

The Task of the Translator

Daisy was a poet; Gavin, a translator; Wayne, a teacher. Gavin translated Daisy's poems, poorly, into English. Wayne taught the inaccurate translations' deeply creased interstices.

Sometimes Gavin added meanings of his own.

Wayne taught these supplemental innuendoes.

Daisy and Gavin were too young to remember the previous war.

Wayne invited Daisy and Gavin to visit his seminar and discuss translation's perils.

Daisy had an accident in the seminar. She broke down crying. Gavin tried to comfort her. Wayne vowed never again to teach Daisy's cloudy originals.

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Gavin and Daisy had an affair.

Wayne changed his mind. He invited Daisy back to the seminar, despite her breakdown.

The seminar took place in a dungeon. Troublemaker Daisy read her originals into a distorting, crackly amplification system, which made the words more desirable.

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Gavin made great money, translating Daisy, a star of underground cinema.

Wayne made a decent living, teaching Gavin's translations. Secretly Wayne wanted a direct erotic friendship with Daisy, but he settled for Gavin.

Wayne and Gavin always met for beers before class, so they could talk about Daisy's opacities.

Daisy was the genius, Gavin the conversationalist.

Gavin tried to translate breakdown. He grew exaggerated sideburns and wore tinted glasses. Daisy wore hippy skirts.

Wayne taught the skirts and the translations, the originals and the sideburns.

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Despite his relative affluence, Gavin lived at the Y. Daisy lived at the Waldorf.

Daisy thought her originals were flameproof so she set fire to them in her ice bucket. A bellboy put out the flame. Daisy faxed the charred fragments to Gavin, who translated them. Wayne taught the remains. Daisy's finger felt the wound.

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Wayne took Daisy out for a drink. Gavin came along, to translate. Only Gavin could master Daisy's demanding multiplicity of dialects. The three friends ordered a plate of clattering mussels.

"Teach my originals," said Daisy, to Wayne, who shot Gavin a complicit look.

"You're a genius but I value my life," Wayne told Daisy.

"My loss is untranslatable," said Daisy, through Gavin. "And my finger hurts."

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Then everything changed. Gavin discovered his voice. Daisy lost hers. Gavin became an original, and Daisy translated him.

Meanwhile, Wayne taught himself the rudiments of Daisy's language, a newfangled combination of several dispersed tongues.

Before class, Wayne and Daisy went out for beers to discuss Gavin's originals. Gavin wanted to come along, but Gavin, now that he was an original, had become untrustworthy, unsavory. As Wayne enveloped himself in Daisy's hippy skirts, the notion of the uncapturable trace came alive for him as never before.

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Daisy and Gavin resumed their affair and videotaped themselves having sex. Wayne watched the videos. A bloody mess. Attractive. For sale. Dispersed remains. Daisy got her voice back

and Gavin lost his. Gavin returned to translation, and Daisy, to originality. Militant divisions. Everything returned to normal.

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Daisy wrote a poem about the imminent war. Gavin refused to translate it. He said it violated her contract. War changes the contract, Daisy argued. Gavin took off his shorts.

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Daisy had Biblical patches. Gavin's duty was to seek out the patches and remedy them, disguise their purple.

In their sex videos, Gavin and Daisy nude-wrestled, their bodies slick with the infantile.

Daisy and Gavin were still in their twenties. Their work had hardly begun. It was a pity that one of them would soon die.

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Daisy sounded like Ponge, Hikmet, and Tsvetaeva, but Gavin distorted her in translation, turning her into a bargain-basement Verlaine. He infelicitously translated Daisy's famous poem about a pebble. Wayne caught the errors but didn't dare tell Daisy that translation had soiled her pebble original.

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Against advice, Wayne showed his students the video of Gavin and Daisy nude-wrestling. Assignment: write a paragraph adjudicating the fight. The students en masse said they hated allegory. They refused to write the paragraphs. The twentieth century ended. The war began. Wayne wrote a paragraph. He brought his allegory to the bar and discussed it with Gavin, before class, while they drank beers. Gavin's alcoholism got worse, almost rising to Daisy's level.

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Daisy decided to take a shower before she wrote another poem about a pebble. She shampooed with Herbal Essence. Gavin joined her in the shower, put conditioner in her hair. Wayne opened the bathroom door. "Can I come in?" he asked.

Gavin said yes. Daisy said, "Please don't use your video camera." Gavin refused to translate. Wayne had forgotten his rudimentary knowledge of Daisy's vernacular. "Gavin," said Wayne, "do you mind if I video?" "That's fine," said Gavin." "I'm sick," said Daisy, "of Wayne's feeble literalism."

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And here are Daisy and Gavin, at the Oscars!

Daisy was nominated for best foreign original, and Gavin was nominated for best translation of a foreign original.

