“If it be now”: The Knocking of Fate

Reading Shakespeare for Translation

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There have been many attempts to characterize the specifics of dramatic speech, and the difficulty for a translator, when delving too deeply in the theory of what he is doing, is that like the legendary centipede he becomes too self-conscious to move a leg at all. He will prefer vague but evocative descriptions of performative speech like Pirandello’s *azione parlata* or Artaud’s *une poésie dans l’espace*. An essential step in translating speech designed to be spoken by actors is to regard it as an actor or a director might, to sound its potentialities for physical action on the stage. This does not just mean running about or fighting or gesticulating; it encompasses all the signals that an actor’s body may be sending out as a signifier, some of which can be most subtle indeed. I still find the most useful term for this physical quality is Bertolt Brecht’s notion of “*Gestus,*” anglicised as *gestus*. By *gestus* Brecht means the sum of codes for physical action contained in dramatic lines. Like speech itself it is too complex for detailed analysis, but Brecht explains the term with the help of a quotation from the Bible. He writes:

The sentence ... “pluck out the eye that offends thee” has an underlying *gestus* of a command, but this is not expressed in a pure gestic manner, since “that offends thee” has another *gestus* which is not expressed, namely that of a motivation. Gestically expressed, the sentence reads (and Luther who “took speech from the lips of com-
mon people”) shapes it thus: “If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out!”
One can see at a glance that this wording is gistically much richer and
purer. The first part contains an assumption, whose special quality can
be fully expressed in the intonation. Then there is a short pause of
perplexity and only then the surprising advice. \(^1\)

Incidentally this quotation is itself illustrative of cultures nurtured by
translation: obviously Brecht’s original is in German, it is quoting
Luther’s German translation from the Greek of the New Testament;
my English translation quotes Tyndale’s translation which happens to
carry the same gestic quality as Luther’s. Actually this is not such a
great coincidence, as both translators were just being faithful to the
Greek original which already exhibits the same sentence structure.
Tyndale is furthermore known to have consulted Luther on questions
of translation, although the story of their desks standing side by side
at Wartburg Castle as they worked on the New Testament has not
been substantiated. \(^2\)

One of the many factors determining the gestic meaning of a passage,
a verbal exchange or a soliloquy, is, of course, its rhythm. Behind
Shakespeare’s verse there are several metronomes in operation that
provide the beat of the verse, take into account the breathing rhythm
of the actor, determine the rate at which batches of information are
presented, and control the phases of emotional crescendo and diminuendo. Each of the metronomes is moreover continually changing
its beat and intensity and each is in constant interaction with the
others. The translator should, like the actor, try to attune his ear to
these rhythmic properties. We know that when a performance captivates its audience the whole house breathes as one body in time with
the actors.

\(^1\) Bertolt Brecht, *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst*, ed. Werner Hecht, 3 vols.
(Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), vol. 2, 163f (my translation).
\(^2\) Privately communicated to the author by Klaus Reichert.