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# “As If We Were God’s Spies”: Poetry out of Nothing

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## Abstract

The starting point for this article is the Latin dictum *ex nihilo nihil fit*, famously dramatized by Shakespeare at the beginning of *King Lear* when the king declares, nothing will come of nothing. Through a discussion of *King Lear* and the poem “Frost at Midnight” by Coleridge, the essay then examines analogies between the writing of poetry and its translation. Two conceptions of creation are introduced and compared briefly, that of the hero who summons his poetry out of the void, and that under the auspices of Lucretius, whereby the poem is a composing of preexisting materials. Finally, the concept of metaxy is introduced to describe the role of both writer and translator.

I find myself in a difficult position as I prepare this article. I’ve always felt that the most fascinating aspect of talk about translation is when an experienced translator discusses the concrete details of choices he has made as his two languages come together. To give two examples from the language from which I have translated the most, how do you translate *buon appetito*? How do you convey the cultural connotations of a word like *pane* for an English audience? I think there is a limit to how far theoretical discussions can take us. The meeting of two languages is as complex and unique as the encounters between two human beings. However, I have translated little in recent years, and I was reluctant to go back to the work on Cavalcanti which engaged me for a decade. There will be no juicy examples here of the difficulties of cultural transposition, nor of my ingenious solutions to such problems. Instead, I have decided to tempt fate and write about poetry and translation in general. I must ask for readers’ patience in what follows if the first part of what I have to say regarding *King Lear* and Coleridge seems more of a manifesto for poetry. What I hope will become clearer as I proceed is how no discussion of the translation of poetry can avoid the question of what poetry itself is, for the very simple reason that both the writing and the translation of poetry are closely connected activities.

## I

I would like to begin by recalling that very dramatic moment in the first scene of *King Lear*. An old man has summoned his three daughters and is about to divide his kingdom between them. First, however, he asks them to declare how strong is their filial love. Regan and Goneril speak eloquently. Then Lear asks his favourite daughter what she has to say for herself.

CORDELIA

Nothing, my lord.

KING LEAR

Nothing!

CORDELIA

Nothing.

KING LEAR

Nothing will come of nothing: speak again.

My starting point is that phrase, nothing will come of nothing, and the question, where does poetry come from? It is common to trace *nothing will come of nothing* to Lucretius and the

Latin dictum *ex nihilo nihil fit* (see *De rerum natura*, Book 1, ll.148-9). Lear speaks an admonition to Cordelia, but originally the maxim, which Lucretius derived from the Greek tradition, was used in a positive sense to argue for the permanence of life. Everything in existence must derive from other matter already in existence. Men might be afraid, Lucretius argues, because things happen whose cause they cannot understand. They attribute these to the action of gods. However, such things are not created by divine agency out of nothing. Rather there is an eternal stock of matter from which things continually arise and to which they must eventually return. Marcus Aurelius stoically says something similar in his *Meditations*:

I am composed of the formal and the material; and neither of them will perish into non-existence, as neither of them came into existence out of non-existence. Every part of me will eventually be reduced by change into some part of the universe, and that again will change into another part of the universe and so on forever. And as a consequence of such change I too exist, and those who begot me, and so on forever in the other direction.

(Book V, 13, my translation)

Shakespeare on the other hand has Lear use the phrase as a rebuke: if you can offer nothing you will receive nothing in return. And in modern times this is the sense most immediately understood. One might rewrite this in the light of the twentieth century: if you have no solid grounds for speaking, and given all that has happened in the last one hundred years only the most daring can claim to do so, then you cannot hope to speak the truth. Instead the most forceful utterances will be heard in the marketplace. Nihilism is barren. Only God can summon things out of nothing, and God is dead. It is easy enough to fall under the sway of Lear's words construed in this sense. *Creatio ex nihil*, any creative act can seem an impossibility because it rests on nothingness.

And yet while Cordelia's inability to heave her heart into her mouth sets in motion the calamities of the play, part of that very tragedy derives from the fact that *in truth* the reader knows her *nothing* to be more pregnant with love and charity, her silence to resound with more life than the glib and oily art of her sisters. It is a rough and ready truth, unsatisfactory for a philosopher perhaps, but serviceable enough, especially when given convincing voice in the good sense of Kent or the starkness of the Fool. For whether one agrees with Lucretius or not, on one level all life and all art are born of nothing. I did not exist and now I do. The page was empty, and now it contains a poem. It is this miracle of coming to have a form and substance that I like to think poetry should continue to celebrate. Just as in translation one continually defies the underlying impossibility of the act itself.

I shall now change tack and consider the opening of Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight", that meditation on a winter's night as the narrator watches his newborn son sleeping.

The Frost performs its secret ministry,  
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry  
Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.

