



Translation in a Time of Loss

doi: 10.54664/JHZK1788

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This article seeks to rehabilitate the notion of loss in translation studies. Invocations of loss are routinely advanced to devalue the practice of translation or stress its limits. For this reason, translation studies scholars are often reluctant to use or engage with the term for fear of being assimilated to reductionist or prescriptivist approaches to translation practice. Approaching loss from the dual perspectives of mobility and mortality, the article aims to deepen and enrich our understanding of the idea of loss and to demonstrate why it continues to be of importance in our reflections on the theory and practice of translation. The notion of “secular faith” as developed by the Swedish theorist Martin Hägglund will be explored to understand why finite time has been and is central to how translations are both produced and received. Translation studies cannot afford to lose sight of loss.

Keywords: translation, loss, mobility, mortality, secular faith, finite time.

Loss is often what translation scholars want to lose. Lawrence Venuti in his 2019 polemic, *Against Instrumentalism*, is deeply critical of the equation of translation with loss. The dictum, attributed to the poet Robert Frost, that poetry is what gets lost in translation figures in Venuti’s list of “proverbs of untranslatability,” a canonical collection of reductive clichés about translation (109–118). The American scholar’s contention is that the idea of loss in translation is based on a primarily instrumentalist conception of what the activity involves. He defines instrumentalism as a way of viewing “translation as the reproduction or transfer of an invariant that is contained in or caused by the source text, an invariant form, meaning, or effect” (1). This is contrasted to the hermeneutic model which “conceives of translation as an interpretive act that inevitably varies source-text form, meaning, and effect according to intelligibilities and interests in the receiving culture” (Venuti 1). Instrumentalism is in effect a form of extractivism, and particular forms of translation can be viewed as informational extractivism where the goal is the extraction of univocal meaning for a specifically defined purpose. I will argue that to see loss solely as a hostage to instrumentalism in translation is to engage in another kind of reductionism, a way of thinking that loses sight of the hermeneutical possibilities of a more knowing engagement with loss. In particular, I want to suggest that experiences of mobility and mortality are central to a re-evaluation of our reflections on what might be gained from not losing sight of what it is that translation does.

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Mobility

Let us begin, a number of years ago, on the night train to Odessa in Ukraine. Paolo Rumiz lies awake, reflecting on his six-thousand-kilometre journey along the Eastern borders of the European Union. As he approaches his final destination he reflects on the role of his interpreter, Monika:

She's been doing the work of three people. Photographer, Russian interpreter, interviewer—tasks she's able to perform simultaneously. Without her, I wouldn't have seen half of what I've seen. I wouldn't have met old Lyuba and her goats, wouldn't have received the confidences of a young Russian lad from the North just released from a forced-labour camp, would never have realized that a private home in easternmost Latvia was actually a former place of Jewish worship, with its basement still full of holy books, forgotten amid cigarette butts and shards of shattered glass. (12)

Without his interpreter, the Italian travel writer is lost. In the borderlands of the East, he can literally only orient himself through the good offices of translation. He finds out about people (Liouba, the young ex-convict) and things (the synagogue) because Monika is on hand to prevent so much (“I wouldn't have seen half of what I've seen”) from being lost through the absence of translation. Rumiz wants to find out about that part of Europe which is so often left lost to view: the Orthodox, Slavic contribution to and experience of European history. He needs to find something lost, unknown to him, located along the faultline of a vertical Europe stretching from Murmansk to Odessa. The traveller's predicament is a familiar one, how can you know what you don't know? Rebecca Solnit in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* suggests one answer: “That thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you is usually what you need to find, and finding it is a matter of getting lost” (6). There is, however, a difference between getting lost because you don't know where you are and getting lost because you don't *want* to know where you are. As Walter Benjamin observed in “A Berlin Chronicle,” not finding your way in a city is simply a matter of ignorance, not having the right map or asking the wrong person, “But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling” (*Reflections* 8).

