

# The Borrowed Silence of Translation

I AM TAKING A standardized test in a boys' school in a different town. The desks are small and right-handed and my pencil drops. There is a space between its scratching in the bubbles on my exam and the small clatter it makes on the worn marble floor.

Where silence clearly signifies, has codified meaning within culture, noise fails to. The sounds that hold up the silence, surround it, cushion, make for it a velvet rope, cannot be integrated into the system. Examples? I am in this studio. I hear cars and birds. I hear the water pipes, I hear my neighborhood cursing at her canvas. They are a background, I can focus on them or not. Or I can focus on the quiet of this empty house. A buzz. The dishwasher. The church bells, shouting seven floors below, my neighbor's television, *Tú sí que vales*, it is very loud, she is very old. How do they fit in my translation?

I have a recurring and frustrating conversation with one of my students in an evening creative nonfiction class. The students, all traditionally college-age undergrads, come in tired and world weary at 6 p.m. They sit down and this one student starts talking about John Cage again. She uses his 4'33" as an example for everything. One of her favorite things is to tell me she "could have done it." I tell her "but you didn't do it" and every time someone makes that comment about contemporary art an artist dies. At some point we get talking about the role of silence in writing, of the pause, of how to use space and breath for dramatic effect in her sad love stories. She brings up Cage again. That his whole work was nothing. I listen to her—she seems very invested in this reading—and then counter. *But wasn't he saying, by holding his hands in the air, by not striking the keys, that the audience was doing the composing? Have you listened to the piece? To different recordings? The auditorium is far from silent.* Silence isn't silence, I keep attempting to drive this home. I find I too am invested in my reading.

LATELY, I AM VERY interested in exploring the parts that society

deems empty. Because I am convinced nothing is ever empty, not the air, not our pauses, not gutters between the frames in comic books. It doesn't mean I know what they're filled with, but I know they are filled. I know air contains heat and cold, that we have to cut through fog, that pauses are too often pregnant.

So I ask: Do the spaces between the words, the *pages left intentionally blank* (by someone else), the timed pause (without time signature to read), the extra indent, the character who stands wordless but is marked by speech—do they create lines of flight in my translations? Deleuze and Guattari's term, not mine: movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Wide air shafts for the words to fall through, suddenly the line is less grounded. The pauses and breaks, what is seeming silence in the text, allows room for clutter, proliferation. It allows room for noise. When I write my own work I am somehow aware of this. I am living it.

In a text there are often signs of silence. Like the inscription of a pause in a measure of music. But they belong to a different culture, a different economy of time. As an author my words hold breath for as long as I see fit. My attempts at someone else's timing seem needy, mollifying. Because silence is filled with noise. Noises large and small, uncontrollable and undefinable, noise is at one with silence, partner, companion.

THE HYPOTHESIS: I've been doing it wrong. When I write my own work I seek out relations, when I translate work I look at words as individual signs. I keep going back to Charles Olson and his discussion about there being two kinds of poets: those concerned with the choice of individual words and those concerned with the relationships between the words. I can't get it out of my mind. I am a writer of word relationships, less about precision and more about scaffolding and bridges and rope swings. But what does this mean for my translations? I am not saying the results will always be different than if they were made through a different method, but what if my relationship to translation needs to be shifted in to make a different kind of better?

I am working on translating an Italian feminist text from the 1960s, Carla Lonzi's *Autoritratto, Self-Portrait*. What if I translate it holding these two different principles in mind?

Lonzi interviews the most important modern artists working in Italy at the time and makes a montage of the interviews to, in fact, create an

autofiction. It is a book about her, through the voices of others. And there is one American artist in the mix. Cy Twombly. Twombly spent most of his adult life in Rome and Gaeta, a small city on the Tyrrhenian Sea an hour south of the capital. He was married to an Italian woman, and had a child. His life was in Italy. But in Lonzi's account he never speaks.

Cy Twombly: (silenzio)

I have a lot of questions. Did Cy Twombly understand the questions? Was he embarrassed about his accent, his Virginian drawl inhibiting him from rolling an "R"? Was the whole conversation, with Rotella and Turcati and Accardi and Fontana, all just a jumble of romantic noise?

It is a particular text and it is teaching me about (reteaching me about?) nonlinear narrative structure. Continuous non-sequitur questions are asked, others are answered. Desire, a gift I never asked for.

Cy Twombly: (silenzio)

In translation I find I am often attempting to have some kind of unmediated experience with the text. In fact, I find I am conscious of this anytime after reading for long periods in a foreign language. It is a different experience, for me, than reading in English. *Mi immedesimo* in English, and immediately with the words on the page, the narrator: I identify. It feels difficult to admit this sticky goo I feel toward my native tongue. I lift that tongue up to speak, hear the wet click of the frenulum.

