

## Variations on the Right to Remain Silent

by [Anne Carson](#)

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Silence is as important as words in the practice and study of translation. This may sound like a cliché. (I think it is a cliché. Perhaps we can come back to cliché.) There are two kinds of silence that trouble a translator: physical silence and metaphysical silence. Physical silence happens when you are looking at, say, a poem of Sappho's inscribed on a papyrus from two thousand years ago that has been torn in half. Half the poem is empty space. A translator can signify or even rectify this lack of text in various ways—with blankness or brackets or textual conjecture—and she is justified in doing so because Sappho did not intend that part of the poem to fall silent. Metaphysical silence happens inside words themselves. And its intentions are harder to define. Every translator knows the point where one language cannot be translated into another. Take the word *cliché*. Cliché is a French borrowing, past participle of the verb *clicher*, a term from printing meaning "to make a stereotype from a relief printing surface." It has been assumed into English unchanged, partly because using French words makes English-speakers feel more intelligent and partly because the word has imitative origins (it is supposed to mimic the sound of the printer's die striking the metal) that make it untranslatable. English has different sounds. English falls silent. This kind of linguistic decision is simply a measure of foreignness, an acknowledgment of the fact that languages are not sciences of one another, you cannot match them item for item. But now what if, within this silence, you discover a deeper one—a word that does not *intend* to be translatable. A word that stops itself. Here is an example.

In the fifth book of the *Odyssey* when Odysseus is about to confront a witch named Kirke whose practice is to turn men into pigs, he is given by the god Hermes a pharmaceutical plant to use against her magic:

So speaking Hermes gave him the drug  
by pulling it out of the ground and he showed the nature of it:  
at the root it was black but like milk was the flower.  
MOLY is what the gods call it. And it is very hard to dig up  
for mortal men. But gods can do such things.

*MOLY* is one of several occurrences in Homer's poems of what he calls "the language of gods." There are a handful of people or things in epics that have this sort of double name. Linguists like to see in these words traces of some older layer of Indo-European preserved in Homer's Greek. However that may be, when he invokes the language of gods Homer usually tells you the mortal translation too. Here he does not. He wants this word to fall silent. Here are four letters of the alphabet, you can pronounce them but you cannot define, possess, or make use of them. You cannot search for this plant by the roadside or Google it and find out where to buy some. The plant is sacred, the knowledge belongs to gods, the word stops itself. Almost as if you were presented with a portrait of some person—not a famous person but someone you might recognize if you put your mind to it—and as you peer closely you see, in the place where the face should

be, a splash of white paint. Homer has splashed white paint not on the faces of his gods but on their word. What does this word hide? We will never know. But that smudge on the canvas does serve to remind us of something important about these puzzling beings, the gods of epics, who are not consistently bigger, stronger, smarter, nicer or better-looking than humans, who are in fact anthropomorphic clichés from top to bottom, yet who do have one escapade up their sleeve—immortality. They know how not to die. And who can say but the four untranslatable letters of *MOLY* might be the place where that knowledge is hidden.

There is something maddeningly attractive about the untranslatable, about a word that goes silent in transit. I want to explore some examples of this attraction, at its most maddened, from the trial and condemnation of Joan of Arc.

Joan of Arc's history, especially the historical record of her trial, is one fraught with translation at every level. She was captured in battle on May 23, 1430. Her trial lasted from January to May of 1431 and entailed a magistrate's inquest, six public interrogations, nine private interrogations, an abjuration, a relapse, a relapse trial, and condemnation. Her death by fire took place on May 30, 1431. Thousands of words went back and forth between Joan and her judges during the months of her inquisition; many of them are available to us in some form. But Joan herself was illiterate. She spoke Middle French at her trial, whose minutes were transcribed by a notary and later translated into Latin by one of her judges. This process involved not only the transposition of Joan's direct responses into indirect speech and of her French idioms into the Latin of juridical protocol but also deliberate falsification of some of her answers in such a way as to justify her condemnation (this was revealed at the retrial twenty-five years after her death).<sup>(1)</sup> Yet these many layers of official distance separating us from what Joan said are just an aftereffect of the one big original distance that separates Joan herself from her sentences.

