One Hand Shakes Another: Translation and the Calligram

by

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Introduction

The word, “lien,” is central to the poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire. It is also nearly impossible to translate into a single English word. It variously refers to a “link,” “chain,” “connection,” “bond,” “tie,” or “relation,” and it may refer to all of these at once. It joins two entities, but can carry with it a positive or negative connotation, and these undertones are raised to the surface when expressed in English. The French language, on the other hand, allows it to mean both.

This flexibility of language creates nuance not only within Apollinaire’s poems, but within a reader’s positionality. Each reader is bound by “liens” – personal, social, and historical factors that influence the process of reading. Yet, through these “liens,” each reader establishes a unique relationship with the text that is dependent upon those very limitations. Once acknowledged and accepted, the “liens” become opportunities for understanding and growth.

Like a spider weaving a web of intricate design, this word, “lien,” moves through every element of my project, binding every substance.

The Dynamic Form

Guillaume Apollinaire’s calligram, an early 20th-century form of visual poetry, invites its reader into a space of activity. I felt a close affinity to the form as soon as I encountered it. Perhaps it was its verbal sketches, words shaped into meandering forms that a child could have created. My brother-in-law, who teaches
the 4th grade, told me that he shows the calligram to his students, and that the children take to the poems like they do to a picture book. Each poem possesses a childlike quality, something familiar and close. Yet perhaps I found myself drawn in because the calligrams just as quickly shied away from reach. I have spent most of a year on only three of them, and still they elude me. Each poem requires an investment, not only of time, but of self. To understand the nature of the form, readers must place themselves in the poems.

The calligram stands as a triumph of lyric poetry, though the poetic subject, or “I,” is by no means linked to Apollinaire himself, or even to a single speaker. It turns the subject into a multifaceted presence, expressed through both visual and verbal means. While the Futurists created visual poetic forms that imitated the sounds of the newly industrialized world, Apollinaire brought the lyric to its highest point. Later in the 20th century, when the concrete poem would remove emotion and subjectivity from poetry, Apollinaire’s calligram would still stand alone in its achievement, having developed lyric poetry, by way of visual expression, into its most complex and powerful form.

The calligram engages its reader through a variety of means. Whereas the concrete poem invites a purely rational method of interaction, through a mathematical systematization of expression, the calligram initiates a personalized encounter. Meaning is not bound to a system; neither does it have to imitate or represent, as it does in the symbolic codes of concrete poems, or in the mimetic sounds of Futurist ones. Before publication of Calligrammes: Poèmes de la paix et de la guerre in 1918, Apollinaire would refer to his new poetic form as an “idéogramme lyrique.” Instead,
he ultimately chose “calligramme,” using the Greek term kallos, indicating beauty (Sacks-Galey 182). Whereas an ideogram references an idea or form expressed through symbols, the calligram can be purely aesthetic, existing as a visual creation without immediate referent. It is not limited to this manner of signification – the lines of poetry will often conjure ideas or meanings outside of the page, in the mind of the reader – but it nevertheless carries the potential for meaning in material presence. While its visual properties (varied typeface, shaped text, handwritten and printed text, and utilization of space, to name a few) place it in a long line of visual poetry, the calligram’s material and representational means of expression allow for a new kind of interaction between poem and reader.

The calligram relies on its reader, who functions as a creative agent in the process. In a study on the rapid-eye movement of twelve different readers of the calligram, Katherine Shingler notes that there is no “single perceptual model” for reading, only “rough parameters regarding what it is possible” (75). This distinction makes the calligram an ideal model for poststructuralist reading tendencies, which emphasize the possibilities available to the reader, as opposed to the definitive intentions of the author. Building upon Ferdinand de Saussure’s notions of signifier and signified, Roland Barthes, writing in the latter half of the 20th century, would divide literature into two categories: “œuvres,” which “se ferme sur un signifié,” and “Textes,” which possess a wide field of signifiers. Whereas the signified introduces a mental concept into the mind of the reader, a signifier does not clearly disclose an idea. It may suggest meaning, but it is not bound to it; instead, it experiences a “libération de l’énergie symbolique” (“De l’œuvre au texte” 227-28). The calligram,
as a prime example of Barthes’s “texte,” offers a space of meaning. Rather than
representing or disclosing meaning, the calligram liberates it.

It is a poetic form that presents itself to a reader as something to be *played*,
rather than determined. The fourth grader plays with the poem, just as I do, though
our respective experiences may differ greatly. Without a fixed process of reading, and
without singularity of interpretation, the calligram proliferates, as reader and poem
come together in a space of potential.

*Translation: The Art of Motion*

Musicians often cover the songs of another musician, sometimes adapting the
mood or substance of these songs into their own style. An orchestra reads sheet music
– reproducing a tune, or deviating from it – and the sheet music serves as script. Sheet
music indicates and suggests without demanding. A hip-hop or rap artist samples a
song or sound of the past, using it to lay the foundation for innovation and growth.
Even when a song is played as originally intended, it is heard differently, according to
the venue, the method of recording, the audience, and the time.

Imitation, deviation, re-creation, and experimentation are all healthy and
accepted aspects of the music industry. In *Performing Without a Stage*, Robert
Wechsler ponders the possibility of this freedom in the field of translation, stating,
“People like this sort of thing when it comes to music; the question is, could they like
this in translation as well?” (82). The answer is no, at least not in the current
understanding of literary translation. Translation is not allowed the same liberty.
Whereas musicians play songs in a variety of styles, expanding upon or transforming a tradition of interpretation, translators must be faithfully accurate to the original texts, also known as “source texts.” Otherwise, they have failed. The translator sports a “scarlet brand of T for Translation” (Barnstone 10), which saps the act of any creative power or agency. Many translators will be all too familiar with the Italian phrase, traduttore, traditore, or “translator, traitor”: the translator who departs too drastically from the source commits a crime against it. In turn, the source is implied to be ultimately superior over its offspring. Citing phrases from Jorge Luis Borges’s essay, “Borges and I,” George Steiner states that a translator either “belongs ‘to oblivion’, (inevitably, each generation retranslates), or ‘to the other one’, his occasion, begetter, and precedent shadow” (76). Either the translation will be consumed by future translations – a death that presumes only a finite period of usefulness – or it will pale in comparison to its source.

In this scenario, the only way to render a successful translation is to distance the product from the act of translation. The translator is given license to experiment only if the translation is not really a translation, but something else. In The Poetics of Translation, Willis Barnstone gives an account of one of the most famous translators who defected from the art: Edward FitzGerald, the English poet and translator of Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám, a work of 11th-century Persian poetry. FitzGerald’s 19th-century English renderings attempted to “improve” upon the original by embellishing and adapting the poems. While the Rubaiyat is one of the more well-known and influential translations in history, its critics very rarely qualify it as such, due to its
lack of accuracy. FitzGerald becomes a co-writer, adaptor, or thief. As Barnstone suggests,

[His] unusual fame as a translator is achieved only at the expense of the activity of translation. His rewriting frees him from the chains and unflattering title of unimaginative translator. The underlying aesthetic premise regards the poet translator as an original poet only insofar as he removes his work from the arena of translation. The case of Fitzgerald [sic], far from being a rare exception to prove that glory can accrue to an original translator-creator, rather unhappily confirms that for most critics and readers esteem for the activity of translation lies in the denial of the translation component of that literary activity. (89)

To be a “translator-creator,” to even gain esteem or infamy in the field, one must deny “the translation component.” This implies that translation instead requires an erasure of self, of the subjective and human element of the act.

In this section, I will approach a practice of translation that elevates the subjective interaction between reader and text to revise the current expectations placed upon the literary translator. A survey of the various types of translation, especially with regard to the translation of poetry, will explain our current idealization of fidelity, as well as the faults with this demand. In order to suggest a new translation practice, which can exist alongside the more “faithful” one, I will use phenomenological and poststructural theory to redefine the translator as a uniquely
creative reader. Through this shift, the possible activities of translator, and possible developments of text-in-translation, begin to expand.

The presence of meaning in text is communicated differently according to genre. A machine may be more able to translate an informational document, like an instruction manual, though even this is debatable.¹ For the most part, however, the instruction manual will use unambiguous and denotative diction, which a machine can often handle. A novel, on the other hand, presents more difficulty: a machine may be able to translate the occasional phrase of a novel into readable prose, though much of the text, if not all, will lack the literary quality present in the original. A novel’s way of meaning is not as direct as that of the instruction manual; there are more aspects to be considered, like pace, tone, and syntax. What about poetry-in-translation? A poem condenses language to an economic form, yet one that works through avenues of meaning far beyond that of the instruction manual. Poetry obscures and stratifies meaning, simultaneously using, for example, connotation, sound, and image to communicate indirectly. To most readers of poetry-in-translation, the ideal translator would preserve not only meaning but essence, feel, meter, rhythm, tone, and every other element buried in the lines of the poem. Individual translators rarely render even one line of a poem the same way.

¹ For an example of machine translation’s failure in dealing with even the simplest sentences, see Yehoshua Bar-Hillel’s essay, “A Demonstration of the Nonfeasibility of Fully Automatic High Quality Translation.”
The reading of poetry allows for a freedom of interpretation, and for subjective connection and experience, where other genres do not. The ambiguity of the poem quite often liberates meaning, so that two readers may have completely different impressions, especially when relating to it through their own lives. Yet still, readers demand accuracy of translators. They idealize fidelity. For most, Barnstone’s “poet translator” is a contradiction in terms, because the creativity wielded by the poet has no place in translation. Where did FitzGerald deviate? He was, first and foremost, a reader. His translation adapted the original according to his reading of it – what he found most poignant, what sparked his imagination, what moved him. He produced a work that elevated the elements most important to him, and for this, the public distanced him from the role of translator and celebrated him as a poet.

Meanwhile, the title of literary translator is left to those who obey the rules. However, the rules are not clear. An expectation of accuracy is not so easily simplified to one demand – what is it that the translator must translate in a poem? To remain faithful to the original, should a translator preserve literal meaning or a poem’s essence? Too creative in its replication of essence, and a translation will depart too far from the original and may lose the name of “translation,” replaced by “imitation,” “adaptation,” “pastiche,” or the like. Too literal, and a translation may have lost its spirit, strangled by syntax and diction that have no place in the target language’s common usage.

Still, several translation theorists suggest this second method. Friedrich Schleiermacher, in his essay, “On the Different Methods of Translating,” advocates not for literalism per se, but rather a bending of the target language toward the source
language. By replicating the linguistic structures of the original, a translator brings foreign forms into the target language. Through this formal presence, the target language may, over time, respond to the difference by increasing the capacity of its own language. Still, Schleiermacher sets up fidelity to the original as the goal of translation, and because of it, reading a translation can only ever stand as a meager replacement for the original. Vladimir Nabokov, on the other hand, advocates for an extreme literalism, through which meaning, as opposed to musicality or meter, is thoroughly and exclusively communicated. His translation of Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, an example of this literalism, is consequently buried beneath a mountain of footnotes, each of which extensively describes an original word or phrase. Still, this excess reaffirms his understanding of the work of translation: “Shorn of its primary verbal existence, the original text will not be able to soar and to sing; but it can be very nicely dissected and mounted, and scientifically studied in all its organic details” (Nabokov 77). Nabokov hands the translator a scalpel, with which the only valuable work can be done. The source will not “sing” again. This result, however, is not limited to Nabokov’s literalism: fidelity to the original is always one-sided. To be faithful in one area is to betray in another, and this imbalance extends entirely from our idealization of fidelity.

Fidelity is only one of the ambitions of translation, though it is an essential one. Especially within a monoglot society like our own, most readers need a translator in order to read a foreign text. This kind of translation, which most of all desires to resemble the source, is necessary to the expansion of our global perspective and understanding. Still, there are other practices of translation that can speak to the
individual reader. By universally demanding fidelity – an inherently flawed and contradictory claim – we restrict the translator not only to a non-literary task, but to an impossible one. So, I suggest a broadening of the term. If “translation” were to become a category for a diverse range of activities, as opposed to a single act of supposedly faithful reproduction, the nature of the form would become more inclusive. Just as “poem” encapsulates a range of forms, so too could “translation.”

One may ask, But what is wrong with naming those other activities “imitations,” “pastiches,” “adaptations,” “performances,” or “versions”? Is it not unethical to give readers a “translation” when they are really getting something else? Why blur the distinction when “translation” already has a distinct definition? Because its current definition, as a faithful and accurate rendering of a source text into a target language, does not work. Not only is our idealization of fidelity flawed, in that no translation can effectively preserve every quality of the original, but it also fundamentally erases the translator who does the work. The creative act of reading, interpreting, choosing, and writing must be nullified in order to pass off as accurate. The “poet translator” is an anomaly. I have read far too many poems-in-translation that abstain from adding the translator’s name to the page, all in an effort to get closer to the original author.

Idealization of fidelity is linked to a notion of authorial supremacy: a translation must approximate the source, because that source is divine, and the translation is but a medium through which to reach it. This notion can be traced back to the late 18th- and early 19th-century “Romantic view of the author as a supreme being – unique, exclusive, ultimate” (Wechsler 90). As a result, the translator stands
in the author’s shadow, hiding the very act of translation to give way to this other presence. However, we may be able to propose a new position for the translator through critical developments in authorial and readerly presence in texts.

Since the latter half of the 20th century, poststructuralist theory has emphasized the importance of the reader in the process of meaning-making. The Romantic significance of the author gives way to a more open-ended creativity on the part of the reader. In the text, meaning is disparate; the reader enters this space, not to discover the ultimate meaning of text, but to experience the plurality of meaning. In S/Z, Barthes defines this plural presence:

Interpréter un texte, ce n’est pas lui donner un sens (plus ou moins fondé, plus ou moins libre), c’est au contraire apprécier de quel pluriel il est fait. Posons d’abord l’image d’un pluriel triomphant, que ne vient appauvrir aucune contrainte de représentation (d’imitation). Dans ce texte idéal, les réseaux sont multiples et jouent entre eux, sans qu’aucun puisse coiffer les autres ; ce texte est une galaxie de signifiants, non une structure de signifiés ; il n’a pas de commencement ; il est réversible ; on y accède par plusieurs entrées dont aucune ne peut être à coup sûr déclarée principale ; les codes qu’il mobilise se profilent à perte de vue.... (11-12; emphasis in the original)

Barthes ultimately brings this ideal image of the text back to the point of view of the reader, for whom the text proliferates like the evening sky, stretching further than any one reader can make out, sparkling with many meanings. The ideal text is entirely
free and without “contrainte de représentation.” Like the purely expressive calligram,
the text does not have to refer to something else, to a definitive “signifié.” It opens
upon meaning, rather than closing on it. As Charles Bernstein puts it, “When reading
poetry is not directed to the goal of deciphering a fixed, graspable meaning but rather
encourages performing and responding to overlapping meanings, then difficulty
ceases to be an obstacle and is transformed into an opening” (48). As the reader
responds to and engages with – without piercing or deciphering – this “triumphant
plural,” both the reader and text experience growth. What at first seemed difficult –
the process of reading, and especially of reading poetry – instead creates an opening
for the reader to inhabit and for the text to develop.

