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At the Limits of Language:
The Challenge of Modernist Literature to Translation Theories and Practice

by

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At the Limits of Language:
The Challenge of Modernist Literature to Translation Theories and Practice

Nigel B. R. Reeves

It is a great pleasure to be able to address colleagues and students at Lingnan College on a fresh occasion.* And on this occasion I would like to begin by talking Nonsense!

There was an old man of Hong Kong
Who never did anything wrong;
He lay on his back, with his head in a sack,
That innocuous old man of Hong Kong.¹

Fortunately I did not have to invent this nonsense—it is of course a limerick by Edward Lear, the Victorian humorist poet. It illustrates vividly the problem which I want to debate with you today—the challenge of Modernist literature—European and American literature largely written between 1880 and 1930 but with antecedents and with descendants through to the post-World War II years and into the 1960s and 1970s—to translation theory and practice. How can one translate into the language of another speech community and culture works that in everyday parlance ‘make no sense’? Or at a deeper level, where the language of the work seems to defy or ignore the rules of grammar and syntax and individual words seem no longer connected with the physical or mental reality to which they usually refer?

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* This paper is based on a lecture delivered at Lingnan College, Hong Kong on 23rd November 1998.
The fundamental questions underlying my topic have been central to translation theory from its earliest days. Can a literary work in translation have the same or similar impact on a foreign language readership as on its own readership? For that to occur its content, a 'message', thoughts, feelings must be communicated. This communication to a new recipient audience is one key concept to be considered—and consideration of who the original audience was in contrast to the new audience is a further related issue.

But a literary work is not constituted simply by the expression of thoughts and feelings. Inseparable from this content, if the term is not too simplistic, is the form. And the form consists in the words chosen by the author inclusive not only of their meaning within the context of the sentence, paragraph, stanza or whole text but of their connotative meaning in the source language and culture. It also consists in their sound and that sound in relation to the sounds of the other chosen words. And it may even consist in the very appearance and shape of the words. But beyond words—or the *lexis*, we have to consider, as I have already indicated, how grammar, here in the sense of morphology, is used to relate the words and construct contextual meaning. Beyond that again we must consider how linguistic elements, the various parts of speech, are woven to create text at the sentence and textual unit level, that is the syntactical level. And finally, and especially in the literary work, we must consider the enframing structure or form—in poetry the verse, metre and rhyme; in verse drama likewise, and in it and in prose drama the pragmatic features of dialogue. Finally in prose, we must consider shifts of narrative perspective and any corresponding stylistic shifts, the use of paragraph and other structural devices that are among the factors shaping the aesthetic whole.

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This all adds up to the second major question: Can a translator transpose a work into another language and retain its aesthetic integrity? And in thinking of this question we must never forget that a special feature of the literary work is that meaning is embodied in the form.

It is, then, hardly surprising that translation theories have been deeply concerned with the notion of equivalence and it would be fair to say that it was a dominant issue in the 1960s and 1970s. This is not the place for a history or a complete mapping of translation theories. But it may not be too crass a generalisation to say there have been distinguished two major categories of equivalence: a communicative equivalence (Newmark), formulated earlier by Nida as dynamic equivalence, by Neubert as semantic and pragmatic équivalence, more recently by Bell as a socio-functional equivalence (my term), and by Hatim and Mason as equivalence of authorial intention, where the principal component is the relationship between the author and the readership by way of the text. Both the latter theories draw on Michael Halliday’s linguistic theory, a core tenet of which is that text is the product and a vehicle of social interaction.

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5 Susan Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies*, op. cit.; p. 27.


Closely related to these notions of communicative equivalence is the concept of equivalence of effect, highlighted by Nida\(^9\) which calls not only for the intellectual/content of the work to be transmitted to the TL readership but for an equivalent affective impact on the SL readership as on the TL readership to be achieved.

The other major category is formal equivalence, to use Nida’s term\(^10\) in which the intimate relationship between form and content is accepted but the emphasis in the translated product is on a reflection of the formal features, as Newmark has put it succinctly in the definition of his semantic equivalence:

A semantic translation attempts to recreate the precise flavour and tone of the original: the words are ‘sacred’, not because they are more important than the content, but because form and context are one. . . . A semantic translation attempts to preserve its author’s idiolect, his peculiar form of expression, in preference to the ‘spirit’ of the source or the target language.\(^11\)

This may be considered to correspond to Koller’s concept of formal equivalence\(^12\) (as one possible level of equivalence), Popovic’s textual/syntagmatic equivalence,\(^13\) where special attention is paid to the syntactical structuring of the source work, its formal shape, and to Wilss’s ‘wörtliche Übersetzung’—‘verbal translation’.\(^14\) In this

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\(^10\) Nida, loc. cit.

\(^11\) Peter Newmark, *Approaches to Translation*, op. cit., p. 47.

\(^12\) Werner Koller, *Einführung in die Übersetzungswissenschaft*, Quelle and Mayer, Heidelberg, 1979, pp. 190ff.


