Remembrance of Selves Past

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Words and images are incomplete class notes from the world, a way of catching reminders. Of course they are only traces.

—Jim W. Corder, “Aching for a Self”

With every word we write, we believe that “our character could be in the text . . . that we do exist [and] that we can be in our words” (140-41). Jim W. Corder, in his essay “Aching for a Self,” proposes that we produce in our writings “evidence” of our existence; we translate our experiences into written form and sometimes between different languages in order to share ourselves with our readers and, in the process, to re-affirm our presence in the world (141). Corder believes that “if we tell our stories carefully to one another,” “fully, painstakingly,” sharing the intimate details of our lives, we might allow others to see us in our “local habitations” and recognize our existence there (142). But he is also disturbed by the fact that we can never fully convey ourselves via language, a system of symbols by which we try to capture shared experience. Corder turns to John Kouwenhoven, who tells us that any speaker of English knows what the word ‘grass’ refers to because that word “suggests an identity” we are familiar with: such symbolic language universalizes our personal experience, but still the intricate details of unique experiences, the “different looks, feels, tastes, and smells” of the objects in reference remain open to personal interpretations (qtd. in Corder 142). Our understandings of words differ, and mistranslations are inevitable. Given the limitations of language and the difficulty of translating sensations and images into words, it seems impossible to render completely our experiences and “compose [ourselves] for another,” even if we do it “carefully” and “painstakingly” (141,142).

Eva Hoffman grapples with leaving a trace of her childhood experience encoded in her essay, “Lost in Translation,” an autobiographical account of her immigration from Poland to Canada. Onboard the Batory, a World War
II ship that is poised to take her away from Krakow, her hometown, the thirteen-year-old Hoffman is overcome with *tesknota* when she takes in “the crowd that has gathered on the shore to see the ship’s departure . . . the waving hands, the exclamations” (176). Even though she knows that her family is heading towards a land of “freedom,” she yearns to remain in war-torn Krakow, to be a part of the crowd that is waving goodbye (177). Hoffman describes her feelings toward this departure using a Polish word instead of the English “nostalgia”: such refusal to translate, she explains, compensates for the inadequacy of her new language. Attachment to her native Polish language reveals what all bilinguals know intimately: not all thoughts and emotions can be translated. Had she just used “nostalgia” to explain her sentiments, the “tonalities of sadness and longing” of the Polish word would have been missing (176). With *tesknota* she clarifies her emotions, but only to herself. Non-Polish readers will not know the full meaning encapsulated in this word and its culture. Even as she attempts to explain the word, we can sense that the emotion aroused by *tesknota* is lost to us, the inexperienced.

Hoffman’s inability to translate her emotions from her native language to English is shared by Russian author Vladimir Nabokov. In one of his collected interviews, Nabokov, an immigrant to both Germany and America and a masterful writer of English, observed that the different linguistic codes we use to represent our experience often lead to “unavoidable blunders . . . [which] could lend [themselves] to hideous mistranslation” (37-38). The ineffable emotional knowledge attached to words and linguistic structures shared by a community who all speak the same language is often unavailable to outsiders who lack access to that language and culture. Perhaps Hoffman’s refusal to use an English word to describe her feelings arises not because a semantic translation does not exist, but rather because she senses in *tesknota* a connotation unavailable in English.

To Nabokov, mistranslations seem unidirectional: unlike the loss of emotions that accompanies his translation of written texts from Russian to English, his “descriptions of tender emotions” in English “slip very delicately into lyrical Russian” (53). Nabokov explains that he is able to represent his emotions and thoughts well to himself in Russian because it is his “natural language,” the one that he grew up with, the one his heart speaks (15). But perhaps the accuracy of this translation from English to Russian is obvious only to Nabokov. A reader whose “natural language” is English and who is as proficient in Russian as Nabokov was in English may compare Nabokov’s original text in English to its Russian version and still see a mistranslation, a difference in “tender emotions.” Nabokov’s experience leads us to wonder
whether the significant loss of meaning that seems to accompany translations can affect the ability of readers to understand the author's unique experience. Is the loss greater for fellow speakers and readers than it is for the writer, who at least knows his own intent? Such an attachment to Polish, her “natural language,” allows Hoffman to represent her emotions more faithfully, after all, in the word *tesknota*. Yet, even when Hoffman uses her “natural language,” it seems as though something is still lost.

