

I am invisible but you see me well enough



Alice B. Toklas (1877–1967) photographed
by Carl Van Vechten, October 8, 1949.

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A transversation (*sic*) by Polly Gannon,
Jaime Hyatt, and Padraig Robinson

Padraig: Where to begin this discussion of care for text? I suppose it's first best to acknowledge that all three of us are in forever-love with the written word and a giggle amongst the profound. Secondly, we are all very aware, too, of the problems in this culture of publishing for the sake of publishing. Of only ever being *visible*, of only being »heard« by the herd. Even at the level of social media, the maxim seems to be »I have an opinion, therefore I tweet.« But there are always lots of things behind the publishing of texts; invisible labor such as language editing and translation. Jaime, you work as a language editor, and Polly as a Russian-to-English translator of literature and poetry (»Everything good begins with trans-« I think Polly said once). As publishable, perishable beings, we are nowadays also directed by algorithms that (in)form opinion. Sadly, this is the only operational way that affect becomes political. And affect does need to become political; but social media technology, or rather dictating, is making people very sloppy, perhaps even to the point of not giving a shit as long as an opinion is heard; a virtue peer-acknowledged, a PhD approved. It's becoming more and more possible that language editing and translating will be done by algorithms that do away with the careful listenings and rhythms of writing.

Polly: (Listenings in the plural! That's very important.)

Padraig: I'm not sure machines can learn to give a shit. Not in *that* way. So while we always talk about the death of the author, what about the work in the work of publishing »the work?« To cut to the chase, let's call this the »giving a shitness« in the work behind »the work.« For example, Jaime, you literally just finished two volumes of pretty hard-core academic writing.

Jaime: Yes, the two leviathans I submitted today comprised of 23 different authors, most of whom were annoyed with me for giving them such an »unreasonable« turn around time to check the typesetting proofs.

Padraig: The turnaround time was not your choice, though?

Jaime: No, it wasn't. The publisher gave me one week per 500-page volume.

Padraig: Christ on a bike!!

Polly: Hahahahaha.

Jaime: Hahahaha, yeah ... But, you just have to get the job done and make sure to communicate with the authors. We are all at the will of the publishers, like it or not. If the authors want to be heard, that is, they must abide. But as an invisible voice who gives a shit, I often take more shit than I feel I deserve. »*The nerve of that woman*,« I can almost hear them say. »*Doesn't she know who I am!? I am the author, for Christ's sake!*« But to be sure, I am the only person on this planet who will have read every word in both volumes (in all *four* volumes, actually – the other two are not yet finished, although the third has just gone into production). I have literally spent years on these behemoths, carefully, painstakingly choosing just the right word to help my non-native English-speaking scholar-colleagues sound like native speakers. »Everything good begins with trans-,« said Polly Gannon. Touché, Polly. Touché.

Polly: It's giving a shit and caring enough to *Translate*.

Padraig: This issue we are skirting is to do with care, and other dubious terminology that describes the invisible labor other people do. This sounds too mechanical to say what I'm trying to say, but this »giving a shitness« for text is about legibility firstly, but also translation and rewriting, which is actually pretty complex in terms of inhabiting a voice, right?

Polly: A line in one of Robert Frost's most famous poems (one of the poems, sadly, that is most misconstrued) reads: »Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down.« The poem is called »Mending Wall« and is often enlisted, especially these days, to justify the building of new walls, as well as keeping the old ones in working order. I read this poem in a much more complex way, because translation is a practice that concerns itself quintessentially with borders and walls. And, on the face of it, it is the translator who wants them down. Conventional wisdom (buttressed by etymology) holds that »to translate is to betray« (*traduttore, traditore*).

Padraig: I am fascinated by this erotics of »betrayal« in the work of translating, and in some cases the idea of the language editor as a necessary enemy translating the author's voice into something that is legible in this more etymological, uhm ... sorry, that word always trips me up ... What am I saying? ... Ah yes, this betrayal of the language edit and translation is actually an issue of craft and care, trespassing enough of the raw word to betray it, so it fits into this habit of etymological legibility, or, of sentences literally making sense to as many people as possible.