All Joan's guidance, military and moral, came from a source she called "voices." All the blame of her trial was gathered up in this question, the nature of the voices. She began to hear them when she was twelve years old. They spoke to her from outside, commanding her life and death, her military victories and revolutionary politics, her dress code and heretical beliefs. During the trial Joan's judges returned again and again to this crux: they insisted on knowing the story of the voices. They wanted her to name, embody and describe them in ways they could understand, with recognizable religious imagery and emotions, in a conventional narrative that would be susceptible to conventional disproof. They framed this desire in dozens of ways, question after question. They prodded and poked and hemmed her in. Joan despised the line of inquiry and blocked it as long as she could. It seems that for her, the voices had no story. They were an experienced fact so large and real it had solidified in her as a sort of sensed abstraction—what Virginia Woolf once called "that very jar on the nerves before it has been made anything."<sup>(2)</sup> Joan wanted to convey the jar on the nerves without translating it into theological cliché. It is her rage against cliché that draws me to her. A genius is in her rage. We all feel this rage at some level, at some time. The genius answer to it is catastrophe.

I say catastrophe is an answer because I believe cliché is a question. We resort to cliché because it's easier than trying to make up something new. Implicit in it is the question, Don't we already know what we think about this? Don't we have a formula we use for this? Can't I just send a standard greeting card or paste in a snapshot of what it was like rather than trying to come up

with an original drawing? During the five months of her trial Joan persistently chose the term *voice* or a few times *counsel* or once *comfort* to describe how God guided her. She did not spontaneously claim that the voices had bodies, faces, names, smell, warmth or mood, nor that they entered the room by the door, nor that when they left she felt bad. Under the inexorable urging of her inquisitors she gradually added all these details. But the storytelling effort was clearly hateful to her and she threw white paint on it wherever she could, giving them responses like:

... You asked that before. Go look at the record .  
... Pass on to the next question, spare me.  
... I knew that well enough once but I forget.  
... That does not touch your process.  
... Ask me next Saturday.

And one day when the judges were pressing her to define the voices as singular or plural, she most wonderfully said: "The light comes in the name of the voice."

*The light comes in the name of the voice* is a sentence that stops itself. Its components are simple yet it stays foreign, we cannot own it. Like Homer's untranslatable *MOLY* it seems to come from somewhere else and it brings a whiff of immortality with it. We know that in Joan's case this turned out to be a whiff of herself burning. Let's pass on to a less dire example of the escapade of translation, but one that is equally driven by the rage against cliché—or, as the translator himself in this case puts it—"I want to paint the scream not the horror."<sup>(3)</sup> This you may recognize as a statement of the painter Francis Bacon in reference to his well-known series of portraits of the pope screaming (which are variations on a portrait of Pope Innocent X by Velazquez). Now, Francis Bacon is someone who subjected himself to inquisition repeatedly throughout his career, most notably in a series of interviews with art critic David Sylvester, which are published in a volume called *The Brutality of Fact*. "The brutality of fact" is Bacon's own phrase for what he is after in a painting. He is a representational painter. His subjects are people, birds, dogs, grass, sand, water, himself and what he wants to capture of these subjects is (he says) their *reality* or (once he used the term) *essence* or (often) *the facts*. By *facts* he doesn't mean to make a copy of the subject as a photograph would but rather to create a sensible form that will translate directly to your nervous system the same sensation as the subject. He wants to paint the sensation of a jet of water, that very jar on the nerves. Everything else is cliché. Everything else is the same old story of how Saint Michael and Saint Margaret and Saint Catherine came in the door with a thousand angels around them and a sweet smell filled the room. He hates all that storytelling, all that illustration, he will do anything to deflect or disrupt the boredom of storytelling, including smudge the canvas with sponges or throw paint at it.

