



Michael NAAS, « *De tout coeur: Translating Derrida by Heart* », *Traduire Derrida aujourd'hui*, revue ITER N°2, 2020.

“. . . translation as the risk and the chance of the poem.”

—Jacques Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend”¹

It is one of Derrida’s most translated texts—at least under a single cover or in a single volume—and yet it is also, by all measures, one of the least translatable and the most resistant to translation.^[2] The “original,” if original there is, bears an Italian title, “Che cos’ è la poesia?”, though the rest of the text is, as always with Derrida, in French. In the edition in which I am reading it, the one I am today holding in my hands, and which Jacques Derrida had the kindness to offer me and inscribe with a dedication during a conference in November 1998 in Arles on the topic of, precisely, translation^[3], there is not only Derrida’s original text with its (non-original) French title, “Qu’est-ce que la poésie?”, and an Italian translation, with the original (and therefore untranslated) Italian title, “Che cos’ è la poesia?” but an English translation, “What is poetry?” and a German translation “Was ist Dichtung?”, the entire volume published by a German press.^[4]

It is an interesting artifact, this little volume of less than fifty pages that contains no fewer than four different versions, four *iter*-ations, of the same text. At once self-contained and self-referring, as if protecting itself from the outside, it is already bristling with references to, and resonances of, the outside—beginning with languages, French, English, Italian, German, though also a smattering of Greek, and so, as a result, as we will see, the entire history of metaphysics, including that “old quarrel between philosophy and poetry” that was itself already old by the time of Plato.

“Che cos’ è la poesia?” is a text, then, about translation, about the necessity and impossibility of translation, a philosophical argument *and* a poem that at once calls for translation and repels it or fends it off—like a hedgehog rolled up in a ball on a European highway (for the hedgehog is not native to the US), a hedgehog that one would like to take in hand, despite the spines or quills, in order to bring it to the other side, to another shore, to give it the chance of a lifetime, the chance to live on, the chance, in short, of another



iteration or another life in another context. And that would be at once the risk and the chance of translation.

To begin, then, to think Derrida's brief text of 1988, "Che cos'è la poesia?", and especially in relation to the question of translation, one would do well to begin right at the beginning, or even before the beginning, that is, with the *title*, since it was not initially Derrida's, though Derrida ended up making it his own. Asked by the Italian poetry journal *Poesia* to respond, as they say, in "just a couple of words" to the question, to their question, "Che cos'è la poesia?", that is, "What is poetry?" "What sort of thing is poetry?" Derrida, attentive as always to the context of his writing, to what might be called the pragmatic context, decided to retain this question as the title of his own text, thereby reinscribing and transforming it, as we will see, from a prosaic, definitional question into a poetic one.

"Che cos'è la poesia?", "What is poetry?" By retaining as his title the question posed to him by *Poesia*, Derrida draws our attention to what appears to have been the guiding intention of the journal, that is, to ask a famous thinker/philosopher/writer his views on the *nature* or *essence* of poetry. "Che cos'è la poesia?" is, as Derrida recalls at the very conclusion of his essay, another iteration or version, the Italian version, of the famous *what is?* or *ti esti?* question of metaphysics, the question that Derrida in *Of Grammatology* and elsewhere called the inaugural question of all metaphysics, the philosophical question par excellence. (It is also a question that, interestingly, was already posed in *Glas*, in a passage on the Genet side of that text: "What is poetry?"^[51]) By posing the *ti esti?* question in this way, though here in relation to poetry, the editors of *Poesia* seem to have been asking for some *knowledge*, some *savoir*, regarding poetry, some definition of its essence, a distillation of some poetic essence from all the particular examples or cases of poetry in whatever language. It is a question, then, that would seem to guide the search for some underlying identity of poetry, one that would exist before, beyond, or above every example or instance of poetry. This question, enshrined by Plato's dialogues as *the* question of philosophy, would try to reduce every material inscription of poetry to a mere example or case of this general definition. It would try to make every example transparent, as it were, to the general definition, or, better, through this general definition, translatable into it. In short, it would attempt to turn the diverse, idiomatic inscriptions of poetry into mere examples of a prosaic definition of it. Derrida ends his short piece in this way:



Recall the question: “What is . . .?” (*ti esti, was ist . . ., istoria, episteme, philosophia*). “What is . . .?” laments the disappearance of the poem—another catastrophe. By announcing that which is just as it is, a question salutes the birth of prose. (“CC” 237)

Despite his hesitation or skepticism with regard to this question, Derrida will not disappoint in trying to meet the expectations of the Italian journal. He will indeed try to say what poetry *is*, in just a couple of words, to try to distill the essence of poetry. But here is where Derrida’s general definition of poetry begins posing some resistance to the question posed by the title. For Derrida goes on to suggest that the primary quality of poetry, its essence, in effect, consists in its *resistance*, precisely, to the form of knowledge implied by every *ti esti?* or *what is?* question. Poetry—or rather the poem, every individual poem—resists being reduced to a kind of discourse that simply provides some knowledge, some essence or some universal quality detached from the particular. Even more importantly perhaps, it resists the idea of translation, a certain prosaic idea of translation, that typically arises from such knowledge. What is poetry? Well, Derrida seems to say throughout the essay, it is that which resists the *ti esti?* or *what is?* question, and it is that which resists the kind of translation that this question assumes.

The title “Che cos’è la poesia?”, “What is poetry?” thus already sets up an opposition or tension between a certain form of knowledge, that of the *what is?* question, and poetry, which resists this question and this knowledge. Poetry would be that which, each time unique, *resists* the possibility of giving knowledge or providing access to some essence that would go beyond the particular or unique combination of meaning and language, or sense and letter. It would resist, as it were, the severing of the meaning or spirit of the text from its letter or its body. For it is that inseparability that turns the poem from a mere example of some form or knowledge (an example of “the poetic,” for example) into an *event*, “an event,” writes Derrida, “whose intangible singularity no longer separates the ideality, the ideal meaning as one says, from the body of the letter” (“CC” 229). “Whence,” says Derrida, “the infinite resistance to the transfer of the letter which the animal, in its name, nevertheless calls out for. That is the distress of the *hérisson*.” (“CC” 231).

Hérisson, says Derrida, because the *hérisson* (the hedgehog)—at once the *animal* and the *name*—becomes in Derrida’s piece an image or a metaphor for poetry itself, or, rather, its



token or its totem, its catachrestic inscription. Not the eagle or the phoenix, therefore, but “the *hérisson*, *istrice* in Italian, in English, hedgehog” (“CC” 223), an animal that does let itself be reduced or sublated, an animal whose name itself calls for and resists translation, which explains why Derrida stresses throughout this text certain vocables, such as *st-* and *str-*, as in *instrice* and *autostrade*, *stress* and *distress*, *stretched* and *distracted*, *strophe* and *catastrophe*, and so on. Derrida’s text bristles with these letters.

The title “What is poetry?”, an example of the *ti esti?* question, is thus already in conflict with that about which the title’s question is posed, at odds with that of which it would be attempting to speak. But the situation is even more complex. For we must recall that the title of Derrida’s text is not “What is poetry?”, or even “Qu’est-ce que la poésie?,” but, and this is true not only of the Italian but of the English and even the French versions of the text, “Che cos’è la poesia?” That is the title of Derrida’s essay in the *original* French, as if this title, this title that feigns to repeat the metaphysical question par excellence, the question that is supposed to assure all transparency and translatability, were the one thing that had to *resist* that question and translation. “Che cos’è la poesia?” is thus a perfect “example,” if that is still the right word for it, of a phrase that resists the philosophical or metaphysical question par excellence, the *ti esti?* question, as well as translation, from within a language—namely, Italian, descended from Latin—that is not a *philosophical* language like Greek or German, at least not in the eyes of Heidegger, who haunts the entirety of “Che cos’è la poesia?” It is a title that causes us to ask what happens, exactly, when the philosophical question par excellence takes shape or form, when it takes body, when it gets embodied, in a supposedly non-philosophical language like Italian? What happens when the metaphysical question of essence gets posed not in ancient Greek or high German but in a lowly Latinate language like Italian, in a language whose totem would be not the soaring eagle or the reborn phoenix but the lowly hedgehog? “Not the phoenix, not the eagle, but the *hérisson*, very lowly, low down, close to the earth. Neither sublime, nor incorporeal, angelic, perhaps, and for a time.” (“CC” 235)

