

Writing Back, in Translation

Robert J.C. Young

We think we are going forwards, but
really we are always on a journey
back to find something that we
might almost have had.

Romesh Gunsekera, *Heaven's Edge*

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We had talked on the phone for almost an hour but when I put it down, I had that feeling that somehow I had left all the important things unsaid. In fact, I had said too much. Next day I received a postcard from her, which read:

You took me out of myself. But now I want to take myself back. T—.

And then, in a different ink, an afterthought.

PS. Don't write back.

What could I say to that declaration of detachment and separation? I knew then from those incisive words, balanced on their cold caesura of a double, reversed translation, turning her back into the original, into what she had been before, her self without me, that it was over, that her mind was made up and there was nothing I could say to persuade her to come back to me, to push herself back across that limbo state of crossed destinies that hung between us in those two sentences. Ignoring her prohibition, but respecting its spirit, I quickly found an old postcard, a hand-coloured photograph of an English sea front being battered on a stormy day, and in the tiny left-hand column designated 'This side for correspondence', wrote a sentimental but serious response.

Wherever you go, you will still be
there in my heart. I will never
stop thinking of you
each day as now.
If you want me back again
just phone me.
I am always there for you.

I took the postcard with me on my way to work and dropped it into the post box. It popped through the red pillar box's open mouth beneath its stiff upper lip and fell with a faint plop on the pile of mail underneath. All day I thought of it on the move, of the postman opening the post box door and dropping it into his sack, driving in his squat red van to the sorting office where it would be quickly spilled on to the conveyer belt. As it wobbled across at eye level on the machine, lining up for the person to spatter it with the blue dots which would imprint an electronic copy of the postcode across my words, perhaps the spatterer would read my short message, wonder who she was that I was writing back to, how her legend had come to be inscribed into such permanent residency in my heart.

And then it would drop back into a sack once more, be dumped on a platform and thrown on to the train to London, before it was sorted again, into another batch of packets with rubber bands round them for the local postman who would carry them in his bag resting in the basket of his bike, as he set off in the cold morning from the Stockwell sorting office across the damp concrete streets of South London. In the morning, when I woke, I imagined the postman pushing it through her letterbox, his fingers almost visible from the inside, falling with a pile of bills, catalogues, offers of credit cards, on her mat. Would she read it, quickly regret her message, be seduced by my offer of 0% finance for six months if she transferred her credit balance back to me, and spontaneously pick up the phone?

The phone rang, but it was never her. She never wrote back. For many days and hours and then weeks, I waited for her letter, but like all letters or phone calls for which you wait, it never came. Afterwards I wondered whether one day, years later, far away back in the humid heat of a startled night in her apartment on the edge of the

starlit ocean, the mooning fan circulating slowly above her as she lay beneath a white cotton sheet, she would wake up suddenly in a cold sweat from a dream.

*An old acquaintance from England had come to visit her
and as they talked, drinking coffee, he had told her about
everyone.*

And at last she said, 'And how and where's R—?'

And he had said, 'Oh, didn't you know?'

And she said 'No'.

He said, 'He's dead'.

She asked him 'When did he die?'

*'Months ago, just after you left, I can't remember exactly
when...'*

As soon as she woke, her throat dry, the silver light of the full moon blazing through the sleeping shutters, she would pick up a piece of paper there and then to tell me that she wanted me back, or at least perhaps, suddenly anxious at the thought that if I had died there was no one to tell her about it, ask me to just send a few words and to let her know that I was all right. So maybe she did write back, but by the time she would have written then I had left town, and my life had changed out of all recognition. The letter she wrote back would have had an addressee and a destination, my name, my address, but by the time it arrived, years later, I was no longer literally there for her, new people were living in the house who had never even heard my name. The ghostly traces of the past when you live in an old house, letters arriving seeking those who have long moved on, their names now separated from their address and forgotten, even though they were once as familiar there as the key in the door. Then another writing back: 'Not known at this address. Gone away. Return to sender'.

Somewhere I wrote that unforgettable story about her that I can no longer remember. If I could find it then I could tell you all about it. It's gone though, like so much else, in my constant expectations of arrivals and departures. You look forward to the future for so long until you realise that, like a photograph, you have no future, that you are drained of all future and that all you have is bound up with the sinuous windings you have made up out of the pathos of the past. I can no longer write to the future now because I no longer know its

address. When the letter arrives, I would no longer be there to have sent it. So instead I write back, write back to the hidden memories that harbour in the cracks where the past lies concealed, insistent material instances, waiting for the moment when someone elsewhere will find them lingering in the dust.

