

## **On the Use of Google Translate in Writing a History of Pantomime**

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I am finishing a huge, panoramic history of pantomime from its origins in the Roman Empire to the twenty-first century. Pantomime is a fascinating, mysterious art whose manifestations throughout its long history have been far more complex and powerful than one might suppose from the whiteface, melancholy clown image of it that has dominated popular consciousness since the 1950s. Much of pantomime history has remained buried, marginalized, or underestimated for reasons the book explores in detail and which have to do with “unregulated” bodily performance in pantomime as distinct from the regulation of bodily performance in dance through steps and positions that glorify movements in themselves or the constraining of bodily signification through speech. A common misunderstanding about pantomime is that it “translates” words into gestures or physical movements. But pantomime is best when it follows its own system of signification rather than translates from one system to another. More precisely, pantomime emphasizes action over movement. Actions, of course, contain movements. But in pantomime, the performer thinks in terms of completing an action and then initiating another one, so that one action follows another. Pantomime shows how the body narrates when speech is “unnecessary,” as Ingmar Bergman explained in relation to his largely pantomimic film *The Silence* (1963). The performance of these actions does not follow any “rules” of movement; rather, the performer finds the best, most efficient way to perform the action, usually in a manner unique to the performer. What is important is the relation of one action to the next, how well the performer connects one action to another according to a “feeling” that is signified while performing the actions. The idea in pantomime is to show how the body alone constructs a

narrative by moving from one action to another according to a logic signified physically. It is about the power of the body to narrate. The idea in ballet is that the body disrupts narrative control over it--to a great degree it is about how the body frees itself from narrative and follows its own "rules." These rules do not come from the performers; they come from movement systems, from schools. Dancers are always evaluated in relation to their adherence to the "system" or school to which they belong. Pantomimes are generally evaluated in relation to the characters they represent, their ability to represent identities outside of their own and outside of any system controlling their bodies.

On the one hand, because it evades a codified system of signification, pantomime should, and generally does, communicate well with audiences that otherwise do not speak the same language. On the other hand, pantomimic actions often include ambiguous or uncertain significations that serve to amplify the subjective responses to them within audiences and to produce greater uncertainty about "what happened" than is perhaps the case with performances regulated through dance or speech. The power and fascination of pantomimic performance seems to increase when one examines its history in relation to different cultures that have created pantomimes, most of which wind up being more unique to the artists who create them than to the cultures in which they appear. Since the eighteenth century, French culture for various reasons has struggled to impose a system of signification on pantomime, to regulate it, to put it in a school, to contain it within some kind of gestural or bodily "language." A major consequence of this enthusiasm for regulating performance is the promotion of a very limited idea of pantomime associated with the so-called "mime culture" built around the image of a white-faced, melancholy clown such as Pierrot or Pierrot-like variants, such as Marcel Marceau's Bip and his many emulators. A revelatory history of pantomime really does need to move beyond this long-

decadent, romantic idea that pantomime is somehow a “universal” bodily system or “language” of communication that performers nevertheless must acquire through correct education, through an institutionalized “translation” of bodily signs into meanings.

In writing a history of pantomime across many centuries, it was necessary to examine documents of pantomimic performance in many languages. I am fairly competent in German and can read French without much difficulty, and I can do all right reading many Dutch texts. But pantomime thrives well beyond the evidence provided by these languages. The book therefore makes use of documents in the following languages: English, French, German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Polish, Latvian, Estonian, Swedish, Finnish, Danish, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Czech, Lithuanian, and Latin. A vast number of these documents came to me through the Internet. Libraries in many countries have made the documents available through digital archives, while many foreign language scholarly works related to pantomime have also become available through Google Books, the Internet Archive, and numerous other sources. Many foreign language books and documents concerning pantomime are still not available on the Internet, but these, too, needed to be deciphered, and often purchased, because even large research libraries did not own them. Translating them was often a tedious business of typing text into Google Translate. I must add that YouTube, Vimeo, and various national broadcasters have provided hundreds of video documents related to pantomime that make it possible to see performances that otherwise required one to rely entirely on written descriptions or remained altogether invisible. Without the Internet resources, it was not possible to write such a large-scale and comprehensive history of pantomime. It was not possible to see the amazing scope and extraordinary complexity of pantomimic action in diverse eras and contexts.

Before the Internet, a historian could attempt such a large-scale project only by traveling, at enormous expense, to archives in many different countries, and then, having obtained, copied, or transcribed the appropriate documents, contacting people who, at further expense, could translate the documents, for it was ridiculous to expect a scholar to learn all the languages in which the history of pantomime has been inscribed. Obviously such a large-scale history never got written—indeed, it was unthinkable. But with the digital resources now available, such an approach to history seems more than thinkable—it seems necessary.

