

# Translation

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## Translating and writing

The relationship between translation and creative writing is a vexed one: many writers translate, though often their translations have received less critical attention than the rest of their work, since translation does not enjoy the same status as what is termed creative writing, particularly in the English-speaking world. Translation is often despised as some kind of secondary activity. Robert Frost announced that poetry was what got lost in translation, while Nabokov, in his 'On Translating Eugene Onegin' wrote:

What is translation? On a platter  
 A poet's pale and glaring head,  
 A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,  
 And profanation of the dead.

(Pushkin 1991: 1)

Nabokov's cynical view of translation as an act that involves the destruction of the author by lesser talents is a powerful one, but more helpful for writers is the view expressed by Octavio Paz who, like Nabokov, knew several languages and also understood the implications of translating. In a famous essay on translation, Paz argues that translation is inevitable and important, for it is through translation that we can come to know more about the world we inhabit and understand more about the discourses we employ:

Thanks to translation, we become aware that our neighbours do not speak and think as we do. One the one hand, the world is presented to us as a collection of similarities; on the other as a growing heap of texts, each slightly different from the one that came before it: translations of translations of translations. Each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation of another text. (Paz, in Schulte and Biguenet 1992: 154)

In the medieval world, the importance of translation as a means of training individuals to write well was fully recognised. Translation and imitation were cornerstones in the teaching of medieval rhetoric, and students undertook translation as a way of engaging with the language and thought of other writers. Cicero had recognised the importance of translation

as a key to greater understanding of texts produced in different cultures and simultaneously as a means of expanding one's own literary vocabulary. For centuries, translation played an important part in the education system of Europe, starting to decline only after the advent of printing and the emergence of the idea that originality, however defined, should be seen as more important than a literary activity that involved transposing work produced by other writers. With the advent of copyright, the status of translation declined still further, and today we have the uncomfortable situation whereby often the name of a translator is given far less prominence (at times omitted altogether) than the name of an original author. The irony is, of course, that without translators, texts written in languages of which readers have no knowledge would remain unknown and unread.

The emergence of the field of study known as Translation Studies in the late twentieth century has led to a reconsideration of the importance of translation. It is now increasingly acknowledged that translation is a means of ensuring the survival of a text, and as Walter Benjamin pointed out, it is a way of regenerating writing from earlier times that would otherwise cease to exist (Benjamin, in Schulte and Biguenet 1992). The fact that so many contemporary writers draw upon the work of ancient Greek poets and playwrights, for example, is due to the skill of translators who have consistently engaged with their works, despite a decline in knowledge of classical languages that has become universal. Highlighting the role of translation in preserving the best of ancient writing changes perception of translations as a secondary, lesser literary activity.

### **Translation and power relations**

Translation has also come to be reassessed from a post-colonial perspective. Much of the older discussion of translation concentrated on the issue of loss: translation, it was held, involved the loss or destruction of important elements of the source text, and the end product was an enfeebled piece of writing. Another way of looking at translation, however, involves challenging the view that the task of the translator is to try and reproduce exactly what the original author wrote and recognising the creativity of the translator. The Brazilian poet and critic, Haroldo de Campos, formulated a theory of translation that involved the 'cannibalisation' of the original, whereby the translator in the New World could feel sufficiently empowered to devour the source:

Any past which is an 'other' for us deserves to be negated. We could say that it deserves to be eaten, devoured . . . the cannibal . . . devoured only the enemies he considered strong, to take from them the marrow and protein to fortify and renew his own natural energies. (De Campos, in Vieira 1999: 103)

De Campos' theory of translation is transgressive, in that it pays no heed to the status of the original and consciously rejects any idea of trying to reproduce something written by somebody else. What he proposes is a translation strategy that will absorb those elements of the original that are deemed important and necessary, and render them in a new, exciting way for a completely new readership. The power exerted by the original is subverted, and the translator is seen as a creative writer in his or her own right.