Poststructuralism links the text’s construction to the reader’s perception of it,
which may otherwise be worded as a phenomenology of reading. There is a
dialectical relationship between subjective reader and text. Because the former is
wholly unique, bringing to the text a subjectivity that cannot be recreated outside of
the interaction, any search for an objective system of reading is futile. A
phenomenology of reading embraces its subjective foundation and uses it to
reconstruct the relationship between text and reader, and therefore between text and
translator. An essential component of phenomenological investigation is perception:
through heightened awareness and observation, the phenomenologist understands the
reciprocal relationships that exist between the objects under observation, and the self
that observes. A reader’s unique engagement with a text is a process of dual
transformation, modifying text through reader and reader through text. Gaston
Bachelard, a phenomenologist of poetics, states that “…il n’y a pas, en ce qui
concerne les caractères de l’imagination, de phénoménologie de la passivité” (La poétique de la rêverie 12-13). To read a text, and most of all, to read a poem, is to act through the text, to engage with it.

Phenomenology’s emphasis on subjectivity, alongside poststructuralism’s emphasis on the reader, offers new avenues of action for the translator, who is perhaps the most intense and careful reader of the text. If the text develops, or opens, through the reader’s presence within it, translation can articulate this growth. We can now link Barthes’s notion of “Texte” to the newly expanded act of translation. Unlike the “œuvre,” an object of passive consumption, the “Texte ne s’éprouve que dans un travail, une production” (“De l’œuvre au texte” 226-27). The text must be enacted through the reader’s work upon it. The translator, as a reader that works through literary production, steps up to the task. The musical analogy becomes useful once again: the reader of a text first “joue au Texte (sens ludique) … mais pour que cette pratique ne se réduise pas à une mimésis passive, intérieure (le Texte est précisément ce qui résiste à cette réduction), il joue le Texte,” as one plays a musical instrument (“De l’œuvre au texte” 231; emphasis in the original). Interaction with “Texte” takes the form of a double recreation, in the sense that one plays within the text, but also that one re-creates it through play, in the manner of a practicing musician. In turn, the translator performs, stepping out from the act of isolated reading-practicing to present the song publicly.

This analogy is present in the word “translate,” which comes from the Latin translatus, the past participle of transferre, or “to bear, carry, bring” (“Transfer, v.”). At its core, translation indicates motion. And while this motion may be represented in
transfer across two languages, it can also take place through time, across space, and
between subjectivities. The translator has the potential to “faire partir” the “Texte”
(“De l’œuvre au texte” 231) by expressing the interaction between poem and subject.
In this way, one translates not only meaning, but the experience of meaning. By
allowing for a translation practice that articulates the experience of the subjective
reader in relation to the text, we can explore the dynamic relationship between not the
text and an ideal reader, but the text and a plurality of readers. A text comes to life
through each individual encounter, so that the process of translation puts the text in
motion. Whereas Nabokov’s suggested practice places the text on a table for
dissection, a practice based on subjectivity and creation lets the text fly. As Edward
FitzGerald once put it, speaking to his desired poetry-in-translation, “Better a live
Sparrow than a Stuffed Eagle” (The Letters of Edward FitzGerald 335).

What does an intentionally creative and subjective translation practice look
like? Already, the very act of translation is subjective: each word is picked from a
vast number of possibilities for a very specific reason. The translator likes how it
sounds, or doesn’t like the implications of other synonyms. The translator thus acts
through a historical, social, and personal lens in order to deliver a translation that
feels right.

Yves Bonnefoy does not shy away from describing the circuitous and
subjective process of finding the right word. In the transcription of his lecture, “La
traduction de la poésie,” Bonnefoy uses an example from his own past to display the
subjective act of translation. In a translation of a poem by W.B. Yeats, Bonnefoy uses
his own life to supply the word that he believes will carry the true force of the
original. He is tasked with translating “labouring ships” into French. In the moment, he denies the multiplicity of meanings associated with “labouring,” and instead chooses to render it as “qui boitent / au loin.” As he puts it, “ces mots ne me sont pas venus par le circuit court qu’on croit qui va chez le traducteur du texte à la traduction, mais par toute une boucle de mon passé” (100). He then divulges his own route to the word: having thought often about this image – of ships limping along in the sea – Bonnefoy once partially wrote his own poem while “pensant bien sûr à [Paul] Verlaine.” This incomplete poem then fed him the image to translate into Yeats’s poem:

La relation de ce qui se cherchait là avec mon souci de la poésie de Yeats est devenu le plus important, le vrai devenir. C’est le poète anglais qui m’expliquait à moi-même, et c’est mon cheminement qui a voulu le traduire. C’est dans un rapport de destin à destin, en somme, et non d’une phrase anglaise à une française, que s’élaborent les traductions, avec des prolongements qu’on ne peut prévoir (ce bateau et son boitement ont reparu dans mon dernier livre). (101)

In this passage, Bonnefoy illustrates how a host of influences, both past and future, come to life in the process of translation. Yeats’s poem brings about an exploration of verbal association and memory, which recalls not only the translator’s life, but the words of other poets, such as Verlaine, whom he has read. Moreover, this choice would further define the image in the mind of the translator who, in later works of his
own, would use it again. The act of translation becomes a summoning of the past self and an opening for future creation.

However, Bonnefoy only goes so far as to account for association and memory in the process of translation. Clive Scott takes it a few steps further by relying equally on the less conscious impulses of the translating subject. He advocates for translation as a transcription of the state of the reader’s encounter with the text in the present moment, which navigates the past self but also encounters an environment that is unique to the here and now. The characteristics of the present subject – not only memory but behavior, mood, wandering thought, conscious and unconscious impulses – influence that subject’s engagement with the text. Scott calls this the “autobiographical input” of the reader, which acknowledges the many layers of self that experience text while reading (2).

Scott’s process allows for a more encompassing definition of the self that translates. Through consideration of autobiographical input, the translator might finally become a fully human force, an “unconscious, a subjectivity, a writerly metabolism,” as opposed to a “particular translational competence” who simply completes a job (3). The human translator is fully separated from the machine translator through a complete awareness and articulation of the translator’s subjectivity. This practice of translation is better equipped to represent the way individual readers engage with a text.

By accounting for the reader at the heart of the translation process, the translated text will carry the force of a creative act, and will encourage a similarly phenomenological engagement to readers not only of the original text, but of the
translated one. Scott is explicit about his translation method being most useful for the polyglot, since “significance of translation lies not in the demonstration of a skill of substitution, but in the fruitfulness of the relationship established” between the two texts (14). Translation does not collapse two texts into one, but rather places the two next to each other as the expression of a reciprocal relationship. However, this kind of translation can also be instructive for the monoglot reader. By taking into account textual meaning and expression, as well as the readerly experience of text, this process reflects the personalized act of reading, and the kind of signifying experience that every reader can have within a text. It does not presume superiority over any other form of translation, and does not replace the more traditionally “faithful” texts that a monoglot reader requires. It instead proposes another kind of translation whose ambitions, and effects, are different. It is the difference between a musician attempting to play the original in the same exact manner as when first presented, and a generation of new musicians, each of whom gives their own spin to the tune.

At any given moment in history, we take advantage of the words we use, believing them to be firm, fixed, and definite. “Translate” is one such term whose definition seems unmovable. But “translate” encompasses such an immense body of practices that it seems absurd to restrict their diversity of process and effect by limiting our understanding of the word to a single and flawed notion. In an essay titled “‘A single brushstroke’: Writing through Translation: Anne Carson,” Sherry Simon explores the many exciting frontiers of translation practice, while focusing on Anne Carson’s poetic use of translation. In this piece, Simon equally expresses her distaste for our modern conception of translation, while letting us know that “other
cultures and other eras have been more imaginative.” The Romans, for example, had a number of terms to indicate methods of looser translation, and several more for close translation, while our current vocabulary, she writes, is “impoverished and judgmental. Translations are literal or free, pragmatic or creative, faithful or treacherous. No wonder, then, that we are at a loss to account for looser forms of translation, where process takes over from equivalence” (110). Our vocabulary does not account for the translation of process and experience.

Instead, we speak of results, assessing the success of a translation’s equivalence or fidelity, and thus overlooking the process itself, that of “moving between two codes, two realities.” It is this movement, however, which spurs creativity into motion. If we can better understand the situation and potential of the subjective translator, we may begin to allow for a practice of translation that promotes not only replication, but writing. In this mode of translation, “the translative impulse … becomes the motor for creative writing (Simon 110). Creativity is generation; through translation, life stirs within text.

_methodology_

The following chapters emphasize a mode of translation that embodies process and result, both meaning and the experience of meaning. They attempt to push the scope of literary translation further outwards, toward a more inclusive definition. This method brings the full presence of the reader-translator into the work, and encourages all readers to bring the same generative and interactive spirit to their own textual encounters.
Each chapter features one of three calligrams, after which I offer my reading of the poem in relation to the process that brought me to those conclusions. This process encompasses a range of activities and experiences: the events in my life, the different venues in which I read and consider the text, the influence of intertexts, even the poems that I write in response to my reading.

Chapter 1 explores the potential disjunction between a poem’s content and its reader’s experience. It equally examines the primacy of the senses, as well as the importance of form over content, in conferring meaning. Chapter 2 works through competing notions of temporality in both Apollinaire’s work and in my own. Chapter 3 searches to understand metaphysical silence in text and to translate this absence. Rather than end with a conclusion, which would bring this process to a definitive (and impossible) close, I have included some brief concluding remarks, which assess the limits of the self, as well as the distinctive benefits that arise from these limits.

In this vein, the theme of “liens” runs throughout, as I repeatedly engage with the limitations of my experience. Each chapter confronts such a “lien,” and through this confrontation, transforms it into an opening, as I advance into both text and self.

I have chosen to place my own verse poems at the end of each chapter. As articulations of my translation process, these poems stand best on their own, and represent my poetic voice, performing alongside Apollinaire’s. Edith Grossman writes of a translator’s “sweet spot,” in which translator and author “have started to speak together – never in unison, certainly, but in a kind of satisfying harmony” (82). I hope for my own poems to hold this harmony across time, space, language, and body, creating polyphony through translation.
Chapter 1. Translating Experience: “La mandoline l’œillet et le bambou”

Fig. 1. Guillaume Apollinaire’s “La mandoline l’œillet et le bambou.”

As I open a first edition copy of Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes: Poèmes de la Paix et de la Guerre, 1913-1916*, I am quickly met not by poems, but by two consecutive portraits of the poet. The first is an etching by Pablo Picasso, which
shows Apollinaire sitting on a chair, a bit uneasy or uncomfortable (see fig. 2). There is a vase in the back of the room; otherwise, there is nothing of the background except loose sketches of the walls. Most detailed are his eyes, mouth, and goatee. His military garb – consisting of a buttoned-down jacket, pants tucked into tall boots, and a belt – is sketched in the same indistinct manner as the walls. One arm is slung over the back of the chair; the other is perched on his leg, his hand cupping his knee. His hands are huge; my gaze is led down the arm toward them, culminating in the fingers, the site of poetic activity.

Fig. 2. First portrait of Apollinaire, by Pablo Picasso. (FC9.Ap437.918c, Houghton Library, Harvard University)
There is also the light impression of a rose on the left breast of his jacket, as well as some sort of platform or patch of earth delivering it. I imagine this rose coming to him on the battlefield, the thought of a lover or a poetic line popping into his mind.

The next illustration, another portrait by Picasso (though cut by René Jaudon) portrays the artist in a slightly different manner (see fig. 3). Careful attention is still paid to the goatee, though this seems to have mostly been reduced to stubble. His mustache thins at the sides. A bit of hair sticks out from under the bandages that cover a shrapnel wound. He looks off to the left, perhaps toward where the war continues without him. He still wears a labelled military uniform, as well as a medal.

Fig. 3. First portrait of Apollinaire, by Pablo Picasso. (FC9.Ap437.918c, Houghton Library, Harvard University)
This sequence of images depicts a man who is or has been in war, in that order. The impression of his role in the war precedes any of his actual writing. The book thus serves to remember the experience through which he lived, and in which others died. The book is dedicated “[à] la mémoire du plus ancien de mes camarades, René Dalize, mort au champ d’honneur, le 7 mai 1917.” The “champ d’honneur” exists in the book; Dalize is buried here, written into its log.

Nowhere is this wartime experience better represented than in “La mandoline l’œillet et le bambou” (see fig. 1). If reading the calligram from left to right and top to bottom, one first sees the image of the mandolin, an oval constructed from shaky handwriting with a single line of verse extending from its center to the top-right, imitating the neck of the instrument.

The unit of text that forms the mandolin begins with a comparison to a bullet (“comme la balle”). The movement around the body of the mandolin imitates the bullet’s travel through *something* – most superficially, a battlefield, though, as the poem mentions, the traversed body could be a physical one (“le corps”), or an abstract one, like truth (“la vérité”). The image of the battlefield returns as one reads the line that runs up the instrument’s neck: “ô batailles la terre tremble comme une mandoline.” The page offers a concrete image of a mandolin, though one that vibrates with the imagery and sensation present on the battlefield.

The handwriting itself distorts and shifts, like tectonic plates rubbing against each other, or opposing armies colliding. The word “mandoline” is ripped apart, distorting into “un ema doline,” an incomprehensible mass of language. This is characteristic of what Anne Carson calls “physical silence,” to which I will return in
Chapter 3 (see p. 90). The handwriting falters, losing the sound of the words to its distortion. The words shake with the music of war, barely holding together.

