

## Different Strokes: Translation and Alterity in Gerhard Richter's Diptychs

Ricky Varghese

Poet and writer Anne Michaels suggested, in her novel *Fugitive Pieces*, that one can choose “[one’s] philosophy of translation just as [one might] choose how to live: the free adaptation that sacrifices detail to meaning, the strict crib that sacrifices meaning to exactitude” (Michaels 109). Based on this logic of a relationship to sacrifice as observed within the textual overflows that might be culled from the, at times, generative, and, at other times, repressive gesture of translation, in such a scene as this, it, translation as such, might be regarded under the heading of a presumed, as in the sense of being always already predisposed to the experience of, loss and the surreptitious grief that such loss is aligned with, mediated by, and, as well, itself informs.

Sacrifice, loss, grief – a triangulation might be imagined under the heading of what translation both gives in the moment of receiving, and what it receives in the scene of enacted and exacted loss; in a sense it compels the loss that it attempts to negate, and it acts as reprieve against any and all gain it might promise. In a sense, again, translation is ambivalence, perhaps *the* literary gesture of ambivalence par excellence. We might then ask: What is sacrificed within its gesture? What is lost in the losing that is embarked upon? What is, ultimately, grieved? If one text, in the scene of the gesture of translation, gives way to another textual life – both same and different in the simultaneity of what can or cannot be adapted or given over to exactitude, so that what we might find here is not just a matter of another textual life, but a case of a living death of the text itself, or a case of a deathly alive or enlivened text that we are newly given over to, or that which is given over to us, as readers – then how can alterity, difference as such, be imagined to orbit around this universe of such an expansive sacrificial logic?

This call to attend to alterity or difference in textual translation, in the gesture itself where a text is forced to both endure and sever its anxious and tendentious tie to its radical reflection (read: the other (in)side itself) might be significant for us to consider. The translator’s arduous task is no less a task of giving – perhaps giving what s/he needs most, and most resolutely. Eric Prenowitz, Jacques Derrida’s translator for the latter’s *Archive Fever*, in the “Translator’s Note” for that text, superbly articulates this task of giving that the translator makes necessarily, if only through a painstaking commitment to the very task of giving itself, possible. As such, here if the task of translation itself, the traumatizing of language in order to rescue it from its own traumatic lose or losing, should take place then:

[a] translator’s task is giving up. Rendering, and very often rending, each time wrenching. Caught in an intractable double bind, immemorial and infinitely iterated, one must decide or rule...right where the idiomatic snarl won’t be untied. It means giving up the dream of an effortless and silent living transfusion, immediate and unmitigated, unmediated. Giving up giving, in other words, because in the first place the thing does not belong

to you and in the second it will not in any case have been handed over intact. But giving, nonetheless. Getting and begetting. Forgiving, perhaps forgiven. Giving forgetting too (Prenowitz 105).

Is this not both a symptom of and, as well, programmatic of the task of translation – the giving off, the figural discharge and the textual secretion, of what one never owned and of what was never owed to the translator in the first place? The text – the story of the past of language’s inscriptive mediation – never belonged to the translator. The words never belonged to her/him; s/he only ever responded to the traumatic lose or losing embedded in language, as in the case of the labor of love that translation is, to pry the invisible into visibility. What appears, here, is a critically and drastically provocative resemblance between the translator and an excavator of rocks and stones as in the case of an archaeologist, or a Baudelairean ragpicker tirelessly picking at, almost assiduously, and collecting from accumulated wreckage; an uncanny poet, so to speak, wrecking and breaking fragile language, coded and recoded; such a translator opens up the wounds in language itself, always already there, of a poem or a prose in a tongue other than her/his own. Belonging and alterity, here, appear to necessarily and even irrevocably part ways.

