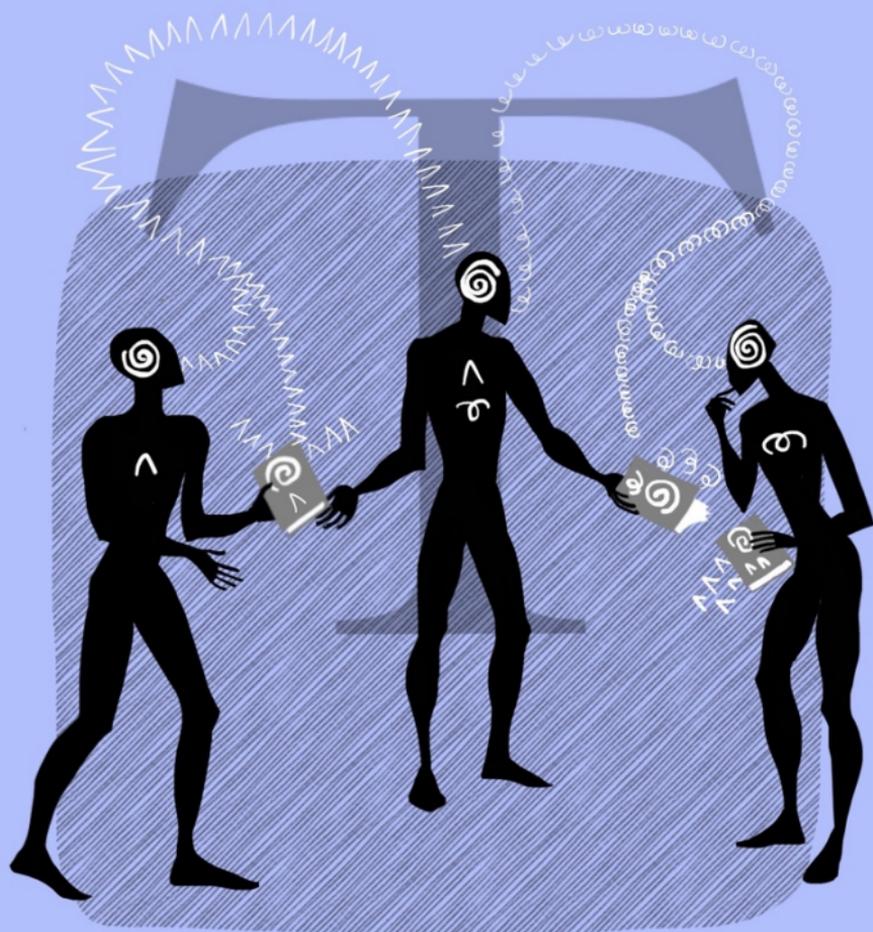


— LETTERS  
on LIBERTY



TRANSLATION AS LIBERATION

Vanessa Pupavac

**— LETTERS**  
**on LIBERTY**

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## *What are Letters on Liberty?*

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

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We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

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We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

*Academy of Ideas team*



## TRANSLATION AS LIBERATION

*'Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold...'*

- John Keats<sup>i</sup>

No speech, no liberty. No translation, no speech. Translation is essential to humanity. We are neither omnipotent gods nor biologically driven animals. Humans are not simply creatures determined by nature - we have created a world that goes beyond nature. This humanised world is founded on the emergence of humans as toolmakers, with language and individual consciousness.<sup>ii</sup> Translation is a universal need among humans as speaking beings with individuality.<sup>iii</sup>

Communication of thought entails more than 'merely vocalising silent speech'.<sup>iv</sup> Language itself is founded upon translation - we translate our experiences or thoughts into words.<sup>v</sup> This miracle of translating thought into word and then transmitting those words between individual humans, is more remarkable than translation between languages.

Speech involves the universal human capacity for imagination and the ability to convey meaning in and out of context.<sup>vi</sup> Many abstract concepts begin as analogies or metaphors, borrowed from ordinary

activities. We imagine things, which we then transfer from one context to another within a single language - this internal translation demonstrates our ability to translate from one language to another.

