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PUSH AND PULL: An Introduction

When a writer puts together a collection of essays, she likes to think some thesis or overarching theme joining together her disparate efforts will become evident. If the pieces were assigned, she can blame demanding editors for disparate topics. But as almost all these critical tasks were self-imposed, I am in the awkward position of myself having to make some general case for them; I can't place blame on any arbitrariness of occasion. If these three decades of essays must be acknowledged as a set of chosen projects rather than dictated labors, something should be able to be inferred from common shapes and concerns.

What has consistently interested me is poetics, most particularly poetics derived from the analysis and experience of poetic translation. When I began publishing essay-reviews, this seemed like an opening of sorts, for which my smattering of foreign languages and readings in Classics gave me some kind of preparation. Because I chose not to be part of the writing programs, having gone my own way (for better or for worse) with the Poundian curriculum left to me by my mother, independent scholarship about poetic translation seemed like a legitimate alternative, standing in for the graduate degree. Certainly none of these pieces were written or published in order to obtain position or tenure. There is, obviously, both a purity and a foolishness to such a proud and very American auto-didacticism.

What began as an exploration of one aspect of contemporary poetry has ended up defining my sense of the vocation. My collection's title (and this introductory essay) allude to the painter Hans Hofmann's consideration of dimensionality. The practice of painting and its specific modes of plastic representation lead to what he referred to as "the real." For Hofmann the work of art is "a self-sustaining spiritual reality." I have increasingly found his thinking useful in relation to poetry, the canvas being analogous to the page, the word as a medium equivalent to paint. I came to Hofmann through my early friendship with his student, Serena Rothstein, his posthumous presence here on the Outer Cape becoming my regular companion. That art transcends death is not merely a concept but an actuality. The translation of literature across time and culture only confirms this experience of mystery, what Hofmann would call art's "magic."

Strictly speaking, Hofmann's use of form and color is, as the non-artist might describe it, an optical illusion. Something like the Renaissance vanishing point, or academic training's use of shadow, the method imparts the sensation of perspective. More extreme versions of spatial play may be found in certain forms of more contemporary art; I'm thinking of the hallucinogenic planes of Bridget Riley and other practitioners of Pop Art. But whether these (as well as cinema and VR) are mere "tricks" or

something more profound depends on one's sense of the nature of art and the creation of an artistic reality. Are such techniques and technologies induced delusions or genuine access to a different dimension of experience?

In the case of literature, it may be agreed that its experience is provably soul-altering; certainly the published word has been shown to have a "real" effect on beliefs and attitudes. But while the novel's force would seem to derive from narrative and character, the art of poetry is much older and therefore more primordial in its workings. In much the way the placement of a line provokes a revolutionary alteration of the canvas's space, poetry works in the medium of time. A syllable breaks the silence and divides sound. In this, poetry is a sister art to music, where rhythm, tone, and timbre function in ways similar to shape, relative position or color. Speaking figuratively for a moment, there is unintentional colorlessness in weak translation (something more profound than clumsy use of diction or register), a lack of courage also to be detected in inferior poetry. The resulting failure has serious spiritual consequence, as entrance to art's dimension of the real is blocked by the false.

These essays chart the evolution of my artistic faith, though I didn't know exactly where they were leading when I began. But as Hofmann writes, "The significance of a work of art is determined by the quality of its growth." Some thirty years ago I started my critical path with Ovid's *Heroides*, which I determined had a greater influence on women's writing than was recognized (especially on the *trobairitz*, the female troubadours, one of whom I was translating at the time). The essays on *After Ovid*, Jim Powell's Sappho, the scholarship of Nicole Loraux, as well as my own versions of Beatrice de Die, were early follow-ups to this initial thread of women writers. Somewhat later I returned to such matters with my translations of and commentary about Pindar's *Dapnephorikon*, the recently discovered fragment of Sappho, and a series of my own renderings of the Roman Sulpicia, the last figure by now more solidly (albeit disputedly) entered into the received canon of Latin elegiac lyric.