Translation is easily conflated with the first kind of loss – much easier to find your way around a foreign city with a translation app on your phone or an interpreter by your side. Translation, in this view, is purposive, instrumental, teleological. The second kind of loss demands a “different schooling.” Losing yourself in translation in this sense is to immerse yourself in the unknowns of the other language, the other culture. It is not to know what you are letting yourself in for. When Paolo Rumiz wants to explain the specific genius of his interpreter, he notes how she loses herself in the worlds of her interlocutors:

Monika translates, and I notice that she's joined us on our little trip without buying a ticket, that is, without drinking even a drop of samogon. That's her specialty; she becomes a member of a group by the power of self-suggestion. She becomes an Afghan among the Afghans, a Jew among Jews, a Russian among Russians. (161)

The only way for Monika to find out what is unknown to them both is to be immersed, lose herself, pass unnoticed, in the language of the other. As the unknown, by definition, cannot be known in advance, this second kind of loss implies translation as oblique, intransitive, non-teleological. Knowing other languages is realizing how much is lost to, and how much is unknown to, those who do not know these languages. But we are all at a loss for words because no one among us will know more than a fraction of the world's languages. The potential for loss then becomes not an unfortunate consequence but a necessary precondition for the existence and practice of translation. The only way to know is to enlist translation in the practices of knowing. How the relationship between translation and loss is negotiated involves its own specific politics. Translation can be a means of control, a way of strengthening the hold of an oppressive (racist, patriarchal, imperial) self, a way of turning knowledge deficits into extractivist gains through policing what is said or translated or what is left unsaid or untranslated. Equally, however, translation can be all about losing control of a known self, about revealing the extent of our ignorance,

the fragility of our prejudices, the unintended consequences of our life choices. On the Kola peninsula in north-western Russia, it is through the translated conversations of a Russian taxi driver, Dmitri, that Rumiz begins to realise the ecological enormity of the devastation caused by the extraction of cobalt, nickel, copper, the metals feeding our insatiable demand for electronic devices. Indeed, by the time he reaches Latvia he confesses, “From Murmansk to here, the anxiety I’ve heard about land going to seed has all been in the language of Tolstoy” (150). Except, of course, that Rumiz does not speak Tolstoy’s language, but his Polish interpreter does. She slowly reveals the nature of what was previously “totally unknown” and of our collective environmental loss.

These revelations may not, of course, be welcome. There may be too much to learn from our travels (Rumiz constantly complains about the expanding number of his black notebooks), as we lose ourselves in the ever-blossoming detail of what we hear, what we see, what we understand. In Olga Tokarczuk’s *Flights*, the roving narrator complains, “There’s too much in the world. It would be wiser to reduce it, rather than expanding or enlarging it” (65). The challenge is to see not more but less, differently:

We have no choice now but to learn how to endlessly select. Learn how to be like a fellow traveller I once met on a night train who told me that every so often he goes back to the Louvre just to see the one painting he considers to be worthwhile, of John the Baptist. He just stands there before it, beholding it, gazing up at the saint’s raised finger. (Tokarczuk 65)

This radical selectiveness is a way of keeping loss at bay, of finding a path to real seeing. Or maybe the gesture is not so radical in that I must endlessly select what I pay attention to, for otherwise, in the words of William James, I would be overwhelmed by the “millions of the items of the outward order... present to my senses” (403). Even if the traveller endlessly returning to the same painting by Leonardo da Vinci is not so atypical as a parable of human attentiveness, he does tell us something about how translation functions in an economy of loss. It is rarely, if ever, possible to translate everything from one language to another; so, the process of translation always involves selection. The selections can be dictated by motives that are variously economic, social, political, or cultural. The popular ontology of subtractive loss that follows in translation’s wake like a malign shadow means that selection is always interpreted as reduction. As if, heeding the advice of Tokarczuk’s narrator, the wise move is to reduce the world, not enlarge or expand it. The sorry history of colonial domination is there to remind us that translation can indeed both select and reduce in ways deeply inimical to the welfare of indigenous populations (see Palmer). However, there are equally forms of selection through translation which enlarge and expand worlds. In the reign of Khalif al-Mansur (754–75), two major medico-botanical works from Sanskrit, the *Charaka-Samhita* and the *Susruta Hamhita*, were translated into Arabic. This opened a dialogue between Sanskrit botanical knowledge and the dynamic and innovative tradition of Arab botany. Indic botanical knowledge was thus integrated into the most prestigious Arabic medical texts such as the *Kanun* of Avicenna, later translated in Sicily into Latin. The influence of Avicenna’s work would be felt in the Renaissance development of medicine and botanical gardens in the Venetian territories (Grove 22–23). These gardens, in turn, would provide an important focus for thinking about the ecological destructiveness of human intervention in colonial and other settings. When the Comte de Buffon and Henri-Louis Duhamel du Monceau in the 1730s began to take an interest in the plant-physiological writings of two British scientists John Woodward and Stephen Hales, they decided to translate a selection of their writings into French. This would lead to an early formulation of theories around climate change. These theories would be used to promote forest conservation measures on the island of Mauritius and the measures would later inspire similar initiatives in other parts of the world (Grove 10).