*  

In the darkness of an early November evening, I stared at this image under the desk lamp in my bedroom. I wanted to gauge my relationship to the calligram by writing a poem that would elevate the aspects that felt most real to me. I wanted to bring the calligram into my experience.

Unsure of where to start, I decided to reproduce the image of the mandolin in my own hand (see fig. 4). The lines I sketched were simple, firm, and thick. They had nothing to do with Apollinaire’s “mandolin,” whose unrefined, imperfect, dissonant energy shook off the page.

Fig. 4. My sketched reproduction of Apollinaire’s “mandoline.”
Through the act of drawing, I realized an essential difference in our poetic processes: his poems agitated with the spirit of war, while mine poured forth from a remarkably stable position, which not only filled my cozy bedroom, but dominated the entire thread of my experience. I could not feel his battlefield.

In *The Eight Stages of Translation*, Robert Bly cautions against this very moment. While defining eight steps of literary translation, Bly points to several challenges that may confront the translator. During the second step, as the translator attempts to understand the meaning of the poem, Bly suggests an assessment of the content in relation to the translator’s personal experience. After the translator has come to an understanding of the poem’s meaning, then

if that store of feeling is beyond the translator, he or she should leave the poem be. At the end of this stage, the translator should ask himself whether the feelings as well as the concepts are within his world. If they are not, he should stop. I’ve had to abandon a number of poems at this point. I remember a Vallejo translation for example; in it I felt Vallejo's feelings toward his own images enter the violet, or grief, range of the spectrum, where I could not follow him. At the age I was, the violet range was not accessible to me, and these feelings can't be faked. In the second stage, we decide whether to turn back or go on. (21)

Bly’s ideal translator will not fake the work. To feel and inhabit the poem, as a great translator does, an arsenal of feeling is brought by the translator to the encounter. If
the poem speaks in a register beyond the capacity of the translator, the translation, Bly feels, must be abandoned.

As I came to understand the major incongruity of meaning between Apollinaire’s poem and myself, and with Bly’s suggestion in mind, I began to worry. Had I any right to work with this poem? Should I turn back? I hoped to write my own poems to articulate my experience of Apollinaire’s poem, but each time I did, that same fear crept back in. The best of these poems, which imagined the battlefield and attempted to draw it back to myself, survived a round of editing but proceeded no further. It was too aware of its essential deficiency, too desperate for a solution. It spoke of “…my mandolin / out of tune / yet has the strings / to be strummed.”

Likewise, the rest of the lines urged the presence of a medium which might someday carry the tune that was, for now, out of sync with my experience. At the time, I had been reflecting on the themes of Marshall McCluhan’s “The Medium is the Message,” which related to my issue only at the most basic level: if a message is indelibly influenced by the means of its production, then I hoped to establish a connection to this poem purely by way of the medium. The poetic form was the link between our disparate experiences; it was the mandolin’s strings.

Yet the visual medium, not the verbal one, had unlocked the disparity of meaning. The visual aspect of the calligram possesses more potential than a mere suggestion of figure. As Willard Bohn states, “…access to the calligrams is controlled by the visual image” (18). Not only had I entered into the poem by way of the visual – through seeing and distinguishing the different images – but I had used the visual to press up against the poem, to realize the underlying difference in experience. This
was only possible by way of the almost unconscious representation of the mandolin that my hand put to the page.

Renee Gladman has a piece of poetic prose that, accompanied by sketches in pen, concerns the relationship between language and drawing. In it, she hopes to write about a series of sketches she has drawn:

I’d give them language so that I could say they weren’t language exactly. They were underneath, something appearing out of something being exposed, and I wanted to say it was language with its skin peeled back, but you couldn’t use peeled-back language to tell an audience that the drawings were language peeled-back. You had to use language with its cover and point away from language to show how language could go around exposed. Language was beautiful exposed; it was like a live wire set loose, a hot wire, burning, leaving trace. If you looked into language this way, you saw where it burned, the map it made. (*The Wave Papers* 3)

Gladman has seen language exposed – in the form of the drawings – but she cannot tell us about it without resealing language. She can only write about what language might look like waving around in the air, “a hot wire, burning, leaving trace.” The audience can only imagine the interior of language, which, if sliced open, would burn with a freedom previously unavailable to it, and wherever that wire waved, it would delineate the marks of a “map.” In fact, the drawings that accompany the prose very much resemble a map, or a city landscape shimmering in summer heat.
But the drawing-as-map model does not have to look like a city. The mandolin I had sketched in sharpie led me into the poem like a torch in a dark tunnel. Its simple form was language that “could go around exposed,” telling me something about the specificity of my life experience, and this language could be put up to Apollinaire’s “mandoline” in a similar way. On this, Gladman writes, “You could draw to think; you could trace your hand along that wall, build something” (Calamities 118).

Drawing is posited as a provocation of and predecessor to thought. Thought can be built upon it.

The poem communicates itself not only through language, but through gesture. In the case of the mandolin, its handwritten quality lends to it an energy and vibration that complements its meaning. The full force of the bullet’s journey, accompanied by the battlefield’s musicality, would not exist without the altered shape of the words that cradle and create movement. The handwriting works just as much to contain this force and presence. According to Scott, who speaks primarily of translation’s use of these tools, handwriting helps to give the text a dynamic, to present it as a centre of developing energies, to endow it with an urgent time-boundness, to plant it firmly in the here and now. Handwriting is the present of the gesturing body; it makes the text mobile and polymorphous […]. Handwriting is a visual paralanguage of the verbal paralanguage of a voice; it gestures the voice, it physically traces words, rather than representing them, and projects meaning in its calligraphic tracings as much as through the words it delineates. And within handwriting
and in handwriting’s extensions, are other expressive resources, notably crossing out and doodling. In a new world, in which one can float seamlessly between visual and verbal paralanguages, handwriting and crossing out and doodling hold out the promise of access to the intricate physiology of the writer’s or speaker’s voice. (46)

Unlike the ideogram, the calligram presents itself as beautiful expression without necessary referent. Its handwriting does not represent, but rather “physically traces words.” A reader picks up on its handwritten quality, which “[plants] it firmly in the here and now,” in the present moment, in a continual state of “developing energies.” When Scott locates handwriting in the realm of “visual paralanguage of the verbal paralanguage of a voice,” this indicates that handwriting, while possessing some quality of the vocalization of the text, equally contributes to its own expressive quality, in and of itself. It may communicate aspects of meaning unregistered by either spoken or written voice. If the visual and handwritten components of language serve, then, as the vessels of energy, as the exposed and burning wires, as the maps, then I hoped to meet Apollinaire at the center of our geographies.

A month later, I turned back to “La mandoline l’œillet et le bambou,” this time at Harvard’s Houghton Library. I was prepared to feel out my experience of it through the act of drawing. I drew each of the objects – “mandoline,” already distinguished as a mandolin; “l’œillet,” often translated as a carnation; and “bambou,” regarded as a pipe, despite the material quality of its French name. I also attempted to
synthesize my current mental state while transcribing the state of the room, as my reading venue. This time, the sketches looked even less like the originals.

My mandolin began in the top-left corner as a series of marks that imitated the sonic environment: shapes came to represent the sounds of fingers on keyboards, whispers and squeaking chairs, rustling pages, perceptible speech, the snap of a stapler. The room vibrated into the image, which held the place of the mandolin in the upper left corner of the page, but it came to look more and more like a face hunched over a book. The sounds became the act of reading in the room, and the senses became the medium through which it was transcribed.

The carnation also grew out of the theme of perception, this time as the cross-section of visual and olfactory senses. Memory too played a role in connecting scent to mental processing. The reading room smelled just like the wings of a travelling stage on which I’d performed plays as an adolescent, and this memory was so strong in my mind that no other meaning could be attached to the scent. The carnation was inverted, its stem pointing down toward the flower, down into the mental framework which categorized it, and finally into the written line. Memory had placed the scent into a line of poetry.

As I moved onto the image of the pipe, the themes of perception and mental processing had taken over completely – I could think of little else. I rotated my pipe up toward the other two images; through it, a smoker inhaled the impressions that drifted down from the mandolin and carnation. The three images were a loop of senses, connecting self and world.
These images formed the basis of a connection between Apollinaire’s poem and myself. Both of our experiences were founded upon the senses that intercepted the world, the medium through which it was experienced. When Gladman writes, “You could draw to think,” I see in this statement a preconscious quality in drawing, foreshadowing thought. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, attempting to understand perception’s preconscious work, writes,

Le premier acte philosophique serait donc de revenir au monde vécu en deçà du monde objectif, puisque c’est en lui que nous pourrons comprendre le droit comme les limites du monde objectif, de rendre à la chose sa physionomie concrète, aux organismes leur manière propre de traiter le monde, à la subjectivité son hérité historique, de retrouver les phénomènes, la couche d’expérience vivante à travers laquelle autrui et les choses nous sont d’abord donnés, le système “Moi-Autrui-les choses” à l’état naissant, de réveiller la perception et de déjouer la ruse par laquelle elle se laisse oublier comme fait et comme perception au profit de l’objet qu’elle nous livre et de la tradition rationnelle qu’elle fonde. (69)

Perception has been forgotten, surpassed by the realm of object, by the “tradition rationnelle” that seems to oppose perception’s subjective nature. And yet, Merleau-Ponty’s significant addition to phenomenology is not to pit subjectivity against objectivity, or to prefer the former over the latter; instead, he suggests that subjectivity is the foundation of objectivity, that our rational systems are first
established upon accounts of individual perception. Perception claims the first interaction between self and other, before consciousness begins to shape it into patterns. Subjective perception precedes interpretation.

Such a comparison can be drawn, in my case, between drawing and writing. Though writing too may possess this preconscious quality – Bachelard, for example, insists on the power of poetry’s written image to strike a reader before consciousness intervenes – it is language that activates an image within. Drawing, and other visual mediums, access this preconscious intuition and experience more directly, leading into the written portion of the poem. As Scott asks (and answers), citing Merleau-Ponty,

…what does it mean for us to speak of reading as a phenomenological event?

It means that reading constitutes a whole-body experience in which words, and grammar, and syntax, and typographic phenomena such as typeface, margin, punctuation, active cross-sensory, psycho-physiological responses prior to concept and interpretation, at a stage when essences, thanks to language, ‘reposent encore’, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, ‘sur la vie antéprédicative de la conscience.’ (11)

If the predicate indicates a quality or attribute of a subject, the anti-predicate precedes this qualification, existing “prior to concept and interpretation.” Reading, mediated by the phenomenal sensations of the body, can affect the reader for a time before the mind intervenes, and it is in this prior stage that a deeper experience can be sensed.
When I draw, I trace my hand “along the wall” of thought, building up an understanding that exists before language. As a translator, I want to access this primary form, where the poem’s forces concentrate. To grasp that which escapes conscious detection, I must inhabit the space of the poem that lies underneath. I do so using a phenomenological approach, which emphasizes subjective sensation.

The primacy of sensation is essential to “La mandoline l’œillet et le bambou.” In the case of the mandolin, the instrument’s sound crosses through truth like a bullet. The carnation posits the nose as the “trône de la future sagesse,” the seat upon which knowledge will sit. The pipe, a jumbled assortment of phrases, gradually moves from left to right by proposing sensual description first (“O nez de la pipe les odeurs-centre univers infiniment déliées qui”) before resolving into more abstract reasoning (“fourneau y forgent les chaînes lient les autres raisons formelles”). The very confusion of the pipe indicates a lack of categorization or clear ordering. Rationalization has not yet occurred; through the pipe, the senses detect the world all at once.

However, while the foundation of senses is common to both this calligram and my own process of reading it, the experiences that this foundation supports could not be more different. What is born out of the same senses grows into divergent experiences of the world. How was I to erase this gap in experience, so that I might hear Apollinaire’s message?

To further investigate the separation of message and medium, I turned to the Oulipo. The Oulipo, which stands for “Ouvvoir de littérature potentielle,” have devised many techniques to re-interpret the written word in order to access its full potential.
In the words of Harry Mathews, the only American among them, the group “aims, on the one hand, at providing writers with appropriately new ways of saying whatever they have to say, and, on the other, at providing analytical and manipulative forms that, applied to preexisting texts, can reveal unsuspected attributes latent in them” (“Oulipo” 174). Like the visual methods described earlier, Oulipo manipulations have the goal of feeling out the deeper layers of writing, of bringing to the surface their “latent” presence.

One of the most popular Oulipean techniques is “N + 7,” in which every noun is replaced with the seventh noun that comes after it in a dictionary. Replacement of the nouns diverts attention away from the subject matter toward the syntactical motion of the sentence. The message is altered so that the medium may shine through. In his essay, “For Prizewinners,” Mathews applies the N + 7 technique to a short story by Franz Kafka. Mathews conducts two of what he calls “translations” on the short story: the first breaks apart the sentence structure while preserving meaning; the second preserves structure while distorting meaning (using N + 7). From this experiment, Mathews identifies an important aspect of the relationship between the reader, who detects meaning, and the “translated” texts:

The first translation (unlike the original) is growing steadily more boring; the second translation is making more and more sense – or, at least, we seem more and more to be expecting it to make sense; and much of the sense we are persuading ourselves to discover sounds, while in no way replicating that of the original, like a kind of commentary on it. (“Prizewinners” 28)
In the reader’s comparison of the two translations to the original, the second translation, because of its syntax, begins to function as a “kind of commentary.” Meanwhile, the first translation’s preservation of sense grows more and more distant. The reader finds it “boring” without its original structure. It is implied, then, that meaning attaches itself not to the sense of words, but to the structures that carry them.

To test this jarring theory, I decided to conduct my own N + 7 experiment using an initial translation experiment I had done, in which I brought “La mandoline l’œillet et le bambou” into English verse. The result was at once ridiculous and far too accurate, especially in providing “commentary” on the original. The N + 7 technique gave birth to a host of new words and phrases that occupied the frame of Apollinaire’s poem. One of the repeated words in “La mandoline l’œillet et le bambou” – “nez,” or “nose” – became “no-see-um,” the small and (nearly) invisible fly. Another repeated word – “odeurs,” which I translated as “scents” – became “schadenfreude,” or the enjoyment derived from another’s suffering. “Verité,” or “truth,” turned into “Trypanosoma,” a genus of parasite whose name comes, as Pamela Nagami states, “from the Greek trupanon – ‘an auger or corkscrew’ – plus soma, ‘body’” (104). Trypanosoma were so named for their corkscrew motion, which allows them to drill through their hosts.