The question of power relations is fundamental to any thinking about translation. Unlike other forms of writing, the translator already has a text when he or she starts the process of translating and has to negotiate with that pre-existing work. The negotiations that the translator has to engage in vary considerably. At different points in time, the relationship

between the translator and that original text has been viewed in very different ways: at one extreme, the translator has been seen as the servant of the original, whose role is faithfully to follow its content and structure, while at the other extreme, the translator has been seen as a kind of thief, stealing someone else's text and appropriating it. These different attitudes have led to different strategies on the part of translators, with some keeping close to the source and others moving a long way away from it. Some translators have advocated the deliberate use of foreignisms in a translation, so as to signal to readers that the text belongs to another culture, while others have sought to create a text that carries no trace of otherness at all. The old dichotomy that has existed since Roman times between word-for-word and sense-for-sense translation is still in evidence today, even though the prevailing trend in the English-speaking world is for translations to read like original works.

### Reading and writing

What distinguishes translation from other forms of writing is that the translator first has to read a text written in another language. That reading gives the translator clues as to how then to proceed to transpose that text. On the most basic level, the translator has to understand what the text says, then take a series of decisions about what can and cannot be translated. Since no two languages are the same, it follows that no translation will ever be identical to the original. Moreover, since different cultures have different world-views, it follows also that such differences will also be encoded in language. The translator must decide not only what can be done on a linguistic level, but also the extent to which cultural differences can be translated.

The best way for any writing student to begin learning about translation would obviously be to learn another language so as to understand just how complex translation actually is. Since that is unlikely to be feasible, the next best thing to do is to look at several translations of the same piece of writing. It is a fact that just as no two readings are ever identical, because each reader brings a unique set of skills and experiences to his or her reading, so no two translations are ever identical. Besides, translations give a very clear way of understanding prevailing literary norms, so comparing translations has both an historical and a stylistic dimension. One of the most useful books to read is by the poet and translator Eliot Weinberger and Octavio Paz, entitled *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*. Starting with the statement of principle 'Poetry is that which is worth translating', Weinberger and Paz have assembled nineteen variations of a single four-line poem by the eighth-century Chinese master poet, Wang Wei (Weinberger and Paz 1987: 1). Each variation is laid out on a single page, and the editors comment on each one on the facing page, showing what the translators have done, questioning the success of each version and pointing to the discrepancies and variations. The book is an important resource, not only for anyone with a specialist interest in Chinese poetry but for anyone wanting to understand more about why translations differ so much from one another.

### Ancient or modern?

One crucial decision that a translator has to take is whether to bring a text from the past into the contemporary world, or whether to try and take the contemporary reader backwards in time. Ezra Pound summed up the issue when he asserted: 'The devil of translating medieval poetry into English is that it is very hard to decide HOW you are to render work done with one set of criteria in a language NOW subject to different criteria' (Pound 1954:

203). In the nineteenth century, translators favoured historical reconstruction, so that archaism was a favoured device, and translators of ancient or medieval texts used a form of Old English, with 'thee' and 'thou' and 'prithce' and similar turns of phrase. Today, this kind of writing is unacceptable: poet-translators like Tony Harrison, Ted Hughes and Josephine Balmer use modern English, often in colloquial or dialect forms.

Edwin Morgan, the Scottish poet, often translates into Scots. Some of his versions of the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky, for example, use down-to-earth colloquial Glaswegian, as in these opening lines of 'War declarit':

'Eenin pa-pur! Eeenin pa-pur! Eenin pa-pur!  
Ger-many! Au-stria ! It-aly'  
And a burn o purpy bluid cam wor-  
ryin through the squerr, aa black-bordit and drubbly.  
(Morgan 1996: 112)

Morgan explains that in his view Scottish literature has a line of fantastical satire that comes closer to accommodating Mayakovsky's black Russian humour than anything in English verse. What he has done is to read Mayakovsky carefully and find an equivalent register, drawing upon two literary traditions, the English and the Scots and opting for the one he feels is closest in mood and tone to the Russian. Similarly, translating the *Oresteia* for the National Theatre, Tony Harrison deliberately used Northern variants of English and when challenged explained his decision: 'One critic wrote that the chorus sounded like fifteen Arthur Scargills! I make no apologies. There's no earthly reason why a Greek chorus should sound like well-bred ladies from Cheltenham' (Harrison 1991: 437).