The usage of *tesknota* offers a clue to the particular, individual sense of loss that Hoffman is grappling with, but it does not allow her to represent entirely or re-experience what she has lost. On the surface, Hoffman’s “youthful sorrow” seems to be brought on by her departure from Krakow (176). She confronts the absence of her hometown: she misses “the sun-baked villages where [her family] had taken summer vacations” and the “conversations and escapades with friends” (176). She had loved these experiences “as one loves a person” (176). The intensity of her attachment makes us wonder why, if she truly misses Krakow, she could not return to her hometown when it becomes possible after she grows up. Yet she does not, and neither does Nabokov return to his: having left Russia as a young child, he never went back, because he was aware that the Russia he was missing had disappeared. It was no longer the place he had once known. The physical Russia had changed along with its political and social landscape. His return would not bring him to a place that still stirred in him the “tender emotions.” Instead, “all the Russia [he] need[s] is always with [him]: literature, language and [his] own Russian childhood” (9-10). Likewise, even if Hoffman had returned to Krakow, it would no longer have been the same place as when she had left. The “paradise” and “sun-baked villages” would have been replaced by an environment filled with “memories of wartime suffering” (177, 176).

“Lost in Translation” reveals, however, that the Krakow Hoffman misses is not really lost. It remains etched in her mind—after all, she is able to recall the most minute details of her bedroom in the last paragraph of her essay: she still remembers the “goose-feather quilt covered in hand-embroidered silk” that she “snuggled under” (177). Her childhood memory also includes more than just the visual details of the room: she recalls her bodily experiences, the “bracing but not overly fast swaying” motion of a tramway ride and the “hum of the tramway” she heard from her room (177). She remembers the time when “the world . . . flow[ed] so gently into [her] head,” when “being awake [was] so sweet” (177). To us it may seem that it is not the physical Krakow she misses but rather the sensations her body experienced in her childhood bedroom. We begin to understand that moving to Canada meant more to her
than a departure from Krakow, more than a loss of her native tongue; it meant being “pried out of [her] childhood, [her] pleasures [and her] safety” (177).

In “Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood,” Richard Rodriguez attempts to understand this act of translation. For him, though, it takes shape in the process of maturing from childhood to adulthood. Rodriguez nostalgically describes the childhood bodily sensations that he misses and the intimacy he had within his close-knit family, a closeness disrupted as much by growing up as by the English language he was required to speak outside his home. As a Mexican child growing up in America, he had heard speech as sounds instead of words with meanings. He describes himself as a “listening child,” less concerned with what people say than with the tonalities of the language they speak (502). “The very different sounds of Spanish and English” have very different meanings for him: Spanish is a “private language,” one that is exclusively used at home, and English is a “public” one used by “los gringos” (502, 503). The sound of Spanish, his “natural language,” serves as a “pleasing, soothing [and] consoling reminder” that he belongs to his family “like no one outside” (502, 503). This intimacy he finds with his family, based on a shared language, among other things, fills his childhood with “laughter” and “pleasures” of home (504).

Rodriguez’s unadulterated happiness, however, lasts only until he realizes the need to commit to English in order to communicate in public. Maturing from Ricardo to Richard, he gains a new identity—a public one—which gives him “confidence” and allows him to accept the fact that he is “an American citizen” (505, 506). Yet, in so doing, he gradually forsakes his “natural language” and his private identity. To his family he becomes one of “los gringos.” Rodriguez believes that his “childhood start[s] to end” when he accepts the idea that he is entitled to use English (508). But along with this empowerment, he loses that “special feeling of closeness at home” that used to be protected by Spanish, the “ghetto language that deepened and strengthened [his] feeling of separateness” from the public (506, 504).