Immediately, I saw myself in the poem, as if called out, guilty in front of it. Whereas the calligram apostrophizes the nose (“O nez”), my poem apostrophized my lack of presence (“O no-see-um”) in an ode to my absence from the battlefield. I was the Trypanasoma parasite, corkscrewing through time, body, and voice, gaining
pleasure ("schadenfreude") from another’s pain. I was using Apollinaire’s time on the front-line to write my own poems.

Of course, this exercise showed the truth of Mathews’s claim – that the structure and motion of the text carried meaning more significantly than the subject did, at least as a commentary. However, it also revealed a major fault in my consideration of the poem. Until now I had feared it would be impossible to grasp the poem because of the difference in subject matter, when, in truth, I had already grasped it. According to Mathews, structured motion, rather than subject matter, conveys meaning. "Syntax," which, in Mathews’s framework, means sentence and paragraph structure, conveys the movement of the text. It is “what engages my consciousness in an action of shifting, of discovery” ("Prizewinners" 24). This motion is captured in the exchanging of nouns: the reader is forced to seek meaning by projecting onto the newly liberated content of the writing. Pushed to fill the text with meaning, the reader discovers, just as I discovered through my N + 7 translation of “La mandoline l’œillet et le bambou.” The movement of consciousness is the desired goal of both author and reader; to push consciousness toward discovery is the great work of writing, and an entirely separate one from subject matter.

Mathews’s “consciousness” is the central force of writing, very different from the more objective and rationalizing force that Merleau-Ponty makes it out to be. Mathews states that the writer, when writing, draws from three different places within the self. The first place is one’s personal history, accessed first through the act of writing, which allows the self to dive into memory, since “language is inextricably bound up with the act of remembering, a deliberate use of language inevitably fishes
up memories.” The writer writes from memory not by simply recalling, but by articulating in the written form, which prompts further remembrance. The second place is the body, which is packed “with meanings and indeed with words. Your shoulders are bursting with nouns, your knees with verbs. An insatiable ‘but’ is locked into your right wrist. All these words are held there by force and are waiting to be released.” A language of physicality, found within the present body, seems to complement the language of memory. Finally, the third place is consciousness, or “what you think and feel with.” It is the medium of meaning, upon which thought and affective response rest. In this way it “[generates] the power to create meaning. It does not produce a particular meaning – it produces no conclusions. Instead, it has the capacity of creating meaning again and again, one meaning after another. We could also describe it as an infinite potentiality of meaning” (“Prizewinners” 17-19). Unlike the language of memory or body, the language of consciousness does not name – it does not produce things. Instead, it produces the means to generate meaning infinitely; it is the vessel of meaning, and works in the text as a vessel to be filled by the reader. It initiates discovery through the reader’s active participation, because the reader is in turn made to use “what you think and feel with.” Syntax, as the tool of consciousness, carries the potential to create meaning. Obliteration of sense, as in the N + 7 experiment, does not destroy the text, since the reader steps in to supply meaning.

When I practiced the N + 7 technique on Apollinaire’s poem, I was horrified to see my guilt in the new nouns. Yet this act of seeing was, in fact, the very activation of my consciousness, and a sign of the consciousness that produced the
poem. Apollinaire had set the written text in motion because of not only verbal syntax, but layout, image, even handwriting, and this act of consciousness carried through to me. The N + 7 technique allowed me, as Mathews states, to “get off the hook on which most of us painfully dangle – the notion that subject matter gives writing its significance” (“Prizewinners” 29). I didn’t have to see myself in the subject; instead, I saw myself in the motion that it provoked, in the shared consciousness stirred by my interaction with the poem. I did not feel the same pain as Apollinaire felt, but I did feel through the same means that produced the emotion.

Once again, the medium surpassed the message in importance, and this time I had lived that reality. I had realized my own positionality in relation to the poem, while also discovering the nonverbal workings of the calligram. The movement of “La mandoline l’œillet et le bambou” had, in turn, moved me.

The true culmination of the poet’s consciousness, however, is in its inspiration of creativity in a reader, not only in thought, but in writing. In order to play the part of Barnstone’s “poet translator,” I took to the page to articulate my own experience of the calligram. Whereas my previous poems had dealt exclusively with the inaccessibility of our experiences, I now felt I could write from a place of acceptance. I wanted to create a poem that could articulate, or at least point to, the foundational layer of perception prior to systems of rational thought. I wanted it to be written from my own position, rather than from the distant and inaccessible position of another. My poem, titled “Cassia Fistula (golden rain)” – located at the end of the chapter – attempts therefore to express the very basic experience of looking out a window. To be specific, this is my bedroom window, just beyond my desk, through which I had
glanced at many points in this process, though never for very long. I had been preoccupied with seeing into an experience of World War I, rather than seeing through my own situation. And so, I sat down once more at my desk and attempted to perceive the moment phenomenologically, without letting myself rationalize it. I looked out at the first proper snow of the year, at the glow of the streetlamps amid the white.

This poem sprang from the influence, or rather, collision, of two poets I had been reading: Charles Wright and Paul Celan. My title comes from Wright’s poem, “Clear Night,” in which “A cassia flower falls” (4). Wright has said that he writes most of his poems either looking out his window or sitting in his backyard (PBS NewsHour). He is a poet of the mundane, the natural, the near-by. The other poet I had in mind was Paul Celan, whose language contains a powerful distancing quality within it. Celan, writing in German, spoke the same native tongue as the Nazis. Because of this, his poetry pushes language away, making it foreign. I wanted to address this distance of language and make it parallel to the distance between self and world throughout my poem. Celan has one poem, titled “Matière de Bretagne,” which became especially important to my writing process. This poem’s use of parentheses and diction establishes movement and its lack, as the “poet’s thought stops on itself,” before unfolding back into motion (Economy of the Unlost 6). I use the same parenthetical structure to represent the mind’s interrupting presence, as it halts the movement of the world, to emphasize the motion to which it gives way. The speaker learns to see the world, to experience the world through body, without consuming it in egoism. While Celan’s poem makes use the myth of Theseus and the false sail, the
error that led to his father’s death, I instead retrace the myth to an earlier point, when Theseus slays the minotaur. The poem works its way into a labyrinth of itself, where the mind paces back and forth, then resolves towards the sea on the other side, led out by the “skeins” of perception. In this manner, I describe the counterbalance of sensational perception and mental disturbance, and the desire to return to the foundation of subjective perception that exists underneath thought, as Merleau-Ponty had described it. I wanted to touch upon the present, upon the excessively ordinary situation, while simultaneously using language to distance the scene from the habitual manner of seeing. Through a new articulation, the present moment could astonish. Accordingly, the poem finds itself overwhelmed, in the final lines, with the question, “How (I feel) can it be / here?” At this point, language is peeled back to something as simple as this question, unambiguous and visible, which finds itself in awe of this place. The beauty behind the veil of the habituated mind is, for a moment, perceived.

Mathews’s conception of the discovering consciousness, which supplies itself to the written text, is here extended to the act of writing anew. Addressing the emerging writer, Mathews states, “The community of your readers participates in an act of discovery that you have made accessible, to yourself no less freshly than to any of your fellows” (“Prizewinners” 30). Writing makes the activity of discovery available to both the writerly and the readerly consciousness; for both, creativity is awoken. The sensation of discovery, prompted by my reading of “La mandoline l’œillet et le bambou,” brought about my own poem, “Cassia Fistula (golden rain).” As Bachelard states, “…la poésie met le langage en état d’émergence. La vie s’y désigne par sa vivacité” (La poétique de l’espace 17). The visual and verbal language
of the calligram lives through its reader, and so I am living its language, as opposed to
the experience described by the language. I may never know the feeling of
Apollinaire’s battlefield, but I do know the feeling of its poetry, and the sense of
discovery described by its movement.

To return to Bly’s second step, then, I believe the translator should be
cognizant of difference in experience, but should not automatically stop there. The
fact of inaccessibility became my point of entry into “La mandoline l’œillet et le
bambou,” as well as into my own poem, “Cassia Fistula (golden rain).” By choosing
to continue with the poem, I learned to live its movement. My limitation opened into
a moment of discovery. Bachelard insists on the separation of language from
experience, such that a reader, here described as a “phénoménologue,” should not feel
threatened by difference:

Pour [le phénoménologue], l'image est là, la parole parle, la parole du poète
lui parle. Nul besoin d'avoir vécu les souffrances du poète pour prendre le
bonheur de parole offert par le poète ... il s'agit de passer,
phénoménologiquement, à des images invécues, à des images que la vie ne
prépare pas et que le poète crée. Il s'agit de vivre l'invécu et de s'ouvrir à une
ouverture de langage. (La poétique de l’espace 21)

To “passer, phénoménologiquement, à des images invécues” is to accept these images
as a vital and untouched form of language that presents itself to the reader. Each
reader lives it for the first time. The life-force of the poetic image is concentrated in
its potential, an overture to the suite of a reader’s life. The text does not itself contain experience; the act of reading does not put one in direct contact with the events that led to the production of the text. Instead, the reader reads a poem, a pure work of art established by the moving consciousness of both author and reader.

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The two portraits of Apollinaire in the opening pages of Calligrammes reveal a man on his way toward death. The first depicts him as a tired fighter, proud but dogged (see fig. 2). The second shows him with a bandage wrapped around his head, the same bandage he wore in all his final photographs (see fig. 3). He looks back upon the battlefield while being constantly aware of the wound that separates him from it. There are no more portraits after this, and indeed, he would die soon after, in 1918, the year Calligrammes was published. However, after the body disappears, a voice picks up. A few pages after the portraits, the poems begin. The first poem, “Liens,” is not visual, like the three calligrams here, but is in verse. The speaker, amid a long list of cords, links, chains, and relations of all kinds, places himself above it. He is the poet, speaking to us from beyond the “liens,” inviting us to join him. He says, “Nous ne sommes que deux ou trois hommes / Libres de tous liens / Donnons-nous la main” (5-7). Beyond our mortal bodies, “liens” give way to a space of freedom and discovery, and it is from here that the poet’s voice speaks. He is not bound to earth, nor to a battlefield. His divine voice carries him forward, away from body and into the eternal present of the text. He asks us to give him our hand.
Cassia fistula (golden rain)

Blind glow on lemon street
string of lemons in the blue night
    (a shiver)

the hour
on skin unstoppered brakes
    (useless, pointless

here where paces
    claypink
the shadow, Golem
    bulls’ heads
cast and cooling). Furies

swoop low to skin
bring primordial heat.
The sense-sail of the iris

fast unfurling. The ends
of skeins bring seas.
How, then, poised

on the immense palate of pinks
how, the pinks roving the air
how (I feel) can it be
here?
"La cravate et la montre," a calligram that depicts a necktie and a pocket watch, returns to the issue of temporality in life and in poetry, this time complicated.
by the clash of public and private life (see fig. 5). The individual at the heart of “La cravate et la montre” is consciously mortal and tied to society.

The tie is in the upper right-hand corner of the page, and it demands my attention before the watch face, especially as my eye is taken in by the funneling motion of “LA CRAVATE.” The poem uses the second person, speaking to “tu” and apostrophizing a “civilisé.” It is essential that the poem begin with this kind of direct address; through this, it refers to the advertising industry of the time, and therefore to the material formation of a socially constructed individual. In The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1923, Johanna Drucker writes that the advertising industry’s use of typography “[provided] the norms against which […] experimental typography [took] on its cultural significance as transgressive.” She further demonstrates the simultaneous growth of commercial society with the advertising industry, and, in turn, with graphic tradition, which had experienced only occasional change, even since its invention. However, as industrialization brought with it the creation of a purchasing public, an “increased interest in graphics as an interface between producer and consumer” dominated the public sphere (Drucker 94-96). Advertisements targeted individual consumers through their use of graphics, and artists began to use the same techniques to turn the effect of the medium to their favor. In this way, the necktie in Apollinaire’s poem uses advertising techniques – urgently majuscule letters, which begin large and grow smaller, channeling the eye through them – but instead discourages the material object that a manufacturer might attempt to sell in a conventional ad. The poem suggests that the “civilisé” remove the article of clothing.
Still, the tie continues to adopt methods characteristic of language found in the public sphere, which Drucker calls “public language.” She states that this language relies less upon syntax, and more upon rhetoric, than literary language. It emphasizes the use of nouns, of the imperative form of the verb, of prepositions rather than qualifying phrases, of verbs generally; and it tends toward direct address (meaning a form which names the audience, identifying it in the language used) rather than third and first person, underscoring the extent to which the assumption of a reader determines the structure of the text. The emphasis is on the recipient of the message rather than on the speaker.

The language of the poem similarly tends toward that of imperative address, away from the “literary language” which might otherwise be heard in poetry. Both the poem’s typography, which engages the reader through movement and urgency, and its language, which targets the “you” of its reader, serve to “name the audience” as complicit participants in the social scheme. The addressee is thus “civilisé,” bound up with notions of civilized society in a moment of commercialization and marketing. The individual is marked with the brand of society.

Just as the tie, a commercial item, is mapped onto the subject, so is the pocket watch an embodied form of social participation, a manifestation of regulated time on the level of the individual. By the turn of the 20th century, debate over time dominated philosophical and scientific discourse. After time was standardized (according to
railway schedules), many public intellectuals began to protest against the increasingly industrialized practice of timekeeping. Henri Bergson’s notion of “durée,” or duration, had perhaps the longest life of any of such philosophical protests. Duration, as the fluid, intuitive, and irregular time of consciousness, pushed aggressively back against public time, and against the domains of science and mathematics, which seemed to quantify time without considering its qualitative experience in the mind. Psychological time similarly found its way into much of the era’s literature, including the work of Proust and Woolf. Still, the argument for strictly internal time is not to be found in “La cravate et la montre.”