This is the space of a necessary stagnancy – a “waiting,” so to speak, to which I will return – we might find, in the aforementioned double bind that translation seems to present us with – giving and giving up giving; belonging to the text, fashioned as though in a God-like manner out of its own image (remember, the desire for adaptation and exactitude), while also simultaneously existing as its alter or other to the original; prying the invisible text into the scene of visibility; recognizing from within the text what might, in another context, be deemed the Freudian uncanny, that which is both intimately longed for and deeply feared – difference in the body of the same. Stagnating, waiting, between this sense of the uncanny that we might glean from the gesture and the structure of ambivalence embedded in the very task itself, it would appear that in the labor of love (a violent love, at its core) that translation appears to be, in the very tendency to be stagnant, to wait, at the hands of the translator, we recognize a semblance to what Kaja Silverman expanded upon when she considered Sigmund Freud’s desire to negotiate psychoanalysis – itself a task of translation of unconscious psychical material – as, fundamentally, a cure, above all, by love which:

[represents] the triumph of relationality; it is a cure through and for displacement. The cure by love frees us from fixation through the formation of a new libidinal relation. Indeed, its whole point is to bring about the reconstitution of the past in the guise of the present. To the degree that what was asserts its priority over what is, the cure by love appears to have failed. Although Freud himself tells us that we must love or fall ill, we are not accustomed to conceptualizing love as a cure. We are generally less aware of its medicinal properties than of its powers of intoxication. This is because we are accustomed to thinking in narcissistic ways about love. [We are, however] encouraged to

approach this topic from the other direction: from the direction of what is loved. It asks us to conceptualize love not in the form either of the aggrandizement or rapture of the one who loves, but rather in the form of care for the world. It suggests that creatures and things are in need of this care because without it they cannot help but suffer from the most serious of all maladies: invisibility (Silverman 42).

Without the primacy of such love, such a labor of love that translation presumes and announces itself to be, the text is rendered invisible without being rendered or wrenched at all in the first place, given over to its own disappearance. However, without love, the past cannot also be made visible in the very present form of the new and translated text, and alterity cannot be mobilized as fundamentally critical to how two textual scenes – the original and the translation – could exist in simultaneity. In the name of such a displaced simultaneity – the double bind love that exists between the original and the simultaneously present copy or translation, how might we understand the fidelity of the translator toward the otherness of the past that the apparent original represents, the original that has already left us in the gesture of translation itself, been laid to presumed waste, and/or given over to possible temporally-charged, spatially-signified, and/or materially-marked textual decay and deterioration? How might we think of the temporality of this necessarily traumatic gesture that is translation and what it might give over to textual transfiguration in the way of situating and citing a scene in which redemption might be the possible inheritance – the cure – we might garner from such a space of both loss and gain, the simultaneous translatory mediation of both a mourning that considers the loss of the past text and its possible ongoing melancholic resuscitation in the new?

As Silverman, again, elsewhere famously suggested regarding the diptych paintings of Gerhard Richter<sup>1</sup>, the answer to these queries might reside not in the space of the “either/or,” the polemical opposition construed of two apparently or seemingly divergent or disparate standpoints, be it, for instance, either mourning or melancholia for the original over the translation, either forgetting or remembrance in the name of one text over another, but in the “both/and” of their simultaneous enactment and activity wherein the inquiry might take an altogether different route<sup>2</sup>. In this scene, rather than asking if translation – as a moment of possible textual ruin – stands in as an assignation of *either* mourning *or* melancholia, it might bequeath us to apodictically come to a conclusion that deems this spatial and temporal metaphor – materialized in the form of the text – as a scene of *both* grief-stricken mourning and the site and situated place wherein melancholic remnants of its own past assumed to have already long departed us find their untimely and even uncanny home in the conflicted space of the new.

Hence the both/and signifies both an attention – a perpetual insomnia and a perceptive waking, a waiting again, so to speak, in order to “awaken the dead,” as Walter Benjamin suggested in Thesis IX of his now-famous *Theses on the Philosophy of History* – to textual overflows. Both the text and its translation as metaphors for time, for traumatic historical

materiality as such, passing from the past into the present and onto a future as yet to come, for which we wait, become equivocated in the instance of this simultaneity, a simultaneity that can only be made possible in the rupture that translation itself sanctions, enlivens, and makes viable as our experience of time and temporality become constantly inscribed upon and imbued with newer meanings and newer identities and identifications. Herein lies the tension that difference might announce into the scene of translation, and how translation negotiates transcendence, as such, when considering the consequences of alterity.

