



a walk repeated

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Presented on:
October 28, 2018 at the University of Waterloo,
University Arts Association of Canada panel discussion:
Writing Visual Culture (Hosted by Brian Rusted)

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between walking and writing. The experience of a walk, the same walk (or a set of walks) repeated day after day, is rooted in its repetition as a method to create a sense of familiarity (or further awareness of the inherent unfamiliarity) with the things and beings that exist around me. Writing as translation becomes the attempted visualization or realization of the walk—an exploration of things seen, heard, thought, and felt. By thinking through both the content and structure of spoken and written prose, this paper begins to explore what it means to re-present an experience from one form/medium to another.

Bio

Andrew Testa is an artist, collector, writer and educator who's practice questions translation and attempts to understand the slippages within acts and gestures of transformation—an inquiry into the spaces between object (whether thing, space, place), perception, word, image, and the experiences these meetings entail. Testa is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor in printmaking at Grenfell Campus, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and has additionally taught at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, and Algoma University in Sault Ste. Marie. He achieved his MFA from York University in Toronto and is the recipient of a SSHRC scholarship and the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation grant. He has an upcoming solo exhibition at Martha Street Studio in Winnipeg in 2019.

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a walk repeated

pause, look, move
rest, walk, pick-up
touch, listen, smell
walk, climb, stop

dust, dirt, stone
kick, toss, drop
crow, flicker, magpie
heard, lost, stop

fracture, broken, stone
walk, pause, pick-up
listen, look, lay
bone, dry, top

move, point, smell
touch, name, stop
slow, wait, pause
walk, walk, walk

Within a relatively short period of time, I have lived in many homes across three provinces. In each instance I make an effort to get to know the place I have temporarily been invited to be upon and in these attempts, I walk—walks from here to there and back...over and over, again and again. For me, there is something about the pace of a walk, a stroll through a space without a destination, which attunes itself to the pace of thinking, of looking, of listening. These are not walks concerned with where one may end up but rather interested in moving slow, of introducing oneself to their surroundings.



Figure 2 – a walk (gridded composition, 2)

During these slow meanderings I converse with the things I encounter. It is not necessarily a spoken language, as I do not share a set of agreed upon terms and symbols with the balsam fir that hugs and lays low upon the wind stricken land it grasps, or the robin that, as I pass, jumps to a perch just out of reach, but rather it is a conversation that exists in one's ability to allow the slow building of an exchange to take place (something that occurs over not one but many walks). Although I know the balsam fir and robin may not understand the words I am thinking or speaking, I feel myself attempting to translate these experiences (for them, for me, and for the improbable hope of a mutual conversation to one day take place). Tim Lilburn, in a collection of essays titled 'Going Home,' speaks about the failure of words to translate such things (not when attempting to converse with things that don't have language the way we do, but rather when sharing or describing such experiences with others). He explains:

The acme of speech is language that carries the knowledge of its inevitable failure inside it: the word cannot be circumscription; it cannot name; it can't even confess with accuracy. But it still loves— helplessly—the world and so walks alongside it; it says what it loves is a red, red rose, says it's a sunset, dusk over a river, and names nothing with this, misspeaks what it points to but hears and reports a moan deep within the speaker. Such language can't identify what it wishes to name, but it somehow manages to achieve a greater interior proximity to that thing. This is desires speech...¹

In this sense, the humble endeavor of words inevitable failure to translate such things can still bring one closer to them. It is in this attempt to translate, the desire to listen and to look at a space, being ok with the fact that one may not hear anything, may not truly see anything, but the willingness to go back, to wait again, and to repeat. And as in anything one may do, practice, repetition and patience are needed to better one's abilities. So I repeat a walk, the same walk (sometimes a set of walks) day after day, to create a sense of familiarity (which always seems to bring to attention the awareness of my inherent unfamiliarity) with the things and beings that exist upon this path I travel. An attempt to learn the language of what is around me.

Just as Lilburn suggests in the previously mentioned quote, language 'walks alongside the world'—two parallel spaces. I too walk alongside the world, peering in curiously from a parallel line with a desire to pull myself closer but always knowing, and being ok with, a distance between this and that, between what is there (a so-called truthfulness) and my sense's humble attempts at translating such encounters.