The visceral quality of the phrase in English fails though; I need an Italian term to tell you how I melt into the page and lose sight of myself. This happens repeatedly while reading Carla Lonzi in *Autoritratto* but mainly because of the halting quality of the conversations she is having with "great men." Not only do I relate to and agree with most of her theories about art and criticism and religion and psychology but I feel for her. I know after this book she will never write about art again because she cannot find a way out of Italian modernism's patriarchal trappings; I know she will end her long-lasting relationship with Pietro Consagra soon as well, because of his need to be a "great artist" and have her career bow to his. She cannot *immedesimarsi* to him

and that does seem to be what he wants. What so many relationships seem to want. Is my relationship to English symbiotic? Codependent? This is the first time it occurs to me; words are always Other but often feel like they are mine. But they aren't even mine when they come from me, I steal them from the tapestry hovering above my head.

I am finding, I am finding this now (Olson writing the instant) that I translate things to make them mine, to same-same them to me. Okay okay, back to the question of those pauses in the text then. If translation, for me, is this process of transformation of self, how can I digest the breaks and silences? Are there really breaks and silences or are they filled with something so foreign I cannot make sense of them? If words proliferate in meaning, noise and silence proliferate as well. As we all suffer from boilermaker's disease today, we have to attempt to understand ambient noise from other continents, other centuries.

And when I translate, the silences and pauses are the most mysterious things; I think of all the sounds and movements that can fill them. It seems to me we too rapidly accept silence and pause within the context of translation. We seem to think it means something vaguely profound but rarely unique; we treat it as the opposite of language. In *Nilling*, Lisa Robertson writes, "As the city is not the opposite of the country, noise is not the opposite of silence. Noise interrupts or effaces the binary organization of sound as meaningful figure and its supportive field."

It has always been the figureless things that interest me. Or the distortion of the figure through a given medium: the impossibility of realism has always been so clear against the backdrop of our culture's obsession with it. I turn around in my study to glance back accusingly at where a lost book used to sit. Where did it go? Did I lend it to someone untrustworthy? It now taunts me in its absence. Like a long pause in a tense conversation, like the face of a dead friend in a passing stranger. I do not know what I am looking at. It is the pause between the time of picking up the pen and putting it down. The time between keystrokes. It is the time before my actions turn to memories turn into actions turn into sleep.

The man upstairs playing Maria Callas again at midnight.

Cy Twombly: (silenzio)

I am opening a book from a glass-doored cupboard, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari. In it a postcard from a friend I haven't seen in years, a black-and-white photo of the Franklin Mountains in El Paso, Texas, where she lives. She has written a quote on the back citing only that it is from *Split-Temples*, page 194. I do a search online to find a Temple to Jupiter in Split, Croatia. No books or poems.

*Cecilia Vicuña says  
Charles Olson says  
Memory is future  
because you will  
remember it in future tense*

There is a fair amount written on the writing of the instant and the writing of reflection. But in reading there is another time and all reading happens in the present. A three-year-old postcard becomes essential to my current reading. How did Andrea know of my need in anticipation? Years without speaking and here we are again: Time makes figureless all figures. Walk through the ancient city, see the once-sculpted warrior atop a pedestal.

For Deleuze, time is “a virtual flow of divergent durations.” I am baffled by the fact that there is no agreed-upon length to measure a line of poetry. I do what I think is natural, seek to enter into the flow of the author I work with. It is the space between words that offers the possibility for different translations. The potential and possibilities at disparateness, their seeming parity only on the surface.

Deleuze writes in *Difference & Repetition*,

Everywhere, the depth of difference is primary. It is no use re-discovering depth as a third dimension unless it has already been installed at the beginning, enveloping the other two and enveloping itself as third. Space and time display oppositions (and limitations) only on the surface, but they presuppose in their real depth far more voluminous, affirmed and distributed differences which cannot be reduced to the banality of the negative.

I have long been interested in noise, concerned with language and poetry as sound as much as I am concerned with it as content. But I want to know more about the agreed-upon measures of silence, or the clutter that we negate in calling it silence. How long is a full stop worth? An em dash? —a comma, a blank page?

This pause is in Italian  
This pause is in French  
This pause in Farsi  
This pause in Japanese  
This pause is in English

Filled with different sound, I step into another's duration. Deleuze: *the only time is the present*. It contains the past and future. The buildup to the writing is a storage unit and the boxes are breaking from wear, the contents spill, photographs shuffle to the floor, a child's mobile begins its song.