I used Google Translate to read hundreds of documents in languages that were otherwise unintelligible to me. Furthermore, I used Google Translate to translate from English into other languages words that were relevant to pantomime history, and these translated words became search terms in Google to discover many documents in foreign languages that do not turn up in searches in which I use terms only in languages within my competency. As is well known, Google Translate is often unreliable or obscure in its rendering of texts from one language to another. Sometimes I have had to translate texts several times in different tabs of Google Translate or at different times to gain a clearer grasp of what the writing communicated. Many times I must consult dictionaries in different languages to supplement what Google Translate presents. A few times, I found that if I translated a text from, say, Hungarian into Polish and then from Polish into English, the text made more sense than when translated directly into English. When quoting in my book from foreign language documents in Google Translate, I almost always made some correction or adjustment to Google Translate's version, usually in relation to grammatical structure. In many cases, I used a more appropriate word than Google Translate, but in some cases I guessed at the author's intention because I trusted that I was more aware of the peculiar context in which the author wrote than Google Translate. On the whole, though, Google

Translate rendered the vast majority of documents reasonably intelligible, and as a result, I was able to see a vast, profoundly mysterious world of pantomime that ironically otherwise remained imprisoned within the languages that documented its “secrets.” It was startling to discover how few histories of pantomime move outside of the language in which the author writes, or how pantomime history consists largely of narrow monographs on this or that performer—helpful in terms of constructing a larger picture of pantomime, but obfuscating in terms of acknowledging that a larger picture exists. Of course, the great majority of books on pantomime are of a pedagogic nature, focusing on how to perform pantomime while failing to acknowledge the great diversity of ways in which pantomime actually has been performed. In other words, by *not* accessing documents that Google Translate is more competent to read than the historian, the historian simply perpetuates a stunted, naively distorted history of an art. The errors that Google Translate makes in reading texts are not nearly as damaging to understanding the history of pantomime as the belief that no history should be larger or more inclusive than the linguistic competency of the historian or that of the qualified human translators the historian can afford to employ.

Professional translators have complained repeatedly that Google Translate distorts, confuses, garbles, muddles, or debases the languages put into it, often to unintentionally comic effect. That is because Google Translate does not really translate languages using dictionaries of vocabulary and grammar; rather, it uses complex algorithms that establish probabilistic correlations between words and their meanings in different languages derived from an immense database of texts on the Internet. As the algorithms become more precise in their power to predict as a result of assessing an ever-growing database, Google Translate becomes more reliable in its translations. I do not dispute that human translators will discern subtleties, nuances,

and even basic meanings that elude the robot and are significant in understanding what the author is saying, although it will probably not be long before the robot will achieve similar levels of discernment, even though it does not “understand” anything in the texts. Reading some texts in Google Translate is somewhat similar to reading many pantomime performances: ambiguities and uncertainties of signification provide a large measure of pleasure in that they urge the reader to see a text or performance operating outside of the regulating system of signification imposed by “culture” on reading itself. The reader becomes more aware of his or her own subjectivity (or aloneness) in ascribing significance to a document or physical action. Yet this heightened subjectivity seems fundamental to producing a more panoramic, more inclusive history of pantomime than an expectation of human competency in every relevant language would allow. But an implication of complaints against Google Translate is that the robot allows people to “invade” foreign cultures without “understanding” them, that it is a way of “colonizing” texts without experiencing the challenging task of immersing one’s self in the manifold peculiarities of the culture that produced the often dismaying complexities of the language of the text. This, however, is rhetoric promoting the utter exclusivity of cultures; it’s designed to protect the interests of those who benefit from some sort of privileged access to a culture. In any case, the point of using Google Translate is to understand how pantomime has communicated across time in different places; it is not to understand the cultures that have produced pantomime, although, of course, you cannot understand pantomime all that well by detaching it from the peculiar cultural circumstances in which it has emerged. Culture in this exclusive sense seems to mean a great many unique rules by which a society lives; it is therefore like a language: one can only understand the culture by knowing the language in which it operates and not through any translation of it, for translation in itself “contaminates,” so to speak, the culture with the values,

the subjectivities of another culture. Moreover, in every country studied, pantomime has appeared in tension with or outside of what one might call the dominant or controlling culture of the nation. Even in the Roman Empire, when pantomime was virtually the only form of theatrical performance of interest to a vast audience, it was continually a source of violent conflict within the imperial society. Pantomime has considerable, maybe even an implacable power to estrange spectators from their own culture. But it is difficult to comprehend the scope of this estranging power without identifying its diverse manifestations in different cultures. Digital technologies allow the historian to enter diverse cultures, and these technologies have their own power, as many have anxiously observed, to estrange their users from some idea of culture that supposedly transcends the lesser values embedded in digital technologies. In conjunction with other digital technologies, Google Translate opened up a vast, hidden history; at the same time, it made this history manageable, possible to a degree that was unthinkable only a few years ago, although the book is indeed quite large. The technologies transformed my way of thinking about how performance changes, how it functions within societies. Above all I became aware of the huge scale on which a seemingly marginal form of performance like pantomime operates when examined across many countries. It also became evident that audiences in every culture showed a far greater interest in pantomime than performing arts institutions had in performing it, for reasons that have to do with the great difficulty of constructing narratives out of “unregulated” bodily actions. I therefore believe that history achieves a great, transformational power or “authority” to the extent that it offers a larger scale of “seeing” the past made possible through the use of digital technologies to access and read foreign language documents.