
Performing Translation

Sandra Bermann

What does it mean to “perform” translation? In one sense the verb “perform” simply means “to do or to complete.” But a semantic subset of such “doing” is “to act, as in a play.” Literary translation has frequently been described with both these meanings in mind. Translation is definitely something one *does*. But as Edith Grossman has noted, it can also be considered a “kind of *interpretive performance*, bearing the same relationship to the original text as the actor’s work does to the script.” Like an actor, a translator might be said to “perform” a source text for her new public, hearing the “voice” of the author and the sounds of the text in her own mind and then interpreting through different words, in her own voice (Grossman 2010, 11–12). Translation is, in this sense, a verbal play in which both a “me” and a “not-me” take active roles. It is also one that consciously and unconsciously acts with a range of other voices – intertexts or previous translations – as it performs for its audience and invites their response.

But for twenty-first-century students of translation studies, the phrase “performing translation” also evokes two related though hardly identical terms of art – “performative” and “performativity” – which speak not only to issues of doing and acting, but to philosophy of language and gender identities. The term “performative” evokes J. L. Austin’s distinction between ordinary, constative statements that “say,” and performative statements that “do” – that perform an action in themselves (Austin 1962, 3–6). A category extended and critiqued by Jacques Derrida in a longer discussion of citationality or iterability (Derrida 1988), Austin’s performative has more recently emerged as a salient element in literary and cultural theory, not least through Judith

Butler's discussions of "performativity." In Butler's work, gender becomes a "doing," and sometimes a specifically theatrical doing, while translation later stages the doing of ethics itself (Butler 1990, 2012). But before discussing each of these terms and the ways they have challenged and transformed our sense of "performing translation," let me first turn to a brief performance poem that, in its simple and provocative format, stages the act of translation, and may help to frame our discussion.

The Theater of Translation

Caroline Bergvall's twenty-first-century performance poem, "Via" (available both in audio and written format), puts literary translation directly in the spotlight. It presents translation as an ongoing act, a performing that engages reader or audience as much as translators themselves. Here forty-eight English-language translations of Dante's initial tercet from the *Inferno* are offered, along with the name of each translator and the date of publication (Bergvall 2000, 2003). The title, "Via," immediately joins the English word meaning "by way of" or "through the medium of" to the Italian word "via" meaning "street," "path," or "way," such as the "way" ("via") Dante claims he himself had lost ("smarrita") at the start of the *Inferno*.

"Via"'s forty-eight translations of Dante's "Nel mezzo del camin di nostra vita, mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, che la diritta via era smarrita" proceed alphabetically according to the first word of the translation, so that neither the translator's name nor the date of the text is prioritized. They include nineteenth- and twentieth-century versions catalogued in the British Library – some quite famous, and others little known. Take, for instance, John D. Sinclair's standard prose, "In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself / within a dark wood where the straight road was lost"; or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Midway upon the journey of our life / I found myself within a forest dark / For the straightforward pathway had been lost"; or the less known Peter Dale's that begins the performance with "Along the journey of our life half way / I found myself again in a dark wood / wherein the straight road no longer lay." Bringing these and forty-five other versions together into an archive of citations, Bergvall highlights the multiple responses to a single tercet, revealing differences within apparent continuity. She also underscores the intertextual dialogue or "colloquy" of these many translating voices, a dialogue foreshadowed by other twentieth-century print Dante collections (Halpern 1998; Bermann 2011a). Here, the effect is magnified by the Web-based technology allowing auditors to listen and mentally respond, and to do so whether at home, in the office, or walking down a street ("via").

In the wake of these insistent variations, the sense of a single meaning in Dante's "original," as well as its hierarchical priority, quickly recedes.¹ Rather, its polysemous nature comes to the fore through the dramatic conversation of texts it has generated. The action of this poem belongs not only to the forty-eight translations, however, but also to Bergvall herself as reader and performer. Her well-paced, unemphatic recitation

of tercet, name, and date brings each translation into a space and moment of its own, with an equal stake in a larger translation history. Moreover, as reader and dramaturge, Bergvall intervenes with a woman's voice and a creative rearrangement of a predominantly male textual tradition. Without adding a version of her own, she transforms the whole through her non-chronological reading (Goldstein 2007; Reed 2007).

