
WHICH CAME FIRST THE CHICKEN
OR THE EGG ?
THE EGG
AS IT'S THE MORE PRIMITIVE
FORM
THAT 'S LOGIC

Cover: Bethan Huws, *Untitled (Which came first)*, 2001, Aluminium, glass, rubber and plastic letters, 75 x 50 x 4.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist / MMK collection, Frankfurt/Main. Photo: Bethan Huws Studio.

I was walking down Valencia Street in San Francisco one day when I ran into an acquaintance, who announced: "You know, we just put you in our play." It was for an upcoming performance by San Francisco Poets Theater, a long-running collective known for writing and staging plays with a campy, slapdash *joie de vivre*. The playwrights had been brainstorming at a kitchen table, when someone's gaze happened to land on a book I had recently translated — Clarice Lispector's *Complete Stories*, a bricklike object at 645 pages, whose glossy cover displayed a black-and-white image of the Brazilian icon's glamorous face overlaid with hot pink lines fanning out beyond her hypnotic stare.

No one thinks of translators as dramatic — except perhaps other translators — so I was surprised and a bit flattered that they added one for intrigue. The play took inspiration from real-life psychic medium Jane Roberts, known for channeling a 30,000-year-old male entity called Seth whose practical and prophetic words she transcribed into best-selling books.

A few weeks later, I slipped into the last row of seats at the art space where the play was just starting. I watched the absurd proceedings with pleasure — the bad wigs and kitschy costumes, the exuberantly stiff reciting of lines from sheets of paper — while eagerly awaiting the translator. She soon fluttered onstage, a loopy, self-important, vaguely Euro *femme fatale* who declares, "I'm the world's greatest translator, based in Paris and Rio." I laughed with everyone else at her ridiculousness, but the mention of Rio de Janeiro, the city where I used to live, also made me cringe for aligning me somehow with the butt of the joke. She further revealed that not only was she translating *Seth Cooks* into "Elfish" and going on tour to translate Bob Dylan but was also the translator of Clarice Lispector.

A few scenes later, Lispector herself made an entrance. My body sat up in an exclamation point. I hadn't expected this twist, having unconsciously assumed that Clarice, as she's known in Brazil, could only exist as a voice speaking to readers intimately from beyond the grave — she died in 1977. Even more astonishingly, this flesh-and-blood Clarice was being incarnated by a usually reserved poet friend who was now swanning around the stage vivaciously. The poet's minimalist style was dolled up with a flouncy, colorful headkerchief, and she spouted oracular declarations and hammed it up with Americanisms like "I'm digging it" in an outrageous Germanic-Slavic accent with Spanish-style flourishes. It's difficult enough to mimic a Brazilian accent in English, even if you speak Portuguese, and Clarice herself had a speech impediment often mistaken for a foreign accent attributed to her Ukrainian Jewish heritage.

There were so many "wrong" things happening onstage, challenging accepted realities and rules of theatrical realism, as well as upending my internalized version of Clarice; the effect was delicious and mortifying.

It was also unclear who the bigger charlatan was, the translator or the medium.

What no one involved with the play knew is that I had in fact visited a psychic medium while translating *The Complete Stories*. I hadn't gone with the intent of conjuring Clarice—I was seeking answers related to my family and a difficult romance—but when I spoke the name of the writer, a torrent of descriptions and pronouncements poured out of the medium. She never spoke "as" Clarice, but instead used her own words to interpret the presence she was intuiting. Making no attempt to restrain her own distinctive personality, the medium cracked jokes, cursed like a sailor, and invoked her experience as a queer Jewish woman from Montreal in ways that didn't feel superfluous. The experience was disorienting because she was refracting the spirit, philosophies, and passions that suffused the writing I had been inhabiting for quite some time, but in a mode that nevertheless belonged entirely to the woman sitting before me.

It was a remarkable encounter that gave me permission to trust my instincts as a translator and stop feeling guilty for somehow violating the sanctity of the original. Some have pressed me to say whether I believe it was the actual author who came from the beyond to communicate with me. In keeping with a Claricean ethos of open-endedness, I prefer not to arrive at a definitive conclusion. Whether it was a version of the writer deep inside me that the medium divined or a manifestation of the *real* Clarice, what she said rang true; its impact was incontrovertible.

