

Lily Robert-Foley

extracts from the beginning of *Err or. An errant grimoire*

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extracts from the beginning of **Err or**. An errant grimoire.

A manuscript in progress that treats the history and future of error as a generative semiotic node for a creative-critical practice. The book is constructed in an errant fashion meandering between a narrative of a woman named Anne El-Arifi, an autotheoretical discussion of error in translation studies, linguistics, and cultural studies, and three sets of experimental translations—algorithms or spells.

by Lily Robert-Foley

“As such, the errant translator might, from this errant body, produce an errant translation. Or an illegitimate translation. Or a small, insignificant translation. Or an illegal, inaccurate, imperfect, incomplete, or otherwise wrong translation. The errant translator might hide the errant translation in the dark, in the shadows of the moon. The errant translation might howl and it might bark, but it cannot be solved. The errant translation might be dragged into the light, but it remains difficult to read.”

- Sawako Nakayasu, “The Errant Translator: Field Notes” (2024)¹

• • •

In the fall, I was working as an English teacher in the Tourism Master’s program at Paris 1, Pathéon-Sorbonne University.

I had just finished passing back the midterms when a hand sprang up. It was Fanny’s.

“Miss?”

Her body in her seat had the tilt of an unquiet tree.

“Yes?”

“You didn’t hand my exam back.”

• • •

I wanted to write an erring book because I’m tired of trying to come up with something new

No, not new. Something total.

How did I get from new to total?

It’s about exhaustion, I suppose.

There’s a law of legitimacy in scholarship that says if you want to say something you should know everything that anyone else has said about that thing.

Even thinking about it exhausts me.

I was going to write, I wanted to write, it’s like trying to consider infinity, because it feels like the pandemic ocean of information is infinite, but although it might be, this is not at all what it feels like, it feels like

¹ <https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2024-01/the-errant-translator-field-notes-sawako-nakayasu/>
[last consulted January 20, 2026]

• • •

I stood there staring at Fanny with an expression that one could mistake for shock, although it was intense embarrassment. And then I began opening all my folders and books, hunting through the leaves in a kind of rage. I put my entire head inside my bag. And although the papers began to meld together like a car crash in slow motion, it was really a show taking place in the gap between who I am and who I am when I am pretending to be a teacher.

I opened my computer and there in the spot next to her name where a slow line of ants of grades marched down the slide of the excel sheet

was a hole
a gap
a blank
cell

But actually I wasn't surprised, some how
in fact, I knew I had lost her exam.

• • •

I have this memory of hearing someone say or of reading something to the effect of: "Erasmus read all the books."

I google this: "Erasmus read all the books"

But all I get back is this famous quip: "When I have a little money, I buy books; and if I have any left, I buy food and clothes."

When I read that, my first reaction is, Erasmus must not have had any kids.

(He did though, seven)

Did I make this bit of knowledge up?

It has sat in my head canon for how many years, a mythology of our relationship to the totality of knowledge, the potentiality of the totality of knowledge. Is it actually possible to know *everything* about something? And if not, why this pretense in scholarship, why the pretense to mastery? I guess it's about coming close

But as I am forced to reexamine this *a priori*, I realize there's something else wrong with it.

(French uses the Latin expression to refer to any old preconception, on the face of it, lingering histories in language)

And it has to do with the word book, the form of it

Because where were the first books written and printed? Were they even written in languages Erasmus could read?

And what constitutes a book? Is a tablet a book? A scroll? A textile? A bone? A shell?

What about a story or a poem told orally and transmitted by memory? Could that be a book?
if we're talking about reading all the books as a kind of mastery of the totality of knowledge I mean

as a kind of metonym, or maybe it's a synecdoche

but why was that not a question I immediately asked myself when I heard or imagined this phrase: "Erasmus read all the books"

instead of my kneejerk reaction which was

when Erasmus was around, it was possible to read all the books

because there weren't so many of them

And now it's not
but any

way
apparently Aristotle also possessed all knowledge, so

• • •

On my way home from class that day, I thought I had better stop in to see the secretary.

