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FRIENDLING TRANSLATION

Abstract:
In this text, originally delivered as a keynote address at the American Literary Translators' Association in October 2013, poet and translator Cole Swensen examines and experiences the translatability of the neologism *Amitier*—the title of a monograph by the French philosopher Gilles Tiberghien—through the lenses of historical etymology and translingual semantics. Swensen places "friendship" under etymological review, tracing the historical transformation and dispersion of the concept, by way of morphological mutation and sociolinguistic application, from Sanskrit to Japanese, Danish, Proto-Germanic, Arabic, and American Englishes. In working dialogue with the contemporary French poets and prose artists Suzanne Doppelt and Jean Frémont, Swensen explores what friendship and translation elicit from and engender in one another.

Keywords:
Tiberghien ◆ translation ◆ etymology ◆ stylistics ◆ friendship ◆ French poetry ◆ Walser

Friendling Translation. That first word, that's a verb. Though I admit, it's a provisional one. I'm playing with it in order to address a problem in a translation that I'm currently working on—and the reason I've lit on it as the title is that the problem is not only one that I have to solve in relation to this particular book, but it also radiates outward to hook up with a couple of other problems—and a couple of other promises—that seem inherent in translation as a whole.

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The book in question is a work by the French philosopher Gilles Tiberghien titled *Amitier* (2009). The title is a neologism, creating a verb out of the familiar French noun amitié. In a certain sense, the whole book is about that one linguistic shift; its thesis is an appeal to extend the static noun of friendship into a verb of ongoing attention, amitier, a verb analogous to the verb 'to love' in relation to the noun 'love.' "I love you" expresses an ongoing activity—an activity essential to maintaining the state, but we don't have such a verb for friendship. One of Tiberghien's principal points is that if you don't have the word for such an action, you can't perform it. The need for the word in order to make the action possible has certainly been pointed out before—but this particular instance made me think, too, of how it affects the possibilities of translation.

For instance, if one were translating this book into a language in which there was such a verb, the entire book would be untranslatable. But that we'll get to in a minute. For the moment, it's a problem rooted in and contained within the linguistic instance—with profound effects on the society that speaks it. And it's one that English pretty much shares. We have the verb 'to befriend,' but that means 'to initiate a friendship,' which almost compounds the erroneous implication of the French: once it's started, on it goes, needing no tender ministrations.

So the problem of translating the title, in this case, represents the main problem in translating the whole book. I thought for a while that I had a solution, simply by titling it 'to friend' (I've been thinking about doing this translation for a long time—i.e., long before Facebook—which is a time, I imagine, that a good many of us remember quite clearly, so: note to self, re: procrastination: huge multi-million dollar virtualities are just lying in wait to slurp up your perfectly good solutions. Gone. Intricately impossibilized. So I've been thinking of calling it *Friendling*—but then again maybe not—it sounds a bit diminutive, and somehow slightly edible. Needless to say, I am taking suggestions.

All that aside, et pour en revenir à nos moutons, it's not just the title. It's the whole word, including its etymology, which is causing problems. The etymology comes into play in a number of places. The fact that the etymologies of the English and the French words for this state are not the same got me to thinking about etymology itself as a basis of friendships, and thus about which languages are friends with which others, or not—and which are relatives—and how close—which are siblings, which are cousins, and which are of such mixed parentage

that there's bound to be conflict or at least a few really, really awkward moments at family gatherings—which, in our field, we call translations. Let's consider a slightly more optimistic image of 'friendship' à la translation.

Translating *Amitier* offers an excellent example for looking at the role of etymology, for in addition to advocating a renovation of our approach to friendship, it also offers an overview of western philosophy's discourse on friendship, which necessitates an exploration of the word itself—in this case amitié. There are several points at which Tiberghien writes things such as: le mot amitié vient du mot Latin amīcitātem, qui est l'accusatif de... and the like.