The ambiguous interplay between theatricality and authenticity is one that haunts both translators and mediums. We channel voices that our audiences might not otherwise access, but the best we can offer is a performance of another sensibility that inevitably gets imprinted with our own embodied idioms, cadences, and interpretations.

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When I translate, I wear a long cloak. It covers me from head to toe. It makes me invisible as I disappear into the voice of the text, my body become words. But this cloak is also made of velvet, in an extravagant shade of violet. My cloak catches the light, and depending on the quality of the interaction, it gleams, it glimmers, it shines, it sparkles, it glistens, it glows. *O meu manto brilha* in Portuguese—the verb is *brilhar* but translated into English it falls in myriad ways based on how I imagine the scene.

How should a translator be? is a question many of us ask ourselves as we approach a task that is equal parts plodding and daring. We spend

our days scrutinizing dictionaries and websites, drawing upon various sources for each grain of semantic clarity, all the while inventing a new work as we see fit. The translator must be a nonentity, giving herself entirely to another's cause even as she colonizes that other's territory and remakes it to conform to her own. In the realm of the text, we are both servant and master, invisible and hypervisible.

There is a strange way in which Clarice Lispector's 1964 story "The Egg and the Chicken" captures a certain dialectic between translator and translated. "*O ovo e a galinha*" is one of her best-known and most puzzling stories, one that I have been reading for over 15 years, yet only recently did I begin to think of it in these terms. It is narrated in simple, matter-of-fact language by a woman looking at an egg on her kitchen table and contemplating its relation to the chicken; but soon the nature of the egg and chicken, as well as the entire story slip further and further away from the grasp of everyday apprehension. The story's title echoes that old conundrum, whose Portuguese version puts the egg, *ovo*, first: *Quem veio primeiro, o ovo ou a galinha?* The narrator answers this question in a wry aside — ***As for which came first, it was the egg that found the chicken*** — yet the overall story remains a riddle that many have tried to solve. Even Clarice herself declared that she did not understand it, though it remained among her favorite compositions.

"The Egg and the Chicken" circles around the human inability to fully grasp the ideal with which we nevertheless come into contact. The egg and the chicken are forms that evoke the ideal and the flawed in endlessly proliferating pairs: soul and body, perfection and error, art and artist, mystery and false explanation. ***An egg is the soul of the chicken***. ***The awkward chicken***. ***The sure egg***. ***The frightened chicken***. ***The sure egg***. And the counterparts continue: possibility and fact, the elusive and the possessive, the unnamable and language, beauty and awkwardness, grace and abjection.

The chicken exists so that the egg can traverse the ages. And the literary translator exists so that great works can traverse the ages. ***The egg is the chicken's great sacrifice***. ***The egg is the cross the chicken bears in life***. ***The egg is the chicken's unattainable dream***. ***The chicken loves the egg***. As the translator of a beloved text, I must be careful to strike the right balance of distance and proximity. ***In the face of my possessive adoration it could retreat and never again return***. Desire and submission, a certain possessiveness cut by a sense of responsibility. These elements shaped my Clarice Lispector, the textual life produced by one of Brazil's most treasured writers from age 19 in 1940 to a day short of 57 in 1977 that I re-produced in English over the course of two years and 85 stories, in a process that took me away from the outside world, like a sickness. ***The chicken's unknown ailment is the egg***.—***She doesn't know how to***

explain herself: "I know that the error is inside me," she calls her life an error, "I don't know what I feel anymore," etc.

I am an anxious chicken who wears an extravagant cloak as she waits for the egg to form. Translating is an act that alternates between virtuosity and humility. The self-doubting translator's mind resounds with the echo of commonplace injunctions. Translators should be read and not noticed. They shouldn't speak out of turn or take things too far. ***Beyond being a mode of transport for the egg, the chicken is silly, idle and myopic.*** They are handmaidens and messengers meant to follow orders and do the bidding of their superiors. They should have no ego, no sense of a separate self. ***The chickens who harm the egg are those that are a ceaseless "I."***

