

Carrying a Single Life: On Literature and Translation

[Teju Cole](#) July 5, 2019, 7:00 am



Bibliothèque des Arts Decoratifs, Paris/Archives Charmet/Bridgeman Images A reproduction of a scene from an ancient Greek vase depicting the flight from Troy, with Aeneas carrying his father Anchises on his back, nineteenth century

The English word *translation* comes from the Middle English, which originates from the Anglo-French *translater*. That in turn descends from the Latin *translatus*: *trans*, across or over, and *latus*, which is the past participle of *ferre*, to carry, related to the English word “ferry.” The translator, then, is

the ferry operator, carrying meaning from words on that shore to words on this shore.

Every work of translation carries a text into the literature of another language. Fortunate to have had my work translated into many languages, I am now present as an author in the literature of each of those languages. Dany Laferrière, in his 2008 novel *I Am a Japanese Writer*, expresses this slightly strange notion more beautifully than I can:

When, years later I myself became a writer and was asked, “Are you a Haitian writer, a Caribbean writer or a Francophone writer?” I would always answer that I took the nationality of my reader, which means that when a Japanese reader reads my books, I immediately became a Japanese writer.

Much is found in translation. There’s the extraordinary pleasure of having readers in languages I don’t know. But there’s also the way translation makes visible some new aspect of the original text, some influence I didn’t realize it had absorbed. When I think about the Italian translation of my work, I can feel the presence of Italo Calvino and Primo Levi, unnerved and delighted that I mysteriously now share their readership. When I’m translated into Turkish, it is Nâzım Hikmet’s political melancholy I think of. Maybe those who like his work will, reading me in Turkish, find something to like in mine as well? In German, perhaps even more than English, I sense the hovering presences of writers who shaped my sensibility—writers like Walter Benjamin, Thomas Mann, Hermann Broch, and W.G. Sebald, among many others. Thanks to translation, I become a German writer.

I trust my translators utterly. Their task is to take my work to a new cohort of my true readers, the same way translation makes me a true reader of Wisława Szymborska, even though I know no Polish, and of Svetlana Alexievich, even

though I know no Russian.

Gioia Guerzoni, who has translated four of my books into Italian so far, has worked hard to bring my prose into a polished but idiomatic Italian. Recently, she was translating an essay of mine, “On the Blackness of the Panther,” which ranged on various matters, from race, the color black, and colonialism, to panthers, the history of zoos, and Rainer Maria Rilke. It wasn’t an easy text to translate. In particular, the word “blackness” in my title was a challenge. To translate that word, Gioia considered *nerezza* or *negritudine*, both of which suggest “negritude.” But neither quite evoked the layered effect that “blackness” had in my original title. She needed a word that was about race but also about the color black. The word she was looking for couldn’t be *oscurità* (“darkness”), which went too far in the optical direction, omitting racial connotations. So she invented a word: *nerità*. Thus, the title became: “*La nerità della pantera*.” It worked. The word was taken up in reviews, and even adopted by a dictionary. It was a word Italian needed, and it was a word the Italian language—the Italian of Dante and Morante and Ferrante—received through my translator.

Translation, after all, is literary analysis mixed with sympathy, a matter for the brain as well as the heart. My German translator, Christine Richter-Nilsson, and I discussed the epigraph to my novel *Open City*, the very first line in the book. It reads, in English, “Death is a perfection of the eye.” The literal translation, the one Google Translate might serve up, would be something like “*Tod ist eine Perfektion des Auges*.” But Christine sensed that this rendering would equate “death” with “perfection of the eye,” rather than understanding that death was being proposed as the *route* to a kind of visionary fullness. So she first thought of “*Vollendung*,” which describes a finished state of fullness; then she thought further, and landed on “*Vervollkommnung*.” *Vervollkommnung* is a noun that embeds the verb “*kommen*,” and with that verb, the idea that something is changing and

coming into a state of perfection. That was the word she needed.

