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An English-to-English homophonic translation of Othello 3.3.453-462:

Nay aver, he a go, lie couth a pond ick see.
Who sigh see, cur, in tandem pulse I've cursed!
Near feal is writ: I ring, abut, key? Psh! Do hound
Tooth apropos take in a hell's spawn?
Insomnia blood e'en thaws, t'wit, violet pays;
She'll near lick book, near web tomb he'll off—
Tilled, the Attick ape a bland, whiter avenge,
Swelling dim maps. No, bite on mobled hen!
E'en thou do revere nice office, criestow?
Eye, ear, encage nigh ward.

My exercise this week is an attempt at a homophonic, homolinguistic translation of Othello's speech in Act 3, Scene 3, lines 453-462. Homophonic translations attempt to translate the sound of a poem into another language, without capturing the sense: Charles Bernstein explains that to do a homophonic translation of a poem from French to English, one might "translate" "toute" to "toot" or "blanc" to "blank." What's unusual (maybe unique) about my homophonic translation, though, is that it is English to English. It tries to re-present as nearly as

possible—exactly is impossible—both the collection and sequence of consonants and vowels of the original in different English words than the original used. The result, then, promises to be, just as homophonic translations across languages promise to be, something of a nonsense poem. Thus I chose Othello’s speech in this scene because he is already at his mental breaking point. Iago’s accusations against Desdemona have already loosed Othello’s hold on language; his usual eloquence has already succumbed to agitated exclamation: “O monstrous! Monstrous!” “O, blood, blood, blood!” (3.3.428,451). If there is any scene when Othello could feasibly begin speaking in tongues, it’s this one.

The principles of my translation’s method follows two aims. First, I aimed when possible translate words in a one-to-one correspondence. For this outcome, finding a true homophone was ideal. And so “sea” became “see”, “due” became “do,” “I” became “Eye.” Where homophones were impossible, I chose words that still sounded very near to the original, words that rhymed or shared a similar consonant and vowel structure, allowing substitutions such as “d” for “t,” “n” for “m” or “ear” for “e’er.” So “Ne’er” became “near,” “Shall” “she’ll,” “Swallow” “Swelling,” “marble” “mobled” (with a shout-out to Polonius, who knows good poetry).

Second, I aimed to translate the sequence of vowels and consonants irrespective of the original word boundaries. When we see printed English, the word boundaries are typographically ever-present, but when we hear English, the boundaries between words sonically range from barely-there to nonexistent; it’s largely the mind’s job, not the voice’s or ear’s, to group sounds into syllables and syllables into words. To break my own mind out of hearing the words of the original, I read aloud the lines slowly, giving each syllable approximately equal emphasis. I tried to hear where the vowels and consonants already might fall into new words and where, with a tweak or two if necessary, I could make them fall into new words. Thus the opening of the

second line, “Whose icy,” became “Who sigh see.” Because homophones are rare, I had to rely heavily on this approach. While I won’t delineate every transformation, then, that I made this way, I’ll finish out the second line: “Current” became “cur-in-t”; “and compulsive” became “and-em-pulse-I’ve”; and “course” became “cursed.”

The strengths and weaknesses of the homophonic translation as a means to represent the sound of the original poetry are both direct results of the main assumption a homophonic translation makes about what the sound of poetry is in the first place: it understands sound to be not rhythm, tone or intonation but certain vowels and consonants in a certain order. While the odd line of my homophonic translation might still be scanned, then (the second line can be read easily enough as iambic pentameter), the phrasal movement of the original is almost totally lost.

Yet because the homophonic translation so totally prioritizes preserving the original sequence of vowels and consonants, it does so exceptionally well. If the translation is read aloud—especially if voiced slowly and somewhat monotonously—it is possible to follow along in the original text and even, at times, not to hear a difference at all.