Not being transparent is the translator's original sin. We are supposed to make readers forget that we exist, to ease them into the suspension of disbelief that lets them imagine that what they are reading is not a counterfeit copy. Kate Briggs's *This Little Art* opens its insightful essaying through the life of the translator's mind with this quandary, of what it means for someone to say he's "read" Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* or the lectures of Roland Barthes when these occur in translation. As Briggs puts it, readers know very well, "This can't really have been what he said," since it is being resaid in another language by another person, yet all the same, they take that leap of faith: "I'll go with it." And translators do their best to preserve the notion of authenticity as honest fabricators. ***The chicken's inner life consists of acting as if she understands. At the slightest threat she screams bloody murder like a maniac. All this so the egg won't break inside her. An egg that breaks inside the chicken is like blood.***

It doesn't take long before a discussion of translation invokes the Italian expression, "*Traduttore, traditore*," which plays on the closeness of the words "translator" and "traitor," intimating that to translate is to betray both author and reader. Translators inevitably distort the original. Things are always getting lost or added; we drop a metaphor, squander finely-wrought detail with a rough paraphrase, omit lines and semi-colons, explain away ambiguity, and embellish with em-dashes and flourishes that push far past the bounds of the original. If "high fidelity" indicates a near-perfect reproduction, then translations are more like a game of telephone between native speakers of different languages. ***But it's because nobody knows how it feels inside for someone whose job consists of pretending that she is betraying, and who ends up believing in her own betrayal.***

In this mode, the translator is always set up to fail. If the original is akin to scripture, then earthly attempts to convey its essence through

translation will always fall short of that ideal of "pure language" that Walter Benjamin fantasizes about in his monumental essay, "The Task of the Translator." Though our accumulated translations might point toward this amalgamated and complete version of language, we remain eternally trapped in the wreckage of the Tower of Babel, blindly groping about in the rubble and trying to piece together something that can never be seamless or whole. ***When the chicken sees the egg she thinks she's dealing with something impossible. And with her heart beating, with her heart beating so, she doesn't recognize it.***

Too much of the narrative surrounding translation casts it as an inferior, derivative practice and an attempt at perfect equivalence. Underlying this view is a misguided assumption that translation is a concrete art, in which there is always a "correct" way for one language to be converted into another. Yet translation goes far past the simple mechanics of substituting the more objective units of language into a borderland where multiple personal idioms meet and are inflected by the contingencies of history, culture, and subjective usage and meaning.

The approach to fidelity in literature is always oblique. Translators are tricksters and silver-tongued dissimulators, but we share this charge of deceit with writers of poetry and fiction, who tell lies to get to a form of truth. What distinguishes translation is that it adds a layer of artifice to wholly original expression; it is constructed to read *as if* it sprang from a unified authorship, rendering invisible its true inspiration as a *response* to the source text.

When thinking about translation as plural in contrast to the singular source, my mind often returns to this moment in Benjamin's essay: "While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds." Here, artifice is lesser than nature, and the translator's linguistic fabric overcompensates because "it signifies a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien." In short, translations are always out of place and trying too hard. They are Carmen Miranda's fruity headdress beside a bowl of actual fruit.

Still, I remain fond of this likening of the woven material of translation to a voluptuous royal robe, which I imagine in purple velvet, naturally. To me, it is an emblem of the translator's pleasure, performative flair, and a certain sovereignty necessary to carry off a translation that captures the power and inventiveness of the original. ***My mystery is that being merely a means, and not an end, has given me the most mischievous of freedoms: I'm no fool and I make the most of things.*** Taking the utmost care also requires moments of letting go.

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Clarice Lispector's heroines are often tightly wound, caught up in that pressure to flawlessly perform their gender alongside a desire for approval that plagues women, though each in her own special way. Her fiction finds its brutal pulse in the places where these women crack, either breaking down or breaking out of their scripted lives. Sometimes the break leads to disaster, as in "The Buffalo" and "The Imitation of the Rose," which draw to a close with their protagonists suspended in acute mental and emotional crisis. In other stories, routinely dutiful women revel in their sudden burst of rebellion, a break that culminates in ecstasy.