When I say Francis Bacon wants to translate sensation to your nerves by means of paint I'm using the verb *translate* metaphorically. In our usual usage, *to translate* is an operation of language, not paint. Silence also is something proper to language and Bacon does at times evoke it literally, as in interviews when he says (more than once), "You see this is the point at which one absolutely cannot talk about painting. It's in the process."<sup>(4)</sup> In this statement he is making a territorial claim, as Joan of Arc did when she said to her judges, "That does not touch your process." Two different senses of *process* but the same exasperated shrug toward an authority

whose demands are unjust. One can sense this exasperation shaping most of the public actions of Joan's life—her military recklessness, her choice of men's clothing, her abjuration of heresy, her relapse into heresy, her legendary final words to the judges: "Light your fires!" Had silence been a possibility for her, Joan would not have ended up in the fires. But the inquisitors' method was to reduce everything she had said to twelve charges in their own wording, that is to say, their story of her solidified as the fact of the matter.<sup>(5)</sup> The charges were read out to her. She had to answer each with "I believe it" or "I believe it not." A yes or no question forbids a word to stop itself. Untranslatability is illegal.

Stops and silence of various kinds, however, seem to be available to Francis Bacon within the process of his painting. For instance in his subject matter, when he chooses to depict people screaming in a medium that cannot transmit sound. Or in his use of color, which is a complex matter, but let's look at one aspect of it, namely the edges of the color. His aim as a painter, as we have seen, is to grant sensation without the boredom of its conveyance. He wants to defeat narrative wherever it seeks to arise, which is pretty much everywhere since humans are creatures who crave a story. There is a tendency for story to slip into the space between any two figures or any two marks on a canvas. Bacon uses color to silence this tendency. He pulls color right up to the edge of his figures—a color so hard, flat, bright, motionless, it is impossible to enter into it or wonder about it. There is a desolation of curiosity in it. He once said he'd like to "put a Sahara desert or the distances of a Sahara" in between parts of a painting.<sup>(6)</sup> His color has an excluding and accelerating effect, it makes your eye move on. It's a way of saying, Don't linger here and start thinking up stories, just stick to the facts. Sometimes he puts a white arrow on top of the color to speed your eye and denounce storytelling even more. To look at this arrow is to feel an extinguishing of narrative. He says he got the idea for the arrows from a golf manual.<sup>(7)</sup> To know this makes me feel even more hopeless about understanding the story of this picture. Bacon has no interest in encouraging such hope; nor did Joan of Arc when her inquisitors asked, "What do your voices smell like?" and she answered, "Ask me next Saturday." Bacon extinguishes the usual relation of figure to ground, the usual passage of information at that place, as Joan extinguishes the usual relation of question to answer. There is instead a catastrophizing of communication.

Bacon has another term for this catastrophizing: he calls it "destroying clarity with clarity."<sup>(8)</sup> Not just in his use of color but in the whole strategy of his compositions, he wants to make us see something we don't yet have eyes for. He goes inside clarity to a place of deeper refreshment, where clarity is the same and yet differs from itself, which may be analogous to the place inside a word where it falls silent in its own presence. And it is noteworthy that for Bacon this is a place of violence. He talks a lot about violence in his interviews. He gets asked a lot about violence in his interviews. He and his interviewers do not mean the same thing by this word. Their question is about images of crucifixion, slaughtered meat, twisting, mangling, bullfights, glass cages, suicide, half-animals and unidentifiable flesh. His answer is about reality. He is not interested in illustrating violent situations and disparages his own works that do so as "sensational." He wants to convey the sensation, not the sensational, to paint the scream, not the horror. And he understands the scream in its reality to lie somewhere inside the surface of a screaming person or a scream-worthy situation. If we consider his study of the pope screaming alongside the painting that inspired it, Velazquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, we can see what Bacon has done is to plunge his arms into Velazquez's image of this profoundly disquieted man and to pull out a

scream that is already going on there deep inside. He has made a painting of silence in which silence silently rips, as black holes are said to do in deep space when no one is looking. Here is Bacon speaking to David Sylvester:

When talking about the violence of paint it's nothing to do with the violence of war. It's to do with an attempt to remake the violence of reality itself ... and the violence also of the suggestions within the image itself which can only be conveyed through paint. When I look at you across the table I don't only see you, I see a whole emanation which has to do with personality and everything else .... the living quality ... all the pulsations of a person ... the energy within the appearance .... And to put that over in a painting means that it would appear violent in paint. We nearly always live through screens—a screened existence. And I sometimes think when people say my work is violent that from time to time I have been able to clear away one or two of the veils or screens.(9)

Bacon says we live through screens. What are these screens? They are part of our normal way of looking at the world, or rather our normal way of seeing the world without looking at it, for Bacon's claim is that a real seer who looked at the world would notice it to be fairly violent—not violent as narrative surface but somehow violently composed underneath the surface, having violence as its essence. I could say that Bacon "translates" the violence to paint, but I want to stop talking about translation metaphorically and take up the actual struggle of rendering a text from one language to another. So can we please shift our historical gaze to Germany at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century and give our attention to some words for the color purple. Our English word *purple* comes from Latin *purpureus*, which comes from Greek *porphyra*, a noun denoting the purplefish. This sea mollusk, properly the purple limpet or murex, was the source from which all purple and red dyes were obtained in antiquity. But the purplefish had another name in ancient Greek, namely *kalche*, and from this word was derived a verb and a metaphor and a problem for translators. The verb *kalchainein*, "to search for the purplefish," came to signify profound and troubled emotion: to grow dark with disquiet, to seethe with worries, to search in the deep of one's mind, to harbor dark thoughts, to brood darkly. When the German lyric poet Friedrich Hölderlin undertook to translate Sophokles' *Antigone* in 1796, he met this problem on the first page. The play opens with a distressed Antigone confronting her sister Ismene. "What is it?" asks Ismene, then she adds the purple verb. "You are obviously growing dark in mind (*kalchainous*) over some piece of news." This is a standard reading of the line. Hölderlin's version: "*Du seheinst ein rotes Wort zu färben*," would mean something like "You seem to color a red word, to dye your words red." The deadly literalism of the line is typical of him. His translating method was to take hold of every item of the original diction and wrench it across into German exactly as it stood in its syntax, word order and lexical sense. The result was versions of Sophokles that made Goethe and Schiller laugh aloud when they heard them. Learned reviewers itemized more than a thousand mistakes and called the translations disfigured, unreadable, the work of a madman. Indeed by 1806 Hölderlin was certified insane. His family committed him to a psychiatric clinic, from which after a year he was released as incurable. He spent the remaining thirty-seven years of his life in a tower overlooking the river Neckar, in varying states of indifference or ecstasy, walking up and down his room, playing the piano, writing on scraps of paper, receiving the odd visitor. He died still insane in 1843. It is a cliché to say Hölderlin's Sophokles translations show him on the verge of breakdown and derive their luminous, gnarled, unpronounceable weirdness from his mental condition. Still I wonder

what exactly is the relation of madness to translation? Where does translation happen in the mind? And if there is a silence that falls inside certain words, when, how, with what violence does that take place, and what difference does it make to who you are?