*Translation between languages is pure altruism - it is undertaken on behalf of others.*

Our speech between each other involves experience, receptivity and interpretation. If there is a readiness between people to communicate and understand, meaning may be more easily conveyed either within a language or into another language. Just as speech between individuals is possible, so too is translation between languages. (Although perfect symmetry between articulation and reception, or the original language and the translation, is impossible.)<sup>vii</sup>

Where cross-communication is rare, or relations are fraught, the possibilities of misinterpretation become greater. But the answer to poor translation is more translation - the repeated experience of translating from one language to another assists individual translations.<sup>viii</sup> Circumlocution - or the coining of new words - may be required. In practice, the speaker's position or context will help screen off many accessory meanings from the original to the translation.<sup>ix</sup> In certain contexts, translators are

consciously wary of accessory meanings (with legal contracts in mind) or they might consciously embrace them in word play.

Translation between languages is pure altruism - it is undertaken on behalf of others.<sup>x</sup> After all, if you are fluent in the language there is no need to translate it for yourself. Perhaps this altruism is underscored by the historically poor rates of pay for translation.

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## **Emancipating knowledge**

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Translation as an ideal is linked to the belief in a common humanity, and a yearning to emancipate ourselves from our linguistic limits<sup>xi</sup> by expanding our voice.<sup>xii</sup> From a universal perspective on human culture, translation opens doors in a long chain of encounters or confrontations enriching knowledge and expression.

A fifth-century Roman called Saint Jerome, who translated the Bible from Hebrew to Latin, famously wrote about translation as taking the original ‘prisoner’ and capturing its ‘meaning’.<sup>xiii</sup> The purpose of translation in classical thought was to add to the stock of human knowledge by taking from other societies. Historically speaking, eras of cultural flourishing have

been linked to translation: there was the great Graeco-Arabic translation movement of the eighth to tenth centuries; the Renaissance period in which translators were drawing on the Byzantine legacy; and the Reformation, coinciding with the printing-press revolution.<sup>xiv</sup>

The translation of the Bible is significant in the history of civil freedoms. The hierarchical religious societies of Europe regarded biblical translation as a capital offence, for the act of comprehension might demystify the original as an object of awe and inspire new and dangerous thoughts.<sup>xv</sup> The translation of the Bible was therefore a courageous assertion of religious independence against the authority of the Church and the monarchy. The English biblical translator William Tyndale was burnt at the stake for heresy and treason in 1536 for daring to translate the sacred text.

*If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the scriptures than thou dost!*

Tyndale is attributed as declaring these words to a priest who condemned his preaching to the poor.<sup>xvi</sup> He wanted all to have access to the Bible, whatever their station in life. Tyndale believed all people had an individual moral conscience, and should be free to read and reflect upon spiritual matters for themselves.

Translation also enabled private and communal study, inspiring the spread of literacy in sixteenth-century Europe. The translation of sacred texts ennobled the vernacular languages at a time when most scholarship in Europe was in Latin. This new dignity such languages enjoyed fostered the dazzling creative work of poets and dramatists who began to hear the language in church. ‘No Tyndale, no Shakespeare’, Tyndale’s biographer David Scott Daniell contends.<sup>xvii</sup> This emergence of spiritual and cultural enfranchisement fostered exciting ideas of political liberty. No Tyndale, no Freeborn John Lilburne - the radical Leveller of the 1600s.

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## Discovery and transfusion

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The ideals of past translators involved humanist aspirations to compile a collection of world literature containing the best works of humanity. If translation gives the original new life - even immortality - it also frees readers to venture further than the limits of our own language.<sup>xviii</sup> The English poet John Keats’ 1816 sonnet, *On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer*, celebrates translation as a voyage of discovery:

*Of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-browed Homer rules as his demesne;*

*Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold!*

The poet and dramatist George Chapman was a contemporary of Shakespeare and published the first complete translations into English of Homer's *Iliad* in 1598 and the *Odyssey* in 1616. Translation, spurred by the print revolution, opened up a classical humanist education to those without an education in ancient or modern foreign languages. In the twentieth century, the Penguin paperbacks (or before paperbacks, the Everyman books set up by Joseph Dent - the son of a Darlington housepainter), offered the reader 'for a few shillings... a whole bookshelf of the immortals'.<sup>xix</sup>

In the twentieth century, the Soviet-Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko described translation as a lifeline, sustaining a common humanity and its cultural store:

*'The translation of various literatures from language to language is a mysteriously powerful mutual transfusion of blood between the sliced-up pieces of the single body of mankind. Were this not so, mankind would not survive.'*<sup>xx</sup>