But "Via" stages more than a series of interpretations and the reader's/dramaturge's challenge to literary history. It also presents texts for a particular audience and calls for a response, creating what Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick call an "interlocutory space" (1995, 13). "Via"'s address to a specifically anglophone audience with its own particular literary and linguistic conventions is important, if only tacitly recognized. (What kind of audience or conventions would be invoked by a performance poem incorporating versions from one or more of the sixty-plus other languages into which the *Inferno* has been translated?)

With its address to an audience, "Via" includes, of course, an invitation to interpret. Though the list of tercets takes nearly ten minutes to hear, and a bit more to read in print, the narrative of the *Inferno* goes nowhere at all. Or rather it is continually interrupted. There is no discernible telos, no glimmer of Paradise and no sign of Virgil as guide. Instead, there is only repetition-with-a-difference, and a reinauguration of the pilgrim-poet's initial predicament: lost. Lost in translation, we as readers and listeners are nonetheless invited to do something ourselves: to interpret the theatrical situation, and perhaps our own, more closely.

To begin to make our way, let us briefly turn to Austin, Derrida, and Butler. Their various views of performance, performatives, and performativity may add new insights.

"Doing the Discipline": Austin's "Performative"

Austin's *How To Do Things with Words* begins by claiming that the usual business of a linguistic statement is to "'describe some state of affairs,' or to state some fact, which it must do either truly or falsely" (Austin 1962, 1). Yet, the drama of his text was, of course, to highlight another set of utterances that until then had gone relatively unnoticed. These do not describe a state of affairs but in fact perform the action to which they refer, as in "I promise" or "I do" in a marriage ceremony. Austin calls such statements "performatives" and gives them a special linguistic function, telling us that these statements do not purport to tell what is true or false. Rather, as he puts it pragmatically, and with numerous examples, they are *felicitous or not*. He also makes clear that whether they are felicitous or not often depends on the circumstances in which they are uttered, the audience that attends to them, and the cultural conventions in play.

Though Austin eventually came to believe that performativity infused all language (breaking down his original binary), one might expect that it could especially well describe literary texts (both because literature *does* something – it creates a world filled with characters, places, and ideas – and also because literature, as Philip Sidney long

ago reminded us, “nothing affirmeth”: it does not claim to be true or false). Indeed, Austin’s theory of speech acts has served as the basis of important new descriptions of literary language and of literature itself (Miller 2007).

Austin’s theory might also help characterize the history of translation studies. To be sure, in the early phases of translation studies, when it struggled for a foothold in the academy, theoretical linguistics was the discipline most often consulted, and brief textual comparisons reigned. But as scholars studied translation more broadly, and included the more contingent and contextual issues affecting the translation process – for example, gender, empire, inequality of languages, orality versus different written scripts – the field shifted its focus from the more formal and abstract strategies of linguistic equivalence toward a study of individual *acts* of translation and what these *did* in particular contexts. That is, if linguists first offered a view of translation in terms of *saying*, the attempt to restate in the receiving language what the source text said (and as accurately as possible), then later translation scholars, interested in the cultural and political *acts* and *effects* of translation, examined the *doing* of translation: the doing of languages and texts; but also the doing of translators, readers, and audiences. In the process, this displacement signaled a move to a less essentialist or ontological view of translation, one less tied to the hierarchy of an authentic “original” and a “secondary” translation meant merely to mirror the source. Scholars became more interested in examining translation’s own productive and transformative potential, both in literary art and in what we call “real life.” As translation studies turned in this “performative” direction, it often engaged with distinctly theatrical metaphors that heighten awareness of the interpretive act of translation, its citational quality, and the issues of gender and identity it implies (Robinson 2003, 3–22).

Though all of this may be true, none of it was quite what Austin had in mind. In fact, the theatrical metaphor is precisely where he draws the line. That is, he explicitly excludes literature – and dramatic performance – from his definition of the performative. His analysis, he claims, applies only to words spoken seriously and in ordinary circumstances.

A performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. (Austin 1962, 22)

He speaks of such literary or theatrical uses as enfeebling, as “parasitic,” indeed as “etiologies of language” (1962, 22).