The winners are—Glenn Close opened the envelope—Daisy and Gavin! The theme music of the Daisy and Gavin movie began to play, and Daisy and Gavin walked onstage together to accept their Oscar, a Siamese twin statuette, joined at the ribcage. Afterward, downtown, Daisy and Gavin found a practitioner to bisect (illegal operation) the monstrous Oscar.

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Gavin got a lot of translation work for high prices because he was exceptionally handsome. Daisy's pebble poems were highly praised because she was very beautiful. Gavin got sexier, after the Oscar. Daisy got dumpy. Now Daisy was jealous of Gavin, his face on the covers of magazines. The translator and his sideburns. The translator and his room at the Y. A curious nation's shifting population watched Daisy and Gavin vie.

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Then Wayne and Gavin started having an affair, and Wayne checked into the Y, to be closer to Gavin. After sex, Wayne and Gavin went to the coffee shop across from the Y, to discuss Daisy's originals. Gavin's body got better and better, the longer the affair lasted.

Daisy continued to write further installments of her pebble poem. Gavin, at the coffee shop across from the Y, discussed the new translations with Wayne. Tonight Wayne was teaching the seven hundredth poem about the pebble, and Gavin couldn't explain a few of the nuances "If I don't understand the pebble,

Gavin, I can't teach this poem," Wayne said, exasperated, as he ate his hamburger and drank his malted milk.

"We go about the tasks of daily life," said Gavin, "in our own ways."

"Your translation is more confusing than the original," said Wayne.

Shocked, Gavin gripped the edge of the table. He froze and fell backwards in time to a moment before he'd begun to translate.

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Daisy's new project was a revision of Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*. Daisy called her version, *The Book of Perpetual Quiet*. Gavin had already begun to translate it, though Daisy had not finished writing it. Gavin worried that Daisy was not composing quickly enough. Wayne worried that Gavin was not translating quickly enough. Over beers, Gavin told Wayne that Daisy's *Book of Perpetual Quiet* was her most difficult work and the most exasperating to translate. Wayne replied that the task of the translator was to stop complaining. To escape the day's cruxes, the teacher reached his hand in the translator's pants.

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"Every act of speech is site-specific," said Gavin, to Daisy. Wayne was filming their conversation with his video camera, so he could replay the event to his class. Wayne worried that Daisy's and Gavin's nudity would offend students.

The students were not offended. They applauded Daisy's and Gavin's bodies.

"In Daisy's pebble poems," said Wayne, to his seminar, "she is totally 'out there.'" Gavin, sitting in on the seminar, interrupted. "I disagree. In my translations of the pebble poem, I show that Daisy is completely grounded. That's the point of the pebble: to demonstrate Daisy's connection to diurnal things." Daisy was sitting at the other end of the conference table. She wore a pink wig today. She still had a wound on her right index finger, from the Waldorf ice bucket flame. Despite discomfort, Daisy took notes. Her new fluency in English surprised every-

one. She was outgrowing the need for a translator. This fact upset her. She had more clout in the literary community if she relied on a translator. Originals were respected only if they passed through translation's veils. "I miss my power," Daisy whispered to herself, in the seminar. As she contemplated her vanishing clout, she began to cry. Georgie, a student who had a crush on Gavin and was doing a video documentary about Gavin's face, began to film Daisy crying. Any exploitative footage was fodder. "I'm pissed," whispered Daisy, as Georgie filmed. "I'm pissed that the teacher doesn't get my pebble nuances."

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The task of the teacher is to translate.
The task of the translator is to wake up Daisy.
Daisy's pebble nuance poem is the translation of the burn.
The translator is the task of Daisy.
Gavin is the Daisy of Wayne.
The Waldorf is the translation of the Y.
The Y is the Waldorf of the translator.
The burn is the nuance of the pebble.
The task is the dispersal of the translator.
Gavin is the Oscar of the pebble nuance poem.
The seminar is the task of the burn.
The breakdown is the Oscar of the task.
The sexual fantasy is the task of the Y.
The breakdown of the translator is the task.
The seminar is the sexual fantasy of the translator.

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Multiple choice quiz:

1. War is
 - (a) the task of the translator
 - (b) outside the story
 - (c) the story
 - (d) untranslatable
 - (e) all of the above.

2. The task is
- (a) the translator
 - (b) Daisy and Gavin's sexual incompatibility
 - (c) Daisy's sexual voraciousness
 - (d) Gavin's sexual hangups
 - (e) how we got here and how we get out of here.

3. Shame is the tint of
- (a) the translator
 - (b) the task
 - (c) Daisy
 - (d) the pebble nuance poem
 - (e) untranslatability.