Apart from the performative contradiction between the meaning of the question and the language in which the question of meaning is being posed, this grafting of an Italian phrase that is not his own onto his own essay begins to make this very prosaic Italian phrase into something like a poem—the first example of that which the title feigns to seek the general rule or definition. That is, through this grafting of Italian into a French or



English text, through this polyglot effect, no one can any longer dream of translating this text into a single language without erasing something *essential* to it. Even in its first, original iteration, “Che cos’è la poesia?” is exemplary of the rule that even the most unique, idiomatic poem is untranslatable *and* already in *more than one language*. Derrida’s title, the one that was given to him, the one he accepted to take on as his own, at once signals the end of poetry in the birth of prose *and* becomes itself a poem of sorts. As a “What is?” question, the title laments the disappearance of that after which it questions, poetry or the poem. But as a poem, it resists the birth of prose that would lead to its disappearance.

The title “Che cos’è la poesia?” thus poses, on one level, the question of the essence of poetry, the nature of poetry in general, and it is itself—lifted out of its original context—a little poem, a little five-word poem, with a rhythm and an alliteration or an assonance all its own, a little poem that must thus be *learned by heart*. For when the reader who does not speak Italian encounters this title in the English or French versions of the essay, all he or she can really do is repeat it and commit to memory, that is, to “learn it by heart.” It is this “learning by heart” of the poem that will be opposed by Derrida throughout the essay to any kind of *savoir* or knowledge that could bypass or forego every form of automatic or mechanical memory, every form of mnemonics or rote memory, every form of memory that is not the spontaneous reawakening within the self of some genuine knowledge. It is the “learning by heart” of a particular, unique idiom—one where ideal meaning is inseparable from the body of the letter—that resists any kind of immediate translation and so interrupts every dream of a translation without remainder.

Derrida was asked, we will recall, to respond to the question “Che cos’è la poesia?” in just a couple of words, that is, as one says in French, in *deux mots*: the first of these “words” is “*the economy of memory*,” for “a poem must be brief, elliptical by vocation,” says Derrida, “whatever may be its objective or apparent expanse.” Derrida’s second word, not unrelated to this first, is “*the heart* [le coeur]”—not, as Derrida is quick to specify, the heart of sentences whose core meaning opens them to translation, or the heart of science and medicine, the heart of technology or cardiography, or the heart of Scripture or of Pascal (the heart with its reasons that reason cannot understand), and not even the heart of Heidegger, who, perhaps not coincidentally, has his own hedgehogs.^[6] No, Derrida insists that what he is evoking is “a story of ‘heart’ [*une histoire de ‘coeur’*] poetically enveloped in the idiom ‘*apprendre par coeur*,’ whether in my language or another, the



English language (to learn by heart), or still another, the Arab language (*hafiza a'n zahri kalb*) ("CC" 227). Poetry is bound up with a learning by heart in a way that, in principle at least, philosophy or science is not. For while these latter can, in principle at least, do without the body or the idiom since they are so easily translatable, the poetic must be incorporated in its idiom, with its rhythms and its rhymes, its assonances and its resonances, committed to memory and thus inscribed in the body, taken to heart. The injunction of the poem is thus always: "Eat, drink, swallow my letter, carry it, transport it in you, like the law of a writing become your body: *writing in (it)self*" ("CC" 229). Take this down, it says: "I am a dictation, pronounces poetry, learn me by heart [*apprends moi par coeur*], copy me down, guard and keep me, look out for me, look at me, dictated dictation, right before your eyes" ("CC" 223).