I have always been struck by those words "secret ministry". To me they evoke that sense of awe on seeing snowfall. There may be perfectly good scientific explanations for snow and frost, and yet often the sight of them returns the viewer to a state of childish wonder, as if they came out of nowhere. "Frost at Midnight" is full of such amazement. For this reason it might be a good example of what Keats once called Negative Capability. Ironically so, because in explaining the concept Keats distanced himself from poets like Coleridge:

Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason – Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the

Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge.

(From a letter dated 22 December 1817.)

Yet “Frost at Midnight” celebrates at least three distinct but related mysteries or examples of half-knowledge. If the first is the frost of the title, the second is the birth of Coleridge’s first child:

Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,  
Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,  
Fill up the intersperséd vacancies  
And momentary pauses of the thought!

The interspersed vacancies, the void, are now full of the breathings of a child who until recently did not exist. What better example of *creatio ex nihil*.

The third mystery of the poem is the film that flutters on the grate. Popularly called “strangers”, these particles of soot that dance in the heat of the fireplace were said in folklore to portend the arrival of some absent friend.

Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,  
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.  
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature  
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,  
Making it a companionable form,  
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit  
By its own moods interprets, every where  
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,  
And makes a toy of Thought.

Coleridge seems to be suggesting it is only human to project onto this thing the inner moods of our idling Spirit. This was clearer in an earlier draft: “To [the film] the living spirit in our frame, / that loves not to behold a lifeless thing, / transfuses its own pleasures, its own will.” But whereas the draft is open to Keats’ criticism, the final version presents things without explaining them away. This task of poetry, to express delight and awe at the world as it is, and at the potential for *creatio ex nihil*, often means contenting oneself with half-knowledge.

But should that be poetry’s charge? Is such delight merely childish? Is it possible, or right, to treat of miracle and mystery in an age caught between science and nihilism? Late in the play *Lear* fancifully, perhaps half-madly, imagines life in prison with Cordelia as a sort of paradise:

No, no, no, no! Come, let’s away to prison.  
We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage.  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down  
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we’ll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news; and we’ll talk with them too-  
Who loses and who wins; who’s in, who’s out-  
And take upon ’s the mystery of things,  
As if we were God’s spies;

I love those last lines: to take upon oneself the mystery of things. Importantly, it adds a dimension of responsibility to Keats’ half-knowledge. The indefinite in Keats might be dismissed as a recipient for one’s own imagination and romantic fantasies. Like Leopardi’s

*siepe* it suggests the infinite, but it is an infinity onto which the poet is free to project himself. Lear's phrase suggests something more, a responsibility to care for and preserve the necessary place of mystery in the world, and of one's need to come to terms with the inexplicable, beginning with the miracle of one's own life. "Thy life's a miracle" says the disguised Edgar to his father. Gloucester believes he has just jumped from the cliffs of Albion, so the grounds for Edgar's words are false. Gloucester's fall and survival is a deception. And yet there is no irony in what Edgar says. The truth of the affirmation remains. If anything it hits home more strongly to the audience because they see this double vision: the truth resting on a falsehood, but still as true as ever it can be in a world gone awry. A world that no longer has the myth of progress to uphold as Gloucester had declared earlier: "we have seen the best of our time: machinations, hollowness, treachery and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves".

That sense of miracle is hard to hold on to. It is not the monotony of reality that dulls perception, but a lack of meaning. That lack with its ruinous disorders is like a veil that mutes the world. Often one's sense of really living life is limited to moments of intense experience like falling in love, or the death of someone close. In "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison", Coleridge writes:

... Hence forth I shall know  
That nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;  
No plot so narrow, be but nature there,  
No waste so vacant, but may well employ  
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart  
Awake to Love and Beauty!

It would be nice if these sentiments could stand as a manifesto against the difficulties of our age. But the rhetorical high pitch of Coleridge as he reaches the climax of the poem is hard to enjoy today. A calmer, clearer voice is wanted, one that does not mince words or let too much weight be borne by those old traves, Love and Beauty. Perhaps a voice like Cordelia's. However stubborn she may appear in the play's first scene, and however naive it may be to rely on virtue and action to speak for her, Cordelia's dilemma is our own. What her sisters have just said leaves her without words and keenly aware of the enormous struggle she must undertake to speak with a skerrick of sincerity. She finds herself on a stage that has had its fair share of the empty rhetoric of playful dissimulation and self-aware deception.

## II

It is sometimes said by poets that translation is useful to fill in those moments when one feels there really is nothing to say. In translation one is never faced with the blank page because there is already something concrete to work with. In this sense translation puts a positive spin back on *ex nihilo nihil fit* and brings things back to Lucretius, for whom everything comes from pre-existing material. And like their translations, all poems arise out of pre-existing elements. The constituent atoms of a poem are the words of a language and its community of speakers. These existed before the poet, and in most cases will continue to do so long afterwards.