I had not yet signed my contract and I thought, if I lost a student exam that perhaps they might not want to pay me or would want to find someone else to replace me for the remainder of the semester

the fact that they probably would not want to ever hire me back if I lost a student exam I tried to keep out of mt mind, but i hovered t here like a land mine, a fault line
vers de terre

The position I occupied in the French University was not really on e
I was what is called a *vacataire*. *déterre*
It's actually kind of funny not funny haha or maybe later or not for me any way

A *vacataire* assures *les vacations*, or *les heures de vacation*
we're paid by the hour
adjunct is a larger umbrella

I guess you translate it by adjunct but term
that you could also translate as "*précaire*" or "*non-titulaire*", which puts in mind of the "*non-human*" but any way

(non-tenured)

I always thought it was "funny" because of "vacation" in English (*vacances* in French, not *vacation*, though they have the same root).

Between vacation and *vacation*, there is the hitch of emptiness an unoccupied person vs an unoccupied position, room, job

vacancy

the CNRTL (Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales) gives, for the etymologie of *vacation* : 1460, 5 août « état d'une charge qui est sans titulaire » (*Reg. des Consaux*, 1454-1461, Arch. Tournai ds GDF.).

state of a charge that is without tenure

as *vacataire* you are not the person, you are what fills that charge
charge has the same ambiguity to be charged or to be in charge

the reversal of power makes the meaning opposite *mauvais sens*

and as Virginie Foloppe² tells us, in *vacataire* there is the word *taire* (and also *vaca*)

quiet cow shut up cow *vaca taire* shuts up

makes you think of cow tipping in another light

“sha[...]dow

[...]

remains difficult to read”

I am, in a quiet literal sens, nothing
over

The space left

by something not said

It’s pretty apt because that’s how I felt, most of the time

a hole

a gap

a blank
cell

• • •

But of course Erasmus didn’t read all the books.

I was about to

jump off this cliff

into an electronic ravine of

the history of books. For example this <https://hob.gseis.ucla.edu/>
looks really interesting. You could really get lost ther

like

in a library

² Virginie Foloppe, « De l’importance des luttes pour la pédagogie universitaire », *Itinéraires*, 2023-2, paragraph 14, <https://journals.openedition.org/itineraires/15832> [last consulted January 16 2026]

The way Borges's library of Babel³ is the internet
the place where the finite rubs up against the infinite like Zeno's paradox⁴

a_mlkji h g f e d c b

but I'm already distracted again erring
and I think it's safe to say there were plenty of things out there when Erasmus was alive that we
might call books or think about being analogous to books that Erasmus didn't read,
didn't even know existed
couldn't even read the language they were written in
and wouldn't have understood even if he could have

but the point of this is not to indict Erasmus (ok a little, but it's besides)

it's just to point out that in order to get to a totality, like, "Erasmus read all the books", you much
better to acknowledge a set of limits and then you're in a
paradox totalityinfinity

like, I'm not now going to go off and read Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* in order to
justify my previous statement

even though it could be interesting. I could write a whole book maybe on the link between "false
friends" and Levinas's ethics in *Totality and Infinity*

And actually

Why not?

Well it's about my body, really, about my experience ,

•••

The secretary was a very slim man, so slim were I to slide him
between his papers
he would disappear

he had also a very slim moustache that was the horizontal axis to his frame and it sat just above
his lip as though threatening to fall into his mouth when he moved it
disappearing behind his bottom lip
which hitched up when he was trying not to talk *taire*

He typed with one hand and held a coffee up with the other

"*Vous n'existez pas,*" he had just said (you don't exist)

"*Mais si, j'existe, je suis là, je suis devant vous,*" I replied, my seat making a twang like encased terror.
(Of course I exist. I'm sitting right here in front of you.)

³ The one that contains every possible permutation of letters and spaces for a finite set of 410-paged books.

⁴ The one where, in order to get from point A to point B you have to get to a point in the middle, C, and in order to get from point C to point B, you have to a point in the middle, D, and so on, without ever getting to point B, and so it is actually impossible to get from point A to point B. False friend.

