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**The Art of Translating:
Going from Good to Worse, Then to Better, in Creative Writing**

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**The Art of Translating:
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ABSTRACT

Everyone knows it is nearly impossible to teach someone how to write good poetry, but what if there were a shortcut, a farce that revealed the essence of poetry, a joke whose punchline was the key to writing? What if we upended Cervantes' idea that translation is —the other side of the tapestry,¹ and instead radically untied the threads so the tapestry was no longer the same, but in the undoing of the fabric, we would learn how beauty is created. My premise is that by having students read good poems, and then make them inferior in their —translation,² they will come to learn about the central ingredients in a strong poem. I usually have the students begin by removing all imagery that is striking in some way, and replacing it with the mundane. Always replace the specific with the general. Then they remove the turns of phrases that are inventive or arresting and turn them into clichés or at least dull writing. We also eliminate titles that are in some ways helpful and appropriate, and replace them with the titles that mask the subject or clash with the poem. And finally, the most difficult is to alter the music of the poem, to supplant the rhythms or cadence or attractive sounds of the poem with the clunky and the prosaic. We do this mainly in the beginning of a semester, in an introductory class, but the technique has also been used in intermediate poetry writing classes and above. I will discuss this theory and use examples from contemporary writers (Judith Ortiz Cofer, Susanna Brougham, Olga Broumas), showing how the good poem becomes even more instructive for young writers when they attack its strong points until it is only a weak bit of poor writing. They learn how to write well, not by doing, but by undoing.

Everyone knows it is nearly impossible to teach someone how to write good poetry, though I have been trying for over thirty years. In the past, I would begin a semester by showing students a good poem, or a poem that I appreciated a lot, and then I'd walk them through the poem, explaining what I liked and why, emphasizing the normal things—a fresh insight or a surprising way of seeing the world, language that has a charge, metaphors that are clear but also clearly original. And by the time I had finished with the dissection, pointing out the beautiful ligaments and strong muscles, I would have lost them. They were listening, but not really hearing. I was preaching to the choir, but they weren't in the choir, had rarely been to church, and couldn't tell one religion from another.

Then I wondered what if there were a shortcut, a farce that revealed the essence of poetry, a joke whose punchline was the key to writing?

What if we upended Cervantes' idea that translation is "the other side of the tapestry," and instead radically untied the threads so the tapestry was no longer the same, but in the undoing of the fabric, we would learn how beauty is created?

My premise is that by having students read good poems, and then make them inferior in their "translation," they will come to learn about the central ingredients in a strong poem and start on their way to writing their own good poems.

I usually give the students a strong poem and have them begin by removing all imagery that is striking in some way, and replacing it with the mundane. Always replace the specific with the general, I suggest. Then they remove the turns of phrases that are inventive or arresting and turn them into clichés or at least dull writing. We also eliminate titles that are in some ways helpful and appropriate, and replace them with the titles that mask the subject or clash with the poem or take the life out of the opening. And finally, the most difficult is to alter the music of the poem, to supplant the rhythms or cadence or attractive sounds of the poem with the clunky and the prosaic.

In a way, this process allows students to see that a poem's meaning is not necessarily the most important part of a poem. When we translate the poem into miserable verse, the subject is still the same—it's just that the air has been taken out of the balloon, the tire, the sails and it's a dead thing. Maybe students learn that meaning in a poem isn't the real thing; if you've removed everything attractive, it ain't got that swing that we love in a good poem even if it means the same thing.

We do this mainly in the beginning of a semester, in an introductory class, but the technique has also been used in intermediate poetry writing classes and above.

I'll take you through one good poem by Judith Ortiz Cofer that I have altered so it's no longer good at all--it's fallen so far in the translation that it's fallen flat. And I'll also show how the class as a whole can work on a poem, in this case, a poem by Yusef Komunyakaa

The first poem is by Judith Ortiz Cofer who was born in Puerto Rico. It supports William Carlos Williams' idea that the "local is the only thing that is

universal—the classic is the local fully realized” or James Joyce’s statement that “In the particular is contained the universal.”

She writes from her Latina experience, including images and words from her Puerto Rican childhood, and makes a moving poem by focusing on sharp imagery and details. The title, “Quinceañera, refers to the party that 15 year-old girls have to celebrate their movement from childhood to young womanhood, or it can refer to the girl herself.

Quinceañera

by Judith Ortiz Cofer

My dolls have been put away like dead
children in a chest I will carry
with me when I marry.
I reach under my skirt to feel
a satin slip bought for this day. It is soft
as the inside of my thighs. My hair
has been nailed back with my mother’s
black hairpins to my skull. Her hands
stretched my eyes open as she twisted
braids into a tight circle at the nape
of my neck. I am to wash my own clothes
and sheets from this day on, as if
the fluids of my body were poison, as if
the little trickle of blood I believe
travels from my heart to the world were
shameful. Is not the blood of saints and
men in battle beautiful? Do Christ’s hands
not bleed into your eyes from His cross?
At night I hear myself growing and wake
to find my hands drifting of their own will
to soothe skin stretched tight over my bones,
I am wound like the guts of a clock,
waiting for each hour to release me.