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"Spleen"

a new poem by Daisy, translated by Gavin

Daisy, grand flotation device,
loves the pale inhabitants of the nearby cemetery
that pours its mortality on the smoky suburbs.

Daisy on the roadside looks for her litter
agitated without rest by the meager galette
that Gavin fed me when I tried to strangle his gullet
with my sad voice, all frill and phantom.

My pebble burden is perpetual mouth, lamentation
faucet that never turns off,
rheumatic dependency, foul ball, perfumed yard-sale.

Heritage is fatal, said Gavin, in the Waldorf,
under a hydroponic umbrella. The handsome valet
offered to undo my pique by sinisterly causing

my translatability to go falsetto.

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In the dungeon, Wayne taught Gavin's translation of Daisy's "Spleen." Daisy attended the seminar. Her burn filled the room. The war began. Would we win was not the question. The question was how to translate the pronoun *we*.

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"I don't want merely to fall back on rhetoric," Daisy said, to the seminar, on the second evening of the war. *Daisy's voice is newly transparent in the evening*, thought Gavin, afraid of being erased by evening. Wayne was trying to teach the students about Gavin's fear of erasure and about Daisy's new transparency on the second evening of the war. "Tasks can't go on as usual," said Daisy to the room, but the room didn't trust her, because she was having another florid breakdown, carefully documented in the pebble nuance poem. Gavin was taking notes for a future translation of Daisy's in-class breakdown on the second evening of the war. Wayne was trying to teach Gavin's future notes, even before they were written down or translated, and this precipitousness, this earliness, was posing problems, complications to be discussed between teacher and translator, later, at the Y, in Gavin's room, after Daisy had returned to the Waldorf.

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Scarlatti wrote 600 sonatas, Daisy wrote in a poem that Gavin was trying to translate and that Wayne was trying to teach even before it had been translated; *Scarlatti wrote over 600 sonatas, and at his death*, wrote Daisy, in a poem that expanded on the work of the pebble nuance poem, *Scarlatti's manuscripts were dispersed, and his reputation fell into obscurity*. Gavin translated the lines poorly, but Wayne could see through the inadequate wording and in any case no longer taught translations, only originals. In the seminar, Gavin applied a bandage to Daisy's burned finger. In war time it was only possible to teach originals, but no one in the seminar, including the teacher, fully understood Daisy's amalgam of tongues, or the sources of her wounds, or if her losses had origins.

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"Ars Poetica"

a new poem by Daisy, translated by
Gavin

Music comes first.
I prefer impairment.
The vaguer and airier, the better.
Less pizzicato, more posing.

It's also necessary to wander from the point
and to choose your words contemptuously
so you don't end up behaving like a grisette
in a Precision joint near the indecisive Rhine.

O beautiful *derrière* of Gavin, translating me!
O beautiful trembling day, nearly noon,
above autumn's accidents, the Kremlin
framing Daisy's love for Gavin's oyster-clear eyes!

Voilà, nuance, come, again and again,
into my pebble poem, colored red or yellow
according to my fiancé's whim —
I hop from dream to dream like a flute having a coronary

and I try to assassinate —
good Daisy that I am — every impure thought,
every "point," every cruel azure argument —

you can take your elegance, Gavin,
and shove it up your ass! feral
Being, assuaged by rhyme,
veiled by the Almost, the Nearly —

I'll sue you, rather than step
forged into the lime-bright falseness of this age,

musical as the Aga Khan though no one cares,
enveloped by agency

and within the alleys of your decisiveness
arguing a footpath between brother and other.

Good luck, Gavin,
I'm parsing you as best I can.
The bed you sleep in isn't literature's.

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Next year, Gavin and Daisy were nominated for Oscars again—Daisy, for best foreign original, and Gavin, for best translation of a foreign original. Daisy lost. Gavin won. Gavin had carefully crafted an acceptance speech, which he read aloud to the gathered crowd. After reading it, onstage, he shot himself in the heart. Daisy, in the audience, ran up to him and threw her living body over his dead one. The next week, Wayne taught Gavin's acceptance speech in his translation seminar. Here is the speech in its entirety:

Translation, like triumph, is a subject I can approach only cautiously. If I had a language other than my own, perhaps I could broach this subject, and this imperial occasion, with more fortitude and clarity; in the absence of a substitute language, I must regard this subject as one too daunting to trifle with, too large to avoid. Lucky indeed am I to be in the position of speaking to you today about this matter, a matter I shall call the opposite of weightless, a matter unapproachable despite my surprising victory; for today's occasion, untranslatable, proposes a subject before which any thinking and feeling woman or man, any woman or man with a sense of historical consequence, must tremble; a subject before which we must take unusual pains, lest we damage ourselves or our listeners by mishandling a single nuance of the burden I would not call "word-hauntedness" if there were a better noun in my forlorn and bewildered language to describe the task.