“Madame,” he rotated his screen to me, “*Vous voyez bien que vous n’existez pas.*”

And it was true, when he typed in my name

El-Arifi Anne

a page came up

aucun résultat
no result

• • •

But there’s always this same dream anyway,
that dream of reading all the books/possessing all the knowledge

which is the same dream of the internet

the dream of totality

a dangerous dream

this happens a lot

dreams of the past meet a cataclysmic fatality of the future

like the dream of universal language

and machine translation

solving for it

“The errant translation might howl and it might bark, but it cannot be solved.”

just when you think things are progressing, moving on (Zeno’s

you are

parad ox), there

again

• • •

“*Essayez sans le e,*” I said to the secretary’s thin mustache, hiding under his lip.

(Try it without the e)

“*Pardon?*” he said but he wasn’t really asking me.

“*Sans le e, my nom.*” (Without the e, my name)

“*l’Arifi ?*”

“*No, pardon, mon prénom, Ann. C’est Ann sans e c’est mon prénom.*”

(No, sorry, my first name. Ann. Ann without an e is my first name)

“*Mais non, ce n’est pas sans e Madame,*” (But no, it is not without a e, ma’am)

“*Si, enfin, ça a été traduit.*” (Yes, it is, it was translated)

“*Comment ça, traduit, on ne traduit pas les noms propres.*”⁵

I could feel my hands gripping harder onto the arms of the chair and I tried to relax them, calm the twanging, which sounded very loud to me, like my accent.

– “*Madame,*” he held up my French nationality card, fresh off the presses, and pointed a long, thin, mustache finger at the tiny e attached to the end of my first name. “*Nous sommes d’accord que ça c’est bien la lettre e.*”

• • •

« *Tout est dit* » dit la Bruyère,

said La Bruyère

Everything has been said
All is said
It’s all been said
Nothing more to add
That says it all
The point has been made
Enough said
All has been spoken
It’s all out there
No more words needed

• • •

The funny (not funny haha) thing is that I had just gone and picked up my French nationality card

this had been a long process that took, in all, about four years from the time I first sent in my application (returned to me by post for missing documents or erroneous boxes checked whatever three times), until the time I got a text message saying that my French nationality card was available for pick-up at the prefecture of proximity.

In-between there had been a lot of waiting, and at some point, an interview

I remember the interviewer told me, when I couldn’t answer his question about what Valéry Giscard d’Estaing had done during his mandate that it wasn’t really important whether I could answer the questions or not, because he could tell, from the moment a person entered the interview room whether they were assimilated or not

vaca taire

and finally, many months after the interview, a letter, declaring my new nationality, along with an invitation to attend a ceremony at the prefecture three months later.

The ceremony was a grand affair with delegates from the region and a *collation* (which means light snack, but also awarding bestowal I wondered whether the homophony was intentional)

⁵ « On part généralement du principe que le nom propre ne se traduit pas », Michel Ballard, *Versus : La Version Réfléchie*, Volume I « Répérages et Paramètres », Orphys, 2003, p. 169. *We generally begin with the principle that one does not translate proper nouns.*

before heading in to the ceremony hall, indeed, in order to gain entrance to it, I had had to hand in my *titre de séjour*, my title of sojourn, my degree of stay, my equity of destination, my security of living room

my my

resident card—the one where it was written *Ann sans e*.

There were then three months in-between handing in my resident card and the fabrication of my nationality card where I had no identity

my Faultland Islander identity documents having exploded into a pile of dust upon expiring

and along with them, *Ann sans e*

had ceased to exist

•••

so I wanted to write an erring book

a book that makes the mistake of existing

when

Everything has been said
All is said
It's all been said
Nothing more to add
That says it all
The point has been made
Enough said
All has been spoken
It's all out there
No more words needed

(and that was already 1880, and La Bruyère goes on to say that we are seven thousand years of human thought too late)

Because I was wondering how to escape the injunction to totality

toute culture, toute langue

as though
by erring
I could

er...

doubt, uncertainty” from Latin *errorem*: “a wand ring, straying, going astray; meandering;

Errare, “to wander, to err”

“deviation from what is normal; abnormality, aberration”

belief, heresy.” “state of believing or practicing what is false or heretical; false opinion or

“difference between observed value and true value”
“detour” (etymonline.com)

épreuve

skew
pervert
deform

• • •

To be continued...