coffee*.

Exit Miriam, within.

Space Walker: I like it here. I think
Time here is more subjective than elsewhere.

Enter Gwendolyn and Fiona.

Fiona: Goodness! Is that the time?

Gwendolyn: How time flies. A week
Has passed. While working on our task
As translunaries we lived on berries.

Enter Convener.

Convener: This is awkward. I am directing
While discovering I have a role in the play.
Ladies, what transformations?

Gwendolyn: There was a mix up.
After all hands to the pump putting out
His smouldering space suit, gasping still
For alien air he handed us what we took
To be our transudation task. Alas!

Only too late in our hermit's cave
We discovered the space poet had handed us
Not a space odyssey, not a haiku from Mars...

Fiona: But his Scientific Report on Conditions
In Space Including Atmospheric Pressure,
And the incidence of Fraunhofer Lines.

Gwendolyn: To which were appended a supplement:
Temperature Gradients on Atmospheric Re-entry;
Heatshield Failure and Subsequent Combustion.

Enter Miriam: The coffee jar is coffee.

Curtain.

Convener: If I may step out from behind
The curtain, I repeat, We have finished
With the excellent Marina Brodskaya
And are ready to move on.
Our Transumptionists have already begun
Working on this celebrated case for treatment.

Minutes Keeper (reads):
They told me of your death, Heraclitus,
And at once, moved to bitter tears
I remembered how we outshone the sun
Talking until its last light had gone.
You, my friend from Halicarnassus,
Are somewhere and everywhere gone to dust.
But your nightingale, that is, so obviously
To mean your poems, still sings over the sea,
Flowering still at dusk so that Hades,
Universal thief, finds these he cannot seize.

Convener: Have we pushed the envelope further?

Town Crier: Here be translucences.
They told me again and again – as if
There was a moment when I did not know
That you had died, Heraclitus.
Many times I entered the same river
In which we had waded and floated,
And always found your absence palpable
As if presence and absence could be interchanged.
The nightingales echoing over the shore wave
Were voicing your strophes from long ago.

Nothing had been lost as the same waves
Re-formed and demanded recognition,
Demanded that time like a sieve
Be raised over our heads...
Here the manuscript breaks off...

Stern Critic: Callimachus? Calamitous!
Calling in question our whole program
Of Translucification.

Convener: I thank you. Yes. It is time
To consider how far the envelope has moved
Only to find it in its original position.
Not enough exaggeration, daring, or
Enough running away with the subject
Or elaboration disappearing out of sight.
Make Lowell seem timid – did we succeed?

Critic: Not yet, mon brave. We need still
To throw away caution.
Translucent ideas have not been met.
I envisaged something remarkable
Where the given text would be transformed
Emerging extravagantly, seeming
To constitute its own primal pre-condition
From which the present text over centuries
Of soft sift, had evolved.
But, lacking such transplendence, regretfully
I step down and relinquish my laurel wreath.

Chorus of Supporters: Never!

Breakaway Group Leader:

With respect, we must not make the same
Mistakes again. We Translucerationists
Share the same ideals: to take
The inert and grey language into which
The Marvellous has been dropped – like the overalls
In Mrs Murphy's chowder – and try
To revive it with the machinery of excess.
Today's contingency finds us unready.
Our plans are still at an early stage.
Our subcommittees have been in retreat,
Crossing the rope bridge over the chasm.
They have prepared, in only a preliminary way,
A ramble based on inventions of Evgeny Rein,
Genial mentor and friend of Joseph Brodsky.
We are drawn to him initially
By a single line, splendid even in translation:
Looking from the pier at time sinking.

Chorus of True Believers: Oh, let us!
Let us work on that line and others
Which must have accompanied it.

Photocopy Officer: Here are a few pages
Of rough sketches derived from him.

Here, retaining the Heraclitean element,
And multiple plunges into a body of water,
Is Evgeny Rein.

On the Island of Ladzaretto

We try to enter the Adriatic twice,
Mindful of Heraclitus' failure to do so
As it approaches and recedes from the island,

Which is measured in tiny steps.
There is a pier which has already played
A pivotal role in our gaze.

