

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

TRANSLATION AS TRANSHUMANCE

MIREILLE GANSEL | Translated by Ros Schwartz | Foreword by Lauren Elkin

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Translation *as* Transhumance

MIREILLE GANSEL

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Historical Events

Holocaust (1933-1945): the mass persecution and genocide of Jews, led by German chancellor Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party of Germany, ultimately as part of a “Final Plan” to eliminate the entire Jewish population of Europe.

Vietnam War (1955-1975): a military conflict between North Vietnam and South Vietnam along with South Vietnam’s primary ally, the United States. The Vietnam War arose out of North Vietnam’s desire to reunite the country under Communist rule, and was a manifestation of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Prague Spring (January-August 1968): a brief period of political liberalization and nonviolent resistance to Soviet domination in Czechoslovakia, including loosened restrictions on travel, free speech, and the press. It was headed by political leader Alexander Dubcek in the hopes of establishing “socialism with a human face”.

Concepts

Transhumance: the seasonal movement of people and livestock between fixed summer and winter pastures (76, 77)

Doublespeak: language that is deliberately evasive or ambiguous (5, 18)

Borderland: geographical and psychological space between, and of, two places or peoples (35)

NOTES ON EXCERPTS

ahead of them
they strayed.
They camped
on the bridges
and instead of the axles
they heard men groaning in their sleep.

Now it is hard to find the path to your house.

In these times of solitude and solidarities, the price of a letter that gets past the censors:

Also the title of this section; brings to mind not only the difficulties of writing with censors and constant surveillance, but also the steep costs of free expression

* poet Reiner Kunze (pg 27) was a political dissident

THE POSTMAN

Day after day
bringing
hope
with each step
creating an arch
between two shores with no bridge.

The postman
day after day
knocking on people's doors
but not allowed inside.

In these times . . .

not mutually exclusive — there is always the possibility of solidarity, even in times of alienation and despair

Can the bridge be more than a physical structure?
How can translation be a bridge across language, space, and time?

NOTES ON EXCERPTS

How is translation
linked to space?
To time?

Translators must
thoroughly
immerse themselves
in the lives of
those whose
stories they seek to
translate

huge beamed ceiling of what was once the main ward. Its high windows look out over the small cloistered garden that has been restored to its original design, with its ancient trees and flowerbeds, a riot of Mediterranean colors and fragrances. It was in that former ward, at my desk looking out onto the garden, that I began to feel that this truly was a place where it would be possible to capture the bursts of light and music of Sachs's poetry of disaster in the urgency of its time. I remember that late summer afternoon, as dusk was about to fall and the *mistral* had given the sky an extraordinary radiance. I was on my way back from a meeting at the offices of the publisher Philippe Picquier at Mas de Vert to discuss the content of the anthology of Vietnamese literature he was planning to publish that autumn. It included a selection of the poems I had translated in Hanoi with To Huu, Che Lan Vien, Te Hanh, and Xuân Diệu. Was it the voice of all those poet friends with whom I had journeyed across so many human landscapes and shared so many tears and joys? Was it the life force I had drawn from living among those people, in the intimacy of their everyday lives, sharing with them their poems and legend-songs, their sanctuaries? Whatever it was, in the clear blue of the intense dusk, I suddenly heard the secret murmur of Sachs's poetry infused with Hebrew calling to me. I suddenly felt, despite everything, a surge of faith in the indestructible light lodged within the human heart. I was ready to begin.

Embodied
and
Radical
empathy

→ Gansel opens the book with a discussion of the ways in which her family's languages were violently displaced.

80 Here, she argues for (and takes comfort in) the ultimate and essential goodness of humanity, in spite of such tragedies.

NOTES ON EXCERPTS

Volkskunde-Museum.

emphasizes studying
the whole person,
and the uniqueness
of each individual

Translating that irreducible, unassailable German required a lengthy and meticulous process of engaging in a humanist approach employing the humblest particular to investigate universal human explorations in time and space.