Although it didn't appear until a few years after it was first written, the piece on David Ferry's *Gilgamesh* turned out to be seminal. (I'll never forget Richard Howard's friendly berating of Ferry's *Gilgamesh* due to its lack of actual encounter with poem's original language; it was my mentor Richard, nevertheless, who saw to my essay's eventual publication.) The editor who originally commissioned the essay (and who insisted I include Willis Barnstone's *The Poetics of Translation* in my review) didn't end up publishing it; he was not an admirer, he explained, of Ferry's own poetry, a discussion of which I very much wanted to include. But with an especially patriarchal flourish, he encouraged me to try to place it elsewhere and not to "put it back in my armoire." The essay as it finally appeared was extensively edited; I've returned it to something closer to its original form here. I had earlier applied certain aspects of Walter

Benjamin's thinking to my undergraduate readings in Athenian tragedy, and here Benjamin turned up again with his considerations of storytelling.

European poetry shares with the novel a shared childhood in the telling of stories. The separation of poetry from prose officially took place with the introduction of literacy, as the technology of the written word took over for poetry's mnemonic modes — its formulaic or metrical patterns. Ballad is story-song, whose precursive long form is the epic; our earliest extant example is the pre-Biblical *Gilgamesh*. Such epics are the recording of myth, a story that exists outside of mortal time even while it may contain reference to actual human history. Not only is the realm of myth the dimension of art, poetic retelling is also a form of creation. When Walter Benjamin writes of a "third" brought about by the interactions between two languages through the process of translation, this created linguistic form produces its own self-sustaining reality.

And while it is true that my readings are mostly drawn from the European canon of my grandparent's generation (mostly male, mostly white), the widely held belief that the fundamentals of classical literature differ from any other poetics is based on ignorance. Ritual is as central to early Greek practice as it is to those of traditional and indigenous cultures. In both, the present ritual act and the mythic time it recreates collapse into one experiential moment; such chronological transcendence happens again and again with each performative gesture. Additionally, the more we find out about literary history through non-textual means, the more it becomes apparent that the contributions of women are integral to our received tradition. Classical choreography may well be one of the lost arts, but its manifestation in received prosodies alone confirms not only dance's presence but its (decidedly feminine) persistence. Knowledge is passed down through the living body, as well as through textual or material culture.

Hofmann's "dreaming in color" finds commonality with the Maori Dream Time, Dante's Universal Soul and Bonnefoy's "Country-Behind." That these are all realms of the imagination supports an assertion of the fundamentally religious nature of artistic impulse. Entry into real art feels like some kind of epiphanic acknowledgement of filiality, of blood relation or recognition of shared patrimonial faith. In art there is no distinction between living and the dead; communication passes through a shared language of forms. Such meaning may arrive with relative positioning of colors, through auditory tones, or with a change in rhythm of the heart-drum. Mythic visits to the underworld (recurring with each reading of the *Commedia,* for example) function as analogues to translation; translations of Dante by poets therefore can be especially electrified. My considerations of the translations by two of my workshop teachers (Pinsky and Merwin) were deeply personal follow-ups to my Medieval studies with Joan Ferrante and others at Columbia. That direction — the Scuola Siciliana, Provence and early Italian lyric

—obviously came from Pound and Ford, though Beckett's Dante played its part in my choice of coursework.

While translation does not necessarily require interaction with the dead, the primary task of the poetic translator is nevertheless to bring the voice behind the target text "back to life." This sense of an actual speaking person is what, in my thinking, determines a lyric translation's "success." In poetry "what" is said is of secondary interest, and so "accuracy" is less a goal than a given. For me, the translation process and the reading experience feel something very much like Hofmann's creation of depth, that sense of a third dimension produced on the two-dimensional plane. There is a sensation of resistance in the reproduction of the real as well as in the encounter of it.