Instead, personal and public notions of time collide in a negotiation of social and individual self. Because the tie is a symbol of purely social participation, divorced from personal benefit, it comes to represent the “civilisé,” the individual who wears the indelible mark of society. The individual that wears it is, in turn, dressed by it (“t’orne”), passive to it. Meanwhile, the watch represents a more nuanced dichotomy of public and private life. The watch face is marked, in the usual way, by hours, though these hours, labelled in French as “les heures,” are short phrases or single words that occupy the space of a clock’s hours. Unlike the universal system of numbering found on a clock, “les heures” are qualitative. The watch hands begin, at 1 o’clock, with “Mon coeur,” a deeply metaphorical and internalized component of the individual. The watch hands then move through other aspects of the body (“les yeux,” “la main”), family life (“l’enfant”), and a series of poetic phrases, such as “le bel inconnu.” There are also less recognizable terms, like “Agla” or “Tircis,” which similarly distance themselves from numbers, if only through the
immediate absence of significance or system implied by their incomprehensibility.
Pénélope Sacks-Galey reads this watch face as an inscription of Apollinaire’s poetic persona: hours 1 through 5 represent his “outils indispensables,” while the rest speak to his poetic inspiration, whether through muses or Dante, or through representations of time (“semaine”) and eternity (“le bel inconnu”) (111-115). Indeed, the watch face is filled with the personal markings of the poet more generally, of a poetic life inscribed within the watch. However, Sacks-Galey then suggests that this poetic alteration of clock time indicates that the individual, whose life is transcribed in the watch, “arrive, en quelque sorte, à se délivrer des limitations temporelles que subit l’homme” (Sacks-Galey 125). I do not find it so cut-and-dry: while the circular motion of the clock indicates a kind of eternal repetition, the individual is nevertheless subject to the “limitations temporelles” of society. The qualitative measures of the individual’s life, represented in “les heures,” do not freely float, but are held within a clearly delineated system of timekeeping, according to standard rule. The individual is both a unique self and a “civilisé,” defined according to society.

Among the competing 19th- and 20th-century notions of time, perhaps a more appropriate philosophical model of time would be that of Henri Hubert and the rest of the Durkheimian school, who proposed a more sociological method for understanding time. Unlike Bergson, who rejects public time in preference of the individualized and irregular notion of “durée,” Hubert proposes an interlacing of public and private. He does so as a result of his examination of the paradox of religious time, which suggests themes of eternity, repetition, and collapse of linear time, all within a secular linear framework, as exemplified by the numerical linearity of the calendar. Reacting to
Bergson’s elevation of the fluid “durée” to the expense of the more atomistic “moment,” Hubert writes,

Moments ou durées, [les] qualités [des “parties du temps”] ne sont définies que par les faits avec lesquels ils sont nécessairement et constamment en relation positive ou négative. Il y a, d'un côté, des phénomènes naturels, astronomiques ou autres, choisis comme jalons du temps, ou des nombres, qui expriment la longueur théorique des périodes … de l'autre, il y a des représentations, que la récurrence des premiers termes entraîne ou repousse nécessairement, et des actes, qu'on accomplit ou qu'on évite pour réaliser, autant qu'il est en soi, les associations crues nécessaires. Les éléments ainsi associés sont intimement unis, l'un entraîne l'autre, et tant que dure le premier, dure le second. (18)

It does not matter, writes Hubert, whether time is experienced as individual moments or as a fluid “durée.” Instead, it matters how this time is attached to the “faits” of social life, to which personal time always exists in relation. Public time is organized through a variety of means, sometimes according to “phénomènes naturels, astronomiques ou autres,” sometimes according to the more theoretical system of numbers. In either case, the actions and experiences of the individual correspond to the external temporal framework that houses them. Individual and collective temporalities are not mutually exclusive, and instead work dynamically through one another.
The final quarter of the watch face (hours 9-12) amplifies the experience of these two notions of time, which converge in the mystifying figure of death. Death, and its anticipation, permeates: the muses arrive at the “portes de ton corps,” spiriting the individual toward the “bel inconnu.” The otherworld-y presence of Dante then appears: “et le vers dantesque luisant et cadavérique,” a stunning cadaver, gleaming in the poetic line. Even the “et” of that line precipitates an end. Will the clock stop at 12 o’clock, or will it begin its rotation once again? Will time repeat, just as a clock’s hands repeat their cycle, or will it cease, along with the life of the mortal individual? Does a full rotation signify life’s end, or just another hour? Whereas the individual anticipates death, the disinterested clock of public time keeps ticking.

My eyes complete the circle, reaching “les heures” once more, then move to the center, where it reads, “Il est -5 enfin, Et tout sera fini.” All is not yet finished, though it will be. Here time seems to stop for a moment. The eyes linger. I read the poem again, but once more halt at the center point. There is only a sliver of time left. It is essential that the minute hand never reach its conclusion, for this would signal a total breakdown of the public-private relationship; instead, time continues to circle from start to finish, as the reader rereads the poem, and yet that awareness of end, of demise, is always present. It is not death, but an anxiety of death, ever present in the individual. This anxiety brings the future into the present, collapsing forward-moving time into simultaneity.

In this way, the calligram defies the temporal role traditionally attributed to poetry. Since Lessing’s *Laocoön*, painting and poetry have often been separated according to their temporal and spatial presentation, in which poetry expresses a
temporally sequential, one-after-the-other progression, while painting depicts a spatially simultaneous, all-at-once presence. Even Apollinaire, in his essay, “Sur la peinture,” rearticulates this position, though he more specifically attributes it to cubist painting. He praises the cubist method of painting as a collapse of several moments into a simultaneous representation, frozen in place by the painting. In this way, the artist “[embrasse] d’un coup d’œil: le passé, le présent et l’avenir” (“Sur la peinture” 7). Meanwhile, the linearity of verse poetry generally presents a more sequential process of reading, as it moves from top to bottom, beginning to end. But “La cravate et la montre” breaks down this division. The duality of the clock’s motion, its uniform and cyclical motion against the anticipatory anxiety felt toward the end of each rotation, implies a collision of sequential and simultaneous times. Similarly, the calligram allows for both simultaneous and sequential modes of reading. A reader can sense an image of the whole while equally measuring the poem according to discrete units of text, “a global pattern realized by a local level of detail (letters)” (Shingler 76). Still, the greatest innovation of “La cravate et la montre” is not found in its dual temporal modes, but rather in its examination of this duality through the socialized individual. Accordingly, the two notions of time reflect the social and personal frameworks that define them.

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The entire picture is complicated by a single line, which reads, “La beauté de la vie passe la douleur de mourir.” As if flung from the bottom of the necktie, the line
lands near hour 1, “Mon coeur,” and from there traces the curve of the watch. It ceases, between hours 4 and 5, as “mourir” is cut in two: “mou / rir.” The line ends with a laugh (rire). Drucker compares this line to the “moral lessons about time inscribed with regularity upon the faces of sundials,” and there is a remarkable simplicity to the line, at least at first. However, upon further inspection, the line defies this categorization. Drucker translates it as “The beauty of life exceeds the sadness of death” (157), but “exceeds” interprets the verb too closely, and incorrectly. “Exceeds” could be rendered more easily using “dépasser” or “surpasser.” Instead, Apollinaire chose to use the verb “passer,” which at first seems much less clear, but results in a plurality of interpretations that change the dynamic of the relationship between subject and direct object. In French, “passer” would rarely be used to talk about, for example, one car passing another, in the manner of “exceeds.” “Passer” does not set up “la beauté de la vie” and “la douleur de mourir” as parallel entities, as “dépasser” might, one thing exceeding another.

“Passer” instead brings both subject and direct object into a relationship, one working through the other. The word usually takes a direct object in French only when used in relation to time, as when “on passe les vacances.” Perhaps the beauty of life spends time in the sadness of dying, as one inhabits the other, or is produced from within the other. Otherwise, “passer” is most often paired with a preposition. Since that is not the case here, there is a greater potential for meaning. “Passer” is dislocated from normal usage, so any one of its manners of expression could come into play. Larousse indicates several useful contexts for “passer”: “Être animé d’un mouvement,” as when water passes through something; “Traverser un milieu, une
substance, une matière,” as when light travels through an object; or “Aller quelque part pour un temps bref,” as when one passes by somewhere (“Passer”). To read it as “exceeds” unnecessarily separates the two expressions, as if in two separate lanes, whereas “passer” indicates an essential link between the two. “La beauté de la vie” travels through or stops by “la douleur de mourir,” a process perhaps less conventional than generally depicted in the “moral lessons” on sundials. It is similar to Hubert’s dynamic interlacing of public and private time through the consciousness.

Still, the dynamic of beauty and death needs unpacking, and here I turn to Michel de Montaigne’s essay, “Que Philosopher, c’est apprendre à mourir,” in search of answers to the anomalous line. Montaigne recommends not that we forget about death or attempt to push it out of our minds – this is the “remede [sic] du vulgaire,” an indication of “brutale stupidité” – but that we keep it in our minds always, that we search for it everywhere, and that we practice it (“pratiquons le”) (85-86). As it stands, our vague fear of the incomprehensible enslaves us, such that we are not free until we have accepted it, and the only way to accept it is to have it so thoroughly present that it becomes quotidian. To think of it as sad, as worthy of ceremony and reverence, empowers it, giving it greater hold. The French douleur, one of the few words to appear twice in “La cravate et la montre,” signifies the emotionally invested custom of sadness, pain, and mourning that lends death its authority. Life is thus occupied by the mournful “cris des meres [sic], des femmes, et des enfans [sic]” (Montaigne 98), as sadness overwhelms our understanding of death. There is no better analogy than “la cravate douleureuse que tu portes et qui t’orne”: the sorrowful (“douleureuse”) social rite, perhaps first seen as a choice, or something the individual
decides to do, in turn becomes the master, dressing ("orner") the one that wears it. In this instance, the necktie transforms into society’s collective anxiety of death, and by lifting it, we learn to truly breathe ("bien respirer"). Montaigne states that this process must be achieved through a face-to-face acknowledgement with, and embrace of, death, since “la premeditation [sic] de la mort, est premeditation [sic] de la liberté. Qui a apris [sic] à mourir, il a desapris [sic] à servir” (88). “La douleur de mourir” is a learned social behavior; to devalue death is to free oneself from this social imposition. We must pass through the sadness of death, reaching a place of acceptance, in order to appreciate the beauty of life without fear. That “La cravate et la montre” indicates breathing (respirer) as the result of this process is important, for breath still entails death within it. Each breath carries us closer to death, but by looking death in the face, it doesn’t matter whether we die or not. Immortality is not the goal, but rather a luxurious experience of the very thing that brings us closer to death: life.

“La beauté de la vie…,” which rests on the outside of the watch face, seems to escape from the obsessive, anxious turning of the watch hands, which rotate endlessly while also nodding to coming death. But this repetition, which at first seemed to signal the constant anxiety of death’s approach, instead might, in Montaigne’s terms, celebrate its constant reminder. We want to see it appear every time the hour passes, to be in constant anticipation for it “all to be finished” (“tout sera fini”). In this interpretation, “le bel inconnu” now seems to better reflect “la beauté” of death’s observance. And whereas the chain of the pocket watch – “Comme l’on s’amuse bien” – at first seems so cynical, it now becomes an affirmation of the joy found in an embrace of death and in shedding the weight of mourning.
Still, with death acknowledged and anxiety quelled, this beauty and joy is tempered by the mark of society, just as the qualitative aspects of the watch conform to the system of uniform time-keeping. Even if the individual no longer fears death, the imposition of social time persists. In order to further understand the relationship between individual and society, along with private and public temporalities, the trope of reverie will be useful. In the work of Rousseau and Bachelard, reverie possesses a divine and intimate quality that raises up the individual, in a moment of oneiric connection, only to return to life with a renewed sense of self and world.

The notion of reverie is perhaps most associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose solitude is equally notorious. He wrote his collection of essays, *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, in the final years of his life, after he had almost completely isolated himself from social interaction. This series of “Promenades” is characterized by social alienation, though this separation creates a new mode of being through which he explores the self. In the “Première Promenade,” he writes, “…plus je pense à ma situation présente, et moins je puis comprendre où je suis” (36). Because of his detachment, he begins to formulate a new sense of self in relation to his environment. He describes himself as “tranquille au fond de l’abyme, pauvre mortel infortuné, mais impassible comme Dieu même” (40). By placing himself in the lowest abyss, he begins to resemble God, untouched by human presence. While his existence had formerly been defined by society, he now begins to articulate an ontological experience that exists outside of social influence. Over the course of the “Promenades,” Rousseau affirms that the self is always formed in relation to the environment in which it finds itself. However, in his new domain of isolation, the
environment shifts from social to natural presence. He communes with nature, and sees himself through it.

From this experience arises reverie, which is most fully expressed in the “Cinquième Promenade.” While this “Promenade” is unique in its optimism – after it, Rousseau will once again take up a tone of dejection and anxiety – it nevertheless presents reverie in its unmediated form, useful for its portrayal of self, society, and time. Rousseau writes,

Mais s’il est un état où l’âme trouve une assiette assez solide pour s’y reposer tout entière et rassembler là tout son être, sans avoir besoin de rappeler le passé ni d’enjamber sur l’avenir ; où le temps ne soit rien pour elle, où le présent dure toujours sans néanmoins marquer sa durée et sans aucune trace de succession, sans aucun autre sentiment de privation ni de jouissance, de plaisir ni de peine, de désir ni de crainte que celui seul de notre existence, et que ce sentiment seul puisse la remplir tout entière ; tant que cet état dure celui qui s’y trouve peut s’appeler heureux, non d’un bonheur imparfait, pauvre et relatif tel que celui qu’on trouve dans les plaisirs de la vie, mais d’un bonheur suffisant, parfait et plein, qui ne laisse dans l’âme aucun vide qu’elle sente le besoin de remplir. Tel est l’état où je me suis trouvé souvent à l’île de Saint-Pierre dans mes rêveries solitaires, soit couché dans mon bateau que je laissais dériver au gré de l’eau, soit assis sur les rives du lac agité, soit ailleurs au bord d’une belle rivière ou d’un ruisseau murmuran sur le gravier (101-02).
The dichotomy of sequential and simultaneous temporalities in “La cravate et la montre” presents itself in reverie’s opposition to social participation. Rousseau gestures toward the temporality of social life, which “[marque] sa durée” (not to be confused with Bergson’s “durée”) and carries “trace de succession.” Along with rejecting sequential time, the “rêveur” forgets all thoughts and emotions, briefly abandoning “le joug de la fortune et des hommes [qui nous rend] au sentiment de nos malheurs.” Social participation reminds us of our unhappiness, just as anxiety of death makes us remember the sad state of our mortality. Reverie, on the other hand, alleviates any “crainte” at all, instead restoring life to a state of pure beauty. Here, the present stretches into blissful “repose,” a rest from the usual rhythm of life. Here, Rousseau writes, “on se suffit à soi-même” (102-103). The present is full of the self, which no longer feels the need to “rappeler le passé ni d’enjamber sur l’avenir.” He lets the water “dériver,” drifting back and forth, without need to progress or resolve. Without past or future, the individual finally sees that “la beauté de la vie passe la douleur de mourir.”

