

Translating Dickinson

By William Eaton

A discussion of four Emily Dickinson poems in the context of Françoise Delphy's French translations appearing in Poésies complètes : Edition bilingue français-anglais by Emily Dickinson and Françoise Delphy (Flammarion, 2009).

I. The Articulate Inarticulate

An early reader of Emily Dickinson's poems used this phrase—"the articulate inarticulate"—to describe her, and for me it provides a way into "translating" or seeking means of understanding one of my favorites among her poems, here quoted in its entirety:

Distance — is not the Realm of Fox
Nor by Relay of Bird
Abated — Distance is
Until thyself, Beloved.

These lines could be read as simply a pretentious way of saying: For me distance is not a matter of a lot of miles; it's from me to you, my love. But I am certainly among those who give Dickinson the benefit of the doubt, who perceive/imagine her, in her best moments, straining language toward a breaking point in an attempt to express aspects of human experience that seem to lie outside of language or to be ill served by it. Among other things, Dickinson's work can help us appreciate how language, writing in particular, can not only speak about the distances between human beings but can itself curtain us from others and erect curtains within our selves as well.

From a letter Dickinson sent to her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert, to whom, although she lived next door, Dickinson sent hundreds of letters and poems:

I would paint a portrait which would bring the tears, had I a canvass for it, and the scene should be—solitude, and the figures—solitude—and the lights and shades each a solitude. I could fill a chamber with landscapes so lone, men should pause and weep there; then haste grateful home, for a loved one left.

This may seem a quixotic if not perverse goal. On the surface, at least, language seems a means of escaping from solitude and even an imposition on the possibility of solitude, with the imposing beginning at a very early age when we are taught to speak to our elders in ways and with words and in formats they already understand. But it is also the case that the sociability that language imposes upon us often seems like “just words,” and thus may deepen our sense of solitude.

Returning to the “Distance” poem, even if we opt for the enigmatic reading I will be proposing, we needn’t struggle to understand the first part about the fox and the bird. Distance, in this poem’s or this reading’s view, is not something physical or geographical, a matter of miles or square miles or something that could be spanned and indeed is spanned by animals, with a little effort. But how will we read “Distance is / Until thyself, Beloved”? If only Dickinson had indeed written “Distance is from me to you, my love.” But three of the words we find recorded—“until,” “thyself,” and “beloved”—can be read in more than one way, or as deliberately ambiguous. The simplest of these, as in the non-enigmatic reading, would have “until” mean “up to” in a more or less physical sense (up to your door, up to your heart). And “beloved” would be shorthand for “my beloved”; and “thyself” an address to a particular reader.

If the friendship “is finished, tell me, and I will raise the lid to my box of Phantoms, and lay one more love in,” Dickinson once wrote Gilbert. Dickinson’s poems, letters, and biographers suggest that she lived in profound intellectual and emotional isolation that was at once relieved and redoubled by her capacity to latch onto people she encountered and to immediately transform them in her imagination and in her poems and letters into the soul mates she never had. It might be said that these imaginary friends were following in the wake of Dickinson’s mother, who was apparently incapable of offering her daughter much nurture

or companionship. And meanwhile the people themselves were understandably leery of being so immediately and vigorously transformed by Dickinson's fertile and lonely imagination. They tended to respond slowly and reticently, if at all, to Dickinson's words.

So, again, we *can* read these four lines as a love poem to someone (not necessarily her sister-in-law) who is hardly far away geographically speaking, but who, for Dickinson, is emotionally unreachable. And we can decide that the "thysself" and "beloved" are part of a caginess or preciousness in Dickinson's chosen rhetoric, or a reaching toward some kind of vaguely Biblical phrasing. (The biographer Alfred Habegger states that Dickinson's mother had not mastered the rules of standard written English, and notes "the misspellings, the opaque diction, the tangled syntax, and that unstable writing voice—its mix of vernacular elements and stilted propriety" in her own letters. Clearly he has the younger Emily Dickinson's poetry in mind, and we might ask if her own mixes of the vernacular and of something like "stilted propriety," and her own at times opaque diction and tangled syntax, served in part to signal her attachment to or acceptance of her mother, warts and all.)

