effects in both of them. Not many people meet the standard, but there's nothing unreasonable about the test.

You would have to meet this entrance requirement to declare a loss of poetry in either direction – in a translation from a foreign language into your own (say, on reading Chapman's version of Homer), or from your own language into a foreign one, if for example you wanted to say that the French or Spanish or Japanese version of John Ashbery's poem 'Rivers and Mountains' just doesn't move you as the English one does. Only if you have these skills in language and poetry can you make a credible claim that something has been lost; but even if you do have them, you will find it hard to tell the desk clerk just what it is.

It would not be relevant to your complaint to say that the relationship between sound and meaning is not the same in the translation as in the original. With the sounds changed because the language is different and the meaning preserved broadly if never precisely, the relationship between the two – a relationship all linguists since Saussure insist is an arbitrary one – must perforce be other.

The belief that the poeticalness of poetry is just that relationship between sound and sense is widespread in the teaching of English and other modern languages. However, it doesn't follow from this at all that once a poem is translated it has lost its poeticalness. The new poem in the new language representing and re-creating the poem in the old also possesses a relationship between its sound and its meaning. It is not the same as the original, but that is no reason – no reason at all – to claim that it is devoid of poetry. Of course, the new poem may be awful when the original was sublime. Few poets write sublime verse every time. But it stands to reason that the quality of a poem in translation has no relation to its having been translated. It is the sole fruit of the poet's skill as a poet, irrespective of whether he is also writing as a translator.

You may not like the poem by Douglas Hofstadter quoted at the start of this book on p. 6. You may like the poem by Clément Marot much more. But all that you could reasonably say about the difference is that Hofstadter is (in this instance) a less charming writer of poetry than Marot. If you didn't know that Hofstadter's trisyllabic verse transposes sentiments first expressed by someone else in a form that has a quite strict relationship to it, you might still not like it – but you wouldn't think of justifying your disappointment by saying that poetry is what has been lost in translation. And since that is the case – as it is the case with many lines of poetry you undoubtedly know in your own language without knowing they have semantic and formal correspondences to lines or stanzas written in another language before them – you can't justify your dislike of Hofstadter's translation by saying that its less-than-perfect quality is related to the way that poetry gets lost in translation. Exactly the same argument applies if you like Hofstadter's poem much more than you like Marot's. Or if you had been led to believe that Marot's French, far from being prior to it, had been inspired by 'Gentle gem . . .' In fact, for the vast majority of poems, the ordinary reader has few reliable ways of establishing whether or not and to what degree it can be counted as a translation. Poets have been imitators, plagiarists, surreptitious importers and translators since the beginning of time.

Dante, Du Bellay, Alexander Pope, Ludwig Tieck, August Wilhelm von Schlegel, Boris Pasternak, Rainer-Maria Rilke, Ezra Pound, Jacques Roubaud, Robert Lowell, C. K. Williams – think of a great poet, and you've almost certainly thought of a translator too. In the Western tradition there is no cut-off

point between writing poems, writing translations and writing poems in translation. Poetic forms – the sonnet, the ballad, the rondeau, the pantoum, the ghazal – have migrated between languages as diverse as French, Italian, Russian, Farsi, English and Malay over the last 800 years. Poetic styles – romantic, symbolist, futurist, acmeist, surrealist – are common European properties, as typical of German as of Polish poetry. Every so-called poetic tradition is made of other traditions. Against the dubious adage that poetry is what is lost in translation we have to set the more easily demonstrable fact that, from many points of view, the history of Western poetry *is* the history of poetry in translation.

Despite this, towards the end of 2007 there were 666 web pages in English that quoted the adage that 'poetry is what is lost in translation';[1] and by May 2011 the tally had risen to over 20,000. Even more stunning is that in all but a handful of cases this adage was attributed to the American poet Robert Frost. But Frost uttered this is an interview essentially as a way of explaining his view of *vers libre*, where 'poetry . . . is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation.'[2] Like many other received ideas about translation, this one turns out to have little foundation in fact.