Harrison is here challenging accepted conventions of linguistic and social register. Ancient Greek texts were traditionally rendered into Standard English and usually performed by well-trained actors using Received Pronunciation to highlight the status of the work. Harrison argues that a proper equivalent is to be found in the living language of regional speakers, not in a restricted more elitist language that has no roots in the community.

Finding a suitable equivalent is the principle task of the translator. E.V. Rieu, who translated Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* for the Penguin classics series in the 1940s, proposed the radical view that ancient Greek verse should be transposed into English prose, since the contemporary equivalent of the epic poem was the novel. His flat prose versions probably introduced more readers to Homer than any other English translations, but the result is that Homer's epics are no longer read as poetry, but simply as stories. The shift from poetry to prose changes the emphasis. On the other hand, the inability of translators to render Icelandic sagas into a readable English form means that these great epic texts are still relatively unknown in English. No Icelandic translator had the courage to emulate Rieu and address the challenge of translating a genre that has ceased to exist in any meaningful way.

### Poetic form and freedom

What is instantly striking about any comparison of translations of the same text are the formal variations. To an extent, these variations reflect the taste of a particular age: when rhyme was in vogue, translators tended to produce rhymed translations, adapting the text to the predominant rhyme scheme of the day. So French alexandrines have often been rendered into English in rhyming couplets, while Germanic epics have been transposed into

blank verse. Occasionally, as with the Petrarchan sonnet, a verse form has been successfully translated and then adapted in the new context. The traditional Petrarchan sonnet was divided into two sections, one of eight lines, often subdivided into two stanzas and one of six, again often subdivided into two sets of three lines. In English, though the basic fourteen line pattern is retained, there was a shift to three sets of four line units followed by a final couplet, which is the basis of the Shakespearean sonnet. What this formal variation does is to focus attention on that final couplet, which then becomes the culmination of the whole poem. Shakespeare's ironic endings were made possible by a simple metrical variation to the basic Italian form. Later, when *ottava rima* was introduced into English through translation, it was taken and developed by Byron in his *Don Juan* into a supremely comic verse form.

Translation can be a source of revitalisation of a literature through the introduction of new ideas and of new forms and genres. A classic example of this in English literature is Ezra Pound's *Cathay*, which came out in 1915. Pound had worked with literal translations of Chinese poetry to produce his own versions, but the combination of subject matter and startlingly innovative imagery effectively created a new genre of English–Chinese poetry, so powerful that it dominated twentieth-century translation from that language. Moreover, the timing of the publication of *Cathay* meant that readers were approaching the poems from the perspective of a society gripped by the horrors of the First World War. The sense of loss and despair in many of the poems found a resonance in wartime England, and it is now generally felt that Pound's translations not only affected subsequent attempts to transpose Chinese poetry into English, but also influenced the work of the emerging war-poets. Imagism came into English literature through translation.

### Letting in light

In the translators' preface to the 1611 version of the King James Bible, the translators use a string of powerful images to describe their work:

Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtaine, that we may look in to the most Holy place; that remooveth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water. (A. V. Bible Preface 6.8)

These images stress the hermeneutic dimension of translation: as the meaning of a text written in another language is revealed, so readers are enabled to see that which has previously been hidden from them. The issue, of course, which was particularly felt by Bible translators, who could face the death penalty for heretical interpretation of a sacred text, is that what is revealed is not an absolute truth but rather the interpretation of the person who has undertaken the translation. William Tyndale, who was savagely attacked for misinterpreting the Scriptures by Sir Thomas More, was one of the great Bible translators of the English Reformation, but was executed for heresy in 1536.

Translation always involves a first stage of reading and in consequence involves interpretation before the process of rewriting can take place. Ezra Pound has an enigmatic but interesting piece of advice for writers. He argues that it is useful for writers to try and write good prose, adding, 'Translation is likewise good training, if you find that your original matter "wobbles" when you try to rewrite it. The meaning of the poem to be translated can not "wobble"' (Pound 1954: 7).