Translation and Derrida’s Drama of Iterability

Responding to Austin’s text, Derrida performs a particular dramatic intervention of his own. He focuses precisely on Austin’s theatrical exception – and makes his point, so to speak, by situating Austin’s argument on a larger linguistic stage. From here he

shows that Austin did not in fact take into account the extent to which language of all kinds is a set of iterable, that is repeatable, citational marks. For Derrida, “iterability” (and he explicitly notes that *iter* probably comes from *itara*, or “other,” in Sanskrit) is a general and fundamental characteristic of all language because for something to be a sign, it must be able to be cited and repeated in all sorts of circumstances, including “nonserious” ones (Derrida 1988, 7–11). Derrida asks, specifically:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a “coded” or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula that I utter to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a kind of “citation”? (1988, 18)

Derrida notes that such a citational quality (the quality that makes language a code or a semiological system) inevitably undermines the sense of a writer’s or speaker’s intention. It seems “other” in relation to that intention, arising from a more general, systematic quality. Though this does not mean that intention itself will not exist:

it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance [l’*énonciation*] . . . the intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself and to its content. (1988, 18)

Language itself, through its ongoing citationality and otherness, will always create a break, or as Derrida describes it, a “dehiscence,” or “cleft,” in the subject’s intended meaning. And this linguistic “fact” will mark all acts of language, whether “performative” or not, “serious” or not (1988, 18).

In other texts, Derrida relates the performative not only to this ongoing citational quality, but also to inauguration, the making of something new. He speaks, for instance, of a

poetico-literary performativity at least analogous to that of promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language or which, in changing language, change more than language. (1991, 55)

Literature, that is, uses language to change the everyday world by creating new worlds of its own with characters, voices, settings to which we relate and in which, at times, we even “believe.” In this, literature has its own inaugural power. It does something in and even *to* the world. It affects its readers, its audience.

If the performative quality of literary texts suggests an iterability that is also inaugural – one that has the potential to tell us something about the world while also affecting the world – then translation offers a particularly intriguing example of literary language. In part this is because translation is, one might say, “ostentatiously iterable.” Just as all literary writing entails an ongoing iterability, along with an array

of intertexts and conventions, so does the language of translation. But translation adds to this its reference to a particular prior text (or “source”). By bringing within its scope this “other text” with its clearly different language(s), conventions and historical context, translation dramatizes the encounter with alterity that exists to a more limited extent in every instance of language use. Moreover, it prompts that frequent reference to the play of voices in the translator’s mind with which this essay began.

At the same time, translation’s scene-stealing encounter with otherness generates linguistic innovation. In Derrida’s other texts on translation, he emphasizes, often with reference to Walter Benjamin, that translation entails a transformation and growth (not reproduction) of language. (Derrida 1985, 122). The translator inclines toward the language and conventions of the source in order to translate them into her own very different language. A new linguistic production results, one infused with the otherness of its source. In ways such as these, translation’s ostentatious iterability reveals a quite uncanny potential for literary *action*, presenting a text from elsewhere to a new audience, while creating a new language that will, in some sense, belong to (and disrupt) them both.

In short, in “performing translation,” we see the figure of Austin’s actor once again. But in the light of Derrida’s iterability, literary performativity does not bring a weakening or etiolation of language. Quite the contrary; its spectacular citationality offers ongoing opportunities for productive interpretations – of texts, languages, conventions, and subjectivities. As we shall see, such qualities also make a connection between translation and Butler’s gender-troubling practice almost inevitable.

“Doing Gender”: Translation and Butler’s “Performativity”

The term “performativity” entered – and irrevocably altered – the literary and cultural scene in the 1990s, largely through the work of Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990). And though this influential book does not discuss translation per se, its references not only to the central cultural category of gender but also to Austin’s “performative” and to theatrical performance (especially drag) have proven particularly suggestive in rethinking the process and effects of “performing translation.”

For Butler, gender is itself “performative.” It is not what one *is* but rather what one *does*. Neither an essence nor an internal world that one possesses, gender is, rather, created by repeated acts over time. Invoking Michel Foucault’s idea of discursive practices, along with Austin’s discussions of “performative” language and Derrida’s notions of iterability, Butler describes gender identity as produced through a “stylized repetition of acts” (1990, 140). Indeed, she suggests at one point that

gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. (1988, 526)

Though the renditions will never be quite the same, the script itself exists in society long before we arrive on the scene. It acts as an inescapable social fiction.