Come from the other, this metaphysical question turned poem, "Che cos'è la poesia?", would have thus turned that which attempts to annul every event, namely, the metaphysical question, the *ti esti?* question, into an event its own right. Instead of heralding, then, as Derrida suggests at the other end of his essay, as its closing words, "the birth of prose," the question turned poem begins to work on us, to work within us, repeating itself in an absolutely low voice, "Che cos'è la poesia?" The title thus poses the question of knowledge and then gives us, in the same breath, a little poem to be learned by heart. The phrase that should have been the most general, the most open to generalization, finds itself couched in a particular idiom. Hence Derrida turns his response—including and especially the title—into something a poem: "Che cos'è la poesia?" would be like a poem, or it would *be* a poem, that has to be learned by heart, something in another language, something that cannot be translated but that nonetheless calls out to be translated, at its own risk and peril. Even if this title already induces translation, even if it requires, as the unique title or the unique poem that it is, a certain translation, "What is poetry?" "What a thing is poetry?" "What is this thing poetry?" it will always leave a remainder, and will lend itself to a good or bad translations—to more or less poetic translations—only to the extent that it transforms the original into another unique combination, another inseparability of ideal meaning and the body of the letter, that is, only to the extent that it makes possible *another event*.

"Che cos'è la poesia?" is thus itself a little poem that one must "learn by heart," that is, *apprendre par coeur*. Come from the other, it must be learned by heart, even when it is in one's own language, but especially when it is in the language of the other. The idiom "by



heart," *par coeur*, is thus turned at once toward the inside, toward an interiority protected from the outside (a knowledge to be learned by heart that would be kept close to the heart), and toward the outside, toward the other as the origin of the poem (and so the origin *in me* of the work I take to heart). It is thus a poem that will have been imposed on us—and first of all on him, on Derrida,—by the other, from the outside, requiring him, and then us, to learn it by heart, to take it to heart and incorporate it. The outside is within, the other's heart mine—that is what the poem teaches.

It is thus always from the other that the poem comes and that we learn it by heart, and it is from the other that we then learn, Derrida suggests, the heart itself, that is, learn what the heart in fact *is*. It is not through some anamnesis, some interior search of the self, that we come to learn what the heart has always been, but through the other.

You did not yet know the heart, you learn [*apprend*s] it thus. From this experience and from this expression. I call a poem that very thing that teaches [*apprend*] the heart, invents the heart, *that which*, finally, the word *heart* seems to mean and which, in my language, I cannot easily discern from the word itself. *Heart* [Coeur], in the poem "learn by heart [*apprendre par coeur*]" (to be learned by heart), no longer names only pure interiority, independent spontaneity, the freedom to affect oneself actively by reproducing the beloved trace. The memory of the "by heart" is confided like a prayer—that's safer—to a certain exteriority of the automaton, to the laws of mnemotechnics, to that liturgy that mimes machines on the surface, to the automobile that surprises your passion and bears down on you as if from an outside: *auswendig*, "by heart" in German. ("CC" 231)

Apprendre apprendre: it is the poem that we learn [*apprend*] by heart that teaches [*apprend*] us the heart, that is, that teaches us what the heart is and how it is to be understood and translated, not to mention how *apprendre* [teach/learn] is to be understood and translated . . . Poetry, or rather the poetic—even the poetic that is to be found in philosophy, in "Che cos'è la poesia?" for example—would be the name of that which teaches us the heart, and so teaches what it means to *teach* or to *learn*, as well as to *translate*.

