

# Corrective Readings: Translation in the Age of Trump



Translators from various languages despaired of making sense of Donald Trump's comments long before he coined in a late-night tweet the word "covfefe," which quickly went viral, inspiring him to add some hours later, "Who can figure out the true meaning of 'covfefe'??? Enjoy!" Three days after Trump's inauguration, for example, the *Washington Post* reported on the difficulties of rendering into Chinese his infamous *Access Hollywood* taped remark: "Grab them by the p---y." One media outlet translated it as, "You can even play with their nether parts; anything goes." The larger problem, according to French translator Bérengère Viennot, is that "Trump's broken syntax, often limited vocabulary and repetition of phrases makes it difficult to create texts that read coherently in French, a very structured and logical language." We know how his Rose Garden speech about withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement was received around the world, but we can only imagine how it was translated because, as Viennot explains, "Most of the time, when he speaks he seems not to know quite where he's going . . . It's as if he had thematic clouds in his head that he would pick from with no need of a logical thread to link them." Which is a dilemma for a translator who must decide whether to render his words literally, leaving others to figure out what he meant, or make them cohere. Trump's former press secretary, Sean Spicer, came up with a brilliant translation of "covfefe": "The president and a small group of people know exactly what he meant." Wouldn't it be nice to say that to a reader who flags a phrase you labored over?

My title comes from Louise Gluck's reflections on the

necessity of corrective reading—that is, reading against the grain, outside our comfort zone, in order to challenge our assumptions about what makes for good poetry. Norman Dubie offers wise counsel: "If you are a young writer who admires the work of a *single* older writer, then you are in great danger. Admire the work of *two* older writers, or more. Give your mind a problem and your mind, without permission, will solve that problem." It is common in a literary apprenticeship to seek models, imitating others in the desire to touch their magic. But it is no less crucial to read as widely as possible, expanding your sense of the contours of literature, in the hope of discovering what might belong only to you. Translation can play a key role in the acquisition of this knowledge. Remember Ezra Pound's advice to W. S. Merwin, who at the age of eighteen, visited the incarcerated poet at St. Elizabeth's Hospital: Write seventy-five lines a day and translate. When I asked Merwin some years ago if he could indeed write seventy-five lines a day, he replied, "No. But you can always translate."

Rereading is another way to read against the grain. If in my youth I read in translation such poets as Eugenio Montale, Czeslaw Milosz, and Anna Akhmatova for pleasure, instruction, and inspiration (admiring the crystalline beauty of their lines, the rigor of their thinking, and their insights into the human condition, albeit with a sense that their experiences were so removed from mine that I might never touch the true depths of their work), I now read them for something more: guidance for a turbulent time. In the same way, I also read Victor Klemperer's two-part diary of the Nazi era, *I Will Bear Witness*, which records day by day

Germany's descent into madness. If once I traced an aesthetic current through German folklore, expressionism, and French Surrealism, now I look to writers who have borne witness to the evil that humankind is capable of.

At the time of Trump's election, I happened to be reading David Michael Hertz's *Eugenio Montale, the Fascist Storm, and the Jewish Sunflower*—a monograph exploring the relationship between the Italian Nobel laureate and his muse, the American Dante scholar Irma Brandeis, and the necessity of maintaining one's independence under an authoritarian regime. Meditating on Montale's so-called Clizia poems, I realized that my life in translation, as a reader of literary, philosophical, and spiritual works from various languages, and as a poet, writer, and translator, was a form of preparation for whatever American-made storm was in the offing. It is not often remarked upon, but in addition to the delights we take from reading great works of literature, we may also find models there for how to live and love and write; how to bear up in difficult circumstances; how to summon courage for the way ahead, no matter how dark that may turn out to be.

"Culture has never been a guarantee against barbarism," Hertz notes, since "among the administrators of 'the final solution' were men who admired Goethe, Rilke, Mozart, and Bach." Then he describes Montale's lifelong effort to compose poems in the service of his language and vision of the world—a vision at odds with the Fascist ethos of Mussolini and his minions. Hertz reminds us that the philosopher and Nazi apologist Martin Heidegger wrote his book on Hölderlin near a concentration camp, and wonders how the course of history might have changed had Hitler not been rejected by the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. He writes:

Montale was probably the most significant poet of the twentieth century who dealt with this great paradox in his finest works. In his poetry he returns again and again to the irreconcilable extremes of human nature as he ponders a world that creates both the forces of the storm and the forces of love. On the one hand, he sees Hitler, Mussolini, and the destructiveness that

overwhelmed European civilization in the mid-century. On the other, he sees his beloved Jewish-American Dante scholar [Irma Brandeis]. How can both be real? How can both be part of what human beings are? What purpose can there be to a humanity that has given a new meaning to *bestial*, a meaning that would even make the beasts ashamed? Montale is the poet who realizes the ramifications of this paradox, who is contemplating the great teachings of the Western culture and staring down the brutality of Fascism at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

In 1925, Montale took the courageous act of signing an anti-Fascist manifesto and then published his first important essay titled "Style and Tradition," the first in a series of articles about the Italian-Jewish writer Italo Svevo, and his first book of poems, *Cuttlefish Bones*, which announced the arrival of a singular talent. He knew that signing the manifesto would not be without consequences, professional and personal, and yet he did it anyway—a reminder that in the face of authoritarian rule every decision counts. He discovered how to embody the complexity of experience, which is always the first victim of propaganda. Against the bombastic simplicity of Trump's tweets, amplified in the echo chamber of right-wing news outlets, I propose that we write and translate poems that embrace nuance. Against Trump's doctrine of "America First," which seems intent on destroying our democratic traditions, political alliances, and even the earth itself, let us learn from those whose works survived the onslaught of totalitarianism and the destruction of the truth. ◉

1. Hertz, David Michael. *Eugenio Montale, the Fascist Storm, and the Jewish Sunflower*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013, pp. 17-18.



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