Largely involuntary, and constructing the subject from birth, performativity is thus a matter of repeating the norms by which one is constituted. But though the roles are given, laid out in advance, and held in place as ongoing heterosexist norms, there is also the possibility of resistance and displacement. Butler writes, for instance:

{Performativity} is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged. (1993b, 22)

Or again:

To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate. (1993b, 22)

There are gaps, slippages, openings that might be used to question and disrupt this gender-binding repetition.

Though Butler has at times been accused of claiming that gender is simply an everyday choice, a voluntarist decision, her position is in fact quite different. In her view, there is no “one,” no formed and essential “self,” who decides to adopt a gender norm (Butler 1993b, 23). Subject formation must rather be seen in anti-essentialist terms, depending largely on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms – these social and historical practices that we repeat consciously and unconsciously. In this sense, we do not “have” a gender, but play our given roles, solidifying them in practices over time. Though these practices are not easy to change, they are nonetheless open to critical reflection and resistance.

As is clear from even this brief résumé of a much more nuanced argument, Butler’s “performativity” presents something related to, yet quite distinct from, Austin’s “performative.” Rather than describing individual linguistic “acts” dependent on context, Butler discusses repeated social practices and historicized norms. Rather than a subject who at a given moment freely chooses to say “I do,” we have one who, having been “girled” by the world’s welcoming “It’s a girl!” and the gendering practices that follow, will likely later hear “I pronounce you man and wife” (Butler 1993b, 22).

Butler also embraces the issues of theatricality that Austin so firmly rejected. As has often been noted, the theatrical metaphor plays a significant role in her argument (Berger 2013). This is perhaps not surprising given the way everyday life is often called a social “performance” and given the role Butler attributes to gendering norms in shaping it. But, as she suggests, such gender norms can also be effectively heightened and parodied in aesthetic performance itself.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler famously highlights the parody of drag. In it she finds a hyperbole for the way gender norms construct the everyday discourse of heterosexuality.

An allegory performed in the space of art, such theatrical play can “send up” static categories, since in drag these same norms are performed not as commands to be obeyed, but as imperatives to be cited, twisted, and queered. As she later writes, “The point about drag is not simply to produce a pleasurable and subversive spectacle but to allegorize the spectacular and consequential ways in which reality is both reproduced and questioned” (Butler 2004, 218). Though a clearer instance of gender subversion might include resignifying acts such as that of the term “queer” itself, morphed through time from an epithet of abjection to a positive, contestatory term, the theatrical space also has an important role to play (2004, 218–19).²

In sum, if Butler’s work reveals gender identities as roles that imprison, constrain, and shame, it also clearly speaks, and often in specifically theatrical terms, to the hope of “opening up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized” (Butler 1999, viii). In this sense, it has given new impetus to queer theory (which contests constraining gender identities of all kinds), to gender and sexuality studies, and to literary, cultural, and translation studies as well.

Though the role of translation does not arise in *Gender Trouble*, gender performativity does put the act of translation in a particular light, and one that returns us to its ostentatious iterability. While translation is hardly drag, it can enact a similar theatrical repetition and questioning of social and historical norms. Using the citational potential of its mode, it can exaggerate, highlight, displace, and queer normative expectations across genders and cultures as well as languages. Such a conception allows us to see anew a number of twentieth- and twenty-first-century translational practices that, in different ways, challenge social and historical norms as they challenge traditional expectations for translation. Let me mention just two examples.

A group of writers associated with the Québécois journal *Tessera*, for instance, produced experimental feminist work on writing and translation in the 1980s and early 1990s. In two separate essays for the journal, Barbara Godard discusses the translator’s work as “transformance,” a neologism bringing together the terms performance, translation and transformation (1989, 46; 1991, 11–18). She explores not only translation’s dramatic dialogism (the play of author’s and translator’s voices) but also the importance of repetition and transformation:

By repetition to fix as form, as model? Or in repetition to carry across into a different state, to transform? The work of performing in the here and now is a turning, a making strange through a recontextualization that opens new networks or fields in which to situate a gesture, a body, a word. (Godard 1991, 11)

In transformance, Austin’s “performative” has an explicit role in framing the utterance itself as a creative site. And the translator takes her role as “an active participant in the creation of meaning, who advances a conditional analysis” (Godard 1989, 50). If the work of transformance seldom questions the limits of the intentional subject (and in this it remains distant from Butler’s conception), its citational play challenges norms of gender and translation (Godard 1991, 11; Von Flotow 2010, 7).

