

Few Observations on Translating the Early and Late Poetry of J. H. Prynne into Bengali

Rupsa Banerjee

This piece offers a few inferences drawn from translating the early and late poetry of J. H. Prynne into Bengali. The distinct styles of the two stages in Prynne's poetic practice call for reciprocal responses in the Bengali translations. For example, a poem such as "The Numbers," from *Kitchen Poems*, has a distinct narrative running through it which allows for the use of a more pronounced rhetorical voice in the Bengali translation. This is also made possible through the assumption of different speaking voices, both singular as well as plural. In the case of the Bengali translation, rhetoric fills in for the part of the poem that eludes the logic of narration, and creates its own community of addressees. Specifically, the lines of the poem are short and project synoptic thought in passionate bursts. In Bengali, this carries into a startling frankness of performance which allows readers to relate to the political critique in the poem; and, it lends a certain immediacy to the context of the poem. Writing on the desire for a literary community established on the basis of the circulation of the poems published in *The English Intelligencer*, a magazine which contains many of Prynne's poems later collected into *Kitchen Poems*, Alex Latter states, "a community which is oriented not towards a determined centre but on a concept of exchange that generates meaning; the truth-claim of this meaning is mantic or ecstatic, simultaneously denying the significance of a singular, fixed originary point, of which the constellated community of the *Intelligencer* is an instance" (76). The literary community, to which the poems address themselves, is structured on the principle of shared dialogue on common interests, and its interlocutors are expected to be transformed and replaced within a temporal continuum. It is the poem's very openness to its linguistic characterization of contemporaneity, ranging from comments on electoral policies within the democracy to the proliferating relations of consumerism, which allows the poem's easy re-assimilation into the Bengali language.

With the early poem, the translated contexts remain largely uniform in the Bengali. If translation is studied within the dialectic of the production and dissemination of culture, two processes that have opposing interests, then the transferability of the contexts provides an important way for the poem to participate in the transformations instituted in that very dialectic. For one, the *Intelligencer* was published in order to overcome the competing rationales of the urgency of reconfiguring English lyric language of the late 1960s and the necessity of distributing it within a select community, sensitive to the interplay of trust and risk. The pressure of such a working principle led to an abrupt termination of the production of the magazine even as the lyrics worked to reorganize associations between poem and the reading public at the level of syntax. Re-introducing the poems into Bengali, almost fifty years after their initial publication, allows for a renewed interrogation of the poems' disbelief in culture as a mere involuntary precipitate of economic activity. Literary magazines, working with unreliable relations in market economy, provide the antithesis of what Richard Ohmann calls the "mass-



circulation magazines as the main vehicle of national brand advertising” (208). The translations, then, explore the absorption and continuity of Prynne’s early stance towards poetic materiality and linguistic utterance in Bengali.

By opening up concerns of artistic commodification and literary autonomy to the Bengali language, concerns that are particularly richly present in the consciousness of the Bengali readers following the work published in Bengali magazines such as *Kaurab* since the 1970s, the translation traces the circuit of production and consumption of culture within the starkly transformed terrain of consumerist relations in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In one version of the Bengali translation of “The Numbers,” certain specific English words were retained in the Bengali, such as, “politics,” “point,” “trust,” (*Poems* 10) and “charge” (*Poems* 11) to instantiate a quality of colloquial conversationality in the tone of the Bengali poem. Rather than disrupting the aural system of the Bengali poem, the presence of the English words pointed towards the extent to which the voice of the English text invites the presence of other languages. These were later edited in the version presented here and Bengali words were introduced for the English ones that were previously retained. The presence of these two versions emphasizes how the translated poem invites transformations in the modes of utterance on part of the Bengali speaker. In “Mental Ears and Poetic Work” J. H. Prynne writes that it is “the language of the text that has and produces voice, and not the mere vocal equipment and habits of a speaker” (130). The rhetoricity implicit in the Bengali translation directs attention towards the assumption of voice in the English text and how its voice is both a performance of subjective meditation and a pronouncement of political satire.

In the translation of “As Mouth Blindness,” from *Sub Songs* (2010), the interlinking of the aural worlds of the English poem and its Bengali translation occurs by retaining some of the English words related to scientific discourse. The difficulty that readers of the English poem experience in moving from one context to the other is reproduced in the Bengali translation, and further indicated through the presence of the two languages alongside each other. As Prynne states himself in “Difficulties in the Translation of ‘Difficult’ Poems”—“By a paradox, this account of difficulty may actually be encouraging. When a translator meets a case of difficult language, perhaps of the very extreme variety, then the difficulty may be not an obstacle to translation but an integral and active part of what is to be translated” (159). In a surprisingly lucid yet conclusive note, Prynne suggests that the answer might lie in replacing “one ambiguity by another” (159). The poems in *Sub Songs* are particularly attentive to the production of a range of aural harmony, from the syllabic level at which the sounds repeat themselves to the phrasal parallelisms and the use of words that are partially homophonic. In addition, the simultaneous dialogue built with multiple discourses dissuades the creation of a defining denotative language in the poem. In its alertness to the lyric as an auditory phenomenon, the poem, “As Mouth Blindness” works with the arrangement of nouns in a rudimentary language-like fashion that is outside of any syntactic predetermination. What it draws attention towards through such a syntactic organization is the substantiality of the nouns. For example:

Gradient scarlet be easy from the corner
patch to stem flotation, crude output



partial or gratify

upper rising dent for-

ward, optimal. Need less lie on a pallet

forage decrypt in its proven bunk scatter. (Poems 609)

The reference to the cavity of the mouth and dental formations disclose the collection's larger preoccupation with the productions and reproductions of vocal utterances and their inadvertent impairments. Alongside the aural expansion of the poem's sound, which appears to paradoxically build through the sequencings of words derived from literatures on the sciences, the lines introduce certain words that halt the spread of syllabic resonance, such as, "stem flotation" and "crude output." Communicating this break in aural harmony in the Bengali translation is, then, achieved in distinct ways.

For one, the words taken from metallurgy are allowed to remain in the English, in order to achieve a sense of contiguity between the two distinct referential worlds of the English and the Bengali. For example:

Gradient scarlet রং অনায়াসে corner

patch থেকে stem flotation এর দিকে, crude output

আংশিক কিংবা ভুঁষ্ট কর

ওপরে উঠন্ত দাঁত অগ্র-

-চালিত, সর্বোত্তম। দরকার কম মিথ্যে শুয়ে থাকা প্যাালেট

ঘাস decrypt নিজের প্রমাণিত বাংক বিশৃঙ্খলা | (Poems 609; bold font mine)

José Ortega y Gasset writing on the relative ease with which the literatures of mathematics and of the physical sciences are translated across different languages states that the phenomenon offers no evidence of words from different languages referring to the same objective reality: "[...] it is utopian to believe that two words belonging to two languages, which the dictionary gives us as a translation one of the other, refer exactly to the same objects" (y Gasset 20). The introduction of the English into the Bengali allows for both a defamiliarization of the sound of the Bengali poem and a radical approximation of the discourse of science that forms the bedrock of Prynne's poem. The context of the Bengali poem is a partial extension of the English one, even with some of the words being allowed to remain in the English; this is because some nouns which also double as verbs in the English, such as "forage," lose their plural meaning when translated into Bengali. The ambiguous shift in contexts is, then, best communicated through a system of sounds in the Bengali that progresses through a non-correspondence with the patterns of sound repetition in the English. The outcome of the translation is, then, to study the ways in which the sound of the Bengali poem deviates from that of the English and the forms of aural dissonances it allows within itself; this, in turn, problematizes the readers' conventional and over-determined relation to the Bengali language itself, allowing for new subject-positions to open up within the language of the poem. As Prynne himself states writing on the poetry produced in locations where English is not spoken, "the subject-position [appears to] bind to the life-world by a different syntax?" ("Afterword to Original: Chinese Language-Poetry Group"). The apparent intersectionality of lives at economically-determined centres and



peripheries remains present in the Bengali translation through the continuing sub-text of scientific discourse, linguistically experienced as a leitmotif of English words with referents standardized by the discourse of science.

William Wordsworth in the 1802 version of the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* identifies a certain correlation between the subjects of poetry and of science, stating that both of them are connected in their act of generating pleasure:

The knowledge both of the Poet and the Man of Science is pleasure; but the knowledge of the one cleaves to us as a necessary part of our existence, our natural and unalienable inheritance; the other is a personal and individual acquisition, slow to come to us, and by no habitual and direct sympathy connecting us with our fellow-beings. (250)

Seen in this light, Prynne’s poetry makes the subject of science an integral part of poetic discourse, such that the language of the late modern lyric establishes a sonic relation between the poem, characterized by its loose internal rhymes and distribution of syllabic count, and scientific literature, whose referents are experienced outside of their contexts and, therefore, become bearers of free-floating verbal sound.

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Rupsa Banerjee’s poems have been published by *Lady Chaos* (New York), *Chaour* (Kolkata), *Earthbound* (London), and *Veer* (London). Her poetry has been shortlisted for the *The River Heron Review Poetry Contest* and for the Janet McCabe poetry prize. She is Assistant Professor of English at St. Xavier’s University, Kolkata, India. Rupsa has



translated the works of the Bengali poet Saileswar Ghosh for an anthology on the literature of partitioned Bengal. She is presently working on translating J. H. Prynne into Bengali. Her academic articles have appeared in Sanglap Magazine and The Apollonian. She is co-editor of the collection *Rethinking Place Through Literary Form*, brought out by Palgrave-Macmillan, 2022.