The theme of reverie appears once again in Bachelard’s poetics, though more precisely formulated as a connection between solitary reader and poem. Robert Morrissey posits Rousseau’s reverie as the “point de contact entre la vie et l’écriture,” as a necessary turn toward the page, prompted by the dreamlike experience (124). Reversing this aspect of reverie – making it into the point of contact between text and life, in that order – Bachelard writes,
Quand un rêveur de rêveries a écarté toutes les “préoccupations” qui encombraient la vie quotidienne, quand il s'est détaché du souci qui lui vient du souci des autres, quand il est vraiment ainsi l'auteur de sa solitude, quand enfin il peut contempler, sans compter les heures, un bel aspect de l'univers, il sent, ce rêveur, un être qui s'ouvre en lui. Soudain un tel rêveur est rêveur de monde. Il s'ouvre au monde et le monde s'ouvre à lui. On n'a jamais bien vu le monde si l'on n'a pas rêvé ce que l'on voyait. En une rêverie de solitude qui accroît la solitude du rêveur, deux profondeurs se conjuguent, se répercutent en échos qui vont de la profondeur de l'être du monde à une profondeur d'être du rêveur. Le temps est suspendu. Le temps n'a plus d'hier et n'a plus de demain. Le temps est englouti dans la double profondeur du rêveur et du monde. Le Monde est si majestueux qu'il ne s'y passe plus rien : le Monde repose en sa tranquillité. Le rêveur est tranquille devant une Eau tranquille (La poétique de la rêverie 180-181).

The gentle rocking and restful tranquility of Rousseau’s reverie finds its extension in Bachelard’s poetic reverie, which explores the encounter between reader and poem. As the “point de contact entre la vie et l’écriture,” reverie prompts the reader to become “l’auteur de sa solitude,” free from social presence, and thus active, in control. The reader writes life anew. This occurs apart from “la vie quotidienne,” such that the reader can “[détache] du souci qui lui vient du souci des autres.” Just as Rousseau redefines self and environment because of his detachment from others, so too does Bachelard’s reader come to know self and world only after a withdrawal
from social life. This is perhaps the most concise rephrasing of the role of *douleur* in “La cravate et la montre,” a term that indicates the sadness imposed on the individual by the socially created anxiety of death. Once the “civilisé” can pass through the social behaviors of sadness and mourning, and can learn to withdraw from this social pressure, then death is no longer feared. The subject can at last “contempler, sans compter les heures, un bel aspect de l’univers.” Though the clock still ticks, the individual no longer feels its constraint, and instead breathes in the beauty of life.

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I wrote my own verse poem, “Grapevine, California” – located at the end of the chapter – with this intimacy and beauty in mind, communicated by both world (as in Rousseau’s reverie) and word (as in Bachelard’s). On a road trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles, I drove through the Grapevine, a name for the high mountain pass that rests between the two cities. The wandering road was hedged in by massive, dark peaks. As I drove on the well-defined and illuminated road, I began to wonder what might lie outside of it, in the dark mountains beyond my reach. I felt that my route was tracked, imposed by society. However, instead of addressing apparel or time as the subject of my poem, I chose to approach language. Still, time found its way back in, first as a moderator of language, then as an effect of it.

The poem begins with a time-stamp. The first line is controlled, like a faucet, by its first word – “tonight” – and so language is, in a way, “muzzled” by time. Since language itself is a socially imposed order, passed down through tradition and
repetition, it seemed to light the thin highway snaking through the mountains. On either side were mountains, the “ashy haunches” that menaced over me. What might exist outside of the linguistic system passed down to me? “Why speak” at all? asks the poem.

Yet this kind of questioning resolves into nothing but stasis. The more frustrated we become with the lives we lead, the less we enjoy them, inhibiting ourselves until we are still “minnows,” inexperienced and naïve, “queued in the estuary,” waiting for an opening which will never come. The “we” pronoun indicates a socially created emotion, collectively hoping for something other than we have.

The rest of the poem shifts toward an embrace of the situation. Words may be inherited, but they also may be adored. The speaker chooses to address a “you,” and engages this “you” in a game of cards, in which each card reveals a favorite word. The “I” and “you” play words with one another, reveling in the intimacy of the connection. The poem moves from open and dark night into a “velvet chamber,” where the intimacy gains a spatial texture. I imagine that this room, somewhat like a casino, blocks out time: one could play these words forever and not realize that time had passed. At this point, the poem is once again time-stamped with “tonight.” However, “tonight” is no longer primary; instead, it is locked into the “velvet chamber,” so that tonight stretches endlessly into the room, through the game, and between the “I” and “you.” Time is subordinated to the intimate space of the poem. This marks the transition from “language” (in the first line) to “the poem.” The poem is a careful and loving selection of letters and words, plucked from the blank darkness of the night sky and pressed into a “wine-glass red.” It is meant to be sipped, enjoyed.
Poetry can teach a reader to enjoy life. As the “sommet de toute joie esthétique” (La poétique de la rêverie 33), poetry brings a reader back to an understanding of the self that is in beautiful harmony with the world. When a reader connects to a poem’s image, the induced reverie “illustre un repos de l’être,” and in turn “illustre un bien-être. Le rêveur et sa rêverie entrent corps et âme dans la substance du bonheur.” The reverie “est une ouverture à un monde beau, à des mondes beaux” (La poétique de la rêverie 20-21). The reverie not only brings about happiness or beauty, but also new worlds of beauty that now surround the reader. A new self is articulated, just as Rousseau explores the new ontological questions prompted by isolation and reverie, and Bachelard’s reader becomes “l’auteur de sa solitude.” “La cravate et la montre” similarly depicts the expression of a new self: taking the place of the cruel and arbitrary hours, the qualitative measures of a life surround the individual, even within the objective system of time-keeping. “La beauté de la vie” works through the social system, which is, at its heart, constructed by human beings, and by the intimate connections between these individuals.

I made my own visual poem, titled “Cared for,” which reflects the importance of intimate, human connection in crafting the socially defined self (see fig. 6). I wanted to make a visual poem that used a pre-established system of formal repetition, in the manner of concrete poetry, while holding onto the subjective element of the calligram. I sought to express the kind of love that could exist within and because of social connection, and so, I fashioned an “I” out of “you”s. The self exists through society, and yet this socialization is built upon a multiplicity of unique experiences.
between an “I” and “you.” The poem is also folded into thirds (not visible in fig. 6) to give the impression of a letter, read by the poem’s reader, inviting the reader to enter.

Fig. 6. My visual poem, “Cared for.”

Time is equally important to the poem, for it took time to make. If time is money, in that saving time means saving money, perhaps its dispensation indicates
something else. By spending time, I show care. I did not try to fit the poem into my schedule, but let it decide for itself how long it wanted to take. I hoped to write the care into the page through repetition and through handwriting. Nowadays, most written communication is conducted digitally, and most of it is never printed. The handwritten, repetitive quality of “Cared for” indicates an anti-industrial, even anti-social time, especially in the accelerated time of social media. Handwriting has an immense power to reveal effort, devotion, even love, and it is this that the poem hopes to revive, within systems of rapid communication, brief interaction, and life in front of screens.

Apollinaire’s poetry often forces a collision of objective and subjective systems, even at the level of language. Within “La cravate et la montre,” the advertising language of the tie – using the imperative to directly address the reader, who becomes its audience in the process – breaks down into the colloquial phrases and personalized themes of the watch face. On this juxtaposition, Drucker writes, “The leap Apollinaire is making is not merely toward a different source of poetic language, but toward a different concept of subjectivity, one more fully conscious of the social component of subject formation in even (especially) the realm of individuated articulation, poetics” (149). The “social component of subject formation” pervades “La cravate et la montre.” It is immediately announced through the apostrophe – “O civilisé” – and is carried out through the investigation of social behaviors (between the necktie and the collective anxiety of death). It is represented in the tension between private and public times, between sequential and simultaneous temporal modes, and between objective reality and poetic reverie. Through each
conflict there is an enslaved “civilisé” whose potential freedom is equally offered, as
with a recognition of “la beauté de la vie,” or with the watch’s qualitative markers of
intimate and individualized life. By engaging with these “liens,” the individual learns
to see past them. Most of all, “La cravate et la montre” subordinates time to social
rhythm, as competing notions of time arise only through social and individual
behavior. The poem never claims a capacity to escape time completely, just as no
reverie lasts forever. But for a moment, the poem stretches time into repose.
Grapevine, California

Tonight, language is a muzzled greyhound
gaunt against ashy haunches
of a beast that lies
in wait

Why speak
when what is said is swallowed
washed in the mouth of black oak

we are mortal
fearing vast countries of wind
we are minnows
queued in the estuary

While here play the hand
of words you hold close.
Play your hand
in velvet chambers. Tonight,

the poem

is
wine-glass
red.
Some months after first reading “Il pleut,” perhaps the most well-known of Apollinaire’s calligrams, I came upon another French poem about rain: Francis
Ponge’s “Pluie,” published in his 1942 collection, *Le parti pris des choses*. The prose poems in this book describe quotidian objects – like a pebble, a snail, or, in the case of “Pluie,” rain – through the eyes of a subject. The objects are neither allegorized nor explicitly connected to the speaker’s life; instead, they channel objective description through the particularity of the unique subject. As Robert Bly writes, “Ponge doesn’t try to be cool, distant, or objective, nor ‘let the object speak for itself.’ His poems are funny, his vocabulary immense, his personality full of quirks, and yet the poem remains somewhere in the place where the senses join the objects” (*News* 213-14).

The poet’s interaction with the objects is phenomenological, constructing the world through the inextricable engagement of self and object. It was through this poem that I began to have a feel for Apollinaire’s “Il pleut.” Ponge’s “Pluie” reads as follows:

La pluie, dans la cour où je la regarde tomber, descend à des allures très diverses. Au centre c'est un fin rideau (ou réseau) discontinu, une chute implacable mais relativement lente de gouttes probablement assez légères, une précipitation sempiternelle sans vigueur, une fraction intense du météore pur. A peu de distance des murs de droite et de gauche tombent avec plus de bruit des gouttes plus lourdes, individuées. Ici elles semblent de la grosseur d'un grain de blé, là d'un pois, ailleurs presque d'une bille. Sur des tringles, sur les accoudoirs de la fenêtre la pluie court horizontalement tandis que sur la face inférieure des mêmes obstacles elle se suspend en berlingots convexes. Selon la surface entière d'un petit toit de zinc que le regard surplombe elle ruisselle en nappe très mince, moirée à cause de courants très variés par les
imperceptibles ondulations et bosses de la couverture. De la gouttière attenante où elle coule avec la contention d'un ruisseau creux sans grande pente, elle choisit tout à coup en un filet parfaitement vertical, assez grossièrement tressé, jusqu'au sol où elle se brise et rejaillit en aiguillettes brillantes.

Chacune de ses formes a une allure particulière ; il y répond un bruit particulier. Le tout vit avec intensité comme un mécanisme compliqué, aussi précis que hasardeux, comme une horlogerie dont le ressort est la pesanteur d'une masse donnée de vapeur en précipitation.

La sonnerie au sol des filets verticaux, le glou-glou des gouttières, les minuscules coups de gong se multiplient et résonnent à la fois en un concert sans monotonie, non sans délicatesse.

Lorsque le ressort s'est détendu, certains rouages quelque temps continuent à fonctionner, de plus en plus ralentis, puis toute la machinerie s'arrête. Alors si le soleil reparaît tout s'efface bientôt, le brillant appareil s'évapore : il a plu. (15-16)

Ponge’s poem begins, like Apollinaire’s, with the subject of rain. However, the former announces its subject in noun form: “La pluie.” It is a fact of being, an actor, an object to be seen. It is not a state of being, like the verb “pleuvoir.” Ponge’s poem also establishes an immediate relationship between the object and an explicit observer, the “je” of the second clause. After this point, the prose poem moves into a poetic yet matter-of-fact description of the patterns of rain hitting a roof. The speaker
examines the particularity of this rain. The rain is a system, even some sort of “horlogerie” or “machinerie,” and yet this system is ultimately fleeting, and is outlasted by its observer. It at first slows, and then, as soon as the sun comes out, the observer realizes, “Il a plu.” The phenomenon has ended.

Unlike this poem, Apollinaire’s “Il pleut” has no end (see fig. 7). It is eternally present, even continually present, across a lifetime. The “merveilleuses rencontres” of the speaker’s life tumble down in droplets. From the start, the rain is not physical, but metaphorical, raining “des voix des femmes comme si elles étaient mortes mêmes dans le souvenir.” The object of rain is immediately removed from its physical presence and its temporal quality, instead being memorialized and allegorized. Whereas Ponge’s rain spreads in dense chunks of text across the page, Apollinaire’s rain streams down in continual fall. Ponge’s rain could be observed, and could pass, so that it happened; Apollinaire’s rain runs through the mind, never ceasing. All the speaker can do is listen and hope that, through this, the speaker too becomes unattached, flowing like the rain across time. The rain is no described object; it is instead a vessel for memory, music, the passage of time, and the self.