A second example of translation's apt citationality – one closer, I think, to Butler's own critique – arises in the feminist, lesbian, and queer work of the American poet Adrienne Rich, who explored the transformational qualities of translation throughout her career and highlighted these in poems dedicated to the theme (Bermann 2011b). In her early writing, Rich used her own translations – particularly from the Dutch and Yiddish – within her project of feminist re-vision. Here, citation and parodic reframing highlight gender norms and the poet's resistance, as in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," where quotations from a variety of languages and texts send up the gender norms of patriarchy (Rich 1993, 145–49). Another particularly intriguing translation project engages her in a collaborative translation of the ghazals of the Urdu poet Ghalib, a project that led her to a transformative reuse of the form for expansive, woman-centered themes (Ahmad 1971; Bermann 2011b, 102).

If Rich used translation in ways such as these to repeat, highlight, and transform the American poetic tradition while creating an opening for new feminist and lesbian constructions, she later takes up translation in a different vein, influenced by Gloria Anzaldúa and others. Here translation becomes a means to perform the complexity not only of gender but of subjectivity itself. Citing Edouard Glissant (1997), Rich describes an "identity not of roots but of meeting places, not a lingua franca but a multiplicity of languages, articulations, messages." A relational identity, made of encounters, it produces "a transformational mode of apprehending" (Rich 2003, 258). Translation, for Rich, thus becomes an invitation to otherness and a means to describe an anti-essentialist self. In this she foreshadows some of Butler's more philosophical statements as well as some recent turns to issues of identity – and ethics – in translation studies.

"Doing Ethics": Performing Translation

Though in Butler's earlier work translation was seldom a theme, in texts written between 2000 and 2012 it more often appears, sometimes dramatically. Here, it is not translation's parodic citationality but its heightened encounter with alterity that takes center stage. Equally important, translation's theater of operation has changed. Translation is not merely the interpretation that a translator performs on a literary or social script. Rather, translation itself – and particularly its encounter with otherness – becomes a model for ethical and political action. In this sense, "performing translation" allegorizes an ethical, and politically effective, comportment.

In *Undoing Gender*, for instance, Butler addresses translation briefly through the work of Anzaldúa and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Looking to Anzaldúa's writing, she notes the author's translational border-crossing and her "multiple," as opposed to unitary, subjectivity. As Butler puts it, this border-crossing itself makes an ethical demand on the reader:

[Anzaldúa] is asking us to stay at the edge of what we know, to put our own epistemological certainties into question, and through that risk and openness to another

way of knowing and of living in the world to expand our capacity to imagine the human. (Butler 2004, 228)

If Anzaldúa suggests a multiple subject, Spivak's translations offer the image of a "fractured" one. In her translation of Mahasweta Devi, there is no smooth or automatic transit from source text to translation, nor should there be. As Butler states, "Devi comes to me through Spivak, which does not mean that Spivak authors her, but only that authorship is itself riven" (2004, 230). In remarks such as these, Butler underscores the "interruptions" of selfhood and the role of alterity intrinsic to the process of translation, while gesturing toward her own developing conception of ethics.³

In other texts, Butler places translation in the ambit of political theory. In "Competing Universalities," practices of translation help create connections within a field of competing, in many ways incommensurable, yet overlapping social movements. Through their contact with otherness, translational encounters subvert dominant, universalizing claims, allow new openings for a range of previously foreclosed subjectivities, and forge new languages that belong to no single group (Butler 2000, 168–69).⁴

Such a productive politics of translation, one that echoes Derrida, Benjamin, and Spivak, relies on specific "foreignizing" strategies. As Butler writes, "the dominant discourse will have to alter by virtue of admitting the 'foreign' vocabulary into its lexicon" (2000, 168). Even the previously unheard and "unspeakable" must be brought into the ongoing labor of "transaction and translation" without being simply assimilated. While aiming to "shatter the confidence of dominance," it will inaugurate a new politics and an interwoven, continually changing "language between languages" (2000, 179).