If, however, we take a break from biographical information and speculation, and just take the words of the poem as they have come down to us, we could note the reflexive quality of "thysself." There is a suggestion that distance, or the distance that is the subject of this poem, might be an internal matter, perhaps a distance from the reader's skin to his heart, or from "I" to "me." I hear, too, an admonishing tone, almost as if the poet were saying—perhaps to her sister-in-law, though now, from the grave, to all of us—"Distance is not what you think it is, a geographical thing; the distance is within you." Or within me and within you. Or the distance is not physical but temporal; it awaits an action or change of heart, and one that seems unlikely to ever occur.

As Samuel G. Ward, a banker and transcendentalist writer, observed after reading Dickinson's poems and on his way to describing her as "the articulate inarticulate":

She is the quintessence of that element we all have who are of the Puritan descent We came to this country to think our own thoughts with nobody to hinder. . . . We conversed with our own souls till we lost the art of communicating with other people. The typical family grew up strangers to each other.

From this perspective, "beloved" can be read as announcing the real problem: it has to do with love, and not with the unrequited love of the poet for a reticent beloved; the problem is a problem for or within "thysself," with the aspect of love that involves being

close to and open to another human being, and as opposed to a phantom or a “beloved” on a page. Thus (our second reading), the poem can be read as saying that there is an untraversable distance between us and the world within us, within our hearts, until we “be loved,” until—up to *the moment* when—we are loved or allow ourselves to be loved. A lack of love—a lack of being or having been loved, or difficulties feeling love—can leave many of us—Susan Gilbert, Emily Dickinson, William Eaton, and many another—feeling alienated and distant. (It can also be noted that a child who is not loved by, or does not feel loved by, his mother or his father will have great difficulty ever feeling loved.)

II. Delphy’s Translations & Three More Poems

I have written this nine-paragraph exegesis of a four-line poem in part because the poem is such a favorite of mine—because it speaks so richly and powerfully to me about love and my own psychology—but also because I recently came across a French translation of the poem. In this translation, by one Françoise Delphy, the closing statement is rendered, “la Distance est / Le chemin jusqu’à toi, mon Amour.” Playing a game of Telephone, translating a translation, I will turn this back into English as: “Distance is the path that leads to you, my Love.”

Well, that’s simple. A reader might thank Delphy for her hard work, for solving the puzzle of the poem, doing away with its ambivalences, and giving French readers something easier to digest. (I note that the editors of the first volume of Dickinson’s poetry ever to be published chose to “improve” some of her poems by correcting “mistakes,” and although subsequent volumes have sought to give us the original versions, there are still plenty of readers, poets included, who find aspects of these original versions, or aspects of some of them, just plain wrong.)

All this said, my position remains that Delphy’s rendition of the “Distance” poem is, unfortunately, not quite right. It reduces Dickinson’s work and distances her readers from the linguistic and psychological complexity that makes Dickinson one of the great writers of English. As the novelist and editor William Dean Howells wrote in one of the first reviews of Dickinson’s poetry: “if nothing else had come out of our life but this strange poetry we should feel that in the work of Emily Dickinson, America, or New England rather, had made

a distinctive addition to the literature of the world”. (Ironically, Howells, and Samuel Ward too, had in mind the first, heavily edited volume.)

I must now backtrack to say some kinder, more admiring words about Delphy’s translations of Dickinson and about Flammarion’s presentation of them. For one, Delphy took on the daunting and wonderful task of translating *all* 1,800+ poems, and her translations have been reproduced in a quite handsome and readable 1,470-page edition that pairs the French translations with the English originals. To my mind, such a bilingual format is ever the best way to publish poetry in translation, allowing and encouraging readers to use translations as ways into the original texts but not as replacements for them. I would encourage francophone readers to take a look at this volume. Even if one’s French is minimal or one finds oneself disagreeing with Delphy’s general approach and with some of her specific decisions, confronting another’s translation of Dickinson’s work can help us reflect on our own “translations,” be these “only” from Dickinson’s English into our own.