All the same it is true that poetry provides translators with a task that is not only difficult, but in some senses beyond translation altogether. Like many people I have a great fondness for poems that I learned in my youth. I'm attached to them in a special way and treasure the very sound as well as the sense that they have. As I was a student at the time, I read poetry in foreign languages – mostly, in order to learn the language they were in. I struggled to understand them and probably for that reason they have stuck in my mind ever since.

Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn
aus der Engel Ordnungen?
und gesetzt selbst es nähme
einer mich plötzlich ans Herz:
ich verginge von seinem
stärkeren Dasein.

For me, no English translation can have the same weight or familiarity or perfection or mystery – nor can any paraphrase in German. I cherish these sounds and words of a language I wanted to master and which I learned in part through the unscrambling and memorization of just these lines. The emotion that for me and me alone is wrapped up in the opening of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* derives from my past, and although I can tell you about it in this roundabout way, you can't share it directly with me. What can't be shared can't be translated, obviously enough. But that doesn't make the poem untranslatable for anyone else:

Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?
And even if one would take me suddenly to his heart
I would die of his stronger existence.

I might have translated the lines that way when I was learning German by learning Rilke. The English says pretty much what the German says. Is it poetry? That's a judgement everyone makes independently, by criteria which have absolutely nothing to do with the quality of the translation. This one, in fact, wasn't done by a poet or by a translator. It was done (with a little help from a friend) by a machine translation service available for free on the Internet.

Personal, quasi-biographical reasons for valuing poems are

probably very common. We may say that we treasure a line or a rhyme or a lyric 'in and for itself', but it's easier to demonstrate that poems often get attached to us, or we get attached to poems, in contexts that endow the attachment with personal emotion. It does not matter whether the focus of such affective investment and aesthetic appreciation was first written in another language and then translated, or written in the language in which we read it. In any case, you can't tell. A Russian reader may know that Pasternak's *быть или не быть – вот в чем вопрос* is a translation, but if she hasn't been told, she has no way of assessing – and no reason to ask – whether it is more or less poetical than Shakespeare's 'To be or not to be, that is the question'.

We can grant that emotional relationships to things, including poems and forms of language, may be ultimately incommunicable. However, beliefs about the uniqueness and ineffability of emotional attachments have no relevance to the question of whether or not poetry is translatable. That is a much less abstruse matter.

Some people doubt that there are any affects or experiences that cannot be expressed, on the commonsensical grounds that we could say nothing about them and would therefore have no way of knowing if they existed for other people. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein presumably meant to adopt an agnostic position on this issue in the famous last line of his *Tractatus* when he wrote that 'what one cannot talk about must be left in silence'.[3] The infinite flexibility of language and our experience of shared emotion in reading novels and poems and at the cinema must also cast doubt on whether there are any human experiences that cannot in principle be shared. On the other side of this thorny tangle is the intuitive knowledge that what we feel is unique to us and can never be fully identified with anything felt by anyone else. That inexpressible

residue of the individual is ineffable – and the ineffable is precisely what cannot be translated.

Should translation studies pay any attention to the ineffable, or to notions, intuitions, feelings and relations that are held to be unspeakable? Oddly enough, anguished engagement with the problem of ineffable essences is not at all characteristic of Bible translation, where you might expect to find mystical and religious issues taken seriously. Instead, it has preoccupied secular scholars of the twentieth century, from Walter Benjamin to George Steiner and Antoine Berman. I would rather approach this boundary of translation from the opposite direction, for it seems to me more important to realize not that the ineffable is a problem for translation, but that translation is one big problem for the ineffable.

Let's imagine a crew returning from a space flight at some future point in time. They've visited a faraway earth-like planet and are holding a press conference at NASA headquarters. They have something spectacular to announce. Yes, KRX29[1] is inhabited, they say, and what's more, the little green men that live on it have a language.

'How do you know that?' a journalist asks.

'Well, we learned to communicate with them,' the captain responds.

'And what did they say?'

'We can't tell you that,' the captain answers coolly. 'Their language is entirely untranslatable.'

