

## VERSIONS ON THE VOLTA

Fiona Hanley

In the beginning is the relation  
— Martin Buber

Without translation, it would be impossible to begin at all, for there would be no need to; no need to track out these lines of thought, to try to find an outline, a language, for what I do not know, but *sense*; no need to turn from notes, from reading, sketching, daydreaming, to the difficulty of making a text, of setting up room for that nebula of thought to configure and take even *myself* by surprise.

Without translation, I would not be able to begin at all, for there would be no need to; no need to turn into another day; to leave the dreamscapes of the night behind; to face the page this morning and write; to tend these words in search of an articulation. Without translation I would not need to search at all — I would always be coincidental with what I know and say.

As it is, I return, to table, window, page — am charged to begin again. And in this turn from day to day, I lose and am lost. Yesterday's thoughts tossed by the tide of today, I shift from knowing to not-knowing; from lucidity to uncertainty; from saying to silence and back again. I return, to table, window, page — responding to an opening, to what began this beginning, whilst knowing the impossibility of the task. "Everything already lost: this always is the moment where we must begin".<sup>1</sup>

Without translation there would be no beginning again and so, no cause to think, forgive, or love at all, for I would never be moved, never touched, there would be no relating — no quickening, no possibility of changing, of slipping off, of transgressing.

What this beginning is beginning to intimate then, is translation's tie to our human capacity to begin again, and more than that, to *want*, to *desire* to begin again, by being begun. For it seems that I begin these words because something has already begun me — impacted on me, spurred me, moved me — an encounter of insight which begins a search for words adequate to describe it; a search for a correspondence to the sense suddenly discovered. And when the words themselves suddenly say, not what *I* mean, but what *I sensed*, they shock again — I'm begun.

I begin in order to be begun, and I have always already been begun, which is why I begin.

What this capacity to begin again is contingent upon seems to be tied to a *turning capability* — to our ability to be shifted, which forces us, constantly, to begin again; to *change our lives*.

With this in mind, let's begin.

<sup>1</sup>  
Jan Zwicky, 'Schuman: *Fantasie*, Op. 17', in: *Chamber Music: The poetry of Jan Zwicky*, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015, p. 64.

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*The quality of your attention was  
not a need, or want.  
More ineffability is what you searched for —  
not answer, but question,  
stepping inside moments of lucidity  
only when perplexity descended  
and you were held —  
between yourself and something else,  
unseen, but sensed.  
You trusted in what was not said  
but suggested  
because it had led you.  
Unknowing was your quest,  
de-creation your art.  
You sought to translate yourself,  
to turn about,  
decentred,  
elliptical,  
possible.  
You wanted a likeness for what  
you did not know, but felt.  
Not not thought but nebula  
in an instant of time,  
a shape showing something else.  
Stieglitz called it equivalence.  
That the photograph is a picture of a cloud,  
is the least important thing.*

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To begin this pursuit, I turn to a tried and tested beginning point — the dictionary — that glosser of tongues par excellence, where I find several meanings of translation which resonate with the sense of it I seem to be arriving at, in their bearing the definition 'to turn'. This sense of turn is present of course too in those synonyms of translation: *version*, *conversion*, deriving from the Latin *vertĕre* (to turn). *Conversion* indicates the turn as an alteration of position/direction; the movement of something or oneself about; attending to something; a change in mind/feeling/conduct; a bringing into another state; a turning into.

To try to catch a glimpse of this turning, which I am sensing as the crux of this understanding of translation as a beginning again, it is perhaps best to turn to a *verse* which does not so much speak *about* this turning, but, as a poem is want to do, veritably *enacts it*, (*verse* being itself a root of Latin *vertĕre*).

Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Archaischer Torso Apollos', or 'Archaic Torso of Apollo', (as it is rendered in the English), enacts, as Mark Doty remarks, the "sharpest last minute turn in sonnet history".<sup>2</sup> He is referring to what is known in the language of poetic devices as the 'volta', (another word derivative of the Latin *vertĕre*) — the point at which there is a turn of direction in the sonnet, and a shift and deepening of the subject's understanding. The volta is the *crux* of the poem's tension that signals an alteration. It is akin to what Leslie Ullman has called the 'centre' of any good poem — the heart of its concern, deployed in the heightened energy at this crux, rather than in its theme or content.<sup>3</sup> The volta is like the striking voltage of lightning which breaks through in a flash, lasts for a moment, and is gone. But to say this much is to get ahead of myself. Let's begin again, with the poem itself.