Building on these and a range of other reflections, the opening chapter of *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (Butler 2012), gives translation a leading role. As part of a discussion about Zionism and a plea for a diasporic, non-nationalist viewpoint in which social plurality rather than cultural sameness provides the basis for a one-state solution, translation acts as a model for political and ethical *relationality*. Indeed, translation becomes the allegory for the way hegemonic traditions – and "integral" subjectivities – can be transformed through encounters with otherness.

As Butler explains, the encounter with alterity is precisely what disrupts our frameworks for thought and action. Being "undone" by cultural otherness, ceding space to the "not-me," are essential:

Indeed, ethics comes to signify the act by which place is established for those who are "not-me", comporting me beyond a sovereign claim in the direction of a challenge to selfhood that I receive from elsewhere. (2012, 9)

And translation, the literary mode that so effectively stages otherness within its lines, helps translate this essential relationality. It also describes the practical transmission of religious and philosophical texts (in this case Jewish and non-Jewish) that deeply

influence how we think about and debate political issues. At best, these texts emerge from the past in the “ruined but vibrant” form of their translations, interrupting our own idiom. As Butler reminds us, “ethics itself requires a certain disorientation from the discourse that is the most familiar” to us (2012, 12).

Again, if translation is to have these effects within and upon us, it must honor the alterity within translation that is, perhaps, its most salient feature:

[T]ranslation cannot be a simple assimilation of what is foreign into what is familiar; it must be an opening to the unfamiliar, a dispossession from prior ground, and even a willingness to cede ground to what is not immediately knowable within established epistemological fields. (2012, 12)

In the process of opening to new and deauthorized fields of knowledge, beyond the bounds of given cultural norms, translation will inevitably lead to a critical relation with power as disparate traditions join in contested fields.

If Butler describes a “counterhegemonic trajectory of translation” in which “translation becomes the condition of a transformative encounter, a way of establishing alterity at the core of transmission” (2012, 17), she also formulates an ethics that will receive and translate these messages and demands into individual idioms and lives. Seeing such encounters as salutary if disruptive experiences, their very otherness interrupts our sense of selfhood and expands our capacity to imagine the human.

In Butler’s interwoven argument about translation, transmission, the politics of Israel, and the debates about a one-state solution, her insights into translation as a performative trope affecting both language and the real have clear pertinence to our theme of performing translation. They also intersect with the views of a number of other intellectuals, among them Spivak, Rich, Anzaldúa, and Glissant. Different in any number of ways, all nonetheless underscore translation as a model not only for writing but for a more general ethical practice, one founded on an encounter with alterity that reduces any sense of sovereign selfhood as it prompts transformative productions of language, subjectivity, and power. In our conflictual world, it may be a model worth developing. For in performing translation along the lines that Butler suggests, a contract or relational promise is enacted, one that entails the risk of the unknown but also the enrichment that comes with new, more complex languages and ways of knowing in radically democratizing, if necessarily contested, fields of thought and action.

In conclusion, and in the light of these encounters with Austin, Derrida, and Butler, let us return briefly to the more limited context of Bergvall’s “Via.” Reflection on the forty-eight English versions might suggest that translation in fact refutes any hope for a single, perfect and complete translation. Indeed, it would appear that the “*diritta*” *via* – the “straight” way – can never be the way of translation. Rather, we find the plural, the diverse, the inevitably queer performances of re-writing. Moreover, what we might call a translation history (here produced in abbreviated and refracted form) is never a linear continuity but rather a re-writing across chasms of time, in dialogue with others.

But the drama of “Via” not only gives us the citational swerve, the queering, and the charged history that translation entails. It also endlessly stages translation’s dramatic encounter with otherness. Dante’s first tercet stops with the word *smarrita*, usually translated as “lost,” but interpreted here in forty-eight different voices. The time of the reading is a time of loss, even dispossession, as reader and listener join poet and translator to absorb its effects. A powerful break in our own everyday narratives, a disorienting pause, it is one from which we can, however, hope to move on. Though it is a moment of loss, it is also a gathering of many human insights through as many different voices. If Dante’s “via” and our own will never be quite the same again, our understanding will have opened and changed, preparing us for the long story ahead.

