



2016

Foreword

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Recommended Citation

Kutzko, David (2016) "Foreword," *Transference*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol4/iss1/2>

Foreword

Sometime in the 8th century B.C., Hesiod was shepherding his lambs on the slopes of Mount Helicon when he found the Muses. Or rather, they found him. The nine goddesses “breathed (*enepneusan*) into me a divine voice, so that I might sing of the future and the past, and they ordered me to hymn the race of the blessed immortals, but to sing always of themselves first and last” (*Theogony*, lines 31–34). The Greek verb *empneo*, like the Latin *inspiro*, literally means “to breath in,” so the Muses in this passage are literally the goddesses of Inspiration. While we are invited to read Hesiod’s encounter with the Muses as literal, the Muses’ lineage suggests a metaphorical reading as well. The Muses’ mother is Mnemosyne, which in Greek means “Memory.” In Greek mythology there is a distinction between real gods, who are worshipped and have temples dedicated to them, and personifications like “Sleep” and “Strife.” “Memory” is one such personification. What does it mean for the goddesses of Inspiration to be the daughters of Memory? Or for a more readily answerable question, what does it mean for our inspiration to be the product of our memory? “Memory” is a goddess and therefore external, but “memory” is internal, namely the mental faculty for recollection. The Muses are divine, but “inspiration” that is the product of our brain is actually our own human imagination.

Before the Muses “inspire” Hesiod, they say something quite odd: “We know how to speak many believable lies and we know how, when we wish, to utter the truth” (lines 27–28). At the literal level, the Muses order Hesiod to repeat whatever they tell him; he will not know when they are lying or telling the truth. If he tells multiple versions of stories about the gods, as indeed he does, he can blame the Muses for changing their story. At the metaphorical level, however, where inspiration is the spark to poetic creativity in his brain, he is giving free license to his own imagination.

Like the best poetry, the literal and metaphorical do not contradict each other, but provocatively coexist. Anyone who has stared at a blank piece of paper for an hour (or a day or a week) knows that when that “aha!” moment hits and the pencil almost starts to move on its own, the feeling can be an out-of-body experience. Hesiod, at the beginning of the Western literary tradition, perfectly sums up the creative process: a combination of the human imagination and magical inspiration that is beyond ourselves. This passage is profound for many reasons. It shows that the creative process and, in particular, the human conception of poetry, has not changed over the centuries—through distance and time, we are all connected. That we have the proof of Hesiod’s encounter with the Muses is in itself amazing, and due entirely to the art of translation. As we have discussed in the forewords to our other volumes, “translation” and “transference” come from the same Latin verb *transfere*. A translation is something that has gone through the action of being transferred from one medium to another. The *Theogony* was first

transferred from oral communication to the written text, and then translated from culture to culture, language to language, and century to century. The translations in this volume on a smaller scale perform the same miracle of communication across time and space. And just like the originals themselves, poetic translation depends on the Muses, the daughters of Memory.

Some 2600 years after Hesiod, Jacques Prévert, in his poem, “Pour faire le portrait d’un oiseau,” expressed the creative process with a similar mix of the literal and the metaphorical. The way to paint a picture of a bird, he says, is to paint an inviting background and a birdcage on a canvas, to lean the canvas on a tree, and then to wait for the bird to hop into the cage. He instructs to wait as long as it takes, years if necessary, for the bird to appear. If and when the bird comes, the artist must wait for the bird to enter the cage, close the door with a brush, and then erase the bars of the cage one by one (*attendre que l’oiseau entre dans la cage / et quand il est entré / fermer doucement la porte avec le pinceau / puis / effacer un à un tous les barreaux*¹). Like Hesiod, Prévert implies that the artist does not dictate what is made, but that the potential creation (the inspiration necessary to make the piece) dictates how the artist is to form it. A work of art manifests itself if the artist is patient enough. It is not created, but coaxed into appearing. Prévert’s striking vision is particularly relevant to the art of translation. The poem really does exist before the translator begins. The setting is the only variable the translator controls. What is the right diction, meter, and tone for the original poem to arrive on the page in another language?

After Prévert has instructed the artist how to bring the bird into the cage and thus into the picture, he explains how to know if the picture will be a success: if the bird does not sing, it is a bad sign, but if it does sing, it is a good sign, a sign that all the painting needs is the artist’s signature, which he/she is to make with a feather from the bird (*mais s’il chante c’est bon signe / signe que vous pouvez signer / Alors vous arrachez tout doucement / une des plumes de l’oiseau / et vous écrivez votre nom dans un coin du tableau*²). When we and our referees pore over the submissions to *Transference*, this is what we look for: the bird to sing. The translations within these pages are poems in their own right because they let the originals sing with a new voice for a new audience.

I am writing this at the end of November 2016, and I am reminded of the greatest poetic tenet, stretching at least as far back as Hesiod’s other great poem, the *Works and Days*, and his telling of the Pandora myth: no matter what happens, hope remains. As always, Molly Lynde-Recchia, my co-editor, and I thank the translators, the referees, our editorial board, and the many others at Western Michigan University who every year help us champion this tenet. All of the translations in this volume erase the bars so the bird may sing.

David Kutzko, Co-Editor

^{1,2} Cited from Prévert’s collection *Paroles* (Gallimard, 1949), 155.