'Archaic Torso of Apollo'

translated by Stephen Mitchell

We cannot know his legendary head  
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso  
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,  
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise  
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could  
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs  
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced  
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders  
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,  
burst like a star: for here there is no place  
that does not see you. You must change your life.

Like any great poem, Rilke's 'Archaic Torso of Apollo' is a gathering of opposites into a tension that ultimately precipitates a turn — here the turn of the final line, (or in the space of the full stop which comes just before it). Rilke leads us through a careful observation of the statue, concentrating on the play between what it shows and what it hides; between its presence and absence; light and darkness. The poem begins with what we *cannot know* — the torso's face — and yet what is somehow revealed through an *inner light* in which his gaze *gleams*. Here we have already, in this first image, the ingredients

<sup>2</sup> Mark Doty, 'On 'Archaic Torso of Apollo'', in: *Academy of American Poets*, 2014. Accessed through: [poets.org/poetsorg/text/archaic-torso-apollo](https://poets.org/poetsorg/text/archaic-torso-apollo), on 23 November 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie Ullman, 'A Dark Star Passes Through it: Essay', in: *Número Cinq*, 2011. Accessed through: [numerocinqmagazine.com/2011/09/19/a-dark-star-passes-through-it-an-essay-by-leslie-ullman](https://numerocinqmagazine.com/2011/09/19/a-dark-star-passes-through-it-an-essay-by-leslie-ullman), on 23 November 2016.

of what allows for the sudden bolt of translation in the final line; the contrast between an absent overt gaze, and a covert inner gaze; between an evident sight and a concealed seeing in the turn of a lamp to low — a subtle light which nonetheless casts forth a brilliance. Rilke's eyes lead us down through the torso, to the turn of the breast in its *curve*, and from here to the *curve* of the smile between hips and thighs — that is, to where his procreative loins should be and which are nonetheless, still powerfully present. The first half of the poem seems to culminate here and is itself a kind of centre, a 'dark centre', as Rilke's images lead us to the crux of the statue's ability to *still create*, to *reproduce*, to *begin*, despite absence. The rest of the poem is, in effect, the consequence of this realization of its ability to gaze, which Rilke's careful observation has drawn out. The poem now seems to quicken, the statue becoming more and more alive, and even *wild* — its torso glistening like an animal's fur, until its light cannot be contained and it bursts *like a star* — that paradoxical light which reaches us, though its body has long vanished. Here, in a *flash*, seer and seen are inverted — the gaze of the poem *turns*, and it is 'you' now who is studied, 'you' now who is seen, with the repercussion of necessary change. Like the transformation operated in the statue, from *thing*, to living, moving, glistening *being*, who has the ability to *meet* another and instigate a change in them, to create, to begin, *we* are charged to embody, ourselves, a greater luminosity in our own living by responding to this encounter with our own beginning — with an attempt to share this flash by creating another celestial body emanating dark light; by creating our own attempt to *meet* another and let *them* begin; life begetting life. What else is this very poem by Rilke if not itself a dark body that illuminates, like the statue, through its play of absence and presence. What else is the poem if not an attempt to find an equivalence to the shock of an experience of insight; a lightning flash which inspires Rilke to begin the poem in an attempt, not to *capture* this bolt that has begun him, but to allow it to *return as* a bolt, *as* a flash, in the poem's turning. In Ullman's essay, she comes to understand the poem's centre as a "dark star" that passes through you — borrowing the metaphor from another turning poem she reads, 'Consumed', by James Tate. Like Rilke's 'dark centre' of the statue, this dark star is what penetrates us without our knowing — we are not present at the beginning of our creation, nor are we really present in this re-beginning. The realization comes *after* — the last line indicating this realization, rather than the change, which has occurred *between* this line and the having been *seen* by the statue. We are begun.

The description of the object serves to facilitate a shift — a movement from it to something else, its meaning perhaps, not as an objectifiable assertion, but only as a connection that is felt. The moment of insight is itself wordless — the words of the poem tend towards and respond to this crux of silence. Paul Fussell describes the volta's movement as analogous to that of the contraction and release of ordinary inhalation and exhalation — a remark which invites Paul Celan on the scene and what he referred to as poetry's *Atemwende*:

<sup>4</sup> Paul Celan, 'The Meridian', in: *Gesammelte Werke* (1983), trans. by Rosmarie Waldrop as: *Paul Celan: Collected Prose*, Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd., 2003, p. 47.