My inspiration for a more joyful approach to translation comes from one of those latter stories. "Miss Algrave" is a particularly wacky tale with a sci-fi twist from the 1974 collection *The Via Crucis of the Body*, written over the course of one weekend during Clarice's late period, in which she flexed a newfound freedom in her writing that rejected conventional standards of literary "good taste." The collection is full of bodily fluids and functions, violence, slapstick situations, and sexual acts and desires deemed shameful, more associated with pulp and porn rather than literature proper, especially in the time and place in which she wrote. In an "Explanation" that prefaces the collection, Clarice addresses the accusation of indecency: "Someone read my stories and said that's not literature, it's trash. I agree. But there's a time for everything. There's also the time for trash."

The title heroine of "Miss Algrave" is a young Irish woman, an adult virgin living in London who takes anything tinged with pleasure—delicious prawns, the cooing of pigeons—as a moral offense or potential sin. She goes around disapproving of every public intimation of sexual activity, including a statue of Eros, couples making out in the park, dogs in heat. "She felt offended by humanity." Miss Algrave takes pride in being correct; she is "the perfect typist" at work and writes "without grammatical errors." She bathes just once a week, not even taking off her knickers or bra, so she won't have to see her sinful, shameful body.

Then one night, Miss Algrave is visited by Ixtlan, a mysterious being from Saturn who comes to her window and deflowers her, turning her into a sex fiend. The beguiling Ixtlan wears a "crown of intertwining snakes, tame from the terror of possible death" and a cloak in "the most agonizing shade of violet, it was bad gold and coagulated purple." After their fiery encounter, Miss Algrave starts indulging in *filet mignon* and Italian red wine on her lunch break, picks up a stranger for sex in Piccadilly Circus, and imagines telling off her boss and becoming a prostitute because she's good at sex and might as well make money from doing what she likes.

If my careful, anxious translator self is most aligned with Clarice's chickens, then my extravagant translator-as-performer self wears Ixtlan's violet cloak that recalls the "overpowering and alien" royal robe of translation that Benjamin describes. I like to imagine myself wearing this cloak not only because it sounds like an amazing look but also because it is an emblem of proud visibility. Ixtlan gives Miss Algrave's body back to her as a source of pleasure and exaltation.

The translator I most associate with this body-positive *jouissance* is Erin Moure, a French Canadian poet who embraces delight and excess in translation, coining terms like "trans*e*lation," with an emphasis on elation and a personalized *e* for *Erin*, which mark her practice. Moure's essays in *My Beloved Wager* include, "Fidelity Was Never My Aim (But Felicity)" and "The Ex*h*orbitant Body: Translation as Performance." In the latter, Moure asserts that translation is a necessarily embodied practice, "a set of performative gestures implicating the body, performance because the translator does not enact her body as her own but uses her body to perform 'the author.' Or what we, as audience, tend unthinkingly to believe is the author …"

So let us consider translation not as a failed attempt to resurrect a semblance of a divine original but rather as a performance, not as the apocryphal misreading of scripture, but as something that entails more freedom by necessity, like the interpretation of a script or a score. To think of translation as a mode of performance recognizes that translation is relational, always a directed dialogue or even a choral conversation, never a monologue. The coherence that gives a translation the force to make the original sing in a new textual body comes from that spirit of performance, the translator's confident self-possession arising in the guise of another's voice.

Clarice's writing voice is both intimate and distant, creating a haunting form of seduction through a strong physicality embedded in its hypnotic cadences. I followed the cues of her punctuation and unusual rhythms as if performing a musical score. I also paid close attention to the psychological and emotional weight of her words. In my translator's note, I compared the process to performing a "one-woman vaudeville act, shouting, laughing, crying, musing, and tap-dancing my way breathlessly across the stage." One of my aims as a translator is technical accuracy and, yes, fidelity to how I understand the text. Yet in this analogy to vaudeville, I'm conjuring a sense of exaggeration, a kind of amplification that we associate with bad acting or farce. What this comparison draws out for me is the very intensity of Lispector's characters and the voices that she puts on, as well as her virtuoso range in shifting between all these moods, from states of crisis to ecstasy, in a singular combination of exaggeration and subtlety.

At the heart of her fictions is a sense of life itself as a daily performance, or a series of out-of-body experiences. The Claricean narrator of "Involuntary Incarnation" describes her proclivity for invading the subjectivity of others as a form of incarnating them and wonders whether her own life "might never have been my own, except at the moment of birth, and all the rest has been incarnations." To incarnate the Londoner Miss Algrave in English instead of in her original Portuguese required an extra level of cloaking my natural California English in Britishisms, like "knickers" for "underwear" and "rubbish" for "trash." I translated "*deslumbrante*" as "dazzling" in the earlier, more literary stories, but when Clarice's style goes a bit campy and slangier in the 1970s, I interpreted "*ficava deslumbrante*" as "she was a knockout."

