

QUESTIONS AND PASSWORDS

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Once, 42,000 fleeing people were killed before crossing a river. Which of the fugitives were killed was the result of a decision that was made on the spot, depending on the way a certain word was pronounced. According to an oft-repeated story from the Book of Judges (12:4-6) this is what took place: 'The Gileadites seized the fords of the Jordan before the Ephraimites arrived. And when any Ephraimite who escaped said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said, "No," then they would say to him, "Then say, 'Shibboleth!'" And he would say, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right. Then they would take him and kill him at the fords of the Jordan.'

Thus the right password is shibboleth or shibbolet or however it is to be spelled; there are also variants like schibboleth or schibbolet or sjibbolet or sjibboleth... It is a word found in many of the languages spoken within the European Union, the Scandinavian ones included, with small variations in spelling and pronunciation of the crucial sh/sch/sj sound (which the Ephraimites were notoriously unable to pronounce in the manner that prevailed then and there). No one remembers the pronunciation of the Gileadites, only that it was what separated friend from enemy.

Shibboleth is a Hebrew word with several meanings, including river.

Meriç is the name of an artist who receives letters from institutions, companies and the Swedish authorities addressed to Meric, Meri", Meri%, Meriä, Maria, Meric?, 'Meri ', Meri?ß, Merip, Merig, Meriç, Meri, Meri€, 'Meriç'.

Meriç is also the name of a river between Turkey and Greece.

In order to answer the question of what constitutes the shibboleth of today, one has to take the test. Am I a part of this or that community? There are many rivers to cross, many shibboleths, and one of them is one's name. Allow me to drop a few names now: Judith Kiros recently wrote a text about Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter and Warsan Shire, a poet born into a Somali family in Kenya and raised in London. One of Shire's statements, writes Kiros, stuck in her physical memory the moment she heard it: 'My name doesn't allow me to trust anyone that cannot pronounce it right.' Later on I read the following in Shire's poem on the Internet:

'Give your daughters difficult names.
Give your daughters names that command the full use of
tongue. My name makes you want to tell me the truth.'

A name is given (or taken) in order to refer to a unique individual, me for example, although I am quite aware that my name is not mine only. My name? *My name is Göran, for we are many.* There are more than 26,000 people in Sweden whose first name is Göran.

A really good imitation is frightening. There is something profoundly disturbing about phenomena that are impossible to determine as fake or not. As in cases where it is far from obvious whether or not the purpose is actually to imitate as well as possible. And, if it is neither nor, neither to do it good, nor bad, what might then be the purpose?

The hauntologist Jacques Derrida writes: 'A *shibboleth*, the word *shibboleth*, if it is one, names, in the broadest extension of its generality or its usage, every insignificant, arbitrary mark, for example, the phonemic difference between *shi* and *si* when that difference becomes discriminative, decisive, and divisive. The difference has no meaning in and of itself, but it becomes what one must know how to recognize and above all to mark if one is to make the *step*, to step across the border of a place or the threshold of a poem, to see oneself granted the right to asylum or the legitimate habitation of a language. So as no longer to be outside the law.'

Is it possible to translate without destroying something? Is it possible to remain truly faithful to the original? Without making it mine? Without guilt? Going back to the original entails a two-fold risk: on the

one hand it no longer resembles what it was that I once translated, on the other it is no longer relevant.

But what if both words in the dictionary are the same, the entry word that was translated and its counterpart in the other language? What if the question looks like the answer? Are these words then the common ground between these languages, an intersection of two sets ($A \cap B$), or the remnants of a much more comprehensive language that no one remembers any longer?

The poets Svetlana Cârstea and Athena Farrokhzad create other intersections in language and write in *Trado*: 'In our collaborative work the translation forces the original to be unfaithful to itself. It asks questions that the original must answer. Often the original succeeds, but sometimes it is forced to roam in search of another way out of the woods.'

That someone would return just to say, 'Forget about me, move on' is not very likely. If that were what that someone had wanted, it would probably have been better not to return at all. Those who return, the haunted, may often be difficult to understand, they speak in a way that always has to be translated into intelligible language.