I hoped to bring “Il pleut” into my own life, though I was not sure how. It seemed that the poem naturally lent itself to this feeling of reliving. Its use of the present tense carries it into any time. And its presentation of rain and self as equally ungrounded substances, neither being fixed or solid, seemed like a perfect mold into which I could place myself. Bonnefoy suggests that translators

sache vivre l’acte qui à la fois [a] produit [le poème] et s’y enlise: et,
dégagées de cette forme figée qui n’en est rien qu’une trace, l’intention,
l’intuition premières (disons une aspiration, une hantise, quelque chose
d’ universel) pourront être à nouveau tentées dans l’autre langue, et d’autant
plus véridiquement désormais que la même difficulté s’y manifeste: la langue
de traduction paralysant comme la première ce questionnement qu’est une
parole. Oui, la difficulté de la poésie, c’est que la langue est système quand sa
parole à elle est présence. Mais comprendre cela, c’est se retrouver avec
l’auteur qu’on traduit, percevant mieux les tyrannies qu’il subit, les
mouvements de pensée qu’il y oppose; et les fidélités qu’il lui faut. (97-98 ;
emphasis in the original)

The translation of a poem, whether into another language or another life, requires an
awkward handling of language – a system – to reach the presence at the heart of the
poem, a presence that defies systematization. By attempting to relive the poem’s
origin, Bonnefoy states, a translator can work with the same initial anxiety of creation
that confronted the poet. It is an attempt at the “universel,” which carries itself
through the “parole” of the poem, now spoken once more. So, I hoped to listen to the
rain, as the poem seems to suggest, and to understand how the rain came to carry the
poem, and the language within it. Released from the calligram’s “forme figée,” from
its streaks across the page, the poem’s forces would channel through my voice and
my experience, re-inscribed according to the sound of the “parole” in my own
language.

At this point, another poem about rain entered into my mind. Sometime
before, I had read CAConrad’s A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon, a collection of not
only poems but guidelines for writing future poems. This book encourages the reader to write poems using the same process that CAConrad had used to write his poems. I chose to follow “(Soma)tic 5: Storm SOAKED Bread,” the fifth guided poem in the book, which has the reader seek out a storm. CAConrad writes, “Lean your face into the weather, face pointed UP to the sky, stay there for a bit with eyes closed while water fills the wells of your eyes. … You are not running from the storm, you are opening to it, you are IN IT!” (18). I did just this. If I had read Apollinaire’s “Il pleut” at this point, I would have known that I was listening to the rain, and listening for the presence in the rain, as it fell. CAConrad has the reader absorb this rain and breath it in, before immediately turning to writing, transcribing this new interaction with the object. The reader, and now writer, is even made to taste it. I was told to place a slice of bread with oregano and garlic in the storm, and I did. (It didn’t taste very good.) I was supposed to chew it with deliberate SLOOOWNESS … So, slowly, please, with, a, slowness, that, is, foreign, to, you. THINK the whole slow time of chewing and drinking how this water has been in a cycle for MILLIONS OF YEARS, falling to earth, quenching horses, elephants, lizards, dinosaurs, humans. They pissed, they died, their water evaporated and gathered again into clouds to drizzle down AND STORM DOWN into rivers, puddles, aqueducts, and ancient cupped hands. Humans who LOVED, who are long dead, humans who thieved, raped murdered, were generous, playful, disappointed, fearful, annoyed and adored one another, each of them dying their own way, their water going back to the sky, coming back down to your bread, your lips, your stomach, to feed your
sinew, your brain, your living, beautiful day. Take your notes POET, IT IS
YOUR MOMENT to be totally aware, completely awake! (CAConrad 18-19)

CAConrad’s depiction of rain is a remarkable channeling of the themes found in “Il pleut,” as if the storm that passed through Apollinaire’s poem was cradled in CAConrad’s cupped hands, made equally available to others. CAConrad advises the poet to not only listen but feel, taste, absorb the rain and its history, as a substance that has passed over generations of beings and that continues to recycle and renew. In the present moment, it presents itself to the poet, who must be “totally aware.” Here we see Ponge’s “Pluie” resurface, as well – the poet’s awareness is essential to the life of the object. Just as Ponge elaborates so deliberately on rain, CAConrad insists on “slowness” in one’s approach to the world. And whereas Ponge’s poem represents a beautiful yet thoroughly grounded portrait of rain, isolated in a moment, CAConrad takes this moment and deepens it across history, reaching through to the rain that washes across Apollinaire’s “Il pleut.”

I ate the “storm-soaked bread” and promptly wrote a poem about rain. Twice I repeated the line, “Water is that secret clocking timpani.” As I went about my exploration of “Il pleut,” I thought I had landed on the same essential aspect – that rain is the puppet-master of change, rinsing through it, and thereby renewing life. It was the pitter-patter on the centuries, like Ponge’s “concert sans monotonic, non sans délicatasse,” distributed across lives, even millennia.

I thought I had arrived at the hidden “parole” of “Il pleut.” I wrote a poem to try to capture it, dealing with this notion of rain across time, but the result felt bland and abstract. I reconsidered this poem while it rained outside, even walking through a
storm to rearticulate my thoughts, but to no avail. I then memorized “Il pleut,” seeking to embody it subconsciously, and in doing so realized that it is not rain itself that renews, but the potential for renewal transported by rain. A poet’s awareness is essential to locating history, life, and death, in rain – it is not the rain itself but the music of rain that allows the poet to embark on a new present, to be free from “les liens qui te retiennent en haut et en bas.”

With this realization in mind, I hoped to rewrite my poem in a new venue. While sitting in the Houghton Reading Room at Harvard University, I read through “Il pleut.” After marking down my observations, I began to grow bored. There is no point in hiding this fact, as most readers at some point find themselves gazing up from the text they read, possibly in response to a distraction, or possibly to distract themselves, and to have an excuse for distraction. There is something to be said for distraction. In Scott’s method of translation, what he calls “radial reading” is an essential aspect of translating a reader’s engagement with a text. Radial reading means “reading out into, and incorporating, other acts of reading and reference, ancillary texts and contexts, marginal notes, glosses, intertextual materials, such that the constructing of texts is intimately part of an autobiography of reading and associating, a process without end” (22). I find this notion to be not just an excuse for unfocused reading, but an embrace of the activity’s particularly creative impulses. And so, bored of reading “Il pleut,” but not wanting to waste time during my brief visit to Cambridge, I turned to the other texts I had ordered, each of which related to Apollinaire’s œuvre in some way or another.
One of these texts was a pamphlet of art criticism, which itself featured several calligrams in response to the art of two of Apollinaire’s peers. This text is titled, “Peintures de Léopold Survage, Dessins et Aquarelles d’Irène Lagut, première exposition des ‘Soirées de Paris’: Catalogue avec deux Préfaces de Guillaume Apollinaire.” After several pages of scattered calligrams, I came to what looked like a bird, its wings formed by layers of text (see fig. 8). Its head, however, seemed to be shaped into a drop of water. Immediately, the phoenix came to my mind, and with it, the theme of rebirth. Already, “Il pleut” had articulated rain drops as vessels for rebirth, and so the phoenix’s head, shaped like a raindrop, made all the more sense. The “gouttelettes” of “Il pleut” are the heads of phoenixes rising from ash, borne by the text that writes their future. The droplet is inundated with text; history is reborn through the act of writing.

Fig. 8. Guillaume Apollinaire’s phoenix-like calligram. (Bibliothèque nationale de France)
Unlike the Futurists, who wrote around the same time, Apollinaire did not want to break away completely from tradition. As his manifesto, “L’Esprit nouveau et les Poètes,” makes clear, tradition could be rearranged. In reaction to the Futurists’ “paroles en liberté,” Apollinaire writes, “…on a horreur du chaos.” The Futurists were “filles excessive de l’esprit nouveau,” while the true poet of the future “se réclame avant tout de l’ordre et du devoir qui sont les grandes qualités classiques … et il leur adjoint la liberté” (“L’esprit nouveau” 945-46). While many critics note the conservative air of this adherence to tradition, alongside the manifesto’s nationalistic claims, these critics miss the “liberté” that, in practice, makes Apollinaire’s work revolutionary. A certain debt to tradition shows itself not only in his use of verse and even poetic meter, but in his subject matter, especially with a poem like “Il pleut.” To write about the rain is nothing new. However, by expressing it through a new means of expression – the calligram – Apollinaire liberates it from its past lives. On this, Drucker writes, “For Apollinaire, materials were already there; materials exist and the task of the artist was to put them into a new order which rendered them visible” (143). We see rain anew, rather than seeing something never seen before. Moreover, the rain is used to represent not only itself, as a quotidian object, but tradition and past more generally. The rain carries the song of women who have already died in memory, along with the “rencontres” of one’s life up until the present. To listen to it is to free oneself from it: tradition must not be forgotten, but rather seen and transformed. As CAConrad writes, the history of the world is in the “water going back to the sky, coming back down to your bread, your lips, your stomach, to feed your sinew, your brain, your living, beautiful day” (19). This tremendous past washes
across the poet in the present, offering nourishment and livelihood, as long as it is accepted by the poet.

While sitting in the Houghton Reading Room, I became aware of this theme in the poem’s typography. Most Internet images of “Il pleut” are not the same as the poem in the first edition of Calligrammes, so I had not expected to see two jarringly different typefaces (see fig. 9). The title, “Il pleut,” is printed in a bizarrely inappropriate font, at least in terms of what I had expected to see. Many of the online versions probably replace this font with their own, or else anthologies or collections following the first edition thought it necessary to correct. Ultimately, however, I realized that this oddity is essential to the poem’s content.

Though the title and body of the poem may be the same font – it is hard to tell, even upon close inspection, though both are serif fonts – I experienced an immediate affective response to the apparent difference. There is only one majuscule in the body of the poem – the first letter, “I,” in “Il pleut.” The title, however, is all capitalized, and is much larger in comparison, though not so much taller than it is wider. It seems horizontally stretched, unlike the minute and precarious letters of the poem. The title is of an entirely different personality: it is imposing, static, and heavy. Meanwhile, the rest of the poem slides away from the title, with a motion and fluidity not seen in the monolithic “IL PLEUT.” The title drapes itself imposingly over the poem, as if demanding to be seen.
The difference in typeface struck me as representative of the primary tension at the heart of the poem: the past stands over the present, which sees this presence and
slides away. “Il pleut” does not forget about past, but instead embeds it in the heavy presence of the title. Meanwhile, the poem listens, so that it itself can be freed from “les liens.” Once free, it flows off the page.

*  

I initially thought that I knew this rain, that I could somehow live it, and expect it to be true for myself. I thought I had a thorough grasp of the poem and could feel the presence of the rain in my life, as well. But I was too quick to assume understanding.

In December, on Christmas day, my grandmother fell and broke her hip. She had been sick for some months and in slow decline for several years. The morning following her fall, I was overwhelmed with thoughts of death. She has since partially recovered, but, for a time, death felt closer to my life than it ever had before.

That morning, hail tapped at the window of my room. It continued to knock on the side of the house for some hours. I felt my grandmother’s presence in the hail, as if her voice were faltering, taking its last breaths, but not yet dead, unlike the women’s voices in Apollinaire’s “Il pleut.” The pounding hail reminded me not of time’s passage, but of its stasis. The links that held me, unlike the “liens” of the poem, did not come crashing down; instead, the hail bound me in my fear. I had thought I knew the rain of which Apollinaire wrote, but now I lived a distorted version of it, one where its pain and suffering had not loosened up into a malleable and fluid substance. It was hard and heavy.
Though I had been surprised, in Chapter 1, by the inaccessible experience of Apollinaire’s “La mandoline l’œillet et le bambou,” and had found a way to better understand my own experience through this difference, the inaccessibility of rain in this instance was at first shocking. This was a substance I thought I had felt so many times before, and which indeed carried me and others through life, one that had both preceded me and would live beyond me.

However, I realize now, as I had realized before while memorizing “Il pleut,” that rain is merely the vessel. It carries time, life, and death. I knew rain but did not know the death that it ushered in; instead, I felt death in hail, pounding with the force of the present moment. I could not think of death in its eternal motion. I could only see it crystallized, ready to shatter.

The speaker of “Il pleut” encourages listening, not so that we hear the rain for what it is, but for what it may come to resemble in our ears. For the speaker, rain bears the past into the present, and through awareness of its presence, one may learn to be free. As discussed in Chapter 2, to confront death is to learn to accept it, and to move beyond its capacity to control us. Similarly, Sacks-Galey identifies “Il pleut” as a “mise en scène d’un conflit intérieur, nostalgie à l’aube de l’aventure. … Le retour vers le passé préfigure paradoxalement le saut dans l’inconnu” (31). To listen is to begin to hear the links tumble down, releasing the individual into an unknown and unstable future. CAConrad writes, “IT IS YOUR MOMENT” (19), speaking to the poet who now must forge ahead.

But I did not want to break from the past. I did not want death to furnish me the present; I wanted death to stay out of the picture. When death knocked at my
window, I shut the blinds, ignoring Montaigne’s advice. The “liens” were breaking too quickly. Ultimately, the circumstances were much too concrete for me to reconcile them with Apollinaire’s poem. I imbued hail with meaning because it seemed to be a more concrete image that expressed my fear and pain, whereas rain felt too abstract, too timeless.

I did not, and still do not, speak the same language as “Il pleut.” Each poem that I wrote in reaction to it, even the ones after my grandmother’s fall, lacked substance. They were not my own. One after the next struggled to make sense of death, hoping for rain but stuck with hail. I thought the process of writing might loosen the frozen chunks into something fluid and manageable. I thought that my grandmother might become Apollinaire’s phoenix, burning down into ash only to rise again, whether healthy, in her own body, or through writing, in my poems. But each one that I wrote was too clean, distant, and disinterested. The words did not feel.

Finally, one poem felt right, simply because it did not feign acceptance or understanding. The poem, titled “Fulcrum” – located at the end of this chapter – involves misinterpretation. The use of the first-person plural tense acknowledges the collective struggle among my family, as we grapple with this stage of my grandmother’s life. We try to understand what is happening, but we do not “carry / the honey that hummingbirds drink. / Nor do we speak / the rivulets rushing the window-panes.” We do not speak the rain; we only hear the “hail that pounds the roof,” and try to search this sign for meaning, seeking the future as if the hail could speak to us like “crystal balls.” We attempt to make her into metonym, represented by the Vulcan kitchen range in her house. “Vulcan” also alludes to the Roman god of the
forge, as if to shift the word from the metal of the kitchen range toward an active force, a living presence that works the metal. Ultimately, we cannot find her in any of these signifiers: “A metal is a metal, but / a mother / shrinks / from name.” We cannot interpret the situation using language, because the proximity of death distorts substance beyond language.