One thing that strikes me about Hölderlin as a translator, and about Francis Bacon as a painter, and for that matter about Joan of Arc as a soldier of God, is the high degree of self-consciousness that is present in their respective manipulations of catastrophe. Hölderlin had begun to be preoccupied with translating Sophokles in 1796 but did not publish *Oedipus* and *Antigone* until 1804. Judging his first versions "not living (*lebendig*) enough," he subjected them to years of compulsive revision, forcing the texts from strange to more strange. Here is Hölderlinian scholar David Constantine's description of this effort:

He warped the original to fit his own idiosyncratic understanding not only of it but also of his obligation in translating it .... Choosing always the more violent word, so that the texts are stitched through with the vocabulary of excess .... he was also voicing those forces in his own psychology which, very soon, would carry him over the edge. And in uttering them did he not aid and abet them? It is the old paradox: the better the poet says these things, the better he arms them against himself. So well put, are they not irresistible? ([10](#))

Irresistible at least was the process of this violence. For it is remarkable that Hölderlin began at this time to revise also his own early work and he went about it the same way, that is, he would scrutinize finished poems for the "not living enough" parts then translate these into some other language, also German, that lay silent inside his own. As if he were moving along a line, ripping the lids off words and plunging his arms in, he met his madness coming the other way.

Yet it was not altogether a chance meeting. From early on Hölderlin had a theory of himself. This from a letter to his friend Neuffer in 1798, which begins with the sentence, "Livingness (*lebendigkeit*) in poetry is now what most preoccupies my mind," then goes on to this lucid analysis of his own balance of being:

.... because I am more destructible than some other men, I must seek all the more to derive some advantage from what has a destructive effect on me ... I must accept it in advance as indispensable material, without which my most inward being cannot ever entirely present itself. I must assimilate it, to arrange it ... as shadows to my light ... as subordinate tones among which the tone of my soul springs out all the more livingly. ([11](#))

This from a letter to Hölderlin's mother from his friend Sinclair in 1804:

I am not the only one—there are six or eight people besides me who have met Hölderlin and are convinced that what appears to be mental derangement is in fact nothing of the sort but is rather a manner of expressing himself which he has deliberately adopted for very cogent reasons. ([12](#))

This from an 1804 review of his Sophokles translations:

What do you make of Hölderlin's Sophokles? Is the man mad or does he just pretend or is his Sophokles a veiled satire on bad translators? ([13](#))

Maybe Hölderlin was pretending to be mad the whole time, I don't know. What fascinates me is to see his catastrophe, at whatever level of consciousness he chose it, as a method extracted from translation, a method organized by the rage against cliché. After all what else is one's own language but a gigantic cacophonous cliché. Nothing has not been said before. The templates are set. Adam long ago named all the creatures. Reality is in chains. When Francis Bacon approaches a white canvas its empty surface is already filled with the whole history of painting up to that moment, it is a compaction of all the clichés of representation already extant in the painter's world, in the painter's head, in the probability of what can be done on this surface. Screens are in place making it hard to see anything but what one expects to see, hard to paint what isn't already there. Bacon is not content to deflect or beguile cliché by some painterly trick, he wants to assassinate it right there on his canvas. So he solicits the interventions of chance. He makes what he calls "free marks" on the canvas, both at the beginning when it is white and later when it is partly painted or completely painted. He uses brushes, sponges, sticks, rags, his hand or just throws a can of paint at it. His intention is to disrupt its probability and to short-circuit his own control of the disruption. His product is a catastrophe, which he will then proceed to manipulate into an image that he can call *real*. Or he may just hang it up:

*David Sylvester:* You would never end a painting by suddenly throwing something at it. Or would you?

*Francis Bacon:* Oh yes. In that triptych on the shoulder of the figure being sick into the basin, there's a whip of white paint that goes like that. Well I did that at the very last moment and I just left it.(14)

Free marks are a gesture of rage. One of the oldest myths we have of this gesture is the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of paradise. Why did Eve put a free mark on that apple? To say she was seduced by the snake or longing for absolute knowledge or in search of immortality are posterior analytics. Isn't the simple fact of the matter that she was bored? Adam had just performed the primordial act of naming, had taken the first step towards imposing on the wide-open pointless meaningless directionless dementia of the real a set of clichés that no one would ever dislodge, or want to dislodge—they are our human history, our edifice of thought, our answer to chaos. Eve's instinct was to bite this answer in half.