What could be gleaned, here, from a possible tying together – a belated binding, as such, in the surreptitious aftermath of trauma that difference breathes into the scene – of translation and the processes that lead to subject formation? Furthermore, how could translation, as both conceptual framework and theoretical practice, open up more nuanced ways by which to examine how alterity itself becomes both spatially defined and temporally qualified as marking difference between and across varied subjects? Rebecca Comay suggests that “translation implies not only a spatial relay of psychic energy from one occupation zone to another but an economic inflation – an overinvestment or hypercathexis in the trifling aftermath of an intensity originally unmarked” (Comay, 25). She continues, then, by interweaving translation to trauma itself, whereby the latter “marks a caesura in which the linear order of time is thrown out of sequence” (25). It is this traumatic displacement at the core of the experience of translation – if translation were to be regarded upon as an experience in and of itself of subjectivity waiting on the sidelines, as well as a practical apparatus that both enacts and endures difference – that one might imagine operating in Richter’s suggestive diptych paintings<sup>3</sup>.

Challenging notions of beginnings and endings, points of origins and points of apparent enlightened historical finish lines, Richter’s diptychs might be read as works of painterly translation, even a sort of translatory transubstantiation wherein, as to recall what Michaels suggested one can choose “[one’s] philosophy of translation just as [one might] choose how to live: the free adaptation that sacrifices detail to meaning, the strict crib that sacrifices meaning to exactitude” (Michaels 109). Alterity becomes emblematically paradigmatic in how we might look at and experience the task of translation endeavored by Richter in his painterly works. Here, difference does not predict nor does it predicate transcendence – one part of a Richter diptych does not rise above or beyond the other. Rather, the task of such painterly translation, as such, is to embark on the very signification of alterity as paramount to experiencing how political subjectivity might be understood and aligned across the very inscriptions that difference negotiates. Following Silverman, again, the answer to the question of how to read these works might reside not in the space of the “either/or,” the polemical opposition construed of two apparently or seemingly divergent or disparate standpoints, but in the “both/and” of their simultaneous activation, activity, enactment, and unearthing wherein the inquiry might take us outside of any and all desire to transcendentalize one figure over another. Political figuration, it might be argued, within the scene of such a translatory task as the one presumably undertaken by Richter, assumes that difference becomes the site of and the very citation for what both figures – the two paintings that form a diptych or two subjects that symbolize difference, self and other – might have to offer up in regards to responses to historical trauma, temporal rupture, the political interplay and the triumphant relationality

between one figure and the other. What is hoped for, ultimately, is that a case might be made for this relationality between variegated figural and literal bodies and divergent political subjectivities as signified by these diptychs, as could be made in the case of a moment of textual inscription and its radical other – the other always already in itself – its translation.

In a sense, as well, to return to the earlier mentioned task of waiting, as such, translation, much like the subjectivities of the texts that it attempts to both connote and re-stage, is not “merely” a spatial metaphor – founded upon the site of the page or a canvas – for alterity, but, as well, a temporal experience or, rather, a temporal act. Translation becomes an act – perhaps the act par excellence, at once both radically possible and disappointingly impossible, much like the encounters promised between disparate subjectivities or two sides of a diptych that attempt at a meeting – of waiting. Waiting, here, for the other to be realized, to be made realizable, to be recognizable, to be made re-cognizable, to be brought into cognition and into the visual field of the other. As John Paul Ricco suggests elsewhere, such a waiting might be “an interminable waiting in the midst of incessant coming,” (Ricco 12) waiting for alterity, waiting for the desire of the other textual subject/object to be made possible in how the translatory task itself becomes a site of emergent fecundity.