Prosody is the key, though translation of prosody from one language-culture to another is considerably more demanding than matters of received form. English meters derived from the classical are more distant from their origins than are taught, to begin with. In the creation of excellent poetry there is something beyond prosodic training (familiarity with a variety of metrical forms and their uses), something that can only be described as an "intuitive" plastic sense. In poetry an understanding of language effects has to be accompanied by an instinctive "mouth-feel" of alternating assonance and consonance, as well as syntactical skills. "Accent," as I've written elsewhere, is a phenomenon that can translate as a matter of stress, or vowel length, or even pitch. What color and form are to painting, issues of vocal accent are to poetry; they are manifestations of soul. As an expression of individual sensibility, the important question to ask is how does the original line move? How can this idiosyncratic "dance" movement, its distinctive shape of thought, be transferred into English? What is the quality of soul to be brought over? There is no correct answer, only experiment by one who understands and responds appropriately to the plastic means of the source text. Functional translation is to poetry what design is to art; inarguably it has its uses. But life cannot be put into a wax figure, no matter how realistic it may seem for a few seconds.

My own translation of Sulpicia offered particular challenges. Ironically, making her "real" became something other than a rhetorical challenge; the continued questioning of her person's historical existence undermined the fundamentals of the task at hand. To work so intimately with the actual Latin lyrics convinced me absolutely that the lines were the production of a Roman girl, and not (as with *The Garland of Sulpicia*) that of a male poet writing in the voice of a young woman; the Latin prosody "betrayed" her. Ford's recognition of Sulpicia's existence in *The March of Literature* properly re-introduced her to the European canon; such acknowledgement was an extension of Ford's advocacy of women poets, one of whom was, not coincidentally, H.D. But that Pound's "Sulpicia" (derived from the *Garland*) was a synthetic literary presence in his *Cantos* further muddied her received personhood.

The Sulpicia experience ruefully confirmed both a woman poet's sense of effacement and an accompanying tradition of female self-insistence. A personal reference for that strong speaking up for oneself came from my years at Bryn Mawr. There remains for me a particular awareness of H.D. (returning to her as a critical topic again and again) and Marianne Moore, two very distinct personalities, two ways of functioning as a woman poet or (as with Moore) a public figure. As antecedents to all of us are what remains of Sappho's students and Pindar's dancing girls, verbal reliquaries of the female component of ritual. With this direction, I began increasingly to think of translation as a form of performance, engaging with a tradition of publicly "performed" song, as well as the self-representation any "reading aloud" involves. The daring, and even transgressive, nature of the literary act of the young Roman Sulpicia would be hard to exaggerate. Beatrice of Die presents herself as an even stronger figure and voice, though you'd never know it through the available versions in English. Circling back to issues of poetics, I returned to that matter of the resurrected "voice," language's embodiment of the individual person. Translation is not unlike acting. It's not just remembering and repeating the playwright's words; the actor brings those phonemes "to life" so that the soul of the personified character is made dynamic and real to the audience. This is how I interpret Hofmann when he teaches that "the aim of art is to vitalize form." It underlies the mystery embodied by the figures of Donatello, made of stone but immortally so present and alive.

Which brings me to that dreaded word: Formalism. The more deeply I considered how poems in languages other than English actually work, the more I found myself increasingly in aesthetic opposition to what was self-described in American poetry circles as "neoformalism." Over the early decades of my essay-writing, there was among certain contemporaries a strong push for "received forms," especially in translations from classical texts. Such discussions seemed to focus particularly on a misguided obsession with end-rhyme. My resistance to this prosodic quirk is primarily a matter of auditory preference, as well as of my own sense of end-rhymes' prosodic meanings. For while an argument could be made for end-rhyme as an evocation of oral (and particularly Medieval) traditions, the liquid enjambments of classical meters themselves actively resist its use. Due to association with English popular verse (nursery rhymes and limericks, for example) too many lines of widely lauded rhymed verse translation have resulted, to my ear, in unintentionally comic effects. But all this is really a matter of personal taste, and as I concluded in my discussions of Horace, it would be foolish to attach any moral or political significance to stylistic preferences. But as a "proponent of the Classics," I hated being placed alongside the neoformalists, as though by default I were taking the side of a reactionary elite. It did not help that in our age of rising anti-intellectualism, a defense of the nonpolitical literary vocation could too easily be perceived as a "classist" position.