Selection

Selection involves choice. It is about making inroads into what we do not know. Reflecting on travel and maps, Rebecca Solnit notes, “[t]o acknowledge the unknown is part of knowledge, and the unknown is

visible as terra incognita but invisible as selection – the map showing agricultural lands and principal cities does not show earthquake faults and aquifers, and vice versa” (163). Seeing the invisible as selection does not have to mean invariably lamenting the translator’s invisibility (again the ontology of loss) but rather can be a way of pointing up how selection, or more properly translation as selection, can make visible what was previously unknown or disregarded. The ecological maps furnished by the Arabic and Latin and English translators began to show the “aquifers” and earth support systems vital to sustaining life, enlarging the understanding of the habitable world. In a sense, it was the reductiveness of their focus, the decision to translate some texts and not others, that generated a scientific momentum for the proto-ecological consciousness which would contest the predatory short-termism of colonial acquisitiveness. Finding out what there was to lose brought an inestimable gain. Rebecca Solnit in her field guide to loss ultimately concludes that the real question is not “whether you can know the unknown, arrive in it, but how to go about looking for it, how to travel” (24). Translation is one of those field guides to the world containing suggestions on what to look for, how to travel, where losing your way is often the only way to finding out.

Witold Gombrowicz had in mind a particular kind of translation loss when he finished reading the French translation of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. In a review he wrote for a Warsaw magazine, *Kurier Poranny*, he expresses his admiration for Joyce’s revolution of style but laments the fact that the translation, in the Polish writer’s second language, prevented “more intimate contact.” He concludes on a note of exasperation:

It is annoying to know that somewhere over there, abroad, a previously unknown method of feeling, of thinking and of writing has been born whose existence renders our methods completely anachronistic, and to tell oneself that only purely technical obstacles prevent us from having a deep knowledge of many new inventions. (11–12)

Gombrowicz has found something in the French translation (in which Joyce, of course, had a hand) but it is not enough. He feels he is missing out because the “purely technical obstacles” of language difference have made him hungry for more. But the fact that the French translation has failed to whet his appetite means that the obstacles cannot be “purely technical.” If they were, they would simply require purely technical solutions and these are, obviously, not forthcoming. Gombrowicz is impatient to have a “deep knowledge of many new inventions” because he fears that these innovations will make what he does obsolete. For this anxiety to make sense, however, we must recognize that the Polish writer is a creature in time and, like all humans, mortal. If he could live forever, he would have world enough and time enough to learn English or wait for a better translation to emerge. He knows, and so do we now, that he is no longer with us, that his time is finite. He cares about the translation knowing that time is scarce and that he may lose all those things which Joyce’s text might teach him as a writer.

Secular Faith

The Swedish critic and philosopher Martin Hägglund in *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free* offers us a frame not only for parsing the anxieties of Gombrowicz but also for understanding why translation needs loss to function as a meaningful practice. In his work, Hägglund seeks to define what he calls “secular faith” in opposition to religious faith: “Secular faith is the form of faith that we all sustain in caring for someone or something that is vulnerable to loss. We all care – for ourselves, for others, for the world in which we find ourselves – and care is inseparable from the risk of loss” (6). Knowing that we are finite beings means that we are aware of the fact that everything we cherish may one day be lost. This awareness does not make us despair but makes us care for what we value and makes us sustain its presence to the best of our abilities. Caring for someone or something only makes sense in a finite world where the loved one or thing may die or disappear. In an eternal life, none of our actions would matter because none of them would be irreversible and they would thus be devoid of consequences. Finite time checks any course of action, ruling out certain futures because you have chosen others, so that what you do matters. A secular faith is committed to the flourishing of finite life – and this should ideally include