In my peering I often ask myself two questions: how does one become grounded and how does one become present? With both, it would be naïve of me to think that I can find an answer for such inquires. Part of me understands the inevitable failure I will face, as a lifetime of searching may very well not be enough. But I often find myself reflecting that there is no better way in spending one's time, learning to the best of one's abilities to be grounded, to be present, to be familiar—trying to converse with a stone

¹ Tim Lilburn, *Going Home*, (Toronto: House of Anasai Press Inc., 2008), 185.

and the geological time from which it comes, or to understand the osprey that I patiently watch as it catches a fish in the bay.



Figure 3 – a walk (gridded composition, 3)

In my attempts I think through ideas of translation—in language and in image. Translation in its simplest form can be thought of as transforming one set of terms from one language to another; but it is important to realize in such parallel jumps there are things that are left behind, and things now newly discovered. Douglas Hofstadter is one such researcher interested in the parallel jumps one takes in such endeavours. In ‘Le ton beau de Marot’, (a title for his book that sets the stage for the complexities of translation as in its rhyming is intended to mean *the beautiful sound of Marot*, but in its reading also suggests *the tomb of Marot* or *a memorial for Marot*)², Hofstadter brings together eighty-eight translations of a poem by French poet, Clement Marot, titled, ‘Ma Mignonne’. Here, one reads various attempts from Hofstadter and others that individually navigate the extent to which what information and feelings are lost from the original source, and what becomes found in the process. Hofstadter explains:

In the act of translation, there are always two ‘frames’—the culture of origin, and that of the destination—that inevitably get blended in countless ways as the ideas are transplanted from one soil to the other. Some ideas transplant easily, others put up a fight, occasionally ferocious, and some simply will not go at all, no matter how hard they are shoved. Out of a myriad [of] stunningly diverse and utterly unrelated cross-cultural matches, quasi-matches, semi-matches, pseudo-matches and mismatches, few if any of which were ever pre-dreamt-of by the original author, emerges the unpredictable shape and feel of a translation into another land, tongue, culture and time.³

² Milton Watt, Review of *Le Ton Beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language*, by Douglas Hofstadter. *Journal of Translation*, (2008), 7.

³ Douglas Hofstadter, *Le Ton Beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 117.

In his presented collection, iterations true to the form (the 28 lines, 14 rhyming couplets, all with three syllables with the stress falling on the third syllable in each line) are present, or the meaning and medium of words takes on a greater priority, and in other instances the energy and feeling of the poem becomes what is extracted. However, at the same time each one of these all seem to allow parts of the original to fall away. In doing so, Hofstadter calls attention to the failures of translation, but also the beauty and intricacies of them. In viewing all the iterations one comes to terms with these complexities, the shortcomings, the details, delicacies and distortions of what it means to jump from one parallel line to another—from language to language, thought to speech, experience to art, etc.

In the beginning of this paper I shared a collection of words (or lists), and one may have noticed the instructional verbs and odd nouns that seemed to rule their being. These words have come from moments of pauses upon many walks where I give myself an opportunity to write. One such pause reads:

walk, stop
look, see
listen, hear
move over, move upon
move slow, slower still
walk, stop, look, see, listen, hear
wait



Figure 4 – a walk (gridded composition, 4)

When writing such lists, I seem to focus on my own relationship with my surroundings as I am in a constant state of learning how to be courteous, how to be here. I turn the words inwards on oneself and in doing so create a list mimicking a set of instructions for one to follow. But in the earlier lists there are also nouns. When learning how to be courteous I am learning the names of things that pass me by, and although I do not share a set of agreed upon terms with the crow, the flicker, or magpie, I see it as an introduction to a conversation where the name quickly falls away. These lists then are both small attempts at translation of my walks, as well as an investigation into the

language of gestures one participates in. It is a reminder to move slow, to wait, to bring the pace of one's thoughts and body to the pace of the coltsfoot or hawkweed that sit by my side.