Most of us, given a choice between chaos and naming, between catastrophe and cliché, would choose naming. Most of us see this as a zero sum game—as if there were no third place to be: something without a name is commonly thought not to exist. And here is where we can discern the benevolence of translation. Translation is a practice, a strategy, or what Hölderlin calls "a salutary gymnastics of the mind,"(15) that does seem to give us a third place to be. In the presence of a word that stops itself, in that silence, one has the feeling that something has passed us and kept going, that some possibility has got free. For Hölderlin, as for Joan of Arc, this is a religious apprehension and leads to gods. For Francis Bacon it leads to Rembrandt.

One of Francis Bacon's favorite paintings is a self-portrait by Rembrandt. He mentions it in several interviews. What he says he likes about this portrait is that when you go close to it you notice the eyes have no sockets.(16) Let us place this explanation alongside a sentence of Hölderlin's that haunts me and I can't say quite why. On the right-hand margin of a page on

which he had already drafted a poem, Hölderlin at a later date began to write an essay. It contains this strange remark:

*Öfters hab'ich die Sprache, öfters hab'ich Gesang versucht, aber sie hörten dich nicht.*

Often enough I tried language, often enough I tried song, but they didn't hear you.(17)

Something about the way the pronouns in this sentence come face to face with themselves reminds me of Rembrandt's eyes. Those socketless eyes are certainly not blind. They are engaged in a forceful looking, but it is not a look organized in the normal way. Seeing is going on but (is it possible that) seeing is entering Rembrandt's eyes from the back. What his look sends forward, in our direction, is deep silence. Perhaps rather like the silence that followed Joan of Arc's response to her judges when they asked her, "In what language do your voices speak to you?" and she answered: "Better language than yours."

To sum up. Honestly, I am not very good at summing up. The best I can do is offer a final splatter. I was trained to strive for exactness and to believe that rigorous knowledge of the world without any residue is possible for us. This residue, which does not exist—just to think of it refreshes me. To think of its position, how it shares its position with drenched layers of nothing, to think of its motion, how it can never stop moving because I am in motion with it, to think of its tone of voice, which is casual (in fact it forgets my existence almost immediately) but every so often betrays a sort of raw pity I don't understand, to think of its shadow, which is cast by nothing and so has no death in it (or very little)—to think of these things is like a crack of light showing under the door of a room where I've been locked for years. In his tower overlooking the river Neckar, Hölderlin had a piano that he sometimes played so hard he broke the keys. But there were quiet days when he would just play and tilt back his head and sing. Those who heard said they could not tell, though they listened, what language it was.

## Notes

- 1 Françoise Meltzer, *For Fear of the Fire*.
- 2 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*.
- 3 David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*.
- 4 Michael Peppiatt, "Interview with Francis Bacon," in *Art International* 8.
- 5 Françoise Meltzer, *For Fear of the Fire*.
- 6 David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*.
- 7 H. Davies, "Interview with Francis Bacon," *Art in America* 63.
- 8 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, translated by D. W. Smith.
- 9 David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*.
- 10 David Constantine, *Hölderlin*.
- 11 Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, edited by Eric L. Santner.
- 12 David Constantine, *Hölderlin*.
- 13 Aris Fioretos, *The Solid Letter: Readings of Friedrich Hölderlin*.
- 14 David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*.
- 15 David Constantine, *Hölderlin*.
- 16 David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*;

Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, translated by D. W. Smith.

17 Aris Fioretos, *The Solid Letter: Readings of Friedrich Hölderlin*.

**About the Author**

Anne Carson is a poet, essayist, and translator. Her most recent work is *Grief Lessons* (NYRB Classics), a translation of four plays by Euripides. In March 2009, FSG will publish *An Oresteia*, a combining of Aischylos' *Agamemnon*, Sophokles' *Elektra*, and Euripides' *Orestes*. Classic Stage Company will present *An Oresteia* Off Broadway the same month.

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