My largest disagreement with Delphy’s work stems from the fact that she has embraced a different tradition of translation than the one I believe in. In some notes to a French translation of *Robinson Crusoe* I found an editor complimenting the translator (long since dead) for having improved on Defoe’s text by making it clearer and more readable “qu’il n’est en réalité” (than it is in reality). Some might say—I would say—that it takes some *cojones* to think one is going to improve on a classic novel written by a classic writer, but my sense is that this is indeed what some translators feel. Even as they greatly admire the work they are translating, they feel that translation gives them opportunities to make some improvements, correct some mistakes.

From this perspective—and although I would call the results of such efforts “glosses” rather than translations—I can greatly admire Delphy’s work. I consulted it at a moment when I was trying myself to translate a few of Dickinson’s poems into French, and I was quite impressed by Delphy’s capacity to resolve neatly and at times elegantly some of the tangles (and, again, notwithstanding my feeling that it is in the “tangles” that much of Dickinson’s genius can be found).

Since this is a text for an English-language publication, I will not dwell at length on Delphy’s French texts. Instead I will reproduce three other wonderful poems, two of which

seem too seldom anthologized and the last of which is one of the great (and not unerotic) poems about marriage (and this by someone who was married only in her fantasy life and may have died a virgin). Not wishing, however, to leave behind Delphy and the challenges of translation (or of glossing), I will also note briefly a few of her solutions, a few of her lines, some of which are inspired and inspiring.

(i) **Our lives are Swiss**

Our lives are Swiss —
So still — so cool —
Till some odd afternoon
The Alps neglect their Curtains
And we look further on!

Italy stands the other side!
While like a guard between —
The solemn Alps —
The siren Alps
Forever intervene!

Another poem about distance, and the biographically inclined may picture Dickinson inside her house and Susan Gilbert inside hers, if just next door. (And to complicate matters, Susan's husband, Emily's brother Austin, had a long affair with another woman, and it seems that their love-making was done in Emily's study, in her house. A scene littered with curtains, guards, sirens, and mountains, we might say.) The one challenge for a French translator is this polysemic word "cool" whose emotional meaning stands out in English, but would not in the French equivalent for a cool temperature: "frais." My idea was "sans chaleur," without warmth, but for that I had to give up the idea of being cool under fire, which fits with the second stanza's "guard," and which Delphy stresses with "Si calmes – si Flegmatiques –"

(ii) **'Tis not that Dying hurts us so**

'Tis not that Dying hurts us so —
'Tis Living — hurts us more —
But Dying — is a different way —
A Kind behind the Door —

The Southern Custom — of the Bird —
That ere the Frosts are due —
Accepts a better Latitude —

We — are the Birds — that stay.

The Shiverers round Farmers' doors—
For whose reluctant Crumb—
We stipulate—till pitying Snows
Persuade our Feathers Home.

If the Swiss Alps were a gentle warm up, these shiverers are a workout. As regards the opening lines, Francophiles may note that French is nowhere nearly as attached to gerunds as English is, so it's going to have to be “to die” and “to live.” And what about the beauty of the closing phrase—“till pitying Snows / Persuade our Feathers Home”—how are you going to capture much of that in a foreign language? Among other things, my sense is that, as readers, we are more skeptical when we find translators using words in seemingly ungrammatical ways than we are when we encounter such twisting by writers who share our mother tongues. For example, “shiverers” is a made-up noun, easy enough to understand in English, but, for French readers, it is perplexing, at least, if it is rendered as the made-up noun *Les Frissonneurs*.

A “translator” (who might be “just” a reader, seeking to understand, struggling to translate Dickinson’s English into her own) may also ask why “stipulate,” a legal word, appears in this poem’s context of begging. Habegger has proposed that Dickinson—daughter of a lawyer and related to various businessmen—“used the technical vocabulary of law and business far more extensively than other English or American poets of her time.” OK, so is this “stipulate” to be read, then, as merely a quirk of her biography?

Of Delphy’s various approaches to all this, and one of the lines that got me reading more and more of her translations, my favorite was:

Nous – nous sommes les Oiseaux – sédentaires.