\(^14\) Wilss’s concept of ‘wörtliche Übersetzung’ is related to Nida’s ‘formal equivalence’ but involves consideration of lexical, syntactical and semantic dimensions and is distinctive from ‘word-for-word’ translation on the one hand.
category equivalence may be sought at a series of linguistic levels, phonemic (the sound), graphemic (the shape of the words), lexical, grammatical—morphological, syntactic and textual—formal\textsuperscript{15} (or discoursal), which I mentioned previously.

In more recent years interest in Translation Studies has shifted from the often quasi-scientific concern with equivalence. The text linguistic approach, focussing more holistically on text type and on genre, is of assistance in the area under debate here, for its identification of text functions, to which I shall return below. For equally serious consideration is the functionalist approach pioneered by Hans Vermeer with his 'Skopos' theory.\textsuperscript{16} Paramount in this approach is the purpose of the translation itself. What is the TL audience and what is their intended relationship with the source text? It might be, for example, to make accessible to a general reading public a work from a foreign literary canon of which the originating country may be distant geographically, culturally and linguistically. Or it might be to make an historical work that only scholars of the source language can read with ease available to a student population.

\textsuperscript{15} Cp. Katharina Rei\ss, op. cit., fn. 3, pp. 115ff. Rei\ss, 21f uses the term 'documentary/philological/learned' translation for a translation that informs the reader about the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic dimensions of the original text.

Or it might be to provide scholars of comparative literature with a formally close translation that owes loyalty to textual forms rather than elegance. To encompass this approach Vermeer and Katharina Reiß, his collaborator, have created the term ‘Adequacy’ in distinction to equivalence, (which for them would involve a process of prioritising linguistic choices for the translation product to achieve the same communicative function as in the source culture).¹⁷ ‘Adequacy’—‘Ađaquathet’ is a useful concept to which I will return when considering the significance of the functionalist approach generally for the translation issues raised by modernist literature.

In none of these theories, among which we can discern a common core of categorisation, does untranslatability feature as the central issue. For all the linguistic, formal and cultural obstacles in the way of translation some degree of flexibility or compromise will render the venture feasible. Kade,¹⁸ (whom Koller quotes) stated at an extreme end from a Marxian rationalistic standpoint that the semantic meaning of any text, which he equates with the ‘rational components of the informational content’, can always be substituted in the TL and the communicative purpose achieved. Koller himself argues from a Chomskyian universalist theory of human languages that translation and expressibility are in principle always possible.¹⁹ And, Reiss and Vermeer make the reproductory transfer of information the heart of their definition of the very term ‘translation’.²⁰ Non-transferability does not seem to feature in the discourse analytical approach of the Hallidayian theorists, Bell, or Hatim and Mason, and is rejected in Georges Mounin’s similar notion of the shared experience of author and reader, author and

¹⁷ Reiß and Vermeer, op. cit., p. 49.
²⁰ Reiß and Vermeer, op. cit.
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translator.\textsuperscript{21} Nida, who did treat untranslatability at length, saw it as a matter of linguistic correspondence or non-correspondence at the phonological, morphological, syntactical and lexical levels—in other words he took a contrastive linguistics approach.\textsuperscript{22} Catford tackled untranslatability in a manner not unlike Nida. He distinguished two types of untranslatability. Linguistic untranslatability is where the 'functionally relevant features include some which are in fact formal features of the language of the SL text. If the TL has no formally corresponding feature, the text, or the item, is (relatively) untranslatable'.\textsuperscript{23}

Catford means here items such as puns, homographs such as 'bank', a river bank and a financial institution, or polysemy where the meaning of the SL text relies on an item having two or more meanings. Now this may indeed be serious if a pun or word-play is pivotal to a text as in an anecdote or where punning is a primary feature of the author's language as it can be in the comic word-plays of Shakespeare's comedies, in the conceits of the 17th century English metaphysical poets, and, coming to the period with which we are concerned here, in the works of Lewis Carroll, such as Alice in Wonderland, which can also be categorised as belonging to 'nonsense literature'. Here even Koller admits one can be close to defeat but the defeat lies in the rendering of individual word plays and underlying phrases.\textsuperscript{24} But it does not render the text itself in its entirety untranslatable. Catford's second category is cultural untranslatability—where there is no corresponding notion or custom. Popovic comes closer to the nub of the problem in the case of Modernist literature when he points to the source of the untranslatability in a fundamental feature of the source text. He

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
  \item Bell op. cit., fn. 6; Hatim and Mason fn. 7, Georges Mounin, Les problèmes théoriques de la traduction, Gallimard, Paris, 1963, pp. 277ff.
  \item Nida, op. cit., pp. 193-225.
  \item Koller, op. cit., pp. 170ff.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
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speaks of 'a situation in which the linguistic elements of the original cannot be replaced adequately in structural, linear, functional or semantic terms in consequence of a lack of denotation or connotation.' 25

Of course this lack could be caused by defects in the text, a text that is simply sloppily written or illogically argued, and it may be that that is what Popovic had in mind. However, it may be deliberate, a functional device.