Fine, as far as it goes—but it doesn't go as far as English, for, though we retain vestiges of this etymology in various words, such as amicable and amity, these are not the go-to words of the average citizen, and if I simply translate a passage such as the previous one as: "the word friendship comes from the Latin word amīcitātem which is the accusative of" etc., that clearly makes no sense, as the word "friendship" does not come from the Latin etc., but in the context of the book as a whole, such passages are used to say important things about the nuances of these root words and their role in creating the state of amité as it is understood in France today, so choosing to translate the word along with its concomitant cultural context, (i.e.: the word friendship comes from the Old English freond etc.) won't work either and would lead the whole translation irremediably astray.

So I have no solution. (That's not quite true. I do, but like most solutions, it's not as interesting as the problem, so we won't bother with it here.)

However, it made me think about the constant presence of etymology as a threat to translation—that the fact that every word always carries with it its entire history, a long echo-chamber of refracted nuances and accumulated associations; it arrives on the page with tons of baggage, as it were, creating a turbulence just below the surface of any translation, as if the incongruent etymologies of the original word and its translation were in a constant struggle, trying to match up, to click into sync, and yet never quite managing to fit—and the greater their difference, the greater the disturbance.

We don't, in the daily work of translation, think of this as a problem because we don't see etymologies, nor are we in any other way consciously aware of them, though they do shape the sound-field of a given language, allowing the sonic

relations within a text translated from a closely related language to hold together more tightly than one translated from a more distantly related language. Their common etymological heritage allows the subtexts of the two works to align.

Am I making this all up? Do such sub-texts even exist? Or are they just abstract fancies based on an overly Romantic / optimistic / mystical conception of the powers inherent in language, not only the power of expression, but the power to retain history, to trace lineage, to safeguard something of the spirit of a language as constituted by the accrual and sedimentation of all its meanings across time. I don't know.

So, back to something that we do know: when this book, *Amitier*, was translated into Spanish, this problem did not exist, for, stemming from a common root, the two languages are still joined through their etymological memories. And when the book is translated into Indonesian, the problem will be even worse; as for its English version, English at least shares some etymological memory with French; we see it in cognates all the time. But the etymological memory of English is split, half heading north-east, the other half heading south-east, and this fact haunts many of our translations from European languages.

So what is the etymology of the English word 'friendship'? It comes from the Old English freond, which is the present participle of the word freogan, which meant 'to love; to favor,' which in turn comes from the Proto-Germanic frijojanan 'to love,' and is related to the Old Norse fraendi, the Middle High German friunt, the German Freund, and the Gothic frijonds, all of which also derive from present participles. So, in short, we do in fact come from a language in which there once was a verb form of friendship—and one wonders why it has disappeared.

Additionally, the Old English freond, with which we started, is also linked to the Old English freo, which was an adjective meaning free, as in 'not in bondage,' but also 'noble, joyful.' Tracing the etymology of freo takes us on a meandering course, intersecting at times with that of freond, and ending up at the proto-indo-european prijos meaning 'dear or beloved' from the root pri, 'to love,' which can be traced back to the Sanskrit priyah, meaning 'own, dear, beloved,' which branched off in another direction to arrive at the Old Church Slavonic prijati, meaning to help.

Thus, the English word 'friend' hauls behind it a long shadow layered with aspirations to freedom and expectations of aid—very different from the shadows that haunt the French ami. It's these peripheral significations that interest me because they seem generative—they seem to hang out there at the very edges of a word's meaning and invite others in; they seem to be constantly trying to stray over the boundary of the word's established limit, but in so doing, they create an ever-larger echo chamber in which the word's layers rebound, involute, augment, and just make a hell of a lot of noise.

And I'm thinking here of noise in the sense in which it's used in information science—that which disrupts the seamless transmission of a message, usually to its detriment, but just occasionally enabling the introduction of new elements into the closed system that is a language. Except that no language is a closed system in any other than the most theoretical terms, and the whole apparatus can always be looked at a different way—for instance, we could look, not at the system that is the English language or the French language, but the system that is all words that mean friendship—and I was drawn to do this because I wondered what underlying assumptions about this basic human relationship could be revealed by its etymologies:

For instance, the Moroccan writer Omar Berrada tells me that the word sahib—though it's become a cliché from its use in British-occupied India, comes from the Arabic sahiba, originally meaning 'he who accompanies.' Thus, a friend is one who travels with you, a parallel spirit.