Qui Frissonnent près des portes du Fermier –
En Attendant la Miette – stipulée dans notre contrat –
Offerte à contre-cœur –

We, we are the sedentary birds who shiver around the farmer’s doors, waiting for the crumb stipulated in our contract and given but reluctantly. These are of course not Dickinson’s exact words, and whereas the roughness of Dickinson’s syntax sets the stage for the elegance of her conclusion, Delphy’s text works in reverse, eloquently evoking the human relations of the middle of the poem and then falling back on a more prosaic conclusion (not given here).

(iii) I gave Myself to Him

I gave Myself to Him —
And took Himself, for Pay —
The solemn contract of a Life
Was ratified, this way —

The Wealth might disappoint —
Myself a poorer prove
Then this great Purchaser suspect,
The Daily Own — of Love

Depreciate the Vision —
But till the Merchant buy —
Still Fable — in the Isles of Spice —
The subtle Cargoes — lie —

At least — 'tis Mutual — Risk —
Some — found it — Mutual Gain —
Sweet Debt of Life — Each Night to owe —
Insolvent — every Noon —

For heady sexiness, you're not going to improve on "in the Isles of Spice — / The subtle Cargoes — lie —", a phrase that somehow lands firmly on the uncertain message of the verb "to lie." Delphy's *rester*—lie in the sense of remaining, being left, loses the doubt that the dishonesty of "lie" inserts. But her closing couplet is a thing of beauty—and this with no small thanks to her adding a rhyme to Dickinson's own close, which itself seems quite deliberately rhyme-less.

Douce Dette de la Vie – redevable chaque Nuit –
En Faillite – tous les Midis –

The rhyme makes this a more tender—bleakly tender—view of marriage than the one offered by Dickinson's more business-like "night-owe/insolvent-noon." But Delphy's poetry cannot be denied. A re-translation:

Sweet Debt of Life — coming due by Night —
Bankrupt in the Light —

Increasingly I find myself using the adjective "breathtaking" to describe some of Dickinson's word choices and segues. My response may come from lately reading more of Dickinson's letters. For example, this, written when she was 11 years old: "My Plants grow beautifully — you know that elegant old Rooster that Austin thought so much of —

the others fight him and killed him — answer this letter as soon as you can.” Breathtaking, perhaps, like a heavy stone falling into a lonely pond. Delphy’s *nuit-midi* couplet well reproduces this effect for French readers and reminds me again of the possibility that Howells raised. Centuries hence, when the extravagant, *voire* reckless American experiment has been renounced, be it by other humans or by a fed-up Nature, it may seem that our greatest contribution to what remains, to some tattered civilization, is the words that Emily Dickinson found to express not only solitude, but also the challenges of trying to survive in the company of others. *La Distance est jusqu’à soi, être aimé*. Distance is to oneself, to be loved!

Credits, More on Colonization by Language, Links

I thank Laure Bréaud for working with me in May on translations for Dickinson poems into French. The “Jusqu’à soi, Être Aimé” was one of her inspirations.

Among the essays in which I have discussed how we are colonized by language is *The Unsaid*, which appears in the Spring 2014 issue of *Agni*. A few sentences from that piece:

Beginning at birth, or in the womb, we are colonized, inter alia, by verbal language, which offers us a remarkable means of communicating feelings and ideas, fears and wishes that, inevitably, are not quite ours, or that are “ours” rather than “mine.” And few of us realize and even fewer of us can long hold in our minds the fact that we have been colonized and that this is not quite “my” language, but rather my “mother tongue,” my national language. . . .

In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein uses the example of a child who, having hurt himself, cries, “and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour.” This is a window onto the process by which “my” feelings (a concept that may make less sense than we think) are given life, social life, as a subset of “our feelings”—the kinds of feelings that our languages, verbal and otherwise, allow us and teach us to express, either to others or within our selves.

Biography quoted: Alfred Habegger, *[My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson](#)*, Random House, 2001.

The present piece follows up on two *Zeteo* articles from 2013:

- **Poetry as Conversation**, a discussion of **Haikus du temps présent** by Mayuzumi Madoka, translated into French by Corinne Atlan (Philippe Picquier, 2012).
- **Translating Baudelaire**, which includes comments on the challenges of translating Baudelaire and poetry in general.

For more on Dickinson readers might see **The Bravest Grope a Little**,
Montaigbakhtinian.com, October 2012.