Before I take the argument further, I therefore need to consider briefly what are the principal functions of language as commonly distinguished in translation studies. Using Bühler's typology (developed by Reiß for translation) 26 we can distinguish the expressive function, the informative function and the vocative function. The expressive function characterises those texts in which the author's inner reality or the author's perspective on reality are paramount. It will include imaginative literature, quintessentially the lyric but also essays, correspondence but arguably even philosophical writings, though they may claim to be objective in concern. The informative function is where the extra-linguistic reality is paramount, e.g. instructions for use, text-books, reports, technical and scientific articles. While it is true that even in these texts terminology may be used loosely, it remains the text function which allows most closely translational equivalence through the use of standardised terms referring unambiguously to concepts and their objects (if physical) that are commonly identified by expert groups in each of the speech and specialist discourse communities. Thirdly the vocative function denotes those texts that seek to persuade or induce the reader to think, feel and/or act in a particular way. Newmark,

who has elucidated these functions admirably, adds the *aesthetic* function which plays on the senses through sound, metaphor and structure, the *phatic* function which includes phrases designed to maintain friendly contact, and the *metalingual* function which is the use of language to describe and discuss language. I would however suggest that the aesthetic function is a sub-set of the expressive, the phatic of the vocative and the metalingual of the informative. A text may, of course, serve more than one function in varying proportions but the distinction is very valuable for the translator in considering strategies and prioritising aspects of equivalence to be emphasised in the translational product.

It will be evident that the main function with which we are concerned here is the *expressive* function, surely the central function of imaginative literature. Now there is literature which claims not to be expressive but rather to reflect or to imitate external reality. The imitation of the objective world (*mimesis*) has historically been one of the central aims of art, most obviously in the visual arts, and in literature in the narrative genre which, in the culminating manifestation of the Naturalism of novelists such as Zola or of dramatists such as Hauptmann, writing in the 1880s, even claimed to reproduce social reality with scientific objectivity and impartiality. Yet the slice of reality chosen for depiction, as with a photograph, itself betrays a particular perspective and tells us something about the viewpoint of the author/photographer originator. All literary genres convey in some measure a personal or even individualistic view of the world, not only the most apparently intimate genre, the lyrical poem. Even the most formally determined neo-classical tragedy of Racine, with its adherence to the unities of time, place and action, its confinement to the twelve syllabled alexandrine and its strictly controlled rhyming scheme, and its re-presentation of plot

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and character derived from Ancient Greek drama and epic, betrays Racine's personal view of human nature.

But this view remains essentially an intensification and powerful re-versioning of a plot with which the 17th century courtly and high bourgeois audience would have had some familiarity through a common classical education. The re-versioning principle even holds true for the lyric, where from the Middle Ages, the artistic prowess of the poet lay less in the expression of new, different emotions, feelings, and responses than in the artful re-creation of the familiar, using conventional imagery, traditional metre and rhyme, and where originality lay in subtle new juxtapositions and conceits. Adherence to traditional form—the unities and the alexandrine in France, or in England Marlowe’s and Shakespeare’s establishment and adherence to the five-act three-part tragic form and the blank verse iambic pentameter or the use of conventional metres, rhymes and stanzas in lyric poetry as well as in epic verse—were not simply the consequence of a slavish acceptance of the rules laid down by the Ancients, by Aristotle and Horace, for example. They represented an unspoken compact with the audience or readership. Their response was guided and supported by the familiar form, which acted as a kind of scaffolding, enabling them to concentrate on reception, to enjoy the aesthetic experience, appreciate subtle variation on the theme, in an age where universal time seemed eternal, and, where notwithstanding—or perhaps precisely because of the ever present possibility of calamitous war or disease together with the constant reminder of death and mortality that characterised the weekly—or even daily message of the Christian Church—drama, epic and lyrical verse may have served as a comfort and tragedy as catharsis or release of emotional tension, helping the audience to cope with the stresses of living. Certainly, three major German thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries were to reinterpret catharsis in this way as the crucial
link between art, specifically stage tragedy and audience. Lessing, Schiller and Nietzsche were all to argue that in their various ways.  

This compact, spoken or unspoken, between art and audience was first placed under strain through the presentation and exploration of realms of extreme experience in the Romantic movement that swept Europe from the 1770s through to the 1830s. The reality portrayed now included the supernatural and confused mental realities, where the dividing line between dream and waking experience, the rational world and the irrational were blurred and the supremacy of the intellect questioned, as in the stories of Tieck and E. T. A. Hoffmann. Calamity had always featured in the epic of the Middle Ages and in tragedy. But a divine order had been comfortably discernible. Now, in the works of Heinrich von Kleist, for example, man is the victim of savage nature and still worse of an uncontrollable savagery of human nature. No one has depicted the savagery of love more terrifyingly than Kleist in his tragedy *Penthesilea* in which the heroine, the Amazon Queen, not only kills her unarmed lover in mortal combat, when he had expected an encounter consummated in love, but tears him to pieces alongside her pack of hunting dogs.