Another Arabic term for friend is sadeeq صديق, which comes from sadaqa, صدق which means 'to tell the truth,' and so the underlying premise here is that a friend is one who tells you the truth, and, concomitantly, is one who believes what you say. There's a closely related verb form, but it, too, means to befriend, to initiate a friendship.

The Japanese poet Sawako Nakayasu reports that the word for friendship in Japanese is tomodachi, and is written with two kanji, tomo, 'friend' 友, and tachi, 'to attain' 友. The first kanji comes from the Chinese and represents two hands, the left and the right, 又 and 左 working together, implying that, in that culture, it is the ability to work together that constitutes friendship.

A Chinese friend, the poet Dong Li, tells me that a common word in Chinese for friendship is 友谊, meaning 'common interests harmoniously linked,' and a common word for friend is 朋友 indicating 'a common master and common interests.' When the verb form 'to work or do' is added, 做朋友 becomes 'to make friends.' So it's the shared nature of circumstance and the ability to negotiate it peaceably that underlies friendship in this context, and again, the verb form speaks to the onset of a friendship but not to sustaining it.

The poet and translator Derek Gromadzki supplies the word in Hebrew: khaver חבר, which comes from the root ח.ב.ר which means 'to connect'—so in this context, the relationship is emphasized over the two things or people who are related.

The word in Danish—my sister-in-law Verena Hayward, a Danish patent attorney, tells me—is ven, from the Old Norse word vinr, which, the Internet tells me, is related to the Latin venus ('beauty'), which I highly doubt, but I just thought it should go down in the record.

The Indian poet Amit Dwibedy, traces the Hindi dost दोस्त back to a common root verb that gave rise to the Old Persian dauš, the Old Avestan zauš, and the Sanskrit jus जुष, all of which mean, roughly, 'enjoy.' Going back further along the Sanskrit, it appears that it is the joy particular to one who has been chosen. Looking back even further and comparing cognates from a variety of Indo-European languages, brings us finally to the Proto-Indo-European verb ğeus: 'to taste' or 'to relish.'

So, while all these words mean 'friend' or 'friendship,' none of them mean the same thing by it. And yet all their differences are, as if by a single stroke of the scythe that is the present moment, equalized (it's like flattening all the layers in photoshop). Or is it? I don't know.

Additionally, I asked all my friend-informants about the verb aspect—is there a verb for friendship as an ongoing activity/engagement? And though there were nuances and detours—often including the idea that 'we used to have one but do no longer,' the answer in terms of current, active use was no. Curious.

Which makes me think that, though Tiberghien's call for this linguistic transformation seems locked—through etymology—into the Romance

languages, it might be applicable, and thus audible across a broad sweep of cultures.

And this is why, in part, I translate my friends. That's not quite right; I translate complete strangers, but in the course of the translation it has happened that we become friends, largely through the conversations and interrogations that translation demands, and based on a mutual fascination with language and its powers.

This has been facilitated by the fact that, early in my translation practice, I decided to work only on the work of living writers, for a couple of reasons.

One is to collapse the time gap between writing and translation; so often, translation lags a generation or more behind, which makes it very difficult for writers to get a comprehensive sense of what their contemporaries in other languages are doing. (And I do come from the perspective of the writer rather than the reader—for readers, the time constraint is not an issue, but for a writer wanting to participate in an increasingly global literary conversation, contemporary translation is essential.)

Thus, if translations lag only by a year or so, there's a much more fluid transfer of ideas and influence and an implicit invitation to carry the conversation over to a literal level—i.e. any English-language poet who reads something I translate or publish knows that he or she can actually meet that person and extend the conversation into an opportunity for a much more thorough exchange of ideas, an exchange that may even develop into a friendship.