Eleven cats, none of them quite the same,
Wait on the jetty for their entitlement
Since there must be fishermen somewhere there.

Byron – Lord George – once sunbathed here
But could not ever return a second time
Whereas, as we look about us

At the sea-gulled white garrison
And the unreflecting lagoon, we resolve
To be here again, some day over the rainbow.

Resources Coordinator:

Evgeny is still living, entering and re-entering
A thousand times the same temporal stream.

Here he is again at a jetty near you.

Rein: Novalis said, 'Life is nothing but a dream.'
All the same – as far as dreams go,
Which is always further than we understand –

How remarkable it is to wake from a dream
And stagger to the mirror, stare briefly
Then return *to the same dream*.

Photocopier Officer (entering with arms full):
More! Here is more, all awaiting your vision.

In these pages Evgeny is wading in a poem;
He has found an old *Life* magazine
With the back page missing.

He is standing about with Brodsky.
They are smoking Camels and looking in turn
At pictures of Venice in mist,

Not knowing what was on the last page.
We in turn think of Venice,
The burial site of of Stravinsky and Diaghilev

As well as Brodsky. We imagine Rein
Arriving in Venice for Brodsky's funeral –

New Convener: Greetings. This funeral
Is an excellent subject for amplification.
Novices! Take this scene in dove mist

And kick it about the field, mindful
Of the fact that there are no goal nets
And that goal mouth lines are not drawn.

Newcomers, we welcome you
With Absolute Beginners who are,
Let me hasten to say, our greatest successes.

And to them may I say also
That Apple Bobbing and Meringue Parties
And Waterfall Scaling and Treading Water

Will occur daily, hand in hand
With exercises in conflation – our purpose
Here at the Glacier Falls Retreat.

We want you therefore to emulate
The wildness of aniseed and parsley plants
Tall and gone to seed.

And here is another Evgeny verse
Which some of you, I would hope,
Might take on, noting its potential.

It is as follows:

Light from a projector out at sea.

Acolytes! Bring out your butterfly nets!

Junior Committee Spokesperson:

We have all seen such brilliance at night.

Archivist: But to return to Evgeny's pier
From which may be seen meteors and starbursts,
The demise of the dinosaurs, the sun
Rising in harmonious traction with the moon,
These two as in a Three-legged Race.
And on the water frangipani petals
(By which is meant wind waves.)

Groundsman: While it is not my place
To interfere aesthetically, I would note
That along the pier boardwalk at dusk
Unexpected crowds gathered: a child on skates
Tying a kite string to the rail,
A surveyor carrying a theodolite,
Mothers and children waiting for the sunset,
A cast of thousands with seagulls
Making up the numbers. As dusk fell
A boat docked and actors disembarked.

At once they began an impromptu rehearsal,
One shouting *I am the Past*.

Fact Checker: You go too far.

Health and Safety Officer: But surely
We have scarcely begun to consider Evgeny's line
Looking from the pier at time sinking.
It suggests fabulous confabulations, certainly.

Iambics Scrutineer: There is here, I believe,
A curious suggestion of the scene –
Supreme in fiction – in *Mansfield Park*
When Maria and Mr Crawford, the one
Foolish, the other carelessly reckless,
Press through the locked gate
Into the dangerous world. In this way:

Here on the pier, now crowded
With children and mothers and rehearsing actors,
Is contingency abounding – and possibility flowering –
Leading us on through the locked gates
Into this larger world.

Games Coordinator:
'Contingency Abounding!' Excellent!

Stand-in Convener: Is this not
The essence and crux we are pursuing?

Cheerleader: And is this not the world
Which Evgeny and all our other mentors conjure?

Chorus: And this is surely the world of our vocation,
Namely Transluceration Triumphant
As laid out in our prospectus.

Novice: As mere beginners, we understand
That we must gather on this very pier
Armed with sharpened pencils and notebooks.

Catering Committee Spokesperson:
And on this pier we will provide
Our trolleys, lavish with refreshments.

Spokesperson for the Actors: Thank you.
Milk and no sugar. And a small cake.