What Pound means by 'wobbling' is a failure to understand fully what is going on in a piece of writing. Mistranslation occurs when a translator fails to understand the linguistic

content of a text and simply does not understand what the words are doing; what Pound is getting at here is what happens when the translator is not quite sure what is going on in a text, despite having apparently understood what the words signify. This can be as straightforward as failing to grasp the foregrounding system in a poem. Often translators will reproduce the punctuation system and patterns of foregrounding of the original, without reflecting on whether they work in English. Usually, they do not work, or certainly not in the same way, because word order differs between languages and there are different conventions of beginning and ending lines. One good way to test this is to take a translated text and change the word order, experimenting with different ways of rewriting it to explore different results. A good translation will often be resistant to such experiments, while a weaker translation may well be improved.

Co-translation is an interesting way of working. When Ted Hughes translated the poetry of Janos Pilinszky, he worked with a Hungarian native speaker, János Csokits. What came out of this collaboration was Csokits' recognition that while he produced versions in good basic English, Hughes would then work to deconstruct them, opting for a process of defamiliarisation. When I worked with Piotr Kuhniewicz on an anthology of Polish women poets, I discovered that we were working in a similar way: he would bring me versions in standard English, which I would then play around with, trying to remove the smoothness of his sentences. I was helped in this by going back to the originals. Despite not being able to understand much in them, what could clearly be seen were patterns of repetition, clusters of words and sounds, occasional rhymes, all of which were missing from the literal translations. For a writer to work with a native speaker from another culture is very rewarding: you start to discover the other text and at the same time are forced to think strategically about how best to bring your discoveries to your readers.

### What is a good translation?

The acid test of translation quality is whether the version works for a new set of readers or whether they have difficulty appreciating it. This is not primarily a question of understanding, rather it is a question of adequacy on the part of the translator as writer. A translator can be an excellent, clear-minded reader and know everything about the original but then fail in rendering the text into his or her own language because of inadequacies as a writer. Sometimes this is due to a desire on the translator's part to try and ensure that as much as possible is included in the translation. So, for example, where there are words or ideas that simply do not exist outside the source culture, the translator may feel that he or she has to add an explanatory phrase or two to make the meaning clearer. This can work, of course, but more often it tends to disrupt the flow of the text and ultimately it is patronising to readers. Significantly, many writers from Africa or India who use English as their medium include in their works words and phrases from other languages that are not glossed or explained, a deliberate strategy to remind readers that there is a universe of discourse beyond the familiar.

Some translators make radical cuts. Ted Hughes did this in his version of Seneca's *Oedipus*, for example, and in his award-winning *Tales from Ovid*. The thinking behind this strategy is that not everything can be rendered adequately into another language, and therefore it is the responsibility of the translator to ensure that what is translated will work as well as the original for the new readers.

Translation always involves a balancing act. In the figurative language that translators use to describe what they actually do, predominant metaphors return again and again to ideas of inbetweenness, to no-man's-land, to bridging between cultures, to juggling plates.

The translator is reader, editor and (re)writer, someone with a dual responsibility, both to the original author and original culture and to a new group of readers who are dependent on translation if they have no knowledge of another language. For these reasons, translation has been seen as a significant instrument in the training of writers, and as a way for many writers to expand the parameters of their own work.

The power that translations can exert within a literature should not be forgotten either. Edward Fitzgerald's *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam* came to acquire such a significant place in the English literary canon that it has remained the pre-eminent translation, despite evidence that shows that it seriously mistranslated the original Persian and an attempt by Robert Graves to produce a new version that rectified Fitzgerald's errors. Keats' sonnet 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' is the most explicit statement about the impact that a good translation can have. Keats acknowledges that he already had some acquaintance with Homer, 'yet never did I breathe its pure serene/Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold'. In the last six lines of the sonnet, he compares his feelings of discovery with those of an astronomer seeing a new planet for the first time, or those of Cortez when he first looked out over the Pacific Ocean. Translation is a complex, multi-layered literary activity that has not received the critical attention it deserves, but it is the means whereby readers can move beyond the confines of their own language and literature and encounter other worlds.

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