But to what extent is it possible to translate poetry? Translation theories, informed largely by the ideals of literary translation, are often counsels of perfection that lead to counsels of despair. The popular pithy

Italian phrase *Traduttore, traditore* (translator, traitor) casts translation as betrayal. Poetry does not simply involve ideas, but those ideas are attached to particular sounds and rhythms which reinforce meaning at a more subconscious level. The writer and translator Vladimir Nabokov bluntly characterised translation as butchering the original in his often-cited poem ‘On Translating Eugene Onegin’:

*What is translation? On a platter  
A poet's pale and glaring head,  
A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,  
And profanation of the dead.*<sup>xxi</sup>

If Nabokov settled for a prose translation of Alexander Pushkin's poetry, Yevtushenko appealed to fellow poets across the Cold War divide to translate each other's work into rival poems:

*If we poets of this world won't lend one another a hand, what then will befall the rest of mankind?... I grant you, of course, full freedom in your work, for I know well from my own experience that only a free and unrestricted translation can in any way claim to be poetry.*<sup>xxii</sup>

Translation supports the key humanist ideal of our shared humanity, putting us in communication with people across millennia and opening doors to knowledge that were previously closed. Through

translations we break down cultural barriers and find ourselves free to build an open university of accumulated human knowledge potentially accessible to all.

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## **The rise of ‘appropriate’ translation**

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In the last decade, automatic translation tools and algorithmic learning have improved immensely, offering instant communication and access to content in another language which goes far beyond getting the gist of the original. Hilariously gross mistranslations are becoming less common, as technology improves by translating between standard written texts.

Nevertheless, the role of translators as interpreters, and the importance of their judgement, continues to matter over and above questions of textual accuracy. In fact, machine translation can act as a useful sounding board for translators thrashing out different translation solutions. However, algorithmic learning tends to favour standardisation around current idioms, encouraging translations of older texts to sound like contemporary parodies of the original.

From a universal perspective, the core ethic of translation has been to strive to represent the truth of

a text - an uncensored representation that is not subordinated to meet the extra-textual cultural sensibilities of a particular society or context. This translation ethic was expressed as a powerful ideal in opposition to twentieth-century totalitarianism, which stifled intellectual freedom. Translators in the Soviet Union under Stalin, for example, interpreted Shakespeare to comply with the ideological dictates of socialist realism.<sup>xxiii</sup> The Czech writer Milan Kundera complained about the Soviet censorship of his work, as well as the Western translation which censoriously rewrote passages in his book:

*'The fate of the book called The Joke coincided with a time when the combined inanity of ideological dictatorship (in the communist countries) and journalistic oversimplification (in the West) was able to prevent a work of art from telling its own truth in its own words.'*<sup>xxiv</sup>

When the Cold War receded, some hoped that belief in universal ideals of the pursuit of truth would be revitalised. Instead, it declined further. Translation theories began to emphasise cultural or social prescriptions over translation itself. The ethics of translating *per se* were questioned, rehabilitating the ancient metaphor as literal violation and inviting translation itself to be seen as doing violence to cultures. Translation's importation or exposure of

ideas became discussed as culturally threatening, rather than emancipatory.

*Intellectually, anti-translation positions roll us back half a millennium.*

‘Appropriateness’ is being substituted as an alternative ethical principle of translation, grounded in respecting cultural sensibilities instead of representing a text’s true meaning. Of course, translation has always been influenced by the customs of its age,<sup>xxv</sup> but what are the implications of expressly calling for non-linguistic and non-aesthetic norms to determine translation? Should the original text only be interpreted by individuals with a particular identity, lived experience or set of values?<sup>xxvi</sup> Where does cultural appropriateness leave cultural rebels, those whose writing is a counterstatement to such constraints? What defence does this translation etiquette offer the translators and translations of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* or other works offending ideological or cultural sensibilities?<sup>xxvii</sup>

A translation etiquette demanding appropriateness as its principle echoes past calls for the artistic imagination to operate within prescribed models of cultural authenticity. Yesterday, it was priests labelling

translations of the Bible as heresy, today, it is new puritans calling it ‘cultural appropriation’.

Such anti-translation ideas pose human sociability and the pursuit of mutual knowledge as dangerous - something that should be kept in check. Radical anti-translation positions echo old elite prescriptions restricting access to literacy and literature, seeking to restrict freedom of interpretation and enforce cultural gate-keeping. Intellectually, anti-translation positions roll us back half a millennium. Fortunately, we as speaking animals exercising our human sociability are constantly pushing back - we want to communicate across speech barriers.