Another reason I translate only living writers is to keep my own translation practice based in conversation, not limited to the words on the page and the peripheral information that research could provide, but with access to knowledge of the writer as a whole, his or her attitudes, abiding concerns, sense of humor, personal history. It also gives me access to the history of the text, the context of its inception, its backstory and its connection to the rest of the writer's oeuvre and to other contemporary works in the language—these are all essential information for a thorough translation. And perhaps they're more important in the translation of poetry, where the information conveyed in the work is a relatively small part of the act. In a sense, it allows me to translate not only the words on the page, but the entire space, atmospheric and physical, that surrounds them as well.

In practice, translation that takes place within a conversation also fosters conversation on larger issues of poetics, which keeps me up to date on the assumptions and questions, both historic and current, motivating French letters, so that I'm less likely to translate a French poem through the lens of contemporary American poetics, but instead have a good idea of the approaches and concerns that inform that particular poem as well as the milieu of poetry out of which it came.

I'm going to share excerpts from two recent translations I've done in "the conversational mode"—which is to say, they were worked through many sessions of friendly conversation that covered everything from specific connotation to background political events. They were both written around 2010, and are both written in prose blocks—beyond that, they're from different worlds, and so represent a range of contemporary French poetic concern.

I'll start with three short pieces from a book coming out soon from Omnidawn Publishers, titled *The Posthumous Life of R.W.* by Jean Frémon. It's particularly interesting in this context because, in this series of short prose texts about the personality and life of the Swiss German writer Robert Walser, the French writer tries to capture the mood and flavor of his work. The etymological histories of French and German do not overlap significantly, and their sound-fields are quite different, so capturing such linguistic subtleties as tone and pacing was a challenge in the first place. But then, when it goes into English translation, a triangulation occurs. Suddenly, a third language that shares significant etymological territory with both of the others steps in and, in a way, functions as a mediator, bringing in more of the German sound-field into the conceptual center of the French. This may make more difference theoretically than practically, but nonetheless, I felt it as an influence throughout the project.

One of Walser's peculiarities was that he wrote at times in an impossibly tiny, compacted "microscript." (You can see examples of it online by putting the words "Robert Walser microscripts" into a search engine.) They are so tiny and so encrypted that it was years before anyone sufficiently deciphered them to recognize that these were indeed additional writings. Susan Bernofsky has recently translated a volume of them, which is now available from New Directions/Christine Burgin.

The Posthumous Life of R.W.

1

In a spacious room on the second floor of the boarding house he's chosen for home, RW stretches out on his bed and thinks that he really should get out and take advantage of that sunny late afternoon he can see out the window. To feel the fine breeze that's shuddering the leaves of the lime trees on my face and through my hair, that would be nice, he thinks. First I'll go to the fountain—I'm always happy just hearing it—then I'll push on, taking the path up the hill to the little grove, from which I just might be able to catch a glimpse of my landlady hanging out her laundry. Watching his landlady hanging out her laundry is one of RW's favorite pastimes. No one could deny, he thinks, that her silhouette is even more lovely when she's reaching upward. And then once at the edge of the grove, he could lie down in the grass to rest a moment. Contemplating the passing clouds is another of his favorite activities. Look at that one, fattening and darkening right there on the spot. But wait, isn't it collapsing into a fragrant gust that will soon turn into a downpour? Those gorgeous sheets, almost dry, he thinks, are going to get drenched unless she races out to get them before it's too late. She'll come back in, rain running down her face, her bangs streaming across her eyes; hope she doesn't catch cold. As for me, thank heavens I didn't go out. It's never wise to rush into things, thinks RW, fluffing up his pillow.

2

RW was always very aware of proportion. There are proportions that delight both eye and mind, he'd say, and others that offend. For example, RW liked small houses, unimposing houses; he felt invited in. But if he had had to live in one, he who loved huge rooms with many windows . . . To find a huge room in a small house is no mean feat, but that's precisely its merit: a rare but satisfying proportion. Or more precisely, a satisfying proportion . . . and rare.