Poetry is perhaps this: an Atemwende, a turning of our breath. Who knows, perhaps poetry goes its way — the way of art — for the sake of just such a turn? And since the strange, the abyss and Medusa's head, the abyss and the automaton, all seem to lie in the same direction — it is perhaps this turn, this Atemwende, which can sort out the strange from the strange?<sup>4</sup>

The volta is akin to a simultaneous moment of death — the poem leading up to the point at which our breath is taken away — and re-birth, through our exhalation again. The centre of the poem is the 'nothing' of the turning of the breath — not inhalation, not exhalation, but the momentary pause between.

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*Experience is obscure, not known — the  
tongue in your mouth is old but all it  
tastes is fresh,  
just as skin on feet in rain soaked  
grass  
And yet, you cannot let tongue explain  
what it has felt.  
On one side taste,  
on the other, words,  
sapience links you to both,  
and yet —  
You learn 'you' are the meaning in the passage  
even if you do not know it.  
Not because the text is 'about' you,  
but because you are its aboutness  
mouthing each word and every pause,  
you become the text's sapience.  
In your tasting  
you make sense,  
what cannot be told, and yet —*

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Rilke's poem enacts what the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty came to understand as the *chiasm* of perception, replacing an ideation of the perceiver as a knowing subject who gazes at the world, to a perceiving subject who is situated in the *fold* of seeing and *being seen*, because they are *in* the world. His philosophy came to present perceiver and perceived as an *internal relation*, rather than the atomization of a subject externally related to an object, as his infamous example of the dynamic of touching and being touched, of subject/object operative in one's own body, demonstrated. The one who looks out at the world feels, not the world as such, but their *own sensation* which they are subject to. What is operative is the ability to *turn into* that which one is perceiving, through this invertible capacity of the perceiver to become object — sensed, not senser, and through this to come to know, in a

way utterly unintellectualizable, what the perceived is like.<sup>5</sup> The paradox is that this knowledge of the perceived has only to do with one's self, one's own *self-knowledge* as this other side of one's being; the not-seeing of seeing, the being touched rather than touching.

To see is to not see — to see the other is essentially to see my body as an object, so that the other's body object could have a psychic 'side'. The experience of my own body and the experience of the other are themselves the two sides of one same Being: where I say that I see the other, in fact it especially happens that I objectify my body, the other is the horizon or other side of this experience [...]. It is thus that one speaks *to the other* although one has only to do with oneself.<sup>6</sup>

The turn of the poem seems to be operative of this *internal relation* of our perception — a crease or fold through which the poem relates to itself. The turn is the point at which the 'I' of the reader, the subject, shifts into its capacity to be a 'you'; they pass from knowing, seeing, touching, to the other side of perceiving — not-knowing, not-seeing, not-touching, but being known, being seen, being touched. The subject is absent — host to the guest of what they *sense*. Rilke's poem is not only a poem in this sense, but a poetics, commenting, as it does, on the manner in which poetry makes sense. Indeed, the poem is indicative of a turning point in Rilke's apprenticeship in words while working under the influence of Rodin in Paris, where he came to gain a new sense of the purpose of his work and the heart of poetry itself; to change our lives. As with the statue of Apollo, whose precise articulation is what allows it to illuminate and *move*, to bear *life*, so too it seems, the poem marks Rilke's realization that his poetry must be sculpted to illuminate and move, as this poem itself does, through artful omission and skilful 'turns'.<sup>7</sup> There is a precipitation of insight where you are met and the turn of a spiral movement reverts back into your life. You must change your life because you have been altered, shifted; you are charged to begin again.