Once in a terraced house in Galway, in the west of Ireland, two rooms up and down, the front door opening straight on to the street, the sitting room window filled with the faces of children playing on the street or peering straight in against the glass, I was cleaning the fireplace out and as it was not drawing well, put my hand inside the chimney to see how it was shaped inside. A little above the line of the mantelpiece, I felt with my hand a small ledge up inside, about two inches deep. My fingers closed round some shapes, and as I pulled them out I felt my index finger being pricked by something sharp. They were thick with soot, but when I brushed it off, I saw a tiny clothes-peg doll, her clothes all crumpled, something that looked like a wrapped, rock-hard blackjack, and a little girl's toy silver ring with a ruby-coloured heart of glass that had drawn a tiny crimson tear from my finger. Years ago, when the house was full of people living and sleeping on top of each other, a small child had found that place, her only point of privacy in the whole house, the only place that she could call hers, and made it her own. Why had she left them there, suddenly abandoned and forgotten for me to find so many decades later? Did she catch a fever and die, or suddenly find herself being taken off to live in a relative's house, or made to enter a convent? She left no message beyond those tiny tokens of herself, an afterlife lying there in wait for the future, each poignant detail an accidental point that pricked and bruised me, stabbing me with the stigmata of irreclaimable, irredeemable, irreparable time.

A wound, the laceration of love, so intense, so intolerable. Is not all writing in some sense a writing back? Am I not writing back to you all the time, rehearsing the past, retracing the memory, translating the lies? Writing as a façade, a counterfeit of the text that you left with me, your words echoing in my mind. Tales of love: writing back, to defy you or woo you? I never know, because it is both, I mean neither. I am a translator, traitor, making visible the invisible, betraying your confidences, spilling your secrets, hungering to take apart your innermost vulnerabilities. You told me those things in

private, in the course of an intimacy of complete trust in which we were sealed together inside our own world of certainties and risk. We trusted each other with our eyes, we told each other things we had never spoken of before, even to ourselves. When the invisible membrane surrounding us evaporated at the end of one long drawn-out night, you started speaking a different language, the nervous language of lonely darkness. I told people things I should never have confided in them, spoke of transgressions that they had never previously imagined. You heard me speak these things of you, the words were public, though they never knew. And yet, it was, of course, still you of which I spoke, I could not stop speaking of you, every detail I revealed was also the detail of our life together, of working through from one to the other. Every detail was also myself, which is why I could not stop talking about it, just as I could not stop thinking of you. My translations perpetuated you into eternity, an eternity of proliferating reproduction of uncertain memories from which I could never return, the afterlife of a text that turned me into a wanderer over the face of the earth, an exile across its seas.

Many years after I had dropped my postcard into that post box on my way to work, I was sitting alone in my office one evening, wondering how to translate with comparable conciseness a line from Valéry's 'Le Cimetière Marin' –'Ici venu, l'avenir est paresse'. I was looking for something better than 'Now that I have come here, the future stretches out in idleness'. As I searched for inspiration, staring out at the darkness of the window, the phone rang. It was a friend of mine whose sister happened still to live in the house where T— had been living when I wrote to her all those years before. He told me that his sister had phoned him to say that a postcard had just arrived from me—addressed to T—. Later he showed it to me, and there were my words still visible, now being read by all and sundry, turned into a piece of history. Still bearing its 7p stamp, it had been franked twice—the date of the day that I sent it, and the date of the day before it had finally dropped through the letter box. It had taken eleven years to arrive at its destination, about fifty-five miles away—true snail mail, creeping towards her long after she had departed, speeding along at five miles a year.

She had never read it. She never knew that I had written back to her. My words had never reached her. She had gone back thinking that I

had responded to her curt declaration of independence with nothing but silence and vacancy.

Publication history:

A different version was first published as 'Writing Back, in Translation', in Raoul J. Grandqvist, ed., *Writing Back in/and Translation* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lange, 2006), 19-37.
Revised version © Robert J.C. Young 2007

To cite this article:

MLA Style: Robert J.C. Young, 'Writing Back, in Translation'. 1 June 2007. [access date]
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