Jaime: »Betrayal« is a very apt word here, I find. And there is definitely something sultry about it.

Polly: Editing is very sultry!

Jaime. As a language editor, I often have to re-work a sentence for structure and flow, or for example, a turn of phrase is used incorrectly in English and needs adjusting; and well, occasionally the response I get is that of the author feeling insulted, as if their text, their words were »betrayed.«

Padraig: Is that ego in the name of the authorial »name« though?

Jaime: Yeah, some of this is ego, of course, but some is certainly due to the ambiguous nature of the act of translating or editing itself. Whereas I feel like I am caring for them and their words – their name, even – and caring for the reader, the author may feel that a line has been crossed. Who, then, is the author? Betrayal happens when that question becomes ambiguous.

Padraig: This is also where terminology like »care« becomes murky and dangerously sentimental. And in fact how editorial care translates into an adherence to a »proper language.« Whether care has »proper ethics« is much more complicated. To think about care, we also need to acknowledge notions such as trespass and betrayal, to somehow delineate »care's« sultry ambiguity.

Polly: The reasons for this ambiguity about the practice of translation is transparent – the most obvious being this very transgression of a border (usually between »natural languages«) that would seem to keep things where they belong. In order to translate between two languages – and this is a denuded, simplistic, reductive description of »what happens«

when we translate – we make a decision to turn our backs on what is called, somewhat quaintly, »the original,« and go in search of an equivalent, a simulacrum, a reflecting mirror of that original, in the »target language.« Terrible term, the less said about which the better. But in fact, there is also a plea built into the act of translating and language editing, since we are searching for »other ears« to hear it with, »other ears« to be heard by.

Jaime: I like this idea of being heard by »other ears« – giving access to these other ears is fundamentally an act of care for the text.

Padraig: Some sentences are better cared for by being »heard« in text, and not spoken out loud, so there is a sense of being privy to a certain privacy, or there's even a domesticity, to the work of translating and editing. So it is actually a pretty ambiguous, multi-layered exercise.

Jaime: Absolutely. Texts »speak,« they are meant to be read, or »heard,« right? So, in a way, translators and editors are in the middle, trying to open the text to »other ears,« maybe to use the gaps in the wall – to use your metaphor, Polly – to liaise between neighbours (or neighbouring languages). The image of Sigourney Weaver as the gatekeeper in the first *Ghostbusters* (™) film comes to mind. Or was it Rick Moranis who was the gatekeeper?

Polly: Hahahaha ...

Padraig: ... Hahahahaha, Sigourney Weaver the actress playing Dana Barrett possessed by Zuul the Gatekeeper. So it's translator and editor as host of writers? Very Gertrude Stein meets Alice B meets the Montmartre modernism scene.

Jaime: Hahahahah, exactly ... So, thinking about one side of the wall containing the original and the other side, a »re-presentation« of said original, not only brings to mind translator-as-Sigourney-Weaver-as-gatekeeper (caretaker of wall, caretaker of ears, etc.), but it also makes me think about the text itself, right? Its existence in different forms, in various states: is it more a simulacrum or a mirror image or, rather an infinity mirror? because, let's be honest, it's a process.

Padraig: It's not as if text just arrives as mimesis of mind though anyway. Eventually, it needs a first reader, a first responder; or even a first aider if we think of the text as a living thing.

Jaime: I have been particularly trying to avoid the word *mimesis* here for the gigantic can of worms it has the power to open ...

Padraig: ... *mimesis* is out I think these digital days, as is this question of the »original« (I cringe when I see unedited manuscripts in archives.)

Jaime: Yeah, so does »the original« really exist so separately from its other-language equivalent?

Polly: In fact, the practice of translating doesn't permit one to turn one's back on the original, or even to cross the border and stay there. That (dubious) luxury, of being on one side of the border or the other, belongs, if it can be said to belong to anyone, to the speakers and hearers of each language. The translator has no such luxury. It is the fate

of the translator to inhabit the border itself, to make forays into new linguistic territory, and then return, repeatedly, to the »old world,« with its »old words,« back and forth, back and forth, but never straying too far from the border one is challenging, and dismantling, word by word. Or building.