By the aughts, there was an outpouring of classical translations which, rhymed or not, were not always poetry. Certain "entertaining" versions of canonical works had the forced jocularity found at an academic conference or the departmental holiday party. Some of the best-received versions of the classics were actually quite dead as poems, especially a number of translations of Virgil and Homer praised as "newly accessible." A whole set of "women in the ancient world" titles heralded a newly developing market; Sulpicia studies became a thing, while my own Sulpicia translations were replaced in an anthology's second edition with depressingly moribund renderings. As a member of the doubly effaced I knew I was expected to either join the new movements or loudly express my objections to them.

But the truth was that a poet who had been producing the most interesting English translations for many decades was a problematic male. Christopher Logue was hardly a secret when I first began to write about him, but it seemed to me me there was inadequate advocacy for him in the United States. I spent a lot of time on Logue's Homer, going to New York to see performances based on his renderings, listening to his hard-to-find recordings, digging up early editions, etc. before getting my observations published. As sometimes happens, as Logue began to get more attention (and publication) in America, the distinctiveness of my reading faded. I also encountered a certain willful resistance with academic classicists, one of whom insisted that my description of the ambivalent reception Logue had encountered was an expression my own criticisms. I had expressed my doubts, it is true, but to love fully is to embrace flaw and failure. In any case, the influence of Logue's poetry extended well beyond translation, the figures of his hyper-masculine gods and heroes continuing to appear widely in both television and film.

In my advocacy for certain translations being published, for the most part I avoided metaphysics, though when I got to my own translations and discussions about Pindar I couldn't see any way out of it. Pindar is thickly incantatory, a high priest in full belief of his interaction with the divine. I approached these texts with a scientific skepticism deemed appropriate to "primitive" ritual but some form of Holderlin's "entheos" took place, maybe something a little close to madness. In any case, I began to to sense I was approaching something deeper and more important than what contemporary poets and critics were up to. Especially exploring the ancient religious background implied by Klossowki's *Aeneid* and his *The Women of Rome* (one of whom would have been Sulpicia), I felt myself brushing up against the mysteries.

Naturally I found myself backing off my critical projects and focusing on my own poetry, as well as rethinking the received form of the "review." I'd originally aspired to become proficient in "the long-form essay." Having spent a certain amount of my young adulthood in Europe, I had a real desire to be a cultural critic, a poet on the continental model. Certainly my studies of Classics bore the heavy trace of French literary theory derived from anthropology, as materialist context seemed crucial to profound

literary understanding. That sounds very old-fashioned now. I continue to believe that the tradition must constantly be re-viewed in relation to the shifting cultural objects which put it into meaningful perspective; social and political agendas are often hidden but can usually be uncovered, with poignance and insight, by the sincere critic's persistent prodding. But I have in recent decades become even more sensitive to the fundamentally asocial nature of artistic production, moving away from theoretical modes. It's not how experience fits into intellectual models anymore; if fact, for me it seems increasingly necessary to resist methodology in order to present experience most accurately. As in Ponge, when things seems to speak for themselves, my task as a poet is to pass on what I think they are saying rather than try to explain the background of their expressive needs.