The essay "Che cos'è la poesia?", and already the title "Che cos'è la poesia?", thus poses the question of poetry in all its generality and then already begins answering it by



throwing out right there at the outset, right at our feet, so that we risk stumbling over it, our first little *istrice*, all rolled up in a ball, untranslatable and yet calling out to be translated. Derrida writes—or rather enjoins, teaches:

You will call poem from now on a certain passion of the singular mark, the signature that repeats its dispersion, each time beyond the *logos*, a human, barely domestic, not reappropriable into the family of the subject: a converted animal, rolled up in a ball, turned toward the other and toward itself, in sum, a thing—modest, discreet, close to the earth, the humility that you surname, thus transporting yourself in the name beyond a name, a catachrestic *hérisson*, its arrows held at a ready, when this ageless blind thing hears but does not see death coming. (“CC” 235)

The poem in general, and the title, the phrase, “Che cos’è la poesia?” in particular, thus resists translation and yet remains vulnerable, exposed to it, vulnerable to a translation that would be its catastrophe. It is like the *hérisson* that one would want to pick up and transport across the road, or translate across an ocean, saving it at the risk of destroying it in its idiomatic singularity. To translate is thus to operate on the heart of the poem in order to save it, and thus to save it at the risk of losing or destroying it.

The poem wants to be learned by heart, to be protected and enclosed within the heart, at the same time it demands being opened to another, to being read, understood, interpreted, and then, inevitably, translated.

The poem can roll itself up in a ball, but it is still in order to turn its pointed signs toward the outside. To be sure, it can reflect language or speak poetry, but it never relates back to itself, it never moves by itself like those machines, bringers of death. Its event always interrupts or derails absolute knowledge, autotelic being in proximity to itself. This “demon of the heart [*démon du coeur*]” never gathers itself together, rather it loses itself and gets off the track (delirium or mania), it exposes itself to chance, it would rather let itself be torn to pieces by what bears down upon it. (“CC” 235)

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I thus cannot but wonder what I will have been doing all these years as a translator, exposing the untranslatable to translation, spelling the death each time of an *istrice* by translating it, *iterating* it, into English, exiling or deporting what is not native to the US into an American idiom, making what once lived out in the wild, or at least in its “natural” habitat, into a sort of domesticated animal in a foreign land and language. One can perhaps be consoled by the thought that this risk is also the chance of the poem or of the poetic, the chance for the *hérisson* or the *istrice* that Derrida will have been or that he is to live elsewhere, quills still able to stick and, even in another language, strike right to the heart. One can find solace in the thought that such a *hérisson* might live on elsewhere not as a captive but, perhaps, as a foreign agent, even a spy, living in the heart of its own land or another’s as a force of disruption or of deconstruction in more than one language.^[7]

I will have often translated—and always in the company of my co-translator, Pascale-Anne Brault—the word *coeur* in the works of Derrida. It is perhaps time to confess that we have almost always done it without really thinking, without really even looking, that is, almost automatically, almost by heart, which is to say more or less heartlessly or half-heartedly, more or less thoughtlessly, as if we already knew what *coeur* means and that it can be translated, without too great a loss, into *heart*. We will have thus often translated it, the word as thing or as organ but then also as part of several idiomatic expressions used by Derrida, *in the heart*, *at heart*, *at the heart*, *with all my heart*, *from the bottom of my heart*, and so on. Never, in fact, to my knowledge, have we translated *coeur* in any other way, as *center*, *say*, or *middle* or *core* or *depth* or *essence*, all justifiable translations in certain contexts. In no case have we had the heart, or the courage, to take the heart out of Derrida’s prose, to distinguish, in effect, between his *ceour* and our *heart*. Indeed how could we have done otherwise, it might be said, when we are still learning from Derrida just what the heart really is? But perhaps one day we will have occasion to translate it otherwise. Perhaps someday we will have to translate a phrase like *mon coeur*, a simple term of endearment that Derrida, in his seminar on *The Death Penalty*, for example, turns into a genuine enigma or aporia, *mon coeur* being that which, outside me, like the other, as the other, teaches me the heart; *mon coeur*, my dear, my sweetheart, my love, my other, who teaches me the heart, the very meaning of *my own heart*. But we are not yet there, not for the moment, and especially not here.