The first stanza – featuring two lines of iambic pentameter, the traditional meter of the English language – represents the figure of the past, of tradition. We try to look through this tradition, using it as metaphor (“Like … / Like”), but this too fails. We cannot accept the past as a way to move forward into the future. We attempt to revive her spirit, placing “embers” in the pile of ash, as if to reverse the process of approaching death, but “the flame / won’t take.” Because we cannot understand, we cannot act.

“Fulcrum” tells of the failure of words. The approach of death breaks down language. I was interested, at this point, to see what else might capture death, especially death as absence. If language cannot name something without name, what else might point to this space? And if death speaks to all, without saying a thing, where is the line between incomprehensibility and universal language?

The work of Henri Michaux exemplifies the struggle between language and its absence, as word modulates into the visual realm, beyond language. He is an inheritor of the calligram tradition, though where Apollinaire complements text with image, Michaux uses image to deconstruct text, hoping to find the place where it stops speaking, or perhaps speaks to all.
A work like “Paix dans les brisements” activates within me a desperation for meaning (see fig. 10). This text includes a sequence of “spine-like, seismographic drawings that also contain remnants of what appears to be handwriting” (Poetry Foundation). Some of the drawings brush over legible script, such that it is just out of reach. There is a surface, above which comprehension and legibility thrive; just below the surface move Michaux’s drawings, at times approaching the open air, at times sinking deeper. Apollinaire’s “Il pleut” slipped from my grasp into this realm of illegibility, sometimes flashing its deathly face before sinking back into the depths.

Fig. 10. The first visual text in Henri Michaux’s “Paix dans les brisements.” (24)

Michaux used mescaline to pursue a heightened interaction with consciousness and to “delve into [its] darker, shadowy realms,” as if to pierce the
surface beneath which illegibility lives. His translator, Gillian Coloney, writes that, in his work, “one can trace the struggle for, and his disappointment in not finding, a medium up to the task, or a universal language through gesture, mark sign, and the word.” “Paix dans les brisements” is the transcription of this endeavor, depicting the ultimately failing language of the depth, the residue of his digging. Conoley remarks on the “somatic, bodily experience” induced by his writing, which, without having reached (in Michaux’s mind) that universal language, can nevertheless communicate intense internal feeling beyond and despite illegibility (7-8). The lack of immediate meaning reaches over the cognitive part of the brain and directly into a source of feeling.

In this way, each self is also a surface; cognition rests above it, able to comprehend, but there are things that live beneath it, which hide from view. Michaux’s work stirs those deep and hidden places without us knowing how or why. I wanted to use a similar technique to articulate the incomprehensibility of death that I had felt throughout my work with “Il pleut.” Though this might not lead to an understanding of it, it would give me a way of visualizing its presence. I sat down once more with “Il pleut” and worked with each word in the poem, and then with each line, attempting to feel where the poem gathered its forces, left gaps, folded back on itself. I wanted to identify its motion, fissures, peaks, and valleys, to monitor its dance of meaning in my body. In this way, I translated the lines of “Il pleut” into a sort of visual language that rejects semantically legible content (see fig. 11). Because of what I bring to the poem, my interaction with each line, word, and letter, depends entirely on my own state of being and my experience. One word will conjure a full
emotional response while another will do nothing. I hoped to use drawing as I had in Chapter 1, when its physicality and preconscious expression allowed me to enter into “La mandoline l’œillet et le bambou.”

Fig. 11. My visual translation of the five descending lines of “Il pleut.”

But I did not understand it. In the moment of its creation, I felt certain affinities, similarities, and representations, and these expressed themselves on the page; however, no system formed across the lines, or even within a single line. What a dot, square, or empty space represents here, will not be the same over there. It rests beyond comprehension.
I wanted to bring verbal order back into this chaos. My sketches occasionally attempted to cohere into words, such as the fragmented “dans” of the first descending line, or what seems to be an “en” in the second. However, they mostly forsook semantic form, only using separation of lines to represent a proximity to “Il pleut.” Moreover, their verticality did not correspond to my understanding of the poem. I tried again with horizontal lines of text, which I wrote as a sort of linguistic reconciliation of both “Il pleut” and my visual translation of it. It emerged as follows:

It is raining, and death is on its breath
A glint of your image idles by
It is an empty abattoir
Arriving anyways
A thresh

Separation arises again, threshing the substance apart, as it did in “Fulcrum.” The “image” of my grandmother possesses the emptiness of the abattoir, containing a memory, a smell even, of death, though the dead have left, absent from the space. Even the word borrows from its French counterpart; “slaughterhouse” would not voice the same spatial quality that “abattoir” captures. We feel the emptiness of the vessel, the “image” without reality, like rain that carries absence. Death pushes out the boundaries of this emptiness, and the nothing of death arrives through the dwindling of the poem itself.
A translation process that includes this kind of unconscious or deep-conscious probing brings increased nuance to the interaction between reader and text. Scott’s intermedial approach to translation asks, “What kind of noises does the illegible make audible: explosions, rubbings, creaks, vocal timbres and wordless mouthings?” (47). My visual translation of “Il pleut” attempted to work at this illegible but audible level, visually representing the movements and life of a poem that escapes from conscious grasp. The illegible or incomprehensible can voice what the legible cannot, and a practice of translation has the power to feature this hidden quality of the text-in-translation.

Carson defines two types of silence that occur within a poem, both of which may be transcribed through the process of translation. Like illegibility, silence is a thing not understood, yet perceived. In her essay, “Variations on the Right to Remain Silent,” Carson distinguishes between physical and metaphysical silences in text. The physical “happens when you are looking at, say, a poem of Sappho’s inscribed on a papyrus from two thousand years ago that has been torn in half. Half the poem is empty space.” Carson, in her own translation of Sappho, titled If Not, Winter, decides to render these silences using brackets, thus carrying the physical distortion of the text into its modern-day reading. I believe Apollinaire’s work equally demands a preservation of physical silence. Though his poems are not ripped in half, or even drastically changed from their original state one hundred years ago, the words themselves possess physical silence. Where his handwriting becomes illegible, a translator may choose to preserve this confusion and obscurity, especially as it confronts a reader. In Chapter 1, I wrote about the distortion of the words “une
mandoline” into “un ema doline” (see p. 27). Into this I read the bullet’s movement as it tore through the words, but this is by no means a definitive interpretation. Physical distortion and silence offers a space of potential meaning, to be filled in by readers and translators alike.

However, I am more interested in the metaphysical silence that fills his poems, and which “happens inside words themselves. And its intentions are harder to define. Every translator knows the point where one language cannot be translated into another” (“Variations”). Carson gives the example of “cliché,” a word borrowed from French not only because English speakers like the elegance of its sound, but because the word imitates the sound of its origin (“the printer’s die striking the metal” when making a stereotype in printing). “Cliché” is stuck in its language of origin, and English has no choice but to borrow it, unable to translate the full force of the word into its own system. To some degree, this is why I chose to use the word “abattoir” instead of “slaughterhouse,” another instance of a borrowed term. However, the truly metaphysical silence comes through Apollinaire’s “Il pleut.” The web of words in that poem serve as vessels for something that I cannot translate into myself: a presence of death, a presence of necessary absence. There is no language I can use to articulate it.

“Il pleut” carries silence through its very words. It may not be silent for all who read, but it is silent for me. Bonnefoy identifies the power of translation in its capacity to reach the initial and essential force of a poem, so that “l’intention, l’intuition premières (disons une aspiration, une hantise, quelque chose d’universel) pourront être à nouveau tentées dans l’autre langue” (97). I had attempted to place
myself in this creative place and to understand what brought about the poem, as well as what continued to carry it. There I discovered two forces at play, both “universel.” The first was rain, and this was something I knew, in the way Ponge comes to know it in “Pluie” — namely, as an object of study and as a product of the interaction between object and observer. However, as I sought to understand the inner depths of the poem using the same process of observation, I came to know that the rain carried a second universal: death, and with it, life, in that order. The vessel of rain presents death, along with the full weight of history, to the “cupped hands” of the poet (CAConrad 18). By listening to this past, the poet is freed from “les liens qui te retiennent en haut et en bas.” This I was not ready to do. I could not translate the poem into my own life because I had not come to confront death as a means to life. I had not found “la beauté de la vie” by transforming the sadness of death, as “La cravate et la montre” would have it. I only knew death, and I knew it so briefly and distantly, and in such a terrifying manner, that to confront it seemed impossible.

Still, I have tried through repeated attempts, and will continue to do so. Carson’s essay culminates in an experiment of translation, or what she calls “an exercise, not exactly an exercise in translating, nor even an exercise in untranslating, more like a catastrophizing of translation.” She proceeds to translate a poem from the 6th-century BC poet Ibykos into not one but six variations, pulling words from a variety of sources and injecting them into Ibykos’s poem. She toys with the poem’s central force, which simply cannot carry into another language, by approaching it with many different lexicons. She variously populates Ibykos’s poem with words from John Donne’s “Woman’s Constancy,” Bertolt Brecht’s FBI file, signs in the
London Underground, even the instruction manual for her new microwave oven ("Variations"). Each new attempt signals the silence behind the poem, voicing it through playful and purposeful distortion. Through repeated cycles, it seeks to draw a circle around the silence that permeates the original.

It is this that I have tried to with "Il pleut." I am revolving around the poem, translating it into every language of my being, always with the knowledge that the central silence will not yet reveal itself. In a note, titled "Au sujet de Paix dans les brisements," Michaux attempts to explain the process of repetition and variation that produced the visual poems:

En tout ce qui est répété, quelque chose s’épuise et quelque chose mûrit. Une sorte de plus profond équilibre est obscurément cherché et partiellement trouvé.

À des centaines de vagues qui frappent sa coque, le navire répond par un ample mouvement de tangage. Sous les coups, on tend à retrouver une unité. Appui sur eux. Sustentation. Les ondes, qui font dislocation, peuvent être aussi rayonnement.

Le poème mille fois brisé pèse et pousse pour se constituer, pour un immense jour mémorable reconstituer pour, à travers tout, nous reconstituer.
I believe a balance has been partially, and only partially, found. At first, I hoped that I could feel the image of the phoenix rise through my grandmother and through my own writing, restoring the balance between death and life. This was not the case. Instead, the process of repeated translations into self, through both visual and verbal means, first identifies silence, then circumscribes it. Death is not contained, but is sensed, relied upon, even used for “sustenance.” It nourishes my own artistic practice in such a way that I am reconstructing myself through its silence. In this, I am examining the “liens” that define death, for me, as something powerfully indescribable. I have not freed myself from these “liens,” but I have begun to understand myself in relation to them. I will continue to listen as the rain falls.
Fulcrum

(for ACC)

Like pressure drawing sap along the hill.
Like crystal balls of hail upon the roof.

Back to light we look
toward the headstone

red-lettered
VULCAN

on a sealed black door.

Into the ash we place
embers, but the flame
won’t take.

We do not carry
the honey that hummingbirds drink.
Nor do we speak
the rivulets rushing the window-panes.

A metal is a metal, but
a mother

shrinks
from name.
Concluding Remarks

Je suis une structure psychologique et historique. J’ai reçu avec l’existence une manière d’exister, un style. Toutes mes actions et mes pensées sont en rapport avec cette structure, et même la pensée d’un philosophe n’est qu’une manière d’explicit sa prise sur le monde, cela qu’il est. Et cependant, je suis libre, non pas en dépit ou en deçà de ces motivations, mais par leur moyen. (519)

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty

When I began this project, I hoped to translate the calligram into a modern American poetic context. In this, I have failed. Instead, I have translated three calligrams into myself. I know now that the process of reading involves two intimately connected players, and that I can only know my reading of text, and, through this, I can know myself in the act of reading. I have repeatedly seen the limitations of my subjectivity, which, at first seeming like roadblocks, have opened to become passageways, leading simultaneously into the dark of the text and into the dark of my self.

In the passage above, Merleau-Ponty might as well have substituted “liens” for “prise sur le monde.” The “liens” of the individual – formed by a “structure psychologique et historique,” and to which all “actions” and “pensées” correspond – bind and liberate simultaneously. I can see only through this lens; on the other hand, only I can see through it.
My hold on the world becomes my hold on text: I read through myself and through the limitations of my reading process. In my reading of “La mandoline l’œillet et le bambou,” I hardly dealt with the carnation or pipe. I could not move beyond the sound of the mandolin, which seemed to shake like a battlefield, a space to which I had no claim. Still, this selective reading allowed me to better articulate both the gap in experience and the ways with which we, as readers, overcome difference. We can use our deviations and idiosyncrasies as means for uniquely grappling with text.

We can also use the venues of our reading to inflect meaning. My bedroom keyed me into the dissimilarity perceived through “La mandoline, l’œillet et le bambou.” Harvard’s Houghton reading room gave me the perceptive clues and intertexts that would establish the central conflict of “Il pleut.” In this way, the reader creates a relationship between environment and text, elevating the process of reading to what Barthes calls a “pratique signifiant” (“De l’œuvre au texte” 230). The process itself bears meaning through the text.

The act of reading sets up a mirror between text and self, so that life events both interpret, and are interpreted by, the text. I projected “La cravate et la montre” onto the mountain landscape of Grapevine, California, and through this act, brought my life into the text. Likewise, my grandmother’s deteriorating health undermined the relationship I had shaped with “Il pleut.” I had to revise my understanding according to my own life.

Translation thrives in this space, threading the shifting present into the past, carrying both text and self forward. This requires a creative contribution from the
reader. In my own translation practice, I came to know the calligrams through my creative process, whether through drawing or writing. In turn, I see Apollinaire in my poetry, and myself in his.

Poetry tends to do this. In “L’esprit nouveau,” Apollinaire suggests that poetry can spark within us “ce perpétuel renouvellement de nous-mêmes, cette création éternelle, cette poésie sans cesse renaissante dont nous vivons” (952). When reading his calligrams, it is hard not to experience this rush of feeling. The calligram offers its creativity to the reader, who, through it, feels poetry rise within.

The act of translation elevates and articulates this intimate connection between text and reader, like a harmony between two voices. The text opens to the reader, and the reader opens to it, as if one hand were shaking another, rousing the second one awake.
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