Christine also knew that what I was calling the eye in my epigraph was not a physical organ (“*das Auge*”), it was the faculty of vision itself. But I didn’t write “seeing,” so “*des Sehens*” would not quite have worked. In conversation with my German editor, she decided on something that evoked both the organ and its ability: *der Blick*. So, after careful consideration, her translation of “Death is a perfection of the eye” was “*Der Tod ist eine Vervollkommnung des Blickes.*” And that was just the first sentence.

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A young woman from Bonn named Pia Klemp is currently facing a long-drawn-out legal battle in Italy. Klemp, a former marine biologist, is accused of rescuing people in the Mediterranean in 2017. If the case comes to trial, as seems likely, she and nine others in the humanitarian group she works with face enormous fines or even up to twenty years in prison for aiding illegal immigration. (Klemp’s plight is strikingly similar to that of another young German woman, Carola Rackete, who was arrested in Italy this week for captaining another rescue boat.) Klemp is unrepentant. She knows that the law is not the highest calling. As captain of a converted fishing boat named *Iuventa*, she had rescued endangered vessels carrying migrants that had been launched from Libya. The precious human lives were ferried over to the Italian island of Lampedusa. The question Klemp and her colleagues pose is this: Do we believe that the people on those endangered boats on the Mediterranean are human in precisely the same way we are human?

When I visited Sicily a couple of years ago and watched a boat of rescued people with bewildered faces come to shore, there was only one possible answer to that question. And yet we are surrounded by commentary that tempts us to answer it wrongly, or that makes us think our comfort and

convenience are more important than human life.

Because Pia Klemp's holy labor takes place on water, it reminds me of an earlier struggle. In 1943, the Danes received word that the Nazis planned to deport Danish Jews. And so, surreptitiously, at great personal risk, the fishermen of north Zealand began to ferry small groups of Danish Jews across to neutral Sweden. This went on, every day, for three weeks, until more than 7,000 people, the majority of Denmark's Jewish population, had been taken to safety.

Currently in my own country, hundreds of people die on the border in the name of national security. Children are separated from their parents and thrown in cages. A few years ago, I visited No Más Muertes (No More Deaths), a humanitarian organization in Arizona that provides aid to travelers by leaving water, blankets, and canned food at strategic points in the Sonoran Desert. These are activities that the US government has declared illegal. The organization also conducts searches for missing migrants, and often locates the bodies of those who have died of hunger or thirst in the desert.

A young geographer named Scott Warren, working with No Más Muertes and other groups, has sought to help travelers cross safely. He provides water and, when possible, shelter. For this holy labor, Warren was arrested and charged last year with harboring migrants. Although the case against him recently ended in a mistrial, the US Attorney's Office in Arizona is seeking a retrial. Warren is far from the only No Más Muertes volunteer to have been arrested as part of the government's war on those who offer life-saving help to our fellow citizens.

Can we draw a link between the intricate and often modest work of writers and translators, and the bold and costly actions of people like Pia Klemp and Scott Warren? Is the work of literature connected to the risks some people

undertake to save others? I believe so—because acts of language can themselves be acts of courage, just as both literature and activism alert us to the arbitrary and essentially conventional nature of borders. I think of Edwidge Danticat’s words in her book *Create Dangerously*:

Somewhere, if not now, then maybe years in the future, a future that we may have yet to dream of, someone may risk his or her life to read us. Somewhere, if not now, then maybe years in the future, we may also save someone’s life.

And I think of a friend of mine, a filmmaker and professor from Turkey who signed a letter in 2016 condemning the slaughter of Kurds by the Turkish state and calling for a cessation of violence. She was one of more than 1,100 signatories from universities and colleges in Turkey. In response, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government initiated investigations of every Turkish signatory, accusing them all of terrorism. Most, my friend included, now face long trials and prison sentences. Many have been fired from their jobs or hounded by pro-government students. Some have already been jailed.

My friend and the other academics were carrying their fellow citizens. With the stroke of a pen, they attempted to carry them across the desert of indifference, over the waters of persecution. For this, they face consequences similar to those faced by Pia Klemp and Scott Warren: public disrepute, impoverishment, prison time. My friend finds herself in great danger for her stand, and so now it is her turn to be ferried to greater safety, because she did the right thing, and we must, too.