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28 Audience participation in the experience of stage tragedy in the form of catharsis or emotional release had been a central issue in the aesthetic debate since the revival of Classical tragedy and interest in Aristotelian theory in the 17th and 18th centuries. In Germany, for example, Lessing had argued for the extension of the content of high tragedy to include the fate of tragic individuals in the middle class, based on the argument of catharsis through audience identification with the tragic hero/heroine. (e.g. *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* 14, [16 June 1767]). Schiller developed the catharsis element to embrace the whole of the aesthetic experience, ascribing to it a psycho-therapeutic effect of benefit to the audience or reader, so securing for art a central role in education and the betterment of society. (Schiller - *Über die Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen* [1795; 1801]); Nietzsche saw catharsis or the vicarious experience of the horror of life through the aesthetic protection of tragedy as the way the Ancient Greeks coped with insight into the essentially tragic nature of living. He was using the Ancient Greeks as an analogy to what he believed to a reawakening of the primeval Ancient Dionysian spirit in modern Germany through music (specifically Wagner!) - *Die Geburt der Tragodie oder Griechentum und Pessimismus* (1871).
Byron's works, too, are filled with high passion, frightful and disastrous misfortunes and terrifyingly bloodthirsty sequences.

But despite the shock and disorienting effect of these works on the readership, the link with the public was still retained in most cases through the continued use of familiar forms—the five-act tragedy, epic verse, the novella, the episodic novel, the epistolary novel, even the fairy tale. And even if the reality presented is unassuring, the language itself is not under threat. Even the hugely complex language of Kleist, which he uses to model and bring under artistic control the chaos of the natural and human world that he perceived, still retains faith in the capacity of syntax to master or pin down events and states of mind that the works' characters cannot themselves understand, let alone control.

What we see, then, is a continued relationship between author and audience, though one which is more demanding on the recipient than previously. And even if language is pushed to its syntactical limits as in Kleist (who was indeed described by a contemporary as 'unGerman' in style), language still provides a common bond with the public.

And as my remark about the Naturalism of the 1880s indicated, in the subsequent works of Realism, the novels of Balzac, Flaubert, Dickens, Keller, Stifter, Fontane, to name but a few, confidence in language to map reality, physical and mental seems to grow, however great the struggle of a Flaubert to achieve the precisely right formulation.

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The how, what, why, when and for whom questions asked by the Hallidayian translation theorists, can still be answered. The connection between source language, text and audience is unequivocal. The lexical, grammatical and syntactical features of the source text are comprehensible and intact. The expressive function of the text is related to an informative function in the sense that the work of art also claims to tell us something objectively certain about the world. Intact, also, therefore are the component elements in the categories that inform modern and our own contemporary translation theory.

But in the 1880s and 1890s there is a profound change. The change took the form in some ways of a deepened, radical revival of Romantic concerns which I can only sketch here. In Freud's theory of dream the non-waking mental world assumes an intimate relationship with our actions in the waking world. We appear to be unaware victims of infantile and childhood experiences that we do not consciously remember. Society is seen as the necessary but precarious repressor of an untamed nature, while in Jung our dreams are evidence of an unbroken connection with an archaic past. It is particularly in Vienna, as George Steiner has pivotally noted, that these concerns surface, at a time when the Austro-Hungarian Empire is becoming moribund, its values showing themselves to be hollow but with no replacement in sight. Language itself comes under scrutiny as a viable vehicle of meaning, as we most eloquently read in Hofmannsthal's fictive letter by Lord Chandos of 1902.

Philosophers, above all Moritz Schlick, the Viennese philosophy professor and his circle of Logical Positivists, attempt to reorientate language by stripping away the subjective and connecting it, by the strict application of logical rules of statement validity, to the

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32 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Ein Brief, first published in Der Tag, 18 & 19, October 1902.
objective world. It was an endeavour paralleled by Bertrand Russell in his mathematically inspired approach to philosophy and language and continued by the Austrian, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who came to study under Russell in Cambridge in the 1910s.

While Wittgenstein was to reduce the scope of philosophical inquiry and language in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* almost literally to the point where it flips over into nonsense, other extraordinary experiments had befallen language elsewhere. In the Nonsense verse of Edward Lear popular verse forms were preserved, the metre and rhyme coming to be the dominant feature, as in my opening quotation, while the lexis is freed from its fundamental task of reference to a reality shared by author and reader. Now, the referential function of language underlies all others, the expressive, the informative and the vocative. It is important to make this function, implicit in Bühler’s, Reiß’s and Newmark’s typology of language functions, explicit at this point. The disappearance of the referential function of language appears to be the opposite of Wittgenstein’s reduction of language to sets of logically coherent propositions that he claims closes any gap between language and reality. But it is part of the same crisis of confidence in language as the intermediary between speaker (or author), experience, and recipient.

In Lear and Lewis Carroll (and in Germany Christian Morgenstern) the liberation of language from the confines of reference gives scope for hilarious satirical effect. Since the meaning of Nonsense lies in the

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33 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, German Text with an English translation *en regard* by G. C. K. Ogden and introduction by Bertrand Russell, Routledge, London and New York, 1981 (1922) paragraph 6.54, p. 188. “My propositions are elucidating in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”. Cp. Rüdiger Görner, *Die Kunst des Absurden, Über ein literarisches Phänomen*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1996, pp. 66ff.
parody of conventional meaning, and the effect is heavily reliant on sound—on the phonetic element and its connotations—while syntax and grammar remain intact, the SL link between author and reader, the comic communicative effect and satirical authorial intention can only be preserved, if at all, I would suggest, by a complete recreation of the work in the target language, reproducing the form, rhyme and assonance. Whether the dislocated or gratuitous meaning of individual lexical items can be reproduced would probably have to be a secondary consideration. For nonsense raises the question of what is to be communicated, if the ‘meaning’ to be conveyed is itself a parody of conventional meaning.

