

Translation as Performance: Caroline Bergvall's "Via"

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Caroline Bergvall's performance poem, *Via*, exists in two incarnations, as a sound recording and as a written text. The sound recording of the work can be listened to on UBUwebⁱ, and there is a terrific review specific to that version in Jacket 34 by Brian M. Reedⁱⁱ. My focus in this essay, however, is on the text version that appeared in *Chain 10: Translucinacion* in Autumn 2003ⁱⁱⁱ. My reason for this particular approach here is that I feel the two instances of *Via* can be seen as two wholly separate performances owing to the very different materials that Bergvall made use of for each project. The two versions of *Via* share the common territory of specific words, but the spoken and the written, especially as used by Bergvall, are composed of different entities and constitute different phenomena, becoming different realms for writers and performers. Bergvall works in the genres of sound performance and text both separately and simultaneously. Further, her talent in performance stems from her awareness of how to work in each medium that she approaches for its specific resources. I'm not interested in making a comparison here; Bergvall creates unique performance spaces in visible, audible and readable territories and I'm focusing on her particular performance of *Via* for the page. What I am most concerned with here is how she works with spatial and temporal expectations of the page to create a viable performance space for *Via*, and how she uses the concept of translation as a type of performance to illuminate the acts that make up creative and literary processes.

In their introduction to *Chain 10: Translucinacion*, editors Jena Osman and Juliana Spahr credit Andre Ajens for the invention of the word "Translucinacion" as "to describe how translation is a form of reading that creates new work, new conversations"^{iv}. They further compare the process of translation to that of dialogue, suggesting that both are modes that can distribute the responsibility and power that a traditional *authoritarian*, single literary voice might have^v. Their note comes from a concern that the tradition of translation lies enmeshed

in ideologies frequently submerged in cultural tunnel vision, flawed ideas of linguistic meticulousness and semantic accuracy and that this has sacrificed indispensable levels of understanding. Many pieces in *Chain 10* demonstrate how careful construction of artifice exposes inevitable distances between an original text and its translation. However, the works in *Chain 10* also prove that a realization of and conscious approach to this distance is often an effective means of transmitting meaning from one language and social/historical context to another.

Bergvall's project places forty-eight translators of Dante's *Inferno* into a conversation that, with its mere juxtapositions, questions the translator's role in creating meaning. Bergvall's contribution to this issue of *Chain* is, like the others, completely unique in its approach to the definition and social and literary purposes of translation. Her fundamental notions of what performance is and what it can do reveal that translation itself is a constant act of the performance of reading, writing and displaying language to an audience. *Via* suggests that showing difference and discrepancy is more accurate than an erasure of one text to be replaced by another, or than the construction of an illusion of smooth, flawless meaning according to our preconceived notions of semantic logic. The exposure of the constant modifications and additions that occur across time reveal a halting, uncomfortable, uncanny resemblance to the true nature of our lives. The work also creates new space for a "silent" observer (Bergvall does not contribute a translation of her own) as an important role of both witness and action. With her gesture of rigorous examination of others' interpretations, and careful consideration of how to perform what she observes, she also manages to achieve equilibrium with readers by delegating part of the responsibility of the reception and interpretation of historical texts. *Via* ultimately provides a space for the reader to consider the obstacles, failures and rewards of crossing and sharing boundaries of language.

Bergvall formats *Via* carefully to construct an authentic sense of both connection and distance with the opening lines of the *Inferno*. Dante's first three brief yet

dense lines concern an individual orienting themselves in a new environment. Bergvall takes this idea as a cue for her project, categorizing the translations into two series': the first is a list of the translations put in alphabetical order according to the first words and numbered one through forty-eight. The second series is a list of the translators in sequence by date, but the corresponding numbers are all over the place (they correspond to the order that the first series was in). The discrepancy between the order of the series' points our attention to an aspect of translation (and performance) not simply executed with linguistic decisions— the crucial nature of initial guidelines. The fact that decisions, whether conscious or not, can not only define a project, but can provide its meaning is a trend that Brian Reed writes of in his discussion of the project: “Bergvall, like many of today’s visual artists, seems to consider the most important part of the creative process complete after deciding on a generative algorithm”^{vi}. And this is indeed a politically integral aspect of the piece, to demonstrate that awareness of context is often submerged or overlooked in the literary process, hard to pin down and interpret, but integral to the reception of a work.

Bergvall’s work with the translations of Dante’s *Inferno* becomes a performance particularly through her use of the idea of display. She uses this concept in order to provide a unique semantic understanding that supercedes explanation and focuses on a reworking of the reader's contextual orientation around both her piece and Dante' original, immersing readers in it from various angles and allowing them to have a critical and personal relationship with the material. Her open approach to performance allows a complexity of meaning to become clear even while wandering through Dante's dark forest. She doesn't merely attempt to demarcate a predetermined path through unfamiliar territory, but creates an inversion of the normal route of translation: we are introduced and then re-introduced to a familiar territory that has constantly shifting ground. Bergvall, as a guide, mostly leads us, not through the semantic terrain of the language, but through our own awareness of how we receive and use it. She also takes on the role of the wanderer in the text, taking Dante’s words as stage directions for her own performance: she is halfway, over and over again, between Dante and a

translation, as well as the translation and herself; simultaneously, sharing that position with us. Instead of another analysis, Bergvall here performs an illumination of what has previously passed for an accurate sense of a text originating in the past. Rather, her results show us that we must accept that the completion of a translation lies in a reader's awareness of the act of reading and their investment in the present moment of reading. Bergvall's construction of an artifice that is itself aware of its own context becomes an aid for a reader to orient themselves in the material and temporal aspects of the dark woods of experience.