all forms of finite life on the planet - as an end in itself: “If the Earth itself is an object of care in our time of ecological crisis, it is because we have come to believe that it is a resource that can be exhausted, an ecosystem that can be damaged and destroyed” (Hägglund 9). If the planet were eternal, there would be no need to worry. However, the knowledge of the irreparable damage we have caused and continue to cause makes the continued existence of the human species on the planet an open question so that we are, in principle, compelled to care and assume responsibility. When the Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbembe argues in the middle of a pandemic that: “[w]e must answer here and now for our life on Earth with *others* (including viruses) and our shared faith [emphasis in the text]” (Mbembe), he knows, like all mortal beings, that time is running out. For Hägglund, the attraction of religious as opposed to secular faith for believers is that it promises a release from the risk of mortality, from the certainty of loss: “I define as religious *any ideal of being dissolved from the pain of loss* [emphasis in the text]” (47). The Christian notion of salvation or the Buddhist concept of nirvana promise an entry into a world beyond human cycles of birth and perishing. Even the Stoic promise of detachment from mere mortality, as humans accept that their regeneration in the material processes of the cosmos, is designed to pre-empt loss. Detachment, not *attachment*, is the watchword. The eternal promise is the dissolution of loss. In eternity it is not only loss which is dissolved but also care, responsibility, value, and meaning. Which means that we should beware what we wish for in translation.

When Vladimir Nabokov declares that “[t]he person who desires to turn a literary masterpiece into another language has only one duty to perform, and this is to reproduce with absolute exactitude the whole text, and nothing but the text” (77), his faith in translation is unmistakably religious. He strives after a translation that is, in Hägglund’s words, dissolved from the pain of loss. Nabokov is not saying anything startling here; if anything, he is articulating a truism. The poetry that gets mislaid in translation is the popular signal of the translator’s fallen condition. Loss, however, can only be removed in the realm of the eternal. From the standpoint of secular faith, “continued fidelity to someone or something is inseparable from the apprehension of loss. This risk of loss is the *motivational force* of secular faith [emphasis in the text]” (Hägglund 129). It is the sense that the translator is grappling with something in finite time that makes the task so vital. She will not be around forever to do it, so every effort must be made to capture each nuance and scruple in the finite time available. However, it is precisely the necessity of loss that drives the struggle against loss. In secular faith, attachment is always risky. The object of attachment can leave or perish. The risk is unavoidable which means that all reasonable efforts must be made to sustain the well-being of the object for which you care and are responsible. Love is born out of loss, ennui out of eternity.

The Czech writer and artist Adolf Hoffmeister on a trip to Paris in 1939 asked James Joyce for permission to translate *Anna Livia Plurabelle*. Joyce’s advice to the young translator was to “poeticize it with the greatest poetic freedom you can give it” and, “[c]reate a language for your country according to my image. Viktor Lloná in *transition* posited the thesis: language can be made by a writer. In this case also by a translator” (Hoffmeister 248). Joyce’s invitation to Hoffmeister implicitly invokes Hägglund’s three conditions of secular faith: existential commitment; necessary uncertainty; motivational force.

Existential commitment which “is constituted by the commitment to a fragile form of life” (Hägglund 50) is present in the very nature of the assignment. Hoffmeister as a mortal being will produce a translation at a particular moment in finite time. Walter Benjamin is intensely aware of this existential commitment when he describes the shelf life of translation itself: “While a poet’s words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and to perish with its renewal” (“The Task” 256). If the translator is gifted with “the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own” (Benjamin, “The Task” 256), the commitment to translate is all the more real because of the ever-present possibilities of the loss of the text to a language if it is not translated and of potential redundancy even if it is. This dual spectre of loss is an encouragement to try harder, or in Samuel Beckett’s words in *Worstword Ho*, “fail better” (27).

The *necessary uncertainty* that comes from being committed to someone or something means “I must have faith in the future and in those on whom I depend” (Hägglund 50). I cannot know for sure

how the future will turn out or what others will do so I must relate to both on the basis of faith. The risk is always betrayal or the unexpected. As Hoffmeister does his translation he can never know for sure whether he will create a language for his country according to the image of Joyce. He cannot be sure how his Czech readers are going to react to his translation of Joyce's injunction to "poeticize it with the greatest poetic freedom you can give it." Hoffmeister must proceed on the basis of faith – that he can create a viable text and an engaged readership – in the context of necessary uncertainty.