The liberation of language from its basic referential function presents a different order of challenge not only to the translator but to the SL reader when we consider the work of the French Symbolists. In Mallarmé, as in Lear, a traditional form is preserved, the fourteen-line sonnet. The syntax is disrupted, grammatical connections are omitted, and the meaning (in the sense of the relationship between the lexical items) is obscure. But the retention of rhyme and metrical rhythm, combined with assonance give a quality of incantation, as if we were approaching the mystical. The theme of the poem below appears to be a fatal shipwreck on cliffs in a wild sea in which a mysterious ‘tu’—perhaps a woman, perhaps a siren, perhaps the very ocean, seems to be the focus-point, whether victim or cause.35

A la nue accablante tu
Basse de basalte et de laves
A même les échos esclaves
Par une trompe sans vertu

Quel sépulcral naufrage (tu

34 Koller interestingly compares a number of German and French renderings of *Alice in Wonderland* and the translators’ attempt to reproduce puns and word plays. Op. cit., pp. 171ff.
Le sais, écume, mais y haves)
Suprême une entre les épaves
Abolit le mât dévêtu

Ou cela que furibond faute
De quelque perdition haute
Tout l'abîme vain éployé

Dans le si blanc cheveu qui trâine
Avarement aura noyé
Le flanc enfant d'une sirène

The reader will experience the incantation, the hypnotic sound, the pattern. Meaning, even for a French speaker, is sensed only in fragments. But that it is a thing of beauty is apparent. The sinister quality less so. This is George Steiner's comment on the similarly opaque Mallarmé sonnet,

Une dentelle s'abolit
Dans le doute du feu suprême
A n'tentr' ouvrir comme un blasphème
Qu'absence éternelle de lit

Cet unanime blanc conflit
D'une guirlande avec la même,
Enfui contre la vitre blême
Flotte plus qu'il n'ensevelit

Mais chez qui du rêve se dore
Tristement dort une mandore
An creux néant musicien

Telle que vers quelque fenêtre
Selon nul ventre que le sien,
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Filial on durait pu naître. 36

‘There are overlaps with the older, classic devices of difficulty: puns, exotic words, contractions of grammar. Explication and paraphrase will have some hold on the text. But the energies of concealment are of an entirely new species. The poem presses against the confines of language. It works not in the mould of public speech but in spite of it (the visible logic of meaning derives mainly from the pattern of vowels and accents . . .) 37

We encounter, then, a poem that is close to the limits of language as a medium of communication in the public domain. The personal vision of the poet has now become so intensely individual that it does not wish to reveal itself in normally accessible language. The key components of translation theory in the domain of communicative/social interaction are threatened. In what does the relationship with a public lie? Indeed in what sense did Mallarmé have a readership in mind at all? The expressive function has become so solipsistic that we no longer encounter expression in any normal sense of the word. But what of form? If form and content are so inextricably linked as Nida and Newmark argue (and I agree) then, I would suggest ‘formal equivalence’ or ‘semantic translation’ defy us, since to retain both assonance and the meaning of the lexical items seems a vain endeavour, exacerbated by the disruption of syntax and the absence of completed grammatical links. While some equivalence of effect may be feasible through a recreation that aims at mystification, we must surely be speaking here of a version rather than a translation. Perhaps Vermeer’s functionalist notion of the purpose of the translation, the Skopos theory, can help, whereby there might be more than one version, almost a word-for-word

36 Stéphane Mallarmé, op. cit., p. 147.
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rendering—an inelegant philological version—and an aesthetically more pleasing and coherent recreation.

Mallarmé may be an extreme example but he is not alone—on the contrary he was a pioneer in the severing of language from its conventional referential function in the service of an art so isolated from the common gaze and from common understanding that it could assume a quasi-mystical or religious quality.

In his extraordinary novel, published in 1904, *The Notes of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rainer Maria Rilke produces what is an extended, written interior monologue, a diary-like mapping of a fictive Danish poet’s (Malte Laurids Brigge) memories of childhood, experiences of Paris where he is living, and his struggle to write poetry, in which—the themes of isolation, death en masse and en famille, the impossibility of reciprocated love, and the strength of unrequited love are the fabric of the writer’s search for language.

He was like someone who hears a magnificent language and feverishly tries to write poetry in it. But disillusionment awaited him as he discovered how difficult is this language; at first he did not wish to believe that a whole long life could pass forming the first short pseudo-sentences that make no sense. He threw himself into learning like an athlete in the field; but the density of what he had to master slowed him down.38

What Malte says of the agony of this search was to be a prophetic anticipation of his struggle to write his ‘masterpiece’. The *Duino Elegies* that took eleven years to create, from start to frenzied final outpouring, spanned 1910 to 1921.