In this poem about a specific cultural and physical moment in a girl’s life, the poet includes great details specific to a Puerto Rican upbringing, including references to Catholicism and fashion. It’s a powerful poem about the liminal moment of passing from girlhood into womanhood, or at least opening the door into womanhood, or wanting to open that door, to feel the release that will come without the authority figures of the mother and god and patriarchy. The great images of the guts of the clock wound tight and the nailed back hair point to the sense of restraint or repression that the young woman is hoping to escape. It’s a moving poem, but by rewriting it and moving away from

specifics, from cool details, from metaphors, we will be able to see the poem defrocked, its message still clear, but all the joy has left the room.

Turning 15

I have put away all of the items of my childhood.
I now place my hand under my skirt to feel my underclothes.
So soft! My mother has taken pains
With the way I look. She is a rigid lady
And a stickler for details.
Puberty has now arrived
And I'll have to do all my own cleaning
From now on.
I always thought our fluids were ok, but
now? Even religious figures have fluids, no?
I'm growing so big and strong as I age.
But sometimes I feel all bunched up.

Here are the principles I've used to revise (and ruin) the poem.

Six Bad Ideas!

- 1--Rather than creating a culturally specific poem, make it general so everyone can relate to it.
- 2--Rather than using particulars and images, use abstractions.
- 3--Don't talk about menstruation directly, talk about puberty. It's vaguer (and it's impossible to get an image!)
- 4--Don't talk about a specific religion, make it general ("religious figures") so everyone can relate to it.
- 5--Don't use interesting images or odd images, use clichés because more people will understand it and relate to it.
- 6--Don't make comparisons—dolls/dead children, satin slip/inside of thighs, black hairpins/nails, I am wound tight/like guts of clock. Use flat language.

Now, I tell my students, I'd like to apply the same principles to a poem by Yusef Komunyakaa, an African-American poet who grew up in small town Louisiana. I'll read it, and we'll talk about places we'd like to ruin because they are too good.

My Father's Love Letters
By Yusef Komunyakaa

On Fridays he'd open a can of Jax
After coming home from the mill,
& ask me to write a letter to my mother

Who sent postcards of desert flowers
Taller than men. He would beg,
Promising to never beat her
Again. Somehow I was happy
She had gone, & sometimes wanted
To slip in a reminder, how Mary Lou
Williams' "Polka Dots & Moonbeams"
Never made the swelling go down.
His carpenter's apron always bulged
With old nails, a claw hammer
Looped at his side & extension cords
Coiled around his feet.
Words rolled from under the pressure
Of my ballpoint: Love,
Baby, Honey, Please.
We sat in the quiet brutality
Of voltage meters & pipe threaders,
Lost between sentences . . .
The gleam of a five-pound wedge
On the concrete floor
Pulled a sunset
Through the doorway of his toolshed.
I wondered if she laughed
& held them over a gas burner.
My father could only sign
His name, but he'd look at blueprints
& say how many bricks
Formed each wall. This man,
Who stole roses & hyacinth
For his yard, would stand there
With eyes closed & fists balled,
Laboring over a simple word, almost
Redeemed by what he tried to say.

I then offer the students a crack at ruining the specifics of the poem, replacing great lines with paltry ones, knocking the bejesus out of it until it's a damned lousy poem. I offer students a chance to revise and translate before I unveil my own diminished poem. Are there any places you feel the urge to ruin, I ask them, because you know it's too good. You might feel the joy that Duchamp felt when he put a moustache on the Mona Lisa. There is pleasure in destruction.

Here is my own "translation," a diminishment that allows students to see the power of the original:

Letters

After work he'd relax
And ask me to write a letter
To my mother who sent us mail too.
He would tell her how he'd
Never be bad again.
I was happy she had left,
And wanted to remind her
That even music never made things better.
He was always ready for work
Around the house.
I wrote the words he told me to.
We sat together as the sunset
Came through the doorway.
I wondered how she received
The letters we wrote.
My father couldn't write,
But he was very handy.
This man, who sometimes
Stole items, would just stand there
And labor over the words,
Almost ok because of what he said.

Gone are the specifics about voltage meters and claw hammers, the strangeness of a five-pound wedge drawing the sunset through the door, the tenderness of a man "almost redeemed by what he tried to say." Yes, the revised poem is still about a working man who writes letters to his estranged wife, but the beauty, the vibrancy, the energy are gone.

So to conclude, through a joyous anarchic spirit, a student can learn where poems derive their greatness from. The student writers need to go small into the world of imagery and detail, and avoid the flat landscape of cliché and dull sounds. They need to be loyal to the local and reach the universal through the personal detail. And students do seem to learn the art of poetry faster through this process rather than the more typical academic approach. When they approach the writing of their own poems, they keep the principles of specificity and musicality and metaphor in mind, and the poems are the better for it.

And the beauty of this approach is that it can be used for fiction, too; for example, it would be possible to remove a point of view that is extremely internal and teach students about the use of point of view, and how in most stories, it is the interiority, the head of the character that is the most important factor and not the action of the story. The students will see the same action in the story, but without the intimacy with the mind of the central character, there really is no story.

There's no limit to how this naughty technique can be used to great effect in all creative writing classes.

Works Cited

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