The *motivational force* of secular faith is precariousness: "My commitment to the continued life of someone or something is inseparable from my sense that it cannot be taken for granted. There has to be a prospective risk of loss for anything to be at stake in sustaining a form of life" (Hägglund 50). The young writer travels to Paris to meet his literary hero because like his Polish counterpart in Warsaw, he senses that, "somewhere over there, abroad, a previously unknown method of feeling, of thinking and of writing has been born." Hoffmeister cannot take it for granted that it will be translated or translated in a way that he would approve of, and thus the Czech language and its literature would lose the subversive input of a new way of feeling, thinking, and writing. It is the same motivational force that underlies an anthropological commitment to sustaining cultural diversity. The Canadian anthropologist Wade Davis defines the ethnosphere as "the sum total of all thoughts and intuitions, myths and beliefs, ideas and inspirations brought into being by the human imagination since the dawn of consciousness" (2). A crucial, though not sole, element in the expression and sustainability of this ethnosphere is human language. Yet current estimates are that half of the world's languages will die out in the next two generations (Rehg and Campbell 1–20). If "every language is an old-growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, an ecosystem of spiritual possibilities," then "we will be witnessing the loss of fully half of humanity's social, cultural and intellectual legacy" (Rehg and Campbell 3). Translation is only possible if you have languages to translate from and into. Lose the languages and you lose, in interlingual terms, the translational possibility of making manifest "the social, cultural and intellectual legacy" of ways of understanding and inhabiting the world. It is the very precariousness of the situation of so many of the world's lesser spoken languages which provides the motivational force for projects to maintain endangered language even if language loss tends to attract a fraction of the attention of other forms of ecological loss.

Speculation on loss invariably invites us to think about what comes after. Would the reception of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in English have been different had the translation he did with the young Englishwoman Juliet Herbert not vanished (Thirlwell 29–30)? When Benjamin mentions the afterlife in the context of translation, but he speaks initially of the triumph of history over nature: "The philosopher's task consists in comprehending all of natural life through the more encompassing life of history. And indeed, isn't the afterlife of works of art far easier to recognize than that of living creatures" ("The Task" 255). What secular faith in translation points to, on the contrary, is the crucial dependency of history on nature, of works of art on "living creatures." Death matters because we have to concern ourselves with someone or something that will live beyond us. As living creatures, "[w]e have to take care of one another because we can die, we have to fight for what we believe in because it lives only through our sustained effort, and we have to be concerned with what will be passed on to future generations because the future is not certain" (Hägglund 168). The afterlife is all about this life and what we propose to do and what we care about. Thinking about the afterlife of translation involves us in speculating on the moral imperatives of finite "natural life" as it does on the transmissive "life of history." Sándor Márai had much reason to reflect on this tension between history and life. His own life and that of his loved ones always ran the risk of falling foul of the ideological forces dominating Hungarian society in the first half of the twentieth century. Much to his own surprise he survived the Second World War and found himself in 1946 in a country straining after a semblance of normality. He even gets news of the foreign translations of his books:

A publisher in Barcelona informs me that he has published my books *Embers* in Spanish, in what he points out is a very beautiful edition. He also writes to tell me that unbeknownst to me a Spanish translation of *Divorce in Buda* has already been published. Reading this news makes me envious: the fortunes of my books are better than mine. Destiny has confined me to a language from which, in

the depths of my heart and soul I cannot and will not free myself. I am chained, condemned to grow old like this, sunk in a swamp. My books live their life, in Stockholm, Paris and in Spain. They are getting ready to set off for Latin America, travelling across the sparkling ocean, touching the souls of strangers, speaking another language... It's better to be a book than a writer. (Márai 23)

Márai feels he has lost out once again in the bargain of translation. Not because he has doubts about the translator, this time, but because he has doubts about the writer, or rather the condition of being a writer. He feels that he is the loser, abandoned, left behind, “sunk in a swamp.” The gains are all on the side of the translations “travelling across the oceans, touching the souls of strangers, speaking another language.” But the value Márai places on his itinerant books is driven by a sense of loss – loss of freedom, loss of income, loss of status – in war-torn Hungary. He comes to value what was previously taken for granted. This is why we need, in the words of Vincent Delecroix, to learn to lose. Not in the sense of actively courting failure but in the sense of learning about loss, what it means and why it matters. Elizabeth Bishop famously claimed in her poem “One Art” that “[t]he art of losing isn’t hard to master” (47). Fortunately, translation is there to remind us that nothing could be further from the truth.

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