Conceiving of translation as performance also recognizes its particular temporal quality, as a conversation happening across two points in time. This perspective emphasizes a translation as just one iteration among many possible iterations, with no claim to be a static monument, as the original is often taken to be. Translations need to be renewed because the relationship between two languages is always evolving; beyond this, there will always be a new angle, a new tenor to tease out, the way there is always room for another staging of a Shakespearean play or additional variations on an old musical standard.

Emily Wilson's recent translation of the *Odyssey* into English, of which there have been around 60, though this is the first by a woman, is remarkable for the way it opens up new ways of experiencing a centuries-old epic. Wilson embraces an ethos of open artifice in her translator's note, over and against narrow assessments of what constitutes "fidelity" and the overidentification of a "natural" translation with a "good" one. Acknowledging the translation's distance from the source, she declares, "I do not want to deceive the unsuspecting reader about the nature of the original poem; rather, I hope to be truthful about my own text —its relationships with its readers and with the original."

The resulting translation is rigorous and confident in its contemporary diction, its unique attunement to language depicting women, violence, and power dynamics, and its rendering of Homer's dactylic hexameter into iambic pentameter in a translation that "sings to its own regular and distinctive beat," in Wilson's words. A broader understanding of translation should look to the license granted an actor or soloist who breathes new life into another's composition, following the script or score but imbuing it with individual personality all the same. Wilson describes this intertwining of sensibilities through another metaphor, turning to a lovely image from the *Odyssey*: "The Homeric text grows inside my translation, like Athena's olive tree inside the bed made by Odysseus …"

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"Inventiveness is risky for translators: we tend to restrain ourselves in the name of fidelity to the original," writes Anita Raja, who translates German writers such as Christa Wolf and Ingeborg Bachmann into Italian. In "Translation as a Practice of Acceptance," Raja asserts that "to confront translational difficulty with inventiveness does not mean renouncing one's devotion to the original. Inventiveness must arise from this devotion so that an ill-conceived sacralization of the original does not generate incomprehensibility, or even untranslatability."

I didn't learn to loosen up and embrace my inescapable presence in the text until the last stages of translating *The Complete Stories*. One might say it was my version of a Miss Algrave-style awakening. In the sprint to finalize the manuscript, I gained a more expansive view of the whole that enabled me to respond to the productive antagonism of being edited with a greater confidence in my gut instincts. Something else happened in the midst of this eleventh-hour fever that one might call my version of a Miss Algrave-style awakening. As I mentioned: I went to see a psychic medium. ***The chicken looks embarrassed***. But then again: ***there's a job, let's call it cosmic, to be done***... I figured Clarice would have given her blessing, since she herself was interested in all sorts of spiritual and occult practices and regularly visited a fortune-teller.

There is much to tell about this encounter, and I have recounted it elsewhere, but the moment that gave me the confidence to don that violet cloak, so to speak, was when the medium told me that it was in fact *not* my job to get her completely. She insisted that Clarice "doesn't want you to get it perfect. If you got it perfect then you'd be her, and she doesn't want you to be her. She doesn't want you to perfectly capture her. Because that would be insulting. If you could, she feels like she wouldn't be that complex and she felt like a complex woman."

In Clarice's story "A Tale of So Much Love," a young girl bewails the fact that her cherished pet chickens end up on the dinner table. Yet her mother convinces her that eating her beloved animals is a way of incorporating them to live on inside her, since their fate is to be eaten anyway. By the end of the story, when it comes time to eat another pet chicken, Eponina, "the girl, in a pagan ritual transmitted to her from body to body through the centuries, ate her flesh and drank her blood." This ritual recalls that unsettling mix of adoration and sacrifice that get bound together in the transmission of culture and that we must acknowledge. Some violence must be done; some eggs must be broken. As for that unsolvable riddle, *How should a translator be?*, I offer this: a translator should be many ways all at once, voracious, desiring, devouring, devotional, all of them honest and none of them innocent.

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