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*Page 18*
Important for us is that Rilke's slow, inner distillation of experience and memory results in a remarkably condensed style in which explication is absent; personal reminiscence—a scene—a scent—a name derived from reading—a painting—fuse to create an almost psalm-like incantation in which the meaning lies in chains of association and the magic in the rhythms of the free verse.

In this example the syntax is easily followed. The content is difficult because the reader—unless a Rilke scholar or armed with extensive notes—cannot share the full power of the association. But perhaps the translator here can simply reproduce that difficulty as equivalent effect. The central problem lies in reflecting the rhythm that is central to the psalm-like quality and thus its strong religious-cum

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mystical connotation whilst still conveying the semantic content of the lexis.

This is Stephen Spender's renowned translation of the same passage:

But tell me, who are they, these acrobats, even a little more fleeting than we ourselves, -so urgently, ever since childhood, wrung by an (oh, for the sake of whom?) never-contented will? That keeps on wringing them, bending them, slinging them, swinging them, throwing them and catching them back: as though from an oily smoother air, they come down on the threadbare carpet, thinned by their everlasting upspringing, this carpet forlornly lost in the cosmos. Laid on there like a plaster, as though the surburban sky had injured the earth.

And hardly there, upright, shown there: the great initial letter of Thereeness, — than even the strongest men are rolled once more, in sport, by the ever-returning grasp, as once by Augustus the Strong a tin platter at table.40

The reader wonders who the acrobats were that inspired this remarkable poem, capturing the futility and daily round of ordinary people caught up in life's machine, helpless before the force that uses them yet that they need in order to survive, mere servants of the strong. These acrobats were in fact inspired by Picasso's painting in his Blue period of a troupe of circus acrobats—Les Saltimbanques, which Rilke had frequently viewed while living in Paris, (while

40 Rilke, loc. cit., p. 55.
Augustus the Strong had been the Elector of Saxony an Elector Prince of the Holy Roman Empire famed for his strength. What the translation cannot capture is the visual yet mysterious dimension indicated in the German by the reference to the capital letter D of 'Dastehn'—namely the D shape of the group of acrobats as they stand in Picasso’s painting. But it has equally to be admitted that the reader without knowledge of, let alone access to, the unnamed painting could not gain that insight either.

Rilke's lyrical condensation and use of personal reminiscence to reflect universal experience have affinities with the technique of T. S. Eliot in The Waste Land, published just one year later in 1922. Rilke's search had been a dual one—converting the encounter with external reality into inwardness through language, and searching in external reality for equivalents to inward experience—as he put it in Malte Laurids Brigge—

Then you set about that unexampled act of violence, your work, which, more and more impatiently, more and more despairingly sought among visible things equivalents for the vision within.  

Eliot, like Rilke, deeply affected by a sense of alienation in the rapidly growing urban sprawl and mass existence of early 20th century cities, coined the term 'objective correlative' in his essay on Hamlet of 1919, for what he called 'a set of objects, a chain of events which shall be the formula of the particular emotion, such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked'.

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41 Spender and Leishman's translation in introduction to Duino Elegies, op. cit., p. 17.
In *The Waste Land* we again encounter that condensation, that use of allusion and reminiscence personal to the poet which, without exploration—and perhaps not even then, remains obscure to the reader, creating atmosphere and appealing to the senses and emotions as much as, if not more than to, any conceptualising intellect. Using incantatory words from the Indian epic ‘The Upanishad’ as a frame, this is how *The Waste Land* ends:

**DA**

*Dhayadhvam*: I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus

**DA**

*Damyata*: The boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

*Poi s’ascose nel foco che gli affina*

*Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow*

*Le Prince d’Aquitaine à la tour abolie*

These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then l’le fit you. Hieronymo’s mad again.
At the Limits of Language

Shantih shantih shantih

In his own notes to the poem offered by way of what he called 'elucidation', T. S. Eliot quotes F. H. Bradley's Appearance and Reality, which illuminates the highly personal, indeed almost solipsistic quality of the vision:

My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thought or my feelings. In either case my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others which surrounds it. . . . In brief, regarded as an existence which appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul.

If this holds true, then communication in language becomes an intrinsically dubious activity, and the expressive function ontologically blocked.

Indeed, Eliot, highly articulate in his critical prose, stated the deliberate intention of the modernist poet to transform language into a more personal, particular form in order to capture the personal, particular meaning very plainly in an essay of 1921 on 'The Metaphysical Poets':

Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate language if necessary, into his meaning.