In such written and visual transformations of my many walks I often reflect upon the re-presentations of these attempts—asking myself: what is truth and 'the real' in such translations? I think back to Hofstadter and his eighty-eight poems and upon reading through them realize that the singularity of each is only successful in its ability to point back to the whole and the origin from which it came. It is not that one poem's failures and successes outshines the others, and not even that the original is necessarily better or worse than any of the new iterations, but that they all collectively and individually speak towards, in one regard, the same thing, and in another regard, their differences. It is my hope then that the translations within my lists and within my works can point to their origin but also to a broader area surrounding that moment, and more specifically, an area of difference and distortion. And with each attempt, in text (whether spoken or written) and image (whether digital or drawn), the pointing continues, however, with new priorities in each—with new failures, delicacies, and complexities.

In this regard, the idea of 'truthfulness' exists in a state of flux. Each iteration draws attention to something different and to simply allow whatever the event or so-called original to stand in as the 'most truthful' may not allow for the introduction of the delicacies, distortions and failures of the translation, a place where I believe there is much to be learned. Because of this, I am interested in the conversations that exist in the parallel jumps between experience and language, or experience and the visual—a parallel jump that gets so close that it can graze against the surface of its counterpart while simultaneously introducing a new 'unpredictable shape' in this secondary form.

One ability of speech and writing when being related to one's experience of a walk is the upholding of duration in the new iteration. The temporal experience of walking can be made similar to a temporal experience of both writing and reading. It invites one to slow down, to walk along the page of a text, or to travel with the words and sounds as one speaks. This is a language that is shared between people calling attention to what Lilburn referred to as the 'moan deep within the speaker'—a translation for others to participate in, one that invites conversation and attempts to become closer to the thing itself, although always knowing a degree of failure within its trying. But this refers to a sharing with others that relate to language and visuals the way I do—what about the earlier proposition I made? The attempt of allowing the slow building of a potential conversation to take place with the non-human: the balsam fir, the robin, the coltsfoot, or the stone that sits by my side in a momentary pause upon a walk where I rest and wait. What does this mutual conversation look like?

One instance in my many walks that I am always excited to experience is when I do find a spot to sit and wait. I often sit upon the ground, or a boulder, a bench perhaps if there is one, and I pick up a small stone near me, one that may be lying by my side. When this occurs and the ground still holds on to the cold night (something that happens more often than not in my current residence in Newfoundland) the stone shares that cool temperature. It is connected to the ground. But when I hold on to it, and caress it, and spend time with it, it begins to warm and accepts the temperature of my body, and my body begins to cool to the temperature of the stone. And then there is a moment of equilibrium—where both my hand and the stone are the same temperature and there is a feeling that there is no point in which I end and the stone begins. For me,

this is conversation, an exchange, a language of sorts now noticed through the many interactions with the many stones I have had the pleasure to experience.

As an artist and a writer I think of myself as a translator. I experience the world around me and I attempt to translate the events witnessed or felt in the hopes of sharing such things with others—to provide an opportunity to look at something together, whether in silence or in conversation. In thinking about Lilburn’s ‘acme of speech’ and Hofstadter’s mis-matches and quasi-matches, the parallel jumps one takes may inevitably fail to reach a sense of equality; a sense of this is equal to that. But in both, the recognition of such slippages and the acknowledgment of failure (in the best sense of the word) brings one closer to the thing itself—allowing one to maybe even touch it. When thinking about an artist or writer as a translator—someone who takes one set of terms and transforms them to another—there may be a thought that a translation can be duplicated. But as seen in Hofstadter’s extensive book, the translation is relative to the translator—their circumstance, their experience, and so on. It may point back to the same thing but also points to never-ending differences. In my translations I am interested in learning how to bring my body to a parallel space that may one day be as close as one can be to the geological time of the stone, or the ephemerality of the dandelion. And in such learning, I use words, or a list, or a set of instructions, to remind myself how to be present, how to be grounded, and how to be here. I will now end with a collection of words or instructions that are in anticipation of a walk to come opposed to a walk already taken:

go for a walk
find a place to sit and wait
wait in this place
walk back to where you began
and repeat



Figure 5 – a walk (gridded composition, 5)

Works Cited

- Hofstadter, Douglas. *Le Ton Beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language*, New York: Basic Books, 1997.
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