The height and width of the sky above him as he walks through the countryside, that's what he likes—and it's all to do with the proportions of the sky in relation to those of his body. He likes to feel small. He can't

resist mentally comparing the distances, both spatial and temporal, between all he sees and all that occurs. Recognizing the proportional relationships among sizes, distances, and durations creates an invisible thread that connects all things and all events, he thinks. And this thought fills him with tremendous calm.

3

Of the books in his living room bookcase—few in number, but each an object of veneration—the one that RW likes best is the big atlas bound in red leather. He opens it on his lap and flips through the pages for hours, his private mode of travel.

And what he loves above all in the atlas are the lakes. He likes real lakes, too, little mountain lakes. There are lots of them around there. RW loves to visit them all, to sit on their banks, and even, in summer, to slip into their cool waters. He loves the way they reflect the sky and thus enlarge the world.

But in atlases, there are many more lakes than there are around there, and in atlases, you can see their shapes, those lovely light blue splashes with strange contours. And what's more, you can see their names. RW loves the names of lakes, almost without exception. He writes up lists: Bodensee, Walensee, Zugersee, Thunersee, Brienzersee, Urnersee, Stillsee, Greifensee, Pfaffikersee. Most of them stretch out lengthwise. Walking around them would be a real journey. Easier simply to cut across. Some are very small and almost round. Crossing them would lead nowhere.

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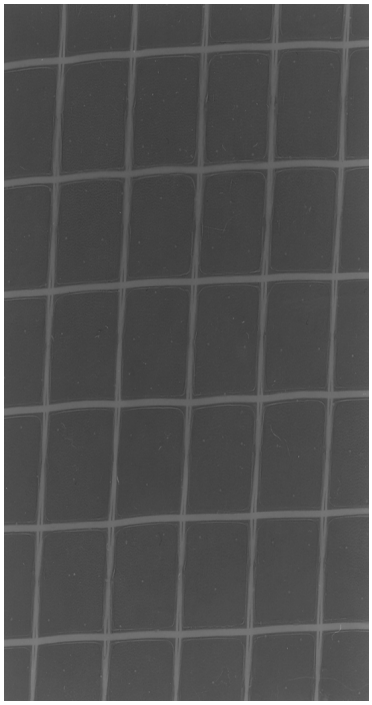
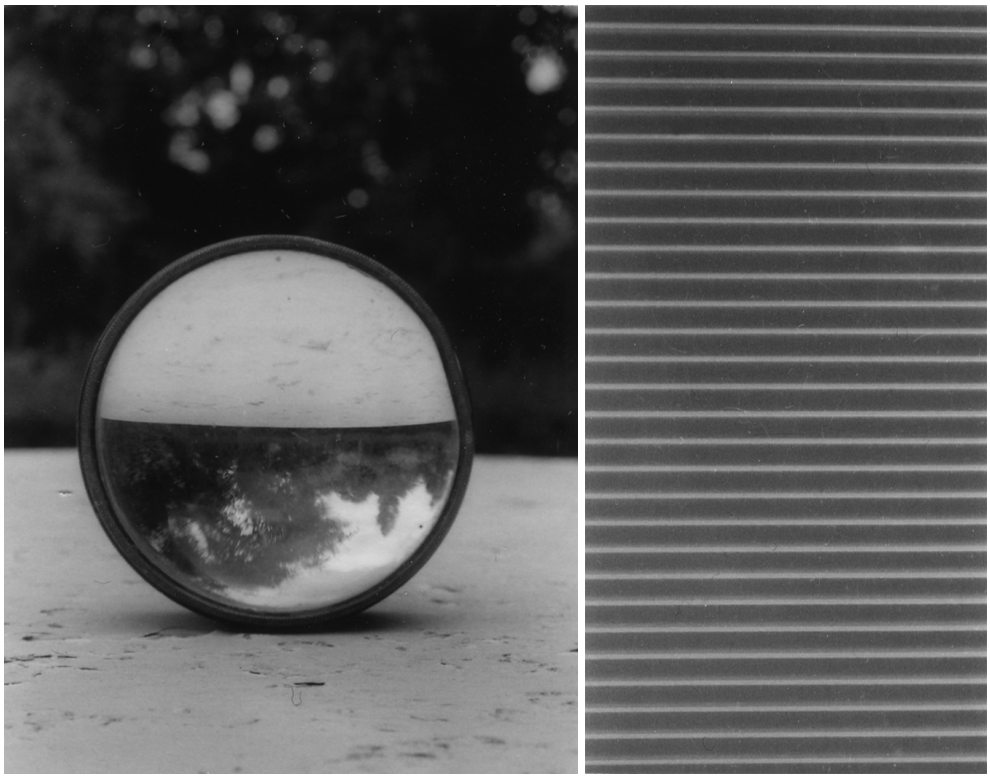
The next few pieces are from a book titled *Lazy Suzie* (2009) by the French writer and photographer Suzanne Doppelt, which is coming out in English next year from Litmus Press. This project presented another one of those problems that's perhaps more theoretical than practical in that it includes photographs, which of course can't be 'translated' and one might be tempted to think that they don't have to be, yet when all the text surrounding them, in short, their entire context, changes, it seems that they must necessarily change as well—but on what principles and in what direction? This need to translate the photos is heightened by the fact that the photos are, in their own way, oblique translations of the text itself, which is a paratactic, ambiguous meditation on perception, particularly sight, and the many instruments we use to augment and distort it.