There are in this collection a few topics not of my own choosing; those experiences were extremely useful in that they confirmed what I did not want to become — a reviewer. Some of these pieces about individual writers were produced upon request, and mostly I took them on to prove to myself that I could write on demand. Fairly consistently I found that what editors really wanted was an expanded takedown or a brief puff piece. The word count various publications imposed became a challenge. It was as hard to come up with a solid defense for thin material as it was agonizing to make the micro-case for great books like those of Nooteboom or Sorrentino. A blog piece on Franco-American Harry Mathews made a joke of given parameters. The admirable Anne Carson resisted traditional defense and prosecution, and I am profoundly grateful to have been granted a place where I was allowed to extend beyond the normal boundaries. Some essays were written in relation to other of my projects. My fiction "All Things Save Beauty," for example, is especially relevant background to my discussion of Pound and H.D., though it was hard to integrate most of that biographic material into my essay on the poet and early cinema. References to film technique also pop up in quite a few pieces, especially in my considerations of Orlovsky, Mekas and Logue, though how seriously movies have figured in my imaginative life will be more evident with the eventual publication of other projects. I would love to write more about film.

Other essays here have been revised and expanded since their publication, their arguments consolidated with talks given on the same subjects; I've tried to indicate these textual histories in added footnotes and afterwords. Yet despite my attending conferences and having the opportunity to interact with some remarkable colleagues, I'm not a scholar, even an independent one. I have instead been, at the most crucial times in my creative life, the Jamesian American in Europe. And so the last essays in the collection are based on my own interests and intuitions rather than on serious research. Personal experience does not exactly come to the forefront in these, though time spent in Paris (either in reality or through literature) underwrites my ongoing dialogues with Benjamin, Beckett, and Celan. Certainly I can

claim no mastery of French. Instead it is a struggle I continue to be drawn back to (dating from when as a ten-year-old I attended the American School in Saint-Cloud), one of several languages that remain "beyond me." Nowhere was this more true than in my imperfect encounters with Walter Benjamin's *Sonette* in German, poems whose published forms in English by another sadly illustrate my concept of "dead" translation.

One function of travel, the encountering of unfamiliar and even painful forms, is to get outside of one's own cultural cosmos in order to observe it, in order to appreciate its particularities as well as its commonalities to human experience. In the realm of language, translation is a form of voyage. Klossowski and Yourcenar in particular continue to present themselves as figures both fascinating and intimidating. I close *Push and Pull* with Yves Bonnefoy. I first heard the poet read in New York City at CUNY to a handful of listeners. Even though he spent a good amount of time in New England, he is still almost ignored here by the American poetry community. Nevertheless, at times Bonnefoy seems almost an American writing in French, particularly given the distinct sway of his translations of Shakespeare into French. But I also deeply admire his profound interactions with painting and painters. Personally important to me are his collegial relations with Paula Rego and the poet Anthony Rudolf, one of the fortunate Bonnefoy's able circle of translators.

Yet even within America are encountered disparate culture and languages. I only recognized the personal significance of the New York School after I'd left the city. As absurd as it might sound, leaving Manhattan and moving to Cape Cod after my daughter was born felt to me at the time like a form of exile. In some sense, I had to play catch-up from a distance in my appreciation of the New York School's "delight in surface" and prosodic "foot-looseness." As in Bonnefoy, I detected European interest in such movements, recognizing the antecedent feet of Whitman and Williams in the twentieth-century's longer, less constricted lines. It's a matter of open space, implied by both the country's prairies and expansive pages. I love the play between continental traditions and American expression — gravid barefoot modern dance interpolated with balletic reference, jazz composed in dialogue with symphonic forms.

I came to feel that O'Hara's poems are considerably less casual and more experimental than they are generally perceived to be. My idiosyncratic reading of O'Hara developed while writing about Edwin Denby, whom I had always intended to contact while I lived in New York but had not. Writing about Denby required pretty much starting from scratch, as at that time there was very little critical consideration of his poetry. But with Denby I began to see the page (analogue to the canvas memory theater) as a stage on which verbal forms dance. The literal voice itself may move, even when fully abstracted from a living body, when (as in Beckett) spoken language is heard in recorded performance. In the work of the midcentury avant-garde — the art that has come to matter most to me — representational

values (figuration or content) are not significant. The subject is not an object of attention but the nature of attention itself. Instead musical values take priority as the relations between things (between colors or sounds, or word set against word) become expressed through intervals, and then through repetition of interval, which is pattern.