This translation, this turning-into, as the poem itself performs, is contingent upon what might best be understood as the cultivation of an attitude of loving attention; of contemplation. Simone Weil believed that this capacity to evacuate the 'I' as it were, to escape knowing, for not-knowing, constituted true attention. "Attention alone — that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears — is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call 'I' of the light of my attention".<sup>8</sup> This withdrawal, this undivided attention, constitutes, as Weil also noted, an alternative approach to understanding: "Method for understanding images, symbols, etc. Not to try to interpret them, but to look at them till the

<sup>5</sup> "This concentration of the visible about one of them, or this bursting forth of the mass of the body toward the things, which makes a vibration of my skin become the sleek and the rough, makes me *follow with my eyes* the movements and the contours of the things themselves, this magical relation, this pact between them and me according to which I lend them my body in order that they inscribe upon it and give me their resemblance, this fold, this central cavity of the visible which is my vision, these two mirror arrangements of the seeing and the visible, the touching and the touched, form a close-bound system that I count on, define a vision in general and a constant style of visibility from which I cannot detach myself [...].", Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible* (1964), trans. by Alphonso Lingis as: *The Visible and The Invisible*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968, p. 146.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>7</sup> That this poetics is rendered through an experience of encountering the figure of Apollo, god of poetry, is not of course incidental.

<sup>8</sup> Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la grâce* (1947), trans. by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr as: *Simone Weil: Gravity and Grace*, New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 118.

light suddenly dawns”.<sup>9</sup> This capacity to attend is what she calls our “creative faculty”,<sup>10</sup> or what could also be understood as our *translative capacity*. What Rilke’s poem seems to re-enact is a certain experience of *contemplating* a statue. What the poem *performs*, rather than simply records, is the sudden and radical alteration owed to a studied contemplation. The poem is not a summation of an encounter, but is itself an encounter and what is needed to ‘understand’ the poem, is the same thing that was needed to ‘understand’ the statue; not an intellectualization, but an attentive contemplation. The poem bears on us only if we behold it, if we allow ourselves to be taken up and absorbed in it, opened for the *turn* which transforms us. The insight is not something that we can really pursue, for it is not an action of the will, or it is owed only to the will’s being concentrated into a full attention where we are emptied of ourselves. The insight *comes to us*, as we say, it *meets us*. It seems that a definition of the purpose of writing/reading could be the desire to experience this turn — to be surprised by the sudden flash of insight, by steeping ourselves into a concentrated state of attention. As the poet Elizabeth Bishop aphoristically noted, “What we want in art is the same thing that’s necessary for creating it — a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration”.<sup>11</sup>

The world is translated into understanding not through objectivization, but through *our* objectivization, through our evacuation of ourselves and being taken up by, encountering, something. The translative is not, in this sense, a movement from A to B, from origin to copy, but is a *movement* of the origin; the manner in which it relates to itself. It is the perceived movement

of the statue which is to be rendered into the poem by Rilke — the movement of Rilke’s poem, its turning and the tension which manifests this living movement, which is to be rendered from the German into another language. It is the *internal relation* of the text to itself which is to be translated — the way in which it relates to itself, parts with itself. Such is the core of what I take Walter Benjamin to have meant by his notion of *translatability*, where the ability of the text to be translated is contingent on the extent to which there is a movement operative within it, which can be *participated in*.<sup>12</sup> The translatable in this sense, is a structural possibility/capacity. The different versions of the text are similar in the sense that what they share is the attempt to capture this movement — the manner of the text’s relation to itself — the uncapturable chiasm of encounter, the *turning* of insight. What is to be translated is the wordless connection operative in the reader — the moment at which there is a crossing of language and life, which poet-translator-critic Henri Meschonnic believed constituted the ‘poem’ of thought: “Opposed to all poetisings, I say that there is a poem only if a form of life transforms a form of language and if reciprocally a form of

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>10</sup> I am, of course, drawing here upon literature of *mysticism*, but perhaps it is a necessary swerve in response to a poem which can itself only be described as mystical, if mystical itself is meant to mean the experience of our own groundlessness; the empty plenitude of our nothingness. Evelyn Underhill’s description of contemplative perceiving also bears noting here in its deep resonance with what occurs in Rilke’s poem. See especially *Mysticism*, London: Bracken Books, 1995, p. 300, where in this contemplative perceiving, “Life has spoken to life”.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, letter to Anne Stevenson, cited in: *Elizabeth Bishop*, New York: Twayne, 1966, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, in: *Schriften* (1955), trans. by Harry Zorn as: *Illuminations*, London: Pimlico, 1999, p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> Henri Meschonnic, ‘The Rhythm Party Manifesto’, trans. by David Nowell Smith in: *Thinking Verse* 1, 2011, p. 163. Accessed through: [thinkingverse.com/issue01/Henri%20Meschonnic,%20The%20Rhythm%20Party%20Manifesto.pdf](http://thinkingverse.com/issue01/Henri%20Meschonnic,%20The%20Rhythm%20Party%20Manifesto.pdf), on 23 November 2016.