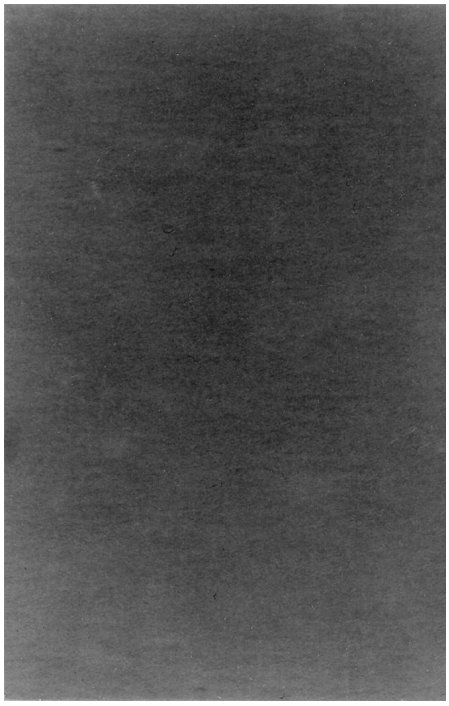
sight presumes a slight fissure and to start painting means to pierce a hole, one is enough to create a sieve, through it you watch history, the world or its reflection, its screen an unsilvered pane, the painting, a window that opens like an orange. Round, squared, a pyramid, or even a leaf of clover in the garden of the chinese emperor or anywhere else, it must give light, let in air, wind, scent but not too much, and sun, all the while framing the gaze, sight is always seeing through a hole of light. The painting is a window that contains another, headed outward, wide open on the landscape, a fragment of nature, fir and pines, rolling hills, varied greens, a river that sings, a bridge and rolling ground, the horizon line and the vanishing point precise, *it's lovely to have so much greenery out the window of my room.* With a 360 degree view, a panoramic vertigo that doesn't let up and to gaze at the sky and then down at the street, everyone who passes, a hat and a coat, a continuous ghost in streaks, you know it by its gait, or motionless, well back in the shadows, the window replaces the walk, the theater, and everything else. To trace a frame is to open a window, 3 feet wide by 5 high toward the cold, a bright screen in a glass wall, leaning on it the better to see the world reflected, varied perspectives and their pictures; the translucent face, seen in three-quarter, with and without contour, strictly obliquely presents a form distinctly, a roman colossus. But what do you see? A large circle, or 180 degrees in the sun, a canvas that forms the background of a system radiating dust and