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44 T. S. Eliot, op. cit., p. 84.
45 T. S. Eliot, Selected Prose, op. cit., fn. 42, p. 112.
But in dislocating language's syntax to suit the 'peculiar', 'private', or even idiosyncratic vision of the poet, the work is being moved to the edge of the public domain. The relationship between author and reader is emburdened—and still more so in the delicate relationship between a translator and a new target readership from a different linguistic and cultural community. The social interaction at the heart of Halliday's theory of text becomes opaque, obstructed, or disrupted. For the poet is more concerned with his vision, his meaning, than with sharing that vision with a readership, a task that might even be impossible if we accept Eliot's Bradley quotation at face value! In *East Coker*, published some 22 years later in 1943, the struggle with language continues:—in a passage that seems to be a parody of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the poem becomes a poem about poetry, words about words and lost meaning. Now no dislocation—we are back in the realm of the translatable—a fusion of Newmärk's expressive, aesthetic and metalingual functions, but expressive of feared communicative failure:

What is the late November doing
With the disturbance of the spring
And creatures of the summer heat,
And snowdrops writhing under feet
And hollyhocks that aim too high
Red into grey and tumble down
Late roses filled with early snow?
Thunder rolled by the rolling stars
Simulates triumphal cars
Deployed in constellated wars
Scorpion fights against the Sun
Until the Sun and Moon go down
Comets weep and Leonids fly
Hunt the heavens and the plains
Whirled in a vortex that shall bring
The world to that destructive fire
Which burns before the ice-cap reigns.
That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter
It was not (to start again) what one had expected.
What was to be the value of the long looked forward to,
Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity
And the wisdom of age? Had they deceived us
Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders,
Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit?
The serenity only a deliberate hebetude,
The wisdom only the knowledge of dead secrets
Useless in the darkness into which they peered
Or from which they turned their eyes. There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.46

The objective correlative, then, remains deeply problematic.
Language for the poet of this period seems unable to convey personal experience to an audience while the connection with experience of the world is also ruptured. There is a deep sense of futility about the value of modern civilisation, the cities that it has built, the direction in which it fondly imagines it is going. Language as the medium through which we share experience with others in this same confusing world is inadequate. But the attempts to force language beyond the limitations of the very structures that create meaning, or to load it with highly personal imagery, while still creating things, verbal artefacts of beauty, are distancing those artefacts from the reader.

In James Joyce, my last example, the novelist turns inwards to the mental realities of his protagonists, normal time sequences and spatial relationships are suspended, the narrative perspectives shift but the reader is given no Ariadne’s thread with which to follow the labyrinthine meanderings of Bloom, Joyce’s modern-day recreation of *Ulysses*. We learn of the world through the prism of the characters’ minds. At the heart of this technique is the interior monologue and the stream of consciousness technique pioneered *in extenso* by Virginia Woolf, but foreshadowed in the dislocated narrative organisation, leaps of style and mode, and the virtuoso use of word-play by Laurence Sterne’s *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, published in 1760 and, in Anthony Burgess’s view, anticipated in the interior monologues of Charles Dickens Samuel Butler, Jane Austen, but most immediately, of Dujardin.47

In Joyce the idiosyncracies of language as it drifts in daydreams and half-sleep, disjointed, syntactically and grammatically truncated, jumping from memory to memory, image to image, appear on the printed page. Language is moving still further from the public domain. Molly Bloom’s interior monologue as she lies in bed beside Bloom and recalls her life and loves, *a tour de force* of sixty pages of dense prose without a single comma or full stop which ends and begins with the word ‘yes’ is the most celebrated example:

Yes because he never did a thing like that before as ask to get his breakfast in bed with a couple of eggs since the *City Arms* hotel when he used to be pretending to be laid up with a sick voice doing his highness to make himself interesting to that old faggot Mrs Riordan that he thought he had a great leg of and she never left us a farthing all for masses for herself and her soul greatest miser ever was actually afraid to lay out 4d for her methylated spirit telling me all her ailments she had

too much old chat in her about politics and earthquakes and the end of the world let us have a bit of fun first God help the world if all the women were her sort down on bathingsuits and lownecks of course nobody wanted her to wear I suppose she was pious because no man would look at her twice I hope I'll never be like her a wonder she didn't want us to cover our faces but she was a welleducated woman certainly and her gabby talk ... 48

Now this is still comprehensible. Sentences are run into each other but there are no linguistic elements that prevent an attempt to understand other than the fluid syntax and the absence of punctuation.

But how about this dislocated, cryptic passage? Here we are truly at language's limits in the expression of a personal experience, with onomatopoeia, assonance and neologisms adorning the dislocated syntax:

Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing
Imperthnchn thnchnhn.
Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips,
Horrid ! And gold flushed more.
A husky fifenote blew.
Blew. Blue bloom is on the
Gold pinnacled hair.
A jumping rose on satiny breasts of satin, rose of Castille.

Trilling, trilling: Idolores
Peep! Who's in the . . . peepofgold?
Tink cried to bronze in pity.
And a call, pure, long and throbbing. Longindying

Nigel B. R. Reeves

call.

O rose! Notes chirruping answer. Castille. The morn is breaking.
Jingle jingle jaunted jingling.
Coin rang. Clock clacked. \(^{49}\)

What is this strange passage? It turns out to be an individual, evocative, erotic prose poem about lovemaking at the end of a night, as we begin to discover from the clues in the next lines:

Jingle. Bloo. \(^{50}\)

Yet it is also, cunningly, an evocation of Homer—the distant model for *Ulysses* . . . . But if this passage evokes through a reduction of language to the inchoate sounds that accompany an early morning love-making scene, it can still be unlocked. A semantic translation reproducing the bare grammatical and lexical essentials, imitating the sound effects would not be an impossible task.

In Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, however, we move to language in which dialect, puns, neologism, broken syntax, dominate to the point where we have to speak of a private language. The traces of a pre-existent lexis are there, sometimes to be clearly discerned, sometimes not. There are cultural allusions, with which we may be familiar—or not. But there is no work which has gone so far in its desire for expressiveness and beyond that, in its linguistic self-consciousness, in its marathon play with its own medium, in its non-conceptual

\[^{49}\text{James Joyce, op. cit., pp. 328f.}\]
\[^{50}\text{James Joyce, loc. cit.}\]
metalingual function, to use Newmark's term. Here, I believe, we are not only at the limits of language but have passed beyond.

Anthony Burgess, the novelist and lifelong perceptive critic and apologist of Joyce, writes of *Finnegan's Wake*.

The language of *Finnegan's Wake* ... justifies its difficulties and unprecedented complexities in terms of its subject matter. Joyce, having exhausted the potentialities of waking English in *Ulysses*, was compelled, in his next book, to 'put the language to sleep'. Freed by sleep of the rigidities of daytime modes of interpreting time and space, language becomes fluid. Opening itself up to the incursions of images from man's collective unconscious, it is also willing to be fertilised by many of the other languages of the world. Many but not all. The dream is to be about human history, but only that segment which has a relevance to a Western brain sleeping in a Western bed. . . .

Certainly almost all the key components of traditional translation theory are at issue—the communicative relationship between author and reader, the communicability of the content to be communicated, the public role of language. They are replaced by an idiosyncratic code that is liberated from the confines of a language where the principal function is referential. It is difficult to decide whether any of Newmark's language functions are in fact fulfilled in any conventional sense—expressive, informative, vocative, aesthetic, phatic, metalingual. Or alternatively it may be claimed that all are fulfilled, albeit in a unique manner. To look for formal equivalence, where the fundamental linguistic features consist largely in syntactical and grammatical fluidity, lexical neologism, phonetic innovation and graphemic invention is at the least challenging. And how can we speak of communication or equivalence of effect when

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51 Anthony Burgess, op. cit., fn. 47, pp. 138f.
the semantic core is so difficult that it may be impossible to discern. Could it be argued that the flexibility offered by Vermeer's functionalist approach, freeing the target text from the constraints of equivalence and looking rather to 'Adequacy' of rendering in the context of translational purpose can meet this challenge? To an extent the answer is positive. If the purpose of the translation is to provide a new readership with access to an opaque text, the translator might feel justified in simplifying the text, disambiguating it, making it more transparent, making translation choices that assist the reader. Certainly, the culturally adapted text which becomes a new work of art such as the translations by Fitzgerald from the Persian or by Arthur Waley from the Chinese—or far more significantly the King James version of the Bible from the Greek and Aramaic have themselves become part of the host culture. But what if the communicative intentions of the author are in doubt, where the text makes no easy 'sense' or is designed to mock 'sense', where words are severed from their referential function, where that severing is itself a part of the aesthetic intention and the means to it essential to the aesthetic identity of the work? Yet precisely this seems to the 'purpose' of the original text in many modernist works.

Let me quote Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane on the nature of Modernism which threw down this challenge to translators:

It is the art consequent on the de-establishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional norms of the wholeness of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective functions.\(^{52}\)

And so I leave the last words to Joyce:

— To bed.
Prospector, projector and boomooster giant builder of all causeways woesoever, hopping offpoint and true terminus of straxstraightcuts and corkscrewn perambulaups, zeal whence to goal whither, wonderlust, in sequence to which every muckle must make its mickle, as different as York from Leeds, being the only wise in a muck's world to look on itself from beforehand; mirrorminded curiositease and would-to-the-large which bring hills to molehunter, home through first husband, perils behind swine and horsepower down to hungerford, prick this man and tittup this woman, our forced payrents, Bogy Bobow with his cunnyngnest couchmare, Big Maaster Finnykin with Phenicia Parkes, lame of his ear and gape of her leg, most correctly, we beseech of you, down their laddercase of nightwatch service and bring them at suntime flush with the nethermost gangrung of their stepchildren, guide them through the labyrinth of their samilikes and the alteregoases of their pseudodoselves, hedge them bothways from all roamers whose names are ligious, from loss of bearings deliver them; so they keep to their rights and be ware of duty frees, neoliffic smith and magdalenian jinnyjones, mandragon, more and weak wiffeyducky, Morionmale and Thrydacianmad, basilisk glorious with his weeniequeenie, tigernack and swansgrace, he as hale as his ardouries, she as verve as her veines; this prime white arsenic with bissemate alloyed, martial sin with peccadilly, free to lease hold with first mortgage, dowser dour and dipper douce, stop-that-war and feel-this-feather, norsebloodheartened and landsmoolwashable, great gas with fun-in-the-corner, grand slam with fall-of-the-trick, solomn one and shebby, cod and coney, cash and carry, in all we dreamed the part we dreaded, corsair coupled with his dame, royal biber but
constant lymph, boniface and bonnyfeatures, nazil hose and river mouth, bang-the-change and batter the bolster, big smoke...\textsuperscript{53}

It seems that I cannot bring Joyce to his last word but must break him off before I so dishearten translators that they abandon the profession.

Ladies and gentlemen thank you for listening. . . .