It's not hard to predict how our descendants would treat the captain and his crew. They would have the astronauts treated for flight-induced insanity, and, if that proved to be unjustified, treat them as liars, or as laughing-stocks. Why so? Because if the inhabitants of the distant planet did have a language, and if the space crew had learned it, then it must be

possible for them to say what the aliens had said. Must, not should: radically untranslatable sounds do not make a language simply because we could not know it was a language unless we could translate it, even if only roughly.

There are intermediate and problematic positions, of course. Not all utterances can be translated even when we are quite sure they are in a language. Egyptian hieroglyphs were indecipherable until two brilliant linguists, Thomas Young and Jean-François Champollion, worked out how to do it with the help of the Rosetta Stone. More generally still, we can't translate from languages we don't know. But to claim that something is in a language is to posit that, with the appropriate knowledge, it can be translated.[4]

Translation presupposes not the loss of the ineffable in any given act of interlingual mediation such as the translation of poetry, but the irrelevance of the ineffable to acts of communication. Any thought a person can have, the philosopher Jerrold Katz argued, can be expressed by some sentence in any natural language; and anything which can be expressed in one language can also be expressed in another. What cannot be expressed in any human language (opinions vary as to whether such things are delusional, or foundational) lies outside the boundaries of translation and, for Katz, outside the field of language too. This is his *axiom of effability*. One of the truths of translation – one of the truths that translation teaches – is that everything is effable.

Especially poetry. America and Britain are awash with poetry magazines, and every year small publishers put out hundreds of slim volumes containing poems in translation. Our present army of amateur poetry translators are keeping poetry alive. Poetry is not what is lost, but what is gained from their work.

An individual poem may have a quality that, for any one of

us, is so personal and unique that it might as well be ineffable, but the issue of unspeakable ideas arises much more obviously in a quite different domain. It is in our interactions not with works of genius but with other species that the ineffable looms before us like a brick wall.

On a short trip to South America Romain Gary picked up a 25-foot-long python, whom he called Pete the Strangler and then donated to a private zoo in California. When he was Consul General in Los Angeles, Gary used to go and see Pete in his cage.

> We would stare at each other in absolute astonishment, often for hours, deeply intrigued and wondering, awed and yet incapable of giving each other any kind of explanation about what had happened to us, and how and why it had happened, unable to help each other with some small flash of understanding drawn from our respective experiences. To find yourself in the skin of a python or in that of a man is such a mysterious and astonishing adventure that the bewilderment we shared had become a kind of fraternity, a brotherhood beyond and above our respective species.[5]

Maybe Romain Gary was right to feel that a python can no more imagine what it is like to be one of us than we can imagine what the mental world of a reptile is like – and it's typically generous of him to allow a fearful and pea-brained monster like Pete the Strangler a reciprocating intuition of the ineffability of human life. On the other hand, many non-human species – and perhaps all living things – do communicate with each other, and some most definitely communicate with us. Dog-owners, to take the most obvious example, easily distinguish between the meanings of different kinds of bark. But the dog-language we can access is a fairly limited thing. It consists of a small set of individual signals. Signals are generally treated as the isolated

vehicles of specific pieces of information – 'There's an intruder in the house', 'Hello and welcome' or 'Take me for a walk.' They can't be combined with each other to produce more complex meanings – as far as we know, dog-language has no grammar. In addition, the set of signals possessed by domesticated dogs – like the signals used by monkeys or bees – is inherited and fixed. There's no new word formation going on in dogs, just as the signalling system of traffic lights is incapable of producing more than 'slow down', 'stop', 'get ready' and 'go'. (The green and orange 'get ready' combination is only used in the UK, as a politeness to drivers of ancient sports cars with gear-shift sticks.) Those are the main criteria by which human language is distinguished from all other kinds of communication by most modern theorists of language. Monkeys can only say what they have to say, and nothing else; whereas human signalling systems are forever changing, and always capable of adapting themselves to new circumstances and needs. These are fairly persuasive reasons for keeping animal language outside the field of 'language proper', and far away from the concerns of translation. But we could try to be as generous and as imaginative as Romain Gary. From such a perspective, human language may well seem to a dog to be just such a limited and inflexible signalling system as linguists imperiously declare dog-language to be.