Padraig: Multiple registers again.

Polly: The translator has too many ears, too many tongues, to do just one thing. To be just one thing.

Padraig: »Too many tongues,« I like that.

Jaime: Me too.

Padraig: Thinking of these multiple registers, like editor-translator-as-Sigourney-Weaver-as-gatekeeper, I keep thinking about Alice B. Toklas, whose autobiography was written by Gertrude Stein, her life partner. For me it's probably one of the most tongue-in-cheek titles in modernism: *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, but *by Gertrude Stein*. In the 1952 oral history interview I sent you both of Toklas, she said that she did the typewriting of her Autobiography *by Stein*. So Toklas's labor of typing Stein's writing also inhabits a weird type of border wall between authoring, translating (in mother tongue) and editing. Stein definitely did not turn her back on the »auto« in the »biography« of Toklas, but rather turned the whole interconnectivity of autobiography on its head. So perhaps Stein was a host-listener, who wrote this autobiography of ... using the tongue of ... typed by the hands of ... Toklas. Like dressing up in each other's clothes? Could *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* then be considered as a work of editorial or translator care? Or a betrayal or trespass into the mouth of the other?

Polly: Your questions touch upon one of the most discomfiting and awkward issues in translation – what we might term a kind of »voyeurism.« And the notion of care is central to this issue, too. If we consider voyeurism – with all its (dubious, but real) pleasures and dangers – to be about seeing while remaining invisible (i.e. »I am invisible, but I see *you* well enough«), then the translator and language editor is open to these charges of voyeurism.

Padraig: Cleaners have access to things in a similar way, and can also be prone to invisibilities that make them privy to a voyeuristic form of »looking« too.

Polly: Did you know proofreaders were referred to as the »cleaning ladies« of the text in the American South as late as 1995?

Jaime: Really!? You know, I'm embarrassed to say, but I find it slightly irksome when someone refers to what I do as »proofreading« or »copyediting« because my job actually involves a lot of re-writing, or rather »writing-with.« But, proofreading and copyediting are absolutely vital steps in the production of the written work. Yet, the differences between them lie, not so much with the particular job in question, but with permission. I am given permission to »write-with«; a cleaner is given permission to enter the private space of the employer; what they see there will never be the same thing the employer sees. The same is true of the »proofreader« who is permitted to look for errors that the author, who is so close to the work, cannot see for herself.

Polly: So even if one is cleaning, translating or editing »with permission,« there is a sense in which there is a kind of voyeurism at play, because the »author« can never see herself, her thoughts, or her (written) words, in their entirety. We are always blind to parts of ourselves that others can see, that others have access to. And when we are being translated, being edited, those parts of ourselves we can't or don't (wish to) see come into view. So the edit, the translation, is also a kind of mirror; and it is by definition a distorting mirror, if we are forced to see what we want to hide, from ourselves and, or, from others. I would say that it is very likely Alice and Gertrude »had each other's permission« – their mutual vulnerability was the pact, and the pact was given the name of »Autobiography.« They definitely inhabited the wall together ... they made the wall, the border, their home. And in reading *their* (oh, the fecundity of pronouns these days!) *Autobiography*, we actively contribute to its legibility, writing it (translating it, editing it, living it, loving it ...), too. That's care, all right. And it's a way of making the mirror gentle, not harsh and unforgiving. (Here, in this metaphor of the mirror, the notion of mimesis makes its entrance again; but we'll turn our backs on it, because it's not just a looking-glass, but a rabbit hole!)



Dan Kane, *Jean*, 270-6, 35mm Kodachrome, New York, 1981.
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Jaime: All of this very much strikes a chord with me on the notion of sincerity, which you and I have discussed at length in the past, Padraig.

Padraig: Yes. The voyeurism, in my writing about trespass in archives, particularly in 6–9: *Notes from the archive of Dan Kane* (Publication Studio Rotterdam, 2016). Significantly, Dan is also a translator of German, so his disappearance into pictures, and in the mirror's in the *Kopf kino* pictures, was really interesting editing the final sequence of photographs with him. Where I was, as such, learning to edit in his vocabulary, or »pictorial pitch« as he describes it (there's a beautiful photograph that did not make it into the final picture sequence, it's a 1981 portrait of Dan's friend Jean, a simultaneous interpreter whom I met sometime in 2015).