Like in an analytic encounter, between analyst and analysand, where the name of the game is the gesture of waiting, wherein an impervious sense of an interminable temporality is founded on how subjectivity becomes marked, inscribed, formed, and delimited within the context of such a waiting where the unconscious life begins to unravel, albeit with grave difficulty – wherein the analyst waits for the analysand to provide what s/he withholds, represses, forgets, most dear to her/him, wherein the analysand always already waits for disclosures, yet to come, left almost perennially, withheld by the analyst, the cure of traumatized subjectivity here, much like a cure that permits cognition between one self and another, is not one of love alone, but of waiting, a waiting that sees in itself, implicitly, no termination. So, a text can be translated, over and over again; a translation repeated endlessly, interminably waiting for that presumed final translatory scene, each repetition differing from the one that preceded it. As such, similarly, Richter’s canvases appear to be painted over and over again, penitently, to see one side of the diptych as being observed, and witnessed over, by the other. Such a waiting, returning to Ricco, might be one “without expectation and yet because it awaits nothing, it is insatiable” (12).

How to make sense of this insatiability that translation leaves behind in its aftermath? Perhaps, an approach – a movement toward – is to not look on the task of translation, the task of waiting for textual mediation, re-mediation, and realization, the task of unraveling the encounter between texts and subjectivities, as so much leading toward an aftermath of perpetual insatiability, but, rather, as being constituted by the very insatiability that it seeks to agnostically resolve. Recognition across variegated figures and disparate subjects is impossible, but it is this, its very implicit nature of such an impossibility that offers the promise, nay the hope, for something as yet-to-come. Here, we are not so much thinking of transcendence, but of a relation, a relationship, as such.

The cure by love – whether of the translator in relation to the text and between the two texts, of the painter in relation to his paintings and between his two paintings, or of the analyst in relation to the analysand – becomes a cure of waiting for that which has as yet to happen, or become possible, or even become plausible. Immunized, vis-à-vis precisely through this gesture of waiting, against its own perceivable undoing, waiting for nothing becomes a waiting nonetheless, simultaneously, for something to happen, to be drawn out and abridged – recognition between and across alterity's inherent and apparent impossibility. Here, resides, rest, and wrests within and from, the possibility of an ethical encounter between disparate subjectivities in search of a binding recognition, still unfettered, still given over to the task of giving what cannot be fully given. Translation as a gesture of surreptitious waiting for alterity to realize its own potential for an ethics of simultaneous commensurability, a meeting, and incommensurability, a parting, then echoes the very commensurate incommensurability we might recognize in Richter's diptych's; a parting then to meet again and again, a meeting then to part over and over again.

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<sup>1</sup> Please see Gerhard Richter's *Abstraktes Bild (726)*, 1990, oil on canvas, part of the Tate collection in London, England: <http://www.gerhard-richter.com/art/paintings/abstracts/detail.php?paintid=6860&catID=31&p=3&sp=32>

<sup>2</sup> Silverman speaks at great length of this specific quality in Richter's diptych paintings that signal his interest in creating analogous relations between disparate and divergent political forces that lie seemingly against one another but in close proximity to each other. She uses the formulation of the "both/and" to explore how Richter's diptychs regard and consider the matter of political difference along lines of similarities, as coexisting despite their differences in proximity of one another. My first exposure to this "both/and" formulation was through the lecture Silverman gave, titled "Unfinished Business," as part of the *Panorama: New Perspectives on Richter* symposium at the Tate Modern in London, on October 21, 2011. I found this formulation most useful to think through in regards to my own concerns regarding the simultaneous occurrence and coexistence of the experiences of mourning and melancholia, and of remembrance and forgetting, as politically-charged forces that appear to be distinct but that one could make a case for their analogous similarities in how both these seeming polarities are situated under the heading of the experience of contending with loss and its incumbent traumatic pressures. A video recording of this lecture can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLsQeSL39iM>

<sup>3</sup> Also note Gerhard Richter's *Canaletto (727)*, 1990, oil on canvas, part of the Böckmann Collection at the Hamburger Kunsthalle in Hamburg, Germany: <http://www.gerhard-richter.com/art/paintings/abstracts/detail.php?paintid=6861&catID=31&p=3&sp=32>