Hoffman’s childhood “paradise” also predates her introduction to the language of strife and “wartime suffering” outside her home (177). Her happiness is compromised by the knowledge gained by growing up. In the last paragraph of her essay, she transports herself back to a four-year-old state and allows us to see the object of her tesknota, her Eden, an innocence which gave her a “sense of utter contentment” and “sufficiency” (177). Even though her country was destroyed by war, she felt that “being awake [was] so sweet” because she was unaware, sheltered by her parents and detached from the
world by her innocence (177). She loses her child-like state of mind, however, when she is introduced to the language of racist prejudices and the “daily struggle for existence” (177). She becomes aware of the anti-Semitism in Krakow and the alienation her family faces. Her Edenic environment keeps her from knowing “that [her] happiness [was] taking place in a country recently destroyed by war,” and she is overcome by the reality of wartime suffering and “dark political rumblings” (177).

As Hoffman begins to recognize that Krakow is not as ideal as she thought it to be, and as Rodriguez begins to understand the need to adopt the public language as his main language, the respective worlds that Rodriguez and Hoffman experienced as children—bubbles, temporary and fragile—pop. The unconditional sense of safety and sufficiency that once filled their childhoods fades away, and they experience sorrow and despair, for they find themselves unable to return to that ideal, idyllic state. Like Rodriguez, who admits to missing his “magical world” of childhood infused with the sounds of Spanish, and Nabokov, who has lived a life without “settling down anywhere” because “nothing short of a replica of [his] childhood surroundings would have satisfied [him],” Hoffman tries to regain her paradise by writing it into being (Rodriguez 503; Nabokov 27).

The last paragraph in Hoffman’s essay reads as a self-serving one. She documents her experience with such intense focus on her own pleasure that we see the image of her bedroom as her attempt to re-experience her childhood, not an invitation for us to step into the enclosure of her private Eden. Similarly, Rodriguez tries to use the narrative element in his essay to help himself return to his childhood by constructing on the page the wonderful moments he shared with his family when Spanish was their exclusive language. Paradoxically, the closest he comes to this return is when his narrative is disrupted by strong nostalgic sensation—“so deep was the pleasure!” (504). He feels compelled to record this eruption even though this is not a moment we, the readers, can share with him. We can follow his narrative, but we are unable to feel the ‘deep pleasure’ brought on by a spontaneous experience that is only his. The intensity of his embodied experience seems impossible to weave into the story, and he has to settle for an interjection, bracketed away from the rest of the narrative it intrudes on. Hoffman’s and Rodriguez’s attempts to freeze their memories into “rhetoric” inevitably bring them face to face with the impossibility of communicating in any language the intense bodily sensations they remember (Corder 141). Hoffman’s hesitation in her last paragraph vividly demonstrates the limits of language to convey emotions: while recounting her childhood experience, she is “fill[ed] with a feel-
ing of sufficiency” but is unable to explain the reason. Eventually she settles for “just because I’m conscious” (Hoffman 177).

Perhaps it is impossible because the memories that each tries to put into writing are pre-verbal, emotions and images experienced without words. As children, we struggle to master the language that we speak before we can form coherent autobiographical memories. Because Rodriguez used to hear languages as sounds instead of words, his childhood memories favor sounds, images and emotions. Hoffman’s childhood memories had been stored as images of her bedroom instead of as verbal descriptions. As Hoffman attempts to re-create the image of her bedroom, she is engaging in a pre-verbal kind of translation (Hoffman 177). But then language gets in the way and Hoffman and Rodriguez are denied any unmitigated return to the childhood they desire.

Their return to the past may forever remain out of reach. Our narrated memories are always re-shaped by new experiences. According to psychologist Dr. Elizabeth Loftus, an expert on human memory, the act of remembering is actually a re-creation and re-interpretation of a given experience in light of present circumstances. We fashion and re-fashion our memories to keep them in line with our current knowledge in order to make our selves seem coherent (“Memory”). This process makes memory “a current record, encumbered, of another time that was also encumbered,” further distancing us from the very sensations that accompany the original memory (Corder 142). Despite her best effort to translate the image in her mind into the words of her essay, Hoffman is unable to perfectly transport herself back to the innocent and ideal state that she yearns for. Her present-day consciousness and knowledge intrude upon the sensation she is trying to recall. She feels compelled to include the fact that “[her] happiness is taking place in a country recently destroyed by war” (italics mine; Hoffman 177). Her adult voice also breaks through the idyllic bedtime scene that she tries to re-experience as a child. Both Hoffman and Rodriguez attempt to return to their past via their pre-verbal memories, but their childhood experience seems to escape as they reach for words.