From infancy to the onset of puberty, children of every culture have always known that animals have things to say to them. There's no folklore in the world that doesn't similarly break the alleged barrier between human and other.[6] But in our Western, script-based cultures, growing up (which is so heavily entwined with formal education that it might as well be treated as the same thing) involves unlearning the instinctive childhood assumption of communicative capacity in non-human species. No wonder our philosophers and priests

have long insisted that language is the exclusive attribute of humans. That self-confirming axiom makes children not yet fully human, and in real need of the education they are given.

However, the traditional reasons for making a radical separation between 'signalling' and 'speaking' are not quite as hard-edged as they are often made to seem. Some animal signalling systems that have been studied (among ants and bees, for instance, where the channels are not by voice but by physical and chemical means) communicate what for us would be extremely elaborate geographic and social information. Whales emit long streams of haunting sounds when they gather in a school in waters off the coast of Canada. The tonal and rhythmic patterns of whale song are of such complexity as to make it quite impossible to believe that what we can hear (and pick up on instruments more sensitive than human ears) is just random noise. Even more striking is the recent behaviour of a group of monkeys in a Colchester zoo. They have added two new gesture-signals to their prior repertoire of communicative behaviour. Even if the 'monkey-sense' of these gestures is not absolutely certain, they are indisputably meaningful signs within the community, and indisputable inventions of the monkeys themselves.[7]

But what makes the communicative behaviour of ants, bees, whales, monkeys, dogs and parrots mysterious to us, what takes cross-species communication into the realm of the ineffable, is the fact that, save for a very limited range of noises from a limited range of long-domesticated pets, nobody knows how to translate 'animal signals' into human speech or vice versa. When and if we ever can translate non-human noises into human speech, species-related ineffabilities will evaporate like the morning haze.

Translation is the enemy of the ineffable. It causes it to cease to exist.

13. *What* Can't *be* Said *Can't* be *Translated*: The Axiom of Effability

When the baggage carrousel comes to a halt and your suitcase isn't there, the weary traveller goes to the airline service desk and complains that your suitcase has been lost. The desk clerk quite reasonably asks for evidence – a baggage stub, for instance – and a detailed description of what has gone missing, so that it may more easily be found.

People who claim that poetry is what gets lost in translation could be asked to follow a like routine. Granted, there's no check-in desk for poetic effects, so the missing ticket stub can be excused. But it's not unreasonable to request a description of the missing goods. If you can't provide one, claiming that something called 'poetry' has been lost is like telling an airline it has mislaid an item that has no identifiable characteristics at all. It doesn't cut a lot of ice.

A reader who says that poetry is what has been lost in translation is also claiming to be simultaneously in full possession of the original (which is poetry) and of the translation (which is not). Otherwise there would be no knowing if anything has been lost, let alone knowing that it was poetry.

A good knowledge of the two languages involved isn't sufficient to justify the claim that what has been lost in translation is poetry. You could only make a convincing case if you knew both languages and their poetic traditions sufficiently well to be able to experience the full scope of poetic

14. *How* Many *Words* Do *We* Have *for* Coffee?

The number of Londoners who can say 'good morning' in any of the languages spoken by the Inuit peoples of the Arctic can probably be counted on the fingers of one hand. But in any small crowd of folk in the capital or elsewhere you will surely find someone to tell you that 'Eskimo has one hundred words for snow.' The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax was demolished many years ago,[1] but its place in popular wisdom about language and translation remains untouched. What are interesting for the study of translation are not so much the reasons why this blooper is wrong, but why people cling to it nonetheless.[2]

People who proffer the factoid seem to think it shows that the lexical resources of a language reflect the environment in which its native speakers live. As an observation about language in general, it's a fair point to make – languages tend to have the words their users need, and not to have words for things never used or encountered. But the Eskimo story actually says more than that. It tells us that a language and a culture are so closely bound together as to be one and the same thing. 'Eskimo language' and 'the [snow-bound] world of the Eskimos' are mutually dependent things. That's a very different proposition, and it lies at the heart of arguments about the translatability of different tongues.

The discovery and understanding of what makes different languages different and also the same has a curious modern