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I am struck by a small terracotta sculpture made in the fourth century BCE in Etruria (in what is central Italy today). It depicts two figures, a younger man carrying an older man on his back. It is in fact a representation of Aeneas

carrying his father, Anchises, out of the burning ruins of Troy. The story is recounted by Virgil in *The Aeneid*, and is part of the origin myth of the Roman people. This little sculpture has tremendous affective charge because almost none of us can imagine having to physically carry our own fathers. Support him, yes, in his old age. Actually carry him on your back, no. Impossible to imagine, except in the most wretched emergency.

The little Etruscan object is strikingly similar to a famous vignette from the fresco in the Vatican showing the Fire in the Borgo. That fresco, painted in the early sixteenth century by Raphael or, more likely, Giulio Romano, also shows a young man bearing an old man on his back.

A few years ago, I came across a photojournalist's image of a pair of refugees. I couldn't identify the photographer, but one of the men in the picture is named in the caption as Dakhil Naso. The man he is carrying is his father. They are Yazidis, in flight on foot from ISIS, on their way to Kurdistan. They've been on the move for days, and all you can see behind them is desert. It is a piteous sight; the old man, dressed in white, is on the verge of exhaustion, and the young man, wearing a red football jersey, hardly looks stronger. How far have they come already? How much farther do they have to travel? Why have we allowed this to happen to our fellow citizens?

I call these people our fellow citizens—following a usage by the Israeli-American scholar Ariella Azoulay—because I truly believe that is what they are: citizenship has nothing to do with what papers one has or doesn't have. We all live and die under essentially similar sovereign arrangements, are all subject to the same international banking system, the same alliances among rich nations. We are all citizens under these inescapable powers, but not all of us have our citizenship rights recognized.

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How can literature help us here? The claim is often made that people who read literature are wiser or kinder, that literature inspires empathy. But is that true? I find that literature doesn't really do those things. After observing the foreign policies of the so-called developed countries, I cannot trust any complacent claims about the power of literature to inspire empathy. Sometimes, even, it seems that the more libraries we have over here, the more likely we are to bomb people over there.

What we can go to literature for is both larger and smaller than any cliché about how it makes us more empathetic. Literature does not stop the persecution of humans or the prosecution of humanitarians. It does not stop bombs. It does not, no matter how finely wrought, change the minds of the little fascists who once more threaten to overrun the West. So what is it good for—all this effort, this labor, this sweating over the right word, the correct translation?

I offer this: literature can save a life. Just one life at a time. Perhaps at 4 AM when you get out of bed and pull a book of poetry from the shelf. Perhaps over a week in summer when you're absorbed in a great novel. Something deeply personal happens there, something both tonic and sustaining.

When I describe literature's effect in these terms, I speak stubbornly in the singular. But I also know I am not alone in the world, and that none of us is. In a speech Albert Camus gave in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1957, he described the collective value of our seemingly disconnected lives:

Some will say that this hope lies in a nation; others, in a man. I believe rather that it is awakened, revived, nourished by millions of solitary individuals whose deeds and works every day negate frontiers and the crudest implications of history.

And this ever-expanding power of a single life brings to mind a thought that

has echoed through the ages. We find it for instance in a codex of the Mishnah written in Parma in the mid-thirteenth century: “Whoever destroys a single life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed the whole world, and whoever saves a single life is considered by Scripture to have saved the whole world.” Exactly the same thought is expressed in Surah Five of the Qur’an.

Contrary to the general noise of the culture around us, writing has reminded me in some modest but essential way of things that people don’t want to be reminded of. Inside this modest thing called literature, I have found reminders to myself to negate frontiers and carry others across, and reminders of others who carry me, too. Imagine being in an emergency: a house on fire, a sinking boat, a court case, an endless trek, a changed planet. In such an emergency, you can no longer think only of yourself. You have to carry someone else, you have to be carried by someone else.

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