According to Nabokov, pre-verbal memories are “absolutely permanent” (12). They are “immortal” and can be re-experienced even if we do not write them down (12). He believes that all we actually need to access these pre-verbal memories is a trigger: a sound, a smell, a taste, an image. This idea is not new. In Remembrance of Things Past, Marcel Proust shows the possibility of returning to the past using the “exquisite pleasure” and “all-powerful joy” that “invade[s] [his] senses” when he eats a morsel of a madeleine with a

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spoonful of tea (48). Initially, he does not understand the sensation that he is feeling, but “suddenly the memory reveal[s] itself” (50). Uncannily, “the whole of Combray and its surroundings . . . [springs] into being, town and gardens alike, from [his] cup of tea” (51). This taste of madeleine triggers Proust’s attachment to a pre-verbal memory so strong that it remained forever imprinted in his mind. So did the Spanish voices allow Rodriguez to “[recall] the golden age of [his] childhood” (Rodriguez 508). For Hoffman, the occasional “hum of the tramway” and the “slowly moving shadows on the ceiling made by the gently blowing curtains” allowed for the re-experience of the safety and contentment from childhood, and “the freshness of the flowers” and “black fir trees” remind Nabokov of “the park on [his] country estate in Russia” (Hoffman 177; Nabokov 12). It seems that the best way to re-experience our loved memories is thus not through language but through our own physical bodies.

Yet we continue to translate our memories and experiences into words, because stories seem to be the best way to keep our memories alive. Stories allow readers to know the authors’ individual experiences, and they serve as “evidence of their lives” (Corder 141). Our writings do not allow us or our readers to fully re-experience past sensations, but they allow us to leave a trace of ourselves in this world. We still write because we “long to be absolutely present to the world, acknowledged, known, and cherished” (139). However, with Corder we may have to accept that words can only help us document an approximation of our emotionally charged memories, and they will never be able to convey our true experiences to others. Pre-verbal memories are not stories that people can insert themselves into, and they do not allow themselves to be shared with others. Language may give us knowledge and public identity, but it estranges us from that unique blissful state that we yearn for. Nevertheless, we should continue to translate our experiences into writing as we attempt to transcend the confines of our own bodies and minds to seek companionship and commonality with others.

Language allows us to communicate and to be “members of the crowd,” but our interpretations and understanding of language remain unique and personal (Rodriguez 508). Our thoughts, pre-verbal memories, and embodied experiences make us distinct, and by keeping them to ourselves we can preserve our sense of unique self. This need for self-preservation also requires us to look beyond the present. The stories we write, the traces of ourselves that we leave in the world, may not be merely for others to remember us by. To Nabokov, an author’s “best audience is the person he sees in
his shaving mirror every morning” (18). The story is perhaps for the author himself.

Written narratives—journal entries, memoirs, essays—remind us of our past and future selves, even if the words fail to capture the emotional imprints of our memories. All we need is a trigger. When asked what language he considered most beautiful, Nabokov responded, “My head says English, my heart, Russian, my ear, French” (49). Indeed, language is often allied with our sensory organs, and our senses are the best triggers to our memories. When our stories are enlivened by senses, the blissful state of knowing who we once were comes within our reach. Our “inability to accept that we . . . someday . . . will [vanish] without a trace, unremembered and unredeemed,” as Karsten Harries puts it, spurs us to write in the present for our future selves (qtd. in Corder 140). Other selves will remember us, and our treasured memories and experiences will live on. With our texts, we allow ourselves to remain unique and ever-present in the world.

WORKS CITED