Jaime: The voyeurism, the autobiographical pact, the mutual vulnerability, the care – all topics or themes of the »new sincerity« moment. We talked about it more recently too, in Weimar.

Padraig: Ah, Cathal Kerrigan and I spoke about Toklas when finishing *Gaze Against Imperialism* (Metaflux Publishing 2019), with the historical »scenes« we were talking about. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is a peculiar sort of transcription too, as it is very likely that it was edited in some form by Toklas, who wrote in her *Cook Book* that her autobiography was already *done* (read: transcribed) by Gertrude. I think we talked about the »new sincerity« moment because neither 6–9, nor *Gaze Against Imperialism*, were sentimental books?

Jaime: Right, and Stein was clearly no sentimentalist either. What I find interesting about this supposed »new sincerity« moment, is that it not only marks a rejection of the »gasp and squeal« of postmodernism (as David Foster Wallace called it), but it rejects the modernist ideal of authenticity that writers like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and artists like Picasso were so concerned with (all of whom, as we know, were friends with Gertrude and Alice). People often use the two terms synonymously today, but there is a fundamental difference between them. Sincerity is a convergence of *avowal* and *actual feeling*. It is a means (»to thine own self be true«) to an end (»so that you can be true to others«). It's an *intersubjective* and ethical project that dominated the Western cultural mind-set from Renaissance humanism up through the nineteenth century. In the modernist period, however, the quest for sincerity elided into the quest for authenticity ... and authenticity, in contrast, is marked by an inward, personal project. It's about subjective truth-seeking, the goal of which is to examine oneself rather than communicate with the other, thus making it an end in and of itself.

Padraig: Insincere care is dangerous. So in a way you can't have care without sincerity?

Jaime: Well, it seems so, and for the modernist »audience,« then (the »other ears,« the viewer), was all but obliterated ...

Polly. ... True that. With Toklas and Stein it was different.

Jaime: And this is what I find so wonderfully poetic about the title, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* by Gertrude Stein: the audience is still vital in this intersubjective project. They not only need the audience to get the joke, but they are, as inhabitants of the wall, each others' ears, each others' mirror, each others' memories in the writing of their »memoir.«

Padraig: In the 1952 interview transcript of Alice B. Toklas I find it really striking how she said that her only contribution to Stein's *Autobiography* by *her hand* was to remind Stein of two memories *Stein* forgot to include in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. It's amazing that she says that her only contribution to publishing the autobiography was this reminding of forgotten memories.

Polly: Then she says *and the typewriting*, remember.

Jaime: Yes!

Polly: This part of the transcript is so interesting – and poignant, somehow, for our discussion of editing, translating and care.

Padraig: I agree, but I can't put my finger on why?

Polly: For me, it is what it says about memory and forgetting – who forgets what and why. Since Gertrude only »forgot two things« and only remembers, according to Alice, what is pleasant, one has to conclude that what made it into Alice's autobiography was very pleasant to Gertrude (no rhyme intended!) Anyway, it's clear from this that they were each other's memories. (Sharing! Caring! With the occasional gentle jibe or two ...) But so telling that the »typewriting« is mentioned by Alice as a kind of afterthought. Not really a significant contribution. (And here I can't help but think of Mrs. Tolstoy and Mrs. Dostoevsky – they were definitely »Mrs.« and not »Ms.« – slogging away, typing their husbands genius »loose baggy monsters,« as Henry James called Russian novels.)

Padraig: Stein the author on the level of genius husbands is a running joke of arrogance in the *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. We could talk for hours about the gender construction in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, but let me for now put it crudely: Stein was an out-and-out »top« ...

Polly: ... top button?

Jaime: Hahahaha

Padraig: »Top button«! But this »and the typewriting!!« afterthought, is the mechanical reproduction, or housekeeping, of the written word. With spelling corrections, too, I'm sure, as Toklas seemed like such a precise, poetic speaker. I'd like to think of Toklas as an icon of editors and translators as carer's. As if this ambiguity in the work of editing and translating must sit on the ambiguous register of the »afterthought«, open to voyeurism, with all the necessary erotics and poetics of betrayal, and trespass.