Bergvall effectively performs the roles that earlier translators took on and clarifies how each reader's particular relationship with Dante's text strongly affected choices of translation. Bergvall turns her honest observation of this phenomenon into a display of what has already been performed, showing how the artifice of literary interpretation often includes the conceits of the "transparent" translator. She manages to neatly avoid becoming lost in this problem by creating a map of that territory. For instance, the pronouns seem to be a tricky mess for the translators. Not only are there seemingly endless options for translating the personal pronoun, but each and every way the words in a phrase or line can be interpreted affects the others, creating continual re-combinations. In Dante's original, "nostra vita" becomes, in the first section that Bergvall shows us, "our life" and is translated as such for the next two, but then turns into phrases such as "the road we have to go" or later "our life's journey" or "our trek in life" or "our days". With each change, other aspects of vocabulary, syntax, and ultimately diction shift to produce a wholly different effect and meaning. Perhaps this is why each translator found it necessary to retranslate *Inferno*, for the text didn't seem right for them; there had to be a better fit between the original and themselves. Bergvall's triumph in this case is that she's able to fracture the deeply egotistical spell that may even have begun with the visitor's privileged isolation in his singular perspective as he wanders in some sort of hell.

Similarly, Bergvall performs a repetition of "I" that mirrors (as it exposes) an operation of literary subjectivity, and ultimately serves to liberate the new

narrator. In *Via*, “I” echoes through the historical time of literary scholarship as well as the real time of reading. Ryan Claycomb, in his article *Staging Psychic Excess: Parodic Excess and Transgressive Narrative*^{vii} asks an important question about the problems that repetition traditionally presents in a dramatic context:

as [Judith] Butler argues, gender codes are absorbed into the matrices of power by *repetition* and *reproduction*. Therefore, for the playwright--feminist or queer-- working to enact such a critique on the stage, a particular bind arises, since dramatic texts execute these very operations in relation to performance. If the dramatic text serves as the reproducible trace of inherently ephemeral performance, how then can the playwright effect the transgression of gender codes without reifying them in her texts?

Bergvall’s inversion of the traditional uses of both repetition and reproduction provides a solution by forcing the operations to reveal their own limitations. She even answers some of these concerns by crossing the boundaries between genres and expanding the terms that Claycomb sets for the role of “playwright” and “stage”. Her experimental process fuses the “dramatic text” with the page as the site of performance, then uses repetition to demonstrate the subtext of obsessive personal perspective underlying scholarly work. Undermining gender codes, Bergvall takes on a literary tradition generally accepted to be rooted in male decisions and, as a woman, she makes specific subversive moves to usurp such a system, uprooting the rules at their source. She doesn't create something new by using power to try and replace what has come before. She creates something new by exposing all the old layers, ultimately creating a table or a visible matrix of the discrete points that have composed the unseen narrative of literary tradition. She uses repetition and reproduction against themselves, a tactic eventually allows a reader to see what’s been played out. The “I” in the dark, night-dark, great, sunless, gloomy, darksome, etc. wood (or forest) gestures towards the elusive group in “nostra vita” or “our life”. *Via*’s exploration of the individual/group dynamic pushes the singular original inside the text to the exterior, the many faces of its reception, almost as if it has finally reached a destination but that this

can only *always* be halfway between a writer and a reader, between an individual and the masses that position and define it.

Thus *Via* finds new manifestations for the contemporary individual, and new roles for the contemporary reader. The frequent differences among the personal choices of translation seem exotic as they stand out like trees from the common ground of Dante's intention. Besides the creative interpretations of what best characterizes the nature of the forest, the translators also find multiple ways to describe the state of the wandering individual as "struggling", "bewildered", "confused", "lost", or "astray". The variations create a changing melody on top of the much more constant "I found myself", whose less frequent changes produce a slower underlying rhythm. And consider the stark break in form when we encounter

In the middle of the journey

of our life

I came to myself

in a dark forest

the straightforward way

misplaced (56)

The only section with line breaks, this section reveals the most recent translator's (Armand Schwerner, 2000) attempt to connect a reader to a familiarity with poetic form. The modern conception of how line breaks work according to Charles Olson's theory of breath is certainly an important consideration for the translation of Dante's *terza rima* into a current context. The emphasis on each discrete unit considered in its own space on the page provides an important pause for the reader, but although it is the last translation in the second list, in the first series it has the potential to be lost halfway through halfway through, number thirteen out of forty-eight. The translations re-perform themselves, reflecting the original gestures into a new context for interpretation.

In *Via*, Bergvall presents new notions of writing's connections to performance, reading's connection to participation, and much broader implications of translation. Her own work in translating *Via* is a process of performance enacted and witnessed on the page, the open nature of which is an invitation to the reader to cross boundaries that need no longer be defined or sanctioned by the authority of genre.

[i](#) Bergvall. *Via*. Summer 2000. www.ubu.com.

[ii](#) Reed, Brian M. "Lost Already Walking: Caroline Bergvall's *Via*". *Jacket* 34 October 2007. Online

[iii](#) Bergvall, Caroline. "Via". *Chain 10: Translucinacion* Autumn 2003

[iv](#) *Chain 10: Translucinacion*. (iii).

[v](#) *Chain 10: Translucinacion*. (iii).

[vi](#) Reed, *Jacket* 34.

[vii](#) Claycomb, Ryan. "Staging Psychic Excess: Parodic Excess and Transgressive Narrative" *Journal of*

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