VERNACULAR:
native language
or dialect

Austrian
ethnologist;
Gansel admires
how her work
was rooted in
respect, empathy,
and humility

A long apprenticeship learning to listen to this language, so enriched by the vernacular of all the countries it traveled through, going with her, step by step, across all those territories. That was why, as I was finalizing my translation, I decided to set off for one of those very remote, high Swiss valleys where Eugenie Goldstern had roamed. I was a guest at the modest house, also a foundation, belonging to Professor Niederer, who was one of the very first ethnologists to visit Bessans and discover her work. It was only while I was finishing this translation, while I was staying in that little valley enclosed by a glacier, that I was able to understand the extent to which this language and this body of work had escaped, transgressing all the boundaries being put in place in interwar Europe.

subcategory
of anthropologists
who study different
peoples

I remember clearly how, one morning as the snows were melting, as I sat at the ancient table beneath the blackened beams, it suddenly dawned on me that the stranger was not the other, it was me. I was the one who had everything to learn, everything to understand, from the other. That was probably my most essential lesson in translation.

Gansel reverses typical conceptions of otherness. The opportunity to translate the works of others is a gift that we must approach with care and translating itself is an exercise in humbling ourselves, learning to appreciate the unfamiliar.

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THOUGHTS ON FURTHER READING

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

I couldn't stop thinking about Anzaldúa's concept of mestiza consciousness while reading Gansel! Both of them speak to linguistic borderlands—moving between different languages, and the histories and perspectives to which those languages are tied.

Carson, Anne. "Variations on the Right to Remain Silent." *A Public Space* 7 (2009).

Carson reflects on the kinds of silence that trouble a translator—physical, in the sense of pages torn or left empty, and metaphysical, where it falls short. This reminded me of Gansel's need to take "syntactical and semantic risks" as a translator, in the hopes of conveying the feeling of the original work, not easily captured in words.

DasGupta, Sayantani. "The Art of Medicine: Narrative Humility." *The Lancet* 371 (2008): 980-981.

As a physician, DasGupta brings a really interesting interdisciplinary perspective to the idea of storytelling and speaking for others. Like Gansel, she reminds us that we should approach other peoples and cultures with humility—that we need to really engage and earn their trust in order to access their stories.

Nabokov, Vladimir. "The Art of Translation." *The New Republic*, August 4, 1941.

Nabokov ruminates on the greatest sins that a translator can commit, as well as the requirements that a good translator should have. Both he and Gansel pick apart the incredibly detailed nuances of literary language, and the difficulties of trying to render those nuances in translation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The word “transhumance” appears only once in *Translation as Transhumance*, described as “the long, slow movement of the flocks to distant places, in search of the greenest pastures, the low plains in winter and the high valleys in summer” (76-77). What parallels does Gansel draw out between the practices embodied in translation and transhumance?
2. Gansel grounds her meditation on translation in the importance of language to people who have been persecuted, invaded, and displaced. What has Gansel witnessed that causes her to believe this? With these instances and your own personal experience in mind, how does language empower us to survive and resist?
3. How would you describe Gansel’s methodology as a translator? In what ways does it evolve throughout the many encounters she documents in this book?
4. Gansel believes that translation can build bridges across linguistic and geographical borderlands. However, she notes that some translators, too deeply entrenched in colonial thought, produce translations that arouse “a sense of foreignness, without being able to communicate the emotions, the deeper feelings that inspire a work” (69). What specific steps can translators take to avoid this issue, and build bridges based on mutual understanding and respect?
5. Based on Gansel’s account, what are the ethics involved in translation? How should translators be held accountable to the people who grant them access to their stories and intimate lives?
6. Gansel frequently refers to the idea of reclaiming lost or suppressed languages. For instance, she admires the East German poet Reiner Kunze, who, despite having to work under the surveillance of the secret police, was able to produce subversive poetry that “[gave] people back their own words” (37). How can language be manipulated or eroded by oppressive political forces? How can the oppressed reclaim it?
7. What does Gansel mean by an “inner language” (32)? How does this differ from other kinds of language?
8. *Translation as Transhumance* explores the issues involved in translating poetry, but does not consider other written forms. Do you think the same principles apply regardless of genre? How might translating a street sign merit the same amount of thought as translating a poem?

THE FEMINIST PRESS

The Feminist Press is an educational nonprofit organization founded to advance women's rights and amplify feminist perspectives. We publish classic and new writing from around the world, create cutting-edge programs, and elevate silenced and marginalized voices in order to support personal transformation and social justice for all people.

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This sample educator's guide was created in collaboration with an undergraduate student currently attending Columbia University. The student volunteer marked up passages, wrote discussion questions, and researched terms, concepts, and related resources, imagining that this text was on their course syllabus.