To end up living in a place where, culturally speaking, postwar Europe met midcentury America has been an extraordinary privilege. As a self-styled urban expatriate, I developed an identification with emigrés and progressives to the Outer Cape, my sense of not exactly belonging but adapting to new circumstance inappropriately corresponding to their admittedly more demanding historical circumstances. Nevertheless I claimed their New York-Outer Cape nexus as my own. I thought of myself as a New York School poet in exile, returning to the city from time to time, indulging in critical "excuses" to think aloud about the sister arts. The tradition I admired was one of poets in dialogue with composers, painters talking to poets. How I love that aspect of the New York School, its perpetual summer of shared enthusiasms, going for a swim in words, splashing around for the sheer pleasure of it. It corresponds to O'Hara's joyous palette, colors more carefully placed against shadow than it would seem by his imitator acolytes. The great Bill Berkson's "The Sweet Singer of Modernism," in the essay collection of the same name, brings joyful Hofmann along to the gathering. Writes Berkson: "Hofmann had to wait for ripeness to allow his powers to disentangle themselves, and he had to relocate from his original sources — and his social roots in Europe altogether — so as to proceed with his singular creation."

I myself had to leave aspects of New York School practice behind. For one thing, I didn't take on art reviewing as a secondary vocation, though this was presented as a possibility. I did write about the sculptor Janice Redman, and could have continued down that path, focusing on other contemporary artists on the Cape. But first I needed to engage with Serena Rothstein, less as "art writing" than as an ongoing collaboration with her work and person. I had by then experienced a certain fatigue with ekphrastic poetry and was moving towards something closer to portraiture in *Cultural Tourism,* defining a "local" tradition that I recognized as my own. I identified particularly with fellow West Virginian and Hofmann student Blanche Lazzell — as well as with Ford's great paramour Janice Biala. (My essays on the latter, with her Poundian, Provincetown and New York School connections mirroring my own, will appear in a subsequent collection of essays about Ford and American poetry.) Writing as an "art critic" about the visual quickly came to feel too much like a tactic. It was a way to establish presence in a local coterie, as a method of claiming membership in an influential club, all in the guise of "good citizenship" and "community contribution." It was a source of great disappointment that, since I did not make myself immediately useful, I was for the most part ignored by contemporaries with whom I ostensibly had so much in common. I may not have been shunned or actively shut out; it may simply have been that the

plethora of poet-critics now "out there" has made it very hard not be heard without a lot of shouting. But with some of my more recent critical writing, there has been a distinct desert-island sense of sending out messages in emptied bottles.

And so from discussions of disparate others, this assortment of damp notes concludes as self-advocacy, as an *ars poetica*. I return to Hofmann and his convictions about the relation between nature and a created realm of spirit. *Ut pictura poesis* (as is painting, so is poetry). The pandemic provided the daily opportunity to observe this reality, my daily encounters with the Outer Cape landscape resonating with Hofmann's studies of dunes, Provincetown's harbor wharves, or the hills of Truro where he chose to be buried. The ancient technology of poetry, which calls upon the Muse of Memory, continues to be a vital form of preservation, especially with new threats to individual sensibility. Electronic modes of production regularize and flatten through digitalization, a phenomenon that has very much invaded contemporary poetry practice. Nevertheless, the vocation continues to affirm the lyric soul shared across time, re-introduces art's real, and works as antidote to deadening joylessness. And if the aim of art is joy, then the purpose of criticism is to share the particulars of those pleasures. Starting out from the process of literary translation, I've tried in these essays to suggest why and how poetry works, why and how over the millennia the vocation came into being, why and how it has endured. Poetry has provided me with a set of keys to Hofmann's dimension of spirit. The intention of these essays is to help the reader also enter that painted door.

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