I began by speaking of the quadrilingual edition that Derrida once gave me in Arles of a German publication of “Che cos’ è la poesia?” That edition also features, on the page



preceding the text itself, a little drawing by Derrida of a hedgehog. It is in the form of an ellipse with a protrusion on the right side, a snout, it seems, and a smaller ellipse just below, legs or paws, with the word “ellipse” written inside it. Drawn within the larger ellipse are two smaller ellipses, like internal organs, heart and lungs perhaps, the one with the word “effacer” written inside and the other with the letters “sTR” (for *isTRice*, perhaps). There are several other words inside the hedgehog ellipse, some difficult to make out (I read “*re-marquer les sTR en italiques, mais effacer certains mots (historien, histoire, système) et . . . ? ? . . . par d’autres,*” that is, “remark the sTR in italics, but erase certain words (historian, history, system) and . . . ? ? . . . by others), words difficult to decipher, to get a hold of, let alone TRanslate.

But on the page before that drawing, in my edition, as I mentioned at the outset, there is a dedication from the hand or quill of Jacques Derrida, a dedication that, this time, for once, I will not translate, because it is so precious and because I would like to retain it, just this once, inside me like a poem I have learned by heart, just this once, in French, untranslated, protected and shamelessly exposed in its original idiom, open to the world and yet, I would like to think, still secret and absolutely irreplaceable—a little *istrice* in its own right that even I dare not even pick up in order to make my own:

Pour Michael et Pascale-Anne,

de tout cœur,

Jacques

Arles, le 15 novembre 1998

^[1] “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” in *Psyche, Inventions of the Other*, vol. 2, eds. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 6; “Lettre à un ami japonais,” in *Psyché, Inventions de l’autre*, vol. 2 (Paris : Éditions Galilée, 1987-2003), p. 14.

^[2] “*Che cos’è la poesia?*” was first published in *Poesia* 1, no. 11 (November 1988) and then



republished in *Po&sie* 50 (Autumn 1989); an English translation by Peggy Kamuf first appeared in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 224-237, reprinted in *Points . . . Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 288-299; hereafter abbreviated “CC” with a page reference to the English translation of Peggy Kamuf, with its facing French text, in *A Derrida Reader*.

^[3] The event in question was the 1998 *Assises de la Traduction Littéraire*, in Arles, France, which ran from 13-15 November 1998. On the final day, a roundtable was organized with Derrida and several of his translators. In addition to myself, there was Vanghélis Bitsoris (Greece), Peggy Kamuf (US), Cristina de Peretti (Spain), Paco Vidarte (Spain), David Wills (New Zealand), Geoffrey Bennington (Great Britain), Mikhaïl Maiatsky (Russia), and Astra Skrabane (Latvia).

^[4] This four language edition, published by Brinkmann & Bose of Berlin in 1990, contains a German translation by Alexander Garcia Düttman, an Italian translation by Maurizio Ferraris, and the English translation of Peggy Kamuf. The original French text is printed three times in this text with its line by line translation below: French with German, then with Italian, and then with English.

^[5] *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 216b; *Glas* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1974), 242b.

^[6] See “*Istrice 2: Ick bünn all hier*,” interview with Maurizio Ferraris, first published in *Aut Aut* 235 (January-February 1990) following the publication of “*Che cos’è la poesia?*,” and then in Peggy Kamuf’s English translation in *Points . . . Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 300-326.

^[7] One can only wonder what Jacques Derrida would have thought about the role played during the Second World War by Marie-Madeleine Fourcade, a member of the French resistance who, under the code name the “Hérisson,” ran a vast spy network of more than five hundred spies throughout Europe. Recently published works have suggested that Fourcade’s work played no small role in the allies’ ultimate victory in France. See Fourcade’s memoir *Noah’s Ark* (New York: Dutton, 1974), as well as Lynne Olson’s *Madame Fourcade’s Secret War: The Daring Young Woman Who Led France’s Largest Spy*



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Network Against Hitler (New York: Random House, 2019).