language transforms a form of life”.<sup>13</sup> Here the poetic expands outwith a genre of literature to encompass *any* text which is invested with a *gaze*, a penumbra of light, capable of enacting a *turn* in the text, where the perceiver is inverted into the perceived; the reader into what is written. When words, as Benjamin put it, *glance back*. The living force of the statue, (through the living force of Rilke’s poem), is what Meschonnic comes to understand as *rhythm*. And it is this rhythm which Meschonnic sought to argue needed to be translated — not the meaning of the words, but this lightning energy — the strange *gaze* of the poem where we are *met* and transformed; the crux, the crossing where language becomes a form of life and life a form of language. It is not the poet who makes the turn, in this sense, but the turn that makes the poet, just as it is the turn which makes the reader or translator.

This surprise of a turn as a sudden connection is something which probably occurs in all thinking, yet what the ‘poem’ does is to make this ‘turn’ central to the text, that is, it is rendered not as a found object, a connection realized, but as a connection still to be made — the relational sense is suspended. We are given not what the poem is ‘about’, but the poem’s *turning itself* is the ‘about’ — what cannot be objectified, but must be *participated in*. The poem’s ‘meaning’ exists not as a present-at-hand consumable, but as a *potential* sense — what still has to be made through our participation. The text is, as Jane Hirshfield has likened it, a kind of score, “for which we are instrument and audience both, held in the procedures of its making”.<sup>14</sup> The experience of the turn is the moment at which the words turn into something else and gesture beyond themselves; a tension of the visible and invisible felt in the reader where they join and the poem is made. The poem’s turning always returns us to this connection which cannot be held, but is momentarily *sensed* through the mutual apprehension, as Hirshfield further points to in her own reading of Rilke’s poem, of body and mind:

That the particular statue the poem looks at is fragmentary and damaged, that much is left to its viewer to fill in with mind, not eye, is part of its power. The poet, the reader, collaborate with the marble torso to complete its meaning. Art is never its own sufficiency. The ground of any artwork’s existence is a human psyche, mind and heart, and the transformations in them it awakens”.<sup>15</sup>

The centre of the poem, in this sense, lies not in the words set out on a page, nor simply in the one who reads it, but in the chiasm of their encounter. *You* are the meaning of the text through a synchronization with it.

The purpose of translation in this sense, whether it be the translation of the text in reading it, or in rendering it into another language, is to become other to yourself, to engage in the metaphor that you are — one who ‘is’ and ‘is not’; self and other; life and death. In the chiasm of encountering the poem, the poem becomes itself through you and you become yourself through it — there is a reciprocal conversion. Translation, in this sense, is not a movement from ignorance to knowledge, but

<sup>14</sup> Jane Hirshfield, ‘Poetry and the Constellation of Surprise’, in: *Ten Windows*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015, p. 184.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., ‘Poetry, Transformation, and the Column of Tears’, p. 252.

from a state of self-possession, of security, to one of vulnerable uncertainty, and self-unravelling. Translation has the paradoxical aim of finding oneself by losing oneself; of being remade by being undone; of slipping the caul of an 'I' into the multiplicity of being otherwise. This 'revolution' *re-voltare*, this 'turning' and 're-turning' of the self, is the transgressive heart of all thinking, where identity is disturbed, and this turning that is thought, this twist of an agile, artful making, like the twist of the loins of the statue, is the seat of thought's pleasure and passion. Engaging in such thinking does not make us 'better', if by better we mean, more adapted to functioning in society, for its purpose seems instead to interrupt the fabric of normalcy with which we dress our world. Not to explain, guide or give consultation on how to live, but to remind us that we are, and can be, otherwise than how we have been — we have within us a faculty of transformation.

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*Because words do not accomplish thought  
but are where it might begin,  
you find a thinking in relation to what is said,  
or thinking is this relating —  
not end or even means,  
but a wordless connecting —  
like a hyphen that cannot say  
yet nonetheless gesturally joins.  
It is a version of the truth,  
and all you have,  
in its varied forms.  
To say it otherwise would be to  
kill the pleasure of connecting.  
Not knowledge per se, but its plain purpose —  
poiesis,  
making.  
The torture of life, you learned, was not the question,  
but ignorance of its mark,  
the brandished token of irreconciliation —  
your breaking, beating heart.*

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