'Do you want to live temporarily or permanently?' The applicant for a visa to Angola, must answer this question. The space allotted for the answer on the application form is less than that required to repeat 'temporarily' or 'permanently'. Regardless of whether the issue is to determine if the applicant will be given permission to enter a certain country, or whether the question is to be interpreted more generally as a way of distinguishing between those who can choose how to live their lives and those who cannot, or if it might even be interpreted as a possible desire for eternal life; regardless of whether it is likely to have been miswritten (it has certainly not been corrected), it is difficult to answer. There are so many questions that one must answer.

Several billion times a day someone tries to get Google to answer a question. The search for answers, however, often takes the form of a statement rather than a question - one lets an answer generate an answer. Among the questions formulated as questions in 2015, the most frequent one in the category 'What is...,' was the terrifying question 'What is 0 divided by 0'. The most frequent question in the category 'How to...,' was 'How to use the new Snapchat update'. So, a question of how best to use an app, whose logo is a ghost reminding us that even

though a face may flitter by for just a few instants, it will continue to exist in some form or other, somewhere or other, and may haunt us for all eternity.

- Where do you come from?
- Why do you ask?
- I would like to know how you respond.
- I would still like to know why you ask.
- I have already given you an answer. That is the question.
- If a question counts, then I too have answered.

The river Meriç forms the border between Bulgaria and Greece and then between Turkey and Greece. But rivers, precisely like all borders and barriers, do not only serve to keep people out. They are also invitations to transcend them.

Everyone who can is now building a wall. In recent years the marking of borders has been on the increase again, and the outer borders of the European Union, in particular, have been considerably strengthened. Fences or walls are being planned or built by Bulgaria along its border to Turkey, by Greece on the border to Turkey, Macedonia is sealing off Greece, Slovenia Croatia, Hungary Serbia, Austria Slovenia, Austria Italy, Estonia Russia... Also in other parts of the world walls are being constructed; apart from the most talked about walls between Israel and the West Bank and along the frontier between the US and Mexico. Saudi Arabia is building a three-metre-high wall on their border to Yemen and a 90-mile-long wall on the border to Iraq, India is walling in the entire Bangladesh and is also protecting itself against Burma, in Botswana one is being built for protection against Zimbabwe, in Thailand against Malaysia, in China against North Korea...

Has Europe gone back to a situation of strong nation states defending their territories? Political scientist Wendy Brown sees it rather as a sign of dwindling national sovereignty, with the walls as a kind of theatrical presentation of this fact. In the same way as the EU logo may be said to present an idea which is in need of continual promotion. Many of the states in Europe and elsewhere have for some time now renounced one policy area after the other, but somehow they have to justify their existence in terms of control. And controlling the movement of people has become the political foundation of a security-based system. The borders are not only rivers or seas or straits, walls or fences but also information-based digital archives of personal data or lists of visa

regulations. Borders suited for outsourcing, and further emancipation from politics.

Just as borders and barriers invite transcending, border people and people of the border invite rejection. That so many people constantly feel called upon to reject them and deny their existence is exactly what makes them so important and what causes them to appear in more and more contexts.

They are inventories of what counts, that which has to be separated from that which does not count. Life which has to be separated from non-life. Life is the border, but the border is somewhere else.

During the millennia that have gone by since the Gilaedites' question about shibboleth, there have been just as many ways of separating one life from another as there have been ways of separating life from non-life. There ought to be something that is difficult to imitate. That tiny little thing which distinguishes a person, that which is the sign of that person's true nature, which is different from *our* nature (nation, union or whatever the collectivity might be), that which renders that person a stranger regardless of his or her efforts to become just like us; that, which to the untrained eye is almost imperceptible, can be so many things, and these may just as well be the same as they always were as they may be brand new, it is hard to know beforehand, it can be the pronunciation, the name, the answer to a seemingly ordinary and harmless question, it can be the trema above an o or the cedilla of a c.