SEE ALSO CHAPTER 17 (BEN BAER), CHAPTER 22 (SPURLIN), CHAPTER 36 (JACOBS)

NOTES

- 1 In the audio version, the Dante is not read. It is cited in the print version.
- 2 For an excellent example including translation, see Bahía Shehab’s use of Arabic script for “No, a thousand times no!” in esthetic and political contexts (Shehab 2012). I thank Jill Jarvis for this reference.
- 3 See especially *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Butler 2005).
- 4 See Butler’s longer discussion of universality as it intersects with Marx, Hegel, and Gramsci and develops in conversation with Laclau and Žižek (Butler 2000).

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Ahmad, Aijaz, ed. 1971. *Ghazals of Ghalib: Versions from the Urdu by Aijaz Ahmad, W. S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, William Stafford, David Ray, Thomas Fitzsimmons, Mark Strand, and William Hunt*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Austin, J. L. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd edn. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Berger, Anne Emmanuelle. 2013. *The Queer Turn in Feminism: Identities, Sexualities, and the Theater of Gender*, trans. Catherine Porter. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Bergvall, Caroline. 2000. *Via*. Accessed April 23, 2013. <http://www.ubu.com/sound/bergvall.html>.
- Bergvall, Caroline. 2003. “Dante & Caroline Bergvall, Via (48 Dante Variations).” *Chain* 10 translucinación, 55–59.
- Bermann, Sandra. 2011a. “In the Light of Translation: On Dante and World Literature.” In *Foundational Texts of World Literature*, ed. Dominique Julien, 85–100. New York: Peter Lang.
- Bermann, Sandra. 2011b. “Re-vision and/as Translation.” In *Translating Women*, ed. Luise Von Flotow, 97–117. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1988. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal* 40, 4: 519–31.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1993a. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1993b. “Critically Queer.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1: 17–32.
- Butler, Judith. 1993c. “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale,

- and David Halperin, 307–20. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1999. "Preface (1999)". In *Gender Trouble*, vii–xxvi. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 2000. "Competing Universalities," in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 136–81. London: Verso.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 2012. *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Culler, Jonathan. 2000. "Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative." *Poetics Today* 21, 3: 503–19.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1985. *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1988. *Limited Inc*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1991. "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida," trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. In *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, 33–75. New York: Routledge.
- Glissant, Edouard. 1997. *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Godard, Barbara. 1989. "Theorizing Feminist Discourse/Translation." *Tessera* 6: 42–53.
- Godard, Barbara. 1991. "Performance / Transformation: Editorial." *Tessera* 11: 11–18.
- Goldstein, Laura. 2007. "Translation as Performance: Caroline Bergvall's 'Via,'" *HOW21* 3, 3. Accessed April 23, 2013. http://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_3/bergvall/goldstein-translation-performance.html.
- Grossman, Edith. 2010. *Why Translation Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Halpern, Daniel, ed. 1998. *Dante's Inferno: Translations by 20 Contemporary Poets*. New York: Ecco Press.
- Maier, Carol. 1984. "Translation as Performance: Three Notes." *Translation Review* 15, no. 1: 5–8.
- Miller, J. Hillis. 2006. "Performativity as Performance / Performativity as Speech Act: Derrida's Special Theory of Performativity." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 2: 219–35.
- Miller, J. Hillis. 2007. *Speech Acts in Literature*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Parker, Andrew, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. 1995. "Introduction: Performativity and Performance." In *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. New York: Routledge.
- Reed, Brian M. 2007. "'Lost Already Walking': Caroline Bergvall's 'Via.'" *Jacket* 34, October. Accessed April 23, 2013. <http://jacketmagazine.com/34/reed-bergvall.shtml>.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1993. *Collected Early Poems*. New York: Norton.
- Rich, Adrienne. 2003. "Six Meditations in Place of a Lecture." In *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, 258. New York: Norton.
- Robinson, Douglas. 2003. *Performative Linguistics: Speaking and Translating as Doing Things with Words*. Routledge: New York.
- Shehab, Bahia. 2012. *No. A Thousand Times No*. Accessed May 13, 2013. http://www.ted.com/speakers/bahia_shehab.html.
- Von Flotow, Luise, ed. 2011. "Preface." In *Translating Women*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.