Jaime: As an »afterthought,« should we add that we have been editing each other throughout this entire process?

Polly: From a distance, in times of social distancing.

Jaime: We are also betraying the form of a conversation, sticking with the trans-

Polly: –figuring?

Padraig: –gressing?

Jaime: –versation?

Padraig: (*sic*)

Polly: 'Nuff said.

Padraig Robinson writes books and screenplays, and is currently working on the production of the feature film *Masquerades of Research*, based around the American sociologist Laud Humphreys. Recent work includes the book *Gaze Against Imperialism* (Metaflux Publishing 2019) launched as a reading room installation in the exhibition CHROMA, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin. Padraig was a Visual Arts fellow at Akademie Schloss Solitude in 2019/20.

Jaime Hyatt has worked since 2015 as the in-house English-language editor at the Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena, an Institute of Advanced Studies with a focus on the history, culture, and societies of twentieth-century Eastern Europe. Alongside her work at the IKK, Jaime is pursuing studies in the field of ecocriticism and is the co-editor of the forthcoming special issue journal *Embracing the Loss of Nature: Searching for Responsibility in an Age of Crisis* (COPAS Issue 21.2).

Polly Gannon is the director of cultural studies at the New York-St. Petersburg Institute of Linguistics, Cognition and Culture. She holds a Ph.D. in Russian Literature from Cornell University, and has translated Russian to English novels such as *Jacob's Ladder* by Ludmila Ulitskaya, *The Symmetry Teacher* by Andrei Bitov, and *Word for Word* by Lilianna Lungina. She lives, teaches, and translates while pursuing a tactile and poetic engagement with the Semiotics of Textiles.

Appendix

Excerpt from »Interview with Alice B. Toklas« (1877–1967) conducted by Roland Duncan in 1952. The Bancroft Library Interview, Regional Oral History Office, University of California Berkeley, California

Roland Duncan: [...] I have always been a little bit curious about your own autobiography, you know. Did Gertrude Stein write it completely by herself –

Alice B. Toklas: Yes, of course.

– or did you contribute some?

Oh, no. No. What could I contribute? She would ask me, »Have I forgotten anything?« and I'd say, »Yes, you've forgotten this.« And then, when she got to a certain distance, there were two things in it that were important, that she should have mentioned, I said, »I don't know what you are going to find apropos, but there are two things you must get in that you've forgotten.« That's all. That was my contribution, and the typewriting. Oh, heavens, no. No, it was a great joke, really. This friend of mine up in Seattle, who was a musician and who later married an American colonel, and when he died she married a British colonel. As the British colonel says, »Colonels are fatal to Louise.« Well, in any case, she was a very amusing person, and she had a way of poking fun at you very gently, and she said to me one day, »I suppose you are helping Miss Stein write her books, aren't you, Alice?« »Oh, surely. Most of them are mine,« I said.

But you must have helped in prompting her at times, I suppose?

No, the only things I helped her with were the two incidents that she should have mentioned, that I thought were important for her to mention, and which she had forgotten really. She had a memory but she didn't like unpleasant things. Things that she didn't like, she didn't remember – really, because it was the only way to get rid of the embarrassment of them.

Just forgot?

But complete. So that when you spoke of them, she'd say, »That isn't true. Did that happen? When?« Then I'd tell her. »Oh, yes,« and she'd sit back, »Oh, yes.« She once denied – but I don't want that for publication –

Wait then. Wait till we get off the –

Because it's a wonderful story. I oughtn't to tell it to you. It's an indiscretion, but you'll keep this entirely to yourself – of her memory, of her forgetfulness?

But then, everyone forgets certain things.

No, Gertrude used to say of me – she had a friend who was an awful bore – »Pomposa,« I called her. She was very pompous and pretentious. But Pomposa said one day, »I never forget, but I forgive.« And Gertrude said, »Alice is just the opposite. She doesn't forgive at all until she can forget. But she fortunately forgets.« Which isn't quite so true, I didn't forget so much. I just got less sharp.