But translation is useful for poets for another reason too. As a check against the dangers accompanying the view of poetry I have been describing. Sometimes in the creative act hubris leads the writer to think that he, god-like, must conjure a world out of nothing. He forgets the relation of the created work to reality and to the community which gives it value; he forgets the complex histories and values of the poem's words; he seeks a self-sufficient idiolect, a bastion against the instability and absurdity of the world. That of course is the paradox of language: a medium common to many and therefore impersonal, that one wants to personalize in order to express one's individuality. As Cordelia knows only too well. What words can she find to express herself after that assault on language by her sisters?

Translation is a reminder that the writer does not pull rabbits out of a hat. He responds to an existing situation, he takes mystery on board. For just as a translator owes an allegiance to

the original poem, so too the poet owes an allegiance to render reality accurately. This common analogy in discussions of poetry and translation is often taken a step further. Just as reality is unstable and evades the author's attempts at representation, so too the original poem will always remain at one remove from the translator. From this point of view the translation and the writing of poetry are both creative acts. Roman Jakobson gave the most theoretical weight to such ideas in the twentieth century in numerous essays including "Linguistic Aspects of Translation" (1959), but of course poets have long been declaring just that. Dante says in the *Convivio* I, vii, 14, "nulla cosa per legame musaico armonizzato si può della sua loquela in altra trasmutare senza rompere tutta la sua dolcezza e armonia" – "nothing [no poem] that is harmonized with musical links can have its speech transformed without destroying all of its sweetness and harmony" (my translation).

The contemporary French poet Yves Bonnefoy has discussed such ideas at length.<sup>1</sup> Like many he is of the opinion that in translation only creative transposition is possible. To argue this point Bonnefoy makes a distinction between an individual poem and poetry in general, poetry that becomes a sort of force, and an activity. The poem, in a sense, is not an end in itself, but rather an opening onto what lay behind the writing of the poem and its language: an experience of the world. Bonnefoy names this catalyst the *acte*. The translator's task on one level at least is to evoke that act again, that initial intention or intuition in another language and cultural context.

In Bonnefoy's distinction between poem and poetry lies both the impossibility and potential of translation. A poem is a unique language object that cannot be translated. But a poem is itself a searching after something beyond language. Poetry can be translated, poetry can take another form where the translator is open to that initial experience, and open to the ways poetry relates to language in order to reach closer to *présence*. In framing the question of translation in this way Bonnefoy advocates the possibility of recreation, but also of fidelity to an initial spirit. Such a spirit remains vulnerable to criticisms that are not dissimilar to those that arise in discussions of Keats' half-knowledge and Leopardi's infinite. Bonnefoy doesn't resolve such problems in talking of the need for an affinity between poet and translator. However he is motivated by a rigorous sense of responsibility to that which he translates. There is a life-long engagement with the poem, the poet, and the language. Or perhaps an obsession. I am reminded of Ezra Pound and his decades-long obsession with Cavalcanti. Pound tried all sorts of ways to bring Cavalcanti to life in the early twentieth century. He started by doing translations in pre-Raphaelite Wardor Street English, but thirty years later he was translating some of the same poems in a pseudo-Elizabethan English because he thought it closer to thirteenth-century Italian. There are also a number of original poems in the voice of Cavalcanti, there are the essays on Cavalcanti, and finally the Opera (both the music and libretto) about the life of Cavalcanti. It was as if Pound were living between two worlds, his own and that of the medieval Florence. But then deep down I suspect that most translators believe in metempsychosis.

What I want to focus on briefly is another aspect of this analogy between poet and translator. Like Pound, both writers and translators exist in a state of in-betweenness, or, as Simone Weil described, adopting a concept from Plato, in a state of *metaxy* (Weil 132-34). Between two languages and cultures; between the original and the rendition; between reality and the poem; between the creative act and nothingness; between our subjective selves and external reality. The role of go-between is rarely easy. Translators will be familiar with that experience when after having worked on the translation of a poem for some time it becomes impossible to read that original without one's own version intruding. Suddenly, neither the original nor the translation exists independently of the other, and one is never wholly satisfied with either. Neither is an end in itself. One is caught between them.

Most of all, though, the poet is caught in between the two conceptions of creation I have outlined here. On the one hand that of the hero who must summon his work out of the

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<sup>1</sup> For the discussion that follows see various essays in Bonnefoy, and in particular the essay "La traduction de la poésie".

void, like a monotheistic god, or who finds he can no longer do so in the culture of post-divine nihilism that is an extension of the same tradition. And secondly, the view of Lucretius that poetry, like translation, arises out of the pre-existing atoms of the world. We may swing between these conceptions, but ultimately both of them require us to take Lear's mystery on board. Weil writes, "The essence of created things is to be intermediaries. They are intermediaries leading from one to the other and there is no end to this. They are intermediaries leading to God. We have to experience them as such" (132). So that it is not far-fetched to consider translation, that carrying across as both an activity and a state of mind, to be an analogy for writing and living in general. One is always in a state of metaxy. To adapt another aphorism of Weil's, poetry out of nothing (she talks of the material world as a whole) is a closed door. It is a barrier. And at the same time it is the way through.

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