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## **The liberty of translation**

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In the art of translation and retranslation, those of us who might not have the capacity to create original works can vicariously enjoy recreating a work and even discover a more expressive latent voice in ourselves. This enhances our individual and collective freedom of expression in principle and practice - no translation is the final word on the work.

Over a hundred translations exist in English of Dante's 1320 *Divine Comedy* - either *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* or

*Paradiso* - and inspiration for new translations continue to flower. The answer to what might be lost in translation, especially poetic translation, is always found in further translation.

For example, Hamlet's 'To be or not to be / That is the question' are two of the most (and most easily) translated lines of Shakespeare. The simplicity of these opening lines has encouraged other writers to take them up in distinct ways. Consider the Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek, in his classic *The Good Soldier Švejk and his Fortunes in the World War*. Playing with the verb 'to be', Hašek wrote these famous lines:

*'At' si bylo, jak si bylo, přece jak si bylo, ještě nikdy nebylo,  
aby jak si nebylo.'* <sup>xcviii</sup>

The lines may be translated enigmatically in ways echoing King Lear's fool, reinforcing the fatalistic folk wisdom underlying the lines:

*'However it were, somehow it were, but how never it were,  
nohow ever were.'*

Shakespeare has inspired creative responses across languages; so too has Hašek. What would Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* be without Hašek's *Švejk*?

In contrast, if a work is not translated, its audience and therefore its legacy becomes limited. Compare another writer who was as important in his own country as Hašek was for the Czechs - Miroslav Krleža was Croatia's most important writer of the twentieth century. He was repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature. The reason why Krleža is less well known internationally is because translation of his work has been slower, at least in English.

Let's take a look at Krleža's most famous poem *Khevenhiller AD 1579*. Czech speakers have speculated that Hašek's two-line word play - 'At' si bylo, jak si bylo' - was inspired by Krleža's poem's extended word-play in his line 'kak bi bilo da ne bi nekak bilo'. This poem appears in Krleža's 1936 *The Ballads of Petrica Kerempub*,<sup>xxix</sup> a work celebrating the expressiveness of the Kajkavian dialect historically prevailing in north-west Croatia. The poem cycle concerns a peasant uprising in the 1570s against feudal lords. It suggests that the fate of the peasant-soldiers under the Habsburgs is similar to that of their fellow Slavs under the Ottomans. Krleža's poem *Khevenhiller* is voiced from the perspective of peasants drafted to build a fortress on the military frontier, who argue that their oppression ensures they will be too weak to defend the land from the Ottomans - lord and peasant alike will fall.

More of us should take up the liberty of translating or retranslating against our habitual language limits and enhance our liberty of expression. We should dare to translate - translation is for all. In this spirit, I offer our translation of Krleža's poem:

*Nowhere has ever been so  
And somehow not been so,  
However never be so  
And us somehow not be so.*

*For how if nobow were somehow so,  
Nobow would not anyhow be so.*

*Howsoever has ever somehow been so,  
How so, and not so, how never was so.*

*Howsoever somehow ever somehow so  
However would be however would be so.*

*Nowhere was there where nothing was,  
So nowhere not be where nothing not be.*

*How be, so be, how so ever has been,  
How be, how will be, and ever somehow be!*

*For how may there be or happen anywhere  
Where the peasant not ever be burdened with feudal toil.*

*Nowhere has ever been, nor ever will be,  
Where the peasant not be drafted into war.*

*Howsoever was so, howsoever so anew,  
However was so, so how is and how ever be so.*

*Howsoever was so, howsoever must be,  
How the men must go and build fortifications,*

*Dig trenches and carry mortar,  
Keeping their tails between their legs like curs.*

*The peasant knows not wherefore it be so,  
Peasants be hungry and military lords full.*

*Nowhere was ever not so for us,  
Nowhere where the peasant not hungry,*

*For nowhere on earth nor in heaven be,  
And so in the end the Turk will defeat us all.*

*And the peasant's fate whether he dies here or there  
Or in Zagreb Cathedral,*

*His remains having no memorial  
Save animal droppings on a pauper's grave.*

- Translated by Vanessa and Mladen Pupavac.

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