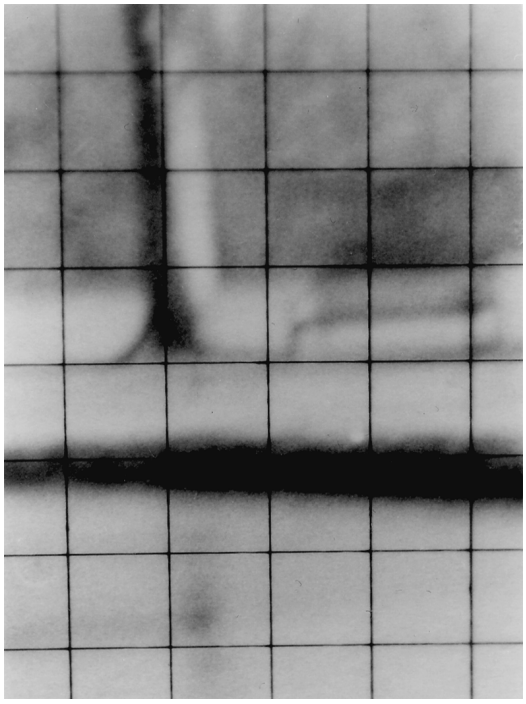
stone, a young man and an old one, it surges back, slowly magnetic, a socket, a single one straight on and strictly slanted, stunned, it's strange how things happen and then the forms they take on. It was windy and the tense air hummed, sometimes one way, often another, the least insect was visible in the sky, but for the filming, the camera was put inside the sphere



detached, the sun is eclipsed when the moon locks in, below, in a straight line, its masked light reflecting as in a glass, a mirror, a shadow's stain rearranging the landscape, the gleaming cubes, cones, and spheres branding the ground, and the sun multiplies itself through the trees. It's what gave aristotle the idea of a pierced box, a lovely little scientific toy: everything outside comes in and everything inside then leaves, the leaves and branches, the animals and faces, the enemies' armies, amazing information. Every little thing is visible, a tree trunk and the ants dancing in a round, a 10-gallon tank and water running down the gutter, the light frames and floods the screen, zooms in on a streetlight, dazzling, a blinding discharge that then disappears in a sudden glaze of ice, the moon passes in front, igniting three minutes of the dead of night at high noon in aden, five in florence. The temperature drops, the air changes color, insects stop in their tracks, birds fall to earth, and the dew strikes

again. A silence different from every other silence, a gleam more matte than any other gleam, tending strongly toward violet, as before any disaster, the horizon changes and all feeling goes flat. *Someday I'll make a film staring straight at the sun, a film about cruelty* and its perceptible qualities— its grandeur and structure, even when the moon's shadow takes it out of the sky, plucking it from sight. And finding it again as the moon slides sideways, events evaporate, replaced by their birth-place, but remain in space, or look into a mirror, round for the sun, square for the moon, such graceful and charming illusions. When everything is perfectly aligned and the moon is as flat as a leaf and slides into the shadow of the earth, it disappears, then re-emerges an hour later in the half-light, a striated ghost and slightly stained, to regain its luster at a later time





the round eye of the mirror captures at least the edges and that of the box eats images whole, kepler invented one that pivoted, a lovely engine of rotation, from view to view the horizon traces a 360 degree line, all of nature in a glance. You can see everything and drifting off, the world's great variety under an equal light, come closer, it's all blurring, flattening, and disappearing; step back a bit, and it all comes together again, multiplied. The precise forms form once more on the highly polished cylinder, objects turn and you turn with them, it's a magic roll, a moving panorama showing thousands of things all in color and perspective,

> monuments and gardens, historical facts, and distant lands. The glance glides mid-speed from left to right, a moving point on a line bordered by trees, frozen vertigo, *but what are you running from?* Psyche unfurls her body, pliable as wax, and the leaves draw fine and continuous lines as from the window of a train, *my wake*

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So while I've yet to come up with the translation of amitier, it seems to me that what that verb is trying to do in terms of creating friendship-as-ongoing-activity is no where better demonstrated than in the work of translation—friendship among people, languages, texts, and cultures. And, as I understand it, that's the whole reason that we're all here—to explore friendship as a verb and as an act of translation on many, many levels.

Editors' Note: A first version of this essay was presented at the American Literary Translators' Association in Bloomington, Indiana, on 18 October 2013.

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